

TEACHING INTERACTIVE INTERPRETING: A GLOBAL APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Interactive interpreting settings present unique challenges to the interpreter. Interpreters need specific knowledge and skills to effectively interpret in settings where turn-taking, conversational dominance, and minority/majority status are considerations as important as the information being conveyed. This paper focuses on an approach to teaching interactive interpreting designed to help students become more aware of the issues and perspectives of all the participants in an interactive interpreting setting. This global approach to teaching interactive interpreting allows students to participate in and analyze the many aspects of interaction and the impact that interpreting has on interaction.

INTERACTIVE INTERPRETING

Interactive interpreting courses have long been part of interpreting programs. In my experience they are often defined in contrast to monologic interpreting. Monologic interpreting is defined as that interpreting that occurs in

classrooms, conventions, and conferences. These settings are similar for interpreting because they consist of little interaction among participants; rather, there is one person who presents for a specified period of time while the audience is seen as a passive recipient of the presentation. Such presentations are characterized by the length of the presentation, and as being highly content-oriented, filled with facts, figures, and names. Such settings are often said to be more difficult settings for interpreters, especially students.

Interactive interpreting (also referred to as dialogic interpreting) is defined, in contrast to monologic interpreting, as that type of interpreting that occurs when two (or more) people have a conversation through an interpreter. All participants are expected to be active in the discussion. These settings are characterized by the shortness of each person's turn, and the relatively limited content included in each turn. These settings are said to be easier for interpreters, especially students.

These definitions focus on the “where” and the “what” of the setting. The feature that is often ignored is the “why” of the setting--the reasons that people have for putting themselves into these various settings. It has been very easy to ignore the “why” with our old “machine model” of interpreting--the “why” was the client’s problem. We concentrated only on the content. However, as we understand more and more about the nature of communication and of interpreting, it has become clear that interpreters cannot any longer ignore the “why” of a setting. There are two reasons for this.

First, in communication, a person chooses from a tremendous repertoire of linguistic and para linguistic features in order to frame the content to be conveyed. The choice of word, style, intonation, and register are all affected by the person’s goals and objectives during the communication. As communicators, we are all acutely aware of and influenced by not only what people say, but by how they say it. All communication in an interactive setting is influenced by the form as well as the content. All communication in an interpreted interaction is influenced by the interpreter’s form as well as the interpreter’s content. Tannen (1986) discusses this concept in her book, That’s Not What I Meant!, a book that is very

useful for introducing this notion to students.

Second, interpreters not only impact the emerging discussion because it is the interpreter’s signs that are seen and voice that is heard, but because they also perform the interpretation based on their own knowledge and experience. Thus, when the interpreter receives a message from one person, the understanding of that message is based not only on the content, but on her/his own knowledge of the situation, the manner of presentation, and the understanding of the goals of the communication. In turn, the outgoing message from the interpreter is affected by the interpreter’s understanding of what the person meant. Roy (1989) presents a very convincing analysis of the impact of an interpreter in the turn-taking of an interpreted interaction. She argues that conversations held through an interpreter are not two-way conversations, but three-way, with each of the two participants taking turns with the interpreter. Although we as interpreters know that this is how an interpreted conversation occurs, we ask the participants to believe that they are taking turns with each other. Interpreters are pivotal points in any interpreted interaction.

If we accept that the “why” of communication is important for interpreters to understand, then it becomes clear that interactive interpreting

presents many more challenges than we have previously thought. These settings are no longer the easier setting to interpret. They involve constant analysis and re-analysis of each participant's intent, based on both the form and the meaning of the message. When we consider the importance of the impact of the interpretation on the impression made by the participants on each other, this type of interpreting provides many more pitfalls than the more one-way monologic settings traditionally considered more difficult.

Teaching this perspective is difficult. It requires that students and teachers analyze each choice that an interpreter makes, not necessarily as right or wrong, but as more or less effective based on an awareness of the content, the setting and the goals of the participants. Using scenarios has proven to be an effective activity for learning and practicing this type of analysis of interpreting.

SCENARIOS

We have long used role-playing in interpreting courses. These are used to provide interpreting settings more dynamic than those in videotapes that we have, and to provide experience in turn-taking. As a student of interpreting I never enjoyed these role-playing activities--they often became "hot-seat" settings. My only goal was to get

through it as painlessly as possible. This dislike of role-playing carried over into teaching—I never found that students concentrated on the aspects of the role-playing that I wanted to teach. Their focus was on getting through as quickly and as painlessly as possible.

When looking for more effective activities for teaching interactive interpreting, I found the activities used in second-language teaching to be a rich resource for teaching interpreting. One book that has been especially useful for working with scenarios for teaching interactive interpreting is DiPietro's book, Strategic Interaction (1987). Although not all of the activities are relevant for teaching interpreting, many are adaptable to the needs of an interactive interpreting course. One aspect that DiPietro emphasizes is the debriefing after the scenario. This is the time that I find most valuable when teaching interactive interpreting. The goal of the debriefing is always to analyze the strategies used by the interpreter to effectively deal with the participants communication needs. An essential aspect of the debriefing is the inclusion of all the participants in the scenario. This includes not only the interpreting students, but the hearing and deaf people as well. This time provides the interpreters a "safe" time to ask both the hearing and deaf people how they affected the interaction and it provides a

“safe” time for the deaf and hearing participants to comment on their reactions to interpreted interaction,

In the following section I describe the scenario activity that I use with my students,

1) Design:

Topics and Participants: Each student designs and orchestrates an interactive interpreting setting. This includes the development of a realistic idea and (optionally) a script. The topic of the interaction can be simple or complex: every scenario provides some aspect of interaction that can be difficult for an interpreter to deal with. The best scenarios are based on situations that have been difficult for the designer. By basing a scenario on an interpreting experience, the student designer has the opportunity to analyze the difficulty and to observe the strategies used by other interpreters that may be more (or less) effective. Design also involves recruiting and briefing the scenario participants. Each scenario requires at least one deaf person and one hearing person. Whenever possible, these participants are familiar with the characters they are asked to play. For example, for a scenario about a pre-nuptial counseling session, a student recruited a minister and a couple who were planning to be married in a few months. Another student designed an interview between a

mental health counselor and a client. This student recruited two counseling students who had some experience and understanding of these settings.

Using these participants provides more realistic interaction during the scenario. It also provides a great variety of personalities for the students to experience. An added benefit is that the participants often learn as much about working with interpreters as the students and I learn about interpreting for their interactions.

When it is not possible to get participants with experience in the particular setting of a scenario, students research real settings in order to provide their participants with as much direction as possible. For example, one scenario dealt with the activity of opening a checking account at a bank. The designer went to a bank and taped an interaction similar to her scenario, then directed her participants based on the live interaction.

Scenario: Scenarios are designed to be 10-15 minutes long, with 10 minutes for discussion and de-briefing with the students and the participants. It is also important to have an additional time for debriefing with only the students present (see discussion below under 3)Debriefing). Once the scenario is designed and the participants are briefed, the student designer also briefs the student interpreter. Designers are

instructed to brief the interpreter only if approached by the interpreter, and with only the information that someone hiring the interpreter would ordinarily provide. Depending on the goal of a particular scenario, the designer may or may not provide the “difficulty.” In one scenario, a situation was set up in which a young client did not want to talk to a social worker because she was very angry. In this setting, the difficulty for the designer was how to interpret the anger; she informed the student interpreter of the situation so that the student would be prepared.

In another scenario, the student designer presented a scenario in which her difficulty was not the emotion as such, but her own surprise at it and her subsequent involvement in it. In this scenario, the student interpreter was not informed of the emotional context but only that an adult student had scheduled a meeting with a professor to discuss a course. In the course of the discussion, the “student” made several angry comments to the professor about the incompetence of the interpreter, blaming the interpreter for what she perceived as a failure to communicate. The student designer, and the rest of the class, were able to observe the strategies used by the student interpreter while interpreting this unexpected and difficult situation.

Once the scenario has been presented, the student designer is

responsible for leading the discussion. This involves discussing the outcome, the reactions of the participants (including the student interpreter), and comments from the rest of the class. The discussion of all the interpreting strategies used is — focused on the problems the interactions caused for interpreting; the strategies the student interpreter chose in dealing with the problems; and their effectiveness in the given situation. This part of the debriefing is especially interesting and informative because of the inclusion of the deaf and hearing participants. Their reactions were often different than ours. In one scenario, the hearing person addressed the interpreter instead of the deaf person. The interpreter continued interpreting and the deaf woman very smoothly asked that the hearing person speak directly to her. Both the student interpreters and the deaf person judged it to be a very effective and acceptable strategy for interpreters. However, when the hearing person was questioned, she commented that, although it was only a brief instance, she still felt slightly ignored and uncomfortable and that this particular strategy had negatively affected her response to the deaf woman for the remainder of the interview. These everyday reminders of the impact of all parts of an interaction serve to remind students (and me) of the importance of the “why” of an interaction and of the impact of interpreting on that interaction.

2) Student Interpreter:

Each of the students in the class is assigned to interpret a scenario designed by another student. The student interpreter is responsible for preparing for the scenario in any manner that seems appropriate. Once the scenario is introduced and begun, the student interpreter is expected to function as the interpreter for the communication--to own” the interpreting. This means that they need to be able to analyze the dynamics of the interaction as they are happening and to choose and use as many strategies as they need to make the interpreting effective.

One example of this was a scenario that appeared on the surface as a simple family reunion. The design of the scenario called for a deaf man to be stuck in a conversation with two hearing aunts of his fiancée. These aunts were unhappy at the surprise engagement and were uncomfortable with the new experience of communicating through an interpreter. They were also very displeased with their niece, who was talking with another family member instead of with them. Their annoyance and discomfort resulted in a very uncomfortable situation for the interpreter, in which the aunts consistently addressed her instead of the deaf person and constantly interrupted her voicing of the deaf person’s comments. In the course of this

scenario, the student interpreter tried a variety of strategies for dealing with these problems, some of them “classic” textbook strategies and some less traditional. She handled the first attempt of the aunts to talk to her instead of to the deaf person by telling the deaf person that she would explain how to work with an interpreter to the aunts--a textbook strategy. This done, she went back to interpreting the aunts’ response, which was another direct question to her rather than to the deaf person. Realizing that the first strategy had not been effective she tried interpreting the question to the deaf person and letting him answer. The deaf person answered, but the aunts interrupted his answer, both talking at the same time. The interpreter explained that she needed each to take a turn so that she could interpret everything--again, a textbook strategy. Both aunts nodded understanding and the conversation continued. They once again interrupted a comment from the deaf person, both speaking at the same time to the interpreter. At this point the interpreter tried another strategy, that of interpreting the interruption to the deaf person. This strategy did not effectively solve the difficulty. The next time it happened, she ignored the aunts’ interruption and continued speaking at a louder volume over the aunts’ comments. They finally stopped interrupting and the conversation became more two-sided. This scenario,

although superficially simple, provided a series of challenges that required the student interpret to constantly analyze and re-analyze the effectiveness of her interpreting strategies.

3) Debriefing:

Debriefing occurs in two parts. The first part occurs immediately after the scenario (as described above in *J)Design*). The student designer directs this part of the debriefing based on the way that the scenario actually worked out. Since this is always spontaneous (no matter how well prepared), this debriefing provides the student with an opportunity to analyze a setting and provide constructive comments on-the-spot. The focus of these debriefings is on the strategies used by the interpreters and on the reactions of the participants to them. In the family reunion example above, the variety of strategies was noticed and the student interpreter was asked to comment on why she chose them. The more classic, textbook strategies she used at first she chose because they are the expected strategies; her strategy of interpreting the interruption was an attempt to get direction from the deaf person about how he wanted to handle the situation. When she got no direction from him, her final strategy of simply talking louder than the aunts was chosen because she wanted to

finish a sentence before she started their comments.

When the deaf person was questioned about this, he commented that he (as his character) was glad the interpreter had explained her role so that he did not have to, and that he really did not notice the interruptions because he was not very interested in the conversation. He kept wondering where his fiancée was and why she had stuck him with the aunts. Likewise, the aunts did not notice the final strategy in which the student interpreter ignored their interruption and talked over them. They (as their characters) were feeling uncomfortable and did not mind who talked and did not really understand that they were being ignored. The outcome was that the conversation continued in a smoother fashion, which was the outcome they all wanted. Thus, the choice of strategies was deemed effective for that situation.

This debriefing with the outside participants provides the students with a variety of perspectives on their performance and their function as an interpreter. It also provides them with the opportunity to learn how to discuss these topics with non-interpreters. This skill is part of learning how to interpret interactive settings.

The second part of the debriefing occurs after the outside participants leave. It is important for the students

and the teacher to discuss the strategies as interpreters and it is important to discuss the design and logistics of the scenario. While the debriefing with the outside participants provides the experience of discussing interpreting with outsiders, this second debriefing provides the time for discussing problems and questions with other interpreters who understand the interpreter's perspective.

4) Evaluation:

As with all classroom activities, this activity is evaluated. The student is evaluated in two areas. First, the design and preparation of the student's scenario is evaluated. The student designer is required to write a summary evaluation of the scenario in terms of its design, preparation, action, and discussion. The grade for the scenario is based on my evaluation of the same points and on the completeness and accuracy of the student's summary evaluation,

Second, the student's interpreting of someone else's scenario is evaluated. The scenario is videotaped and the student analyzes her/his interpreting, writing a detailed analysis to be turned in. I also analyze the interpreting, and my grade is based on my analysis and on the depth and accuracy of the student's own analysis.

CONCLUSION

Scenario activities have proven to be valuable in teaching interactive interpreting. They provide situations and challenges that other activities, such as videotape practice and real life, cannot provide. Tapes, although very useful for practice, do not allow for the basic fact of interaction--each turn is dynamic, built on the preceding turn. Students know that their performance will never affect the outcome of a taped interaction. Thus they never know if the strategy they choose is really effective. Real life interpreting does not often provide the time for discussion and analysis immediately after the event. Interactive scenarios, when designed carefully and focused on the effectiveness of interpreting strategies, provide a safe environment for students to practice and analyze.

These scenarios also provide a source of constant learning for me as a teacher. By giving the students the responsibility for making the scenarios work, I learn what they have understood and what they have not understood. It helps me to listen to my students--it's nerve-racking while it's happening, but after experiencing the scenarios and the discussions with them I find that our discussions of interpreting become much more professional, as one interpreter to another, rather than as a teacher to a student. The scenario provides an

opportunity for the integration of the many skills that students need in order to become interpreters, especially the skills of personal interaction and dynamic analysis of communication.

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