Garbage In = Garbage Out: The Importance of Source Text Selection in Assessing Interpretations and Translations

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Abstract: When we test interpreting students, it is essential that we select the appropriate level of stimulus material. If the source text is too simple or too complex, we can’t measure interpreting skills accurately. The interpreting stimulus materials we choose for testing need to be carefully matched to the skill levels of our students.

This efsli 2010 presentation shared the input from an international group of interpreting researchers and educators about identifying stimulus texts for teaching and testing interpreting. Choosing appropriate stimulus texts will help teachers prepare skilled interpreters.

Introduction

The choice of source stimulus texts is as fundamental to the assessment and evaluation of interpreting as is choosing the appropriate evaluation rubrics. In spite of this, both informal discussion and interview data collected to date from experienced interpreting educators in the US indicates that few can provide solid, evidence-based criteria, for that selection. By far the most common rationale for stimulus text choice seems, anecdotally, to be “gut feeling.” When pressed, some will expand the rationale to include “authenticity,” “good quality sound or video,” “length,” or “it works.” While such factors are important, they do little to enhance a deliberative selection of source stimulus texts, especially in education and evaluation.

The discussion of which source texts will most effectively draw out the kind of interpretation that reflects those features we intend to evaluate is essential to interpreting education and assessment. In ASL/English interpretations for example, many features
that are heavily weighted in evaluation are found with more or less frequency depending on genre and register in ASL source texts. These include use of referential and prosodic space, non-manual signals, fingerspelling, and hand-shift. These linguistic features serve specific functions in ASL. Those same functions are served by a variety of linguistic features in English that are often different from those in ASL. For example, ASL combines spatial referencing with lexical items to create cohesion through discourse, often without directly re-naming a referent; English requires more frequent re-naming of a character in order to maintain clear referents throughout discourse. It is the effective use of those features that contribute, in part, to the creation of a successfully coherent, dynamic equivalence in the target production.

The research described here shares the first stages of the input of an international group of interpreting educators and researchers. Although many participants represent ASL/English interpreting and are from the US, there are also participants researching and teaching other signed languages as well as spoken languages. The initial findings reported here can be applied to, and be beneficial for, educators and evaluators in considering the source as the starting point for assessing a target interpretation. It includes both theoretical and evidence-based practices, and practical applications for educators and evaluators.

**Project Description**

**Beginnings**

This project is an outgrowth of an earlier project in which several US interpreting educators and researchers attempted to identify the expected interpreting skill outcomes of students graduating from 4 year interpreter education programs (IEPs). The facilitators of this Source text project, Dr. Winston and Dr. Swabey, became interested in source text selection when they realized, after working with the research group over two years, that one major challenge was the result of “gut-feeling” source text selection. An initial literature review yielded little information, and they determined to convene a group of leading experts to obtain a variety of perspectives and to identify existing resources.
Convening Experts: An Online Seminar

Identifying those researchers and educators known to have written about, or conducted research in the area of source text selection, the facilitators determined that an online seminar could best involve the world-wide group of experts. The seminar, entitled “Source Text Selection for Interpreting Education” ran from June 28-July 2, 2010 and was hosted in an online, asynchronous setting. The original objectives of the online roundtable were to 1) identify existing resources in source text selection in interpreting; 2) generate questions for further investigation and consider potential directions for future research; and 3) examine current practices in source text selection.

Participants

The facilitators convened a group of 20 international researchers and educators from both signed and spoken language interpreting, inviting them to participate in the 5 day online seminar. Invited participants were asked to commit to logging in twice a day and contributing three or four substantial postings during the conference. As a benefit of participation, each participant had access to the complete online seminar discussions after the seminar ended, through December 31, 2010.

Seminar Structure

The online seminar opened for pre-readings on June 28, 2010, with active discussions beginning June 29 and continuing thru July 2. Four forums were established, one for posting pre-reading resources, and three for active discussion. There were a total of 68 postings in the active discussion forums, which were:

• Where do we find source texts (48 postings)

• Factors in selecting source texts (5 postings)

• Source Text examples (15 postings)

Although the three distinct forums were established to spark conversation from different perspectives, all three were similar in content, with participants contributing input about choices, sources, rationales, and uses of texts across all of the forums.
Results/Findings of the group

Importance of Source Text Selection

Two of the three objectives, identifying resources and examining current practices in source text selection were addressed with some detail; the third, generating ideas for future research, was discussed in a few postings, but not pursued in depth.

Objective 1: Identifying resources

Based on a review of the literature, a few resources were either posted or suggested as potential readings for participants. These included Assessing Source Material Difficulty for Consecutive Interpreting (Liu & Chiu, 2009); Student Competencies in Interpreting (Roberts, 1992); Introducing Interpreting Studies (Pöchhacker 2004, Ch. 9); and Fundamental Aspects of Interpreting Education (Sawyer, 2004, Chs 4 & 8). By the end of the online seminar, more than 30 resources were shared with the group, ranging from articles and informational resources to radio and television broadcasts, to personal experiences and specially produced texts. Many of the resources were sites that included a variety of individual source texts, along with tools and materials that supported their use as teaching texts. Participants usually included descriptive explanations about their contributions, describing the reasons a text or source was useful in their work. The list of resources is being prepared for public posting in the near future. All are being entered into a database that will be available for educators and evaluators to search and utilize.

Objective 2: Directions for Future Research

Discussion around this objective identified two important directions. Participants described their criteria for source text selection, indicating that they looked for “appropriate” levels of difficulty, relevance, speed and density in the texts. The need to determine the parameters of “appropriate” in different settings and for various uses was identified. The need for understanding specific test specifications in more depth, and for understanding where, when, and how they might be useful in our work was also identified as important for future discussions and research.
Objective 3: Current Practices in Source Text Selection

Discussion on this topic was rich and broad. The summary below is intended to present some preliminary groupings of the topics, and not a definitive description of criteria for source text selection. The topic of source text selection as a meaningful focus was an important part of the discussion. Three reasons supporting the need for such discussion and research included minimizing the impact of inter-rater reliability in evaluation; establishing continuity across teaching practices; and, especially in interpreter education programs, contributing to fairness for students and test-takers.

This objective generated a great deal of in-depth discussion, and expanded into two major sub-topics, the purposes of source text selection and the features considered in source text selection. Each sub-topic is summarized below.

Purposes of Source Text Selection

Overall, the group identified two main uses of source texts in interpreting: evaluation and education.

Evaluation:

Source texts, when being selected for evaluation purposes, were expected to provide a snapshot of interpreting skills that demonstrated a minimum level of competence for a given domain or environment. Various target groups were identified as being needing evaluation. These were the newly graduated student, the certified or credentialed generalist interpreter (e.g. NAATI, RID, AVLIC), and the certified or credentialed specialist interpreter (e.g. conference interpreting, legal interpreting, educational interpreting, etc.).

Education

Source texts, when being used for educational purposes, were selected to provide ongoing practice to encourage growth toward competence, whether for students just learning to interpret, or for skilled professionals enhancing skills or entering new
specializations. Source texts were expected to product target interpretations that allowed teachers and students to identify strengths and weaknesses in the interpreting products/processes and that could be used to demonstrate and document growth and progress.

**Features of Source Text Selection**

Four categories of specific criteria surfaced during the discussions. These were authenticity, relevance, text features, and multi-purpose applications. Of these, the first three were similar regardless of evaluation or educational purposes.

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**Evaluation**

The fourth, multi-purposing, was discussed in the context of education, and simply not addressed in relation to evaluation. It is important to note that these four categories are not intended to be discrete, mutually exclusive groups. Rather, they overlap in many cases. Participants agreed that, in principle, source texts should 1) match or appropriately challenge the interpreter’s current level of expertise (for teaching); 2) match the level of expertise deemed essential for working/certification in that arena (for evaluation); and 3) trigger linguistic/discourse features in target language production.

**Relevance**

The relevance of a source text to the purpose and target audience surfaced as an essential feature among the participants. Both the content and contextual features of the source text...
needed to be relevant to user goals/needs for expertise. Areas that were emphasized in this area included:

- discourse style/type: the source text needs to be of the same or similar types of discourse most often interpreted by interpreter (e.g. formal presentations for testing conference interpreting skills; medical forms when teaching healthcare interpreting)
- topic/content: the source text topic and content needs to be similar to that which the interpreter will be working in their field or specialization (e.g. medical, diplomatic, academic)
- number of participants: the source text needs to reflect the kind of interaction that the interpreter is being tested for (e.g. monologue/dialogue)

**Authenticity**

Authenticity was a second essential category that surfaced through the discussions. Participants emphasized that the use of real-world texts is important, agreeing that texts should be taken from real-world events whenever possible. However, there was also consensus that simulated authenticity (role plays with authentic participants; re-reading of authentic presentations) is sometimes necessary for a variety of reasons. These include meeting students’ needs in learning; deleting unusable sections of an authentic text (e.g. too dense, too difficult, off-topic, inaudible, etc.); and rendering administration of text more feasible (e.g. shorten, breaks for consecutive practice, etc.)

**Text features**

Text features formed a third category of features that participants identified as important in selecting appropriate source texts. These are those characteristics intrinsic to the source language that are predicted to trigger specific parallel features in the target interpretation. Not intended to be a comprehensive list, these features included speed, pace, metaphor, idioms, and grammatical structures.

**Opportunities for Multi-purposing**
Especially important for those teaching interpreting was the ability/opportunity/potential to use a source text for many purposes throughout a course or curriculum. Some of the purposes identified included:
1. spiraling the text throughout the students’ growth and learning (translation > CI > SI)
2. teaching students how to prepare for a topic
3. teaching students how to analyze discourse
4. providing opportunities to compare multiple or parallel versions of similar texts
5. providing authentic tasks (i.e. allowing students to prepare for topics that they will need to eventually interpret
6. providing practice working with other interpreters
7. practicing selective watching

**Conclusion:** The online seminar was closed for discussion on Friday, July 2. This report shares a summary of participant input about text selection. Additional products of the seminar were a list of resources and materials for gathering source texts, which is being prepared for public dissemination. Many of these resources were accompanied by commentary from the participants about the various applications and uses the participants found for them, both in testing and teaching. In addition to describing the resources and uses, many participants described their strategies for incorporating them into their teaching. The topic is being pursued with a second online seminar, *Garbage In = Garbage Out*, in March 2011. Participants will be presented with a variety of source text videos chosen based on the input from this report. They will be asked to rate them for potential usefulness and appropriateness for performance testing and teaching of interpreters at various skill levels. It is hoped that the results of these early discussions can be pursued further, expanding the base of knowledge for source text selection in education and assessment.

**References**


**Facilitators:** Betsy Winston & Laurie Swabey

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**Participants:**

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Bios

**Dr. Betsy Winston** is the Director of the Teaching Interpreting Educators and Mentors (TIEM) Center. Over the past 25 years, Dr. Winston has held a variety of roles, including professional interpreter, interpreter educator, educator of interpreting educators, linguist, researcher, curriculum designer, and administrator. She developed the Domains and Competencies for Teaching Interpreting, and led the design and implementation of both the Master Mentor Program and the M.ED-Interpreting Pedagogy programs, based on model curricula and unique as the only programs of their kind in the US and for being distance programs as well. She holds a Ph.D. from Georgetown University, an M.Ed. from Western Governors University, an MA from Gallaudet University, and a BA from Georgetown University. She also holds an AAS-Interpreting degree from Portland Community College and a Distance Education Graduate Certificate from the University of Wisconsin. Most recently, Dr. Winston has published “Evidence-Based Practices- Puzzling Together the Pieces.” (In Press) in B. Nicodemus and L. Swabey (Eds), *Interpreting Research in Theory and Practice*.

**Dr. Laurie Swabey** is a professor of interpreting at St. Catherine University and the director of the CATIE Center - National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers. She has taught interpreting for over 25 years and in 2008 received the Kelly Faculty Excellence Award. In her work with the NCIEC, she leads the national initiative on healthcare interpreting. She is a member of the Advisory Committee for the National Council on Interpreting in Healthcare (NCIHC) and also a member of the National Coalition on Healthcare Interpreter Certification (NCC), representing both the RID and the NCIEC. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota in Linguistics and her research interests include bimodal interpreting in the healthcare setting, relevance theory and interpreting, and second language acquisition. One of her current projects is co-editing a volume on interpreting research with Dr. Brenda Nicodemus. She has presented papers on interpreting in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia and developed interpreting curricula for several programs including the University of New Hampshire (ASL-English BA program) and the University of Minnesota (multi-lingual certificate program).