

Fit to be shared? Measuring the acquisition of ethical awareness in interpreting students

1. Introduction

In 1976, at a time when 'terrorist activities were rampant' (Hauptman 1998: 292), Prof. Robert Hauptman undertook a simple experiment in several libraries where he asked the reference librarian for information on how to construct a small explosive device, specifically about the properties of a chemical called cordite and whether a small amount would blow up a suburban house. Of the 13 librarians queried, as Hauptman (ibid.) recalls, 'not one refused to supply the information on ethical grounds', although 'some were more helpful than others'.

What Hauptman (ibid.: 295) was trying to show was that 'aiding and abetting a serious crime in the name of [...] a dubious commitment to information dissemination and then claiming that a professional organization's code calls for this, is an abjuration of personal responsibility and a highly unprofessional act'. His was one of the first experiments in what was later named 'information ethics', the field studying ethical approaches to the use of new technologies in the information era. At that time, librarianship in the US was a thriving profession, and scholars did not yet much concern themselves with moral dilemmas in training librarians.

Indeed, students are empowered through training to become future professionals; at university, very few of them will be trained to become scholars or researchers in their area of study; this is probably the reason why students tend to choose degrees where it is believed jobs are easily available after graduation, as has been the case of Translation and Interpreting Studies in Spain for the last few years. Technical training, however, is not the main purpose of universities. Lecturers may have the moral responsibility of remaining in contact with research and the improvement of society through the use of their knowledge, transmitting these values in their teaching (Hortal 2002: 72). In order to fulfill their purpose, universities and any other educational institutions must provide space for ethical awareness among staff and students. Ethics and didactics are cross-disciplinary fields applicable to every profession, and are therefore present in such educational entities in the form of subjects like deontology.

However, according to authors like Harris (2010: 164) there exists nowadays an intellectual and moral emergency whereby those who think there are truly right

answers to moral questions are mostly religious demagogues who think the Universe is 6,000 years old; everyone else seems to believe there is something suspect about the concept of moral truth (Harris 2010: 27).

Moral thought plays an important role in the well-being of humans, and quantifying it, as Harris suggests, would be possible, however complex. This could be done not only as a cost-benefit analysis, such as those which are carried out for business ethics (Schreiner 2003; Maines 2008; Cortina 1994), but also by measuring ethical decisions which influence states of the human brain.

Taking up Harris' cue, this paper seeks to study whether measuring acquisition of specific competences in ethical awareness of a group of interpreting students is necessary. We will first define our objectives when conducting this experiment, as well as the methodologies involved. We will then present preliminary data obtained and develop new ideas brought forward as a result, including plans for future research. Finally, we will ask whether thinking about ethics in terms of human well-being and cooperation should be applied to teaching and learning in our profession.

2. Why is it desirable to measure ethics?

Trying to quantify the acquisition of ethical awareness in a group of interpreting students was the result of the realisation on the part of the lecturer that there was a problem with the way ethics was being learned/taught in her interpreting class. The main objective of the initial action research cycle planned was to solve the lack of ethical awareness in a group of students who, in spite of having received ethical training in theory, did not seem capable of applying this knowledge to specific case studies in a critical manner.

The notion that ethical awareness could be measured in interpreting students took shape after conversations with colleagues about assessment instruments and the perusal of the literature on applied ethics. Attempts at measuring or quantifying ethics-related constructs in professional settings include testing accuracy, measuring ethical awareness in patients and health workers, quantifying the importance given to ethics by businessmen, etc. The translator/interpreter can also be an entrepreneur, a business owner, communicator, mediator/social worker, volunteer, and much has been written about ethical stances in all these professions. A significant difference in ethical approaches, values and the importance given to ethical dilemmas was found between two large groups, the first comprising medicine, healthcare-bioethics, humanitarian

action, social work and teaching; the second, among others, business, translation and interpreting, journalism and engineering.

A preliminary study (Brander de la Iglesia 2010b) established definitions, distinguishing deontology and ethics in internalistic and externalistic perspectives within applied ethics (Beauchamp 2003), in order to propose a coherentist approach in the teaching and learning of interpreting. The main objective of the exercise was to improve the teaching and learning of ethics in interpreter training by trying to take the lecturer and class to a third level of metaethics; the ethics of teaching translation and interpreting (Brander de la Iglesia 2010b).

3. Using action research as a methodological approach in applied ethics

From October to November 2010, two groups of third-year consecutive interpreting students were asked in the classroom whether they could easily tell the difference between 'deontology' and 'ethics' after having read about key concepts at home and being prompted by the teacher for reactions. Then, they were encouraged to think of an extreme situation where deontological codes could be broken ethically. In one group, a student suggested a hypothetical situation where an interpreter was sworn to secrecy by a client, and as a result she and the defendant's lawyer were the only people to know the client had purposely killed someone. The client was acquitted. Should the interpreter take this knowledge to her grave? The class was divided; moral judgements were made about the victim, the killer and even the lawyer. Still, some students defended secrecy even if the victims were children.

Revealingly, interpreting students have no intellectual problem with learning or memorising the theoretical difference between two concepts. They can learn by heart, understanding the contents, and get all the questions right. This is why it would have been too simple an experiment if we were to try to teach the difference between deontology and ethics to a group of students and then test them to see whether they had acquired the theoretical knowledge. The real difficulty arises when the theory has to be applied to a case study, real or imaginary, for then the students are no longer sure about the difference between ethics and deontology.

When specifying exactly what the researcher wants to quantify, it is essential to first ask why one would wish to quantify ethical awareness. The purpose of this study was not to instill in the students' minds an alternative set of values chosen by the lecturer, for this would be prescriptive and contradict what the experiment meant to show was

wrong. Rather, the point of trying to quantify ethical awareness is to improve our environment and society. Giving them a solution would be no better than giving them a prescriptive code; the lecturer would be manipulating them if she told them what to think. Why would her set of values be better than say, moral prescriptions which will perhaps make them successful entrepreneurs in the near future? Perhaps, if the students were indeed aware of the stakes involved, they would willingly choose a set of values in accordance with business ethics and not with values found in other fields such as communication or social work.

The approach had to include the use of different methodologies and perspectives, both in terms of research and in the teaching and learning situation, which changes constantly with group dynamics and the environment. The main objective was to change the object of study at the same time, in order to improve the students' ethical awareness. Action research allows for this. What is more, in an interpreting class there is a wide spectrum of techniques and valuable tools for the action researcher that can be made explicit about the speeches used, namely rhetoric, argumentation, political stances, the intention of the speaker, etc.

Thus, an improved action-research spiral was designed to quantify ethical awareness: first, a group of, this time, fourth-year students were presented with an extreme fictitious situation in the form of a case study (Brander de la Iglesia 2010a) and asked about the intentions of their characters, their motivations and the stakes involved; then they were asked as homework to read a few articles and definitions. Finally, a real-life case study was produced (ibid.) so that they could apply their ethical knowledge to reality in the profession.

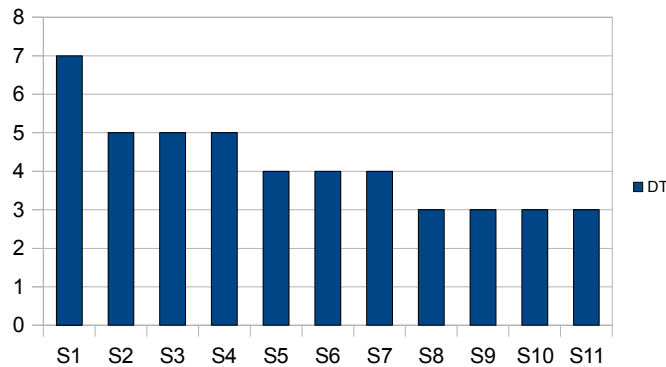
In parallel to the customary ethical and deontological subjects treated – such as collaboration and teamwork, helping your boothmate, equality – readings about critical thought, argumentation, fallacies, propaganda and manipulation were included in the curriculum during self-study hours. During assigned lab hours a more technical, or traditional, interpreting class took place. According to the essays written by the students, they thought awareness of critical thought theories was of essence to interpreting studies as well as to the profession and life in general.

The students were then asked to apply this theoretical knowledge to a real-life case study and to identify possible ethical dilemmas from a critical perspective, trying to see the point of view of the various people involved. Preliminary results were lacklustre, as shown in Figure 1, notably when it came to understanding conflicting opinions and applied awareness about the difference between ethics and deontology.

4. Preliminary results and future research

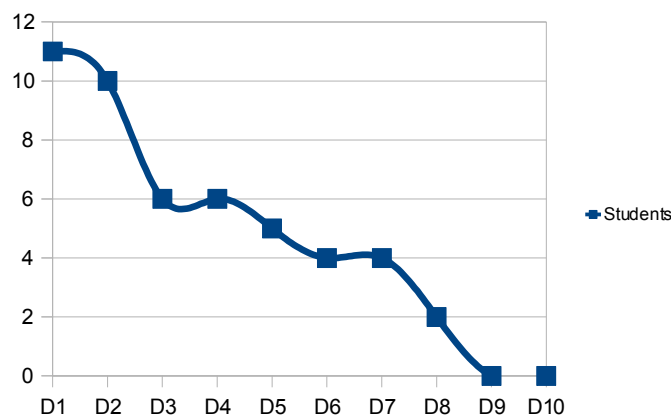
The teacher had previously identified at least ten ethical issues in the case study presented to the students (D1 to D10). Out of the twelve students who started the course, one had to opt out for personal reasons, leaving eleven (S1 to S11).

Figure 1. DT (number of ethical dilemmas found) per student.



Only one student (S1) found at least 7 ethical problems in the case study portrayed; three students (S2-S4) identified 5 ethical dilemmas; three more students (S5-S8) spotted 4 ethical issues and the remaining four students (S9-S11) noticed just 3, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Number of students who found each ethical dilemma



As a general rule, students seemed keener to identify breaches of 'the deontological code' (as some of them still called it) than moral issues, suggesting that they were still hearing such terminology in other settings or subjects. For example, out of five students who considered worth mentioning that a lady involved in the case study needed money to support her family, only three (S1, S2 and S5) thought it was ethical

to choose her as a boothmate; the other two were against helping the lady in a difficult situation (although one of them had misunderstood and thought the lady was being exploited). Yet, all the students mentioned that it was a breach of the unwritten deontological code to charge €400 instead of €300 for an interpreting job (i.e. more money than was the custom, and not less). Only one student (S1) thought, in a critical manner, that perhaps asking for more money was the opposite of dumping and could in fact help the profession. Ten out of eleven students mentioned the choice of boothmate as an ethical issue. Only five students recognised an ethical issue linked to performing relay interpreting or employing a native interpreter. All of them ignored the fact that a client's name and address had been forwarded to a third party, thereby disclosing personal information without the client's permission, to give but one example.

The results also showed that, when applied to a case study, the ethical awareness of the students had not been changed by careful explanation and study of differences between ethical and deontological concepts. As is often the case when undertaking action research in an educational context, the objects of the study change and the situation is changed as the students' critical minds develop; the objective of the study also evolves as the action alters the situation. In this instance, the next objective pursued was the simple improvement of these students' ethical awareness.

Two more action research sessions were then undertaken; the first as a regular part of the teaching and learning process, dealing with issues tackled as well during the technical interpreting training sessions; the second, in the form of a role-play exercise, again using the case study with the same 10 ethical dilemmas (see appendix). The students had to put themselves in the shoes of people whose intentions and interests they had least identified with in the case study. They were then able to identify the greatest number of ethical problems after having found they could defend a point of view they had first considered opposite to their own, suggesting that more emphasis should be put on the development of empathy and inter-relational competences in future research.

The students asked more than once for the teacher's answer to the moral dilemmas discussed. Using a critical pedagogy approach, the lecturer in turn gave an explanation on why many of the issues did not have a right or wrong answer, but rather different perspectives. Students understood this for a while, but again asked for the teacher's input in subsequent sessions. It took them a long while to grasp that a traditional top-bottom approach to teaching was different to the action researcher's role in critical pedagogy, where the main purpose is to make them think for themselves and become

empowered. Another study on motivation and manipulation in the teaching of interpreting is underway, with the aim of searching for alternative ways to make the students critical about the lecturer as well as the structures they belong to and the ideological use of deontological codes (Kultgen 1998).

Forthcoming research will include triangulation within the action research spiral by means of an online questionnaire, focusing on ascertaining whether the students can think critically and empathically about deontological and/or ethical issues. In subsequent academic years, control groups can be added in classes of different language combinations, including students who have chosen translation rather than interpreting as their main curricular activity. The study would considerably improve if it included ethical awareness in lecturers and interpreters as compared to the students' or to other professionals such as judges or the police.

Finally, it may prove worthwhile to look into the relationship between quality and ethics. Does quality improve with an ethical understanding of the profession of interpreting? This could be done from different user expectations, including as well that of lecturers of different subjects within Translation Studies.

5. Concluding remarks

Apprentices are usually taught to abide by professional codes, in a similar way that interpreters sometimes learn techniques in 'the medieval tradition of the master teaching the apprentice' (Pöhhacker 2010). Philosophers and experts in applied ethics have traditionally been alone in wondering whether professional codes are indeed ethical. Can such a thing as an unethical professional code exist? What happens when our moral values are at odds with traditional professional codes? The answer to this question probably depends on the fact that the ethos of a profession changes with the times.

When 'good', as in 'virtuous', is compatible with 'good', as in 'excellent', the concept of 'fairness' plays an important role in the definition of quality; if an excellent interpreter is also a 'good' person, capable of empathy, aware of social justice and, among many other issues, a team player and a helpful boothmate, he or she will be considered highly by his/her peers and may become more successful in business.

The same might apply to the excellence of interpreter education and institutional improvement from a metaethical perspective. For example, if educational institutions also serve as interpreting agencies, it seems unlikely that students in any field will defend student rights after an infringement if they think their lecturers are the only

ones who can give them a job in the near future. Thus, students may still be saying what they think the lecturer wants to hear, and perhaps any beliefs or research of this sort should be validated again once they have finished their studies and authority is no longer an issue.

Only time will tell whether this experience has made students more critical and empowered to think critically, or whether in some cases they have simply become aware of other people's interests and motivations and have as a result become empowered to use their critical thought to pursue their own interests. Even if it were so, this would not pose an ethical problem for the lecturer because the students will have learned to identify manipulation and become conscious of it. Yet, most importantly, if they are now indeed conscious, do they care? How does this affect them? It still remains unclear whether ethical behaviour can be *unlearned* or forgotten as environments change, whether manipulation occurs unavoidably in teaching as it does in communication, and whether it is indeed ethical on the part of a lecturer to think that his or her own set of values is better than another's.

Becoming more ethically aware, or feeling more empathy towards differing opinions, does not, however, imply that individuals are prepared to take action. It is still to be proven whether improving students' empathy is enough to empower them into taking moral actions and change certain traditions or deontological codes.

It will perhaps take a few more years for lecturers and professionals to realise the implications of this, and that teaching interpreting students deontology or 'how to find a job' does not encourage critical thinking or empathy towards fellow colleagues, clients and, most importantly, other human beings. In a spirit of self-reflection and critical pedagogy, rather than speaking of a 'set of values' and giving students straightforward answers with regards to ethical dilemmas, perhaps it would be desirable for the lecturer to ask them instead: 'What makes you think this – or any lecturer's – moral values are fit to be shared?'

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Appendix: Ethical Dilemmas found in the case study

1. Laura's colleagues treat her unrespectfully because she is a potential competitor.
2. Laura asks her former student Susan to be her boothmate for an interpreting task.

3. Susan is pregnant and her husband has lost his job.
4. Laura sends an e-mail to Rémy, the President of the Association d'Interprètes de Besançon, forwarding him the client's name and e-mail address.
5. Laura and Susan will charge €400, instead of €300, for half a day's interpreting.
6. Laura and Susan are native speakers of English, and the other interpreters are not.
7. Laura and Susan have received formal interpreting training into English.
8. The unwritten code of the group of interpreters does not correspond to Laura and Susan's idea of ethical behaviour. They do not belong to the Association, although they work in the same region.
9. Laura receives a nasty e-mail from Nathalie, one of her colleagues, accusing her, in the name of a group of fellow interpreters, of being *unethical* (sic).
10. Laura keeps quiet about her future interpreting jobs with Susan.