

Teaching... Naturally: Collaborative Efforts in Interpreter Training for Development

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Abstract

The notion of 'interpreting for development' encompasses, on the one hand, paid professional activities undertaken with the aim of improving society (e.g., paid professional interpreting for NGOs or institutions) and, on the other hand, ad-hoc interpreting tasks for audiences without means (eg. interpreting in Social Forums or in humanitarian contexts). 'Interpreting for development' and, by way of consequence, 'interpreter *training* for development' can benefit largely from new and free technologies, both saving scarce financial resources, and helping trainees acquire interpreting competence and abilities. Collaborative learning tools and environments, along with databases, such as the Speech Repository of the European Commission, increase the use of material taken from real-life and a wide range of discourses and situations.

Using innovative technology or hardware, however, does not imply that the contents or the methodology of a course are improved *per se*. In this respect, action research constitutes a useful contribution to the variety of paradigms in didactics of interpreting enriching our field of study (Pöchhacker, 2004:202). According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), the main objective of action research is to improve practice, the understanding of practice and the situation in which the practice takes place. By analysing and understanding their practices, action researchers can put new ideas in place, solve certain problems or become more effective in a given area, thus improving their practice. The article will analyse student feedback taken from different contexts and trainee backgrounds, including undergraduate classes and a taster course before a Social Forum. The *Weltanschauung* of interpreting for development would entail the joining of ideologically complementary efforts in training practices. From a constructivist

perspective, it could also favour the appearance of new networks for the exchange of teaching materials and methodologies at a global level.

1. Introduction

"It all adds up to this - and I hope to make it even more convincing in 2010. Irrespective of language, place, time, type, training, age, circumstances and language proficiency; insofar as bilingualism is universal, so too **TRANSLATING IS UNIVERSAL**". Brian Harris (2009a)

Since the 1920's it has been believed that education was a science whose main objective was to draw the best out of a child (Sharma and Romesh, 1998). Yet, the philosophical aspects of the 'teaching animal' (Strauss:2001) show us that there is more to the nature of education than those objectives. The process of teaching is universal, as is translating and interpreting in bilinguals, all of them as old as the hills (see. for instance, Hermann, 1956/2002:17).

Starting with Harris' definition of 'natural' translation, for some opposed to 'unprofessional' translation, we will define interpreting for development. A key concept linked to ad-hoc interpreting is the improvement of quality in production. The use of collaborative methods in training and the creation of collaborative learning tools in the teaching and learning of interpreting will take us to explore new ways to revise our own teaching practice, notably through action research.

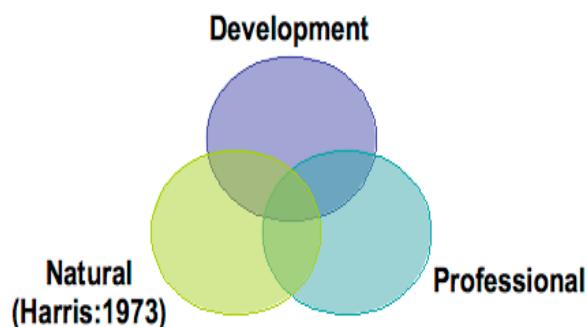
2. Towards a definition of 'Interpreting for Development'

Based on Harris and Sherwood's (1978:155) definition, 'natural interpreting' could be a synonym for 'lay interpreting', that is, interpreting done by bilinguals without specific training for the task (see, for instance, Pöchhacker (2004:22). This core definition of natural interpreting as ad-hoc interpreting leaves, however, a conceptual vacuum when trying to taxonomically define certain volunteer interpreting situations. Would this definition then suggest that professional interpreting is not 'natural'? If bilingual children can interpret naturally, perhaps what professional interpreters do has been 'naturally improved' by training and/or practice, as learning is also 'natural', as we will see later. The term 'natural interpreting' seems to be the best to describe the cognitive skills

involved in translation inherent in bilinguals, but not the translation situation (Malakoff and Hakuta, 1991 ,143). With reference to the intuitive aspect of 'natural interpreting' Brian Harris recently wrote:

"Might there have been a better term? *Naive Translation*? Not bad. *Intuitive Translation*? Good too. *Untrained Translation*? A suitable cover term to include both natural and native translation. And insofar as most of it is spoken, it could also be called *Natural Interpreting* (a suggestion made early on by Otto Kade of Leipzig). Anyway, we can't put back the clock. But when searching with browsers for natural translation, you can try to cut down the noise by adding a contextualising word like *children*, *bilinguals* or *brokering*." Brian Harris (2009b)

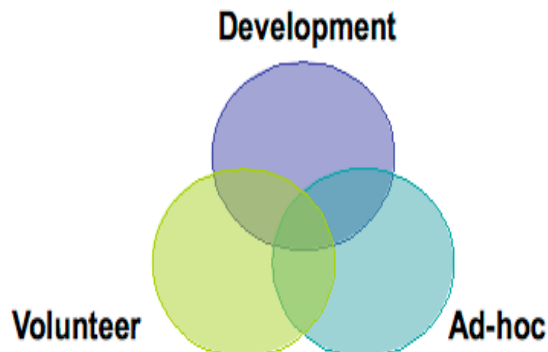
Thus, it would be logical to assert that 'professional interpreting' and 'ad-hoc interpreting' are mostly antonymous, even though one could think of at least two borderline exceptions: 1) many ad-hoc interpreters have gradually become professionals by acquiring the techniques without training and 2) a professional interpreter who has trained for only certain modalities may be classified as an ad-hoc interpreter when trying to interpret in another situation. Yet this interpreter could barely be called an outsider, as he or she would have acquired techniques and a certain level of expertise. It is relevant here, then, to remember the distinction between 'modality' and 'context'; the techniques (e.g. simultaneous) and the situation, as well as the seven hypertexts introduced by Pöchhaker (1995) for conference interpreting.



'Interpreting for development' will be defined as interpreting for the benefit of developing countries, whether the interpreter is a paid professional or not. It refers to the intention of the interpreter at doing his or her work and not to the monetary nature of the relationship. This notably encompasses 1) humanitarian-related conference interpreting,

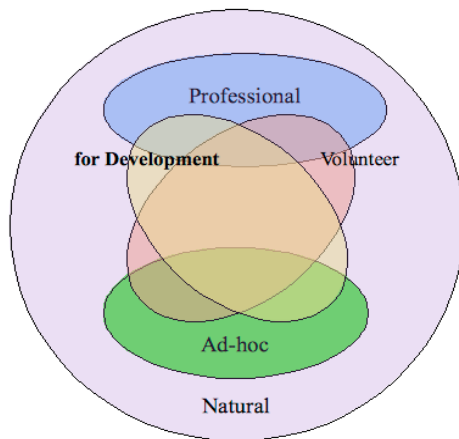
regardless of the technique, but also interpreting in contexts where NGOs or international entities interact in a multilingual environment, including international organisations or governmental social services, and 2) interpreting in meetings and conferences NGOs with lack of funding. This would exclude particularly government-driven initiatives or sufficiently-funded private entities, as well as Public Service Interpreting, which should be done by professionals (Brander de la Iglesia, 2010). Again, it would be ethically wrong to use volunteer work to obtain low-cost services that can be provided for by the public sector.

As a result, if we continue believing in the cognitive quality of 'natural interpreting' when trying to define certain volunteer work situations which are a reality in our field, we could conclude that interpreting for development can be both professional and natural. Such is the case of professional interpreters who do pro-bono work in their free time. It would perhaps be redundant to underline the difference between the concept of 'volunteer interpreting' and the at times misunderstood view of 'unpaid unprofessional interpreting' as anyone practising the latter would incur in unfair competition or dumping if they accepted working for free for a sufficiently-funded client (Brander de la Iglesia, 2010).



Similarly, a volunteer professional who interprets (for free) in one context, is likely to do paid humanitarian work for well-funded institutions, governments, companies or foundations in another situation. It would be correct to say then, that a different individual could be an 'ad-hoc volunteer interpreter for development', if he or she wishes to be so. The same could be done, in groups of three or four, with the five concepts shown in the above Venn diagrams, if one felt inclined to draw them all in order to show every hypothetically possible relation (1: natural, ad-hoc, volunteer; 2: development, professional, volunteer; 3: natural, volunteer, professional, and so on). It seems the only two concepts that do not intertwine, as explained above, are 'professional' and 'ad-hoc',

and so a larger Venn diagram still with a finite number of sets would have to be devised so that these two would not come into contact, thus:



The five-set Venn diagram above is a colourful attempt to show the relation between the concepts we have explained before. All interpreting would be 'natural', just as translation can very much well be universal. Professional interpreters and ad-hoc interpreters (a distinction made according to the training received) would not mingle as much if it wasn't for those 'interpreting for development' situations in which their good will (according to their humanitarian intentions, or social commitment) leads them to perform volunteer work which is, by definition, unpaid.

Such a unique setting where both professionals and ad-hocs work together for free – sometimes even risking their lives in the process– can take place in conflict areas or in developing countries, but not only there. Arguably, interpreting for development should first and foremost take place in the classroom, wherever that teaching context may be. If 'interpreting for development' refers to the intentions and the ethical values of the interpreters, those intentions should be the same within and towards every country, regardless of its level of development, and the good will to help others communicate could in turn be, just as translation at the core, universal.

Ad-hoc volunteer interpreters working for minorised languages and peoples in a developing country will require inexpensive training (Brander de la Iglesia, 2010). Such pro-bono work will best meet the quality everyone deserves if taken care of by volunteer

professional trainers in interpreting. Intentions, training and quality are intimately related, and in the point where the three converge, there is a grey area: development is not possible at all if communication is lacking; communication cannot only be based on intentions and no training, as bad quality in communication is usually detrimental to noble intentions. Training better interpreters in the West who offer the highest professional quality and can also do volunteer work for development, having become aware of the ethical implications and stakes involved, is a way of increasing quality, training, and the results of good intentions at the same time.

3. Collaborative Learning Environments and Action Research

We shall not dwell here upon the advantages and disadvantages of computer-supported collaborative learning environments, which authors such as Sandrelli (2002), Motta (2005); Moser-Mercer, Class and Seeber (2005) and Motta and Drummond (2007) have begun developing in our field; Moodle courses, virtual social constructivist environments, video-enhanced interpreter training, OpenCourseWare platforms (footnote www.ocw.usal.es/humanidades) are all student-centered tools that add to a variety of existing methodologies and teaching materials. It is necessary, though, to underline that interpreter training is ideally done in a blended environment, not only using collaborative learning tools and new technologies, but applying as well a comprehensive collaborative method which includes aspects sometimes forgotten in distance interpreter education.

One such key competence –lacking even in some presential courses where only single booths are available– is helping your boothmate, which could constitute a technique in itself depending on the degree of implication of the interpreter, as the cognitive efforts are as complex as those involved in simultaneous interpreting itself. Promoting this specific set of cognitive efforts is no given ability, especially in the case of trainees, who are by definition in more need for help at the beginning; it involves listening to the original speech, listening to the boothmate's production, looking at the documentation and the screen as well as writing. It could be argued that many professionals just rest when they are not actively interpreting, but the role of the "well-intentioned boothmate" when training for an interpreting task, includes shared, collaborative work, and this not only during the interpretation, but especially before it begins and, if the trainee interpreters are classmates, also after the interpreting session has ended. The teacher

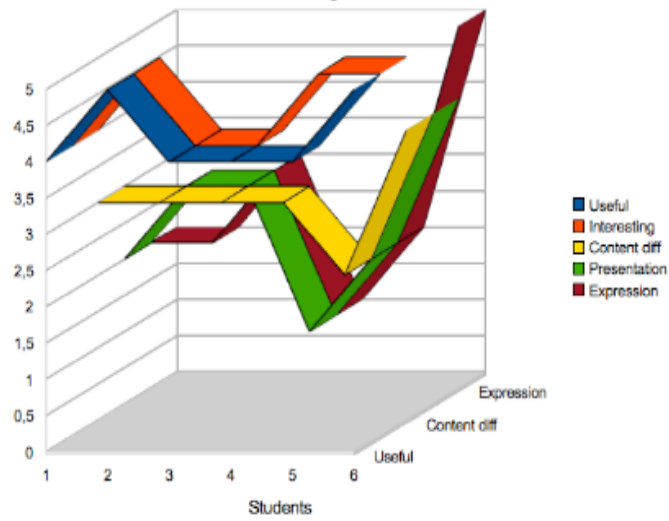
can provide, why not, prescriptive solutions for the exercise if considered necessary, but also leave space for reflection, understanding of the processes involved, debate and the creation of collective knowledge. For this purpose, applying action research to collaborative learning in real-life may constitute an extremely interesting methodology. In order to make it as close to professional situations as possible, the interpreting class can take place around a given interpreting task which, towards the end of the academic year, could indeed be a real-life situation, be it a conference, bilateral interpreting for a business or a task for Public Service Interpreting etc., each modality probably having more interesting facets to be explored by the action researcher.

4. Preliminary results

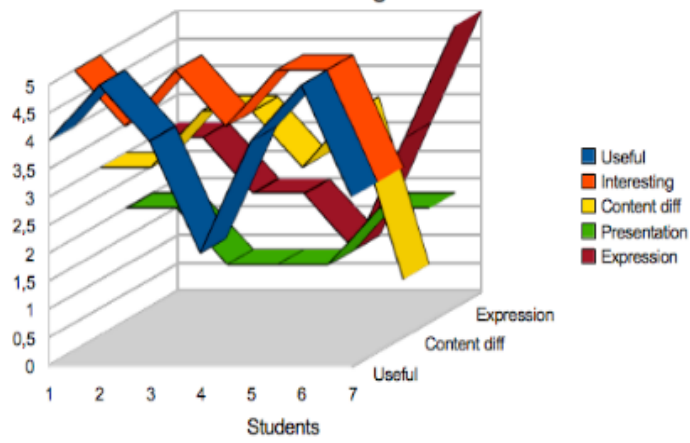
Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning has an inherent social nature, and explained this theory in his concept of a 'zone of proximal development', which could be defined as the difference between what students are able to learn on their own and what they can achieve with help and guidance from the teacher and teamwork with other students. Interpreting for development and, by way of consequence, 'interpreter training for development' can benefit largely from this inherent social nature of blended collaborative learning, and technologies or environments such as Moodle. Minimising financial efforts in social commitment thanks to new technologies is only one of the advantages of collaborative interpreting training for development.

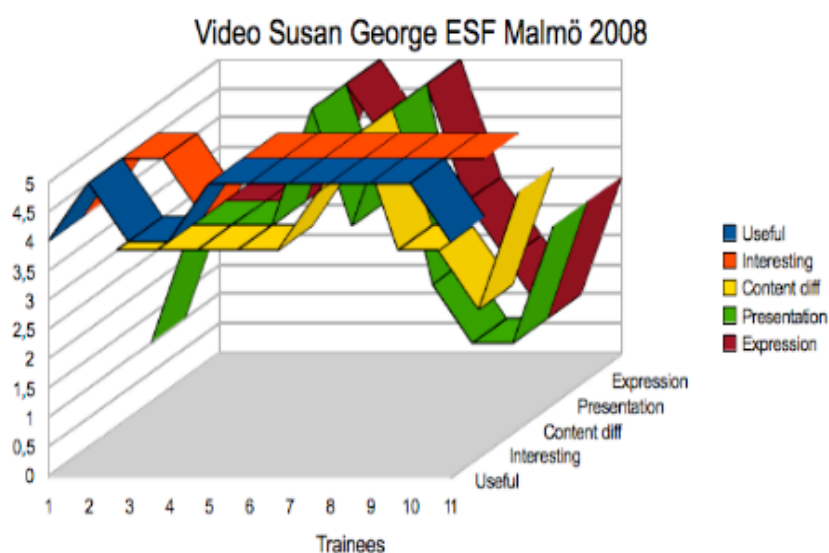
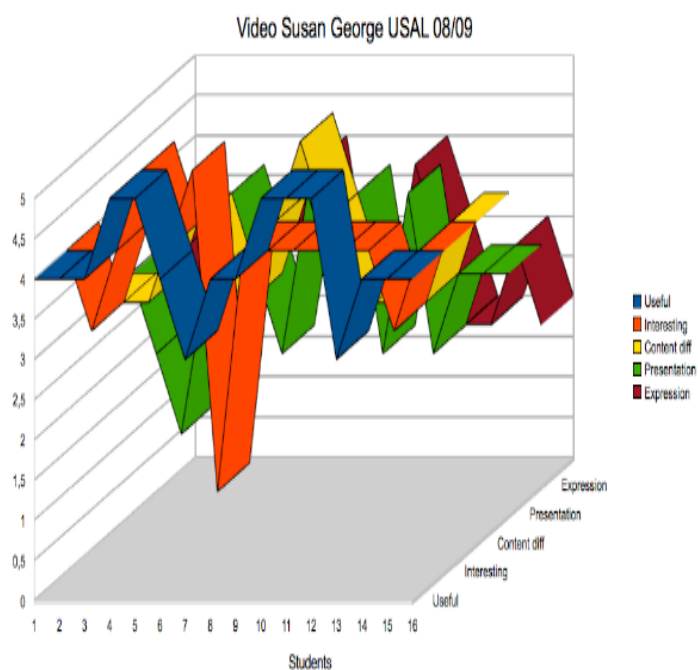
The following charts portray preliminary results from the evaluation of a video by four groups of students and trainees from two different social contexts (at two universities and during a workshop before a Social Forum). The learners were asked to rate from 1 to 5 the usefulness, interest, and difficulty of a video they had interpreted (for more information on the questionnaire and a complete bibliography on this research project see, in this volume, Brander de la Iglesia and Opdenhoff, 2010).

Video SusanGeorge Heriot-Watt 05/06



Video Susan George USAL 06/07





The video, a speech by Susan George, was chosen for this case study because it was rated as one of the most useful and interesting by trainees, and had been recorded from a Social Forum (see Abril Martí, 2009; Padilla Benítez and Brander de la Iglesia, 2009). Only one student rated it as very uninteresting, and he or she explained that it was the subject matter, that is, the economic situation, that was not an appealing topic. Among the open answers explaining their thoughts on their evaluation of the interpreting task, it is interesting to note that the trainees in the workshop before the Social Forum in Malmö were extremely motivated by Susan George's speech, and worked on the vocabulary, the transcriptions and the abstracts, collectively sharing their glossaries and organising them by subject matter, leaving coordinators and lecturers alike much perplexed at how

much time and energy they invested in the tasks. Various trainees, one or two for each language, volunteered to coordinate this effort, started for previous Forums by Babels coordinators, and the results can be seen on the Lexicons website of Babels.

This is the first video interpreted by the four groups represented on the charts for this case study, and it will be of interest to compare these results to those of videos perceived as more difficult, to those obtained from future workshops and school years, and to the answers provided by students interpreting into A or into B. It must be said that the students, both at Heriot-Watt and in Salamanca, had interpreted easier speeches before, and were in the fourth year of their Translation and Interpreting degrees, whereas the trainees at the Social Forum were, for the most part, complete beginners of various backgrounds (mostly translators and bilingual activists and students, among which those with an insufficient proficiency in English had been suggested that they were needed in other organising tasks). Data from an action research discussion group that followed each of the teaching and learning situations is currently being assessed and will be included in a forthcoming PhD thesis. Preliminary results, however, do point to the striking fact that students who are not used to working with real-life videos find these more difficult than trainees who are given an interpreting task for the first time. In addition, it would be worthwhile to study the relation between difficulty, motivation, context and previous misconceptions, or the four stages of competence according to Maslow (1940). The objective of this case study was not to propose generalisations from the results obtained, as the number of students is not representative and the situations and variables at stake are subjective; the main purpose was to improve our collaborative teaching and learning experience and practice, by means of applying action research to the training of interpreters for development, including both undergraduates and volunteers in Social Forums.

5. Concluding remarks

Teaching is remarkably complex natural activity (Strauss: 2001), as is interpreting by definition; both natural and universal.

"The fundamental tenet of the Natural Translation (NT) Hypothesis is that *all* bilinguals can translate. The first person to state that explicitly was the brilliant Bulgarian semiotician Alexander Ludskanov (A.L.) in 1967. [...]: *By intuition and habit, all bilingual*

people can translate in some way or other. Consequently the fundamental question for the study of human translation is not how to teach people to translate, but how to teach them to behave in a way that will produce results conforming to certain well-established, accepted criteria". Ludsanov in Harris (2009b)

Yet the teaching of interpreting, though logically natural as well, is far from being universal according to norm: only those who pass examinations can enter certain Translation and Interpreting Schools where they are taught, according to the norm, how to translate and interpret (mainly) for international institutions and the private professional market (including PSI). Yet speakers of minorised languages are unable to attend postgraduate masters in Western countries, and conferences organised in developing countries deserve high-quality interpreters as well. In between stand the young interpreting students from the North, who are eager to travel the world in order to become responsible citizens, while they practice interpreting.

As Harris puts it in his blog, "I'm a Gemini, an auspicious sign for translators. Geminis have a dual personality. On the one hand I observe the inevitability of Natural Translation and preach awareness of its usefulness. On the other hand, I'm a member of two associations of Professional Expert Translators. I don't consider my two personas incompatible: there's a time and a place for everything" (Brian Harris, 2009c). One could argue the place is cyberspace, and that the time has come to join efforts in interpreter training for development to and from minorised languages. The sign is Libra as open-source collaborative learning materials constitute a revolutionary tool in the creation of networks for the exchange of collective knowledge among universities and among peoples. This *Weltanschauung* would only enrich the universality of interpreting, and of teaching, naturally.

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