

Pedagogical Approaches To Adaptive Expertise In Conference Interpreter Training

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Abstract. This article explores expertise in conference interpreter training and reports on a preliminary study on the use of reflective practice as a pedagogical approach in the development and evaluation of ‘adaptive expertise’ (following Moser-Mercer, Ref. [1]). The discussion considers the potential for locating the object of study within the emerging digital humanities paradigm as a result of the new possibilities offered by technology for capturing cultural practices of learning and performance in conference interpreting. It ends with a call for more ethnographic research on curriculum design and delivery to complement interrogations of practice through digital technologies.

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Introduction

As a complex activity that is often conducted in high stakes environments of diplomatic and international relations and business, conference interpreting and, by extension, interpreter training entails a focus on what could be termed initial expertise development to an extent not reflected in other areas of translation-related training. This claim finds echo, for example, in the Quality Assurance Standards of the EMCI consortium [2] (2012), according to which “the quality of the candidate’s interpreting should be such that s/he can be recruited *immediately to work alongside accredited conference interpreters* in meetings in regional and international Organisations and on the private market” (emphasis added). While “[i]t is understood that beginners are not normally assigned to the most technical or demanding meetings” (ibid), the EMCI Standards set out professional entry-level criteria that imply a mastery of *skill* particular to the field and a highly developed meta-cognitive *capacity*; ‘expertise’, then, is necessarily viewed as taking multiple forms.

This article explores pedagogical approaches to the development of ‘adaptive expertise’ (following Moser-Mercer, Ref. [1]) in conference interpreter training. Rather than viewing expertise in terms of an intended learning outcome or goal in itself, a process perspective is adopted which allows emphasis on the emerging identity of the ‘expert learner’ in conference interpreter training and the transferability of prac-

tices between the learning environment and professional contexts of practice. Finally, building on Moser-Mercer’s approach, the article critically appraises the value and purpose of reflective practice within a multifaceted approach to expertise development by reporting on a preliminary study.

This focus is considered important for several reasons: first, because of the long neglect in conference interpreting studies of pedagogical theory and the ways in which it informs curriculum design and delivery; second, because of wider issues of employability and the increasing need to acknowledge that entry level into professions requires high levels of expertise, and third, because the specific requirements of professional practice entail the ability to foster resilience and self reliance (capacities that can be grouped under the umbrella of adaptive expertise). Arguably, current approaches to interpreter training consider developments in these areas to be natural outcome of training as opposed to something that needs to be *attended to* in teaching and learning.

1. Conference interpreting research and the digital humanities

As this article forms part of a volume dedicated to the digital humanities, consideration is needed concerning the extent to which the object of study fits within this emerging paradigm. Although the nature and scope of the digital humanities is still the subject of debate [3], considerable consensus

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has emerged regarding its potential for interrogating cultural practices in different areas of social life and scope to open new forms of inquiry; to date, such potential appears to have been seldom discussed in relation to conference interpreting research. In part, then, this article aims to open up debate; however, it is important to distinguish at the outset between technologically-mediated practices that fall beyond the scope of the paradigm and the interrogation of cultural practices through digital technologies - interconnections between the two, however, are acknowledged.

Conference interpreting, and in particular simultaneous interpreting, has long been a technologically-mediated activity even in its earliest, most rudimentary forms. In the contemporary context, the impact of technologies extends to all aspects of service provision: from mediating performances *in situ*, to prior preparation and research, and the digital capture of performances in institutional settings, among others. Developments in digital capture have transformed the way in which the 'product' of interpreting is conceived, since it has led to a durable materiality in the public domain which confers upon it the status of a 'cultural artefact'. This shift in status has made it possible for both enhanced public engagement with multilingual institutions (through post-hoc access to public meetings) and for scholars to explore the activity as a cultural practice in ways and on a scale hitherto impossible to achieve [4].

In the field of education, the availability and ability of technology to capture experiences of a broad range of learning activities provides increasing scope for programme teams to interrogate approaches to teaching and learning as a form of cultural practice on a broader empirical basis. Furthermore, scrutiny of such cultural practices is considered crucial for the effective assessment of the nature and range of so-called 21st century literacies that individuals need to handle the changing demands of the (conference interpreting) work place and social life more generally, which in academic terms concern 'language, power, identity and what counts as knowledge' [5]. A clear link emerges therefore between the development of such literacies and Moser-Mercer's focus [1] on the importance of a technology-rich learning environment in supporting the development of adaptive expertise in conference interpreters, a concept to which I return in section three.

2. Research on expertise in conference interpreting

Conference interpreting research to date has illuminated many aspects of expertise with an overarching emphasis on expertise-as-interpreting-performance; however, connections between research findings and their pedagogical implications remain under-examined.

Early, and largely personal accounts from the field served to cultivate an image of interpreters as figures of wonderment

in the popular imagination [6,7]; however, the ascription of expertise on the basis of unspecified criteria precludes *explanation* as to what actually constitutes it as Ericsson [8, p. 190] observes: "in many domains the assessment of expertise is questionable because individuals' reputation and their levels of training are often used as substitutes for individuals' level of expert performance". For Ericsson, working within the cognitive psychology tradition, the investigation of expert performance must be predicated on a science of performance, involving the identification of phenomena that can be isolated and repeated under laboratory conditions; however, there is a risk that by decontextualising performance in this way, the impact of wider features of context and their impact on performance are neglected.

Sloboda's research [9] on expertise in musical performance opens the discussion to more fundamental questions about the purpose of research on expertise; for instance, the extent to which it is designed to 'get inside the expert's head', explain 'exceptional performance', and why, even if the same amount of input (i.e. practice) is undertaken, some never achieve 'expert level'? [9, p. 154]. The latter points to a 'common sense view' of expertise that Ericsson [8, p.187] counters by drawing attention to the limited empirical evidence available to support such a view; by contrast, he asserts that research does suggest that performance can be improved through training, and that motivation can impact on attained levels of performance.

In seeking to define expertise, Sloboda [9, p. 155] also challenges the common sense view and observes: "[i]t is difficult for me to escape the conclusion that we should abandon the idea that expertise is something special and rare (from a cognitive or biological point of view) and move toward the view that the human organism is in essence expert". He posits a definition of an expert as "someone who can make an appropriate response to a situation that contains a degree of unpredictability" as opposed to "someone who performs a task significantly better (by some specified criterion) than the majority of people" [9, pp. 154-155]. In many respects, the 'appropriate response' perspective has informed approaches to research on expertise in conference interpreting, in recognition of the unpredictability inherent in the activity and the desire to develop 'tools to gain *more control*' over the interpretation [8, p. 206, emphasis added]; examples include, research on language processing which is characteristic of research in the novice-expert paradigm [10], investigations into improved efficiency in working memory [11] and the process of allocating resources to the various cognitive tasks involved in simultaneous interpreting [12, 13]. In related research, attention to 'optimum quality' in interpreting [14] is also indicative of such an approach to expertise.

Research on expertise in interpreting performance has therefore helped to illuminate the mental processes of novice and more experienced interpreters, but as mentioned above, the pedagogical implications of the research remain

under-explored. Of particular concern to pedagogues is the need to unpack the apparently unproblematic linear trajectory of learning and development promoted through the dichotomous ‘novice-expert’ pairing, and emphasis on isolated tasks in expert performance analysis which yields insight into process but does not allow due account of the relation between performance and situated activity. Finally, the transitional phases in learning and the literacies students need to develop in order to move through such phases point to the need to focus direct attention on developing the ‘expert learner’ (and the ‘expert trainer’) as part of a more holistic approach to the understanding of expertise in interpreter training and performance.

3. Developing adaptive expertise

Moser-Mercer builds on previous research [1] in conference interpreting by exploring human performance theories and the extent to which they shape the nature and forms of expertise that are commensurate with the needs of the modern and increasingly technologically-mediated conference-interpreting world, and allow due account to be taken of learning needs of lower and higher ability students and students with different age profiles. She presents a triangular model of human performance (in which performance is conceived as an interrelation between opportunity, capacity and willingness) in which she locates a cognitive theory of adaptive expertise with reference to interpreting activity. The aim is to improve understanding of the ‘basic psychological factors’ that promote improved performance, and also to show how recent educational research can develop effective learning environments that support expertise development in its multiple forms [1, p. 24], thereby marking a clear attempt to bridge the gap between cognitive approaches to skills development and pedagogy.

The approach highlights the need to distinguish between different types of expertise and account for them in teaching and learning in ways that are mutually supportive. A distinction is made, for example, between ‘routine expertise’ (i.e. an ability to solve familiar problems) and ‘adaptive expertise’ (i.e. an ability to adapt to new situations and improve performance over an individual’s career trajectory). The distinction is supported *inter alia* by research that suggests that ‘skill acquisition is not coextensive with expertise’ [15, p. 312] and by a critical appraisal of traditional approaches to interpreter training that have tended to focus almost exclusively on routine forms of expertise - in part explained by the privileging of teaching input from practising interpreters without formal pedagogical training. While this approach has a number of clear advantages for students, it risks over privileging didactic approaches to learning to the detriment of others [16]. Furthermore, the potential lack of continuity between sessions risks skills being taught and perceived in isolation; as a consequence the overarching ‘pedagogical narrative’ risks being

lost, or rather the onus is placed on students to create their own narratives, and they are - initially at least - unlikely to have the skills to do this.

‘Adaptive expertise’ is understood by Moser-Mercer (following Ref. [17]) as ‘meta-cognitive’ in the sense that adaptive experts are considered able to perform tasks efficiently *and* at a higher level [1, p. 8, emphasis added]; further, that the development of this type of expertise can best be fostered through a technologically-rich learning environment in which student and teacher-led, individual and collaborative approaches to learning are employed. In her approach, the literacies students need to develop to operate successfully in such an environment and transfer skills to the professional sphere are fostered through a socio-constructivist approach to learning. Salient features of the approach concern the emphasis on whole activity systems as opposed to isolated skills exercises [18], and on learning as a meaning-making process [19].

A key claim of socio-constructive approaches to learning concerns its ability to allow account to be taken of the complexity of the learner [20]; however, the practical applications of this claim often appear taken for granted. Since many conference interpreting programmes contain multicultural cohorts, the cultural norms of learning are likely to considerably differ. Arguably, many interpreter training programmes assume that students are similarly culturally situated at the start of the programme, i.e. as novices in the same educational context, and will automatically and unproblematically become culturally acculturated over time [5]. The extent to which socio-constructivist approaches *overestimate* the ability of individuals to successfully adapt and ‘construct’ learning, even advanced learners such as those engaged in conference interpreter training, therefore merits additional scrutiny in order to build in appropriate compensatory strategies.

There is insufficient empirical evidence available to determine the extent to which socio-constructivist approaches to interpreter training can and do foster *inter alia* relevant diagnostic skills for trouble shooting, the capacity to discern the suitability of materials / activities to meet particular learning needs, the capacity to reconcile relations of the self with technology and with co-present others in the learning process, and assess the benefits / pitfalls of individual and collaborative learning to a depth warranted by the complexity of the activity and demands of the (future) workplace. The cultural location of the student in relation to the over-arching pedagogical approach and the manner in which this is attended to by the teaching team, will necessarily have a bearing on meta cognitive development entailed by the abovementioned list of actions.

For pedagogues wishing to develop adaptive expertise, then, consideration needs to be given to the nature of ‘scaffolding’ provided to support learning activities and the evidence base needed to evaluate development for assessment purposes (whether formative or summative). Moser Mercer

suggests that development can best be evidenced through evaluating the discursive practices of students (in the written mode), and promotes journaling as a method to capture student experiences over time; however, analysis of their validity and utility is beyond the scope of her article. It is posited that while journaling may assist the individual in articulating his/her cultural location in relation to the learning experience, it may be limited in its ability to provide evidence of the of social interactions and broader sense of community and identity that emerges within a cohort of students - an important part of transitioning between academic and professional practice. The need to capture the interdependencies involved in its realisation suggests that a broader range of methods and alternative theoretical approaches to learning need to be considered.

4. Cultural production, situated learning and identities of expertise

O'Connor [21] provides insight into alternative methods of capturing and evaluating learning experiences and the development of adaptive expertise. He reports on an investigation into the emergent 'identities of expertise' (i.e. the adaptive capacities) of a group of students from two institutions representing different educational traditions, who came together to work on the same project in engineering aimed at elevating the status of practical aspects that were considered to have been devalued. The project involved reconceptualising expertise developed in educational research based on theories of cultural production.

Drawing on linguistic anthropology the project sought to show, through the analytic mechanism of 'indexicality', i.e. the way in which linguistic meaning is related to context and how "language is used to produce a world in which certain kinds of expertise are valued (or devalued) while at the same time speakers position themselves and others within those ways of understanding expertise" [21, p. 63]. Through recordings of spoken interaction between the two groups O'Connor analysed how identities across the academic boundaries of the two institutions were negotiated and the extent to which their discourses reinforced or challenged the status of certain engineering practices (e.g. manufacture).

The research was premised on a situated learning approach, through which the notion of the "mutual constitution of persons and contexts" is promoted over (decontextualised) cognitivist approaches that are believed "to emphasise the acquisition of knowledge in the production of educated persons" [21, p. 64]. Contextualisation processes were captured in the form of oral interactions, which according to O'Connor help to show "how individuals take up positions, and position one another, with regard to the interaction and broader communities in which they are participating" [21, p. 72]. The fact that the students in the study were found to commonly reproduce the discourses that had served to devalue those aspects of the profession that the project was seeking

to address, shows the level of difficulty involved in firstly developing a level of self awareness of one's 'cultural location' and secondly, in acting in ways that permit transformation of cultural formations and foster more adaptive behaviours over time.

In the study discussed in the final section, the aim was not to see how certain types of expertise were valued or devalued by learners, but rather to evaluate the extent to which an individual approach to reflective practice helps to discern the emerging identity of the conference interpreter as an expert (i.e. adaptive) learner; in this sense then, in common with O'Connor, discursive practices are viewed as a window on the positions taken by students to the many facets of the learning process. However, a key question concerns the extent to which individual approaches to the written logging of experience provide insight into the extent of its realisation, or whether they risk reinforcing a cognitivist approach that proponents of situated learning approaches seek to avoid. I return to these questions in the final sections.

5. Reflective practice

Despite being well embedded in curricula across higher education, reflective practice has only recently emerged as a component of translator and interpreter training. Viewed by many as a means for 'dealing with complexities challenges and uncertainties inherent in professional practice' [22, p. 121] and as an 'organising framework for professional preparation' [23, p. 192], reflective practice nevertheless raises problems in relation to its promotion and measurement among others, and cannot therefore be invoked uncritically. Boud and Walker [23] for instance assert that undue focus on isolated problems risks perpetuating the decontextualised approach to reflection on action that these authors, among others, have identified in relation to Schön's [24] early approach to reflective practice.

For Moser-Mercer, the incorporation of self and peer assessment and reflection in the learning environment is described as 'a mechanism to externalize [students'] metacognitive processes' [1, p. 14], with the implication that they are reinforced in the process as Tennant et al [5] assert. Other scholars (e.g. Boud [25]; Moon [26]) highlight the importance of reflective practice for helping students to both understand their own learning processes and increase their *ownership* of learning, which has resonance for practice beyond the academic environment.

Conspicuous by their absence in many of these discussions, however, are notions of time and a clear sense of when and why reflective practice might be relevant at particular points in the programme. Assumptions that it is relevant from the start and that a single form of reflective practice (e.g. journaling) is suited to all aspects of development merit further discussion. It is perhaps to be anticipated that students - at least initially - pay more attention to skill acquisition (and

‘routine expertise’) and are intrinsically more interested in this aspect than the arguably less tangible notions of meta-cognition. Some of these issues are teased out in the preliminary study discussed in the final section.

6. Discussion of a preliminary study

At the University of Manchester students on the MA in Conference Interpreting (MACINT) complete a module on professional development in the second semester of the programme, as part of which they participate in a series of simulated multilingual conferences. The module is designed to foster skills in conference preparation, performance and wider awareness of standards promoted by professional bodies such as AICC, and to lay the foundations for effective transitions to the profession and future professional development. Assessment on the module includes a component of reflective practice which is designed as an exercise in ‘meaning making’ on the part of the student and to provide insight for lecturers of the nature and range of responses and actions taken by students in relation to teacher-led input and their individual and collaborative approaches to learning. Students receive comprehensive written guidance on the exercise and dedicated in-class input on the principles and practice of reflective learning. The preliminary study involved analysis of 44 journal entries of approximately 500 words in length. Entries were made over a three-month period and individual feedback provided by teaching staff on each entry.

The regular feedback on the journals led students to develop increasingly targeted approaches to preparation and evaluation after early entries suggested difficulties in making a distinction between identifying a realistic short-medium term goals and relevant subtasks to complete to achieve them. Nevertheless, the tendency to orient reflection to prescriptive statements was evidenced in almost all entries across the module, suggesting students consistently felt the need to show their reader that they were *aware* of the appropriate professional practices even though they had not achieved them yet, evidenced through statements such as ‘the internalization of information should be prioritized at the preparation stage’.

The tendency towards prescriptivism appeared linked to an apparent reluctance to place the self at the centre of the discussion (i.e. in articulating the relation between prior learning and new situations in the conferences) suggesting the group found it difficult to articulate their changing positions to practice as emerging expert learners and how they

(re-)positioned their learning and development in relation to others in the group. As a result, activities and reflections tended to be presented as discrete tasks without a broader ‘narrative’ of learning being established. Overall, the journals primarily externalised connections between routine expertise development and experiences the simulated conference and much less emphasis was placed on the meta cognitive aspects discussed in relation to adaptive expertise, despite the activity being executed during the later stages of training and deliberate pedagogical input on these aspects.

Conclusion

The findings from the preliminary study suggest that students can find it very difficult to bring all of the elements of their learning together in ways that are meaningful for them and at a level of sophistication that provides a compelling evidence of increased market readiness and awareness of the nature of the wider professional community they are soon to join. This raises questions of whether too much is expected of the practice. In terms of evidencing the extent to which both routine and adaptive expertise have emerged, the approach appears useful but limited because of the individual cognitivist focus it entails and also, in the case of this study, perhaps due to the limited word count available for each entry and the large number of international students in the group who were encountering this approach to learning for the first time.

The digital capture of journals, however, over time allows banks of evidence to be built that can show the impact of changes to teaching input on the students’ approach to reflection over time; in this sense it has important potential as a pedagogic tool. For students, however, the oral externalisation of experience in lecturer-coordinated feedback and reflection sessions may be a more conducive way for students to develop understandings of their positioning in relation to the activities undertaken by hearing others’ views and being directly prompted to consider particular aspects (such as prior experiences of learning) by teaching staff (as discussed by Tsang [27]). Removing the need for the formal assessment of such practices within the curriculum may also be a way to reconfigure the activity in ways that allow greater flexibility and responsiveness to group learning patterns, which by their nature, change with each cohort of students. Overall, the study suggests that there is scope for more ethnographic work in this area to complement digital repositories of reflections in the written form.

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