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# Lost In Translation? A Report Into Action Research On The Effects Of Interpretation On Learning And Teaching

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## Abstract

This paper follows from Zeng and Burrows (2013), in which the issue of the effects of interpretation on learning and teaching was introduced. Action research was completed in China in 2013 and this paper reports some of the analysis and results of that research. A number of issues were identified and these are of interest to all practitioners, as they are pertinent to both general and specific teaching practice. The learning process is, in the main, a dialogue between teachers and learners. However, there are many occasions for triangulation, for example, language interpretation, signing and use of amanuenses. This small-scale action research project has highlighted some of the issues inherent in teaching and learning through interpretation, but the points raised by the research can inform practice in all situations.

*NB: In this paper, the following terms apply: the 'trainer' is the UK Teacher Educator, the 'interpreter' is the member of the Chinese university staff who interprets on the training programme and the 'teachers' are the Chinese teachers attending the training.*

## Key words

Interpretation; Vocational Education; Teacher Education; Learning; Teaching.

## Introduction

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) Project comprises training programmes on student-centred learning, based in a Chinese university in Guangdong Province. UK Teacher Educators lead the training; the Chinese institution organises venues, accommodation and interpreters. The latter are all University staff and trained teachers. They have varying degrees of expertise in both English and interpretation skills. Some have such a high command of English that they can do chuchotage (simultaneous translation, whispering in the ear of the one requiring translation), while others have to wait for a speaker to finish before translating. They all vary in terms of longevity in the teaching profession and experience on the VET programmes.

Teaching through interpretation involves triangulation, an unusual method for many practitioners who are used to direct communication with their learners and need no intermediary. The two authors have worked together, and with other professionals, on many occasions and they considered that a small-scale action research project could inform practice (as stressed by McNiff and Whitehead, 2002) and provide impetus for future co-operative Anglo-Chinese research.

## Research question

The general research question concerned the effects of interpretation on learning and teaching. Four issues were identified for discussion on analysis of the research product:

1. Chinese teachers' understanding of the original English
2. The effects of interpretation on the speed of delivery
3. The relationship between the trainer and interpreter
4. The overall effects of interpretation on learning and teaching

It is important to note here the paucity of research on the effects of interpretation on learning and teaching – there is no body of work to which the authors can apply for support in their research and conclusions. Hopefully, this action research project will stimulate activity in this area.

### **Method and Process**

The project involved surveying and interviewing three groups of respondents: (1) Chinese teachers of vocational subjects undertaking a VET training programme; (2) Chinese interpreters who translate in the training room; (3) UK English-speaking trainers who lead the training.

Whilst multi-strategy research is not a universal panacea, the researchers followed the advice of Schroder (1999), in which he advocated using qualitative and quantitative methods in tandem.

### **Questionnaire**

Questionnaires were devised for each of the three groups; both the teacher and the interpreter questionnaires were translated into Chinese. The questionnaire responses provided valuable quantitative data; however, because respondents were asked to provide explanations for, and details of, their responses, some qualitative data was also produced for analysis.

As always with the issue of questionnaires, response rates have to be considered and strategies put in place to achieve the highest rate possible. Postal questionnaires are notorious for low response rates, as reported in Mangione's classification (1995) – this also applies to email in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Questionnaires were sent by email to trainers and interpreters and the response rate was poor (less than 30% in both cases). The teacher questionnaire was issued during the training; the result was that 96 questionnaires were available for initial analysis prior to formulation of focus group and interview schedules.

### **Focus groups**

As Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, focus groups are low in cost, can achieve results quickly and increase the sample size. Focus group discussions were conducted with two groups and took place in the training rooms, thereby allowing the interviewer to study participants in, what was for the teachers, a natural and familiar setting. They were conducted in Chinese by the Chinese researcher and translated.

As Kitinger remarks, focus group discussion '*...involves some kind of collective activity...*' (2005: p. 56) and the researcher must remember that they are not a detached observer but a participant in the process and great care must be taken with how questions are phrased and posed. Although there can be pressure in a focus group for participants to conform, which can contaminate results, the method was considered to be a vital part of the research, as it encourages '*...a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behavior [sic], opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues*' (Hennink, 2007: p. 6).

### **Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted among the three groups. Two trainers, four interpreters and two teachers were interviewed. The trainers were, obviously, interviewed in English; however, it was felt that material could be generated for comparison if some of the interpreter and teacher interviews could be in English, and some in Chinese.

Therefore, one teacher and two interpreter interviews were conducted in Chinese, and one teacher and two interpreter interviews in English.

The comments that are provided in the analysis were drawn from both written responses (questionnaires) and verbal discussion (in focus group discussions and interviews).

### **Reliability and validity**

Every researcher must address the issues of the reliability and validity of their data – to what extent (if any) are participants saying what they think the researcher wants to hear? Obviously, questionnaire answers can be compared and discussions and interviews can delve more deeply into what participants say, and their reasons for saying it. The researchers were very conscious of the fact that there was only one opportunity to capture data from the Chinese teachers on the training programmes, as the way in which the latter are designed means that there is never any opportunity to revisit a particular training cohort.

However, in this research, there was an added, cultural, dimension. Apart from the UK trainers, every participant was Chinese and therein lay two issues: firstly, the reluctance of the Chinese to answer questionnaires and/or provide open answers, and secondly, the issue that is something of an enigma to Westerners – ‘face’. This concept is so difficult to define and explain in any language other than Chinese and difficult to understand if one is not Chinese. These two issues are intertwined and have been the subjects of research in China, most notably by Gu A et al and Chen.

*‘Questionnaire research method... is suitable for western culture where universalism and honesty are highly valued. However, China is a society ... where people are not prone to release what they really think to strangers, the public or outside world. As a result, you can find a relatively higher refusal rate when doing questionnaire research in China.’*

(Gu A et al, 2006: p. 60)

Reasons given for refusal included: never having done a questionnaire before and not being willing to try it; suitability of the questions for the individual; waste of time; poor educational background and unwilling to appear stupid. The main reason given was violation of personal privacy.

The research also analysed why *‘Even if you get answers, they may not much reflect the reality’* (Gu A et al, 2006: p .61). Reasons for respondents’ reluctance to provide transparent responses included: when there was no benefit to them; impatience with questions that contained many different choices; unwillingness to rank factors.

The Chinese researchers also found that there was resistance to answering open-ended questions – 20% of their sample refused to provide answers to such questions (Chen, 2012). Various reasons were given for this; for example, respondents felt that these were a waste of time, that they invaded personal privacy and there was no perceived personal or societal benefit to be gained from answering.

The second issue is that of ‘face’. The researchers found that some respondents completed the questionnaires only for the sake of ‘giving them face’ – this is because they knew the researchers personally but even then the latter found many answers to be brief, uninformative and lacking detail. There are two Chinese words associated with face – *lian* (脸) and *mianzi* (面子). The former is relatively stable and concerns the individual’s value of existence (honour is at its core), closely related to factors such as wealth, power etc.

Mianzi is less stable and is the extent to which an individual's existence and will is imposed on by, or imposes on, the behaviour of others. There are also two other important aspects, as discussed by Liang (2003) – negative face, which in Chinese means the recognition of individual existence and positive face, which is recognition of social existence – this latter is highly important in a collective society like China, exemplified by the Chinese proverb: 一荣俱荣, 一损俱损 'If one flourishes, all flourish; if one loses (face), all lose (face)'.

These factors were important to consider when devising the questionnaires. The research was outlined for the teachers and they were asked to complete the questionnaire, which had to comprise open-ended questions, as their opinions were needed. Knowing that some Chinese consider these a waste of time (see above), the reasons for posing the questions in this way were fully explained. Through this, it was hoped that the teachers would be given face, they could return the compliment by providing answers and both positive and negative face could be satisfied.

**Issues: identification and analysis**  
**Understanding of the original English**

To assist in determining the effects of interpretation on learning and teaching, it was important to find out how much of the training/explanations in the original language (English without interpretation) the teachers understood. Therefore, they were asked to provide a rough estimate, in percentage terms, with the following results:

<b>% English understood</b>	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>0-10</b>	6	0	0	1	<b>7</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>11-20</b>	2	0	2	2	<b>6</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>21-30</b>	2	0	1	5	<b>8</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>31-40</b>	4	0	3	7	<b>14</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>41-50</b>	0	1	2	4	<b>7</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>51-60</b>	7	2	2	1	<b>12</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>61-70</b>	0	2	7	2	<b>11</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>71-80</b>	6	6	2	4	<b>18</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>81-90</b>	1	3	1	2	<b>7</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>91-100</b>	0	0	3	3	<b>6</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note: % results rounded to nearest whole number*

So, 7 out of 96 (7%) of teachers understood 10% or less of the original training language and 6 understood nearly all. There was a significant number, 41, who understood between 50% and 80%, representing 44% of the sample. The effects of interpretation on the different teachers' learning would be interesting to analyse.

The teachers were asked when they understood more of the original English, with some predictable responses: when they were involved in activities (many particularly mentioned games); when the original English was clear and easy to understand; when the content was related to their prior knowledge and specialist subjects; when the trainer used body language to good effect; when resources supported the training. The occasions on which they understood less of the original English were theory-heavy, when technical language was used and new concepts introduced and when there were no supporting resources.

Two things emerged for trainers to consider. Firstly, a training group will comprise all linguistic abilities, from those teachers who understand little or no English to those who understand nearly all. Secondly, the trainer's style and methods of teaching must be adapted/planned to meet the needs of the teachers.

### **Interpretation and speed of delivery**

As interpretation inevitably slows down the training process, it was important to find out in what ways, if any, this affected learning. The interpreters reported that course participants were aware that interpretation would be needed, and so expectations could be managed. Most teachers reported that the slower pace helped, for example: *'I think the slower pace caused by translation has imposed a good influence on my learning of the course because the slower speed of delivery has made us deepen our understanding of what the teacher means and made us more aware of the training purpose'*.

Some teachers with high skills levels in English did comment that the pace was slow for them, but none reported a negative influence on their learning; in fact, quite the reverse. One commented, *'I actually listen to the content twice, I think it is positive'*. Another reported, *'I don't think the speed is a problem. Actually it is good for my better understanding. The interval time allows me to think and digest what the trainer says. Comparing my understanding with the interpretation not only helps me learn but is also interesting'*. Trainers and interpreters also commented on this; one trainer stated: *'...interpretation allows participants who have some understanding of English to have two chances to understand what can be unusual and challenging teaching methods and topics'*. One interpreter summed it up succinctly: *'...it is much better than going quickly and understanding little'*.

In terms of how delivery speed affects teaching, trainers mostly reported that interpretation contributed positively: *'I don't think it is an issue at all. In fact it gives thinking time about what you want to say, and you end up giving clearer explanations'*. When interpreters do chuchotage there is hardly any noticeable change in speed at all; however, not all interpreters are able to do this. Overall, it was reported that, *'With good translation, the training process is not particularly slowed'*.

### **Trainer/interpreter relationship**

Many teachers gave considered and thoughtful replies to the question of how relationships between trainers and interpreters affected their learning. This was particularly apparent in the two groups taught by the authors, who have worked together many times. For example: *'A good personal relationship between the [UK] teacher and the interpreter will help the interpreter better understand the [UK] teacher's meaning'*. They commented on good trainer-interpreter co-ordination, communication, mutual understanding and fluency in understanding eye contact, body language and attitudes.

All the interpreters stated that their relationship with the trainer was an important issue in learning and teaching on the programmes. They cited examples of how good relationships can be created and consolidated: keeping an open mind about each other's culture; an attitude of give and take; recognition of the other's professional knowledge and expertise; tactful handling of any awkward situations. The one essential on which all were agreed was the need to engage with the trainer(s) to become familiar with accents, tone, speech patterns, inflection and idiosyncrasies.

For the trainers, this relationship is fundamental to their teaching, for example: *'I was almost bereft when they changed my translator at the end of the first week's work on my*

*first trip. I had built an excellent relationship with her – she knew how I thought and taught – and I now had to build a new relationship with another translator...* A positive symbiotic relationship between trainer and interpreter is vital to teaching and, hopefully, learning success.

### **The overall effects of interpretation on learning and teaching**

All teachers reported that interpretation assisted them in their learning; many said that an interpreter is able to bridge the cultural divide, for example: *'The interpreter provides me with a Chinese context in which I can understand what the [UK] teacher says'; 'The interpreter can introduce cultural differences between the west and the east'*. The linguistic and pedagogical expertise of the interpreters is also of paramount importance to the quality of learning in the training room, as exemplified by such comments as: *'...an interpreter with good practical experience can give us good advice...'; 'When the [UK] teacher is having a conversation with certain participants, the interpreter's simultaneous translation helps the conversation go smoothly...'*

Trainers considered that interpretation provides more advantages than disadvantages: *'as time went by the interpreter became an integral part of the course, guiding, clarifying and adding a richness that would not have been possible [otherwise].'* The interpreters' ability to translate the trainers' words and ideas is central to teaching on the VET programmes. To sum up: *'Good interpretation can only improve teaching and, as a result, learning'*.

Interpreters were equally positive about the effects of their work on learning and teaching. They play an important role beyond the translation of language – they assist in clarification, classroom management, timings, provide feedback for all parties and are sensitive to teachers' reactions. The teachers are *'... more likely to tell a translator what they think about the class than to tell the British people. So a good translator could help to explain to the trainees why certain arrangements are made or activities completed... The translator could also discuss with the expert how to make necessary adjustments for any special needs'*.

Overall, it was thought that interpretation aids clarity, breaks down barriers and assists in deepening learning, facilitating assessment and providing feedback. As one Chinese teacher commented: *'Interpretation has affected learning and teaching in two positive ways. For trainees' learning, interpretation benefits understanding of difficult content, helps us gain perceptual knowledge, imposes a deep impression on us about what we learn, and helps us learn more systematically'*.

### **Lessons learned**

Prior to the research being carried out, it was thought that the slower pace caused by the need for interpretation would have a negative effect on learning, but not so. It provides opportunities to check understanding and facilitate reflection. The trainers and interpreters agreed with the teachers – even if a teacher understands much of what has been said in English, they have their understanding confirmed or refined through the translation; also, that a slower speed aids deeper reflection on the course content.

Interpretation goes beyond mere language; it involves the interpretation of culture, social mores, attitudes, misunderstandings, atmosphere, values and even tone.

Trainers should be aware of their body language and use it to full effect; as one interpreter remarked: *'The more a trainer uses body language... the shorter the distance between the*

*trainer and the teachers and the less need for interpretation of every word and explanation of every nuance and gesture’.*

Teaching styles also require adjustment for successful learning to take place – a piece of advice from one of the trainers: ‘*Trainers: change your style – dramatic pauses mid sentence (used in classes back home to refocus attention) just confuse the context for the translator. For example: “now, what we’re going to do is...” (pause for effect and silence)...’* Habits such as these also confuse the teachers and can affect their learning adversely.

Use of clear and concise English is paramount, as garbled or imprecise speech makes it difficult for the interpreters to understand the focus of explanations. Translation will suffer and so will learning.

Learning and teaching through interpretation require huge efforts on the parts of everyone involved in the process. Trainers will always benefit from prior research into things like the differences between the different languages, the concept of face, and the Chinese education system. They must also be aware of their own idiosyncrasies and how these could be translated in a different context, their speech patterns and language they use.

A positive relationship between the trainer and the interpreter is of great importance in learning and teaching. Spending some time getting to know one another prior to teaching is helpful, as it facilitates understanding of personalities, teaching styles and language construction and enables training to be efficient and effective.

Teaching in a situation that involves triangulation is merely one extreme example of the communication barriers that affect learning and teaching. All information is filtered – what is transmitted by the teacher is not necessarily accurately received by the learner. The addition of a third party translator adds a further level of filter to the communication process. The research has shed some light on this dilemma. It has reinforced the vital importance of good teaching practice elements, such as clarity of speech and instructions, providing opportunities to check understanding and facilitate reflection, appropriate use of body language, adjustment of teaching styles and resources for different audiences etc. Good teaching is good teaching, whatever the context. If practice is effective in a situation requiring interpretation, then it is likely that it will be effective in all situations for all learners.

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