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Thinking Outside the Black Box: A Theoretical Evaluation of Adult Learning and the NVQ Pathway to Interpreter Qualification

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Thinking Outside the Black Box: A Theoretical Evaluation of Adult Learning and the NVQ Pathway to Interpreter Qualification

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Abstract

This article utilizes two popular theories of adult learning as analytical lenses to evaluate the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) process of accrediting British Sign Language (BSL)/English interpreters in the United Kingdom. Although an NVQ is an assessment, learning opportunities are inherent in the assessment process and in the training which typically precedes it. Behaviorist and constructivist theoretical orientations are applied in this analysis as both are applicable and relevant to the NVQ process. The Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting framework exemplifies a behaviorist orientation, although it also blends in elements of constructivism. It is suggested that training which further incorporates constructivist learning opportunities be made a requirement as this may prove beneficial for a more holistic approach to interpreter qualification via the NVQ pathway. This analytical exploration is relevant to interpreter educators and researchers in other countries and other language combinations because, although interpreting has been traditionally viewed as a technical, skills-based profession, thereby lending itself well to a behaviorist learning orientation, it has also been identified as a practice profession (Dean & Pollard, 2005) where determinations for the work product are imbued with situational nuance, a reality to which a constructivist approach is particularly well suited.

Keywords: NVQ, behaviorism, constructivism, interpreter qualification, adult learning, interpreter training

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Thinking Outside the Black Box: A Theoretical Evaluation of Adult Learning and the NVQ Pathway to Interpreter Qualification

1. Introduction

This article aims to identify and evaluate theoretical underpinnings of adult learning in the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) process of accrediting British Sign Language (BSL)/English interpreters in the United Kingdom (U.K.). It is important to note that an NVQ is, strictly speaking, a competence-based assessment via an evidence portfolio. Training is, however, typically included in the overall process, and the Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting is considered interpreter preparation, with those working toward compilation of the portfolio eligible to register as trainee interpreters. Under consideration here, therefore, is the NVQ framework for interpreter qualification and how it may influence student learning as viewed through two theoretical understandings of adult learning.

Learning theories are denoted as explanations of what happens during a learning process, and this article draws on what Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) refer to as *behaviorist* and *constructivist* theoretical orientations on learning. We present these two theoretical orientations as useful analytical lenses through which to view the learning opportunities of interpreting students completing an NVQ, and provide suggestions for ways to leverage the constructivist learning perspective further to potentially facilitate additional learning in preparation for professional work. This analytical exploration is relevant to interpreting educators and researchers working with other languages and in other countries, because interpreting may commonly be considered a technical, skills-based profession; however, researchers have identified community interpreting as hewing more closely to conceptualizations of practice professions wherein nuances of human interaction and situational factors influence the work product (Dean & Pollard, 2005). It is, therefore, interesting to consider the appropriateness and efficacy of mapping the training of practice profession students to enable the passing of a technical, skills-based assessment, such as the NVQ assessment in consideration here.

2. The NVQ Pathway to Interpreter Qualification

The Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language (BSL) Interpreting is one route to full qualification as a sign language interpreter (SLI) in the U.K. An NVQ is one of the most common types of qualifications completed by people in the U.K. and is therefore widely recognized. NVQs assess work-related, practical tasks and the skills necessary to effectively perform a specific job, and for this reason, most NVQs focus on vocational as opposed to academic studies (NVQ.org, n.d.). NVQs can be earned in areas ranging from plumbing and electrical work to sign language interpreting and are typically offered in progressive levels (NVQ.org, n.d.). To become an SLI via

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the NVQ route, an individual must first earn NVQ language qualifications in BSL before applying to undertake a Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Interpreting.

The Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting is based on the National Occupational Standards in Interpreting which are "technical specifications" of interpreting and describe what an individual needs to know and be able to do in order to perform a specific job role (Qualification Specification, 2013, p. 49). Competence is most often demonstrated in this qualification route by video clips—either filmed in real working situations or during a simulation—submitted along with written work. This evidence forms a portfolio satisfying requirements for four mandatory modules and one of two optional modules of assessment and must be approved by an assessor, an internal verifier and an external verifier. If the work is deemed unacceptable, the student may be given another opportunity to produce a suitable submission. (The pass rate has been 100% for the past 5 years; Signature, 2015). A rubric is often used so that when a specific behavior is observed and considered satisfactory, a tick mark is made in the appropriate criterion box.

Successful preparation for the NVQ assessment typically comprises two parts: classroom-based teaching and knowledge and evidence collection for portfolio compilation. The taught component, however, is not a requisite, as the crux of qualification in this pathway rests on satisfying the NVQ assessment criteria. Nor is the classroom component standardized; hence, specifics about interpreter training in this pathway vary amongst the many providers, most of which are private organizations. In general, however, instruction is typically tailored toward passing the assessment. Although the structure of the taught contact hours may differ with providers, an informal survey of several providers indicated that a relatively typical format might be to encompass taught course material in eight 2-day blocks spread over 8–12 months, augmented later by tutorial or progress review meetings with an assessor while the assessment portfolio is being compiled.

There is no data publicly available indicating student demographics other than that learners studying for the NVQ Diploma are adults. Theories of adult learning are thus applicable to consideration of the NVQ process for SLIs. We may thus analyse the NVQ process for SLIs through the lens of adult learning theories.

3. Theoretical Orientations Toward Learning

Several branches and tangential perspectives within many schools of theoretical thought about adult learning exist, and there is little consensus on how these should be grouped for consideration. For this reason, Merriam et al. (2006) refer not to delineated learning theories but rather to general theoretical orientations which are based on different assumptions about learning. Behaviorist and constructivist orientations were found to be particularly pertinent to the current analysis.

3.1. Behaviorist orientation

The *behaviorist* orientation focuses not on the internal thought processes of an individual but rather on observable behavior, with change in behavior considered the manifestation of learning (Merriam et al., 2006). Knowledge exists outside of and independently of people, so the environment, as opposed to the individual learner, is the determinant of what one learns. As Ertmer and Newby (2013, p. 48) explain, "Learning is accomplished when a proper response is demonstrated following the presentation of a specific environmental stimulus." This learning happens via contiguous reinforcement to specific events (Merriam et al., 2006). In this way, the learner reacts to surroundings rather than actively engages in discovery. A metaphor of a machine or a black box is often used to describe this theoretical orientation. As Cohen (1987, p. 71) put it, "Our behavior is the product of our conditioning. We are biological machines and do not consciously act; rather we react to stimuli." Essentially, the learner is a black box and all internal processes are unknown and regarded as inconsequential (Friedenberg & Silverman, 2016).

Behaviorism is the theoretical orientation that underlies most adult education, particularly vocational and technical education (Merriam et al., 2006), as well as learning the workplace (Marsick, 1988). As Merriam et al. (2006, p. 281) explain, "The emphasis in vocational education is on identifying the skills needed to perform in

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an occupation, teaching those skills, and requiring a certain standard of performance of those skills." Toward this endeavour, behaviorist orientations are typified by the following characteristics: observable and measurable outcomes such as behavioral objectives and criterion-based assessment are emphasized; students are often preassessed to determine readiness for specific instruction; and rewards and informative feedback are used for reinforcement to influence correct performance (Ertner & Newby, 2013). Although this theoretical orientation has historically dominated adult and workplace learning, Marsick (1988, p.187) recommends modifying a strict behaviorist approach to facilitate workplace learning through critical reflectivity and "greater learner participation, problem-centeredness, and experience basing," all of which are suggestions that align with a constructivist orientation.

3.2. Constructivist orientation

Constructivists hold that learning happens through a process of constructing meaning and concepts as people interpret their personal experiences and, therefore, depends on internal, cognitive activity (Merriam et al., 2007). The construction of this knowledge is based on an individual's past and current experiences, social interactions and motivations. "Constructivists believe that it is impossible to isolate units of information" (Ertmer & Newby, 1993, p. 57), so the learning that an individual gains is based on the overall context in which it happens, in conjunction with that individual's entire history of prior events and constructed knowledge. For this reason, constructivists deem it crucial that learning take place in realistic settings and that learning activities be consistent with a student's experience (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Active inquiry and self-direction are important to constructivist learning, leading some to refer to an educator's role in this approach as a "guide on the side" (White, Clark, DiCarlo, & Gilchriest, 2008, as cited in Weegar & Pacis, 2012, p. 11). Assessments typically focus on the transfer of knowledge and skills to situations and problems that differ from the initial instruction (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Learning experiences should therefore be opportunities "that induce cognitive conflict and hence encourage learners to develop new knowledge schemes that are better adapted to experience," while social learning processes may also be leveraged through dialogue as "individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members" (Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994, pp. 6–7).

Although these two theoretical orientations are based on disparate premises regarding learning, one is not necessarily right or preferable to the other. In fact, Jonassen (1992) argues for what Marsick (1988) alludes to— the notion that a blended theory approach may be appropriate, and the theoretical approach considered may depend on a learner's stage of knowledge acquisition. Jonassen (1992) argues that introductory knowledge acquisition is encouraged by more objectivistic approaches such as those with a behaviorist orientation since learners have not yet integrated adequate knowledge structures; however, he suggests a transition to a constructivist approach to present learners with greater complexity at more advanced stages of knowledge acquisition (Jonassen, 1992). This blend of behaviorist and constructivist approaches is manifested in the NVQ process, although the two theoretical orientations could be leveraged to potentially greater benefit by being made to work in enhanced synergy.

Table 1: Learning orientation characteristics

Behaviorist Characteristics	Constructivist Characteristics
Approach seeks a proper response to a stimulus; reactive to the environment.	Approach seeks knowledge construction rather than reproduction; based on learner discovery and interaction with environment; cognitively driven process.
Emphasizes observable and measurable outcomes.	Results are not easily measured and may differ amongst learners; emphasizes active engagement during experiences in real/realistic settings, interaction and problem-solving.
Educator presents information which students then demonstrate they understand.	Educators encourage dialogue amongst students and present opportunities for problem solving and higher-order thinking.
Learners are passive and acquire identical understandings.	Learners are active and construct their own understandings.

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Assessment based on behavior and criteria.	Assessment may be based on activity goals or transfer of knowledge and skills to situations and problems that differ from that of instruction.
Learning happens via informative feedback to reinforce or influence correct performance.	Learning may be encouraged by inducing cognitive conflict to develop knowledge schemas adaptable to situational factors.
Approach may be most suitable for introductory knowledge.	Approach may be best suited to later stages of knowledge acquisition.
Approach underlies most adult education, especially vocational and technical education.	

4.   Theoretical Analysis of the NVQ Interpreter Qualification Pathways

In regard to adult learning, perhaps the most obvious challenge when evaluating the NVQ pathway is the fact that it is a skills and knowledge assessment whereby competence—and not necessarily learning—must be demonstrated. There are, nonetheless, learning opportunities both in the NVQ assessment process as well as in the assessment-tailored training that typically precedes it. It is therefore interesting to consider how this type of influential focus on a practical assessment may impact learning.

The Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language Interpreting focuses on interpreting's "technical specifications" (Qualification Specifications, 2013, p. 49) and, like many vocational and technical education approaches (Merriam et al., 2006), exemplifies a behaviorist orientation through criterion tick-boxes on rubrics indicating satisfactorily demonstrated behaviors; student preassessment to determine readiness for instruction; and feedback given to reinforce or influence performance, among other factors. This focus on technical skills is interesting given that Dean and Pollard (2005, p.259) maintain that interpreting is not a technical profession but rather a practice profession due to the intricacies of human interaction:

> Interpreters cannot deliver effective professional service armed only with their technical knowledge of source and target languages, Deaf culture, and a code of ethics. Like all practice professionals, they must supplement their technical knowledge and skills with input, exchange, and judgment regarding the consumers they are serving in a specific environment and in a specific communicative situation.

Although interpreting may not be classed as a technical profession, this is not to say that a technically based, behaviorist approach is wholly incorrect for interpreter qualification. On the contrary, some aspects of such an orientation are necessary: Performing an interpretation effectively requires specific skill sets which must be mastered to a satisfactory standard. Assessing students' objectively observable behaviors enables identification of readiness to professionally practice these technical tasks. Interpreting qualification pathways skewed heavily toward behaviorist approaches, however, may overlook important skills necessary in a practice profession, particularly the ability of professionals to effectively navigate the situational nuance and ethical gray areas which they will encounter when working with people.

It is interesting to note that many of the same adjectives and metaphors used to describe a behaviorist orientation have also been used to describe interpreting phenomena. The conduit role metaphor, for example, is a direct parallel with the machine metaphor of behaviorism. Although conceptual frameworks for interpreting role metaphors have evolved, several researchers have identified the perpetuation of the conduit role in practice (Hsieh, 2006, 2008; Roy, 2002). And Turner and Best (in press) have written, "Interpreting has historically been understood as a mysterious, impenetrable exercise conducted inside the 'black box' of the practitioner's head. Words enter the box, the cogs whirr invisibly, and utterances emerge." The black box metaphor is comparably used to describe behaviorist approaches.

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Some research suggests that conduit-like approaches and reactionary stances are driven by an educational enculturation of interpreters into a specific, restricted understanding of professionalism (Dean, 2014; Hsieh, 2006; Tate & Turner, 2002; Turner & Best, in press). Behaviorist approaches, which focus on eliciting a correct behavior in response to a specific stimulus, may arguably foster reactive professional stances. It is also interesting to contemplate whether this restricted view on professionalism similarly stems from a lack of constructivist reasoning at later stages of training, as at advanced levels of knowledge acquisition "misconceptions, such as reductive bias are most likely to result from instruction that oversimplifies and prepackages knowledge" (Spiro et al., 1988, as cited in Jonassen, 1992, p. 143). Hence it is worth considering that whilst aspects of a behaviorist approach may be indispensable in interpreter training and qualification, an over reliance on this orientation may possibly enculturate interpreters into adopting reactive stances that impede the constructivist reasoning necessary for higher level professional decision making. Furthermore, while the preceding critique broadly references phenomena in the interpreting field, it is nonetheless worthy of consideration as potentially and specifically applicable to the NVQ qualification route since the NVQ process is heavily influenced by a behaviorist orientation.

The NVQ pathway for interpreter qualification does, however, have some considerable aspects of constructivism, and such elements are equally necessary for effective interpreter preparedness. The essence of constructivism is captured in Winston's (2005, p. 223) explanation that "student-centred activities that foster the development of critical thinking, decision-making, and self-assessment are essential to interpreting effectively and competently." The experience-based process of filming interpreting clips for the NVQ assessment portfolio and reflecting on one's performance both individually and with an assessor clearly derives from a constructivist approach. The assessor is the 'guide on the side' who is able to encourage perspectives for critical reflectivity on one's work. Bentley-Sassman (2009) explores the necessity of genuine work experience and ensuing reflectivity for interpreter development, and the NVQ process offers this precisely. However, in the NVQ pathway, there may be less of a guiding support into the profession and more of a behaviorist type of feedback into what needs to be honed and more clearly demonstrated in order to pass the assessment. Furthermore, the support/feedback offered to trainees seems to vary amongst NVQ diploma course providers; and further research will better ascertain if the handful of progress review meetings typically provided to trainee interpreters are sufficient to engender effective, sustained reflective practice. Moreover, the focus of reflection in an NVQ may only revolve around the criterion boxes that must be ticked, potentially limiting reflection to these points and thereby discouraging exploration of other considerations.

Whilst constructivism is inherent in the NVQ process, the behaviorist slant denies some valuable learning opportunities. Observation in the NVQ process, for example, is behaviorist orientated in that it is typically only observation *of* the student with no observation required *by* the student. A standardized training programme that incorporates shadowing of or co-working with fully qualified interpreters before the portfolio assessment could provide valuable learning experiences. Bentley-Sassman (2009, p. 65) states that requiring observation hours in interpreter training is foundational to the development of reflective practice since "students need to see a variety of signing and interpreting models to construct how they might interpret a similar situation," as well as to glean proper interpreting etiquette, learn new vocabulary, and see how experienced practitioners implement the Code of Conduct. Similarly, Farmer, Buckmaster, and LeGrand (1992) found that individuals in many professions reported that learning how to navigate risky, complex or ill-defined situations was greatly facilitated by modelling a more experienced practitioner's handling of such situations. Trainee interpreters completing an NVQ may or may not have opportunities to shadow or co-work with fully qualified colleagues. When trainees do have the opportunity to co-work with fully qualified interpreters, they may or may not be required to engage in any type of debriefing or reflective critique with their more experienced colleagues. Collaborative, interactive learning experiences, however, need not only happen with more experienced colleagues. Research has found that when students engage in reflective practice of their work with other students, they achieve "deeper levels of understanding" (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005, p. 45). While this type of peer reflection may happen informally in NVQ preparation programs amongst students, the Qualification Specification does not require it. Overall, while the NVQ pathway incorporates important constructivist elements, the constructivist theoretical orientation could be leveraged further to facilitate more complex learning necessary for effective professional interpreting practice.

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5. Conclusion

The current pathway to the Level 6 NVQ Diploma in Sign Language lacks requisite interpreter training and standardized training requirements, although instruction, following a behaviorist approach to learning, is available to prepare students to pass the NVQ assessment.

Evidence of a constructivist approach to learning appears at later stages of interpreter knowledge acquisition, when students integrate and experientially apply and develop understanding during the development of an assessment portfolio. These later stages of the overall process may still tend toward a behaviorist orientation and thus remain confined within the 'black box,' possibly even hindering the experiential learning critical to developing the higher-level decision making skills required for effective professional practice.

The entire qualification pathway could be significantly enhanced through standardized training that uses a constructivist orientation, requiring observation and more regular critical reflectivity with both experienced practitioners and fellow students. Broadening the scope of the theoretical approach in the NVQ interpreter qualification pathway could provide a more holistic programme which may thereby enrich practitioners' ability to navigate complex issues—a skill essential for a practice profession, but difficult to test for.

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