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Binhua Wang
Hong Kong Polytechnic University, wangbinhua@hotmail.com

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Binhua Wang[1]
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract

Developing students' interpreting competence requires not only systematic training of interpreting skills but also sufficient authentic and deliberate practice, as well as acquisition of professional interpreting strategies and norms. To this end, students need to be encouraged to do more autonomous, situated, and self-reflective learning in addition to classroom learning. This article reports on an interpreting-corpus-based blended-learning project of interpreter training, which, by complementing in-class instruction with out-of-class online practice, was designed to enhance students' awareness of interpreting strategies and to develop their professional competence. The design, implementation and effectiveness of the project are described and an experiential learning model with an "Experiencing – Observation – Reflection – Discussion" cycle proposed.

Key words: interpreter training; blended-learning project; experiential learning model

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[1] *Correspondence to: wangbinhua@hotmail.com*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Challenges and problems in interpreting classes

Interpreting is an interlingual and crosscultural activity that requires a high level of competence in multitasking in cognitive operations and immediacy in information processing and transference. Developing interpreting competence requires both instructor and student effort: skill transfer by expert instructors in the classroom and hundreds of hours of deliberate, self-directed out-of-class practice by students. Interpreting students across different training programs are now commonly required to complete an adequate number of practice hours (cf. Wang & Ye, 2009). For example, the "European Masters in Conference Interpreting" (EMCI) program requires students to attend 400 hours of interpreting classes in the course of one academic year, complemented by about 600 hours of group work and self-directed practice. Interpreting researchers (e.g., Moser-Mercer, 2000) estimate that achieving professional standards requires 3,000–5,000 hours of deliberate practice (including class activities, group work and individual work).

Considering the requirements of professional interpreting practice, interpreter training should always strive to be skills based and profession oriented, and involve simulated real-world features (Wang & Ye, 2009). However, despite the best efforts of class instructors, the following three issues are commonly encountered in interpreter education:

1) Insufficient practice hours. Compared with the demand of hundreds of practice hours referred to above, the number class hours offered in the curricula of most interpreting program are far from sufficient. However, due to institution and program limits, adding class hours is not always feasible.

2) Lack of authenticity in course materials and classroom activities. Real-world interpreting skills depend on the interpreter's ability to cope with spontaneous speeches given by different speakers, in differing accents, and at varying rates of delivery. It is always difficult for classroom instructors to create mock activities which retain the same level of authenticity as real-world speeches. This results in a gap between classroom practice and real-world interpreting contexts.

3) Lack of guidance for students' out-of-class practice. Students in interpreting classes are often required to undertake out-of-class practice but may not have access to suitable material nor know how to evaluate their own performance.

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1.2 Possible ways to address these challenges

Liu (2008) demonstrated the "qualitative differences" between student and expert interpreters in terms of interpreting processes and output. According to Liu, expert interpreters are better at providing a more accurate and complete interpretation, characterized by fewer errors, faster responses, and less effort. Expert interpreters seem to have developed well-practiced strategies in the process of comprehension, translation, and production. According to Ericsson (2002), "deliberate practice" is a key ingredient in the development of expertise. We may infer that classroom instruction and students' self-directed practice are equally important when it comes to mastering interpreting skills.

In spite of the importance of self-directed out-of-class practice, current interpreter education appears to be almost entirely teacher-centered. According to one study of conference interpreter training (Hartley, Mason, Peng, & Perez, 2003, p. 2),

> Currently, many if not most interpreter training programs still apply a trainer-centered approach where expert-trainers, as the source of expertise and authority, play the major role in judging and assessing trainee interpreters' performance. However, the acquisition of interpreting skills by trainees requires not only professional guidance during classes, but also extensive practice outside these hours.

Students required to search for recordings or transcripts of speeches for use in self-directed practice sessions often have difficulty accessing appropriate resources, potentially resulting in students picking up incorrect habits during interpreting practice. The fact that students do not always have access to suitable study support and appropriate materials means that "the work they do in their self-study hours is often unstructured and unmonitored" (Sandrelli, 2002: 190).

A blended-learning approach utilizing interpreting corpora and information and communication technology (ICT) tools may make it possible for trainers to establish stronger connections among classroom instruction, real-world interpreting, and students' self-directed development. Despite the wide-scale development of corpus and ICT tools in the language classroom over the past decade, interpreter training has benefited from such technological progress only to a limited extent. In fact, such tools have great potential for implementation in interpreter training, especially in situating teaching and learning in more authentic and realistic environments. Kiraly (2000, p. 43) notes that "for learning to be authentic and productive, learning tasks need to be embedded in their larger, natural complex of human activity." Interpreting corpora can provide suitable and structured materials for deliberate practice, and ICT tools can help instructors to guide and monitor students' out-of-class practice (cf. Crezee, Burn, & Gailani, 2015; Ritsos, Gittins, Braun, Slater & Roberts, 2013).

2. The interpreting-corpus-based blended-learning project of interpreter training

In 2013, Hong Kong Polytechnic University launched a blended-learning project utilizing corpus and ICT tools. The project aimed to address the challenges in interpreter training discussed above and integrate professional interpreters' successful experiences with student interpreters' self-directed learning.

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2.1 Objectives of the project

The project aimed to achieve the following outcomes:

1) To develop an authentic speech repository for interpreter training, which would provide authentic audio and video materials for both classroom instruction and out-of-class learning.

2) To build an on-site interpreting corpus, in this case a bilingual (English/Chinese) parallel corpus, that is searchable and from which typical teaching and learning materials can be extracted.

3) To create an e-learning environment for out-of-class autonomous learning, with the aid of ICT technicians. This e-learning environment aimed to incorporate several interfaces of learning: the authentic speech repository, the on-site interpreting corpus, and a web-based environment used for out-of-class practice as well as peer assessment.

4) To integrate professional interpreters' successful experiences into the interpreting classroom. It was hoped that engaging students in an in-depth analysis of the interpreting corpus and having them reflect on the interpreting skills and strategies of professional (on-site) interpreters, valuable professional practices would be integrated into student learning.

Cultivating in-class situated learning and stimulating students' autonomous out-of-class practice aimed to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world.

2.2 Implementation of the project

Two years of incorporating this teaching and learning project into interpreter training has led to several major accomplishments:
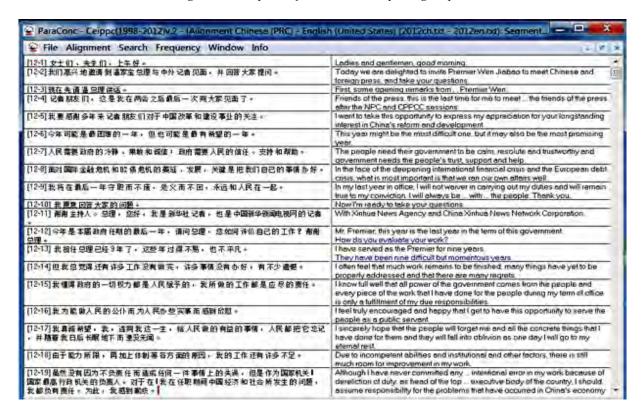
1) The development of a repository of authentic speeches and their interpretations.

Video recordings of real-world speeches and their on-site interpretations were collected, and those appropriate for interpreting teaching and learning were selected. Recordings were edited, formatted and then pooled together to form a repository of authentic speeches and interpretations. The repository covers interpretations in both English–Chinese and Chinese–English interpretation, including a variety of interpreting scenarios such as opening addresses, press conferences, luncheon addresses and keynote speeches, and a wide array of topics ranging from politics and diplomatic issues to services, trade, information technology, tourism, energy, climate change, and so on. The repository includes a large number of videos of professional interpreters working with actual speeches.

2) The creation of an on-site interpreting corpus.

All the recordings of speeches and their interpretations have been transcribed. A parallel bilingual interpreting corpus was uses the aligned transcripts of source-language speeches and target-language interpretations. A snapshot of the on-site interpreting corpus is shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1. A snapshot of the on-site interpreting corpus

3) The launch of an e-learning environment that uses the Blackboard platform for students' autonomous learning.

This e-learning environment was designed to integrate the speech repository and the interpreting corpus into the Blackboard learning platform. It comprises the following four components of experiential learning, which guide students through the process of autonomous learning (see Figure 2):

Step I. Practice with authentic speeches.

Step II. Observe on-site interpreting done by professional interpreters.

Step III. Analyze interpreting skills and strategies.

Step IV. Share and discuss reflections on skills and strategies.

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Figure 2. The e-learning environment for autonomous interpreting skill development
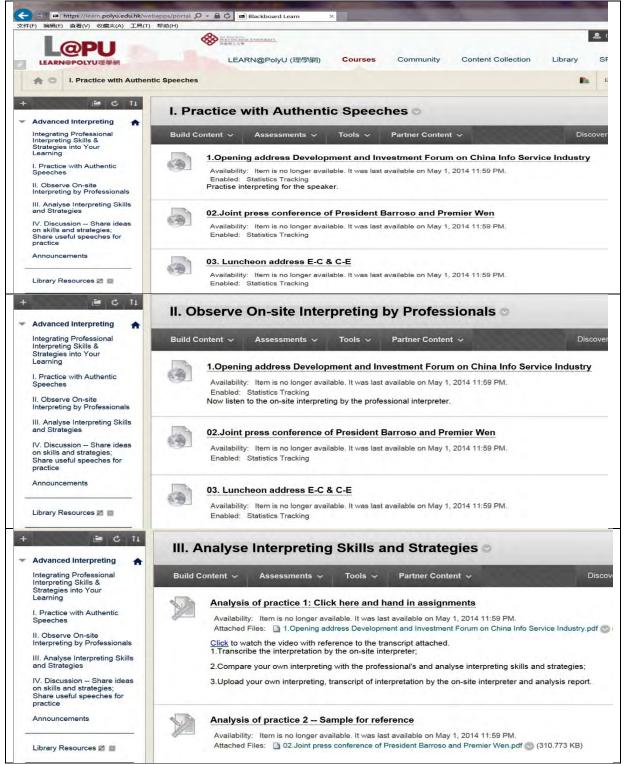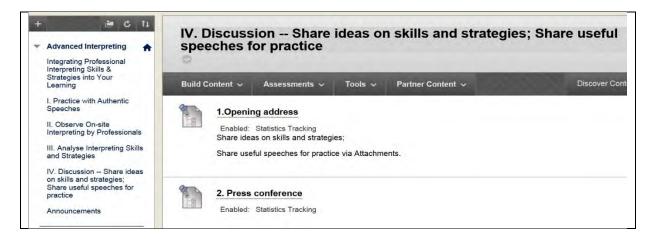

Figure 2. The e-learning environment for autonomous interpreting skill development (continued)

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Step I involves students watching authentic live speeches, practicing interpreting them, and recording their interpreting performance. Students then upload the recordings to the website to be graded by the instructor. In Steps II and III, students write analysis reports on interpreting skills and strategies that they have observed in the professional interpreters, while also reflecting on their own interpretations. In Step IV, students engage in peer learning by sharing ideas on what they have learnt.

    3)   Students' systematic analysis of interpreting skills and strategies used by professional interpreters.

As part of the assignment on the e-learning environment, students analyze the interpreting skills and strategies that they have learnt from the professional interpreters and reflect on their own interpreting performance. Instructors then review the reports to gauge student learning.

2.3 Effectiveness of the project

The e-learning environment has been applied to students' out-of-class practice and autonomous learning in a number of interpreting courses including Introduction to Interpreting, Consecutive Interpreting, Simultaneous Interpreting, Advanced Liaison Interpreting, and Advanced Interpreting. At the time of writing, 160 students in seven cohorts had engaged with the e-learning environment.

This environment has been effective in managing and enhancing students' deliberate and focused practice. It has served as an efficient complement to classroom teaching by increasing students' practice hours: Since the e-learning environment was introduced, autonomous out-of-classroom practice has increased by approximately 36 hours, and more time has become available for learning activities in class.

With videos of students interpreting practice and their written analyses and reflections, instructors now find it easier to monitor students' practice and progress in out-of-class learning. Students have generally agreed that the e-learning environment has both motivated them and assisted them to achieve learning outcomes for various courses.

3. Implications: Towards an experiential learning model of interpreter training

The concept of interpreter training, as implemented by the blended-learning project, can be represented by the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984), which features a learning cycle of experiencing – observation – reflection – discussion":

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Figure 3. An experiential learning model of interpreter training (adapted from Kolb, 1984).

Access to the authentic speech repository has led interpreter education to become more situated in real-world contexts, with students enjoying more authentic environments during both in-class and out-of-class learning. Situated and self-directed learning have helped to optimize the effectiveness of interpreter training. In addition, because both instructors and students engage in assembling the authentic speech repository and the on-site interpreting corpus, the process itself promotes active and collaborative learning.

Using the interpreting corpus, instructors guide students in observing the on-site interpreting performance of professional interpreters and in using these observations to improve their interpreting performance, thus bridging the gap between the interpreting classroom and the real-world context. Student learning follows the experiential learning model shown in Figure 3: Instructors encourage students to experience, observe, reflect on authentic interpreting tasks and solve problems in real-world interpreting scenarios. The project enriches interpreter training with analysis and criticism of professional interpreters' skills and strategies in real-world contexts. The use of appropriately designed ICT tools shifts interpreter education from the teacher-centered (transmissionist) approach that prevails in most interpreter training towards a learner-centered (constructivist) approach, encouraging students to become self-directed and self-regulated learners.

4. Conclusion

The blended-learning project described here has explored the following new approaches to interpreter training:

(a) the implementation of new technologies including interpreting corpora, ICT tools, and the Blackboard learning management system to facilitate teaching, learning and assessment;

(b) the integration of professional experience into interpreting classrooms; and (c) the promotion of active and autonomous student learning.

The university plans to further adjust and improve the e-learning environment based on the feedback of student users. The next stage of the project will involve expansion of the speech repository and interpreting corpus to accommodate different modes of interpreting and to include material catering to the needs of students at different levels of development. Other programs exploring blended-learning approaches may consider including peer-to-peer learning and assessment to further enhance student learning.

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Acknowledgements

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