



## ESSENTIAL SELF-TRAINING SKILLS TO BECOME AN INTERPRETER: ENGLISH-MAJORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

Nhi Nguyen Ngoc<sup>i</sup>,  
Huong Tran Thi Truc,  
Quynh Huynh,  
Phung Nguyen Thi Ngoc,  
Thu Tat Thien  
Can Tho University,  
Vietnam

### Abstract:

Currently, interpreting has become a profession in high demand. This study surveyed students' perceptions of the essential self-training skills to become an interpreter. The study used a questionnaire to collect data collection tool which was a survey with 12 multiple-choice questions and 4 open-ended questions. 82 English-majoring students of High-quality program Batch 45 – at Can Tho University participated in the survey. The results show that students majoring in High-quality English Language perceive the importance of skills in interpreting: shorthand skills, listening comprehension skills, memorization skills, visualization skills, presentation skills, skills in using search engines, teamwork skills, multi-tasking skills, and pronunciation skills. Students also pointed out a number of skills that they think are equally important if they want to become an interpreter such as reflexes, situational skills, and contextual skills. On that basis, a number of measures of how to support students to develop their own training plans and hone their skills for their future careers are proposed.

**Keywords:** interpreting, self-training, interpretation skills

### 1. Introduction

Employment has emerged as the top concern for students of the School of Foreign Languages in general and English-majoring students in particular after graduation. Students studying linguistics disciplines can find employment in a wide range of industries and forms. After graduation, many English majors pursue careers in the field of interpretation for a variety of reasons, including interests, passions, personal needs, opportunities to adapt to new environments, and relationship development. Being a successful interpreter requires more than just learning a foreign language, so English

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [huongb1910232@student.ctu.edu.vn](mailto:huongb1910232@student.ctu.edu.vn)

language majors who wish to work as interpreters should not only master the material needed and offered by their instructors properly but also constantly practice their skills. In an increasingly competitive society like today, are students aware of what skills are necessary and most important in the interpretation profession? And how should they improve themselves as would-be an interpreter after graduation as those of the translating and interpreting majors? There hasn't been much research focusing on students' perceptions of what skills they must have and how to acquire them in order to become an interpreter. From the above reality, the scientific research topic "Essential self-training skills to become an interpreter: English majoring students' perception" helps understand students' perceptions of the important skills required from an interpreter, thus some solutions are proposed to help students' self-practice the missing skills.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Interpretation

Interpretation is defined as a form of oral translation (Riccardi 1999:161). Interpretation means translating or expressing information and ideas from one language to another language orally. Stenzl (1983:40) wrote: *"During compilation, the message is conveyed entirely by graphical means, but when interpreting the interpretation involves not only linguistic elements but also about intonation, voice quality, changes in pitch and volume, pauses, and nonverbal elements, all of which can contribute to the message and must be interpreted by an interpreter."*

Continuous interpretation and Simultaneous interpretation are two basic types of interpretation. In the continuous interpretation process, the interpreter will translate as soon as the speaker finishes. The interpreter can communicate with the speaker during the translation process, asking the speaker to repeat or explain more clearly to ensure the accuracy of the translation. The interpreter needs to provide a clear and precise structured translation of the meaning of the message without distorting or changing the message (Nguyen Thu Huong et al., 2012). About simultaneous (parallel) interpretation, the interpreter will translate while the speaker is speaking without waiting for the speaker to finish, meaning that the process of speaking and translating takes place at the same time. This is a commonly used type of interpreting because it saves more time but is also considered a rather complicated process because there are operations involved in decoding and encoding information (Barik, 1969). In parallel interpretation, there are different types of interpretation: visual interpretation, silent interpretation, interpretation by electronic devices, and sign language interpretation.

### 2.2 Interpretation skills

Nguyen Thu Huong et al. (2012) claim that in order to perform their jobs effectively, interpreters need to be fluent in both the source and target languages, have a rich and varied vocabulary, be skilled in multiple languages, and have solid foundational knowledge in multiple fields. In addition, the skills of memorizing, taking notes, reading comprehension, visualization, summarizing, presenting, etc. are equally important.

According to Kalina (2000), interpreters working at conferences, in negotiations, in dialogues, or in the media are expected to provide a professional service, based on the skills and abilities they acquired during training. If they don't translate correctly, misunderstandings can arise, the atmosphere between communication partners can be affected, or communication between different language groups can be completely disrupted. Therefore, it is not only language skills that are important, but also a deep understanding of the cultures of the countries or regions involved, including the differences in politics, economy, administrative structure, community life, literature, and art.

### **2.3 Self-training and self-training skills for interpretation**

As stated by Dong (2021), self-training is the primary method used by individuals to acquire knowledge and reach educational levels that far exceed those attained in formal education. Hien (1992) defined self-training as learning done independently to increase understanding without being compelled to do so. Self-directed learners always exercise self-control, choose their own learning goals, and are open to studying at any time.

According to Paolo Torrigiani (2014), the two main categories for self-training are everything you can do to advance your linguistic and general knowledge, as well as all practices related to interpretation. Paolo also offered useful self-training advices for interpretation students such as: planning ahead, keeping a log book, trying group work, and activities on your own.

### **2.4 Build a self-training plan**

There are 5 steps to build a self-training plan: (1) Identify a learning objective; (2) Break your objective into smaller goals; (3) Develop your plan; (4) Take advantage of available resources; (5) Hold yourself accountable (Blake Bishop, 2018).

Brown (2001:17) provides a number of suggestions to assist teachers in maximizing class time to mentor students in independent study and self-training: (1) Using class time to mentor and interact with students; (2) Not wasting time on tasks that students can self-study and practice at home; (3) Reducing the importance of tests and focusing on the knowledge and skills that students acquire; (4) Encouraging students to have outside-the-classroom learning and practice strategies; (5) Providing numerous opportunities for students to learn and practice more outside the classroom; and (5) Establishing a club and having rules and regulations for it.

### **2.5 In the context of Vietnam**

Vietnam is currently integrating into the world and making significant progress, and the interpreting profession has played a significant role in this context. The majority of English-majoring students in general place a high priority on developing their professional skills in order to have a solid foundation for their future career path. The field of interpretation is one of the career paths that draw a lot of their attention. However, a high level of expertise, knowledge, and soft skills, as well as cultural and

linguistic understanding are also necessary for this job. Specialized knowledge and competence in interpretation are crucial for students and enable them to compete for jobs in the future in a very competitive labor market (Lam Quang Dong, 2007). According to Lam Quang Dong (2007), interpreters need a broad and varied mastery of vocabulary in addition to being proficient in recognizing the similarities and contrasts between the two languages' syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Besides, Dinh Hong Van (2011) indicates that the practice of listening to the meaning of utterances will have specific goals with a certain length of information, along with its own requirements and accuracy. Learners need to understand the meaning of the sentence correctly in order to restate the information with high accuracy.

A research by Nguyen Lan Trung (2002) has developed a new method to help students associate received information with simple images to make information more accurate and easier to interpret. Students need to train their ability to remember information by listening to a passage without taking notes and then repeating the main ideas as accurately as possible. However, human memory is short-term, so to overcome this point and become a good interpreter, Trung considers it necessary to improve their note-taking skills. He gives 10 essential steps to improve this skill: practice listening-understanding, practice summarizing, practice abbreviating words, practice abbreviating ideas, practice writing your own symbols, practice recording relationships, practice arranging words groups of synonyms, practice recording when reading the text yourself, practice recording when others present, practice recording when listening to the tape - radio.

Agreeing with the above issue, Hoan Thi Thanh Van and Dao Thi Lan Huong (2013) conducted a survey to find out the status of using short-term memory to translate from English to Vietnamese in specialized English translation. The results show that 9% of students are seriously interested in the role of short-term memory while students with the same percentage are not interested and do not realize the importance of short-term memory in interpretation. In addition, there are 37% of students aware that they should be alert and pay more attention to training short-term memory. In addition, the study also found that common types of information that are difficult to remember for students such as numbers, proper names, dates, lists of items, and abbreviations account for 40%, 38%, and 11% respectively. According to Ho Dac Tuc (2012), if language knowledge is acquired, the next requirements are public speaking and presentation skills. Besides, the ability to memorize words in interpretation is an indispensable component of the interpretation profession. Most students are able to translate a word or phrase in a fixed sense, but cannot apply the contextual translation to the whole story. It can be seen that to become a good interpreter, students must be aware of important skills such as shorthand, listening comprehension, memorization, visualization, and presentation.

### **3. Research design and methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

As the research aims to survey English- majoring students' perceptions about what skills they must have and how to acquire these skills, a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to conduct this descriptive research (Ellis, 2012).

To build the initial theoretical foundation for the research, the present research employed information related to the topic from literature, scientific journals, graduation theses, and scientific research articles. Then on the basis of the theoretical framework found, a questionnaire was designed and piloted to ensure its validity.

The final version of the questionnaire was set up with two main parts. Part one focused on students' perception of interpreting and their opinions about important interpreting skills that need self-training. Part two are four open-ended questions to find out respondents' perception of interpreting and interpretation career and their solutions to improve their interpretation skills. These questions are (1) How do you define interpretation?, (2) What skills do you think English – majoring students are weak in and still need to develop?, (3) Do you think the interpretation courses at school are satisfactory? If not, what improvements or additions would you suggest?, (4) Currently, what self-training activities have you taken to improve your interpreting skills?

The survey used three types of questions: multiple choice, rating scales, and open-ended questions. Eleven multiple-choice questions were designed to investigate the students' perceptions of interpretation and career trends. One scale-rating question was used to measure the level of importance (very important, important, less important, not necessary) to survey students' opinions on interpretation skills. And the four open-ended questions were included to collect students' individual views about interpreting and interpreting courses in the training program as well as interpretation career and their solutions to improve their interpretation skills.

#### **3.2 Research setting and participants**

The study was conducted in the context of School of Foreign Languages at Can Tho University where we are studying. There are around 110 English–majoring students from 4 classes of High-quality program were invited to participate in the survey and 82 of them accepted. The study aims at these target sample participants because they are the ones who have passed interpretation and translation courses in their curriculum, so they have the background knowledge and understanding about interpretation in order to answer the questions in the survey properly. Furthermore, according to Creswell (2005), convenience sampling can be employed to select participants who are available and willing to take part in the study. The survey's participants are in their final year of university, and their ages range from 20 to 22.

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

The study was conducted over six months from June 2022 to November 2022. Prior to the delivery of the questionnaire in classes, lecturers' permission and support were received. The questionnaire was administered in two forms: paper and online for the participants' convenience. The link and guidance were sent to classes by lecturers. The total number of responses collected was 82 including 62 online responses and 20 paper responses. The data obtained from the survey were then coded, processed, and analyzed by using the software SPSS 20 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

According to Hulin, Netemeyer, and Cudeck (2001), the reliability of the data obtained from the survey panel is expressed through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. To these scholars, a reliability level of 0.6 to 0.7 is considered acceptable, and a reliability level of 0.8 or higher is considered very good. Values above 0.95, however, may indicate redundancy, so they are not always a good sign. Through the process of software SPSS 20, the data obtained in the current study were reliable enough with Cronbach's alpha of 0.773 and Pearson correlation of 0.18, showing the consistency of the scale's components.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Students' perception of the role of interpretation courses in their curriculum

Data collected from the question "Do you think interpreting is one of the important courses in English Studies?" revealed that the majority of participants (77/82) believe that interpretation courses should be included in the training program for English language majors because it is a crucial course (Table 1). This makes sense given that both professional and volunteer interpreters are in great demand right now across all industries. In the framework of economic integration, interpretation is currently one of the industries with the highest growth, claims HrChannels (2022). The field of interpreting is particularly well-liked, and language students in particular are eager to study more and get the skills necessary for their future careers. This outcome is comparable to Thu's study (2017) on the importance of interpreting as a module in all university specialized language training programs.

**Table 1:** Do you think interpreting is one of the important courses in the English Studies?

Opinions	Frequency	Percent (%)
Agree	77	93.9
Disagree	2	2.4
Neutral	3	3.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

Given that the program only requires students to pass three translation-related courses namely General Translation, Basic Translation, and Basic Interpretation, it is not surprising that many students lack interpreting experience. Because they haven't had many opportunities to practice and hone this skill, students can only comprehend the basics of interpretation skills.

#### 4.2 Students' opinion about their future career

Table 2 shows that the majority of students in the survey (65.9%) have not yet made up their minds about whether they will become interpreters in the future. This result is similar to My (2022) study on desire after graduation.

**Table 2:** After graduation, do you intend to choose an interpreter as your career?

Opinions	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	8	9.8
No	20	24.4
No idea	54	65.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.3 Students' opinion about interpretation courses

Many students (40.2%) thought that the interpretation courses designed for English majors at Can Tho University were good enough to give them the confidence to work as interpreters. Three translation-related courses were included in the curriculum even though the translation is not a major: General Translation, Basic Translation, and Basic Interpreting. On the other hand, some students (34.1%) are dissatisfied with the school's translation courses. Students don't really have access to enough interpretation-related knowledge and experience to give them the necessary skills (Table 3). As a result, students lose confidence in their ability to pursue a career as an interpreter.

**Table 3:** In your opinion, are interpreting courses in Can Tho University's curriculum enough for students majoring in English to confidently become an interpreter?

Opinions	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	33	40.2
No	28	34.1
No idea	21	25.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.4 Students' opinions about interpreting skills

As scholars like Nguyen Thu Huong et al. (2012), Question 10 "Rates the importance of the following skills for the interpreting profession" aimed to investigate the participants' assessment of the importance of learning interpreter-related skills such as shorthand, listening comprehension, memorization, visualization, presentation skills, search engine skills, teamwork skills, presentation skills, multitasking skills, and pronunciation skills. Students specifically mentioned reflexes, situational skills, and contextual skills as extra talents they believe are equally crucial if they wish to become interpreters.

**Table 4:** Students' opinions about interpreting skills

Rates the importance of the following skills for the interpreting profession	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Shorthand skill	1	4	1.76	0.713
Listening comprehension skills	1	4	1.48	0.593
Memorization skills	1	4	1.46	0.670
Visualization skills	1	4	1.99	0.778
Presentation skills	1	4	1.68	0.768
Skills in using search engines	1	4	2.21	0.813
Teamwork skill	1	4	1.96	0.554
Presentation skills	1	4	1.59	0.702
Multitasking skills	1	4	1.79	0.603
Pronunciation skills	1	4	1.54	0.632
The importance of skills	1	4	1.75	0.683

**Source:** Compiled from survey results.

Statistics from survey results and data analysis in Table 4 show that students are quite consistent in their assessment of the importance of 10 skills in interpretation with a variance from 0.55 to 0.81 (SD = 0.554 and SD = 0.813). The data show that those students did not highly evaluate the importance of interpretation skills. Most of the skills were evaluated under the average mean, only 1.75 (M = 1.75; SD = 0.683).

A breakdown analysis reveals that just the skill of using the search engines is over the average with a mean of 2.21 (M = 2.21; SD = 0.813). That means students now depend so much on search engines to do their interpretation assignments. Visualization skills (M = 1.99; SD = 0.778) and teamwork skills (M = 1.96; SD = 0.554) are in the group of skills rated closer to the average mean. The findings show that Gen Zs now are very familiar with teamwork and IT (Josh, M. 2018)

It is really a surprise that such skills as Listening comprehension and memorization were ranked with the lowest scores 1.48 and 1.46 respectively. The problem here is that English majoring students in High-quality program seem not to realize that listening comprehension skills are important to the interpreting profession. Multitasking skills (M = 1.79; SD = 0.603) were rated a bit higher than the presentation and pronunciation skills, respectively (M = 1.68; SD = 0.768) and (M = 1.54; SD = 0.632). These findings are similar to those gained by Van and Huong (2013) who conducted a study on short-term memory.

#### 4.5 Students' self-training

The second part of the survey is the four open-ended questions to capture the respondents' perception of interpreting and interpretation careers and their self-training activities to improve their interpretation skills.

The survey data from the question "How do you define interpretation?" to investigate students' perception of interpretation show that 59 out of 82 respondents defined interpretation as *interpreting information from one language into another language*. The skills of listening, quick thinking, and reflexivity are essential for interpreters. Additionally, 18

responses mentioned that *when interpreting for audiences, interpreters need to be skilled listeners and memorizers. According to one opinion, an interpreter "must interpret accurately and ensure professional ethics."* The remaining 4 students did not participate in answering the question.

It is clear that most students have enough understanding of interpreting and interpreters. A few students do not, however, have the knowledge or understanding of translation, and as a result, they are hesitant to answer this question.

To the question "*What skills do you think English – majoring students are weak at and still need to develop?*", students gave many interpretation skills that they think they are weak at and need more practice such as shorthand (13 responses), listening (10), memorizing (10), presenting (8), multi-tasking (7), speaking (6), writing (4), vocabulary (4), grammar (3), interpreting fast and correctly (3), pronunciation (3), visualizing (2), interpreting idioms and proverbs (2), fluency (2), situational handling (2), using search engines (1), reflexing (1), problem-analyzing (1), paraphrasing (1), communicating (1). There are also 3 respondents saying that all skills should be practiced and 1 has no idea.

To the question "*Do you think the interpretation courses at school are satisfactory? If not, what improvements or additions would you suggest?*", 41 out of the 82 responses were satisfied with the translation courses they were taking. The reasons for their satisfaction are mainly because the majority of them major in linguistics rather than interpretation. Interpretation is merely an optional course among other language courses. Besides, 35 respondents are unsatisfied with the interpretation courses. They think it's important to include practical interpreting activities in the learning process, to practice each skill thoroughly and frequently, and to give students more chances to speak with foreign instructors. And there are 6 blank answers to this question.

The question "*Currently, what self-training measures have you taken to improve your interpreting skills?*" gets a variety of responses. The respondents applied different activities for self-training like listening more (videos, TED talks, movies, short clips, news, music...) (30 responses), practicing translating (translating newspapers, websites, movies,...) (10), reading more (newspapers, books, specialized documents) (6), watching movies (6), practice memorizing (5), using English in daily communication (4), improving vocabulary (3), practice pronouncing (2), practice presenting (2), joining English club to practice translation and interpretation skills (2), learning grammar (1), practice shorthand writing (1), taking note (1), acquiring knowledge through specialized subjects (1). There are 8 blank responses, and 3 respondents said that they were practicing but gave no practice measures.

**Table 5:** Self-training measures students use to improve interpreting skills

Measures	Frequency	Percent (%)
Listen more (from TED talks, movies, podcasts, news, music,...)	30	36,6
Practice translating (newspapers, websites, movies,...)	10	12.3
Read more (newspapers, books, specialized documents,...)	6	7.3
Watching movies	6	7,3
Practice memorizing	5	6,1
Using English in daily communication	4	4,9
Improving vocabulary	3	3.7
Practice pronouncing	2	2.4
Practice presenting	2	2.4
Joining English club to practice translation and interpretation skills	2	2.4
Learning grammar	1	1.2
Practice shorthand writing	1	1.2
Taking note	1	1.2
Acquiring knowledge through specialized subjects	1	1,2
Blank responses	5	6,1
No idea	3	3,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Compiled from survey results.

Table 5 summarizes the students' responses to the question. It shows that students cared more about listening to more videos, TED talks, movies, short clips, news, music, practicing translating (translating newspapers, websites, movies...), reading more newspapers, books, specialized documents. These findings confirm the self-training activities that students need to do frequently in order to get enough competences to become an interpreter as mentioned by Zagoto (2016), Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016).

## 5. Conclusion

Through the findings, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- From the survey results, it is easy to see that the majority of students see the career prospect of an interpreter in their future. However, a lot of students haven't decided on their choice and are not sure whether to go into interpretation as a career or not.
- Most of the Batch 45 English – majoring students in High-quality program at School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University are aware of the important role of interpretation courses in the school's curriculum. More than 40% of students thought that the interpreter training program of Can Tho University was good enough for them to confidently go in the direction of interpreting after graduation. However, more than 50% of the total students said that they still have to find more methods to improve their interpreting skills outside of the school's curriculum. In addition, more than a third of the students were satisfied with the courses at school while the remaining one-third think that the courses still lack practical activities.

The collected data also showed that almost half of the students do not have any experience related to interpretation.

- Although the majority of students are aware of the importance and opportunities of interpreters in foreign companies and international organizations, the percentage of students who plan to become interpreters after graduation is low (24.4%) (Table 2). The figures also show that more than half of the students are still pondering whether to go in the direction of interpretation or not. However, statistics confirm that more than 40% of students think that the interpreter training program of Can Tho University is enough for them to confidently go in the direction of interpreting after graduation. In addition, more than a third of the students are satisfied with the courses at school, while the remaining one-third think that the courses still lack practical activities.
- In terms of skills needed for interpretation, most students agreed that an interpreter should be fluent in at least two languages. Nearly half of students have a neutral opinion about the importance of grammar for interpretation. Besides, a percentage of students think that grammar is equally important and unimportant. Similar to the results found in previous studies, most of the students appreciated the skills of using search engines while the skills of memorization were not highly valued. Statistical data show that the importance of skills is ranked in order from highest to lowest as follows: Search engine skills, visualization skills, teamwork skills, multi-tasking skills, presentation skills, pronunciation skills, listening comprehension skills, and finally memorization skills.
- Students list the types of skills in which they are weak in order as follows: presentation skills, memory skills, shorthand skills, listening skills, multitasking skills, pronunciation skills, and finally visualization skills. The students are also aware of the skills that they still need to develop for themselves. The survey reveals that they use a variety of techniques to hone their interpretation abilities, including reading books, watching movies, listening to music, watching foreign programs, conversing with foreigners, and practicing listening and translating in different contexts.

## 6. Recommendations

From the survey results, a very small percentage of students intend to pursue careers as interpreters after graduation. In order to encourage students to pay more interest in this demanding career, the study makes the following recommendations:

### 6.1 For schools of foreign languages

- Adding more practical hours in class as well as field trip courses in the curriculum so that students get acquainted with the real working environment of an interpreter so that they are less surprised and confused with the jobs in the future.

- Propagating and raising awareness of students about job opportunities in the translation industry.
- Regularly organizing seminars on interpretation so that students have the opportunity to interact and interact with experienced interpreters.

### **6.2 For organizations and companies recruiting interpreters**

- Coordinating and linking with the University to provide information about recruiting interpreters to students.
- Entering into a labor contract to ensure the legal rights of the students later when they graduate from school to work as an interpreter.

### **6.3 For students**

- Taking an active part in extracurricular activities offered by the school.
- Planning to arrange a reasonable time to practice skills, actively and frequently self-training interpretation skills through the mass media.
- Developing a self-training method that not only includes theories but also has to go with practice.

### **6.4 For further study**

Future research on interpretation and interpreting skills can refer to this study. By using this study as an example to compare and contrast in order to prevent errors, future studies can elaborate on the research problems and gain a deeper understanding of related issues. This study can be used by students who have been or who plan to be in the interpreting field to get a general understanding of the field as well as the significance of the skills needed to become an interpreter.

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### **About the Author(s)**

**Nhi Nguyen Ngoc** is a 4th year student majoring in English at Can Tho University, Vietnam. She has long been extremely interested in learning and research in the field of interpretation in particular and translation in general. Email: [nhib1909469@student.ctu.edu.vn](mailto:nhib1909469@student.ctu.edu.vn)

**Huong Tran Thi Truc** is a 4th year student majoring in English at Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is interested in finding solutions to help students practice their interpreting skills. Email: [huongb1910232@student.ctu.edu.vn](mailto:huongb1910232@student.ctu.edu.vn)

**Quynh Huynh** is a 4th year student majoring in English at Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is interested in the techniques that high-quality English language majors frequently use to raise the caliber of their interpreting. Email: [quynhb1909423@student.ctu.edu.vn](mailto:quynhb1909423@student.ctu.edu.vn)

**Phung Nguyen Thi Ngoc** is a 4th year student majoring in English at Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is interested in the difficulties that English – majoring students face when they want to become an interpreter. Email: [phungb1909470@student.ctu.edu.vn](mailto:phungb1909470@student.ctu.edu.vn)

**Thu Tat Thien** is a PhD Student, Senior lecturer of General English and ESP Department, School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Vietnam. Her interest is interpretation and finding ways to interest students in becoming would-be professional interpreters. Email: [thutat@ctu.edu.vn](mailto:thutat@ctu.edu.vn)

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