THE TRAINING OF BLIND STUDENTS AT THE SSLMIT - TRIESTE

Cynthia Jane Kellett Bidoli
SSLMIT, University of Trieste

The Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori - SSLMIT) of the University of Trieste in Italy originally started as a course for translators and interpreters in 1953, offering a limited number of language combinations at the Institute of Modern Languages of the Faculty of Economics. The course gained legal recognition and became the School of Modern Languages for Translators and Conference Interpreters (Scuola a fini speciali di lingue moderne per traduttori ed interpreti di conferenze) which, in 1978, was transformed by presidential decree into a university faculty in its own right (Riccardi 1995:60). The School was conceived during a period when new multicultural and linguistic contacts were developing out of the ruins of the Second World War, between allies, friends and former enemies, not only in the political arena. A dense network of international and bilateral relations developed in the decades following the War, increasing the need for quality interpretation and translation services, as did the founding of numerous international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, EEC, EFTA etc. throughout the greater part of the 20th century (Kellett Bidoli 1999:18). Though 'schools' for translators and interpreters had existed since the Middle Ages (Herbert 1952, p ix) there was a post-war boom in their proliferation in order to train qualified people to fill the ever growing demand for interpretation and translation; for example, Geneva (1941), Vienna (1943), Mainz/Germersheim (1946), Saarland (1948), Georgetown (1949) and Heidelberg (1950) (Delisle and Woodsworth 1995:252).

Fifty years have seen many generations of students pass through the Trieste School, a tiny fraction of which have included blind students. The number is minuscule indeed: five totally blind students in all, though requests for admission (through an entrance examination) by the Blind has approximately doubled this number. We have had a few students with evident visual impairment but they had functional vision and were taught with the mainstream students without any necessary adaptations to teaching. As the proportion of blind students to sighted is so low why, one may ask, is there the need to write an article about the training of the Blind in such an institution? Three good reasons are firstly, although the Blind have the same rights to education as everyone else and therefore apply for admission to further education including interpreting institutions worldwide and form an integral part of the student population, next to nothing has been written neither about their experience nor

that of their trainers. In our well-stocked school library on translation and interpretation related literature, which contains over 20,000 volumes, I have been unable to find any reference to the Blind in direct connection with interpretation or translation, and noted only two references in connection with early speech acquisition and language development (Preisler and Palmer 1986, Dunlea 1989). Brief reference to the Blind (mainly on first language acquisition) is sporadically made in the subject index of books dealing with language and cognition. Secondly, the Blind obviously aim at jobs, which do not depend on sight but on touch or auditory skills (for example as switchboard operators, mainly before the advent of the digital revolution in telephony, or in the field of physiotherapy). Because job opportunities for the Blind are extremely limited in our sighted world, another obvious choice of career is interpretation, (rather than translation), as it is perceived by the Blind as a profession that essentially requires auditory and speaking skills and where visual ability is unnecessary. As today the Blind have access to information on the Internet concerning education and careers, it can be expected that the number of blind students enrolling at schools that teach interpretation and translation will increase in the future. Thirdly, having taught two of our blind students during my long years of experience at the SSLMIT, several colleagues and I have had to adapt to a new teaching situation with no formal training to help us and I feel that an international exchange of information concerning this area of teaching would be most welcome. In conclusion, as blind students consider interpretation as a possible career, can and do enrol in schools of interpretation and translation, creating a challenging situation for trainers in class, I feel that though our sample of blind students is very small, there is a need to divulge our experience in Trieste in teaching the Blind and hope our colleagues in other, similar institutions will be encouraged in the same direction.

Over the thirty or so years since the 70s, when the first blind student enrolled, the courses and curricula, as well as the level of certification have changed considerably. Out of our five blind students (three females and two males), two completed the first two years of our old diploma course in the 1970s taking French as their first language and English as their second and did not continue with their studies. Therefore, neither entered the interpretation courses that at the time began in the third year. The girl has since become a language teacher in a private institution; the boy is believed to have entered the world of Italian trade unionism and journalism. In the 80s, two more students, of French origin, entered directly into our third year and completed what was then an interpretation diploma course. Both are now working as interpreters in France with the French-Italian language combination. Our fifth student is at present completing her second year of our four-year degree course, and she wishes to choose interpretation with the French-English combination. It is curious that

though our sample is so small, three Italian blind students entered the school on the strength of the French admission exam. It would be interesting to investigate further as to whether or not they have found learning a second romance language that is similar to their mother tongue (Italian) easier than a Germanic one (e.g. English). Do British blind students opt more often for German?

From interviews with several colleagues from our French and English departments on their experience over the years with our blind students, it has been possible to outline the following aspects related to the teaching of language, translation and interpretation. As regards teaching methodology, no radical changes have been introduced; all attempts have been made to regard and treat blind students the same way as the sighted. All members of staff have always been free to adopt whichever didactic method they feel is most appropriate in the classroom in order to impart information to enhance the learning process of all the students involved. Nonetheless, certain adaptations have been found necessary.

What most colleagues have commonly experienced when a blind student has enrolled in the School, is the absolute need to provide in advance all written material used in class or at home, which is then transcribed into the braille alphabet: texts for translation, handouts with examples, exercises, overhead transparencies, as well as written tests and examination papers. It is not always possible to foresee what will be taught in advance and in some cases it is the students themselves, singly or in groups, who prepare translations on transparencies for overhead projection, which are then viewed by the whole class and corrected through discussion. At the SSLMIT there is no braille conversion equipment. This entails the preparation of lessons at least two weeks in advance to enable the blind student to receive any new material and have time to get it transcribed elsewhere. Fortunately, in Trieste there is the Regional Rittmeyer Institute for the Blind (for the Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia) founded through a donation by Baroness Cecilia de Rittmeyer in 1901, where blind students living in Trieste or coming from other parts of the Region or Italy may find accommodation, transport to and from state schools or university, written text-to-braille conversion and other facilities and services catering to their specific needs. At the Rittmeyer Institute there are four people employed in the conversion of text-to-braille for their resident blind community or for whoever is in need. Once our student is provided with the necessary written material and has had it transcribed into braille she can follow any lesson with the rest of the class. Of course this problem could be averted by having a braille conversion computer programme and braille printer installed on the premises that could be used when needed with the ease of a photocopier. But at present no one on the staff has any experience in this respect nor has received training in

this direction and so far, enrolment of the Blind has been so sporadic as not to warrant any such acquisition.

A major problem encountered by our blind student is the quantity of written material she receives to transcribe each week, which produces numerous thick, 30 × 30 cm. wads of heavy paper/card (regular paper can be used but is not durable) bound together according to the logic of the transcriber, which she must subsequently bring along each day to lessons. On occasion she mistakenly brings the wrong material to class or finds parts missing or bound in the wrong order and thus has difficulty in following the lesson.

During lessons, one has to get into the habit of adapting to the new circumstances such as remembering to pause to tell the blind student which exercise is about to be completed or which overhead one is going to show the class, to enable him/her to find the appropriate page in braille, which tends to be a rather cumbersome operation owing to the size of the pages in braille which are held together by durable plastic spiral comb binding and thus span some 60 cm! In the 70s, I remember that the student I had at the time listened to and recorded my lessons on a tape recorder, as there was no practical, alternative way of 'taking notes'. She then learnt mnemonically from what she had recorded. The only alternative to this was for our blind students to carry a very heavy braille machine, rather like an old-fashioned mechanical typewriter, from class to class. It made such a noise when the keys were hit to emboss the paper with the braille dots, that it distracted the other students or muffled the teacher's voice and was so unpopular that it was used only when essential or during written examinations. With the advent of computers over the last decade, circumstances have certainly changed. Our present student now carries a lightweight laptop wherever she goes. All she needs is a power socket to wire up her computer, and with braille texts on her lap she can follow the entire lesson taking notes in complete silence apart from the occasional beep. Whatever is typed into her computer she can also hear through a voice synthesizer and therefore, to a large extent, can correct any imprecision in three languages: Italian, French or English. At home, later in the day, she connects her laptop to a braille terminal display that reads everything she has written on her computer and converts it instantly into braille, which she can touch on a special moving bar, one line at a time. At written examinations she brings both the laptop computer and braille terminal display which require ample table room. This enables her to work from a written examination text (previously converted for her into the braille alphabet) into braille directly on the braille terminal display. She can 'feel' the text on the moving braille bar which is immediately converted into written text on the computer. Through head phones she can also hear, the text read out loud through the voice synthesizer, in order to make further corrections before giving in a final written version on diskette at the end of the

examination. All I need to do is print it out, correct it and meet her to discuss any errors at a later date. As far as English is concerned, she copes very well with translation texts, reading comprehensions, composition and multiple choice type texts but has problems with listening comprehensions. We suspect this is due to the fact that the instructions such as, 'tick the correct boxes with true or false' or 'place the appropriate expressions next to the correct letter of the alphabet....' may not be so immediately clear in braille and also slower to write out in full on the computer. Another reason could be that graphic organization of the text in braille may be different from the original of which we teachers are not aware, which again may slow down the answering speed, leading to the missing of spoken chunks of information vital to the understanding of the whole listening test, thus leading to omissions or miscomprehension. Further investigation in this area is needed.

Another major problem for the teacher is the difficulty encountered in remembering not to diverge from a pre-planned lesson which leaves little leeway for spontaneous modification or improvisation if the case arises which is common in normal circumstances. In any foreign language class it is natural for the teacher to suddenly think of new examples of what s/he is describing and to write them on the black/whiteboard or overhead projector. Likewise, students may ask for a written spelling of complicated words or expressions or the teacher may draw a chart, diagram or other graphic design to better illustrate a concept. With a blind student in class one must always remember to read out, spell out or describe everything that is written or drawn up on the board, which obviously slows down the speed of the lesson. Other adaptations in class concern the constant description of graphics or images. Particular graphic devices illustrated in the class texts such as photographs or the use of special layouts, as in the case of newspapers, advertisements or business correspondence, must be described in detail to the sightless. These cannot be converted into braille. Normally, written text is scanned and memorized on a computer using Rich Text Format or Plain Text File (Word Perfect, Microsoft Word, etc.). With the appropriate translation software the text is then converted into a braille file which through a computerized braille embosser can be printed out. Therefore it is only the written word that can be converted and not other graphics on the page. For example, after scanning a business letter, graph, diagram or invoice, the words and numbers and some common symbols in the original text are converted into lines of braille text. The person converting the material has no other choice than to try to place the single words, short sentences or groups of words found in the original into logical sets, often placed one under the other, thus losing the specific spatial organization that was purposefully illustrated in the original. Therefore, dividing lines, graph lines, pie charts, columns, axes and, in the case of business correspondence, the correct

positioning of letterheads, addresses and dates etc. are lost. Furthermore, the conversion of the phonetic alphabet into the braille alphabet is a particularly lengthy process and not all sounds can be reproduced on a six dot system. Braille was developed in its early form by Louis Braille, a teenaged blind student, in Paris in the 1820s. It has developed since then and today with six dots it is possible to write numbers, punctuation, mathematical symbols, music and a set of standard contractions to save space. Braille shortens many words and letter combinations with a specific system of rules, but in any case, the dots have to be spaced out and thus more pages are required than for written text despite embossing on both sides of the page. Different braille sizes can be used for special purposes (petite spacing, jumbo spacing, Library of Congress spacing), and resolution can be changed to requirement by altering the distance between dots[1].

Textbooks, which are essential either in class or for personal reference, must be made available to the blind student too. Since 1994 in Italy, several centres have been established which form part of the Italian Library for the Blind (Biblioteca Italiana per i Ciechi "Regina Margherita" - Onlus[2]), a charity organization which provides pupils, their families and university students with didactic materials and aids of various kinds. The Trieste Rittmeyer Institute hosts one such centre and can also borrow reading material in braille from headquarters in Monza. However, basically only popular fiction, general reference books, some dictionaries and grammar books are available and therefore for study at university level students must get essential textbooks converted into braille with the consequent loss of much information for the reasons explained above. A disadvantage of traditional braille conversion for students is the enormous and voluminous number of pages in braille that are produced for just one average sized textbook which are subsequently awkward to carry around and later store. A solution to this problem is slowly emerging as today more blind students are studying than ever before. It is now becoming the custom in English speaking countries and to a lesser extent in other parts of Europe to convert the written text found in books into a braille shorthand form. However, this requires special training in order to learn the shorthand system which, to further complicate matters, varies from language to language.

Another aspect to note is that the blind student may request extra time with the teacher, directly after a lesson or on appointment, to clarify difficulties encountered in class or to go through written work done at home or during examinations. As teachers' written comments and red pen marks cannot be converted into braille the teacher must patiently describe every single error and imprecision directly to the blind student. All corrections have to be memorized

---

1   see www.brailler.com (visited June 2002).
2   see www.bibciechi.it/index.htm (visited June 2002).

unless the student records the teacher's comments or brings the laptop along. Apart from the usual language errors and wrong choice of lexis, a fair number of inevitable typing or punctuation errors have to be pointed out and distinguished from common spelling mistakes (more easily avoided by the sighted; but not always!). There have been some other obvious drawbacks for our present blind student, for example, in the case of writing out English business letters, she finds the correct letter layout difficult to achieve; correct spacing, paragraphing and positioning of the various parts of the letter without being able to see them.

As mentioned above, amongst those colleagues teaching language and translation, there seems to be a general feeling that the teaching pace slows slightly with a blind student in class, with the exception of simultaneous interpreting (SI) classes where teaching always entails the use of oral discourse (no written texts nor other written illustrative teaching materials are used in class by the students) and where both the sighted and sightless work principally through the auditory channel. The teaching of consecutive interpretation is a slightly more complex issue and will be mentioned separately below. That the sightless may ask questions more frequently than the sighted to clarify points missed, is very individual. Generally, the Blind sit next to sighted students who help in case of need, such as the checking of spelling on the laptop screen. During oral drills and exercises the Blind should be questioned with the rest of the class and, where possible, it is useful to get the students to work in groups or pairs so that the sightless become more involved with them; they get to know each other better. I am always amazed when I ask my student to read a paragraph in English from a text the other students have been asked to read too. With no difficulty she finds the right place to start and at normal speed, hands gliding quickly across the embossed pages spread across her lap, completes the required task.

Another minor point that has arisen, is that all sighted teachers instinctively use linguistic expressions, which are connected with the ability to see the world. Thus, when talking to a blind student it is easy for common expressions connected with the act of seeing, which we take for granted, to slip into the conversation such as, "*let's see now*", "*let's take a look at this example*", "*we'll see*", "*you may observe*", "*you can see from the example*" or "*take a look at page x*" which might cause embarrassment for the teacher in a vain attempt to quickly find an alternative expression. However, this is an unwarranted reaction as I discovered from my student one day when on giving her a new batch of photocopied overheads for her to convert into braille she said, "Thank you, I'll take a look at them later at home."

The teaching of consecutive interpretation (CI) presents a series of problems apart. Blind students perceive interpretation as an entirely oral, auditive skill and probably erroneously think that it is the only form of interpretation that the job

market requires. Though in real life CI is not as frequently used as SI, it is required, and at the SSLMIT, CI forms an integral part of the curriculum which blind students cannot avoid. Some professional interpreters never or rarely use it, others often do so, it all depends on where and for whom one works and whether a technical hitch or financial limitations prevent the use of a booth (Kellett Bidoli 1999:19-21). Consecutive interpretation entails listening to portions of a speech for a few minutes, taking notes and rendering the speech in a foreign language, with an acceptable presentation, in front of an audience of varying proportions according to circumstances. Thus, clearly, the acquisition of note taking technique and public speaking skills are of prime concern for the CI trainer and especially so with a blind student in class.

As far as the 'input' stage or listening part of CI is concerned, there is probably little difference between the auditory perception of the sighted and sightless, though the latter may be at a slight advantage, in that lacking the sense of vision their auditory acuity and attention is more pronounced (though my blind student discounts this as total myth!). While listening however, the sighted take notes and here the matter becomes more complex for the Blind. French colleagues have told me that when they last taught consecutive to blind students in the 80s, the students had to bring their noisy braille machines into class which caused a lot of disturbance for everyone, the Blind included. Today the problem of noise has been solved through computer technology, however the problem of teaching note taking to the Blind remains.

When teaching note-taking technique, one method used is to start by suggesting common symbols and simple abbreviations that go up on the board. These however, do not cause serious problems for the Blind if they are described in detail, however, arrows and the numerous personalized iconic signs such as a stylised hay fork for agriculture or a smoking chimney stack for industry are another matter. Furthermore, as students start to practice with short chunks of text, they are asked to come forward and write their notes and scribbles on the board in front of the whole class to generate general discussion. Debate ensues and subsequent explanations are divulged about why such and such a sign was invented, certain facts were left in or omitted, or why a certain word order or page layout was chosen etc.. A blind student could have difficulty in following. In CI, speed in taking notes is of the essence and our blind students in the 80s with the old braille machines were certainly at a disadvantage. Contractions and some ready-made abbreviations and symbols do exist in braille but not as many as are required for consecutive. Thus blind students of interpretation have to learn to summarize to a maximum, using the a minimum number of 'written aids', relying to a greater extent on memory, which of course is an excellent skill to sharpen in consecutive anyway. Today, note taking in the traditional sense would require use by the Blind of both the silent laptop and

braille terminal display or an alternative could be experimented in the coming academic year. At the SSLiMIT in Forlì (University of Bologna) they have devised a system whereby their blind students, rather than take notes during CI lessons, record the speech while listening to it (thus having time to get the gist and think about terminological solutions). They rewind immediately after and subsequently translate the text simultaneously with the use of head phones (Monacelli, personal communication, 1997).

Rendition of the consecutive text or 'output' requires two further stages: translation into the target language and an acceptable delivery. As far as translation is concerned, blind students and sighted are on a par. Quality oral translation does not solely depend on visual capacity – too many variables are at play. There are talented students, good students and less good, but it is not sight that is the issue.

Delivery of the speech is just as important a part of CI as the other components. However, delivery does not merely entail having a pleasant voice for the end-users to listen to. It involves correct breathing and posture, control of hands and body movements and appropriate facial expression as well as eye contact, which in my classes are checked individually, for each student, by video recording (see Kellett Bidoli 1995,1997). Some blind students are very natural in their way of speaking but the majority produces facial expression which seems unnatural or irregular to the sighted observer, and eye contact is of course totally lacking. Teaching public speaking skills to the Blind (if untrained in this specific field) seems a daunting prospect to me. In real life I suspect that blind interpreters mainly work in the simultaneous mode, though I have no statistics at present at my disposal.

In the teaching of SI, it is explained to the students from the start that the best working position is one where they can clearly see the speaker at a conference in order to catch any prosodic cues, facial expressions, direction of gaze and body language that may enhance the understanding of the speech or explain the cause for any minor interruptions by the speaker during the interpreting event; taking a sip of water, waiting for a technician to adjust a faulty microphone or prepare an overhead projector, etc. Some teachers at the SSLMIT use video recorded speeches of politicians and statesmen during lessons to render the atmosphere as realistic as possible. In this case the blind student would be at a visual disadvantage. Likewise, at real life conferences, film or slides showing graphic information or images might cause problems to a blind interpreter though normally, interpreters work in pairs, so that in this case a sighted interpreter could take over without interruption. The effect of visual communication on interpretation quality is an area still open to investigation. Though Bühler (1985) gave much importance to visual communication through non-verbal cues, contrasting results have emerged from experiments undertaken

by Anderson (1979, 1994), who tested differences in the linguistic quality of SI according to the visibility of the speaker or the total absence of visual information during interpretation. In both cases, no significant difference in performance was detected. Balzani (1990) confirmed this result when speeches were read to the audience, but in the case of impromptu speeches, it was found that visibility is indeed a significant factor.

Differences in the ability to learn and achieve positive results between sighted and sightless students are impossible to establish in any significant way, as our sample of blind students is too small and drawn out over too long a period of time to draw any conclusions. Teaching methodologies, curriculum and technological aids have undergone great changes and have varied too much over the years to be able to make any comparisons. Results obtained individually have varied according to the courses followed and the language combinations chosen; in some cases the students have been on a par or even better than their companions, in others, worse than average.

The ability of the blind students to socialize with the whole class has also varied individually. Some sightless students are very independent, finding their way around the School on their own while others depend entirely on other students chaperoning them around between lessons. In class they tend to sit with the same sighted students rather than get to know different people.

As mentioned above, technology has certainly come to the aid of the Blind in language learning over the past thirty years. Gone are the days of the noisy braille typewriter. Not only does our present student use modern computer technology, but she also has access to text-to-braille conversion (and vice versa), dictionaries on CD-Rom, talking books (books read out on audio cassettes) and books written in braille which she can borrow through the Italian library lending system or can order from the amazon.com bookshop online. She can communicate with the outside world via the Internet, develop her language skills by listening to the radio, DVD film or satellite TV. Today, just like their sighted companions, it is even possible for blind university students to apply for a Socrates Erasmus student exchange at a foreign university, that can cater for people with varying degrees of visual impairment. Unfortunately, though, so far no blind student at the SSLMIT has applied. The Blind are no longer confined to their homes or institutions and will certainly make great strides in our modern society in future as technological and medical innovations strive to render their lives as natural as possible. They will certainly continue to enter the interpreting profession. It is hoped that this modest contribution describing our experience with the sightless in Trieste will stimulate interest elsewhere and generate research into the many unexplored aspects of teaching languages to blind students of interpretation and translation.

References

Anderson L. (1979): *Simultaneous Interpretation: Contextual and Translation Aspects,* MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal.

Anderson L. (1994): "Simultaneous interpretation: contextual and translation aspects", in *Bridging the Gap: Empirical Research in the Teaching of Simultaneous Interpreting*. Ed. by S. Lambert & B. Moser-Mercer, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp. 101-120.

Balzani M. (1990): "Le contact visuel en interprétation simultanée: résultats d'une expérience (Français-Italian)", in *Aspects of Applied and Experimental Research in Conference Interpretation*. Ed. by L. Gran & C. Taylor, Udine, Campanotto Editore, pp. 93-100.

Bühler H. (1985): "Conference interpreting: a multichannel communication phenomenon", in *META*, 30 /1, pp. 49-55.

Delisle J. & Woodsworth J. (1995) (eds.): *Translators Through History*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia, John Benjamins.

Dunlea A. (1989): *Vision and the Emergence of Meaning. Blind and Sighted Children's Early Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Herbert J. (1952): *Manuel de l'interprète,* Genève, Georg.

Kellett Bidoli C.J. (1995): "Video-aided testing of student delivery and presentation in consecutive interpretation", in *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 6, pp. 43-66.

Kellett Bidoli C.J. (1997): "Una proposta di valutazione della qualità dell'interpretazione consecutiva (italiano-inglese) con l'ausilio della videoregistrazione*",* in *Nuovi Orientamenti negli Studi sull'Interpretazione*. Ed. by L. Gran & A. Riccardi, CLEUP, pp. 75-90.

Kellett Bidoli C.J. (1999): "Aspetti Storici dell'interpretazione", in *Interpretazione simultanea e consecutiva. Problemi teorici e metodologie didattiche*. Ed. by C. Falbo, M. Russo & F. Straniero Sergio, Milano, Hoepli, pp. 3-25.

Preisler G. & Palmer C. (1986): "The function of vocalization in early parent-blind child interaction", in *Precursors of Early Speech*, Wenner-Gren Center Stockholm, International Symposium Series, Vol. 44. Ed. by B. Lindblom & R. Letterström, New York, M. Stockton Press, pp. 269-277.

Riccardi A. (1995): "Breve storia della SSLMIT di Trieste", in *Il Traduttore Nuovo*, vol. XLIV/1, pp. 59-62.