Customization in Designing a Course for Interpreter Training

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Abstract

This article deals with the notion of customization for the purpose of conference interpreter training. Two years ago a new MA level programme in Interpreting and Translation was created at the School of Languages and International Studies, University of Central Lancashire in Preston, UK. At the beginning of the third year of teaching on the programme, the author attempts to analyse the course design to find out if the course can be tailored to meet an individual student's needs while at the same time ensuring that the students are taught all the key modules. All the modules that are directly relevant to practising interpreting skills are presented and carefully analysed. The author is also interested in the process of intercultural communication between students from the respective language streams on the course (so far, in alphabetical order, Arabic, Chinese, French, German and Polish) and the influence it could have on the students' co-operation within the course. Another important background question is related to the impact customisation in the course design could potentially have on the alumni's employability and in what way the programme actually prepares students for their future professional lives. Conclusions and evaluation form the last part of the article.

1. Introduction

The notion of customization, or, to be more specific, 'mass-customization' first attracted the author's attention when she received a call for papers for the First International Conference on 'Mass-Customization' for Language Teaching and Learning to be held at the University College Dublin in Ireland in August 2010. She was genuinely interested in the idea of 'mass-customization' and in how it could possibly apply to new course design as well as to designing teaching materials in interpreter training. The presentation the author gave at that

conference forms the background to this paper, but it was focused mostly on customization in designing teaching materials for interpreter training. For the purpose of this paper and in an attempt to look beyond the materials, the author has decided to highlight the team's practical approach to course design at the beginning of the third year of the MA level course in Interpreting and Translation at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, UK (although in this context the focus will be rather on 'customization' than on 'mass-customization'). In particular, the author would like to find an answer to the following questions:

- Is it possible to tailor anything within the course 'to the individual customer's preference' in order to allow students a certain degree of freedom of choice while at the same time assuring that all the key content is taught?
- What impact would the on-going customization approach have on the course design in the succeeding years?
- How would it affect the students' learning experience, intercultural communication awareness and employability?

Growing numbers of international organisations as well as global business development, have resulted in the increased demand for trained conference and business interpreters across the world. International migration of people who do not necessarily speak the language of their target countries is another reason for the constant need for interpreters in public services. There are quite a few approaches to interpreter training across Europe and across the world. Niska (2005:39) mentions that only in the UK itself "a number of universities offer interpreter training, but the organisation and emphasis varies so much between different universities that it is difficult to schematise the British system. This liberal attitude also prevails to a large extent in the organisation of interpreter training in the United States and non-Francophone parts of Canada. (…) A third trend, not tied to academic traditions, is the strictly labour-market oriented education given by academic and non-academic institutions around the world, where emphasis lies on the training of interpreting skills".

With so many approaches to interpreter training on the market it is quite encouraging to hear Gile (2005) say that "in spite of the ever increasing volume of research on interpreting (…) there is too little evidence that would make it possible to determine that any combination of concepts and methods in a set program is 'better' than others in absolute terms, or even in particular environments." Furthermore, and with reference to the actual course curriculum, Gile also comments on the one of the most challenging issues in interpreter training which is whether simultaneous interpreting should be taught only after consecutive interpreting has been mastered: 'Consecutive is taught in most conference interpreter training programs, but

it is given more or less weight depending on the institution. (…) [e.g.] it is practised for a full academic year before simultaneous is introduced. In others, it is given less weight, and taught at the same time as simultaneous, from the start. No data from research is available to demonstrate the superiority of one option over the other' (Gile, 2005:133).

2. The Course

The MA course in Interpreting and Translation at UCLan aims strictly at employability for its graduates insofar as to ensure that not only conference, but also business interpreting is taught throughout the duration of the programme. It was launched in September 2009 in an attempt to design a versatile and practical course with the major stress on interpreter, not translator, training. However, the first years of any programme are usually the testing period and it is highly recommended that all the staff members are very observant as to how the course evolves with time, what can be re-designed, removed, added or otherwise improved in order to benefit both all and individual students in terms of their preparation and practice for their future professional lives.

What initially formed the course design at UCLan was the course leader's experience as a conference interpreter and interpreter trainer at other institutions. Most of the team members were employed only shortly before the commencement of the course, which was the main reason why their input to the course design could only take place at the end of the first year of teaching based on the practical experience with the original curriculum. The strong points of the course are the 11 hours of tutor-led interpreting per week with compulsory modules including Simultaneous Interpreting, Consecutive Interpreting (here taught along with Simultaneous from the beginning of the course), Technical Business Interpreting and Mock Conferences. Translation is a compulsory module, too, but with two hours per week it is regarded as playing a supportive role in raising linguistic awareness of our students and showing them the importance of work on style and register in both working languages.

Michael Maerlein (2010) in his presentation on "Mass-Customization": Rethinking language learning for the 21st century" identified Translating (understood here as the ability to both translate and interpret) as the fifth language skill, one that is based entirely on the remaining four: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. The language skills are supported by learning strategies and knowledge and at the same time they require foundational knowledge and abilities: phoneme and character recognition, culture, grammar and vocabulary, and finally phoneme and character reproduction, some of which will be referred to hereafter.

Languages represented within the MA programme so far include (in alphabetical order) Arabic, Chinese, German, French and Polish. Trying to customize the course to fit the needs

of respective language streams as well as individual students from different cultural backgrounds has resulted in the team's determination to ensure that the needs are met particularly with reference to the following aspects:

- language skills

- interpreting skills

- intercultural communication skills

3. Language Skills

3.1 Entry Requirements

Based on the UCLan course recruitment criterion, non-native speakers of English (with a non-UK degree) must have either the TOEFL qualification (with minimum 600 pbt or 250 cbt) and TWE at the 4.5 level or IELTS minimum 6.5 with 6.0 in writing or an equivalent.

3.2 Tutor's Advice

In the first three weeks of the course, students are introduced to the theoretical outline of the course and the fundamentals of both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. At the same time, tutors have an opportunity to identify potential weak points of individual students' language abilities. This allows early feedback and actually customizes the scope of language work to be done in addition to the main course content. It may happen that it is not only a student's foreign language that requires extra work. Thus tutors aim at raising students' awareness and understanding of the fact that their mother tongue skills must not be neglected as they frequently require the same amount of attention and work as the Other Language skills.

As practice reveals, some students with a high level of competence in English may still need to work on e.g. collocations (this and the points below obviously applicable to their mother tongue, too), idiomatic expressions, numbers, measures (metric vs imperial), geographical terms etc.

At this stage, some simple steps are suggested to the students to improve their advanced or proficiency level language skills. Hence the activities recommended for outside of the classroom, however obvious to interpreter trainers, include reading newspaper and magazine articles related to the same topic in both languages, watching TV shows and videocasts related to the same topic in both languages, listening to radio programmes and podcasts related to the same topic in both languages and topic related glossary building based on the above activities. The need for constant improvement and enriching first language skills is repeatedly stressed. Students are also encouraged in class to speak about their own experiences of their extracurricular activities and to share

their ideas and insights with their peers. Experience and individual-customised routine-building with respect to improvement of language skills gained at this stage of training can prove invaluable for the students' future professional careers.

3.3 Classroom Work

The first semester classes usually devote 10-15 minutes of tutor-contact time to individual and/or group practice of skills that can be useful for interpreting. This would normally include paraphrasing and synonyms/antonyms/collocations/ terminology exercises etc. making it easier for students to apply these important skills in their interpreting renditions throughout the course. This would also enable students to feel more confident while interpreting, not to mention that it actually resembles preparations made before undertaking real-life interpreting assignments.

4. Interpreting Skills

4.1 The Core Curriculum

The course curriculum has been customised to ensure that all language streams are taught the essential skills indispensable for both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting (including technical business interpreting).

Contrary to some schools of thought as mentioned earlier, we engage our students in both types of interpreting which are taught side-by-side; with the number of hours being devoted to each of them. Thus the students are involved in 2 hours per week of interpreting into English and 2 hours per week into the Other Language (totalling 4 hours for simultaneous and 4 hours for consecutive practice). In addition to these hours, students participate in 2 hours of Technical Business Interpreting a week and 2 hours of bi-weekly Mock Conferences. The course design ensures that different types of skills are being developed and practised for the duration of the course.

4.2 Interpreting Skills Relevant to Both Types of Interpreting

The Interpreting skills practice for both types of interpreting comprises the following:

- General knowledge
- Delivery (public speaking skills)
- Active listening / analysis
- Memory techniques
- Stress management

At the first sight, there seems to be little scope for course customisation within the above items as all the skills require extracurricular activities done by students themselves in order for them to achieve higher level of competence. However, the course team has made an effort to help students evaluate how much they know about the modern world by introducing

weekly general knowledge and current affairs quizzes. The quizzes consist of a few pre-developed questions (usually relating to interpreting in general and weekly topics according to the course curriculum) that are given to all the course groups independent of their language stream. The other part of the quiz is regularly prepared by a given language stream tutor and it is specifically customised to include language and country-specific questions referring to headline news from students' countries of origin.

It should be underlined here that the quizzes are not targeted at an assessment of an individual student's general knowledge by the tutor. They have been designed as a means of self-evaluation of a student's general knowledge to show them why it is necessary to be alert to the news and to simply get in the habit of watching not only their own backyards but also world affairs in the widest possible context. This knowledge is indeed a daily tool in an interpreter's work where language fluency is an obvious prerequisite, but where it may be hard to survive if one has never heard about the IMF or which countries are commonly referred to as the countries of the Middle East. Hence, a quiz is a simple tool which reveals students' major gaps in general knowledge thus enabling them to actually customize their choice of sources and methods so as to adjust their actual general knowledge to the level they will need to feel at ease as professional conference interpreters.

Moreover, once per semester students are offered a history and geography quiz. As in the case of general knowledge quizzes, feedback is offered to the group rather than to individual students and group work and discussions are encouraged to stimulate the students' natural curiosity about the world and for individual identification of what still needs to be learned or revised having future successful interpreting renditions in mind.

4.3 Consecutive Interpreting-Specific Skills

The skills typically related to consecutive interpreting are:

- Note-taking, by which we can understand:
  1. ability to create and develop symbols for note-taking
  2. ability to distinguish between primary and secondary information
  3. ability to understand the meaning of a source language message before the actual note-taking can take place
  4. ability to successfully render a message in the target language based on the notes

Weekly practice in consecutive interpreting classes covers a wide range of relevant topics also used for simultaneous interpreting, but the customization process is largely represented here by the very fact that after the initial introductory weeks students are encouraged to develop their own note-taking system that could be applied in their professional lives.

For instance, students in the Polish language streams are asked to present their symbols portfolio (a result of their hard work in the first semester) in front of the group in one of their

initial semester two classes. The presentations have revealed that, indeed, customisation is very much in evidence here, as some of the symbols can be borrowed from one another and shared by the group, whereas some others are highly individual according to the rule 'use whatever works for you, no matter what the group and tutor may think about it'. A remarkable degree of inventiveness (not to mention sense of humour) has allowed students to apply anything from simplified graphic forms, numbers, initials, acronyms, abbreviations, phonetic script, mathematical symbols, modern text and email language to emoticons and their simple, but well thought out variations.

What, however, is and will be stressed by the tutors, is that the symbol systems developed must be consistent and easy to remember and apply, no matter which language stream a student is attending and regardless of their mother tongue.

Another example of customization is certainly students' creativity in selecting speeches for their peers within the group for the out-of-classroom practice. Within the Polish group, the students are encouraged to send a recording of one short speech in English and one short speech in Polish per week to the whole group. This allows for a high level of customization for an individual student first of all in making the decision on how much and how often they want to practise, and also whether they actually choose a given speech to render in the consecutive or simultaneous mode. An added benefit in terms of customization is that the students get as many different accents and pronunciation models as there are members of the group.

As public speaking skills are clearly indispensable for this particular type of interpreting, video recording has to be mentioned as a means of identifying a student's public speaking, presentation and note-taking skills at the very beginning of the course (as well as towards the end of each semester but before a final assessment). In the author's opinion, it is a particularly good example of customizing the course to the individual student's needs whereas the rest of the group can also benefit from watching others' performance. Schweda-Nicholson (1985:149) in her article on use of videotapes in the classroom highlights the benefits: 'Both strong and weak points are highlighted during the critique sessions. The students are judged not only on their overall delivery (e.g. eye contact, voice modulation, poise and assured manner) but also on correct ordering, completeness and fidelity of the message'.

4.4 Simultaneous Interpreting-Specific Skills

The lesson plans pre-developed by the team apply to all language streams and aim at development of the following abilities:

- décalage
- anticipation

- reformulation (paraphrasing etc.)

Whereas lessons devoted to interpreting into English are designed for all the language streams also in terms of activities leading to development and practice of the above mentioned skills, sessions into the Other Language enables tutors to tailor the exercises to suit their students' needs thus again allowing for customization on a language stream level. From day one students are encouraged to become aware of and to monitor their use of native language by being vigilant to the register and style of speech they use in various contexts in everyday life situations. It can be the very first time for some of the students when they are asked to pay attention to the daily use of their native language.

In addition to feedback given in the classroom, students are encouraged to record their booth performance on regular basis and analyse their work in more depth either on their own or with a group of their peers. The peers' feedback is often invaluable as it is easy for them to identify the strong and weak points of the rendition based on their own effort to interpret it.

5. Intercultural Communication Skills

Languages can be a barrier in communication with representatives of other cultures. Other factors, such as anxiety, assuming similarity, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice as listed by Jandt (2007) can add to the general sense of being misunderstood by or misunderstanding students from other groups. Dealing with native speakers of a few languages other than our own and learning to work with them in a business interpreting or a mock conference context required the tutors to look at what could be done to ensure a collision-free collaboration among all the language streams within the course. Having experienced the first year of our course (with no classroom time devoted to intercultural communication competence which brought about unnecessary misunderstandings between various language streams) it was essential that we need to make our students aware of the fact that different language stream student's 'controversial' comment or behaviour may often be a result of their cultural background and identity, and not intended to offend the other party on purpose.

Smooth communication among our students was our major target. We have decided to devote one of our introductory joint classes fully to the idea of intercultural communication. In the first year the students received a general intercultural briefing followed by projects in groups consisting of different nationalities representatives. It was of major importance to the team to spark the students' integration process at the very beginning of the course.   In addition to this, in the second year of the course the students were given a questionnaire, the purpose of which was to help them notice and be aware of their own cultural identity and background at the beginning of the course. They were also shown the most typical attitudes to other cultures that might affect them as future interpreters dealing with clients from

different cultural backgrounds. The author, in her preparations for the classes she delivered wanted the students to be aware of how subconscious (particularly negative) stereotyping can impact on their perception of different cultures. Kabagarama (1993:51), while introducing her 'Seven-Step Process (T.S.S.P) of Cross-Cultural Understanding, explains that 'stereotypes very often get in the way of cross-cultural understanding. They are rooted in and help justify prejudice which is a tendency to negatively judge others based on a personal characteristic, without any objective basis for making such a judgment'.

5.1 Overlapping with the Language Skills Aspect

Overlapping with the language skills, a data base of recordings of speeches has been built by the tutors both in English and in the respective Other Languages. The recordings are then used for simultaneous interpreting practice and the accents are varied from week to week. This kind of approach enables our students to get accustomed to both variety of "Englishes" and variations in pronunciations of their native languages. Such a selection of idiolects in recordings offered to students nearly from the beginning of the course prepares them for their professional lives where it is not uncommon to start panicking when having to interpret an accent and pronunciation that has not been encountered before and may be quite difficult to understand. Not to mention that a variety of speakers means also various level of their public speaking skills as well as different paces of speaking (speaker speed).

5.2 Intercultural Communication and Its Reference to Interpreting

People from one cultural background communicate in a manner differing from the other culture in many aspects and on many levels. Kondo et al. (1997:153) states that "not only that, the way they use a language is different. Indeed, the way they communicate is an important aspect of cultural identity. The interpreter stands between two or more of these cultural communities. The interpreter's task, according to Zalka, is to help the parties perceive and decode, i.e. understand the meaning of the message that is being sent." This is best seen in an all language streams mock conference, where students have an excellent opportunity to identify ways in which others communicate, to interpret from relay and to make an attempt to convey the "foreign culture" message to speakers of their own languages in a way that leaves the listener (the delegate / client) with no doubt as to what content and meaning was rendered in the source language.

5.3 Mock Conferences

The mock conference can be truly referred to as interpreting in progress. They are held bi-weekly beginning from the third week of the course and they replicate 'real life' events as closely as possible. Topics may include internationally controversial issues that often lead to heated discussions and exchanges among the delegates representing different cultures and different points of view. Students learn to understand live English spoken with various accents along with a mixture of culture-related interpreting and speaking styles.

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Difficulties may include e.g. Arabic language stream students having problems with interpretation of notions relating to Santa Claus, Chinese interpreters refraining from interpreting of what has just been said about Tibet or a European interpreter having problems with remembering which Arab country is a country of origin of an Arab delegate and referring to him or her as 'a delegate from an Arab country' etc.   One way of dealing with this kind of difficulty were culture related assignments introduced at the beginning of the third year of the course. In addition to mixed nationalities group research and British culture related presentations, all the language specific groups have prepared presentations on their respective countries and cultures of origin.

Students learn also to notice that what they expect to hear from their interpreters may vary from culture to culture. For example, the Chinese delegates to the UN usually expect a quite literal rendering that supersedes style and fluency – 'thus the way quality is understood by the Chinese delegates is very different from the way it is seen by many professional interpreters" (Shlesinger, 1997:127). The author of this paper feels tempted to finish the previous sentence with "many professional interpreters from a different culture", even if at this stage it could have become quite obvious to the reader. But as quality in interpreting in the intercultural context is not the topic of this paper, the author feels that enough has been said about it for the purpose of this publication.

5.3.1   Customization in Mock Conferences

Students have an excellent opportunity to prepare for a bespoke conference both in terms of their interpreting and public speaking skills. After the first five tutor-led conferences all the remaining events are partly designed by the students who decide among themselves who is to be a respective country / language stream delegate, the chair person and who is going to interpret. All the topical preparations are also left fully to the students' discretion. The role of the tutors remains simple, although not always easy: to be present, to listen, to give general and language specific feedback and to act as a critical client.

5.4 Technical Business Interpreting

The classes devoted to Technical Business Interpreting again highlight the intercultural aspect. They are fully based on real life external assignments undertaken by the tutors (of different nationalities). In addition to the above, the team ensures that two language streams working together change every half-term. The sessions comprise a variety of business and technical topics and give students an overview of what can really happen in a business interpreting context – tutors do not refrain from very natural reactions, making side comments that may not always be polite, showing excessive emotions like indignation, stress, tiredness etc.

Similarly to mock conferences, students are given a chance to make their own preparations for the weekly topic that is presented to them in a way that allows for a number

of approaches. Alternatively, they are free to come to class unprepared to see how it may affect their interpreting abilities.

6. Evaluations and Conclusions

To reply the first of the questions asked at the beginning of the article and having thoroughly analysed the programme, the author's observation is that there certainly are possibilities to tailor parts of the course 'to the individual customer's preference' in order to allow students a certain degree of freedom of choice while assuring at the same time that all the key content is taught. Three major levels have been identified where customization has been possible and actually achieved so far. The first level is tailoring the course to the needs of respective language streams. The second level is adjusting it to the individual student's needs, with the third level allowing customization on the intercultural (and interpersonal) level.

To reply the second question, having started the third year of the course it seems that on-going customization in the course design has proved to be effective in interpreter training so far. For instance, in the first year of the course the speeches for simultaneous and consecutive interpreting were fully dependent on a given language stream tutor's discretion. This, however, lacked the general sense of consistency and grading the progress for all the language streams and resulted in the team's decision to have the same speeches in English for all the language streams whereas the language specific speeches were provided by the language stream tutor. The third year of the course continues to follow this approach.

Similarly, in terms of analysing the impact of course design customization on students' learning experience, intercultural communication awareness and employability, three months into the third year of the course, the tutors' observations show that the degree of co-operation and understanding between various language stream students far more exceeds the co-operation and understanding levels in the first year of the programme. Students seem to be forming a very open attitude towards different cultures thanks to the course being customised on the level of intercultural awareness and skills. This was achieved mostly by the joint intercultural communication class including the questionnaires at the very beginning of the course, as well as by the culture-related assignments partly in mixed nationalities groups as mentioned above.

Moreover, making students aware of customization in their course design (especially as far as interpreting skills are concerned) can be a valuable means of enabling them to take more responsibility for their learning, or at least making both the staff and students more aware of the ELT concept of learner's independence that can also be adapted for the needs of professional courses. This applies also to the students' time and choice of tasks with reference to their out-of-classroom practice.

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Undoubtedly, the best evidence of how efficient the customised programme has been is the way it will help our students to reach their professional targets in their future careers. The author has started an informal process of collating a database of information on the alumni's professional careers to show their actual employability. The graduates are asked to describe in a few sentences what they have done professionally since graduating from the course. So far 16 replies (out of the total of 48 graduates) have been received indicating current employment, with only three jobs not related to either interpreting and translation or interpreting and translation training. The request for information has been sent to all the graduates from year one (5 replies) and year two (11 replies) of the course. Only one graduate returned to the UK to study for another degree, MSc in Intercultural Communication for Business and the Professions, for which our programme seems to form a very good basis.

The author acknowledges that the number of responses received may not be entirely sufficient to give the full picture, but enough surely to draw an initial conclusion. The generic course design customized on three different levels may actually be useful in increasing the graduates' flexibility in their search for employment not only in terms of interpreting and translation, but also as far as their openness towards different cultures is concerned as it does seem to be very relevant for the profession of an interpreter.

It is the author's intention to continue to collate the graduates' careers data-base to monitor their employability. This is also a very good way to keep in touch with them as well as to make use of some of the contacts as the first professional networking contacts for our current students. One way to achieve this has been to form a closed group on one of the main social networking sites where our students and graduates are encouraged to exchange information both with reference to social events as well as to professional assignments or job advertisements related to various language streams.

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