

Developing and Cultivating Expert Interpreter Competence

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Abstract

This paper explores the way in which 10 professional interpreters develop and cultivate their expert interpreter competence. It draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews and carries forward the previous process- and experience-based account of interpreter skills and (sub)competencies based on the same 90,000 word corpus (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2012). The main points addressed are the requirements that can be learned, the timeline of acquisition of the various (sub)competences, and the ways in which they are further developed. These ways include formal continuous professional development, semi-formal assignment-gearred knowledge building, informal off-the-job acquisition of relevant information, on-the-job learning by doing, and the evolvement of savoir-faire in the course of professional life.

Introduction

This paper follows up on the process- and experience-based model of interpreter competence developed on the basis of a 90,000 word corpus of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 professional conference interpreters (cf. Albl-Mikasa 2012). It draws on the same corpus and aims to bring together the reported experience of how these interpreters developed and now cultivate their interpreter competence. Given their long years of mostly AIIC-based contracted engagement in the profession, they can all be said to perform at expert level. As

detailed in Albl-Mikasa (2012), the 4 female and 6 male interpreters (recruited, on the basis of their availability, from the 32 respondents who had completed the earlier questionnaire in my survey on the implications of Global English on the interpreting profession, cf. Albl-Mikasa 2010) have a long working experience: 2 of them of 30 plus years, 2 of 20 plus, and the other 6 of about 15 years; all work as freelance conference interpreters in the German-speaking market: 1 for the EU, 2 for the EU and the private market, and the other 7 in the private market; 9 have German as their A (native) language and English as B (active) or C (passive) language, 1 has an English A and a German C; 8 of them are members of AIIC.

The interviews were conducted (and recorded) in a face-to-face situation at the interpreter's home and at a time chosen by the interviewee (with the exception of three interviews – I-1, I-4, and I-6 – which were conducted at the interviewer's home). Apart from I-2, which was conducted in English, all other interviews were held in German; thus the quoted statements given herein are translated versions (my translation). The interviews lasted for 60 to 70 minutes and their word-for-word transcriptions (disregarding prosodic and other paralinguistic features) range from 7,000 to 11,000 words each. They were coded and referenced as I-1 to I-10. Of the 10 interpreters, 3 (I-2, I-3, I-7) are also involved in interpreter training and 1 of them used to teach (I-4). Since they have not only a performance-oriented but also pedagogic view of interpreter competence, I will specifically mark them as I_t (t for teacher/trainer). To account for the differences in how interpreters with only one foreign (B) language and those with several foreign (mostly C) languages approach competence development, I will further mark the interviewees for that criterion, which results in the following coding of the 10 interview(ee)s: I-1_B, I-2_{Ct}, I-3_{Bt}, I-4_{Ct}, I-5_C, I-6_B, I-7_{Ct}, I-8_B, I-9_B, and I-10_B.

In this paper, I analyze the interpreters' statements on how they built up and now cultivate the competencies and (sub-)skills they reported to be the professional basis of their work. These reported skills and the corresponding processes were detailed in Albl-Mikasa (2012), where I used Kalina's division of the overall interpreting process into pre-, peri-, in-, and post-processing dimensions (cf. Kalina 2002) as a scaffold to structure and model the process-oriented skills specified by the interpreters. For reasons explained in my previous article, I added the para-process dimension. I also provided a summary of the resulting model of interpreter competence in the following graph (due to a lack of space I refer the reader to the 2012 article for a clearer understanding of what the individual skills, such as ELF compensation, ELF accommodation, and informed semi-knowledge, represent):

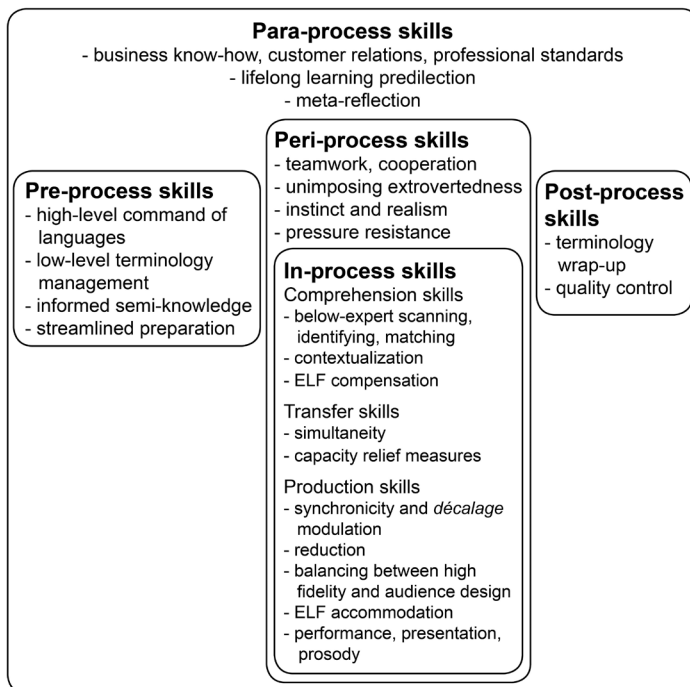


Table 1. Process- and experience-based model of interpreter competence (Albl-Mikasa 2012: 63).

Against this background, I begin by presenting the interpreters' ideas of what can be learned and what skills students require to become a professional interpreter. I then address what they feel is acquired in the course of interpreter training and what is adopted in the post-study phase. I continue with their reports on how they achieved expertise development. Their elaborations can be analyzed in terms of *formal learning*, that is, planned and targeted learning, organized in the framework of a particular setting or structure (e.g., in professional development schemes, courses, programs, workshops, or seminars); *informal learning*, that is, unplanned, unintentional, but conscious and meta-reflective learning; and *implicit learning*, that is, learning without awareness (cf. Williams 2005). Finally, I detail what it requires, in their view, to be a successful, professional conference interpreter.

Herein, I use the term 'interpreter competence' in the sense of Kutz's "Dolmetschkompetenz" (2010), that is, as a general term for everything an interpreter needs to know and be able to do to perform a professional task. This differs from Pöschhacker, who makes the distinction between *interpreter competence*, which refers to the interpreter's professional role, and *interpreting competence*, which concerns transfer and *linguistic/cultural competence* (2007: 44-45). In my analysis, the notion of 'interpreting competence' is used to refer to interpreting proper, that is, the interpreting-specific skills involved in the simultaneous and consecutive modes (see below).

1. Interpreters are neither born nor made

Interpreters agree that not everybody can become an interpreter and carry out their highly specialized task (cf. Russo 2011). In the psycholinguistic literature on bilingualism, simultaneous interpreting is described as “one of the most complex language tasks imaginable” (Christoffels/de Groot 2005: 454). The four ‘teacher interpreters’ interviewed all agree that sometimes it takes barely a week in training courses to determine who will not succeed (for interpreting aptitude, cf. Chabasse 2009, Shlesinger/Pöchhacker 2011). This view is shared by their non-teaching colleagues:

There are people who I am sure could never do it. Not that they are not intelligent enough, but for them it would be too much tinkering and pottering, they’d simply be annoyed by the fast-paced seesawing. It is to those who are ready to engage in this enormous degree of simultaneity, and who, in addition, can fully depend on their mother tongue, that I would say “learn a foreign language and give it a try”. (I-5_c)

At the same time, none of the interpreters felt that would-be interpreters needed to be born with a unique talent or specific characteristic properties.

I’m not sure, but I think it can be learned. There are, of course, those who are gifted, that’s the high-flyers, and that’s probably the difference, but as for the ‘mid-fielders’ I believe one can learn it unless one has no interest in languages. (I-9_b)

Interest is, in fact, generally favored over talent by the interviewees as a necessary prerequisite. According to one interpreter (I-8_b), one need not even be endowed with a talent for languages, which s/he felt s/he had never had. While s/he conceded that it was true that those who had a “musical ear” learned a number of languages with much greater ease (cf. “speech sound discrimination” in interpreter experts, Moser-Mercer 2008: 8), it was not the talent for languages that this interpreter felt it took to become a good interpreter; instead one had to *take joy in* and have a constant preoccupation with language. This was reported by other informants as well: the key point was to be constantly alert with regard to, and take a great interest in, language-related matters (I-5_c, I-7_c, I-9_b) and to be ready for an above-average level of awareness and meta-cognitive consciousness for language(s) (I-1_b, I-10_b). In fact, it was felt that required capabilities were not so much a matter of genetic endowment, but of “socialization” (I-9_b). It helped, for instance, to be brought up in a family environment where language was understood to be important, where there was linguistic awareness, or where family members were generally articulate and eloquent (I-9_b), and “to have a certain ‘Sprachgefühl’, the foundations of which are laid in childhood” (I-1_b).

Finally, the interpreters were not sure whether one should assume dispositional traits, but they were certain that a fundamental *eagerness* was the one indispensable precondition, that is, more than relishing in questions related to language, one had to “want to communicate” (I-8_b); to “feel like exposing oneself” (I-10_b) while, at the same time, being happy to hold back and not to take centre stage (I-7_c, I-8_b, I-9_b); to take delight in any subject matter (I-8_b) and not to ex-

clude anything (I-4_{Ct}); to fancy the schizophrenic simultaneity of listening and speaking (I-6_B); to be ready and willing to endure stress (I-4_{Ct}, I-6_B) and to enjoy recurring challenges and travelling at short notice (I-4_{Ct}, I-10_B); to be always in for something new, for challenges and flexible dealings (I-10_B); and to have a general learning predilection and curiosity (I-4_{Ct}).

It was felt that “when you take this kind of attitude or have this type of personality that a lot can be learned” (I-10_B). Against the background of such a basic foundation, additional requirements were reported to be “social competence”, regarding colleagues and customers alike (I-9_B), an ability to “empathize” with speakers and audiences (I-7_{Ct}), “acting” qualities (I-5_C), “a certain mindset, a certain openness of attitude” (I-2_{Ct}), being “quick in uptake” and analysis (cf. “processing speed” Moser-Mercer 2008: 6), an “intent concentration” capability (I-10_B) and the ability to grasp orally presented, complex subject matters quickly and reproduce them.

What’s the use if people are brilliant in a number of languages but afterwards you don’t know what was actually said, or they may know exactly what a speaker is on about, but can’t reformulate it or only in deficient language. (I-3_{Bi})

Again, it was said that the main thing was not necessarily to be disposed of these requirements but to want to obtain them and not to get annoyed or be put off by any of them. Accordingly, in the interpreters’ view, preconditions for the acquisition of interpreter expertise are situated somewhere *between ‘environmentally induced predisposition’ and attitudinal zest*. This is in agreement with accounts in the specialist literature on interpreter competence and expert skill acquisition, regarding predispositional traits for professional interpreting (cf. Kutz 2010: 233-258) and the role of willingness or motivation, which is “an essential ingredient” of the considerable effort required for “[h]igh levels of performance” (Moser-Mercer 2008: 4).

It is against this background, and providing one has an appetite for it, that the interpreters feel that the following requirements *can be learned*:

- *lexical and grammatical knowledge in the foreign language(s)*, less so in one’s mother tongue (I-7_{Ct}) (“you can learn to cope with the language better”, I-2_{Ct})
- *entrepreneurial skills* (negotiate with customers, acquire an assignment, etc.) (I-5_C, I-6_B)
- *preparation skills*, namely, how to tackle the technicalities of a highly specialized assignment and what to focus on (I-5_C) (“You start off working your way through an entire business report before your first annual meeting, but after a number of such assignments you know what you are looking for”, I-6_B); efficient, fast, and effective decision-making on the essential ingredients, key terms and central notions of a particular assignment (I-4_{Ct}, I-8_B); rapid text and document analysis (I-4_{Ct}) (see also Moser-Mercer 2008: 5)
- *oral production skills and fluency* (I-6_B) (see also Moser-Mercer 2008: 8)
- *interpreting strategies* (“you can learn coping strategies, little things like what to do with those typical convoluted German sentences”, I-2_{Ct}).

2. Developing interpreter competence – start-up and consolidation

When asked about interpreter competence development, what immediately came to mind to the interpreters interviewed was (linguistic) knowledge of their mother tongue and foreign language(s), the technicalities of interpreting proper, and business-related know-how. There is a general consensus about the timeline and chronological development of interpreter competence(s). *Language(s) competence* needs to have been acquired prior to the study/university course phase; command of one's mother tongue must be 'perfect' and foreign languages must already be at a high level of proficiency. This competence is then further developed and cultivated during university courses, in stays abroad, and in the post-study professional work phase. *Interpreting competence* proper is learnt during interpreter training and is maintained on the job. It refers to simultaneous and consecutive modes and, thus, to simultaneous comprehension, transfer, production, and monitoring, as well as to the necessary strategies, and, for the consecutive mode, to additional mnemonic and note-taking techniques (I-6_b). *Business competence* is – excluding some basic facts and ideas – only acquired in the post-study working phase. It includes the whole range of skills involved in setting up a business, managing a small-scale enterprise, and establishing and maintaining good customer contact and relations (see the para-process skills in Albl-Mikasa 2012: 86-87).

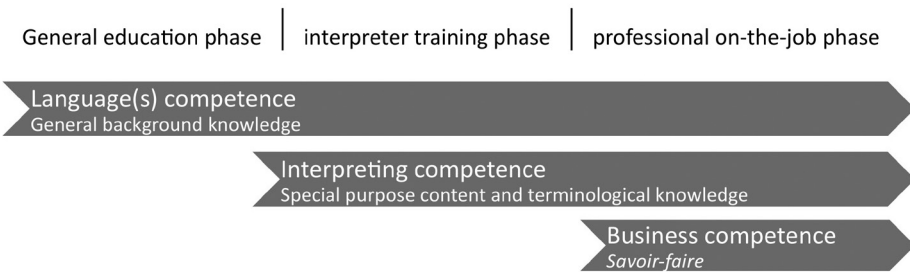


Table 2. Timeline for the development of interpreter competence.

The interpreters are most concerned with *language(s) competence*. It is the fundamental precondition for their university course and training and it is what they are preoccupied with throughout their professional life. With regard to *interpreting competence*, “the main thing at university is the basic skill of interpreting, to lay the foundation, I don’t think it would make sense to offer highly specialist knowledge about organizations, terminologies, or particular subject matters at that stage” (I-4_{ct}). Once such interpreting competence is acquired, it is maintained on the job through work and, otherwise, taken for granted: “All those simultaneous techniques are, in principle, set and internalized” (I-10_b). This is why many interpreters are reluctant to accept consecutive assignments, because they simply do not get enough work opportunities and, thus, get out of practice regarding memorizing and note-taking: “When I was at the university I loved consecutive, but it’s just a matter of practice, I can’t do note-taking any more” (I-2_{ct});

“memory faculties suffer during working life because in simultaneous you always only store a sentence at most” (I-9_B). *Business competence* is felt to be essential and needs to be built up. Thus, while it is believed that the pertinent skills can be learned, they also depend on inner growth and experience and on “age, especially when it comes to dealing with customers” (I-9_B). Life and work experience give people a better idea of how to deal with things. It is this *savoir-faire* part of interpreter competence that one does not yet have upon graduation. Just like business competence, *special purpose content and terminological knowledge* are also largely obtained during the course of the interpreter’s professional life (apart from some basic foundations, which are laid in supplementary university courses on law or economics or during mock conferences).

What also emerges from the interviews is that the more formal or systematic parts of competence development are confined to the early stages. Thus, *continuous professional development* in the form of programs, courses, *workshops, or seminars* begins shortly after receiving one’s degree and is geared towards individual needs:

- “formal learning doesn’t really happen in my case, I don’t think I did any professional development courses after university” (I-1_B);
- “I did AIIIC updating courses in my C languages” (I-2_{Ct});
- “three weekend seminars on banking and finance to get into my main operational fields” (I-3_{Bt});
- “summer schools at universities in the C language countries and interpreting courses in the C languages” (I-4_{Ct});
- “a one-week course in Edinburgh to turn my English into a B and a consecutive refresher course” (I-5_C);
- “an accounting and tax workshop, a corporate image seminar, and a workshop on legal issues for interpreters” (I-6_B);
- “an interpreting course in my C language” (I-7_{Ct});
- “a vocal training course, that’s all I did, I’m a bit of a couch potato when it comes to continuous professional development” (I-8_B);
- “an occasional speech training course, because my mouthparts are an important aspect in interpreting” (I-9_B);
- “an interpreting refresher course in Edinburgh and an ‘American language and culture’ AIIIC course in Washington” (I-10_B).

In the later phases, the interpreters seem to be too busy for such courses and, for various reasons (see below), rely almost exclusively on assignment-geared targeted preparation work.

3. Cultivating interpreter competence – learning by doing, practice, and experience

When asked directly and explicitly about how they further develop and cultivate their competence(s), the interpreters interviewed reported that they did relatively little. “Many skills are built up and enhanced rather unconsciously. I guess that’s what you call experience” (I-7_{Ct}). It was generally agreed that “regular work

makes for regular practice” (I-5_C) and that their competence developed mostly through learning or practicing by doing.

When asked about continuous competence development, interpreters tend to think of language(s) competence first and foremost. Accordingly, the measures taken depend on the developmental stage of the respective language to a large degree. As one interpreter noted (talking about his five foreign languages, of which the first is a B):

It’s difficult to generalize, there’s no homogenous answer I can give you, because in my various languages competence levels vary. So in language 1 and 2 I do relatively little in terms of formal or conscious professional development, I simply look up, after the session, problems (lexical points, idiomatic things, acronyms, etc.) I encounter during interpreting or I ask a colleague. There is little else I do other than reading the newspaper and watching television, of course, these are my main media, not to advance but to keep the languages at the given level and to keep them up to date. As for language 3, I do quite a bit using podcasts, which I listen to while traveling. Things are different for languages 4 and 5, where the level is not yet such that I can remain calm and cope with any subject matter. Here I make an active effort. For language 4, I enrolled in a summer school at a university in the respective country and participated in courses in philosophy, psychology, and marketing. As for language 5, I attended an interpreting course (in a group of 6) in the foreign country and last year I went to that country to attend university courses and sit in on court sessions to note down interesting points from the trial and case proceedings; and this year I will hire the teacher of that interpreting course for private lessons with a special emphasis on how to avoid interferences between languages 1 and 5. I am composing my own professional development program as it were. (I-4_{Ct})

This is in accordance with all of the interpreters and particularly true of the C languages interpreters. As stated above, they would only engage in *formal* professional development measures, seminars, and workshops in the beginning stages or when taking up a new language. More “*semi-formal*” learning, directed mostly at the cultivation and further development of language(s) competence, is then pursued mainly for the C languages, which need to be maintained. Because the opportunity interpreters get to practice their languages, that is, work with them, varies from language to language and languages are a skill “you lose very, very quickly” (I-2_{Ct}), C language interpreters make it a point to “go to my various countries on an ongoing basis” (I-2_{Ct}; also I-4_{Ct}, I-5_C), to read the newspapers and listen to podcasts (I-4_{Ct}, I-5_C), to have the radio or television on in the background much of the time, and to “devote attention” to the languages with which “I am still on a learning curve” (I-2_{Ct}). More *informally*, they keep reading books and chat with friends of the respective mother tongues over dinner (I-2_{Ct}, I-4_{Ct}, I-5_C) and regularly go to cinemas that display foreign language films (I-5_C). Maintaining C language competences means:

[...] integrating it into everyday life. Just like others take to playing an instrument, I practice languages. I keep reading books, rotating between languages 1, 2, and 3; I have a satellite dish installed and have TV on all morning while doing my house work; I look up idiomatic expressions when I come across them in newspapers and I do a page of vocabulary work every day, a whole lot of little things like that all the time. (I-5_C)

The construction and maintenance of C languages takes “discipline” (I-4_{Cl}) and one has to keep at it all the time (I-5_C). What helps is the fact that competence in one *language transfers* to all other languages: “I have come to observe that my ‘language head’ works better and better; whatever I do for one language makes it work better for the other languages as well; it makes for greater ease, because there are a lot of similarities and points of transition” (I-5_C).

Things are somewhat different for interpreters with only one A and one B language. Because their B language is English, the interpreters interviewed (I-1_B, I-3_{Bt}, I-6_B, I-8_B, I-9_B, I-10_B) can afford not to offer interpreting in any language versions other than A-B and B-A. In those two versions, they are highly experienced and have no pressing need to keep building and developing their competence levels. Once more, they only make a special effort in the early phases of their career:

In the beginning, I did three weekend seminars on banking and finance to get into my main operational fields and I thoroughly waded through a book for car mechanic apprentices to get fit for training courses in the automobile industry; and before I start working in a new field, I will have to sit down for several days. (I-3_{Bt})

Other than that, in later stages, B interpreters tend not to cultivate their competence in any systematic way, but work in a highly targeted, assignment-gearred fashion: “Then the pressure is high enough to get you down to doing something, otherwise I like to look at language-related matters more in terms of what I find interesting” (I-1_B). The picture is very similar for all interpreters who work exclusively with one A and one B language:

Cultivating my interpreter skills is not something I do particularly consciously or systematically, but as part of my assignments, for which I prepare rather painstakingly; thus developing certain skills. As far as interpreting proper is concerned, again it’s getting better by interpreting, I simply focus on not repeating the same mistakes. Other than that I keep doing job-based terminology work on my database and I realize that the work I did two years ago helps me to prepare new assignments more quickly and more efficiently. (I-1_B)

Maintaining interpreter competence? Through work. Other than that I don’t do much. In the early days, I used to read *The Economist* and systematically exploit parts of it subject- and vocab-wise. I used to read books on accounting and work my way through annual business reports and I ordered textbooks from England on how the Company Secretary has to organize his annual meeting. Today it’s assignment-specific research on the internet, documents provided, and falling back on existing glossaries and my database. (I-6_B)

How do I keep up my interpreter competence? By interpreting. Through my everyday work and very thorough conference preparation, and, of course, what they keep telling you at university, to keep updated by reading the newspaper, and virtually everything in it, even the feuilleton, the media page, and the bits on science. Competence development is really the very act of doing it, of interpreting, it’s learning by doing, it also involves putting yourself in difficult positions and accepting a job that takes a day or two of intense preparation, even when you are not sure whether you will ever be working in that area again. (I-8_B)

After working for some time, interpreters find it “uneconomical” and even “counterproductive” (I-3_{Bt}) to build up subject-related and terminological knowledge unless it is in relation to a particular assignment, that is, they do not make an effort to gain access to a full subject matter in a systematic or comprehensive way. The reasons given are that, first, anything can crop up during an assignment (I-3_{Bt}) and one never knows in which domains one ends up getting jobs (I-6_B); second, for freelancers there is such a variety of subject matters that to dwell on a particular field would be at the expense of other relevant work-related measures (I-3_{Bt}); and third, it would be a waste of time, because by the time the processed matters might become topical, one would not have them down pat anymore. The preference for a more assignment-gearred approach was expressed in the following terms:

It is common experience that things learned at earlier stages gradually disintegrate and that one often fails to track down the terminology extracted and stored at some previous point. (I-3_{Bt})

I much prefer to work in an interpreting-specific way, namely, on what is of immediate relevance for an assignment. All this broad, unfiltered reading is dissatisfactory. You may recognize some of it at a later point but in the end you can't really say what you've gained. (I-10_B)

Some interpreters simply lack time because of teaching and other commitments (I-7_{Ct}). Moreover, it appears to be more to their liking “to make something I look up my starting point and then browse along” (I-1_B). Another interpreter specifies:

I start researching in *Wikipedia* and end up following all kinds of links to more substantial articles. I like to get lost in reading alongside the assignment-based official homepages, which I find a better way of preparation than just sticking to the documents. (I-8_B)

Additionally, there is another major point the interpreters make for why they tend to refrain from engaging in any measures other than assignment-gearred ones. They come to realize that interpreter expert competence is something that progresses over time in the course of one's working life; that evolves by developing a momentum of its own; and that, on the whole, is very much a matter of practice, *routine*, and *experience*. This applies to aspects ranging from the practical (“You just have to have been late for an assignment once to know that this is not the way to do it”, I-1_B) to the more substantial. In fact, a great number of requirements and skills of the interpreter's task, as outlined in the interpreter competence model in the introduction above, are subject to the developmental aspect and routine factor. The following aspects were mentioned in the interviews as being highly dependent on developmental processes. Points a) to c) relate to the *pre-process* skills in interpreter competence, points d) to l) to the *in-process* skills, point m) to the *peri-process*, and points n) to o) to the *para-process* skills (in the model above):

- a. develop an eye for what is essential and where to focus in the preparation process (I-1_B, I-6_B, I-10_B) and the ability for selective and economical preparation (I-7_{Ct});

- b. develop an understanding of how to attack new subject matters (I-5_{Ct}, I-9_B, I-10_B) (“preparation is now quite a different matter from what it used to be, much more structured”, I-10_B; “you no longer have yourself swamped by the flood of information”, I-5_{Ct});
- c. develop an understanding of the importance of having rested before embarking on a job and of starting preparation work on time and organizing one’s working week (I-7_{Ct});
- d. develop a clear idea of what happens at an event on a particular topic, who’s speaking, how speakers will present themselves, which position they take (I-7_{Ct});
- e. develop a sense of how to enter the head of the speaker (I-3_{Bt}, I-5_{Ct}, I-7_{Ct}) and read between the lines (I-1_{Bt}) and of how to state it so that the audience gets a clear picture of the intended utterance (I-3_{Bt}, I-4_{Bt}, I-5_{Ct}, I-10_B);
- f. develop the courage to leave out information in target speech rendering (I-4_{Ct}) and make pertinent reductions (I-3_{Bt});
- g. develop the routine to keep pace with the presentation rate (I-6_B), not to lag behind, and “to be synchronous” (I-2_{Ct});
- h. develop a routine that frees capacity for more complicated things (I-10_B);
- i. develop equanimity (I-7_{Ct}) and the ability to remain calm (I-1_{Bt}, I-9_{Bt}, I-10_B) and to maintain a professional profile (I-7_{Ct}) under all circumstances;
- j. learn to let go of perfectionism and develop a feel for what concessions are helpful without compromising speaker fidelity (I-8_B);
- k. learn to work in a team, to take turns, to take the relay when languages suddenly change (I-7_{Ct});
- l. more generally, get into the “conference grove” (I-7_{Ct});
- m. develop “psychohygiene”, that is, finding outlets for one’s anger without letting the audience notice or annoying one’s colleague (I-8_B); become more tolerant and stop getting angry at speakers (I-7_{Ct}, I-9_B);
- n. build up the soft skills surrounding the job in terms of how to organize oneself as a freelancer (I-7_{Ct});
- o. develop a clear concept of one’s own value (I-7_{Ct}, I-8_B, I-9_B), a more differentiated way in accepting assignments (I-7_{Ct}), a more determined way in negotiating working conditions (I-4_{Ct}, I-6_B, I-7_{Ct}) and in arguing fees (I-8_B);
- p. develop life experience and the wisdom of old age when dealing with colleagues and customers (I-9_B).

4. Becoming a professional

Because interpreter competence appears to have much to do with becoming experienced, with developing an intuitive sense, and with professionalizing in the course of practicing and gaining work-related routine, what is it then that forms a professional interpreter?

For the interpreters interviewed, it is all about performing better at what they do and about doing each individual assignment to the best of their abilities under the circumstances. Each time, from job to job, it is a kind of *rapprochement*

towards the *ideal* of which they have rather clear and similar ideas. The following points detail *interpreting quality as defined by the professionals*:

- “People will like it when I serve up things to them nicely, when you are rather sleek and when high fidelity does not mean antagonizing listeners with an ultra-complete rendering.” (I-1_B)
- “The main thing is to keep the customer satisfied.” (I-2_C)
- “Successful interpreting is when we interpreters supply the client in such a way that he can truly react, get the joke no more than a second later, and can fully participate in the conversation, it’s the miracle of Babylon as it were.” (I-3_{Bt})
- “What customers value most is an unagitated presentation and pleasant formulation, remaining calm, daring to skip details, summarizing meaningfully, getting my text across just fine.” (I-4_{Ct})
- “Communication must work, that’s the basic thing. And then my aim is to quickly arrive in the situation, never again to face a situation which I experience as terrifying in terms of subject matter, to always end up feeling that one did one’s best under the given circumstances, never to be asleep at the wheel, to always make sure that communication works, to deliver a pleasant presentation, and to get across a certain ease so that the customer doesn’t have to feel or suffer with the struggling interpreter, not to let him have the impression that he doesn’t immediately get the information provided by the speaker, to be impeccable language-wise, to deliver a spontaneous, fluent and relatively complete target speech.” (I-5_C)
- “The eternal principles are that the performance should be complete, idiomatic, convincing, and pleasant to listen to.” (I-6_B)
- “I would say a blameless performance to keep the customer satisfied, to give a non-tiring presentation to the audience, to always be well prepared and informed, to give advice and consultation to the customer where needed.” (I-7_{Ct})
- “It’s an absolute must that the performance sounds good, that one knows where to make cuts and to be able to give a meaningful summary rather than exchanging content for sounding good.” (I-8_B)
- “I wish to leave with my listeners the impression that they were able to follow as well as those who listened to the original.” (I-9_B)
- “We try, of course, to have things flow smoothly, so that, for the listeners, it feels as if they were communicating directly. As for the interpreting process, I’d say that the most important thing is faithfulness regarding sense. ‘Form follows function’, for what’s the use of the most beautiful expressions, if it’s not what the speaker intended to say; the next thing is to follow up on his style and to be as complete as possible and, then, what is also important is a pleasant voice, so that your listeners like to listen to you. There is no point in being a brilliant interpreter if people take off their headphones.” (I-10_B)

Finally, the interpreters report that their own, subjective *requirements have changed* in the course of becoming an expert. First, this is related to the fact that, after graduation, in the beginning phases of working as an interpreter, they were busy simply trying to meet the challenge.

When I came out of university, I was more worried about actually understanding and getting the message across, just coping with it. (I-2_{ci})

At the beginning you simply do it laboratory-like, you struggle along from utterance to utterance, you're basically busy trying to survive in this extreme other-determined situation and coming to terms with this perverse and unbearable uncertainty of not knowing what will happen the very next second. (I-3_{BT})

Requirements change when *routine sets in and capacity is released*.

You learn all those energy-saving measures, you note down all those names, conference title, key terms so that you don't have to think about them, but can simply read them off and spit them out; you acquire all those reduction strategies and an awareness of your role, which helps to release energy for the comprehension process. And, of course, gradually you build up more capacity, just as you do in sports. (I-3_{BT})

In the first assignments, it's simply a matter of how to survive, how not to make a fool out of yourself in the face of one's colleague. Later, routine will make you calm down and relax; thus freeing capacity, which you can then use for all those other things. (I-10_B)

This extra capacity is then invested into *flexible and dynamic adjustment* to the given working conditions.

The more capacity you have the less you worry about less relevant phrases you left out and the more you think about how you want to perform; in some circumstances you find that it is possible to render all the details and then you raise your expectations and you feel you want to be complete; in other settings you are aware of the difficulties, of the bad speakers, the extremely difficult topic and then you lower the standards you set yourself. If things do not go well, you analyze, during your coffee break, what is going wrong and you stop being frustrated, you think about how to go about it differently, and what to concentrate on and then you turn the tide. (I-10_B)

Part of changing requirements is a more realistic appraisal of what is needed and a *giving up of perfectionist standards and exaggerated goals*.

At university you learn to finish your sentences, to phrase things beautifully, to speak clearly, to render all the details, to be native-like in your B language. These are the expectations you have in the back of your mind all the time, which made me stand in my own way until I realized that it is more about keeping cool, sounding good, and coming across as competent. This idea of completeness made me talk very fast in the beginning so that I started to splutter, until I noticed that I could compensate for a number of details through intonation, or a confident phrase that did not follow the original very closely. Moreover, I used to think that I should do more acting, now I simply speak the way I speak. (I-4_{ci})

After graduation I was extremely eager to produce wonderful phrasings. That has given way to a much more economical way of working. When I find a good expression I'm pleased, but I no longer go out of my way for it. I think that was a bit vain, too. I'm much more of a neutral voice rather than a performer nowadays. (I-5_c)

I used to be a perfectionist or even pedantic. I couldn't bear not being able to render a phrase or to do something incorrectly. As a result, I got so annoyed with myself that my performance was even more affected. Nowadays 90% of my anger (about speakers, colleagues, or working conditions) is outside the booth, but no longer while interpreting. So, yes, have mercy on yourself, accept limitations, and indicate them where necessary. (I-3_{bt})

I used to agonize over putting in enough preparatory work and continue into the night. Nowadays I call it a day at 9pm at the latest and rely on the confidence that I will not make a total fool out of myself. (I-1_b)

While clamping down on unnecessary perfectionism, the professionals, at the same time, *raise their expectations and self-imposed requirements*, because they have come to know that they can do very well: "I think the standards I set myself are constantly on the rise" (I-9_b); "There is now this new feeling of some communicative exchanges running through me, as in an electric circuit, which feels really nice" (I-3_{bt}).

Changing requirements and becoming an expert is, in the final analysis, fundamentally about finding *one's own way* and doing things in a *self-determined* way.

I have developed my own yardstick, a sense of when I feel good at work, and when I actually am at my best. (I-4_{ct})

I used to work at the x ministry and they wanted to push me into English – French interpreting and that had never been my cup of tea; I did it at the time because they wanted me to, whereas now I see things in a wider perspective and in terms of what I still want to achieve. (I-5_c)

Such self-determination is a corollary of people being *different learner types* and having different learning styles, tastes, and preferences.

You have to keep updated all the time. I do that with newspapers, I find watching Italian television in Germany artificial. (I-2_{ct}) – For me television in my various languages is absolutely essential, because it presents language in its most living form and discusses and analyzes the most topical daily news. When something like Fukushima happens, you want to find out how they put *Abklingbecken*, for instance. (I-7_{ct})

I don't think one can learn much from watching films in the original, because you don't really catch much or you lose it again very quickly. (I-6_b) – I watch a lot of DVDs in English, which helps enormously in comprehending different accents, slang, or colloquial speech. Also, production-wise I can now see phrasal verbs coming out automatically and correctly without me having to think about it. I think that comes from all that exposure. (I-10_b)

My students are supposed to acquire an informed semi-knowledge to be able to know how things are interrelated. How they do that is immaterial, because people are different, some of them attend professional development courses, while others like to work away in isolation using Wikipedia. (I-3_{Bt})

I'm convinced that everybody must find out what suits him. At university, I found it rather unsettling to be told that we would have to keep updated in all our working languages and read all those newspapers on a daily basis. And that was among many other things we were supposed to do. Nobody can do that, at least I couldn't. I would definitely recommend that students read what they feel like reading in their respective languages, to pick up whatever comes their way in terms of films or books, provided they do not feel under any compulsion to do so and do not have to make an effort. It's when you enjoy it, when something sparks your interest, that you learn most. (I-10_B)

Finally, a sign of expert behavior and professionalism was reported to be approaching the interpreting task in a much more relaxed and even “playful” (I-5_C, I-7_{Ct}) way.

5. Conclusions

When asked about interpreter competence development, the 10 professional interpreters interviewed speak of *language(s) competence*, *interpreting competence proper*, and *business competence*. They feel that much of it can be learned by those who have the drive for it and that motivation is more important than natural talent. They see a clear timeline for when the above-mentioned competences are acquired and enhanced over the three periods of general education, interpreter training, and on-the-job professional life. Moreover, they agree on the quality parameters that characterize expert performance. Although interpreters with several C languages are much more preoccupied with upgrading their various languages than those with only one B language, the picture of competence development that emerges from the interviews is a homogeneous one.

After the initial stages or, in the case of newly added languages, once language proficiency is at a high level, the interpreters barely engage in *formal learning*, other than assignment-specific targeted preparation work. They like to proceed in an interest-oriented way (“It's when you take an interest in something that you feel like it and have your mind set on it”, I-1_B), which means that most of what they do is semi-formal. The interpreters can be observed to follow events with a constantly high level of meta-reflective awareness. During *informal dinner occasions*, interpreters are ‘accused’ of “never going off-line” (I-4_{Ct}) or they cause astonishment for taking a genuine interest in party small talk and for asking relevant technical questions into guests’ professional backgrounds (I-9_B). Given this constant state of being on alert, it may be assumed that, in comparison with people in other professions, there is less *implicit learning* for interpreters; instead they are always on the lookout, “always on duty” (I-1_B), “always on standby or 5% in the working mode” (I-7_{Ct}), always meta-cognitively aware. At the same time, a substantial amount of unconscious learning might, in fact, take place due to “constantly browsing the internet in English or watching foreign language films”, so that one ends up “automatically getting all those phrasal verbs right”

(I-10_B). However, the accent in expert interpreter development seems to be on *assignment-specific*, *semi-formal*, and *meta-reflective informal* competence building.

Based on my study sample, interpreter competence cultivation is, (a) *on the job*, that is, learning by doing, trying to do better each time; (b) *before the job*, that is, efficient, targeted information gathering; and (c) *over time*, that is, becoming a sovereign professional who builds on his experience and affords confidence and courage, awareness, and a relentless willingness to serve the customer, as well as to make languages and interpreting an integral part of his or her life. In this process, the *savoir-faire* part of interpreter competence becomes as important as the continuous updating of language(s) and of *special purpose content and terminological knowledge*.

Some of the interpreter statements might shed somewhat doubtful light on the interpreting profession because they might imply that building and keeping up one's own competence does not require regular effort. While stressing the obvious need for further investigation with larger groups of professional interpreters and different language combinations, I would like to adopt the tentative view that the results could, in fact, lead to a somewhat different hypothesis of expert competence development, which has some basis in the specialist literature and might be worth taking into account in future research. It seems to me that what may sound somewhat neglectful and *laissez-faire* at first (e.g., that advanced interpreters invest little effort in competence building, rely on on-the-job practice, and let regular work routine and experience take the lead rather than engage in systematic and more formal professional skills development) can be shown to tie in with findings in translation research into the ways in which translation competence evolves to support expertise.

According to Shreve (2006), the cognitive changes that bring about the multiple translation-relevant cognitive resources referred to as translation *competence* and are at the foundation of translation *expertise* (that is, consistently superior performance) require *deliberate practice*, that is, the "regular engagement in specific activities directed at performance enhancement in a particular domain" (ibid.: 29). One of four conditions under which deliberate practice can only occur is "informative feedback" (ibid.: 29), which is often restricted to pedagogical settings. In the absence of work environments and professional contexts that offer opportunities for feedback (and feedback is, indeed, a rare commodity in interpreting settings, cf. Albl-Mikasa 2012: 70, 71, 85), a high level of self-directed "metacognitive activity" related to performance assessment is paramount, including self-regulation, namely, "the ability to attend to, monitor, and reflect on the nature of the text and the task" (Shreve 2006: 32). Moreover, the cognitive changes that underpin the development of translation competence are also instrumental in the "reduction in effortful processing, increase in speed of task performance, and [generation of] 'automaticity'" (ibid.: 38), which are typical of expert performance. This means that self-regulation and more automatic processing may replace continuous, deliberate practice.

Similarly, while it is assumed that the accumulation of *experience* needs to be coupled with deliberate practice to bring about the cognitive changes associated with expertise (Shreve 2006: 29), this may no longer be the case once these cogni-

tive changes are in place (according to a number of researchers, such as Ericsson and Crutcher 1990, it takes at least ten years of deliberate practice for expertise to emerge). Thus, once competence is acquired and expertise gained, experience *without* deliberate practice may suffice to uphold, stabilize, and even strengthen expert performance, because it is topped up with metacognitive regulation. Finally, there is evidence that the translational behavior of professionals is increasingly “heuristic and intuitive in nature” (Kirally 2006: 81) and that deliberate practice may not play the key role (cf. Abl-Mikasa, forthcoming) that has been posited (cf. Ericsson 2000).

Against this backdrop, the interviewee statements above (to the effect that the interpreters follow their own yardstick, approach their job in a self-determined way, replace perfectionism with an informed appraisal of requirements, remain calm, and handle the task in a more care-free way, etc.) reflect a transitional process from novice to expert, in which regular and targeted efforts and measures (in the sense of deliberate practice) are confined to the competence *development* stages and are then superseded, in the competence *cultivation* phase, by mostly intuitive and experience-enhanced, and to some extent meta-reflective and self-regulatory activity, which is predominantly on-the-job and assignment-based.

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