Keywords: Interpretation training; knowledge-based approach; cooperative learning; data mining.

1. Introduction- English-Chinese interpretation teaching and learning problems in Taiwan

In the dynamic and even turbulent competitive environment for interpreters, only those who know how to make best use of their skills can survive in the market. Most interpretation courses offered within educational institutions, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, focuses on teaching techniques. However, technique application is limited to the classroom setting. Unlike traditional teaching and learning for other professions, which depend on one-way directional instruction, interpretation training requires more experience and sharing centered activities. This is because students, upon graduation, are expected to work on site either individually or with partners for conference and non-conference settings involving diverse themes and topics ranging from politics, economics, biology, science and technology, and so on. Lee (1996) and Her (1999) found that a teacher’s background, course content, teaching methods, and teaching quality in the various Taiwanese universities and colleges vary to a large degree. Moreover, only a few teachers are able to provide real-world expertise in certain fields, so students are not prepared to work with topics with which they are not familiar.
Despite the popularity of interpretation training in Taiwan, as indicated by the 99 departments teaching students interpretation courses (Liao and Hu, 2008), literature review pointed out that the language skills of undergraduate students are seriously insufficient (Lee, 1996; He, 1999; Liu, 2002) and they cannot meet the requirements needed to attend professional interpretation training courses. In addition to training future professionals, interpretation teaching at the undergraduate level should be used to complement second language teaching and adjusted according to student demands and competence levels.

Moreover, students at the Graduate Institutes of Translation and Interpretation Studies (GITIS) in Taiwan who are able to transform their knowledge into action are surely able to enjoy competitive advantages in the market. This fact perfectly matches the training objectives of GITIS. Interpretation training in a classroom setting environment helps equip students with basic skills and techniques. Sometimes, teachers of these courses relate their experiences and insights as personal or peer interpreter while other teachers ask students to participate in conferences as observers so that they can learn more about the real world aspects of the profession. After undergoing the above-mentioned training methods, students should feel very comfortable in acting based on what they have learned. As a matter of fact, however, students are hesitant to start their first real conference interpretation job. Most of the time, they feel not only nervous, but also panic. This indicates a gap between interpretation skill acquisition in the classroom and actual conference interpreting.

With the three above issues identified, this paper, thus, proposes several knowledge-based approaches that have been widely applied to learning organizations. They include cooperative learning, data mining, and self-evaluation and are used to facilitate effective interpretation teaching and learning and to bridge the gap between knowing and doing.

2. Why knowledge-based approaches?

As suggested by Gandolfi (2006), organizations, in any particular type, size, and format, that have transformed themselves into learning ones focus on continuous improvement and are able to respond to changes. Comley, Ardez, Holden, and Kuriata (2001) echoed this point by stating that schools as a learning organization have the “distinct ability” to cope with changes more effectively and successfully. Brandt (2003) also proposed that a learning organization has to be responsible and flexible to the changing environment and should have characteristics such as an “institutional knowledge base and processes for creating new ideas,” “system for obtaining feedback on products and services,” “ability to refine basic processes,” and an “open system sensitive to the external environment” under different social, economic, and political conditions. Edvinsson and Malone (1997) identified “two important types of knowledge”, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. The former is learned from direct experience and it is normally difficult to express verbally or cannot be articulated while the latter can be communicated and acquired through formal education and training as well as experience on the job. Thus, the ability to manage the acquisition of these two types of knowledge is essential not only for knowledge distribution but also for knowledge application. Since the ability of students to learn and to adapt to the working environment of different conference settings needs to be improved as indicated in the introduction of this paper, this paper, thus, proposes several knowledge-based approaches that have been widely applied to organizations including cooperative learning, data mining, and self-evaluation to help create an environment and a process that facilitates interpretation teaching and learning in order to bridge the gap between knowing and doing.

3. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning was initiated in the 1930s in the US and gained popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. In the mid 1960s, the Cooperative Learning Center was built to promote the relevant program at the national level in the US. Cooperative learning, unlike traditional teaching and learning, emphasizes active interaction between teachers and students and students are “not only responsible for learning” but also help their peer students to learn and then to “create an atmosphere of achievement” (Johnson, 2001). Cooperative learning, thus, meets the requirement of a systemic approach to initiate cultural change in learning organizations as contested by Gandolfi (2006) to initiate changes in “the mindsets of autonomous professional teachers” that have been taught to take responsibility for the quality of learning in the classroom settings. Coff-Kfouri (2001) and Wu, Shen, and Lee (2003) also suggested the importance of cooperative learning in classroom settings for translation and interpretation courses since students can benefit from interacting with teachers and peer students with different backgrounds and specialties. Active learning has been the core activity of cooperative
learning. It helps people to work together in order to achieve a specific goal (Johnson, 2001). The application of cooperative teaching to interpretation started when Wu, Shen, and Lee (2003) conducted an inter-departmental cooperative teaching program for interpretation courses offered in different language departments (German, Japanese, Spanish, and French) at a college of languages in Southern Taiwan. In Taiwan, Professor Yang Chenshu’s website www.itbi.edu.tw provides an introduction, theory, and examples of lesson plans for multilingual interpretation teaching. Furthermore, currently at Chang Jung Christian University, students of the Graduate Institute of Translation and Interpretation Studies help foreign students and teachers with learning and teaching. This is also a good example for the application of cooperative learning to English-Chinese interpretation teaching and learning. Through the proposed cooperative learning, both students and teachers can get help from their peers and successfully complete interpretation teaching and learning.

4. Data Mining

Although wild guesses should be definitely avoided during an interpretation assignment, sometimes, an interpreter inevitably needs to make educated guesses when s/he is unsure about the message sent by the speaker. This scenario occurs not only in real meetings, but also in the classroom when interpretation courses are offered to undergraduate students who are relatively young in age, have a low level of language competence in both Chinese and English, and insufficient professional knowledge as required by professional interpreters. Since almost all colleges and universities around the island now offer interpretation classes to undergraduate students, this poses a big challenge for both teachers and students. The purpose of interpretation courses at the graduate level is to train conference interpreters, yet this apparently does not apply to the undergraduate level where students are relatively young in age, have a low level of language competence in both Chinese and English, and possess insufficient professional knowledge as required by professional interpreters. Experts and scholars also indicate that interpretation courses at the undergraduate level should only provide alternative methods for students to improve their language skills and other relevant abilities rather than providing professional training (Lee, 1996; He 1999; Liu, 2002). This study, thus, proposes that knowledge-based consecutive interpretation training should be included in undergraduate programs in order to transform information into knowledge, a so called “data mining process,” by teaching students to focus on the key words, sentence structures, transitions, and paragraph arrangements in the speeches as well as the knowledge delivered and disseminated by speakers.

Data mining techniques are often used for “pattern discovery and extraction,” the traditional way that people turn data into information and then knowledge (Fayyad et al., 1996). Information is also transformed into knowledge through hands-on data analysis. During the data mining process, manual analysis and interpretation are the core tasks; for example, scholars and experts periodically review and analyze current issues and challenges to develop trends or patterns for future reference. Hence, data mining is not a simple data analysis process and is often applied to knowledge discovery and prediction through comparing and finding relationships. In the context of learning interpretation skills at the undergraduate level, data mining helps students to reap the benefits of extraction from experience, patterns, and relationships in the data, manage the complexity and make the best use of identified, documented and preserved expertise. As reported in the literature, students, after interpretation training at the undergraduate level, are expected to be able to improve their communication skills and have more employment opportunities.

If acceptable consecutive interpretation performance is the objective of undergraduate courses then there is an urgent need to improve listening comprehension and enable them to conduct model manipulation. If we examine the components of listening comprehension, it contains “phoneme perception,” “word recognition,” “syntactic analysis”, and “propositional construction” (Yamahuchi, 2001) and as indicated by Hayashi(1991) listening comprehension difficulties arise from insufficient processing of individual words, fundamental to information processing, at the sentence level. Wu and Lee (2009) revealed the need to apply certain types of speeches to help students to increase effort allocation and to improve the interpretation performance of students. Wu and Pai (2008), in their quantitative study on discourse analysis and consecutive interpretation learning, further proved that the analysis of content and context help students to determine the presence of words or concepts. Thus, the effectiveness of a simple data mining process can be determined through individual word recognition testing as well as consecutive interpretation performance by undergraduate students.

In the simple data mining process proposed and introduced by this study, students are able to recognize individual words through free association and brainstorming in a given context. Students are able to put individual words in the right position of sentences and speeches during a fill-the-blank class activity. The introduction of
speech formats also eases nervousness, helps them anticipate messages given by speakers in the later part of a speech, and boost the confidence of students during a consecutive interpretation assignment. The study of Wu & Wu (2009) also found better consecutive interpretation performance by subject undergraduate students after the introduction of the simple data mining process. In the end, judging from feedback given by the subjects, the researchers concluded that students are able to learn more interpretation skills and techniques, feel more interested in interpretation, and have more confidence in their performance.

5. Self-evaluation

Most studies on the knowing and doing gap focused on organizational learning. Disseminating knowledge and transferring expertise is not an easy task even within academic institutions. In a formal education setting, learning is regarded as something that is unproblematic and taken for granted. However, in interpretation courses, students face intense workloads because they are required to perform many tasks such as “hearing, listening, analyzing, memorizing, and interpreting” (Weber, 1989; Gile 1995) at the same time or within a very short period of time. Moreover, the complexities of these tasks and unfamiliarity with the interpretation process (both consecutive and simultaneous) usually have a negative impact on the performance of beginning students (Wu and Pai, 2008).

Learning, according to studies in psychology during the 1960s and 1970s, was defined as a change in behavior and approached as a recognized or seen outcome and experience. In some way, learning helps to initiate behavioral changes through the generation of new knowledge, but in fact, not all changes in behavior involve learning from previous experiences (Smith 1999).

According to the cognitive theory of learning, the internal mental process (how learners think, understand or feel), should be the focus for teachers (Nerriam and Caffarella, 1991). Self-evaluation skills are, thus, important for students in regards to knowledge development and learning because they improve conceptual understanding. The practices and ideas of self-evaluation go back thousands of years. Research on self-evaluation focuses on how knowledge is constructed and how students learn from their experiences (Villano, 2006). These experiences impact students and influence the selection of learning strategies that maximize efficiency. The more one knows about how things happen, the better s/he can benefit from what they learn. The self-evaluation of students facilitates an active and self-directed learning process in which students can discover problems, understand the existence of the knowing and doing gap, and develop strategies to cope with challenges they face as interpreters.

6. Conclusion

The ideas presented in the literature review and this paper suggest a belief that there is a knowing and doing gap between interpretation training, learning in a classroom setting and working as a professional interpreter. Interpretation is a cognitive activity and, like language learning, students may consciously or subconsciously apply what they learned in the classroom setting properly to a real conference interpretation job (Wu, 2006). In conclusion, teachers need to be more aware of the cognitive learning process and possible barriers in order to help students apply what they have learned both in the classroom setting and at conferences so that they can perform at their best and close the gap. With the proposed knowledge-based approaches that have been widely applied to learning organizations, the goal of facilitating effective interpretation teaching and learning and bridging the gap between knowing and doing is achieved.

Reference


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