An Investigation of the Skills Taught in Interpreter Training Courses in Bachelors of English Translating in Iranian Universities

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Abstract: Introduction and Aims: Interpreting requires certain basic necessary skills. This study aims to show whether interpreter training courses offered in bachelor’s degree of English translation in Iranian universities are adequate in teaching these necessary skills. The basic necessary skills required for interpreters were investigated. Methodology: Semi-structured interviews with experts and review of literature were used to find the skills required in interpreter training. A researcher-made questionnaire was completed by 103 students from six different universities. The questionnaire contained 69 items with a four point Likert scale to find out how much the students felt they had learned each necessary skill and technique during their courses. SPSS 17 was used to analyze the data. Results and suggestions: The results showed that out of these universities, 67% received a mean score of less than half the highest possible score and the score of the remaining universities was more than half the highest possible score. There was a significant difference between the six universities (P<0.001). A reformation of the curriculum of interpreter training courses is suggested.

Keywords: Interpreter Training · Simultaneous Interpreting · Consecutive Interpreting · Curriculum Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

While translation and interpreting can be both defined as professions used to ease communication between people, they are in essence different in nature. Time is the most obvious difference between these two professions. Interpreters need to be trained in order to be able to overcome the disadvantages that they face over a translator [1].

Training course for interpreters should include core interpreting subjects and interpreting-related subjects. Also, inadequate courses may be counter-productive as they give the students the false impression that they know everything only to realize they have yet a lot to learn [2].

Ideally, a separate major should be taught for interpreting in universities. Many colleges and universities provide such courses around the world such as University of Geneva, Georgetown University and many more. Most researches carried out in this field have compared universities with market demands [3-8]. However, these researches have not evaluated interpreter training courses on their own and no research has been carried out in Iran to evaluate the courses offered to the students. This study attempts to do so by looking at the techniques and skills taught to interpreters during the “interpreting” course offered to bachelor students of English translation in Iranian universities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is descriptive in nature and aims to evaluate the interpreter training courses presented in universities of Iran to bachelor’s students of English translation. Therefore, the population of the study was all bachelor students of English Translation. The selected sample for this study was 103 students from 6 different universities. The following research questions were formulated in order to see whether interpreter training courses are adequate or not:

- To what extent have the students of Bachelor degree of English Translating in Iranian Universities been familiarized with the basic definitions and concepts of interpreting in the ‘interpreting’ course?
How much have the skills, related to consecutive interpreting, been practiced in Bachelor degree of English Translating in Iranian Universities in the ‘interpreting’ course?

To what extent have the skills, related to simultaneous interpreting, been practiced in Bachelor degree of English Translating in Iranian Universities in the ‘interpreting’ course?

Is there a statistical difference between the six universities in this study in terms of the skills and techniques taught to the students for interpreting as indicated in the previous questions?

The descriptive nature of the first three questions means that no hypothesis is needed. However, as the fourth research questions aims to differentiate between the universities in this study, a hypothesis is required. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

Hypothesis: There is a no significant statistical difference between the six universities in terms of the skills and techniques taught to the students during the interpreting course.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was prepared for the gathering of the data. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts. The first section was designed to gather general and demographic information about the participants. This section of the questionnaire consisted of six questions such as gender, mother-tongue etc. The second part collected data regarding the student’s knowledge and the training they received during their course.

The second section of the questionnaire was divided into three parts consisting of 69 items. The first part, “basic definitions”, contains six items related to different types of interpreting and their meaning. The second part, containing 40 items, is titled “techniques for consecutive interpreting”. These 40 items include topics such as the three necessary stages of consecutive interpreting, note-taking and memory skills. The final part, “techniques for simultaneous interpreting”, with 23 items, includes topic such as the ability to use the equipment properly, developing split attention, methods of reformulation and timing.

The students had to answer each of these items by selecting one option on a four point Likert scale. The values for the scale are:

- Hasn’t been taught
- Mentioned briefly
- Has been taught
- Thoroughly explained

The content validity of the questionnaire was checked by experts’ opinions. Test-retest was carried out on 15 subjects to check the reliability of the questionnaire and Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to be 0.8.

SPSS 17 software was used for data analysis. Other than simple methods of descriptive data analysis, such as frequency and mean, non-parametric independent sample was used to analyse the data because the data were not normally distributed. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to see if there is a significant difference between the universities or not. A P value of less than 0.001 was considered as a significant difference.

RESULTS

A total of 103 students of English translating from six universities took part in this study, out which 26 were from Allame Tabatabaie University, 20 from Sheikh Bahae University, 19 from University of Shahrekord, 14 from University of Isfahan, 12 from Khorasgan Azad University and 12 from the Isfahan branch of Payame Noor. Of these students, 32(31.1%) were male and 71 (68.9%) were female. The following sections will look at the different sections of the questionnaire and the data gathered for each section.

Understanding of Basic Definitions: Before looking at the techniques and skills required for interpreting, the students have to know the basic definitions of different terms used in interpreting. The first section of the questionnaire, consisting of six questions, was used to find out how much the students felt that had learned these definitions and jargon.

The data showed that 9.7% of the students felt that they had learned everything they need to know about the basic definitions of interpreting and 21.4% thought that these definitions had been taught; whereas 48.5% noted that these definitions had only been mentioned briefly and 20.4% felt that these definitions have not been taught at all. The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there is a significant difference between the universities in terms of the understandings of the basic definitions (P<0.001). This is given in Table 1, as the sum of the answers given by each student and the mean and the standard deviation for each university. These were calculated by giving a score to each option on the Likert scale of the questionnaire. The values for the scale are;
Table 1: Sum Score and Mean of Each University for Basic Definitions (questions one to six)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Isfahan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allame Tabatabaie University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Shahrekord</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Bahaee University</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khorasgan Azad University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payame Noor Isfahan</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>P&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Sum Score and Mean of Each University for Consecutive Interpreting (questions seven to forty six)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Isfahan</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<td>Allame Tabatabaie University</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>104.7</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Shahrekord</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Bahaee University</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>115.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khorasgan Azad University</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payame Noor Isfahan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>P&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Hasn’t Been Taught
- Mentioned Briefly
- Has Been Taught
- Thoroughly Explained: 4.

Using these values, the minimum, maximum and mean of each university is calculated and given in Table 1.

The highest score possible for this section is 24. The mean for all of the universities for this section of the questionnaire was 10.8. Based on the results of table 1, it can be observed that Sheikh Bahaee University had the highest mean (15.8) and University of Isfahan had the lowest mean (6.6) among the universities when looking at the students’ understanding of the basic definitions.

Techniques and Skills of Consecutive Interpreting:
The second research question was regarding the techniques and skills students need for consecutive interpreting and the second section of the questionnaire, consisting of 40 questions, was used to check how much the students felt they had learned these skills and techniques.

The data indicates that, the majority of the students (55.3%) felt that the skills and techniques required for consecutive interpreting have only been mentioned briefly whereas only 15.5% felt that these skills had been explained thoroughly. Out of the remaining students, 28.2% felt that these skills had been taught and only 1% felt that none of these skills had been taught.

Using the same value scoring system as explained above, the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for each university has been provided in Table 2.

The highest score possible for this section is 160 and the lowest is 40. The mean for all of the universities for this section of the questionnaire was 82.3. As Table 2 shows, Sheikh Bahaee University had the highest mean (115.7) and University of Isfahan had the lowest mean (52.8) among the universities when looking at the students’ knowledge of skills and techniques for consecutive interpreting.

**Techniques and Skills of Simultaneous Interpreting:**
The third section of the questionnaire, consisting of 23 questions, was used to check the students’ understanding of the skills and techniques used for simultaneous interpreting.

The data indicates that only 18.4% of the students felt these skills and techniques related to simultaneous interpreting had been thoroughly explained and 25.2% felt that these techniques have been taught; whereas 42.7% felt that the skills and techniques related to it had only been mentioned briefly and 13.6% felt that these skills had not been taught at all.

By giving a score to each response on the Likert scale of the questionnaire (as explained before), the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for each university is calculated and the results are shown in Table 3.

Having 23 questions for this sections means that the lowest possible score for each university is 23 and the highest possible score is 92. The mean of all of the universities was nearly half the highest possible score (45.7). However, the Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there is a significant difference between the universities (P<0.001). University of Isfahan received the lowest mean
Table 3: Sum Score and Mean of Each University for Simultaneous Interpreting (questions 47 to 69)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Isfahan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allame Tabatabaie University</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Shahrekord</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Bahae University</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khorasgan Azad University</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payame Noor Isfahan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>P&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Sum Score and Mean of Each University for the Whole Questionnaire (questions 1 to 69)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Isfahan</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allame Tabatabaie University</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>179.2</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Shahrekord</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikh Bahae University</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>195.3</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khorasgan Azad University</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>117.1</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payame Noor Isfahan</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>106.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>138.8</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>P&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1: Mean Score of All of the Universities for Each Section and Total

score among these six universities (24.3) and Sheikh Bahae University received the highest mean score (63.8) with Allame Tabatabaie University following a close second with a score of 62.5.

**Overall Score of the Universities:** Having talking about the research questions in detail, this section will show whether and to what extent the score each university obtained in the questionnaire differed from each other. Using the same scoring system as explained before, the score for each university will be provided in Table 4 below. It should be noted, however, that this will be the total score obtained for the entire questionnaire and not just one section.

The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there is a significant difference between the universities (P<0.001). Given that there are 69 questions in the questionnaire, the lowest possible score is 69 and the highest possible score is 276. The results in Table 4 show that Sheikh Bahae University managed to get the highest mean score (195.3) among these six universities. University of Isfahan also received the lowest mean score (83.8). Figure 1 shows the mean score each university obtained for each section of the questionnaire and also the total mean score they each achieved.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

As only the fourth research question had a hypothesis, the hypothesis will be presented here again and a brief explanation will be given based on the obtained results shown in the previous sections.
Hypothesis: There is no significant statistical difference between the six universities in terms of the skills and techniques taught to the students during the interpreting course.

As explained in the previous sections, there was in fact a significant difference between the universities in each section. The Kruskal Wallis-H test was also used to see if there is a significant difference between the universities in the overall score they each achieved. Table 4 showed that there is a significant difference between the universities (P<0.001), disproving the aforementioned hypothesis.

Different factors can be considered to be the cause of the differences between the universities in this study. The most obvious of these factors, is in fact, the teachers of these courses. Interviews with the Sheila Bahaee University and Allame Tabatabaie University teachers revealed that they were in fact, researchers and experts in the field of interpreting. However, teachers in the other four universities had majored in English Teaching and either had not learned anything related to the subject or were not interested in this field.

It should also be pointed out here again, that the University of Isfahan offers interpreter training as a single, 2 unit courses and not as three, 2 unit courses. This can greatly affect the learning outcome of the students as the teacher does not have enough time to teach all the important skills.

As most of these courses are either held in normal classroom or in laboratories (the equipment of which are never used), the students never get the opportunity to talk in a conference like situation and therefore do not pay attention to the communication skills which is required of them as a speaker and not just an interpreter.

A lack of resources available also makes the teaching methods harder. Currently there is no text book available to the students and the teachers, which they can use as a point of reference in learning the necessary skills. However, it should be pointed out that resources, does not refer to only text books. Most of the interpreting work done by students is done by translating what their teacher or classmates say. Videos and audio files of native speakers are rarely used during these classes.

Due to the short amount of time the teacher has, many essential skills, for example in note-taking, are often neglected. The skills for note-taking require much practice and they need to be explained thoroughly to the students. The students must become so skilled in note-taking, that they are able to make notes for speech segments of five minutes and read them back to the class.

The same argument can be made about other aspects of teaching consecutive interpreting. Memory training, for example, is a skill which needs to be improved over a period of time.

The equipment a simultaneous interpreter requires, although not hard to find, are rarely ever used during the course. Even though most universities have laboratories, most of their equipment is either out of date or not suitable for teaching simultaneous interpreters. One may argue that the basic use of headphones and microphones are rudimentary and simple explanations will suffice and working in a booth is no different than working outside the booth. However, all scholars and experienced interpreters believe that in order to overcome nerves and gain first-hand experience, practice with this equipment is essential during training.

The implications of this study have more of an effect on the practical side of interpreter training than on the theoretical aspects of interpreting in general. Curriculum planners and interpreter trainers can use the data shown in this study to improve the training courses provided in Iranian universities.

Based on the issues mentioned in this section, a few suggestions will be made on how to improve interpreter training courses.

The first issue that needs to be dealt with is the selection of the trainers. As explained before, the majority of trainers are not familiar with the basic concepts of translation, let alone interpreting. Training the trainers is fastest way to improve the teaching standards of interpreter training courses.

The next step, which can be seen to be just as important as the previous, is the preparation of resources. This step may include preparation of text books, audio and video files and homework material. There are quite a few textbooks written for aspiring interpreters; unfortunately none are available in Iran. These books can be either brought in to be used in the interpreter training courses or used as points of reference in writing a new textbook by scholars and experts in Iran.

The use of audio and video files also needs to be carefully planned by experts in the field. Although there is an abundance of audio and video files on the internet, these material need to be selected carefully to meet the students’ needs.

Although most universities have laboratories equipped with headphones and cubicles, they are rarely ever used during the course of interpreter training. Four out of the six universities investigated in this study, did not use the laboratories and the two that did use them, did not
teach the students how to use the equipment. It should also be pointed out that the cubicles in laboratories are not suitable to be used for simultaneous interpreting, as simultaneous interpreting needs to be done in sound proof booths.

The last, but in no way least important, issue that needs to be addressed is the duration of the training course. As previously explained University of Isfahan offered this course as a single 2 unit course and also received the lowest average score. Even if all the suggestions made above are implemented in the training courses, there needs to be enough time for practice during these courses. Having three 2 unit courses, as the majority of universities do, does help to increase the learning standards greatly. However, it is strongly advised that Iranian universities look at interpreting as a separate major completely and offer interpreter training as a four year undergraduate course.

This is also in concurrence of previous research carried out by Mahmoudzadeh, who has shown that university training does not meet market demands [9, 10].

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REFERENCES