Corpus-Assisted Exercises in Conference Interpreter Training

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Abstract: The article discusses the role of exercises for beginners in conference interpreting classes, introduces possible ways to create such exercises by means of speech corpora available online, and advocates for a combination of research-informed and technology-assisted approach to interpreter training. First, the state of research in interpreting pedagogy, and in particular the concept of part-task training are briefly described. The goal of decreasing cognitive effort during interpreting, and during the learning process, underlines the usefulness of part-task exercises for automatization of interpreting sub-skills. Based on this theoretic rationale, available handbooks for interpreter trainers are critically assessed. It is argued that interpreting programs could benefit from collections of exercises, or from methods to create them. In interpreter training, especially corpora of political speeches allow the creation of multiple exercises for automatization of certain sub-skills, which is illustrated by several examples.

Introduction[1]

Pedagogy of conference interpreting was one of the first sources of interpreting studies, and training issues continue to play a significant role in translatology (cf. Gile, 2001; Pöchhacker, 2016; Yan et. al, 2018). A recent general overview of research and practice of teaching conference interpreting was provided by Kalina and Barranco-Droege (2021); for a review on the development of interpreter education and programs in Europe see Niska (2005) or Šveda (2021), in Russia – Alekseeva (2011, 2013), and in China – Zhan (2014). For a comprehensive account of the institutional framework and curriculum, see the introduction to Sawyer et al. (2019). As for more practice-oriented contributions, Andres and Behr (2015) offer a collection of articles on methodological topics by experienced interpreter trainers. Another significant publication in this field are two coursebooks, one for students and one for instructors, by Setton and Dawrant (2016).

For further discussion, it is relevant to note that research in interpreting pedagogy is characterized by a lack of empirical studies. This issue was criticized by Dillinger as early as in 1989: "it is not clear how to treat information experts provide in the absence of a body of experimentally-based theory" (Dillinger, 1989, as cited in Sawyer, 2004, p. 22). Later, Kalina expressed still the same concern as she wrote that empirical studies regarding the use and success of different teaching methods are missing in interpreting studies (Kalina, 2000a, p. 169), and stressed the need for a „broad basis of scientific findings from which it will be possible to develop a scientifically-based teaching methodology" (Kalina 2000b, p. 11).

In 2001, Gile partly, explained the situation at the earlier stage of interpreter education research with the following observation:

> […] training is clearly the most popular theme in the literature from the very beginning. This is probably due not only to its importance for a community essentially composed of interpretation instructors, but also to the fact that texts on training can be descriptive, analytical and/or prescriptive, and be written by authors without any training or

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skills in research on the sole basis of their experience. (Gile, 2001, p. 231)

The same focus on own experience in designing instruction materials has also been noted by other scholars (e.g., Kalina, 2000; Andres & Behr, 2015).

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the recent publication by Yan et al. (2018), empirical studies in interpreter training are possible, even if they are particularly difficult to conduct. Challenges begin with a relatively low number of trainees in interpreting programs at the universities, hence limited numbers of potential study participants, and less significant results. Other problems are language specifics and transferability of study results to other language pairs; assessment of interpreting quality (as one of the most obvious markers of the quality of training); and even ethical questions that arise whenever educational research is conducted by means of experimental studies. A comprehensive account on other methodological challenges in interpreting studies was provided by Bendazzoli and Monacelli (2016). This partly explains why there is still no satisfactory empirical grounding for any set of exercises for simultaneous interpreting.

Thus, training methods in interpreter education are justified in a number of ways. First, there is the experience-based approach. Second, attempts of empirical studies in pedagogy of interpreting, combined with the above-mentioned difficulties. And the third possibility is to borrow insights from neighbor disciplines, first of all cognitive science and psychology of learning, where empirical research can be conducted with more reliable outcomes.

Such research-informed approach appears to be a feasible way to advance interpreter training, and the corresponding goals are being set in latest publications: for example, "to describe how basic insights into fundamental cognitive processes underlying SI [simultaneous interpreting] can be operationalized in an attempt to develop a training approach" (Seeber & Arbona, 2020, p. 370). In line with this claim, Seeber and Arbona (2020) propose a multimodal educational setting within the framework of "cognitive ergonomics", others report on successful introduction of such pedagogical models as situated learning (González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído, 2016), flipped classroom (Kim, 2017), or interprofessional education (Hlavac et al., 2022).

Among many important areas in interpreter education research, like aptitude, feedback, and assessment, there is also a debate about the role of exercises. This issue has a lot of aspects: what kind of exercises shall be introduced in the beginning of the training, what combination of class activities is the most appropriate, what training materials shall be used, etc. The above questions apply to the organization of practice in all types of activities that interpreter trainees have to master, including for example, note-taking for consecutive interpreting. The following article discusses only the exercises that involve actual interpreting, after preparatory exercises (Andres et. al, 2015) have been introduced and mastered.

Exercises and part-task training

The prevailing position regarding the exercises depends on the view of a particular trainer on interpreting pedagogy in general. As described by Seeber and Arbona (2020), instructors with a more holistic approach would probably put more emphasis on letting the trainees to interpret whole speeches, whereas those who favor a more atomistic approach would try to propose more exercises for specific sub-components of interpreting. At the same time, a rather heterogenous combination of class activities is reported: proponents of the holistic approach also recommend drills out of context, and proponents of an atomistic approach also include full-fledged interpreting exercises, and many of the differences between the two approaches can be "reduced to a question of degree" (Seeber & Arbona, 2020, p. 373).

Keeping in mind this "question of degree", the present article will address the topic of interpreting exercises from the more atomistic point of view, and explore how simultaneous interpreting skills may be acquired by novices through part-task training. This can be analyzed by asking what skills should be trained in the first place, and how to practice them within the framework of contemporary MA programs. Crucial for both issues is human working memory which has been a popular area of inquiry per se, and is "probably the single most often researched isolated cognitive component in interpreting studies" (Timarová, 2012, p. 44).

On the one hand, working memory is extremely loaded during simultaneous interpreting (cf. Hodzik & Williams, 2021). On the other hand, working memory also plays a decisive role in the acquisition of interpreting skills, as it does in learning every other new secondary knowledge (cf. Geary, 2007). This can be described as two types of demands that are placed on working memory resources, namely:

    (1)   demands during simultaneous interpreting; and

    (2)   demands during the learning process of such complex task as simultaneous interpreting.

The former demands (1) are met with the cognitive effort, described as the "amount of resources the interpreter uses in order to carry out the interpreting task" (Tiselius & Sneed, 2020, p. 2). Desired reduction of the cognitive effort may be achieved if some portions of the task are carried out with a certain degree of automaticity. Such automatization of a specific cognitive process is often divided into three stages (cf. Kellogg, 2003; Anderson, 2010), from controlled processing to "autonomous, procedural, automatic processing" which "requires practice and repetition to develop" (Chmiel, 2006, p. 50). Hence, the first of the above questions (i.e., what skills should be trained) may be answered as follows: we should practice, first of all, those skills that are likely to reduce cognitive effort if they reach a certain degree of automaticity, so that less cognitive resources are needed to use this skill. This means, that it makes sense to practice especially those skills that can be assumed to reach automatic processing stage within a relatively short MA course.

The latter demands (2) that are placed on working memory during skill acquisition, may be reduced by breaking the skill into sub-skills and by partly automating their processing one by one. To answer the second questions (i.e., how to practice): skills should be practiced in a way that does not unnecessarily increase demands placed on the working memory during the exercise: "Learning tasks should be designed in such a way that the available WM [working memory] capacity is efficiently used to achieve the highest return on mental effort investment" (Paas & Merriënboer, 2020, p. 395)

The above conclusions shall be now applied to the subject of interpreting exercises, and discussed below in more detail.

What to practice?

The concept of part-task training has already been used in interpreting pedagogy research (e.g., de Groot, 2000; Han, 2013; Chmiel, 2010), and many sources unambiguously point out on automatization as one of the teaching goals in interpreter education (Komissarov, 1997; Moser-Mercer et al., 2000; Riccardi, 2005; Setton & Dawrant, 2016). However, despite the general agreement on the theory, it has been hard to find a consensus on the role and the implementation of the part-task exercises in interpreting curriculum (Setton & Dawrant, 2016, p. 61).

Different authors come up with different sets of interpreter sub-skills or competences to be taught (Kalina, 2000b; Sawyer, 2004; Kutz, 2010; Han, 2013). A recent attempt of decomposition of interpreting task shows that there are "semi- or almost fully automatable procedures (transcoding one-to-one lexical equivalents, set phrases, perhaps even some structural patterns), for which isolated task drills are necessary" (Setton & Dawrant 2016, p. 66).

While a typology of language structures for the interpreting exercises deserves more attention and should be discussed separately, it is clear that the above "structural patterns" subject to studying will depend on a specific language combination. They may be taken from available interpreting studies literature, or suggested by trainers on basis of their own experience. Other possible sources are: contrastive linguistic research, extraction of word lists and collocations from speech corpora, research into translation difficulties.

How to practice?

As was established above, the process of learning a complex task places high demands on the working memory of a trainee. It is therefore advisable not to increase this load with additional difficulties in the beginning of skill acquisition. This approach is being implemented in teaching written translation in form of contrastive exercises, when sentences are translated without context in order to highlight specific language phenomena:

[...] students translate sentences out of context, so that attention is focused on the contrastive problems themselves – problems that, in context, are often blurred by questions of style or genre. This does not mean that context is less important than we have insisted, but that learning to make strategic decisions implies developing a contrastive awareness of available translation options; this awareness is sharpened by taking sentences out of context. (Margaret et al. 2020, p. 168)

Applied to simultaneous interpreting, this would mean to interpret isolated sentences or phrases with examples of "structural patterns" without the context of the whole speech. While such training may not be considered widespread, it was indeed practiced at some conference interpreting programs and is applied by individual interpreter trainers as reported in Alexeeva (2021).

To be able to repeat such exercises in form of a short interpreting activity multiple times and develop a skill of interpreting the given element of speech, a sufficient amount of training materials is needed. At the same time, it should be emphasized that we are discussing interpreter training within the framework of university MA programs which normally last two years or less. And it is considered unlikely that interpreter students will acquire necessary skills without additional self-study (Dingfelder Stone, 2015). Repeated exercises to acquire the necessary "mileage" (Seeber, 2017, p. 13) in interpreting are indispensable.

In other disciplines, such as mathematics or foreign language learning, special workbooks with multiple tasks or problems are used for this purpose. Practice-oriented interpreting coursebooks are also available. In the following section, we shall briefly discuss if they comply with the above suggestions.

Contemporary handbooks

There are several contemporary practice-oriented publications by experienced interpreter trainers (e.g., Kautz, 2000; Nolan, 2005; Gillies, 2013; Setton & Dawrant, 2016)[2]. Their advantages have already been reviewed in the literature but, as far as the part-task exercises are

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[2] Textbooks dedicated to consecutive interpreting or note-taking are not included in this review as the main focus of this paper is simultaneous interpreting.

concerned, they all have something in common that hinders them from becoming more popular among teaching professionals and students (cf. Pavlisová, 2022).

First of all, as briefly noted in the introduction, most exercises proposed so far seem to be suggested by the authors solely on the basis of their own working experience, and not scientific evidence (cf. Kalina, 2000b); moreover, in most cases there is no data about the effectiveness of the proposed exercises, and the usefulness of some of them is challenged (Gile, 2005, p. 136); finally, and most important, practice materials per se are not provided, as the manuals contain only descriptions of possible tasks, while the exercises have to be prepared by trainers.

It is understandable: these manuals are meant to be not language specific, and hence do not contain any ready-to-use materials. But, as demonstrated above, repeated exercises for automatization are crucial for skill-acquisition within the part-task training paradigm, and the question remains: where to find the examples, and how to create materials for practice.

For a long time, in spite of the obvious importance of this issue, different regions, institutions, and instructors seemed to come up with own and often ad hoc solutions. This is illustrated by the fact that Sawyer, in 2004, was quoting Weber's comment from 1984 as still applicable: "It is always surprising to people wanting to add a translation and interpretation component to their language instruction that there are very few – if any – textbooks in these fields" (Weber, 1984, as cited in Sawyer, 2004, p. 25).

Even now, almost another 20 years later, the situation looks similar: *The Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting* (Albl-Mikasa & Tiselius, 2021) covers a lot of topics on more than 600 pages but doesn't mention specific collections of interpreting exercises, apart from some publications that cannot be considered ready-to-use consolidated practice materials for reasons described above.

At the same time, a recent survey among 63 interpreter trainers showed that 36% of participants do not use any textbooks at all, and 98% of respondents create their own teaching materials (Pavlisová, 2022, p. 88). While this data describes only the situation in Czech Republic, judging from the anecdotal reference from other regions we

may suggest that the overall trend is similar in other countries, too: own training materials are very common in the field.

Interpreting courses could benefit from collections of (or at least from a method to create) such pedagogical materials for different language combinations, as a help for interpreter trainers who are often, at the same time, practicing conference interpreters. While their working experience is surely very useful for teaching, they are not always able to spend a lot of time to develop and update own teaching materials, and additional research-based textbooks with multiple exercises to simplify the preparation for the classes will probably be welcome.

In the absence of such textbooks, other sources may be used to facilitate creation of the needed exercises. The corpus-based approach, which is evolving as a promising field of interpreter education, might be able to deliver training materials that will comply with the ideas described above.

Corpora as the source of training materials

Text corpora are already being used for teaching translation (cf. Bárcena et al., 2014). At least 72 programs within the European Master's in Translation network use corpora in their curricula (Mikhailov, 2022, p. 10). In this regard, translation research is naturally one step ahead of interpreting studies because in order to create a written text corpus one doesn't need to transcribe the oral speeches. This is a rather difficult task (cf. Niemants, 2012), and it is not surprising that interpreting corpora are less frequent than translation corpora. But corpus-based interpreting studies also gather momentum, as more and more publications appear (cf. Russo, 2019; Bendazzoli et al., 2018).

As demonstrated by the recent coursebook on text translation by Baer and Mellinger (2020), there is a difference between using corpora for research purposes and using them for training. The latter allows for less sophisticated design, smaller amounts of text, and more flexibility in data selection. Spontaneously created corpora for teaching and learning purposes do not necessarily need to have the significance of an extensive scientific corpus, but they still can be successfully used by instructors and students.

The same applies to corpus-assisted interpreting pedagogy: even corpora of smaller size may be relevant for educational purposes, as shown by the examples below.

Bertozzi (2018) reports on the development of Italian-Spanish intermodal corpus ANGLINTRAD with a focus on loanwords. While this work revolves around only 241 target words, it delivers valuable pedagogical material: terminological sheets with in-depth analysis for each of the 241 English loanwords in the Italian corpus, and a classification of the strategies adopted by interpreters and translators to each loanword, allowing for comparison between the two in interpreting or translation classes.

Ferraresi (2016) describes how English-Italian intermodal[3] parallel corpus EPTIC can be used in an educational setting to analyze differences in decision-making processes in translation and interpreting, and proposes corpus-based teaching materials on collocations.

For the purpose of the part-task training approach, a corpus doesn't have to be multimodal, nor is a special translation or interpreting corpus needed. If chosen carefully, even a monolingual corpus can become a source of interpreting exercises within the suggested training framework. It is, however, important to find the right corpus for this goal, and the corpora of parliamentary or political speeches seem to be especially suitable.

Advantages lie in the nature of this source. Parliamentary corpora contain official spoken speeches of appropriate stylistic quality and required lexical level, they reflect political discourse, and some are constantly updated. All this makes their content nearly perfect for training conference interpreters.

Corpora segments can be flexibly searched, extracted, and reused, which allows to create multiple exercises without much manual formatting work. There are corpora of this kind that can be accessed free of charge, with modern user-friendly online interfaces, and a simple search procedure does not require any specific technical knowledge. In the following section, two of such online corpus tools are presented, and possible exercises are discussed.

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[3] Intermodal corpora combine parallel or comparable translations and interpretations of the same source text; for additional information about such corpora see Bernardini et al. (2016).

Examples of corpus-assisted exercises

The first corpus to be presented is the Europarl corpus of European Parliament proceedings. It contains speeches in the official languages of the EU with around 60 million words per language, from the period 2007–2011. Europarl is available via Sketch Engine online tool[4].

The second corpus that was used for the present report is the corpus of German political speeches available on the DWDS[5] platform. It contains 15240 official speeches (ca. 27 million words) of German-speaking politicians from six countries and regions, from the period 1982–2020[6].

Both corpora have been used by the author as sources of teaching materials for German-Russian conference interpreting classes. In the following final part of this article, three examples of such corpus use are reported. In all three cases, the exercises were created on different accounts: in the first case, the reasoning is represented by combined pedagogical experience of colleagues; in the second case – exercises were means to tackle a particular problem trigger in interpreting; in the third – the idea was taken from the literature and developed into a proper exercise material.

The first case, is trainer's suggestion to practice set phrases, syntactic constructions, standard expressions, or language formulas, that, from his or her experience, are deemed advisable to learn for conference interpreters. Such elements can be easily found in available speech corpora in sufficient amount[7], and this option is rather obvious and self-explanatory: the lists of examples can be then interpreted one by one, out of context of the speeches, in order to focus attention only on rendering this, presumably common, German constructions in Russian, according to the described part-task approach.

Second, when alternating between the exercises and the full-fledged interpreting of speeches, a trainer may notice that some

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[4] https://www.sketchengine.eu/europarl-parallel-corpus

[5] Digitales Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache (eng. "digital dictionary of the German language"), a project of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

[6] https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/politische_reden

[7] If this is not the case (e.g., if what is intended to practice as a common formal greeting to open a speech is not found in a large speech corpus), it may be a sign that such experience-based training material needs amendment.

students have particular difficulties with certain expressions, and suggest individual exercises for a specific phrase. For example, the German syntactic construction "das ist etwas, was" (eng. "this is something that") turned out to be a recurrent problem trigger during a German-Russian interpreting class. The literal translation is not the best option stylistically and, in the Russian language, it could pose significant difficulties for further processing of the source speech. It is advisable to omit or rephrase this German construction. This can be trained by multiple repetition, and a simple search in the above mentioned Europarl corpus provides many dozens of examples of this syntactic construction in the German language. Search results can be then exported to a spreadsheet file, sorted (e.g., some of them may be deemed too difficult for beginners and deleted manually), and prepared for the next class.

Third, even more complex elements of interpreter training, like interpreting strategies, may be trained in the same way. Setton and Dawrant (2016) argue that segmentation is an important interpreting strategy that can be used when interpreting concessive clauses. It is recommended to start interpretation with the subject noun to avoid further difficulties: "ignore the subordination (opening preposition, subordinate conjunction, etc.: *although, which, notwithstanding*) and instead start with a subject noun, but restore the meaning, where necessary by making later, downstream adjustments" (Setton & Dawrant, 2016, p. 281). Along with this recommendation, Setton and Dawrant (2016) provide only four examples which is not enough for proper training, and a mere awareness about the existence of such strategy is not sufficient to automate the sub-skill. To train this strategy more examples should be used. They can be found by a simple corpus inquiry for sentences that begin with "obwohl" (eng. "although") and "trotz" (eng. "notwithstanding"). The DWDS corpus provides hundreds of such phrases in appropriate context.

Such high quality of context and content is a very important feature, as it makes the use of political speech corpora much more efficient compared to Internet search engines. In all of the above examples, a corpus search not only delivers the necessary results, but they also all come from authentic political speeches or addresses and thus represent exactly the type of text that is relevant for interpreter training. Additional advantages are: left and right context of the given

phrase, rich lexical content, formal language style, relevant facts and figures.

Finally, all of the above methods may be used by trainees independently to practice at home which makes this exercise model similar to a "technology assisted self-study tool" that is considered to increase student motivation (Dingfelder Stone, 2015, p. 246).

Conclusion

The described corpus-assisted approach facilitates preparation for the classes, makes them more responsive to individual needs of trainees, and, in accordance with the provided research-based rationale, presumably promotes effective part-task training and sub-skills acquisition.

The above considerations regarding the training mode are based mainly on research from other fields of science, and the cases of corpora use are reported from own experience of scholars and teachers. As a next step, an empirical test of the effectiveness of corpus use in pedagogy and part-task training would be of great interest. Challenges that are common for empirical interpreting studies have already been described above, but even a small pilot study, with all the usual limitations of such research projects, may provide valuable experimental data. If such pilot study is feasible and delivers meaningful results, similar experiment designs with a control group and with less limitations can be considered.

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