CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETER TRAINING IN A NON-STANDARD ENVIRONMENT: AN AUTONOMOUS APPROACH

Eman Mohammed Mohammed Ahmed Barakat[1]

Abstract

Conducting interpreter training in a non-standard environment characterized by limited training courses, large groups of students, insufficient class time and overloaded instructors prevents from achieving progress in interpreting performance and negatively affects training outcomes. Against this context, the present paper describes a student-centered training approach where students are trained to develop their interpreting skills and assess their own performance for the purpose overcoming training constraints, fostering learner autonomy and creating life-long learners. The sample of the study consisted of 21 translation students receiving consecutive interpreter training at UST (University of Science and Technology, Yemen). They were asked to rate their recorded interpreting performance using assessment criteria that covers three categories: content, language and delivery. Students were also asked to write their positive and negative reflections on this mode of assessment. Furthermore, an online survey was conducted to find out students' perceptions on self-assessment. The correlation between students' self-assigned grades and teachers' assessment was also calculated. Findings suggested a positive attitude towards self-assessment among interpreter students as it served to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. Students reflections also provided useful suggestions for instructors on applying self-assessment more efficiently. It was also found that the students and teachers' assessments were close which meant that students were in a position to be in charge of their own learning.

Keywords: Consecutive interpreting, non-standard training environment, self-assessment, learner autonomy, assessment criteria

Introduction

Interpreter training is mainly skills-oriented. Trainees are expected to develop interpreting skill within the period of training and reach the journeyman level upon the completion of training which means that they become able to work unsupervised (Kiraly & Moser-Mercer as cited in Sawyer, 2004). Trainees are given interpreting tasks in class and receive feedback on different aspects of their performance, points of weaknesses and suggestions to improve their interpreting skills. Hence, interpreter training, unlike theoretical courses, is time and effort demanding. Continuous assessment of trainees is the key element for developing interpreting competence. Teachers are expected to give as much practice as possible and to assess the performance of individual students regularly and monitor their progress.

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[1]Dr.

Non-standard interpreter training environment

Gile (2005, pp. 146-148) explains that in some parts of the world interpreter training is conducted in what he calls a "non-standard" setting that is characterized mainly by lack of pool of trainees, qualified instructors, and necessary infrastructure which challenges the fulfillment of interpreter training goals. The training environment where I belong is highly non-standard and very similar to the one described by Gile (2005). There are many factors that hinder conducting interpreter training. There are no admission tests and students in general lack in language skills and aptitude needed for interpreter training. Conducting interpreting training for such heterogeneous novice learners dictates giving intensive interpreting tasks. Furthermore, instructors are overloaded with teaching and administrative tasks and have no time to interact with students or to give extra training sessions. Teacher-student ratio is high which makes it challenging to work with students individually. Besides, interpreting courses are limited in number as they are given within the translation program and they account for only (9%) of program credits (Barakat, 2015). I have one class every week and students' groups are large (twenty and more). In such environment it is essential to adopt alternative methods for training and to make a shift to other learning approaches to minimize the effects of training constraints.

This article presents an autonomous, student-centered training approach in a consecutive interpreting course in which self-assessment is implemented. Allam (2007) explains that involving students in the learning process and giving them the chance to check and monitor the quality of their performance serves to save instructors' time and effort, improves students peformance and promotes autonomous learning. The purpose of the present study is to investigate students' perception on autonomous learning via self-practice and self-assessment and their ability to be in charge of their learning process.

Autonomous learning

Henri Holec (1981) pioneered in introducing and elaborating the concept of learner autonomy. He defines learner autonomy as:

The ability to take charge of one's own learning: to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning, i.e. determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.) (p.3)

Van Lier (1996) and Little (1996) emphasize that learning takes place only if students are involved in the learning process by choosing what to learn, holding responsibility of their learning and developing the ability to monitor and evaluate the learning process.

Little (2007, p.17) argues that "it is our nature to be autonomous, to be proactive in exploring and responding to our environment and to persist in following the agendas we set for ourselves." Autonomy is part of our life experience even if we are not aware of it. Little (2007, n.d) points out that the distinction should not be made between non-autonomous and autonomous learners but between learners whose autonomy is focused on learning and those whose autonomy is focused on other issues. It is in this point that teachers' significant role is played. Students are not expected to be fully responsible for their learning. Teachers should provide students with the assistance and guidance to self-direct their own learning. While teachers are not in full-control of the learning process as they used to be in traditional teacher-centered contexts, their role is of vital importance in scaffolding and promoting learners' autonomy. In fact, it is teachers careful planning of learning situations and tasks and their constructive advises and feedback

that secure the success of autonomous learning approach. On the same line, Little (1996) asserts that autonomous learning is possible only with autonomous teachers. Horváth (2007, p. 104) further highlights that:

Autonomous teachers are independent, self-sufficient personalities, who assume ethical responsibility for their teaching. The primary role of autonomous teachers in the classroom is not the transmission of knowledge. Instead, they act as organizers, advisors, and sources of information.

In interpreter training context, students learn in formal training sessions the skills of interpreting. They are given interpreting exercises and are exposed to various problems they are expected to encounter when they interpret. If class time is limited and if the number of students is large, students do not get the chance to practice well and to develop interpreting competence and, hence, it is very productive to train students to learn and develop on their own. Harmer (2004) adopted an autonomous approach with second year interpreting students at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. She reported that

With careful coaching and supervision, students were able to build awareness of the skills they needed to master, to strategize and integrate new skills, and to develop intrinsic motivation through autonomous learning environment. (p.10)

The advantages of adopting autonomous learning approach are not only educational but professional as well. Sawyer (2004, p. 73) states that interpreter training programs serve to take students from the naïve to the journeyman level where they can take interpreting assignments and work unsupervised. Reaching the levels of expert and master are achieved only by professional practice. Involving students in the learning process and training them to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress makes them life-long learners and qualifies them to depend on themselves to do high quality interpreting and to reach the master and expert level in interpreting practice.

Self-assessment

Assessment has long been considered a teachers' task. Students used to think that teachers are the only persons who are authorized to assess students and make decisions about their learning. Lee (2016) adds that educational institutes adopt traditional teacher-centered learning approaches because they believe that students are not trusted to objectively assess themselves as they do not have the skills and experience to do that. This view has changed, however, and assessment has become an integral part of the learning process. Students act independently of their teachers and are given the role of assessing their work. By gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data on their performance, students autonomous learning is promoted.

Lee (2005) points out that students practice self-assessment in interpreter training by "analyzing, and assessing their own performances, finding strategies for improvement, and monitoring their own progress overtime." In this way students "invest time, get more involved in and outside the classroom, and take responsibility of their learning process."

Lee (2005) emphasizes that developing autonomous learning skills is not necessary only in the training phase but for the professional development as well. Interpreters –to- be who are trained to practice self-assessment will be in a position to assess the quality of their performance, identify problematics areas and fix them in future tasks which is necessary to grow professionally. Lee (2005) father explains:

In most cases professional interpreters are responsible for their own quality of performance and do not rely on others for assessment... They are left on their own to check their interpretation quality and find measures for improvement on their own. It is true that the ultimate assessment comes from the client. However, clients rarely give feedback to interpreters, and if they do, it usually comes in the form of complaints. Therefore, it is important for students to learn to assess themselves during the training phase so that they can develop an approach that will prove useful in the years to come.

For students to be successfully integrated in the process of assessment, assessment criteria should be made clear to them (Lee 2005, 2016, Wargg 2001). Students should know what aspects of their interpreting performance they are expected to assess. Lee (2005) clearly states that "an important aspect of self-assessment is that students clearly understand the criteria based on which they are assessing themselves."

Methodology

A total of 21 translation program senior students participated in the study. The subjects were undertaking consecutive interpreter training and had completed a number of translation courses and a course on sight translation. They were given three CI tasks from English into their mother tongue (Arabic). Two of these tasks were done in class and one at home. Subjects recorded their performance using their mobile phones. Upon the completion of each task, students used an assessment sheet to rate three aspects of their interpreting performance: message, language and delivery. The assessment sheet used a 5-point scale (Very good = 5, good = 4, average = 3, bad = 2, very bad= 1). Message was assessed in terms of consistency with the original and completeness. The aspects for language were grammatical errors, word choice and pronunciation. Delivery items were clear voice, fluency and intonation. Students were given a transcript of the ST to provide assistance for them in carrying out self-assessment. They listened to the recording of their interpreting while visually following the written ST and rated their output using the assessment sheet.

For the purpose of scaffolding students' use of this autonomous assessment tool, the assessment criteria were first outlined and explained in class and a demo was conducted on the interpreting performance of one of the students.

At the back of assessment sheet, students freely reflected upon their experience with self-assessment, expressed their positive and negative points and stated what they needed to learn more for the purpose of conducting self-assessment more effectively. Assessment sheets of each student were submitted after completing the three interpreting tasks.

After completing the three interpreting tasks, students were asked to respond to an online survey in order to explore their perception on assessing their own performance. The questionnaire was adapted from Lee (2005) and Ibrahim González (2012). Respondents were asked to rate 9 closed-ended items on a scale from 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=don't know, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree). There was also one open-ended question on what students needed to help them carry out self-assessment more efficiently. To avoid any kind of misunderstanding or confusion, the questionnaire was written in students' mother tongue (Arabic). The questionnaire was designed using Google forms and the link was sent to students' WhatsApp group. Results were automatically analyzed by Google forms too. The response rate was 100%.

Students were asked to send the recording of the last interpreting task they did to their instructor who in turn assessed their performance using the same criteria. The ratings of

the instructor and each student were compared to identify how close or far they were. The total for the three categories grades was 40: message 10, language 15, delivery 15. Students and instructor total grades were compared for each student. The qualitative analysis method used was descriptive statistics. Furthermore, statistical correlation was calculated using Spearman's *rho*.

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Results and discussion

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1.   Students reflections on self-assessment experience

These reflections students wrote on the back of their assessment sheets upon completing assessment tasks. The collected reflections and their frequencies could be classified and grouped as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Students reflections on self-assessment experience

Students' reflections	Frequency
General opinion	
Good	11
Bad	1
It was useful to identify my weaknesses	12
It helped to see specific points about performance	9
I want to do it again	4
Self -assessment is not easy	5
I need help to do it	2
Home task was better	2
It helped to monitor progress	2
The use of ST was helpful	1
It helped to overcome my fear	1
It made me disappointed	1
Interesting feedback	
Now I know why I get bad results	1

As can be seen from Table 1, students' reflections on their experience with self-assessment were positive in general. About 50% of them thought that this autonomous approach was a good learning tool. Feedback received from students also showed how students benefited from assessing their own performance. It was possible for them to identify their weaknesses, monitor progress and overcome stress.

Other feedback was constructive and provided insightful ideas for promoting learner autonomy. Students needed to practice self-assessment more frequently and to be guided by their instructor on how to use assessment criteria. These reflections sounded reasonable as students at undergraduate level were not qualified enough to receive interpreter training in terms of language mastery, maturity and delivery skills. They were also not used to assess themselves. Furthermore, two students reflected that their performance in home task was better as they felt less stressed which meant that students should be encouraged to carry out interpreting practice outside class. The stress resulting from public speaking in front of their classmates and instructor was relived and students had the chance to practise interpreting skills before carrying out in-class interpreting tasks.

One student wrote that conducting self-assessment helped her to learn about the level of her performance as the assessment criteria used by the instructor became clear. She discovered aspects of her performance she was unaware of such as inappropriate word choice and wrong word order. Self-assessment could help students identify areas that they should work on to improve interpreting performance.

On the other hand, about 25% of students pointed out that the task was not easy. It is important to consider that students are used to teacher-centered approaches and they find it difficult to depend on themselves in their learning. They lack confidence in their ability to assess themselves and they feel unsafe while doing the activity. One student wrote that the activity made her disappointed. A good suggestion to promote self-confidence is to do guided self-assessment exercises particularly at the initial stage of implementation. It is also useful to compare students' assessment with instructor assessment and discuss similarities and differences. This could be time-consuming particularly if we consider the constrained context training is conducted in. A good advice for instructors to save time and effort is to conduct more than one in-class demo instead of working with students individually. Students discuss and justify the different assessments; they learn how apply assessment criteria and form an objective view interpreting performance. This would draw the track for students they would follow in individual practice and in their life-long learning. Little (1995) emphasizes the role of teachers in autonomous learning as they serve to facilitate the learning process and offer the support that students need.

2.   Students perceptions on self-assessment

The reflections that students wrote were not comprehensive enough. Some student wrote only one sentence and others submitted their assessment sheets without writing any feedback. For the purpose of finding out the out the way students appreciated self-assessment in consecutive interpreter training and how they benefited from their experience, students were asked to respond to an online survey. Students responses (see Table 2) showed that all students agreed that self-assessment was useful and helpful which supported the adoption of this approach in interpreter training.

The remaining items of the questionnaire were concerned with the different features of self-assessment that students found effective. The aspect that was agreed upon by 100% of students was the usefulness of using the source text while listening to and assessing their interpretation. This indicates that visual inspection of the written source texts helps in conducting self-assessment and makes students feel more confident while doing the task. Also, almost all students (71.4% strongly agree, 23.8 agree) said that they were able to identify specific problems in their performance and to determine whether these problems were relevant to rendering message, language use or delivery. The majority of students (95% strongly agree and agree) responded that self-assessment was beneficial in identifying problems with their language, forming an objective view of their performance and monitoring their progress. Features that students found less useful were the role of self-assessment in improving interpreting performance (85% strongly agree and agree) and the usefulness of assessment criteria (76% strongly agree and agree). This could be attributed to the limited time students practiced self-assessment which was not enough to help them see improvement in their performance. As for the use of assessment criteria,19% were not sure it was useful and about 5% did not agree that it helped them in self-assessment. By the same token, Lee (2005) reported that for his students, the biggest challenge was using the assessment criteria despite the fact that these criteria were explained to them before carrying out self-assessment. It seems that students

needed more in-class practice on how to apply these criteria, identify the type of errors they made and rate the different aspects of their performance appropriately. By analyzing students answers for the last open-ended question on how to make self-assessment a more effective learning tool, it was found that the given suggestions were focused on these two features; students mentioned that doing more self-assessment exercises would help them improve their performance. Moreover, training on how to carry out self-assessment and use assessment criteria would make them able to depend on themselves and trust their own assessment. It is important to consider the challenging nature of interpreting and students' level of linguistic and personal maturity. Before they are given the privilege to be in charge of their own learning, they should be prepared well for this role. In this way much of instructors' efforts and time will be saved and learning outcomes will be fulfilled. Ibrahim-Gonzáles (2012, p. 1072) commented on this point:

Probably, due to their language command, level of maturity (undergraduate students) and other factors such as extra-linguistic skills, novice learners still need guidance from their teachers in improving their interpreting via self-assessment in order to achieve full learner autonomy.

Table 2

Questionnaire and students' responses

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Self-assessment has been useful and effective method of learning for this course.	57.1	42.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Self-assessment has been useful in helping me improve my interpreting performance.	57.1	28.6	14.3	0.0	0.0
Self-assessment has been useful in helping me identify my linguistic weaknesses.	66.7	28.6	4.7	0.0	0.0
Self-assessment has been useful in helping me identify the most problematic area in my performance.	71.4	23.8	4.8	0.0	0.0
Self-assessment has been useful in helping me analyze my performance in an objective manner.	52.4	42.9	4.7	0.0	0.0
Self-assessment has been useful in helping me monitor my progress overtime.	57.1	38.1	4.8	0.0	0.0
The use of assessment criteria aids me in assessing my performance.	52.4	23.8	19	4.8	0.0
The use of visual inspection (written source text) helps me in assessing my performance.	52.4	47.6	0.0	0.0	0.0

3.   Correlation between students' and instructor's assessment

The comparison of the grades students assigned to themselves using the assessment sheet and those given by their instructor showed that they were close. As Figure1 shows, students grades for the three aspects of interpreting, message, language and delivery, were similar to those given by the instructor. Moreover, SPSS 19 was used to calculate the statistical correlation between students' and teachers' grades. Spearman's *rho* value was 0.603 which was statistically significant. This correlation value meant that the relationship between students and instructors grades was moderately significant. Based on these results, it is possible to say that students are in a position to assess their own performance and that it is possible for them to play the role of the instructor. The chart below shows also that some exceptions exist. Students could overrate or underrate their performance. Karnilowicz (2012) argues that self-assessment could sometimes be inaccurate as high achieveing students tend to underestimate their performance while lower achieveing students tend to overestimate their self-assessment. However, this does not undermine the usefulness of self-assessment. Rather this means that students need more training on how to assess different aspects of their performance and to implement self-assessment more frequently as they suggested in their post-interpreting reflections and questionnaire responses. Moreover, feedback given by the instructor on self-assigned grades provides guidance for new tasks and makes students produce more accurate assessments and become better autonomous learners.

Lee (2016, p.107) argues, however, that even if self-assigned grades were similar to those of the teachers' "this fact alone is not sufficient to conclude that students have the ability to self-assign grades to their own performances." Lee (2016) explains that students and instructors' assessment could be similar in grades but not in content. Students usually focus on aspects of their performance different from those teachers consider salient to write about. Nevertheless, what this study suggests is that students should be involved in the assessment process as a means to overcome the limits of short period of training and overloaded instructors. If well-trained, students can practice CI and monitor their progress at any time. Interpreting practice is not confined only to class time. Classes in that case would be used more efficiently for implementing demos and giving instructions and feedback on students' self-assessment activities.
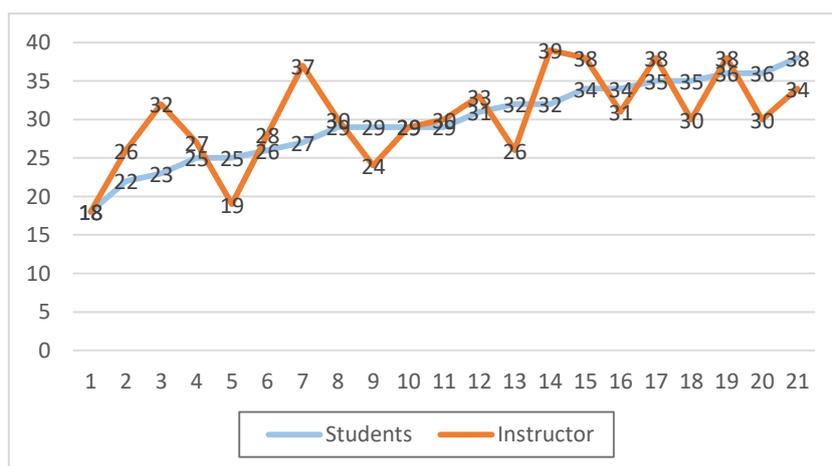

Figure 1. The relationship between students' and instructors' grades

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to develop an autonomous approach in consecutive interpreter training as a means to overcome the obstacles faced in a non-standard training environment. This approach was developed by involving students in the assessment process via self-assessment. The paper attempted to investigate students' perceptions of self-assessment and their ability to implement self-assessment accurately. Results showed students highly appreciated this autonomous tool as it served to understand and apply assessment criteria, pinpoint areas of weaknesses, and relieve stress. However, more work on the part of the teacher should be done to increase the efficiency of self-assessment including more training on how to apply assessment criteria, giving students feedback on their assessments so as to create self-confidence and make them more able and confident to be charge of their own learning.

Results also showed that students are able to assess themselves quite accurately if they are taught to apply assessment criteria and use visual inspection of written source text to check their performance. As an instructor, I find that the most beneficial aspect of involving students in the learning and assessment process in addition to saving my time and relieving workload is that it makes students understand how instructors assess their interpretations which makes them more satisfied with grades I give them.

With all the advantages of this autonomous approach, some challenges exist. It is not sure that all students will do it especially if they are not interested in interpreting or have poor language competences. Such students find self-assessment intimidating and would prefer be assessed by their teachers. A good suggestion is to carefully plan and grade self-assessment tasks so as to increase students' self-confidence and encourage them to implement this autonomous tool. Establishing this training approach could be laborious in the initial stage of implementation but the results are great for both learners and teachers particularly in a non-standard training environment.

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