Mock conference as a situated learning activity in Algeria: consecutive interpreter training as a case study, its design and effect as perceived by trainee interpreters

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Abstract:

The use of Mock Conferences (MCs) to immerse trainee interpreters in a situated learning activity for future professional purposes later, yet the elaboration of a course in which MCs are embedded are under the radar of scientific research. This article discusses the significance of MCs as a situated approach in interpreting teaching and reports on a case study of their teaching effects. Data were collected through questionnaires from 10 second-year Master students in interpreting. The trainees were overly satisfied with the course of consecutive interpreting with MCs. Findings indicate that skills concerning professionalism, public speaking, note taking are better consolidated in MCs.

Keywords: mock conference; consecutive interpreting; situated learning; modalities; teaching effect.

الملخص

تسعى المؤتمرات الصورية إلى غمر التراجمة المتدربين في التعليم المناسب للاحتراف لاحقا. ومع ذلك تبقى الدروس التي تعتمد على المؤتمرات الصورية في زاوية مظلمة للدراسات الترجمية. يعنى هذا المقال بأهمية المؤتمرات الصورية كمقاربة تعليمية في تدريس الترجمة الشفهية، وتعتمد على دراسة حالة تصف آثارها التدريسية. تم جمع المعلومات عن طريق استبيان استهدف عشرة من طلاب الترجمة الترجمة الشفهية. وعبر طلاب الترجمة التتباعية عن ارتياحهم واعجابهم بالدرس. وتفيد النتائج أن القدرات الخاصة بالاحترافية، فن الخطابة وتدوين رؤوس الأقلام تجد لها بيئة مناسبة للتطور .

الكلمات المفتاحية: المؤتمرات الصورية، الترجمة التتابعية، التعليم المناسب، الآليات، آثار التدريس

¹ Ilhem Bezzaoucha

1. 1. Introduction

The focus of learning has shifted over the years from the instructor-centred perspective to the student-centred one. Interpreting is a highly situated professional activity (Angelelli 2004; Hatim and Mason 1997; Napier 2006; Roy 2000; Setton 2006): "Situated Learning is generally understood as a context-dependent approach to translator and interpreter training under which learners are exposed to real-life and/or highly simulated work environments and tasks, both inside and outside the classroom. Under this approach, it is the tasks and real-life professional demands, as well as other contextual factors such as institutional, social, geographical, or community beliefs and customs, rather than a predetermined closed syllabus, that drive curricular design. Ultimately, Situated Learning seeks to enhance learners' capacity to think and act like professionals." (González Davies 2012).

As interpreting should be taught as a situated practice, teachers may resort to organizing mock conferences (MCs). The importance of MCs has been repeatedly mentioned in the Interpreting Studies literature (Ardito 1999; De Leat 2010; Gillies 2013; Kurz 1989, 2002; Lim 2003; Lin, Davis, and Liao 2004; Tsuruta and Naito 2011). However, little has been done in Algeria to cement its importance and further its systematic design and teaching effect. In Kelly's words:

In many countries, compulsory training exists for all other levels of education, but at universities it is simply assumed that those who know, know how to teach. It is still the case in many countries that new members of teaching staff are left literally to sink or to swim in the classroom, while more attention is paid, for example, to their training as researchers in their discipline. (2008, 102)

We observe, however, that this situation has improved in recent years, as shown by the increase in the number of train-the-trainer offerings, which testifies to a heightened awarness in suitable pedagogical approaches to the teaching and learning of Translation and Interpreting.

Against this background, this article attempts to fill the gap by sharing experiences of designing MCs in Algeria and exploring their teaching effect.

2. MCs in interpreter training

Unlike translation where the translator and target readers are distant from one another in terms of time and space, interpreting is performed on the spot where the interpreter shares the same situation with the speaker and listeners, and has access to the immediate and shared context which keeps unfolding as the communicative act proceeds. Consecutive interpreting puts an additional weight on the interpreter, for as much as the simultaneous interpreter remains in the shadow of the booth, the consecutive interpreter remains in the spotlight thought the event. One major difference between the two modes is that the consecutive interpreter is accompanied by his/her notes. The sole purpose of said notes is to trigger the memory of the interpreter to provide a better a wholesome rendition. While most literature correlates simultaneous interpreting with MCs, not much was said about consecutive interpreting.

2.1 MC as a situated learning approach to the consecutive interpreter training

Consecutive interpreters serve a social function to interact face to face with the participants and are more highly visible than simultaneous conference interpreters. In student-centred environments, learners are involved in authentic tasks that mirror—the way knowledge will be transferred in future working scenarios. Trainees have access to actual practice, take part in expert performances, and share professional ethics standards among other things.

According to our students of Consecutive interpreting, a Mock Conference is definitely the closest thing a student can get to a real conference environment, especially, when visiting real conferences isn't "that much" available. It helps students to be more conscious about the skills they need to develop and areas where they need to work more on. Hence, trainers and the experts involved are regarded as a team as they provide scaffolding assistance and encourage sound reflection (students' self-introspections to know more about their strengths and weaknesses in their learning process and performances) to identify the distance between learners' level and experts' level, and skillfully leverage all available resources in preparation for different types of assignments in line with the model of interpreting. Situated learning provides a theoretical foundation for enculturation into the professional community (Gillies 2013, Setton 2010)

The importance of situated training in translation & interpreting classrooms is echoed in relevant literature. Mock conferences, however, remain under the radar notably in Algeria. The author of this article, based on her knowledge of the curriculum observes that the interpersonal dimension of interpreting is not considered as important as the linguistic and cognitive components of interpreting. Nonetheless, trainees need to develop the ability to contextualise the type of interaction after graduation. Curricula should prepare trainees for the realities of

the market (e.g. read-out speeches, speeches with visual aids, peculiar accents, public speaking...)

Students of consecutive interpreting have strong profession and career orientation, and that is why motivational strategies exposing them to situated professional experiences generate positive learning outcomes (Lin 2013).

2.2. Situated learning through internships

It might be thought that internship, if available, would be one of the best approaches to situated learning. However, internship opportunities are limited in Algeria and even in other parts of the world. Although some international events provide opportunities for students to practice in dummy booths (for simultaneous interpreting for example), this experience is not often feasible in consecutive where confidentiality is an issue. Trainers are left with difficult task of creating alternative context-rich experiences before real involvements begin.

Simulations as form of replicas make up for the lack of internship opportunities, bring the benefits of situated learning to traditional classrooms by providing access to authentic contexts. Students are kindly requested to prepare a specific theme through which a myriad of scenarios will arise. Trainees have to act as if they were real participants of the encounter and discuss the theme within the boundaries of variables contexts.

Organising MCs plays an important role in an interpreting programme. As explained by Albl-Mikasa (2013), the interpreting skill development process can be divided into three phases: initial development of skills in traditional interpreting classrooms, skill sharpening through simulated practices and internships (if available), and skill maturity phase in the form of on-the-job learning after graduation.

3. Designing MCs: principles and guidlines

Skills are not transmitted directly from the instructor to students. The trainer is a manager and a facilitator and a source of advice and encouragement. It is not advisable to interrupt and give feedback during MCs (Lim 2003). Instead, the trainer may take notes on students' performances and provide feedback to complement their self-reflections during the debriefing phase. To convey the required sense of reality, students are briefed with the what, who, why, when and where, for the job at hand, allowing for preparations background and documents research, analysis of parallel and comparable texts, glossary building (Gile 2002).

Dr. Ilhem Bezzaoucha

MCs need to involve various speakers, topics and speech to prepare students for the realities of local market.

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The following section presents a case study investigating the teaching effect of MCs designed in the light of consecutive interpreting. Three questions drove this research:

- (1) How do trainees rate MCs as learning experiences?
- (2) What skills can be acquired better at MCs than in traditional interpreting classes?
- (3) Compared with traditional interpreting classes, what are the advantages and disadvantages of MCs?
- 4. The effect of MC as perceived by trainees: A case study

4.1 Participants and context

The participants were 10 Masters students in their early twenties who were assured of anonymity and voluntarily participated in this study. As indicated by their response to some items in the questionnaire, all had strong motivation to learn interpreting, and most were oriented towards a career in interpretation.

The MCs were roughly organised following the principles and guidelines described above due to the novelty of the approach. Before data collection began, ten MCs had been organised, all involving consecutive interpreting as the main working mode as the author teaches consecutive interpreting and is aware of the demands of the market. The participants interpreted both from and to their 'A' language, which is Arabic.

4.2 Research method and procedure

The questions were short and to the point. The first question was about rating their MC experiences. They considered whether their MC experiences were generally good, stimulating, beneficial, enjoyable and satisfying, which were expressed in five statements. They responded to each statement on a continuum of 4-point scales (1 totally disagree, 2 disagree, 3 agree and 4 totally agree).

In the second question, they were asked to select skills that can be better acquired at MCs than in traditional interpreting classes from a list of skills as presented in Table 1. The features of MCs and traditional interpreting classes were explained. The component skills were based on T&I literature (Jiménez Ivars 2009; Kalina 2000). Since the MCs involved only consecutive interpreting, the skills were specific, though not unique, to consecutive interpreting.

Mock conference as a situated learning activity in Algeria: consecutive.....

Table 1. Interpreting skills

Bilingual competence Analytical listening and comprehension

Delivery of message in Target Language (TL) (public speaking, etc.)

Monitoring of production

Linguistic agility (resourceful enough to cope with emergencies, etc.)

Knowledge competence Subject-specific knowledge

Cross cultural

communication Non-verbal communication (facial expression, body language, etc.)

Culture-specific strategies (culture-loaded elements like idioms, etc.)

Transfer

competence Language-specific strategies (strategies to render certain syntactic patterns, numbers, terms and pat phrases)

Psychological competence Concentration

Shared attention between listening ahead and note-taking

Shared attention between note-reading and production

Being calm under pressure

Mental agility (flexible enough to cope with emergencies, etc.)

Strategic competence On-site problem-oriented strategies (compression, omission, addition, etc.)

Professionalism Preparation (glossary building, background information research, team work, etc.)

Professional ethics (dress code, behaviour, etc.)

Self-reflection (weaknesses, strengths, etc.)

The last question consisted of two open-ended questions, respectively on the advantages and disadvantages of MCs compared with traditional interpreting classes, the trainees were told to respond to the questions based on their own experiences.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

The 10 participants did not complete the questionnaires because of the covid situation that broke out last year. There has been a problem of attendance due the online environment of the consecutive course which was an issue in itself. However, 5 out of ten trainees still managed to provide answers. As the questions were direct, no specific statistical procedures were used.

4.4 Findings and discussion

4.4.1 MC as a learning experience

All considered MC as a good, beneficial and enjoyable learning experience.

4.4.2 What skills can be acquired better at MCs?

The participants' selection of skills that can be acquired better at MCs than in traditional interpreting classes involved all the items. The trainees seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed this mode of teaching.

4.4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of MCs

The most prominent advantage mentioned was the creation of an authentic environment. The participants suggested that it motivated them to work as real interpreters and that the presence of paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements assisted their interpretation of the message. For example, some of them commented:

1-According to the experience we had, it was definitely way better than any kind of traditional methods. It allowed me acquiring a number of skills including dealing with real time difficulties, having command over stress and time, controlling the flow of communication, developing listening and speaking skills, enhancing delivery skills and voice tone regulation while presenting... I would suggest that students have a free choice of topics for a more challenging and diverse context of conferences.

2-Personally, I learnt a lot from mock conferences (how to form speeches, gain some sort of experience about real consecutive interpreting, learn how to deal with real life difficulties in this field), it was certainly a good and a fun experience. MCs differ from traditional INT classes in a lot of things; we can mention the diversity of the presented topics, spotting the difficulties that students face which allow them to address them.

We can gain many skills during this MCs; for example, listening and speaking skills, improving our personal glossary, stress and time management.

I would suggest that the topics would be free and chosen by students, this will be more challenging.

3- Is goes beyond the shadow of a doubt that MC experience was extremely useful for me as an interpreting student, for it was a very creative way of learning Consecutive interpreting and that's what drives students and motivates them to keep going - creativity in learning - traditional methods kill the good vibes and

decreases student's enthusiasm to learn . MC has been very beneficial in many ways such as having an experience that so close to real life conference CI , watching those videos of conferences online also helped me practice Active listening and enhance my active memory because you feel like it's the real professional deal , enhance my glossary in various aspects - politics , health , diplomacy and much more . Also , each student gets the chance to choose and work on a topic of his own choosing so by the end of the course every one of us enhances his research skills and diversity of topics and terms to be learned .

4- Mock conference is definitely a good exercise and training and it's considered the closest thing a student can get to a real conference environment, especially in our case, when visiting or interning in real conferences isn't "that much" available. Plus it helps students to be more conscious about their skills and areas where they need to work more on.. And help teachers as well to assess and evaluate their students.

Skills that could be acquired are a better stress management and a better delivery and the overall experience have a comparative edge to it.

4.4.4 Suggestions to improve the current design

Most participants expressed satisfaction with the current design of MCs without providing suggestions for improvement. Only a few participants gave advice. If financially and technically possible, some of their suggestions may be taken into consideration in organising MCs in future:

- (1) The audience should be as diversified as possible.
- (2) The MCs should be held in venues different from students' classrooms and language labs.
- (3) The instructor needs to protect the students and enhance their confidence in the initial phase by selecting familiar topics and providing as much background information as possible, and increase the challenges of MCs to raise students' capability of coping with emergencies and prepare them for the market in the later phase.
- (4) Students' performances may be recorded for personal reflection and improvement.

The first two suggestions are concerned with the authenticity of MCs. Simulated practices should reproduce the reality as much as possible and participants should act as if they were working in real-life contexts (Jones 1984). Only then can MCs better motivate students to learn (Foster 2008). The suggestions should be taken

seriously because involving different groups of audience in different MCs and holding MCs in venues different from classrooms with which students are familiar do increase authenticity and create more intense atmosphere.

The third suggestion is related to pedagogical progression. Simulations aim at providing an effective bridge between the classroom and the real world (Hyland 1993). Different from internships and on-the-job learning, simulations lower students' anxiety level by providing a less threatening environment (Hyland 1993) and protect them from otherwise severe consequences of mistakes (Garris, Ahlers and Driskell 2002). For student interpreters, MCs help them experience the real world under controlled circumstances (Lim 2003). To be pedagogically progressive, the instructor may adhere to the principle of building or spiralling, moving from familiar and general topics to unfamiliar and specialised topics. When the instructor observes progress in the students' performance, the difficulty and diversity can be increased to reflect the professional realism of the market.

The fourth suggestion is also helpful. Videotaping students' interpreting performance can be a powerful tool to encourage self-assessment, peer assessment and targeted teacher feedback, allowing students to better identify their strengths and weaknesses and raise their awareness of quality issues (Kurz 2002; Tsuruta and Naito 2011). The ability to reflect is a crucial skill for developing attitudinal and strategic competences (Lim 2003; Fernández Prieto and Sempere Linares 2010).

5. Conclusion and limitations

This study was intended to inform interpreter trainers about the theoretical foundations of using MCs as situated learning activities and their design principles and procedures, and to probe into trainees' ratings of interpreting at MCs as learning experiences, benefits of MCs in helping trainees acquire skills, their advantages and disadvantages compared with traditional interpreting classes, and spaces for improvement in design.

The results indicate that, though MCs seemed to be challenging tasks, trainees perceived them as good, beneficial and stimulating learning experiences, and that the participants' ratings were positively correlated to their times of interpreting at MCs. The findings also suggest that skills related to professionalism, psychological competence, strategic competence and many other non-linguistic dimensions might be better acquired at MCs than in traditional interpreting classes. This concurs with the perceived advantages of MCs mentioned by the participants. As for the disadvantages of MCs, most were related to the organisation of MCs,

suggesting that authentic and confidence-building learning experiences come from well-designed MCs. The participants suggested improving the authenticity and pedagogical progression, and videotaping their performances for future reflection, to improve the current MC design.

This study may contribute to knowledge on the theoretical justifications and empirical evidence of the usefulness of MCs in interpreter training. It is hoped that it can provide insights into the use of MCs for colleagues to better prepare their students for future professional life.

The limitations of this study lie in its sample size and means of data collection. This study focused on a specific group of trainees in a specific teaching context. Further research that includes a wider representation might yield more generalisable results. Although questionnaires are widely used in researching students' perceptions of teaching approaches, triangulation of data collection combining both questionnaires and in-depth interviews may provide more food for thought.

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Dr. Ilhem Bezzaoucha

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Dr. Ilhem Bezzaoucha

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