Interpreting studies research and interpreter training – worlds apart?

In January of this year the AIIC Training Committee offered the first of four seminars in a new cycle on teaching conference interpretation. Here are some reflections from my participation in the course.

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If you are a professional conference interpreter, have you ever felt under pressure to give the version your client wanted to hear? That it would be better to change the register of the original speaker to achieve his intended effect on the audience? That you were being scapegoated as the "bearer of bad tidings"? And have you ever felt emotionally involved and even distressed because of the nature of the material you were required to interpret?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes", then I have news for you: you are not a conference interpreter at all, but rather a community or "public service" interpreter. At least, that is the answer it appears many Interpreting Studies researchers would have given until relatively recently. For whilst research into Community Interpreting looked at such issues as loyalty to the customer, and relationships between people, research into conference interpreting, particularly in simultaneous mode, tended to focus on the neurolinguistics, the supposed "simultaneity of the cognitive processes", and information processing models - put simply, it was process-oriented not sociological (put even more simply, we were not being examined as "people people", but rather as circus acts).

Things are changing, however, as I discovered at a fascinating seminar given by Dr. Ebru Diriker, Associate Professor of Interpreting Studies at Bogazici University (Istanbul), in Rome in January 2007. This was the first in a cycle organised by the AIIC Training Committee examining the application of Interpreting Studies research to interpreter training. I was initially sceptical of the relevance of much research (as Daniel Gile said in these pages in 2001, "there are many prescriptive, repetitive, non-innovative essays with a low value-to-length ratio"), particularly since as an actor I see interpreting as a branch of this very human discipline (playing an existing role "interpreted" into another language) rather than as being about the transfer of data. Often research appeared to have been carried out in "laboratory conditions" (e.g. pre-recorded source speeches taken from written texts, played to a solitary guinea pig) rather than in a situation where one human being is attempting to communicate with another through the medium of an interpreter.

But as Dr. Diriker demonstrated, there is much for trainers to learn from research - partly because simultaneous interpreting is now being seen as a "socially situated act", but also because some practical areas of course organisation can benefit from a thorough reassessment, even if in some cases it is only to validate current practice.

In the case of aptitude testing, we learnt of the interesting case of Italy, where a student cannot be excluded from a course at a state university on the basis of an aptitude test. In one experiment, the
students were tested for aptitude, passed or failed on similar criteria to those used elsewhere in Europe, but all were admitted anyway. At the end of the course, 28% of aptitude test "failures" passed the final exams. Should we conclude that a quarter of our "rejects" are unrecognised talents?

We also heard theoretical (and sometimes, empirically established) arguments to back what are often instinctive feelings on the part of practicing interpreters: that there is a need to teach consecutive interpreting skills before introducing simultaneous, that sight translation and "shadowing" exercises are of limited relevance to interpreting skills, etc.

Building a theoretical basis for a pedagogical structure step by step, on the basis of research with large enough samples, sufficiently replicated, allows us to be more consistent in our approach. I look forward to helping develop further methodologies for monitoring simultaneous, for example, a notoriously difficult task: how do we get beyond the Omniscient Examiner who just checks off against a source "text" for errors, or suffers "Speech Fatigue" on repeated hearings (not replicating the real-time activity of the trainee); or the day-dreaming listener who occasionally stops to think "is that how I would have said it?" Solid research can help bolster our efforts to develop a more thorough, fair and ethical methodology.

Equally valuable was the exchange of views with other trainers - some practicing conference interpreters, some not, or no longer; some community and/ or sign-language interpreters; some engaged in academic research themselves. The old divisions were sometimes clear: some had had negative experiences with professional interpreters ("A good interpreter doesn't necessarily make a good teacher") who had behaved like "divas" in the classroom (and perhaps been discouraging or over-harsh to the students in order to defend their own freelance market); and several European universities even go as far as banning their staff from undertaking outside freelance work, including interpreting assignments. (As an Associate Lecturer at Leeds University in the UK, I am given a free rein to continue in the booth and elsewhere - but is this a privilege for me, or in fact my duty to the students?)

This cycle of Training for Trainers seminars is a dynamic and timely contribution, which can help to bridge various gaps which currently exist between researchers, interpreter-trainers and practicioners. We all have a role to play, and can all learn from each other. As for where our loyalties ultimately lie... perhaps we should commission some research into that?

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