Team teaching - better than makeshift

Team teaching was introduced at ESIT to provide training for students with mother tongues not included in the regular curriculum.

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As the European Union enlarges, there will be a steep increase in the need for conference interpreters with the applicant country languages as their mother tongues. Some countries already have a sizeable number of professional interpreters and well-established training institutions and it will be relatively easy for them to meet the new demand, but those countries which do not will find it more difficult. Until such time as interpreting schools are fully operational in these countries, existing schools elsewhere will be called on to train interpreters in their languages and produce a first generation of professionals able to train others.

Conscious of the need to train interpreters to provide (with additional instruction in the teaching of interpretation) this multiplier effect, the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) at the University of Paris III decided in the late 1960s to admit students from all over the world regardless of mother tongue (Dejean Le Féal 1990)[1]. Over the years, nearly two hundred government-sponsored and individual students have graduated from the school with a great variety of native languages: Albanian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Korean, Croatian, Danish, Estonian, Greek, Hindi, Hungarian, Laotian, Lithuanian, Malaysian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Serbian, Swedish and Vietnamese. [2]

Why team teaching?

Since these students - called "Special Cases" at ESIT because their native languages are not part of the regular curriculum at the School[3] - must receive training equal in quality to that of ordinary students, they must be taught, like other students, by instructors who are not only practicing conference interpreters but also experienced interpretation teachers.

Moreover, their training cannot simply consist of learning interpretation methods without attention to language. The techniques of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation are learned initially through exercises into the mother tongue - interpretation, a dynamic process, needs a driving force and reference points; and the best way to ensure that both of these conditions are met is to work into the native language.

In Paris, "exotic" language interpreters meeting the professional, pedagogical and linguistic criteria required for teaching have always been few and far between. For this reason, team teaching was introduced at ESIT to provide training for students with these languages as their mother tongues. Classes are taught jointly by an interpretation instructor without the language in question and a native speaker of that language as teammate.
Teammate profile

The choice of teammate to act as an enlightened and demanding user of the student's interpretation work and to present speeches in the student's mother tongue is crucial. Perfect mastery of the native language is essential, as is broad general knowledge and a willingness to read up on the subjects chosen for classes when acting as user and to prepare speeches when acting as speaker. Since it is a well known fact that any extended stay abroad tends to adversely affect the native language skills of those - and most people fall into this category - who are unaware of the need to maintain them, care must be taken to choose a teammate who, while being able to communicate in a foreign language, has not been outside of his or her country for too long a period of time. Finding the right teammate is not easy.

The team teaching process

The teammate must be carefully briefed prior to each stage of the training process (consecutive into A, consecutive into B, simultaneous into A, simultaneous into B). The procedure at each stage is as follows:

Consecutive into A

Acting as a user of the student's interpretation, the teammate is placed in a situation where he or she is entirely dependent on that rendition to understand the speech. The teammate is therefore asked to leave the classroom during the initial presentation and to return to listen to the student's interpretation.

The student's performance is then assessed in two stages - the substance and the form of the interpretation are analyzed and discussed in turn. For this purpose both the original presentation and the student's interpretation are systematically tape-recorded.

The evaluation of the accurate rendition of meaning consists primarily in checking to make sure the teammate understood the message; the student's classmates are asked to take part in this critique, and class participation increases over time as students become more proficient.

If one is lucky enough to have an interpreter as a teammate (i.e. a young professional interpreter wishing to acquire teaching skills), he or she is asked to re-interpret the student's rendition back into French or English - obviously a fast and effective way to verify the student's work. Then the student who did the initial interpretation is given an opportunity to identify any mistakes made by the teammate. If there is any disagreement - such cases being extremely rare - the tape-recordings are played.

When the teammate is not an interpreter, he or she is asked to listen attentively to the student's interpretation and to sum up the main ideas. The class is then asked to identify those passages that were poorly interpreted or omitted. The tape recording of these passages is then played and the teacher questions the teammate about his or her understanding of their explicit and implicit meaning.

Once the substance of the student's interpretation has been clarified, the teammate then comments on its form. To do this, the teammate is asked to listen again to the tape-recording of the interpretation and to identify linguistic defects, discuss these with the class and explain them to the teacher.

Based on all the information supplied by the teammate, the teacher then reviews the student's work
as a whole, indicating progress since the last class, discussing the causes of mistakes with the student and recommending exercises to correct problems. This "diagnosis" is an indispensable part of the evaluation. Each student is different and each has specific difficulties at each stage in the training; it is therefore important to analyze mistakes in order to identify the source of the difficulties and help the student overcome them.

Consecutive into B

Once students have mastered the consecutive interpretation method, they begin exercises into their B language. The teammate and teacher now switch roles, the teammate becoming the speaker and the teacher the user. To facilitate evaluation, argumentative as opposed to descriptive presentations should be used - they enable the teacher, who has not understood the original speech, readily to identify such defects as distortions of meaning, inconsistencies and lapses in logical reasoning in the student's interpretation. The teammate and the student's classmates identify and discuss any additional substantive errors not picked up by the teacher. The teacher then evaluates form and again performs a diagnosis.

In simultaneous

Students do not begin training in simultaneous interpretation until they have mastered consecutive. Again, they begin by working into their mother tongue, with the teammate acting as user. Here, too, if the teammate is an interpreter, he or she re-interprets the student's work (preferably in simultaneous) to check the meaning and later on listens to the tape-recording to assess the form. If the teammate is not an interpreter, a classmate - capitalizing on the initial training in consecutive - re-interprets the student's work in consecutive to verify substance and the teammate is thus able to concentrate entirely on form.

Form must at this stage be assessed with particular care. Defects in formulation, especially those deriving from literal translations, are, to a greater degree in simultaneous than in consecutive, a good indicator of improper method. The start of simultaneous training is a critical phase in the training process. Students run a major risk of acquiring poor habits if they do not take the right intellectual approach from the outset and it is crucial that the linguistic form of the interpretation be scrutinized to pick up any signs of transcoding and correct course right away.

Another way to make sure that the student gets the method right is to ask him or her to reconstruct, from memory in the original language, the speech that he or she has just interpreted in simultaneous. If the student can still remember the line of argument in its entirety, then one can be sure that the student has not bypassed cognitive analysis and moved straight from one language to the other. If not, it is better to backtrack or even start again from scratch rather than leapfrog this stage in the process (Déjean Le Féal 1997[4]).

Once the simultaneous method has been mastered, instruction in simultaneous interpretation into B can begin. This is taught at ESIT only to Special Case students since, unlike students following the ordinary curriculum, they will be obliged after graduation, at least for a time, to work into their B language from their mother tongue. Evaluation is in accordance with the same pattern as consecutive into B.

Conclusion

Team training may be harder to organise than conventional instruction, but it achieves the same results. The only difference between the two lies in the approach taken to assessing the student's work. This system is thus a good way to overcome the lack of interpreting schools or to prepare to
set up schools in countries that have none. The proof that the system works lies in the fact that all the Special Case graduates of ESIT are working today as interpreters and many of them are involved in training others. It is in fact fair to say that team training has one advantage over conventional training - it places students, from the start, in a situation in which they have a better perception of the real task of the interpreter which is to communicate a message clearly and comprehensively to someone who has not understood the original.


[2] Some former Special Case students are now practicing in Paris and helping to train their compatriots, so that the number of language combinations in which team training is required is lower today than it was thirty years ago; nevertheless this type of training is often still essential if the increased demand is to be met promptly.


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