Book review: Interpretation techniques and exercises (2nd edition)

Ongoing enhancement of linguistic and rhetorical skills plus broad cultural knowledge are part of the job description of the professional communicators we call interpreters.

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Interpretation Techniques and Exercises, Edition: 2

By James Nolan

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James Nolan's book shows interpretation for what it is: a challenging task which requires tough training and a never-ending effort to keep up and improve command of one's languages. As the author rightly warns in the Introduction: “Interpretation cannot be learned from a book alone, but only through a combination of study and steady practice.”

The preface to this (second) edition illustrates very forcefully the advantages of interpretation over cross-cultural communication (which is basically tantamount to using 'bad' English). I found especially interesting the notion of interpretation as a vehicle for a type of communication based on respect for one's interlocutors and as a psychological equalizer between participants.

From this recognition of the superiority of international communication conducted in different languages there naturally flows a very demanding 'job profile' for conference interpreters: professional communicators with an excellent command of their languages – an ever moving target – and a broad cultural background, very different from the all too common view that anyone who speaks more than one language passably is de facto an interpreter.

The author himself describes in the introduction what to him should be the learning curve of interpretation students: they should first be trained in the skills that are most necessary to a professional interpreter, such as public speaking, and then move on to more complex tasks, such as transposing literary allusions.

A red thread throughout the book is the need for an ongoing enhancement of the interpreter's linguistic and rhetorical skills: anticipation, complexity and compression, word clusters, figures of speech, argumentation, formal style, Latinisms, humor are only some of the topics addressed in the various chapters. The chapter on 'figures of speech', in particular, made fascinating reading even for a seasoned interpreter-cum-instructor, as is the drafter of this review.
After a brief introduction each chapter provides a wealth of exercise materials (in English, Spanish and French) that will be of great use to students in their effort to develop a thorough command of their languages in a very broad range of registers and topics. The book also includes specific exercises to help develop short-term memory and to practice reformulation strategies. Many of the exercises are also useable with additional language combinations.

Last but not least, the bibliography includes a section of Internet links to audio or video speeches for listening and interpretation practice.

The reviewer was initially somewhat surprised at finding excerpts from Abraham Lincoln's speeches among the authentic materials proposed to students: if my 'reading' of the author's approach is correct, perhaps the inclusion of a couple of historical speeches is expected to heighten students' respect for political discourse and make them feel more responsible towards the modern speeches they interpret, an approach I entirely subscribe to.

This book is not about interpretation theory nor does it provide a systematic treatment of note-taking skills or the teaching of simultaneous interpretation. What it does convey is the sense of a quest for excellence in communication and linguistic expertise, which are fundamental to good interpretation.

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Recommended citation format: