Interpreters versus technology - Reflections on a difficult relationship: Part 2

Training can help narrow the gap between students' skill set and the technology literacy required to be a conference interpreter today.

Alexander DRECHSEL.
Published: December 7, 2013 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Disclaimer: This article represents purely the author's own views and in no way engages DG Interpretation or the Commission. It was written in a completely private capacity.

In Part 1, we took a look at the modern history of conference interpreting and its often-uneasy relationship with technology. Now we move on to examine how adaptation on both a personal and a profession-wide basis can be fostered during the formation of future professionals.

In my diploma thesis I discussed the question of how training could close the gap between the skills interpreting students bring and the (technology) competencies that are required to be a professional conference interpreter (Drechsel, 2004). Quite some time has passed since my research and technology has been evolving quickly. Smartphones and tablets, such as the iPhone and the iPad, have entered the scene, bringing us ever closer to pervasive computing. While today's students are certainly more aware of technology and possibly also more skilled than previous generations, their skills will vary considerably. Interpreter training must therefore strive to bring all students up to a certain level and pave the way for technology adoption in the profession. During the course of study, T&I-related technology literacy should be developed and applied in the classroom.

There are several platforms that bring together practitioners, teachers and researchers. One of them is “Transforum”, established in 1984 by the German T&I association BDÜ. In 2002, a Transforum working group compiled a compendium of skills that future translators should have. The list includes, among others, mastery of TM systems, terminology tools or machine translation software. This example shows how translators may be more likely to be accustomed to IT relevant for their everyday work.

In the conclusions of my study on the use of IT in interpreter training at the five major universities in Germany, I noted that all of them provided training in new technologies and new media with varying priorities (such as electronic speech processing at Saarland University). I also found differences between traditional institutes and “newcomers” and, within a given university, between “bigger” and “smaller” languages. In brief, English departments are ahead of other departments, which may be due to a wider offer in software and to the fact that English is the de facto default language used in new technologies.
Putting skills to use

For decades, translators have been integrating a wide range of new technologies into their daily work, maybe because they have had to. But the work of interpreters remains remarkably technology-free – apart from the conference technology required for simultaneous interpretation. A quick glance at the software available is revealing: Translators can find a wide and diversified range of solutions, such as Translation Memories (Berber, 2008). But solutions tailored to the needs of interpreters are few and far between. Interpreters use IT to prepare for conferences and follow up on them afterwards, to manage their free-lance business, but increasingly also as an information tool on the job. Translators can hardly do their job without technical assistance in a time where source texts become increasingly technical and complex but the time available keeps shrinking. What is more, they often have to work with the tools that their clients use or require. Interpreters, however, could get by without much technology: Terminology can be managed in notebooks (or printed out at home before the assignment), notes are taken on paper. This tradition may lead to a certain degree of skepticism among interpreters when it comes to new technologies. Our consoles we know inside out, yes. But there is not much to know, after all, and they haven’t changed all that much over time.

Skepticism in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. I knew quite a few “tech skeptics” back in university, both teachers and students. I know quite a few today, both young and old. But new technologies can be incredibly useful. Nobody would claim they can replace interpreters altogether – at least not yet. And not even the best computer in the world will turn an unqualified interpreter into a genius. New technologies should be explored in the safe environment of the classroom. Once the daily grind sets in, making time for this is much harder. As Donald Kiraly puts it:

*Attaining competence in a professional domain means acquiring the expertise and thus the authority to make professional decisions; assuming responsibility for one’s actions; and achieving autonomy to follow a path of lifelong learning. This is empowerment.*

I will now discuss three areas in which technological innovation can be introduced in the classroom:

- Hardware and software in interpreter training
- The Smartpen as a pedagogical tool
- Information management

Ways of using hardware and software in interpreter training

While notebooks have become very popular in booths, a new category has been making inroads in recent years: tablet computers. They are a perfect fit for interpreters. Compared to traditional notebooks, they are small and lightweight. Since they have neither fan nor keyboard, they are silent and they last for a long time without a charger. Internet access is possible via WiFi or a mobile phone module. They may not be as multifunctional as a computer – that’s the point, and it’s also an advantage. Users are usually restricted to just one application at a time, which can aid concentration. A tablet put to good use is indeed an “infallible information butler” (Rutten, 2003).

Most students will carry a more or less smart phone in their pocket nowadays. Those smartphones can be a very useful tool for budding interpreters: dictionary, notepad, dictaphone for self-study and much more. I see a huge potential here for mutual learning and teaching among students and with trainers.

Software has gone through what can be called a revolution. Social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, and platforms for virtual collaboration have mushroomed. Those tools could be integrated with the suggestions I made in my diploma thesis concerning mock conferences. Mock conferences
are part and parcel of interpreter training at all major schools and provide an excellent opportunity to simulate an interpretation assignment “as close as possible to real-life situations” (Gile, 1995) and from various perspectives (client/interpreter). The complete preparation, including organisation, time management, documentation, collaborative terminology work etc., could be handled via an online platform like Google Drive, Basecamp or similar functions in their respective university IT system. An additional benefit from the didactic point of view is that all work is documented and thus available for review and follow-up.

**Smartpens**

In 2008, the [Livescribe](http://www.livescribe.com) company launched its first “smart pen”, a slightly oversized writing contraption full of electronics providing additional features. An infrared camera just below the writing tip records the movements of the pen on special paper and a built-in microphone continuously picks up ambient sound. Handwritten notes are synchronized with the sound recordings using a digital time signature. After the fact, just tap anywhere in your notes with the pen and it will play the sound recorded at that point in time – either through the built-in speaker or through headphones. Printed on the special paper are “buttons” for play, rewind, fast-forward, volume and playback speed.

Marc Orlando, coordinator of the T&I Studies Program at Monash University in Australia, has turned the Livescribe Smartpen into a formidable tool for teaching students how to take notes. Beyond the note-taking systems devised by Matyssek or Rozan, every interpreting student needs to develop a technique that works for him or her. According to Orlando, the Smartpen enables us to not only focus on the actual interpretation or the notes that were taken in the process, but also on how the notes were taken over time (Orlando, 2010). A video recording of the student only permits an evaluation of external appearance. The Smartpen’s time signature, however, is an easy way to listen to what was actually said when the student noted down something. Additionally, the audio recording of the original speech and the notes taken can be bundled together as a multimedia file called “pencast” and then stored and reused. This would allow students to compare and discuss their individual performances outside the classroom.

Michele Ferrari, an interpreter of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Interpretation, also leverages Smartpen technology for a novel hybrid mode of interpretation dubbed “simultaneous consecutive” (Hiebl, 2011; Ferrari, 2011). Instead of capturing a speech by taking notes the traditional way, the interpreter records it and uses that recording almost as if she were interpreting simultaneously. But since the interpreter has already heard and processed it, she can adapt the rendering and, let’s say, leave out redundant elements (as she would in a classic consecutive). Whenever there are difficult elements in the speech (numbers, names or particularly dense thoughts), she can slow down the playback – or accelerate it to skip repetitions in the original text. The idea here is not to do away completely with notation; the interpreter can write as much or as little as she wants. Rather, the Smartpen is a support that can reduce stress through the safety net of a sound recording (and notes on top of that). Especially in “typical” consec settings, where accuracy is key (healthcare, police, courts), it could be extremely useful. The Smartpen’s inconspicuousness could be an asset when it comes to how it is embraced by interpreters. Ferrari has suggested additional use cases, such as the use of the pen by members of selection panels in accreditation tests or the creation of audio glossaries.

**Information Management**

The Internet has become an indispensable tool for interpreters: communicating with clients and colleagues, obtaining information for the next assignment, learning and maintaining languages. In
several ways it is similar to that most classic fount of all knowledge, the library. To start your search, all you have to do is to get in. But to actually find something, you need a certain degree of expertise. In a library, you can consult comprehensive catalogues or ask one of the librarians. However, on the Internet, you’re more or less on your own. That is why knowing how to research information is now more important than ever before. In the age of the internet and ubiquitous information, preparing for an assignment is both much easier and much harder. We no longer need to pore over encyclopedias and specialized literature – everything is just a quick web search away. We are, however, confronted with the risk of information overload. For any given topic, an encyclopedia may give us a well-researched, concise article; the internet floods us with anything from a Wikipedia article to a highly technical scientific paper. What is needed to search (and find!) efficiently is the right toolbox: knowing how to translate the required information into the right search terms, being familiar with search operators (in order to exclude terms or search within a specific website, for example) and knowing that simply running an image search for an unknown word can give useful results quickly. Finally, the results of the search need to be properly evaluated (November, 2012). Other components of information management (Gillies, 2012) include the use of concordance software to go through comprehensive preparatory material or methods of terminology management. Unfortunately, terminology management often plays only a minor role in interpreter training (Veisbergs, 2007).

In this context, I would like to refer briefly to the idea of an “interpretation portfolio” which I have developed (Drechsel, 2004). In analogy to longer texts that translation students have to translate during their studies, interpreting students compile an “interpretation portfolio” as a means of recording how they prepare for a simulated conference on a given topic. Firstly, it should contain all relevant documents used for preparation, such as their own and others’ glossaries and parallel texts or background information. Secondly, students should write a commentary describing which research strategies they applied, which sources they found useful, which difficulties they faced and how they were able to overcome them. Another use-case for the portfolio could be the compilation of practice material (such as video and audio recordings) for self-study and a documentation of how it was used.

**Outlook**

Interpreters today stand right in the middle of a “tsunami” of technological and social change. We must act and “understand the wave” to be able to ride it and not drown. Translators, it seems to me, are ahead of us. We have to catch up in both education and professional practice – most likely through the combined efforts of everybody involved (interpreters, clients, trainers, researchers). There already are highly promising examples, such as the pedagogical support provided by the interpretation services of the European institutions or projects such as the “Speech repository” or “Virtual classes”. Practitioners and trainers should continue to examine, use, modify and further develop existing and new technologies, in particular remote interpreting. These activities should be accompanied by interpreting studies. Cooperation platforms, such as CIUTI, the SCIC Universities Conference or the EP’s Rectors’ Conference should continue and intensify their work against the backdrop of a single European higher education area, while professional associations such as AIIC continue to make valuable contributions. Unfounded fear of technology can simply disappear when trust is built through constant contact with the new (through training, colleagues and clients). When we are forced to deal with the new and when we experience what a difference technology can make, we may be more willing to make good use of it.

---

**References**


Alexander Drechsel is a conference interpreter and member of VKD. He has worked for the European Commission's Interpretation Directorate-General since 2007. Alexander regularly shares his experience in using tablets for interpreting on Twitter as @tabterp and on www.tabletinterpreter.eu.


Recommended citation format: