Something old, something new … A review of Conference Interpreting: A Complete Course by R. Setton and A. Dawrant

My overall impression of the book is altogether positive: Setton and Dawrant’s Complete Course is the best-argued and most thoroughly explained training manual I have read to date, addressing most if not all aspects (closely or loosely) related to conference interpreter training.

Conference Interpreting: A Complete Course

- Authors: Robin Setton and Andrew Dawrant
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Introduction

This 470-page book, the 11 chapters of which I reviewed in its electronic version, bears a rather cunning title seeing that it actually comes in two volumes. On the one hand, the Complete Course “is intended mainly for students of conference interpreting and their instructors, but also for practitioners of interpreting in all its forms, and all those who are in any way interested in this profession”. On the other hand, the authors hasten to add that the book is no self-study guide, cautioning that without the assistance of a qualified instructor – presumably with the aid of the 650-page Trainer’s Guide (the companion volume) – the exercises in it “will make no sense and will not take the student anywhere near the level of expertise envisaged for the programme”.

In other words, make room – lots of room – on your bookshelves, because here comes the most comprehensive book on interpreter training yet: over 1100 pages worth, marrying theory and practice, uniting trainers’ and trainees’ perspectives, and combining 60 years of complementary experience and expertise of two authors with very different pedigrees. Robin Setton, based in Paris and a staff interpreter at the OECD, is probably best known as an interpreting scholar and trainer (with extensive training experience at ESIT and more recently ISIT in Paris, but also in Taipei, Beijing, Shanghai and Geneva). Andrew Dawrant, based in Shanghai, is a freelance and consultant interpreter with vast training experience in Beijing and Shanghai, and was recently dubbed the top Chinese-English language interpreter working in China today by one of the most widely read newspapers in his native Canada. While Setton graduated from ESIT, a well-known interpreter training program with a strong holistic tradition, Dawrant trained in Taiwan and, in a recent interview [1], likened his experience as a student to the abuse endured by US Marines during their training. Along with their diverse professional exposure, the authors’ different training backgrounds promised to make this book an interesting read. Unfortunately, owing to its scope, a detailed analysis of the entire manual is not possible within the boundaries of this review. However, seeing that the Complete Course feels like a wedding in more ways than one, in my review I will make sure to discuss the old, the new, the borrowed and the blue.

Something old

To begin, it is important to note that just because something is aged to a certain point does not mean that it is of inferior quality. In fact, there are many valuable traditional elements in interpreter training, and one could argue that the approach to training conference interpreters has evolved relatively little since the first training manuals were published in the 1950s. Indeed, the authors of this book don’t envisage departing much from the “standard model” (a term perhaps more commonly associated with particle physics), which in the case of interpreter training most likely refers to the apprenticeship model currently applied by most leading conference interpreter training programs. Instead, Setton and Dawrant want to slightly expand this model by including the dimensions of “incremental realism” and “full realism”. In other words, rather than doing artificial drills that are theorized to be cognitive components of the full interpreting task, they focus on the “communicative goal that is the essence of interpreting” from the very beginning and eventually “bring students in contact with all the realities of professional interpreting, including (...) the most challenging conditions (they) will face on today’s market”.

By doing so, they firmly ground the Complete Course in one of the most widely known training approaches postulated by the Paris school, a training paradigm that has dominated a sizeable part of the relevant literature since the days of Danica Seleskovitch. All throughout the book, but especially in the theory section, we are reminded of the basic tenets of the interpretive theory and the “Paris triangle”, including the central notion of “deverbalisation” as the interpreter’s main task. It is therefore unsurprising that the authors themselves expect that “(t)rainers and other seasoned professionals will naturally find much that is familiar or even obvious and elementary”, although they tentatively suggest that the book might perhaps also contain some new ideas.

When it comes to the discussion of the overall training paradigm, the authors do miss the opportunity to enrich and balance the debate by adding findings from their own research, which showed that whilst factors such as accuracy, elaboration, and experience correlate with user-perceived quality, reformulation (i.e., the very bedrock of deverbalization) alone does not (Setton and Motta, 2007, p.216). The suggested holistic approach also remains at odds with research into training approaches of other complex skills (Ericsson et al., 2006) that underline the usefulness of drill-type training. So while the training paradigm embraced in this book is comfortably couched in a strong – and when it comes to training conference interpreters, successful – tradition, the Complete Course does not always accurately reflect the current state of research in areas that may not lie
within its area of focus. For example, while in 1995 Sperber and Wilson still speculated that, “it is probable that hearers constantly make and update anticipatory logical and syntactic hypotheses as utterances are unfolding”, we have had irrefutable evidence that this is indeed the case (see Altmann and Mirkovic, 2009). For example, the danger of espousing a paradigm as assertive and unbending as the interpretive theory might well be the temptation (or even obligation) to accept all of its claims, including those that are largely unsubstantiated. Categorical claims such as, “SI into a non-native language is obviously more challenging cognitively and linguistically”, or that, “interpretation into A will always be preferred on the market for the most stylistically challenging, rhetorical speeches” are indeed somewhat reminiscent of the ideologically-driven positions of times long gone. My final points regarding “the old” elements concern the examples. Here I would have hoped to find updated illustrations for the many points the authors want to make about restructuring or anticipating. And yet, the former are based on a speech Jospin gave some twenty years ago, while the latter are largely taken from Setton’s first book (1999). Again, the fact that the examples are old does not mean that they are no longer valid. However, just like the wedding party appreciates seeing the groom in a new tux for the big day (even if only rented), as a reader (especially one familiar with the authors’ previous work), I would have appreciated some fresh examples.

Something new

One of the reasons the Complete Course is so comprehensive is because the book includes a number of novel features, many of which other authors have not explored at all or not nearly as thoroughly. For example, Setton and Dawrant go to great lengths to show that “what interpreters actually do is both less magical and more complex than it seems”. Consequently, the table showing the kind of language, skill, knowledge, professional and training requirements for conference, court/legal, community/PSI and in-house interpreting is particularly helpful and provides a quick overview of the very comprehensive description of different domains and settings. The authors also spend considerable (and, I would argue, necessary) time discussing the requirements to become a conference interpreter, although the main focus remains on language proficiency (which benefits from the juxtaposition of AIIC and ASTM definitions), while communicative skills, general knowledge and personal qualities are covered in considerably less detail. The sample calendar of a staff interpreter provides the reader with a good idea of a staffer’s daily work; the addition of a similar calendar for a freelance conference interpreter would have been helpful to complete the picture. Importantly, a checklist aimed at helping prospects decide whether the conference interpreting profession is indeed for them definitely is to be shared and should soon find its place on the social media outlets normally used by candidates. Finally, the entire note-taking process, along with exercises for note-taking, are described in more detail than in other books I have recently read, and are made accessible thanks to helpful examples, including a “how-to” on taking and reading notes. Also, a concise one-page discussion of the language in which not to take notes, including the pros and cons of the different options, is a welcome aid for trainers, as the question inevitably comes up once notes are introduced in consecutive training.

Somewhat unexpectedly, sight translation figures rather prominently in the Complete Course: while during the early stage of consecutive training, the authors suggest that it represent up to 25 percent of class time, by the middle of the second semester they suggest “Sight Translation can be taken on in earnest”. Such focus on sight translation, however, might be disproportionate, seeing that contact hours with qualified trainers are the most valuable commodity and often hard to come by.

Before delving into simultaneous interpreting, the authors cover language enhancement (of C, B and A languages) in an exhaustive chapter, including a number of effective, creative and easy-to-implement exercises. The only outlier seems to be the “verbatim shadowing” exercise recommended for the improvement of B language, consisting of copying the speaker’s accent, intonation, stress and idiomatic expression. This type of parroting is somewhat reminiscent of dated language-learning approaches and may well result in rich lexical and idiomatic structures grafted onto rather poor syntactic and semantic foundations. The chapter on SI, finally, is divided into five distinct stages (initiation, coordination, experimentation, consolidation and reality), and while it does not cover anything substantially new, the incremental nature of the exercises, as well as a short analysis of the main challenges students are expected to encounter at each stage, are sufficiently novel as to set the Complete Course apart from other training manuals.

Of all the new features of this book, however, it is the introduction to professional practice that scores the highest: it provides exhaustive answers to trainees and recent graduates about where work comes from, how to interact with colleagues, how to deal with recruiters and what to be wary of when accepting the first assignment. By doing so, it takes a load off training programs that have long had to cover all these aspects, either piecemeal as a part of classes devoted to the acquisition of the skill proper or in special sessions organized for recent graduates.

Something borrowed

It goes without saying that no book on the training of interpreters can get by without borrowing from those who have addressed the issue before. This book is no exception and the authors give due credit to a dozen or so authors from as early as 1956 to as recent as 2013. Among the things borrowed are concepts, theories, arguments, examples and exercises. For example, the section on what to expect from a conference interpreting course appears to have been inspired by the EMCI core curriculum, which is not surprising perhaps, seeing that several of the training institutions where (at least one of) the authors have taught are members of that consortium, and that its curriculum has long become a reference for conference interpreter training programs the world over. The challenge, however, is to make sure that everything that was borrowed still fits together to make a coherent and harmonious whole, and for the most part, the authors succeed in doing just that. It is in the discussion of the basic techniques of SI where some confusion is created, probably because different concepts were borrowed without necessarily defining, re-defining or adapting their meaning. So we learn that the most important SI techniques are “keeping pace with the speaker by working with short units of meaning, chunking, deverbalizing, and reformulating…”. My biggest reservation – I suspect one that is shared by other trainers and trainees - is that these concepts are not unambiguous and are used to mean different things in the literature, as well as in the Complete Course itself. For example, the authors understand “deverbalization” to mean “discarding or forgetting the words of the original”, thus a process; “conceptual rather than linguistic representation” - meaning the product of the aforementioned process; and “ensuring that the speaker’s meaning is accurately conveyed in clear and effective language”, so the overall outcome of the process and the product being used in an interpreting situation. The same applies to the notion of “chunking”, which is explained as “working with short units of meaning”, but also listed alongside that definition in the quote above as if it were a different concept.

In a similar vein, we all borrow terms without really knowing who coined them, especially when they are used so pervasively that they have become part of our technical professional jargon. One of these terms made it into the section on Professionalism and Ethics, which incidentally is one of my favorite chapters of the book. Here we learn about how unqualified practitioners create “grey markets”, undercutting the interests of unaware clients and users. Although as a practicing professional and a member of AIIC I have much sympathy for the authors’ defensive stance, the truth is that as long as our profession remains “unprotected” and (at least in the non-agreement sector) still largely unregulated, from an economic standpoint there is no such thing as grey markets; whether we like it or not, we are all forced to compete in one and the same market. Finally, and on a somewhat lighter note, the recommendation borrowed from Seleskovitch, “urging students to speak ‘as if explaining it to (their) grandmother’” is cute, just like your grandmother, but it does bring to mind the smell of mothballs, rose water, medicine, and a whiff of that cheap gin to wash them down.

Something blue

Just like we rarely come away from a wedding thinking it was perfect (except, of course, our own) it goes without saying that a book as
comprehensive as this, addressing an issue as complex as conference interpreter training, will not necessarily meet every reader’s expectations in full. The purpose of this review, therefore, is not to find the proverbial fly in the champagne, but to share my impressions of the book with a larger audience – something I tried to do through the lens of my own biases and expectations. When everything is said and done, each reader, be it trainer or trainee, will have to decide for themselves whether their own expectations were met, and to which extent. This is also why I will attribute the few shortcomings listed in this last section to infelicitous or potentially ambiguous wordings, the failure to (double-)check the original source of information or simply a failure to establish a connection between the authors and this reader.

For instance, the results of a large-scale experiment on remote interpreting (see Roziner and Shlesinger, 2010) are reported as indicating that, “[r]esearch is inconclusive as to the ‘objective’ effect of remote interpreting on output quality”. In actual fact, the original report says that, “interpreters felt that the quality of their work was being gravely harmed during remote interpretation, although this finding was not backed up by objective tests of performance quality, in which only a slight decrease in quality of performance was found during the remote interpreting conditions” (Mertens-Hoffman, 2004: 273). I was similarly taken aback to find that, in the section on SI with text, the authors suggest that “listening is faster than reading”. This is incorrect: a recent norming study at the Human Rights Council revealed speaking speeds of between approx. 105 and 190 wpm, with an average of 150 wpm (Barghout et al., 2015), giving us an approximate idea of the speed at which conference interpreters receive auditory input. From early reading studies, however, we know that even slow readers read at 150 wpm while fair readers attain 250 wpm and good readers reach 350 wpm (Fry 1963). This does not even account for speed-reading techniques which are claimed to get reading speeds of up to 1000 wpm with high accuracy rates. So even though we know little about the interaction between reading and the SI task, we do know that, when it comes to language processing during comprehension, the eye will have faster access to information than the ear.

Another example comes from the discussion of the intricacies of relay and retour interpreting, where the authors draw attention to the fact that, “(e)ven double relay is sometimes necessary notably in the EU with its 24 official languages (at the time of writing) – for example, Finnish to Swedish to English to Slovakian”, seeming to suggest the deliberate use of double relay. However, the Director for Organization and Planning at DGINTE, the European Parliament’s interpreting service, confirms that, as a rule, relay is provided via one of the five “relay languages” (i.e., English, German, French, Spanish and Italian), allowing each booth to work into their respective language (as these are systematically covered), and that anything else is but an exceptional emergency measure (personal communication).

Last but not least, the authors suggest that Geneva’s FTI offers a customized preparatory course (for their own conference interpreter training program) approved and taught by professional trainers. While the curriculum for the undergraduate degree in Multilingual Communication includes a 4ECTS elective class entitled “Initiation to Interpreting”, a glance at the course description reveals that it covers the history of interpreting, its different modalities and types, as well as interpreting ethics - in other words, parts of the content that the Complete Course covers in chapters 2 and 10, and therefore hardly a preparatory course.

Conclusion

Given my distinct preference for a deconstructive approach to the training of conference interpreters, I cannot but feel like a bit of a wedding crasher. And yet, my overall impression of the book is altogether positive: Setton and Dawrant’s Complete Course is the best-argued and most thoroughly explained training manual I have read to date, addressing most if not all aspects (closely or loosely) related to conference interpreter training. The authors chose a well-known and firmly established paradigm in which to embed their training manual and manage to cover all relevant aspects of conference interpreter training within that framework. But even as I would like to say that the wedding between theory and practice, between Eastern and Western approaches to training, between two complementary authors was successful, some 150 cross references to the companion volume to the Complete Course remind me that although very comprehensive, the book is not nearly as complete as the name might suggest, and that the wedding reception is far from over. In fact, “research and ongoing debate on some key points are flagged and briefly discussed as of the Complete Course, with cross-references to the Trainer’s Guide (TG) for more in-depth treatment”. This means that so long as I have not read the second volume, which is currently stored on my iPad, this review should be treated as provisional and my definitive opinion on the book(s) subject to change.

References


Footnotes


About the author

Kilian G. Seeber is a professor at the University of Geneva and director of the Interpreting Department. He has been training conference
interpreters as well as interpreter trainers at the highest level. His research interests include cognitive aspects of multilingual and multimodal processing, along with ethical considerations affecting the interpreting process. He has been involved in the development of online training platforms, blended learning courses and self-administered online training modules for conference interpreters. Kilian completed his undergraduate training in translation and interpreting at the University of Vienna, did his graduate work in interpreting at the University of Geneva and his post-doctoral research in psycholinguistics at the University of York.

He is a professional conference interpreter accredited to the European Institutions and the European Patent Office, a member of AIIC and the convener of its Research Committee.

Recommended citation format: