Conference Interpreting: A Trainer’s Guide
by R. Setton and A. Dawrant

I found the Trainer’s Guide more complex than the Complete Course, but also more audacious.

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Introduction

A few weeks after finishing the review of Setton and Dawrant’s Complete Course, I started reading its companion volume, the Trainer’s Guide, in order to complete the exercise and to make good on the promise of sharing my definitive opinion on the books but, admittedly, also in an attempt to keep the momentum going, hoping it would carry me through yet another tome of several hundred pages [1]. At 15 chapters spread over 650 pages this second installment is even more impressive than the first, but that was not going to discourage me. In fact, knowing that I would be interviewing Robin about the books (view video at bottom of page) only a few weeks later, I had both the motivation and the resolve to go back to what promised to be an interesting read. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to tie up loose ends and to confirm or refute first impressions. In a way, and in keeping with the wedding metaphor used to frame the first review, this second installment may well be likened to the second part of any wedding. The formalities are over: the words were spoken, the vows taken, and strict protocol adhered to. Now it’s on to the reception and the after-party – which some might argue is the more interesting part of any wedding, if only because of the free food, the (hopefully) open bar, and the less polite but perhaps more genuine whispers you might pick up here and there.

As for expectations, I was reminded that the two volumes were not written symmetrically as is sometimes the case with language learning textbooks, where the student workbook is accompanied by a teacher’s guide that mirrors both its structure and content. Instead, the authors’ objective behind the Trainer’s Guide is to provide extensive additional guidance for trainers, although in the authors’ own words, “it will become clear that there is a lot more to (the trainers’) role than merely following the exercises or methodological suggestions that any textbook, however detailed, may provide”. Setton and Dawrant also candidly admit that in spite of their effort to include and build on
findings from cognitive science and expertise research, they largely base their recommendations on experience.

The usual suspects…

A bit like at a wedding reception, where you tend to know or at least have a pretty good idea of who will be attending – as opposed to those who will leave right after the ceremony – I started reading the Trainer’s Guide with certain expectations of topics likely to come up or come back. Consequently, I was not surprised to see that the question of what makes a good instructor is addressed early on in the book. Their answer: someone who can do it, who understands it and who can teach it. Trite as it might sound, it very much resonates with me. Of course the authors don’t stop at that, but provide a fairly complete picture of their ideal trainer, along with the role they see for junior (read inexperienced) and senior (read retired) interpreters. If anything, I would tend to caution against the rather strong push in favor of teacher demonstrations. While I appreciate that live demonstrations by trainers can serve the purpose of illustrating a point or giving the trainer more credibility, in the world of professional (sports) coaching the recommendation is to recreate the scenario as closely as possible without actually performing (Ferguson and Moritz, 2016). Perhaps throwing in the odd theory fun fact or simple ad-hoc experiment (e.g. to illustrate priming or anticipation), rather than relegating all theory to the theory class as suggested by the authors, could achieve the same goal of giving us credibility. But I digress. Along with the discussion of teachable moments and a table with effective and ineffective teaching approaches – both found later in the book – this section also provides a good reference for those hiring and evaluating interpreter trainers.

It was also no surprise to see that the progression stages identified in the Complete Course (i.e., initiation, coordination, experimentation, consolidation and reality) permeate the Teacher’s Guide. These stages are modulated by the principles of incremental realism (i.e., incrementally more difficult holistic exercises rather than attempting to separate interpreting into sub-tasks), trainee individuality (i.e., the need to adapt projected progression and learning curves to individual differences) and what the authors dub 3-D teaching (i.e., observing, diagnosing and suggesting treatment).

The comprehensive discussion of concepts and terms used in interpreter training was welcome, particularly after some potentially confusing wording slipped through the editing process of the first book. Not only are concepts defined and described much more succinctly and less ambiguously, the authors also successfully sort out the confusion among natural processes, techniques and strategies that is still prevalent in the literature. In a display of academic honesty (not always common in our field), Setton re-qualifies his original (1999) nomenclature putting forward a much more coherent definition whereby decoding, encoding etc. are seen as a part of natural processes; chunking, waiting, stalling etc. are referred to as techniques; and their deliberate combination or application is called tactics.

Of course the Teacher’s Guide could not get away without a discussion of deliberate practice, which has become a prevalent theme ever since interpreting embraced expertise research (see Ericsson 2000) as the go-to paradigm both for research and training. To complement Ericsson, however, the authors use a comprehensive and very useful table based on Shadrick and Lussier (2009) that they themselves then apply to interpreting. And yet, Setton and Dawrant are not afraid of taking a critical, perhaps even reactionary, stance on peer feedback, reminding us that, “students in the same group will often be experiencing similar problems, to which they have themselves not yet found solutions, and so tend to tell each other what they already know…”.

The sections on teaching different interpreting modalities, from consecutive to simultaneous, are
undoubtedly too comprehensive to be done justice to in a short review like this. Suffice it to say that they are replete with helpful advice both for novice and, especially, also for experienced trainers. I would venture to guess that the latter will find the progression matrix available for both modalities very helpful, as they cover the different learning stages, learning materials, required skills, and class and exercise objectives. This is also where the most common symptoms (in case of incomplete or failed integration of a skill) are diagnosed and possible remedies discussed. In the respective annexes, readers will find worked examples of different interpreting techniques, although I found the model illustrating the “vulnerable points” of the simultaneous interpreting process grafted onto the (already complex) model presented by Setton in 1999 somewhat mystifying.

The final topic I was fairly certain to encounter again was testing, also because it was relatively exhaustively discussed in the first book. Here, too, little is left unsaid and the meticulous description and analysis of exam procedures will stand in good stead of those with little or no experience in organizing what is undoubtedly a complex procedure. I found the scoring rubrics for different tests particularly promising, while the suggestion of calculating the inter-rater reliability among jury members (although well taken) a futile exercise so long as caucus-style holistic deliberations prevail. Finally, the inclusion of parameters such as curiosity, empathy, and coachability in admission exam procedures most likely goes beyond what we can currently measure using validated instrument and metrics, forcing jury members to fall back on their gut feelings – which is exactly what (some, including myself, argue) should be avoided.

Unexpected guests…

The intriguing part about the Trainer’s Guide, however, is the unexpected topics and issues that are addressed. And just like unexpected guests at a wedding reception and its after-party, these are the ones that’ll keep you talking about them for a while.

The biggest surprise for me was to see the same authors who for the Complete Course, aimed first and foremost at learners, appeared to profess a fairly uncompromising holistic training approach (in line with the “Paris school”), take a much more balanced if not positive approach to the debate on the merits of deconstructing the interpreting process – at least for the purpose of achieving better training results. This change of heart does not come about abruptly, however, as at the beginning of the Trainer’s Guide Setton and Dawrant analyze the component-skills approach to conclude that only some mechanical tasks such as translating abbreviations and converting numbers can be taught independently. It is only after a broad discussion of the arguments brought to bear by both sides that they determine that, “the Interpretive Theory of Translation (…) paints a somewhat over-polarized picture of deverbalized interpreting vs. transcoding that may underestimate the portion of the task that can be more or less automated, especially on some material that is common in everyday practice”. In a later section, fittingly called, “depolarizing ITT, opportunities for automation”, they concede that cognitive science supports the idea that the brain is able to automate much more than merely translation equivalents for technical terms, names and numbers. This concession was a welcome surprise, although my excitement slightly abated when reading the authors’ conclusion that, “while some sub-skills could be drilled in isolated or partly-combined but simplified form, provisionally relieving time pressure, or input difficulty, it is safer to stick to ‘incremental realism’ as the dominant principle in training”. It looks like a door opened, even though the authors still show some reluctance to walk through it. I would argue that the challenge of primarily using realistic and representative materials, as suggested by the proponents of the holistic teaching approach, is that if comprehension underlies Bayesian probabilities (Kuperberg and Jaeger 2016) and our brain more easily processes and more quickly anticipates and integrates structures that have been encountered more frequently, then it makes sense to isolate certain lexical, grammatical and syntactic patterns for repeated drill-type practice. Of course they also occur naturally, but their frequency in realistic
materials is too low for rapid assimilation of schemas (forcing students to accrue “mileage”). Sports analogies from football, where set plays are part and parcel of every training session, or tennis, where long-line passing shots are set up explicitly and practiced repeatedly, illustrate the rationale behind the argument.

The second welcome surprise and one of the most interesting suggestions in the Trainer’s Guide is the Speech Difficulty Index (SDI), in other words the idea of a metric to assess training and exam materials based on parameters like subject matter, speed of delivery, density, style, accent and prosody. While for everyday training this may be too ambitious, I see a lot of potential for use in exams especially when coupled with analytical assessment criteria (although the authors tend towards a more holistic appreciation of interpreting performance, informed by select analytical parameters). In any case the SDI is likely to generate debate and provide food for thought, if only because the authors’ take on speed reflects reality more closely than previous scholars and thus constitutes somewhat of a departure from the traditional “comfortable” (see Pöchhacker 2016) rate of 100-120 words per minute. Setton and Dawrant posit rates under 100wpm to be artificially slow, whilst labeling discourse presented at 100-120wpm as easy, at 120-140wpm as moderate, at 140-160 as challenging and exceeding 160wpm as difficult.

Another surprise emerged from the discussion about sequencing of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, where the authors present the option of introducing simultaneous interpreting before the complete acquisition and integration of all consecutive interpreting skills as recommended by the Paris School. This opening-up is welcome and, I would argue, necessary in the face of training programs that have been applying this principle rather successfully for years. If anything, what is perhaps missing is a critical discussion of the validity and reliability of a mid-point exam the assessment criteria of which (immediate, accurate, complete, idiomatic rendition with good presentation skills and not exceeding original length) at first sight cannot be distinguished from those one would apply at proficiency exams. Additionally, the (mathematically) calculated concessions for renditions into a consecutive B language (they are allowed to exceed the length of the original by 20%) and into a simultaneous B language (they are allowed to exceed the original by no more than 10%) appear somewhat simplistic as they reduce the difference between consecutive and simultaneous interpreting potential to a rendition-time difference of 10%.

The entire discussion of B languages, albeit not an unexpected topic, takes an unanticipated turn. Whereas in the Complete Course we are told that in order to qualify for a B-language, applicants need to be proficient users of the language (reference is made to CEFR C2 or exceptionally C1), in the Trainer’s Guide we read about scenarios with a, “B language still needing a lot of work”. Although any learned language will benefit from further improvement, the wording suggests major shortcomings. This is borne out by the authors’ examples of mistakes likely to be made by these students (e.g., countable and uncountable nouns, phrasal verbs, etc.) that should be acquired at much lower proficiency levels (between CEFR A2 and B2). I am furthermore not convinced that Setton and Dawrant’s use of qualifiers such as “active”, “strong”, and “very good” for B languages is necessarily helpful. Also, for the sake of consistency, one would then have to qualify all languages (A, B and C) accordingly.

The recommendations about feedback, that the authors base on their 3-D principle is very well developed and seeing that the notion itself was mentioned over 50 times in the Complete Course I was not surprised to see it come up another 130 times in the Trainer’s Guide. What did surprise me, however, was the recommendation of “stop-and-start” coaching. Accordingly, Setton and Dawrant suggest that, “some aspects of technique need real-time intervention, or are too complex to describe retrospectively after the entire performance is over, even with the help of playback, and need to be addressed immediately, by interrupting”. They believe this method to be particularly useful for sight translation, early simultaneous interpreting and in general for students working into their B
language. Having sat through a fair number of seminars on effective feedback myself, this suggestion does not seem to follow the current trend. But while it might be complicated (perhaps even impossible) to really apply in a simultaneous setting (where the original cannot be stopped for one only one student without affecting everyone else) I am certainly willing to try it and attempt to collect students’ impressions through evaluations afterwards.

The final and probably most appreciated unexpected guest – incidentally also the most entertaining section of the book by far – is to be found in the chapter on testing, where a fictitious nightmare scenario of an exam had me in stitches while outing the authors as Trekkies: they have candidates work from Klingon and Ferengi while external examiners come from the Federation of Planets.

Is it getting late…?

There comes a time at any party when you can’t help but feel that the guy you’re talking to is just trying to impress you – usually through the use of hyperbole, by embellishing, or by giving lots of seemingly random statistics which, if you had a minute to yourself, you’d check on your smartphone. On one occasions in particular I felt like that’s what was happening; maybe because of a cut-and paste job gone wrong, maybe because someone forgot to double-check the math: when describing the ideal qualifications of candidates, Setton and Dawrant suggest that they should have a good undergraduate degree with high marks, a post-graduate degree in a non-language subject, and several years of work experience. The ideal age for such candidates would be between 22 and 32. If we assume that today’s youths graduate from secondary school at 18, finish their undergrad at 21 and complete their post-grad two years later, however, by the time they acquire several years of work experience, most of them will be flirting with the upper threshold of the indicated age range, while none of them could possibly be under 26. As I am writing this, however, I realize that I might simply be starting to nitpick and that it’s probably time to wrap up.

Conclusion

I scroll through my annotated copy and I realize that there are many more things one could have and probably should have said – many of which could be considered details, most of which are probably only relevant to a small sub-set of readers, but all of which would have once more underlined the extraordinarily comprehensive and meticulous nature of this book.

On the whole I found the Trainer’s Guide more complex than the Complete Course (it will require more coffee to get through), but it is also more audacious. I salute the genuine – and largely successful – attempt to look beyond old ideological divides, especially when it comes to the benefits and shortcomings of deconstructing the interpreting task. Similarly, I am pleased to see indirect criticism leveled against institutional employers for insisting that modalities such as simultaneous interpreting with text feature prominently in training curricula whilst at the same time showing a reluctance to include them in their own professional exams.

For what it’s worth – I am fully aware that humor is very personal – I found the Trainer’s Guide to be funnier than the Complete Course. For example, the anecdote of the interpreter, who faced with a technical introduction to an unforeseeable and thus unprepared topic resorts to reading out a Wikipedia entry, struck a cord with me – not only because I have come across very similar anecdotes over the years. In fact, it does not really matter whether or not it really happened – what matters is that it might have happened to someone at some point… and that it provides trainers with yet another tool to break up what might otherwise be a long, hard and tedious training session.

This then concludes the most complete review I have written to date and unless someone is toying with the idea of writing a book on training conference interpreters in three or more volumes, it shall
remain my personal record. As for the wedding, as usual the guests had fun while for the ones directly involved it was a lot of hard work. And just in case I did not say so before: Congratulations! Time to go home – the party is over.

References


Footnotes

[1] Please refer to the first review for more information about the authors’ personal and professional background.

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