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General introduction

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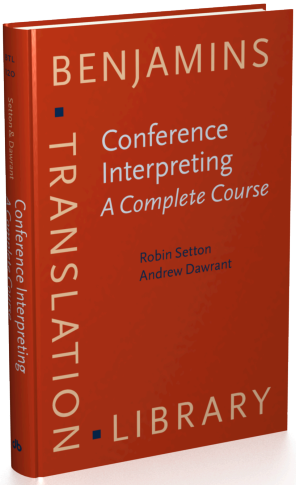

Pages xxi–xxviii of
Conference Interpreting – A Complete Course
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General introduction

Interpreting is an attractive profession for people of a curious, independent cast of mind. Bridging cultures and communities, interpreters are rewarded with a rich and varied experience of humanity in its diversity. Unlike the translator of written text, the interpreter's work is fleeting; yet beyond the thrill of mediating live communication, it can also be deeply gratifying when it is done well, leaving a sense of having truly brought people together across cultures. This takes a complex mix of ingredients – language, analysis, empathy, knowledge and technical skills – that for best results should be stirred into expertise by teachers and students working together: interpreters are both born *and* made.

The two volumes in this set are not symmetrical (one for students, one for trainers), nor is the first volume intended for self-study: trying to go through the exercises alone without the guidance of fully-qualified instructors will make no sense and will not take the student anywhere near the level of expertise envisaged for the programme.

Conference interpreting is a social, interactive, contextualized activity performed in very specific conditions and environments. The skillset and judgment required cannot really be mastered alone, nor even by a transfer of wisdom from master to apprentice: it requires a partnership in which instructor and student each have their role. Instructors create realistic and relevant conditions – speeches, exercises, simulated contexts – in which students learn through practice, with detailed feedback and guidance, plus additional support from theory, language and knowledge enhancement, voice training and so on, to be able to meet the needs of real users in real conferences. To make that necessary symbiotic relationship clear, the first volume – the Complete Course (CC) – deliberately intertwines and alternates between the student's and teacher's roles as we move through the stages in learning. The process is centred on the student, who should also benefit from understanding the instructor's role. As for instructors, extensive additional guidance is provided in a separate volume (the Trainer's Guide [TG]), but it will be clear from TG-2[1] that there is a lot more to their role than merely following the exercises or methodological suggestions that any textbook, however detailed, may provide.

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1. Chapters and sections in either of the two books are cross-referenced with the prefixes CC- (for the Complete Course) or TG- (for the Trainer's Guide).

The level of detail we offer in our recommendations for exercises, class procedure, feedback, practice or testing may give the impression of an over-'prescriptive' approach to interpreter training. Certainly we have written these books because we believe, on the basis of our experience, research and appreciation of the skills required, and of the reality of the job, that some methods of training are better than others, and that some structure, a reasoned progression and explicit guidance (and some key supporting components, like language and knowledge enhancement) make for better results. At the same time, training must always be student-focused and needs-based; so these recommendations, however strongly argued for, must necessarily remain suggestions that instructors and course designers will adapt to their specific needs, and enrich with their own ideas, practice and methodology.

The focus is on conference interpreting, but the principles and many of the exercises, particularly in the early chapters, are relevant to interpreting in all modes and settings. Today there is a steady demand[2] – and growing, especially in emerging markets – not only for SI but also for reliable consecutive interpreting for the thousands of meetings held every day in locations where no SI equipment is available.

Throughout both books we have sought to support our training proposals with both theory, from cognitive science or expertise research, and constant reference to real-world practice. Trainers and other seasoned professionals will naturally find much that is familiar, or even obvious and elementary, but perhaps also some new ideas. 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. Conversely, CC-references in the Trainer's Guide point the reader to the relevant stage or exercise in the Complete Course.

The indexes and tables of contents should also help readers to find specific points of interest, and more systematically, exercises, examples or case studies for each stage in the progression, as well as complete (mini-)syllabi for the various complementary modules: language and knowledge enhancement (CC/TG-7), the use of theory both *for* training (TG-3) and *in* training (TG-12), professionalism (CC/TG-10), an introduction to the organization of the profession (CC-11), lifelong and teacher training (TG-14), plans for postgraduate courses (MA and PhD, TG-12), and last but not least, blueprints for exams (CC-3/TG-4 for admission, TG-3.4 for in-course testing, TG-11 for the final diploma). Course leaders and instructors will find the principles of course design and pedagogy summarized in TG-2 and TG-3, with additional guidance in TG-13 on negotiating the challenges of creating and running a programme in a host institution.

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2. As reflected in the number of functioning schools: in 2014, AIIC recognized 84 interpreting schools meeting its basic criteria – i.e. turning out reliable professional conference interpreters – in 44 countries.

In the core teaching chapters (CC-4/TG-5 to CC/TG-10), new techniques and exercises are illustrated with worked examples in various language pairs, with English as a common thread, and with graphic process diagrams, boxes highlighting key techniques or controversial issues, some discussion of the learning and teaching challenges of the new skill, and (especially in TG) a review of relevant literature. Detailed guidelines on how to study and practise independently or in groups outside class – an indispensable part of the training – are provided to students in an Appendix to CC-5.

We hope that researchers, instructors and students will all find these volumes a rich but also an original resource: while the programme we describe builds on the 'standard model' of training that has successfully turned out generations of professionals, we also propose some adaptations and improvements to meet the changing profile of conference interpreting.

Training interpreters: tradition and innovation

In an age where 'evidence-based' is a buzzword, we need to explain the basis for our recommendations. Interpreting is a complex activity, and interpreter training still more so. As is often repeated in the literature, comparative empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of different training methods is complicated by practical difficulties such as tiny samples, high individual variability and the elusive and ephemeral nature of live performance data, not to mention the lack of statistics on student outcomes. We must therefore still rely largely on experience,[3] supplemented with what we know from research on language, cognition, human communication, education or sociology.

Despite the lack of published data, we do know that since the 1950s and 1960s a few well-known ('leading') schools have been largely successful in training operational conference interpreters for work at the highest levels, applying a 'standard' apprenticeship-based training model – also promoted by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC[4]) – of which one version has been

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3. In the authors' case, a combined total of nearly sixty years as interpreters and as trainers, administrators and researchers in various programmes in Europe and Asia. Many exercises and teaching methods were developed, piloted or implemented in conference interpreting programmes in Taipei in the 1990s (GITIS, Fujen University), in Beijing in the early 2000s (BFSU), then in Shanghai, as taught from 2003–2011 (SISU-GIIT), as well as Geneva (FTI, formerly ETI) and Paris (ESIT and ISIT).

4. International Association of Conference Interpreters, known by its French acronym 'AIIC'. http://aiic.net. (See CC-2, Appendix).

described in the best-known manual published to date (Seleskovitch and Lederer 1989/2002).[5]

Our own scheme is also in line with AIIC recommendations, but aims to 'stand on the shoulders' of past generations of trainers to update and adapt the standard paradigm to the realities of interpreting in the 21st century, including its emerging markets. In most respects we have followed established practice, in some ways even 'more so', but with some adjustments and innovations, notably in the areas of teaching style, assessment and testing, and support with language and knowledge enhancement, in pursuit of fairer yet more efficient and realistic interpreter training.

Progression and incremental realism

One of the cornerstones of the standard training model has been a progressive and constructive curriculum that takes students from exercises in active listening and analysis, then through consecutive interpreting with notes, and some sight translation, before moving on to SI, learning each new skill first into the native (A) language and only then into the second (learned, 'B') language.

We still find this progressive approach, as intuitively followed by early trainers, to be pedagogically highly persuasive. Our readings in cognitive science suggest that it largely reflects the incremental challenges of these tasks – for example, practising interpreting a speech or text in two stages, as in consecutive and sight translation, for at least a while before trying to do everything simultaneously, as in SI – and we have therefore articulated it in still more detail than in past training blueprints, identifying four stages in the mastery of each skill – Initiation (Discovery), Coordination, Experimentation (reflecting individual student variability) and Consolidation – with some limited flexibility allowed for students advancing at different speeds (see TG-3 for discussion and rationale).

Authenticity of tasks and materials is another traditional concern. To reconcile this with progression in difficulty and keep things fun and stimulating, we apply a principle of **incremental realism**: instead of doing artificial drills that are theorized to be cognitive components of the full interpreting task – an idea that some have toyed with in the training debate – we ensure that each exercise from the very start contains something of the communicative goal that is the essence of interpreting, gradually adding new challenges in terms of (i) the communicative characteristics of the input (from natural to formal, recited speech, for example), (ii) the techniques

5. The Ecole supérieure d'interprétation et de traduction (ESIT) in Paris is the home of the 'theory of sense' or 'interpretive theory of translation' (ITT), which we refer to at several points throughout these books.

required to deal with them, and (iii) the expectations for the quality and clarity of the product. Performance objectives are spelled out at each stage. In contrast to language learning, this means that input materials do not necessarily progress linearly in terms of 'linguistic' difficulty or subject matter, but are chosen to encourage and develop a particular type of cognitive processing at each stage. A tentative typology of speech difficulty on four parameters, with indications of appropriate speech and text types for each stage, is provided in an Appendix to TG-2.

We adopt a 'components' approach mainly at a descriptive level, in the postulate that overall interpreting expertise can be seen as a successful integration of four competencies – Language, Knowledge, Skills and Professionalism ('LKSP', CC-2.4). Each is either enhanced (L, K) or acquired through the course (S, P), and thereafter consolidated through life, but these four must be fully integrated to achieve overall, operational interpreting expertise that will continue to mature with practice. Some components – such as language proficiency, specific domain knowledge, or the more mechanical aspects of note-taking – can be focused on separately to some extent, but these are the exceptions to the general rule of incremental realism.

Full realism: going the last mile

Our second extension of the Standard Model involves a commitment to *full* realism, aiming to bring students in contact with all the realities of professional interpreting, including 'last-mile' training to deal with the most challenging conditions that graduates will face on today's market: fast, dense, formal and recited input, foreign accents and presentations that mix speech, text and slides (CC/TG-9).

Unfortunately, due to the pressures of time, money and the need for many speakers to use non-native languages, we don't always have the luxury of interpreting for people expressing themselves transparently and clearly in live, interactive discussion, but are often faced with speech that is rushed, informationally dense (read out from text), or otherwise opaque, stilted or uncommunicative. As interpreters have become increasingly taken for granted and invisible over the years (moving out of the meeting room to the SI booth and now to remote interpreting), it has become virtually impossible to refuse such tasks, even on quality assurance grounds.

While it remains true that coherent and meaningful interpretation is *never* possible without focusing primarily on the sense, conference interpreters must be fully prepared to deal with speeches that are either delivered so fast that the message can only be rendered comprehensibly by (meaning-preserving) compression, and/or are replete with formulas and jargon for which set equivalents are expected, or numbers and names to be accurately reproduced (i.e. a high 'transcoding' factor); or are produced from written text whose linguistic structure requires

complete reformulation to be delivered in comfortable, idiomatic form to an audience listening in another language.

To respond to these challenges, interpreters must complement their basic listening, analysing and speaking abilities with a suite of additional competencies: linguistic *readiness*, or the instant availability of ready phrases, both to keep up and because set equivalents are often expected; the ability to stay close to the speaker in SI *temporally,* not to overload short-term memory, but not *linguistically,* to stay idiomatic or even comprehensible, especially from written text – in contrast to the flexible lag and spontaneous formulation that is possible when following a natural, spontaneous exchange; and the ability to compress the text while preserving meaning, often the only way of coping with very fast speeches.

In our pedagogy, two strands correspond to these contrasting techniques as of the first steps in SI training. Alongside spontaneous and natural speeches that allow for a more elastic lag and freedom of style, more or less static or drip-fed text-based exercises are introduced towards the end of the first year (CC-7) alongside freer sight translation, leading into gradually accelerating 'chunking-and-joining' in SI-Initiation (CC/TG-8.2), preparing for the relatively rigid and formal material of institutional discourse and presentations from text (SI-Consolidation and Reality).

Finally, since *all* these techniques are vastly facilitated by familiarity with the subject matter (and sometimes impossible without it), we prescribe intensive study and practice on materials typical of the main target market(s) as soon as basic SI technique is in place (CC/TG-8.5), along with training in document management and conference preparation.

'Bi-active' SI

Another update is the **mainstreaming of 'bi-active' simultaneous interpreting**, i.e. into the B as well as the A language, long since standard in emerging markets, to meet the increasing demand for this capability worldwide (overwhelmingly with English B). SI into a non-native language is obviously more challenging cognitively and linguistically. To preserve the pedagogical progression (B into A before A into B), but still provide sufficient hours of training and practice into B, two adjustments to the standard curriculum are needed: extra class hours for into-B training, and significantly more language enhancement (LE) support than is traditionally provided in leading schools, both in dedicated LE classes and in classroom feedback into B. CC-7 describes exercises and guidelines for Language Enhancement, both within the course and for independent study and practice, and additional knowledge modules required for key domains in conference interpreting (Law, Economics, Parliamentary Procedure etc.) or other specializations.

Teaching professionalism

Another component of training that needs reinforcing is Professionalism, with three interacting facets – craft, ethics and service – that interact to ensure trust and quality in the interpreter-client relationship (CC-10). To take an obvious example, the near-impossible conditions described above are best *mitigated* or pre-empted in advance (as with climate change), to avoid having to *adapt* to them, by communicating better with our clients upstream. With growing pressure on young beginners to accept makeshift or unreasonable terms and conditions, students need a fuller and more detailed introduction to proper working conditions, ethics, role norms and conventions, dealing with (and educating) clients, and the organization of the profession, than has traditionally been provided in schools. This preparation should be consolidated in practice visits to organizations with work in 'dumb booths', and followed up after graduation with support and mentoring.

Under the general heading of professional ethics, norms relating to the *interpreter's role* are known to vary widely in the more diverse and less professionalized settings of community interpreting. However, we have found that such norms vary even among conference interpreters on different markets. The conference interpreting skillset – full consecutive and SI – has long been in demand well beyond the multilateral intergovernmental organizations, notably in settings like bilateral diplomacy and high-stakes business, where the full neutrality of the interpreter (and some more secondary conventions and conditions) is often neither expected nor taken for granted.

In short, while there are no defensible grounds for diluting the oath of *confidentiality*, and no revolutionary leap in human cognition has occurred to change the optimal and minimal *conditions* for quality interpreting, principles like neutrality, loyalty and fidelity are not as clear-cut nor as easy to apply in practice as these iconic words suggest, and need to be better understood in the light of the diversity of practice if we are to preserve their ethical core in the real modern world. After observing some clear differences of perspective between cultures and markets, we have therefore had to settle for presenting both sides of an apparent divergence in the contemporary self-image of the profession – frankly unresolved here – between those who believe that we should always strive towards and never relinquish interpreter neutrality as a goal, and those who hold that (full) neutrality is either not possible or cannot be required of interpreters in some settings and situations (CC/TG-10.3).

In terms of 'business/service' professionalism, practical information that future graduates will need about market organization, getting work and key relationships as they embark on their career (CC-11) is the substance of a final-semester 'Introduction to Professional Practice' module.

Acknowledgements

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Several recent publications on conference interpreting or interpreter training have been referenced only briefly, having emerged too recently to be fully addressed in this book. For additional background and information, including abundant online references and resources, readers are referred to the Further reading sections in each chapter, and to the following excellent general reference works in the field:

Baker, Mona and Gabriela Saldanha (eds.). 1998/2009. *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203359792

Chapelle, Carol (ed.). 2013. *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (10 Vols). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gambier, Yves and van Doorselaer (eds.). 2011-2013. *Benjamins Handbook of Translation Studies* (4 Vols). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi: 10.1075/hts.1

Malmkjær, Kirsten and Kevin Windle (eds.). 2011. *Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199239306.001.0001

Millán-Varela, Carmen and Francesca Bartrina (eds.). 2012. *Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies*. London: Routledge.

Mikkelson, Holly and Renée Jourdenais (eds). 2015. *Handbook of Interpreting*. London: Routledge.

Pöchhacker, Franz and Nadja Grbić (eds.). 2015. *Encyclopedia of Interpreting Studies*. London: Routledge.

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