Interpreters' Perceptions on Their Profession and Quality in Malaysian Conference Interpreting

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Abstract

Interpreters' perceptions about their profession and quality of interpreting were explored by a survey in five international conferences to fill in the gap between research and practice in conference interpreting and quality expectations in a Malaysian setting. Open-ended questions formed the main part of the questionnaire, adapted from Moser (1995). Analysis of the eleven participants' responses showed that interpreters describe their profession as "communication facilitators". Interpreters indicated adapting with the speaker's speed as the most difficult aspect of interpreting. Time constraints, lack of knowledge, familiarity with the terminology, and technical problems were the most problematic issues and main difficulties in conference interpreting. Environmental conditions, interpreters' insufficient technical knowledge, incorrect terminology, and mistranslation were marked as other important problems of conference interpreting.

Keywords

interpreters' perceptions, quality, conference interpreting

1. Conference Interpreters, Perceptions and Quality

Conference interpreters render meaning verbally at various situations in different types of meetings. Interpreters get involved actively in the interaction, sometimes asking or answering questions, correcting mistakes, expressing feelings and asking parties to repeat or clarify themselves when they are not clear. They usually work behind the scene in a sound-proof booth as core members of a team that facilitate communication. Creativity and the ability to deal with challenges and difficulties in immediate interpretation situations are considered the essential characteristics of interpreters' job.

Interpreter's role can be viewed from two perspectives: first as the neutral translator or linguistic interpreter, and second as the advocate or the cultural interpreter. Garzone (2002, p. 118) points out that it is only the interpreter's responsibility to assure quality and determine which interpreting is good, because interpreters are accountable for the finished product. This explains why most of the researchers of quality in interpreting prefer to focus on research carried out on professional interpreters, such as AIIC (The

International Association of Conference Interpreters) members rather than, for instance, users or clients. Interpreters must "always consider who is talking to whom, to what purpose, and with what possible (Kurz, 2003, p. 13). From interpreters' point of view, the three most important factors to define interpreting quality are consistency with the source text, completeness of information, and logical cohesion (Chiaro & Nocella, 2004, p. 288). This is in line with the findings of Garzone's (2002) investigation on basic quality requirements of interpreting from interpreters' point of view, which also found that sense consistency or fidelity to the source text, accuracy, and successful communication are important (pp. 107-119). According to Pöchhacker (2001, pp. 412-414), survey studies have been deemed as the most popular and productive line of empirical studies on quality in interpreting. Questionnaire-based survey studies have been carried out from the generic perspective, which often refers to the interpreter's task, and with reference to concrete interpreting events (Pöchhacker, 2001, pp. 413-414).

2. Methods

The objectives of the study are to address several aspects of interpreting, including the problems in the young area of interpreting quality research in Malaysia. The present exploratory study was an attempt to achieve the following objectives:

(1) To build a profile of interpreters in Malaysian conference interpreting.

(2) To identify interpreters' expectations of interpreting quality.

(3) To identify the extent to which interpreters' expectations of quality vary based on their:

a) Gender;

b) Conference typology;

c) Age;

d) Experience;

e) First-language;

f) Educational level.

(4) To determine the interpreters' view on the key problems and constraints that they face at international conferences.

(5) To put forward suggestions for modifications and improvements of interpreting service in Malaysian international conferences.

An empirical survey study using questionnaires for evaluation of interpreters' perspectives on interpreting quality was adapted from Bühler (1986), Moser (1995), and Zwischenberger and Pöchhacker (2010). In addition, the on-site questionnaire-based survey method allowed the researcher to observe the research setting, and collect data while monitoring the procedures to obtain data. The results are mainly based on the open-ended responses, as scale analysis was not reliable due to the small number of subjects.

2.1 Participants

The subjects were 11 interpreters selected from a pool of interpreters working at international conferences in Malaysia. The on-site subjects were selected from the following international conferences in Malaysia:

(1) 14th International Conference of Translation and the FIT 7th Asian Translators' Forum, 27-29 August 2013, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.

(2) Third World Tourism Conference, 21-23 October 2013, Melaka, Malaysia.

(3) The 3rd Regional Conference on Educational Leadership and Management (RECLAM), 18-21 November 2013, Genting Highlands, Malaysia.

(4) Impact of Science on Society, 27 December 2013, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.

(5) Offshore Technology Conference Asia (OTC Asia), 25-28 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, Malaysia.

Data collected in five sessions and included 11 questionnaires completed by interpreters working in Malaysia. Four interpreters completed the questionnaire on-site while seven emailed them. The details of the interpreters' profile are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Interpreters' Profile

Total	11	Frequency
Gender	Male	8
	Female	3
Nationality	Malaysian	8
	Non-Malaysian	3
Age	36-45	3
	46-55	3
	Pbove 55	3
	Total	9
	Missing	2
Qualification	Diploma	2
	Postgraduate-diploma	3
	B.A/B.S	3
	M.A/MS	3
Freelance or Staff	Freelance	7
	Staff	3
	Total	10
	Missing	1
Work experience	Below 5 years	1

	5-10 years	5
	11-15 years	1
	16-20	1
	Above 20 years	3
Sector	Public	3
	Both	4
	Missing	4
A language	Malay	5
	Arabic	1
	English	3
	More than one	2
B language	Malay	2
	Chinese	1
	Arabic	2
	English	5
	Indonesian	1
C language	Malay	2
	Chinese	1
	Arabic	1
	More than one C language	2
	Missing	5

Note: Interpreters' scale.

Because of the low number of subjects, analysing percentages for their scale and other variables for such a small population would not lead to any significant difference. However, even these percentages show that interpreters have higher quality expectations compared to users and clients (Amini, Ibrahim-González, Ayob, & Amini, 2015). The cumulative percentages of interpreters' very important and important attributions were 100% for sense-consistency with original message, fluency, terminology, grammar, synchronicity, style and completeness. These percentages show the highest importance that interpreters attach to those quality criteria. Interestingly, there was no unimportant rating by interpreters. Table 2 summarises the interpreters' attributions to the quality criteria.

Table 2. Summary of Interpreters' Attributions to the Quality Criteria

Quality Attribution	parameter	Frequency
	very important	8
Sense-consistency	Important	3
Fluency	very important	8
	Important	3
Terminology	very important	7
	Important	4
Grammar	very important	5
	Important	6
Lively intonation	very important	2
	Important	7
	less important	2
Native accent	Important	6
	less important	5
Synchronicity	very important	4
	Important	7
Style	very important	3
	Important	8
Completeness	very important	8
	Important	3
Pleasant voice	Important	8
	less important	3
Logical cohesion	very important	6
	Important	4
	less important	1
Total		11

Note: Analysis of open-ended responses.

Obviously, due to the small number of subjects, and the fact that it is impossible to reach a reliable sample of Malaysian interpreters, as there are not many certified/qualified interpreters in Malaysia, no typology and variable analysis were carried out for the interpreters' data; however, the interpreter's data was transcribed to find common grounds in interpreters' perspectives and perceptions about their profession and quality of interpreting. The findings from the open-ended questions yielded the following comments on interpreters' description of their job, their perspective on the interesting aspects,

difficulties, main shortcomings of interpreting and their suggestions, and recommendations to improve the quality interpreting in conference settings.

2.2 Interpreters' Description of Their Job

Six out of 11 interpreters described a conference interpreter's job as communication facilitator, communicator, or someone who serves as a bridge between speakers of different languages to promote understanding on topics in discussion, and someone who makes the communication happen. Two subjects mentioned that interpreters remove the language barrier or make it easier, while the users rely heavily and solely on interpretation. Another subject believed that conference interpreter's job is an important role, without which, a conference may be totally irrelevant to some participants. One interpreter highlighted the importance of conference interpreters in the context of Malaysia, whereby the use of Indonesian and Malay languages need to be promoted as conference languages and languages of scholarship.

When the interpreters were asked if the importance of quality criteria varies depending on the type of meeting or assignment, seven of them answered "no". However, the four other interpreters said "yes", and emphasised the importance of contextual features. Those interpreters who answered "yes" to this question were asked to elaborate on their answers. One of the interpreters believed that in large assemblies or seminars the interpreter can give priority to several particular aspects of quality criteria whereby Simultaneous Interpreting is usually required, unlike the meetings such as press conferences which usually requires Consecutive Interpreting. Another interpreter mentioned that if the conference is technical, for example in medical or engineering conferences, quality of interpreting is subject to the nature of the knowledge the interpreter has. Two other interpreters indicated the importance of the context and situational features of each meeting.

Interpreters were asked "which factor(s) can have an influence on the relative importance of interpreting quality?" They were also provided with the following options and were asked to add if they had any further idea or comment on these questions.

(1) Certain technical fields such as politics, business, and economics, or law, etc.

(2) The degree of formality/informality.

(3) The duration of a meeting.

(4) Size of a meeting.

(5) Others (please state).

Eight interpreters mentioned that all of the above-mentioned factors influence quality of interpreting. However, the degree of formality/informality was emphasised by three interpreters. One interpreter believed that quality consideration should be the same regardless of domain or degree of formality and the interpreter has to be committed to quality even if it is an informal event regardless of the topic. Another interpreter mentioned that quality criteria are not affected by the subject, type, duration or size of a meeting and the most important factor if that the interpreter should know all the technical terms and jargon. One of the interpreters marked the formality/informality, size, and subject of meeting as the

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factors that affect quality.

2.3 Interpreters' Perspective on Interesting Aspects of Interpreting

All of the interpreters answered the question "what do you consider particularly interesting about interpreting profession?" Three subjects mentioned international contacts, two mentioned getting to know important people, and two mentioned travelling, as the most interesting aspects of their profession. One interpreter believed that interpreting broadens networking, enhances knowledge in specific areas, broadens one's outlook by listening and understanding the diverse views and principles. Another interpreter indicated that in conference interpreting, range and diversity of topics, currency of topics, context with thought-leaders and leading figures of each domain, and keeping abreast of cutting edge of development are the most interesting aspects of interpreting. One subject maintained that interpreting is a challenging job with a range of topics which require the interpreter to constantly update his knowledge base. According to the opinion of one subject, the most interesting trait of the profession was that an interpreter could be ahead of other people to know about a given piece of information, since their duty normally "covers everything under the sun".

2.4 Interpreters' Perspective on Difficulties of Interpreting

Interpreters were asked to describe the difficulties that a conference interpreter faces and the most problematic areas in their profession. Three subjects considered catching up or adapting with the speaker's speed as the most difficult part of the interpreters' job particularly for simultaneous interpreters. Two interpreters mentioned time constraints which might cause distraction and loss of concentration and confidence. Not being familiar with the topic or lack of knowledge were mentioned by two interpreters as the most problematic areas of interpreting. Also, another interpreter stated that conference interpreters need to learn fast about the areas although this learning might not be in depth. Dealing with the unknown, and being at the mercy of the speaker who does not know anything about the interpreter was highlighted by another subject as the most difficult aspect of conference interpreting. One interpreter indicated that understanding speakers, not the language, because they are speaking a language they don't master, is the most problematic area that interpreters face. Speaker who jump from one sentence to another without finishing the sentence properly are a major problem to the interpreter. In this case, the listener may not understand and think that that it is the interpreter's fault for not finishing the sentence. An interpreter maintained that a second of distraction may affect the flow of the sentence or topic being interpreted, or an important fact might be "lost to thin air" and the interpreter left grasping for words to complete the sentence. In one of the interpreters' opinion, the lack of correct terminology is fatal in this line of duty.

2.5 Interpreters' Perspective on Main Shortcomings of Interpreting

The main shortcomings of conference interpreting were addressed in another question. Technical problems such as poor quality of microphone or headsets and the equipment breakdown were mentioned by three of the interpreters as the principal shortcoming of conference interpreting. Two other interpreters maintained that poor preparation and insufficient or lack of cooperation between the

organisers and interpreters sometimes causes serious problems such as late preparation or loss of materials. Two subjects considered insufficient technical knowledge as the main shortcoming of conference interpreting. Speakers' foreign accent was also mentioned by two of the interpreters while two other interpreters considered incorrect terminology and mistranslation as the main shortcomings of conference interpreting.

2.6 Interpreters' Suggestions to Improve Interpreting Quality

Based on the results and findings of the present study, as well as of previous studies, the following recommendations are presented for interpreters or trainees concerning as what they need to do and avoid while they are still trainees, and after they start their job. Interpreters emphasised updating knowledge by education and training and that professional interpreters need to constantly update on latest developments in order to remain synchronic with current trends. Continually updating knowledge seems to be a must for interpreters, despite the fact that there is no clear-cut definition of what "knowledge" might entail, and the ranges of subject areas and their boundaries might not be very transparent. Interpreters suggested training conference organisers and clients, as they considered poor organisation as an obstacle for an effective communication. They believed that clients must allocate more time to the interpreter for preparation and provide the interpreter with the prerequisite knowledge and skill in the subject matter. Practice is important to help interpreters gain more confidence, and strategies such as preparation of materials, anticipation or what things the speaker will talk about next, and self-monitoring or listening to one's own output to ensure coherence and appropriate style were recommended to improve the quality of interpreting. Paying more attention to the interpreters' needs was highlighted by another interpreter stating that briefing the interpreter before the interpretation session starts about the topic and terms, and avoiding speaking at high speed, especially reading from a text can be helpful strategies. One interpreter suggested more investment in the field, and another interpreter suggested that the environmental aspects such as temperature adjustment in conference halls should be taken into account in order to avoid any inconvenience. Conference interpreting trainees should attempt to expose themselves to real-life interpreting situations as much as possible before they start their profession as interpreters not being restricted to classrooms. Mastering the skills without using them in real-life situations will always leave gaps. In this regard, using dummy booths in which the trainees have the chance to work and be evaluated by experienced professionals can be helpful. Interpreters are encouraged to maintain linguistic criteria, such as clarity of expression and speak in complete sentences. Also, the interpreted version of the message must be grammatically correct. Other important points are obeying microphone discipline; conveying cultural content, and interpreters' appropriate reaction in case of technical breakdowns. Exaggerating or overstressing the emotional content and intonation should be avoided, while maintaining neutral tone during the interpreting session is recommended. Making long pauses far behind the original, poor synchronicity, and unfinished sentences must be avoided. Interpreters' voice should be lively rather than monotonous. Interpreter's having a foreign or regional accent was not mentioned as a determining factor by most of

the participants of this study. However, whether or not an accent can be defined as foreign or local is not entirely clear and is subject to personal opinion to a large extent. More investment so as to fulfil interpreters' needs and attention to the environmental aspects were other important suggestions made for promoting interpreting quality. Interpreters believed that speakers reading too fast from a text make the interpreters' job more difficult.

3. Conclusion

The interpreting community may not be willing to challenge its own codes and regulations and they might feel that interpreters can assess the quality of colleagues intuitively, based on their experience and professionalism, but the questions is that whether they are actually able to express their subjective judgments by objectively measurable standards. In Malaysia, the number of certified conference interpreters is insufficient to let the researchers conduct any large-scale survey on their perspectives. Yet, the currently available interpreters' perceptions and summary of common points and perspectives can at least lead to a general acknowledgement of their points of view and expectations about Malaysian conference interpreting. Conference interpreter work and function in complex environments which can host vague expectations and even contradictory interests. Factors known in general as the common "qualities of interpreters" are language skills, analytical skills, listening and recall, interpersonal skills, ethical behaviour, speaking skills, cultural knowledge, and subject knowledge. However, other factors can affect the quality of an interpreter's performance, such as the workload of individual interpreters which should not exceed a certain time, e.g. 40 minutes for a single speech, taking turns about every 30 minutes (AIIC, 2002b).

An interpreter may be "a Jack of all trades" or a generalist in all subjects, but they need to have the understanding of linguistic and/or extra-linguistic knowledge, and interpreting in turn cannot be achieved without complete understanding. However, interpreters can't be expected to have the same specialised knowledge as the speaker or give their own opinion about the information, but instead they need to possess the ability to understand this information and have the faculty of analysis and an intellectual level equivalent to that of the speaker. Natural talent is not sufficient and the professional interpreters should be trained because of growing demands in international communication. The idea that "interpreters are made not born" should be stressed in interpreter training and in the development of criteria of rating and quality for interpreter training programmes as provided by AIIC.

Last but not least, interpreting performance and quality will always depend on a multitude of factors such as knowledge, stress and concentration, cooperation of the organisers, linguistic and extra-linguistic criteria, working environment and working conditions that will determine the level of quality obtained. Interpreters are usually at the backstage, hence at the focal point of criticism. Research into interpreting can also benefit users, clients, conference organisers and particularly interpreters because it is associated with academia and, therefore, can contribute to the increment of interpreters' social status too.

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