An Innovative Teaching Activity for Undergraduate Interpretation Courses: the Use of Mock Conference as a Term Project

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Abstract

In many studies of interpretation teaching, efforts are made to discuss and plan on how to design a more effective course in graduate level. However, little attention is paid to the design and structure of an undergraduate interpretation course. Moreover, teaching suggestions provided by some experienced instructors usually lack a theoretical framework and are merely reflections of their own personal teaching experiences in translation and interpretation. Thus, this study aims at proposing an effective teaching activity for interpretation courses in undergraduate level and examines its practicality and appropriateness. The hope is that this study will be of importance to interpreting teachers for undergraduate courses in providing them with the necessary background to effective teaching in class.

Key words: Interpretation teaching, international mock conference, project work,
INTRODUCTION

In light of the fact that Taiwan is already a member of World Trade Organization (WTO), a great demand for the students to acquire real communication skills in English arises. This phenomenon is especially reflected in the courses provided by colleges. There are more interpretation courses offered in both graduate and undergraduate programs than before to improve and enhance students’ oral English ability. According to Her (2001) and Liu (2002), the teaching objectives of interpretation courses in graduate level are different from those in undergraduate level. The former is to train students into professional interpreters while the latter intends to improve students’ overall language proficiency, covering listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating.

In many studies of interpretation teaching, efforts are made to discuss and plan on how to design a more effective course in graduate level. However, little attention is paid to the design and structure of an undergraduate interpretation course. Moreover, teaching suggestions provided by some experienced instructors usually lack a theoretical framework and are merely reflections of their own personal teaching experiences in translation and interpretation. Thus, this study aims at proposing an effective teaching activity for interpretation courses in undergraduate level and examines its practicality and appropriateness. The hope is that this study will be of importance to interpreting teachers of undergraduate courses by providing them with the necessary background to effective teaching in class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The course design of an interpretation class has always been one of the main foci in the studies of interpretation pedagogy. However, most interpretation instructors in
colleges have never received any related training, and many of them are not professional interpreters, either (Her, 1999). This for certain will cause some language problems to the teaching effectiveness. Therefore, if the teachers could use certain teaching theories as a basis for structuring the interpretation course, some of the teaching problems might be alleviated.

**Interpretation Teaching**

In the training process, home or abroad, simultaneous interpretation (SI) is usually taught after students have been initiated into consecutive interpreting and sight translation in both language directions (Wu, 1999). Van Dam (1989) proposed that students be taught in a step by step approach. She thought that simultaneous interpretation is a skill, and that the training of simultaneous interpreters should be based on concepts and techniques of skill training. In order to reach the goal of being able to interpret simultaneously, several different tasks are introduced to students in a sequenced order. These tasks are widely adopted by instructors of SI. They are: (1) the use of equipment in the booth and booth etiquette, (2) shadowing, (3) distancing exercises, (4) anticipation of speaker, (5) anticipation of speech direction, (6) sentence reduction, (7) gist extraction, and (8) integration.

**Foreign Language Teaching**

In the field of TESOL, several teaching methods have been applied in a classroom setting. For the sake of this research, (1) cooperative language learning, (2) task-based language teaching, and (3) project work will be discussed briefly as follows.

(1) Cooperative Language Learning:

Communicative competence has drawn great attention and indeed played an important role in language learning. Cooperative language learning is a possible way
to improve learners’ communication skills and help learners to acquire interpersonal social skills. According to Kagan (1995), students’ potential for learning success can be inspired by the interactions with others in social contexts. And the cooperative learning techniques can serve as the medium for students to gain communicative competence through actual language practices. Moreover, cooperative learning has been proved to induce learners’ motivation in learning and better academic achievements (Baloche, 1998; Dörnyei, 1997).

Cooperative learning refers to a teaching method requiring students’ involvement in various cooperative activities of pairs or small groups. According to Olsen and Kagan (1992), cooperative learning has been defined as an organized group learning activity so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. Unlike individual learning, in which students’ goal achievements are independent and usually competitive situations are formed, students in cooperative learning situations perceive that they have to accomplish shared goals by seeking outcomes beneficial not only to themselves but also to all other group members (Johnson et al., 1993). In sum, cooperative learning provides students with a whole new learning environment totally different from that under traditional teacher-centered instruction.

The implementations of cooperative learning in the second language classes indeed have impact on learners. First, higher academic achievement is found in the cooperative learning situation. Baloche (1998) explained the phenomenon of higher academic achievement from the following three perspectives: constructivist-developmental theories, information processing and peer discussion. For constructivist-developmental theories, Vygotsky and Piaget (1978) associated social transmission with cognitive development by stating that learners are in “a zone
of proximal development"—the distance between the actual level of development and the potential development that can be reached through adult guidance or peer collaboration. For information processing, Heterington and Parke (1986) contended that the development of memory and problem-solving abilities are due partly to strategies used to transfer information into memory as world knowledge. Finally, peer discussion can (1) encourage frequent repetition of information and explanations, (2) increase retention, understanding, and integration of different points of view, and (3) provide opportunities for peer feedback, support, and encouragement (Baloche, 1998).

Second, social skills are enhanced through the cooperative way of learning. Baloche (1998) stated that as individuals feel more influential and included and learn to handle their differences and conflicts skillfully, honestly, and empathically, they will become a lot more concerned with issues of interpersonal affection, appreciation, caring, and interdependence. In this way, students also develop their communicative ability, which has been a focus of instruction recently in current language classes.

The third positive effect of cooperative learning is the promotion of students’ learning motivation. In the cooperative learning setting, learners’ positive peer relationships tend to develop positive attitudes toward school and learning as well (Baloche, 1998). In this sense, students find academic and personal supports from their teachers and peers. They may look for extra resources and information about the subject matter, and tend to come to class regularly. These positive effects on students are in line with the experimental results of a study conducted by Chao and Chang (2003), in which students of the experimental class receiving the cooperative learning instruction enjoyed English classes more and show stronger motivation in learning English.

(2) Task-based Language Teaching:

Task-based Language Teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as
the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Some of its proponents present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching since it draws on several principles that formed part of the communicative language teaching movement from the 1980s (Willis, 1996). First, activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning. Second, activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning. Third, language that is meaningful to learners supports the learning process. Tasks are proposed as useful vehicles for applying the above-mentioned principles.

(3) Project Work:

In recent years, increasing numbers of language educators have turned to content-based instruction and project work to promote meaningful student engagement with language and content learning (Fried-Booth, 1986). Through content-based instruction, learners develop language skills while becoming more knowledgeable in a given area. By integrating project work into content-based classrooms, educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher-level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning (Henry, 1994). When incorporating project work into content-based classrooms, instructors distance themselves from teacher-dominated instruction and move toward creating a student community of inquiry involving authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem solving (Sheppard & Stoller, 1995). Project work is viewed by most of its advocates “not as a replacement for other teaching methods,” but rather as “an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students” (Haines, 1989).

In this research, in order to fulfill the interpretation teaching objectives, the authors tried to integrate a term project in an interpretation class and see if it could be
of teaching use and bring about the positive effects mentioned above.

METHOD

(1) Subjects:

A total of 13 students participated in this study were from a university in northern Taiwan. They were in their last year in the university and were all English majors. They had completed “Interpretation I” for exactly one year and then took “Interpretation II” for another year. “Interpretation II” was the course that this research was based upon. One of the researchers served as a participant observer.

In this particular English department of the university, the teaching emphasis is placed on translation and interpretation. Therefore, lots of practical courses are provided for students’ electives, including Translation: Theory and Practice, Subtitling Translation, and others. Unlike courses offered in other schools, the courses mentioned above all last for an entire academic year; that is 2 semesters with 4 credit hours. For “Interpretation I”, sight translation, paraphrasing, number conversion, short-term memory exercise, note-taking and consecutive interpretation (CI) are taught and practiced. On the other hand, “Interpretation II” emphasizes on teaching the use of equipment in the booth and booth etiquette, shadowing, review of CI, distancing exercises, anticipation of speaker, anticipation of speech direction, sentence reduction, gist extraction, simultaneous interpretation (SI), and SI with text.

On the first day of “Interpretation I”, 60 students enrolled in class. In order to ensure the teaching quality and chances of individual practice, the first screening test was conducted and 20 of the 60 students passed the test. However, still too many students remained in class. Hence, the second screening test was administered and 15 out of 20 survived the test. After the first semester, 2 more students were flunked.
Thus, the rest of the students had the privilege to take “Interpretation II”, and they were the subjects in this study. “Interpretation I” was taught by an instructor and one of the researchers of this study was responsible for teaching the “Interpretation II” course for the whole school year.

(2) Procedures:

At the beginning of the course (Interpretation II) in the second semester, the instructor announced that there would be a term project, international mock conference in March. The final grade of each student would be based upon class participation, mid-term exam, final exam, and a large proportion of term project. After knowing the class requirements, students had a clear learning objective which was to present what they had learned and practiced in class to invited guests.

During the preparation stage, students practiced and reviewed what they learned in “Interpretation I”. Meanwhile, they had received solid training on shadowing and simultaneous interpreting in both language directions (English to Chinese and Chinese to English). The hope was that students could utilize all these skills to perform well in their term project. The term project used in this course basically followed the steps proposed by Stoller (2002).

Step 1: Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project

Beginning in February, right after the school started, the students and the instructor started working on the theme of the term project. The instructor was notified in advance by the office of the Department of English that the director of the Graduate Institute of Translation and Interpretation of University of Bath would come to Taiwan in March to interview Taiwanese applicants for the T&I program at Bath.

The instructor caught the chance and asked the director whether she was willing to give a speech on T&I. Luckily, she was pleasant to grant this favor and the students
were excited about this upcoming T&I seminar. Since these 13 students had been practicing interpreting for a long time, this subject matter was not considered to be too difficult to them.

**Step 2: Students and instructor determine the final outcome**

In this stage, according to Stoller (2002), students and the instructor consider the nature of the project, its objectives, and the most appropriate means to culminate the project. In this particular case, the class decided to make the T&I seminar an open house setting. The audience would evaluate the students’ performance of interpretation skills and conference organization.

**Step 3: Students and instructor structure the project**

After choosing the topic for the term project, the students teamed up to structure the whole conference. Some were logistics directors and some coordinating directors. Everyone was in charge of a peculiar task. The idea was to establish a cooperative and working and learning context. In the mean time, the instructor would give suggestions if there were any problems or difficulties in the process of structuring the conference.

**Step 4: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of information gathering**

At this point, the instructor did the best to teach the students those much desired interpreting skills and shared with them what might happen when interpreting in a real setting and how to work with their own booth partner. The students also did their best to do some background research related to the topic.

**Step 5: Students gather information**

It was very much like step 4. The students divided themselves into different groups to collect information that would be useful in assisting their interpreting. As known to everyone, a professional interpreter would do thorough background research to ensure his/her understanding of the subject matter. This issue was especially
mentioned to all of the students.

**Step 6: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling and analyzing data.**

After collecting all necessary information, the students used the materials to practice in class as rehearsing the project. The instructor would give feedback to each and every student.

**Step 7: Students compile and analyze information.**

The students met outside the classroom to practice in their own free time. When facing a problem, these students would make a phone call to one another to solve the problem by themselves. It was also gratifying to see the students work not only as a team but also as a family. Once the students found the previously collected information as not sufficient, they started compiling the information again.

**Step 8: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of presentation of the final product.**

As time was pressing, more rehearsals were carried out both in and out of class. All students and the instructor went through the agenda of the mock conference time and again to make sure that each link of the project was carefully planned and connected. The students needed to know when to change their roles without alerting the audience. It was planned before the open house performance that each student would have a chance to interpret in the booth so that the individual’s interpreting skills could be evaluated and assessed by the audience.

**Step 9: Students present final product**

After all the hard work, the students were finally ready to present the final outcome of their project. They set up the meeting agenda by themselves (see Appendix 1). Each student had the chance to interpret in the booth and deliver speeches on stage.
First, two students served as MC (master of ceremony) and moderator to introduce the audience the run down of the seminar and the invited speaker. The director from University of Bath gave out a speech on T&I learning in England while 6 students were doing their best with their booth-mates in three distinctive interpretation booths to provide simultaneous interpretation service.

For the second part, the other 6 students went into the booth to take over the interpretation service, and the instructor went on to the stage to give another speech of T&I learning in Taiwan. Some of the students were also asked to share their learning experiences with the audience.

Right after the panel discussion, there was a coming-up Q&A session. People from the audience were welcome to have interactions with the foreign speaker and the students.

The whole conference was videotaped for later class discussion.

**Step 10: Students evaluate the project.**

After the mock conference was finished, the students distributed a survey in a questionnaire form (see Appendix 2) to the audience and asked the audience to evaluate the term project. In addition, the students and the instructor had a thorough discussion in class, trying to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the students’ performance inclusive of the overall evaluation of the meeting.

**RESULTS**

The students gave very positive feedback to the term project. It turned out to be a great success, thanks to the students’ hard work, dedication and collaboration. Implementing an international mock conference as a project work in an interpretation course proved useful and effective. It provided the students with a chance to
demonstrate their learning. Also, term project served as a good way for the students to experience and realize that a good interpretation performance not only based on the individual’s hard work but team work as well.

In class discussion, these 13 students reported that holding a mock conference on their own gave them a very good chance to work with their classmates and experience the importance of team work. As a professional interpreter, one needs not only the ability to interpret but also the ability to work with others and the capability to cope with any unexpected trouble. According to the students, they could now fully understand the difficulties that they might confront in a real interpreting setting.

They described the project as a very worthy activity. By organizing the meeting themselves, they learned how to work with others. Some of the students even expressed that when they were asked in job interviews if they were capable of handling a meeting, they would reply with a confident YES.

Also, according to the evaluation from the live audience, they were highly satisfied with the students’ performance and the agenda of the conference. From some written comments, this project proved to be a good way to let the audience know more about this new arising profession, interpretation. Moreover, the audience revealed that they were quite amazed at the students’ ability in interpreting simultaneously and organizing a meeting.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In graduate programs, students are given mini mock conferences on a regular basis, with focus on advanced simultaneous interpretation training and a broadening knowledge. This idea proved useful as well at the undergraduate level with focus on practical training of interpreting, speaking, moderating, and meeting organization.

In a traditional interpretation class, students are used to passive learning: looking
up words in a dictionary, waiting to be called upon by the teacher, interpreting a paragraph cautiously, and waiting to be corrected. With so many things on students’ mind all the time, they most certainly would want to take a course in an effort efficient and less time-consuming manner. When the idea of term project was introduced at the beginning of the first semester, there was uneasiness and hesitancy in the air. However, as time went by, one could witness the transformation taking place among the students. In order to make the term project successful, these students did a great deal of volunteer work and spent so much time practicing. It was most gratifying to watch and to share the students’ joy in active learning and their presentation with such enthusiasm and confidence.

After the presentation, through the term project of an international mock conference, these students were no longer afraid of the pressure coming from interpreting and had a better understanding of what a real conference was. On the other hand, these students equipped themselves well with the ability to cope with difficulties when interpreting in a conference or meeting and the ability to turn things around. It also proved that better results would be brought about through students’ collaborative work.

To begin with its practicality, the students in their early twenties are capable of learning and organizing on their own with their energy and positive attitudes. When it comes to appropriateness, nothing can be more convincing and beneficial as to combine interpreting skills with an authentic interpreting setting.

It is suggested to interpretation instructors for undergraduate courses that it is an effective way to implement such a mock conference in their classes. Yang (2000) also suggested such activities are good for students to acquire interpreting skills. Certainly, since this present study is not in the position of having any generalizable inference, the authors would still like to recommend this useful form of instruction to teachers
out there. While this study has its limitations, it is hoped that it can serve as a basis for further research in finding out empirically whether or not the use of a term project can enhance students’ interpreting skills.

References


Appendix 1

英國國立巴斯大學口譯與筆譯課程講座

日期：2003年3月27日
時間：12:30～14:00
地點：綜合大樓國際會議廳
主題：Interpretation and translation
參考網站：www.indexedu.com.tw 或 University of Bath 的網站查詢

注意事項

1. 集合時間：3月27日(四)早上11:00國際會議廳演練（請同學務必配合到場）
2. 將口譯班同學分為口譯組和議事組，議事組配置如下

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Persons in Charge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 接待英國講員</td>
<td>Clarence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 發放耳機、接收器、回饋量表</td>
<td>Mickey、Diana、Julia、Kiara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 攝影與拍照</td>
<td>Sherry、Sunny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 口譯班代表（需準備各5分鐘的Presentation）</td>
<td>Karen、Jammy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 司儀 moderator</td>
<td>Quinn、Susan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 場控與器材</td>
<td>Ben、Peggy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. 每一位學生都必須擔當 Interpreter 的角色，現場進行同步口譯。

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Persons in Charge</th>
<th>Interpreters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12:15 ~ 12:30</td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>Mickey、Diana</td>
<td>Group A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30 ~ 12:35</td>
<td>Opening、Orientation</td>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>Julia、Kiara、</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:38 ~ 12:43</td>
<td>Welcoming Remarks</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Sunny、Clarence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:43 ~ 12:48</td>
<td>Class Presentation</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Susan、Peggy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:48 ~ 13:20</td>
<td>Bath University Presentation</td>
<td>Director from Bath</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:20 ~ 13:40</td>
<td>Q &amp; A session for audience</td>
<td>Susan 主持</td>
<td>Group B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:40 ~ 14:00</td>
<td>Q &amp; A session for classmates</td>
<td>Susan 主持</td>
<td>Mickey、Diana、</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:00 ~ 14:30</td>
<td>場地回復、清點耳機接收器</td>
<td>Susan 主持</td>
<td>Sherry、Karen、</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16
14:30 ~ 15:20 檢討與改進 Instructor 主持

每一位同學皆有自己的夥伴，將整場分為兩階段

(一) 12:10 ~ 13:05 Group A 負責上半場口譯、Group B 負責上半場場務
(二) 13:05 ~ 14:00 Group B 負責下半場口譯、Group A 負責下半場場務
(三) 夥伴分配如下

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Booth 1</td>
<td>Clarence</td>
<td>Karen、Jammy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booth 1</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>Sherry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booth 2</td>
<td>Julia、Kiara</td>
<td>Mickey、Diana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booth 3</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Quinn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booth 3</td>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>Ben</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(四) 在 13:05 ~ 14:00 時段內 Karen、Jammy、Sherry 同在一個 Booth 內
(五) 換手順序：3/24 11:00am 演練時告知

4、個人工作執掌表

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clarence</th>
<th>事前和講員溝通聯繫、盡量要到講稿並 e-mail 給大家 當天接待講員、口譯員</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mickey</td>
<td>發放耳機、發接收器、回饋表  借 70 副耳機 (3/24(一)通知 Karen 助教) 當天借耳機、機接收器、口譯員</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>收耳機、接收器、回饋量表  歸還耳機、接收器、口譯員</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>拍照與攝影  向系辦借還攝影器材、口譯員</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiara</td>
<td>一人準備五分鐘東吳英文口譯班上課內容(一中一英、或是兩人皆英) 3 月 24 日(一)中午 12:00 前將講稿寄給老師 3 月 26 日(三)下午 3:00 ~ 3:30 與老師約在系辦 Rehearsal (有問題請 Call Ben) 口譯員</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>開場、介紹老師、與會貴賓、以及口譯班同學、講解耳機使用方式、請 Karen、Jammy、Director 發言</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>閉幕、主持 10 分鐘 Q&amp;A、提醒歸還耳機和回饋量表、提醒大家期未成果展時間 口譯員</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>借還電腦、製作議程 ppt 操作燈光音響設備 買錄音帶（錄 Director 的內容） 口譯員</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Peggy      |                                                                          |
Appendix 2

英國國立巴斯大學口譯與筆譯課程講座
T&I Seminar, University of Bath

• 謝謝您來參加這次會議，為使下次會議籌辦更順利，請幫助我們完成下列問卷。(1 是最差，5 是最好。請勾選)
Thank you for your presence in this conference. To hold a better conference in the future, please help us with the following questions.
(1-worst, 5-best. Please check.)

1. 會議是否準時進行 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
if we start on time

2. 會議進行流暢度 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
the flow of the conference

3. 會 議 主 題 引 起 您 的 興 趣 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
The topic of this conference interests you.

4. 接收器收訊良好程度 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
the sound quality of headsets

5. 同步口譯員表現（翻譯講者） [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
the evaluation of simultaneous interpretation (Interpretation Service for the speaker)

6. 同步口譯員表現（Q&A Section） [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
the evaluation of simultaneous interpretation (Q&A Section)

7. 會 議 整 體 表 現 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
your overall evaluation of the meeting

8. 主持人和與會者之間的互動 [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5
the interaction between the MCs and participants
9. the interaction between the speakers and participants

10. What did you learn from today’s meeting?

11. In today’s meeting, which part is your favorite?

12. What is your suggestion for today’s meeting?

13. Please give us advice on the topic that you are interested in.