Assessment scales for evaluation of students' interpreting skills

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Abstract

The paper focuses on describing the methodology of an experiment, conducted within the research directed at the development of interpreting skills[1]. The aim of the research is to create an experimental syllabus of a course of introduction to interpreting, which focuses on the development of interpreting skills prior to consecutive interpreting; and to test and evaluate its effectiveness. For this reason, an experiment was conducted, which measures interpreting skills of students at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The exact, step-by-step methodology of the assessment is the key contribution of this paper which might prove to be useful for other interpreter trainers. The paper therefore also introduces the preliminary results of the experiment which was evaluated according to this methodology and proved that the syllabus was in fact effective in developing interpreting skills.

Introduction

How can interpreter trainers prepare students for consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, and how can they be sure if the chosen teaching methods serve the intended purpose? These two questions were the main motivators of this research, which focuses on creating a syllabus that would improve the interpreting skills of students prior to courses of consecutive interpreting. For the syllabus to have a scientific back-up, an experimental research was conducted, in which the interpreting skills of students were evaluated at the beginning and the end of the semester to determine whether any improvement could be detected.

The focus of this article is the design of the methodology of the research, more specifically the methodology of the assessment of interpreting skills. First, the context of interpreter training in Slovakia will be explained. Then, the research project itself will be introduced in more detail. The most important section will be focused on the methodology of the assessment. At the end, preliminary results of the experiment and the next steps planned within the research scope will be mentioned, as the research prospects had to be adapted due to the switch to remote learning caused by the pandemic of COVID-19.

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[1] This paper is a part of a PhD. research project aimed at developing interpreting skills. The dissertation under the title Identification of Key Skills for Interpreting Studies and Their Development in the Teaching Process is to be published in the early 2021.

The experiment, which will be explained within the article, already shows promising results. If the research project proves to bear fruit in development of interpreting skills and preparing students for consecutive interpreters, the author hopes that the methodology could be useful for those researchers who would like to replicate the experiment.

1 Interpreter training in Slovakia

The research is set in the context of interpreter training in Slovakia; and several regional specifics shall be taken into consideration. Therefore, the context of interpreter training in Slovakia will be introduced first.

As of the academic year 2019/2020, the study programme of translation and interpreting has been replaced by a more general programme "philology". This study programme incorporates previous programmes such as translation and interpreting, linguistics, and literature. The details of its organization can be found online; as well as a description of all the requirements and specifications of the study programme[2]. According to the description, a graduate of the bachelor level of studies should have "mastered the processes, skills and strategies of translation and interpreting and use them in practice to mediate basic communication"[2]. In the academic year 2020/2021, there are five universities offering the study programmes of translation and interpreting (Comenius University in Bratislava, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice and University of Prešov. The universities offer this study programme in a wide variety of languages. This article will focus on the study programmes on the bachelor level.

However, at the time of designing the syllabus (academic year 2018/2019), the organisation of translation and interpreting studies was different, and the syllabus was mostly designed to reflect the situation at the time. Translation and interpreting were joined to form one study programme. The details of the organisation of the study programme are described in Šveda (2016). Among "practical skills", the description states that the graduate should be able to "translate and interpret on a professional level" already on the bachelor level. Therefore, the need for interpreter training was present during the first three years of the studies. This was also confirmed in the syllabi of the study programmes at the individual universities, as all five of them offered (and still offer) interpreting training (be it introductory or consecutive interpreting training) already at the bachelor level. Although the detailed description of the skills is not present in the current description for the study programme of philology, it can still serve as an inspiration in the present.

The contents of the study programmes of philology (more specifically of study programmes that include English) are analysed by Šveda and

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[2]   https://www.portalvs.sk/en/studijne-odbory/zobrazit/filologia#details-contents.

Djovčoš (2018). According to their analysis, out of the 5 universities, one only offers consecutive interpreting courses and the remaining three offer both introductory and consecutive interpreting courses (Djovčoš and Šveda 2018, 127). This follows the model set by Seleskovitch and Lederer, according to which consecutive interpreting should be taught before simultaneous, which comes later, usually at graduate (master) level (Seleskovitch and Lederer 1995, In: Šveda 2016). At the same time, more than a half of the mentioned study programmes follow the recommendation of Djovčoš and Šveda, according to whom "in order for the course [of consecutive interpreting] to be focused solely on practical aspects and techniques of consecutive interpreting, it would be appropriate if it was preceded by an at least one-semester long introductory course to interpreting" (Djovčoš and Šveda 2018, 139).

It is therefore established that such introductory course is necessary in the context of Slovak universities and the study programmes that include interpreting. The first publication that at least partially covered the area of interpreter training in Slovakia also states that interpreter training should be divided into two parts: "preparatory and main part" (Keníž 1980, 83). As it can be seen above, many universities already have such a course. However, the contents and syllabi of the said courses are not freely available and therefore each interpreting trainer, charged with the task of teaching the said introductory course, must set out on a way of creating a syllabus on their own.

At the Comenius University, the materials provided for a preparation of such programme were found to be insufficient by both students and interpreter trainers, and at the university, a systematic approach, and a complete syllabus for this course were virtually non-existent. However, seeing the importance of the introductory course, the development of creating a syllabus for this subject became the priority of the research.

If the research were to contribute to the context of interpreter training in Slovakia and hopefully even improve it, the decision was made to make the syllabus, once completed, freely accessible to all interpreter trainers. The goal is to make the syllabus flexible and adjustable for the needs of individual students, but at the same time keep a fixed structure of exercises aimed at the development of individual interpreting skills.

A major advantage of this syllabus will be the fact that its effectiveness will be validated by the experiment. If the syllabus proves to bring the desired results and succeeds in measurably developing interpreting skills, it is hoped that it would become an attractive option for interpreter trainers from other Slovak universities, as well. To verify the effectiveness, a decision has been made to assess the skills of students at the beginning and at the end of the course. If significant improvement is found, the syllabus would be evaluated as effective in fulfilling its purpose and recommended for the use for other interpreter trainers.

1.1 Introduction to Interpreting from English and the syllabus

The course which leads students through the introductory phases of interpreting at the Comenius University is called Introduction to Interpreting from English and is a compulsory course for second-year students of the study programme of philology in the fourth semester of their bachelor studies. According to Djovčoš and Šveda, the course should be aimed at "basic analysis of an oral speech in foreign language, short-term memory, hierarchization of heard information, logical and structural analysis of the text and the basics of public speaking" (2018, 139). The university also provides a "course description", which states the following aims for the course: "The course is focused on the development of skills and abilities necessary for consecutive interpreting, such as: text analysis, hierarchization of information in text, short-term memory, basics of public speaking"[3], which is in accordance with the quote above. Therefore, the syllabus needed to be constructed in a way that would meet the stated conditions.

According to Keníž, the preparatory part of interpreter training should focus on "practice of individual interpreting processes separately, which will later be merged into one fluent process" (1980, 83). Therefore, the syllabus also aims to practice individual processes, as well as individual skills separately, and only as the semester progresses, merges them together to prepare the students for the transition to consecutive interpreting.

The exercises used in the syllabus are a combination of tried and tested introductory exercises from various interpreter trainers and their publications (see Gile 2009, Gillies 2013, Šveda 2014, Melicherčíková 2012 etc.), exercises that were inspired by colleagues or other interpreter trainers, as well as novelty exercises created by the author of the research project. The difficulty of the texts and speeches used gradually increases. The ratio of exercises in Slovak and English starts in favour of Slovak at the beginning of the semester and leans towards the prevalence of English towards the end of the semester. Within the set structure of the syllabus, additional exercises can be added according to the needs of the students, once the teacher trainer identifies weak spots.

2   Introducing the research

As was already suggested in the previous section, the aim of the research is to prove the effectiveness of the syllabus by detecting the improvement of students' interpreting skills. For the experiment, five interpreting skills were chosen: **active listening and analysis, anticipation, memory, paraphrasing and public speaking**. The reason for the choice of these specific skills and also how they are defined in the context of this research are described in the article *Návrh modelu testovania*

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[3] https://ais2.uniba.sk/repo2/repository/default/ais/informacnelisty/2017-2018/FiF/SK/bpANSP.pdf.

tlmočníckych zručností (The design of the interpreting skills assessment) (Podlucká 2018), which was the first introduction of the research and provides a first, later improved draft of the research and experiment. The important fact to note is that the assessment strives to evaluate each of the skills separately. Of course, the skills are closely interconnected and cannot always be assessed on their own. However, significant effort was made to minimize the intervention of other skills into each exercise.

To detect improvement, the students were evaluated in the said skills at the beginning and at the end of the semester, e.g. before and after being subject to the experimental syllabus. The exact methodology of the assessment of the skills will be described in section 3. To prove that the improvement can be assigned to the experimental syllabus, a control group underwent the identical evaluation. The experimental group consisted of 14 students who took the course Introduction to Interpreting from English, following the experimental syllabus. The control group included 9 students who also took the course, but with a different interpreter trainer, following a different syllabus (one aimed at consecutive interpreting instead of preparatory exercises). To be able to determine whether the syllabus was successful in the development of the skills, the results of the two groups were compared.

3   Assessment scales – methodology of the experiment

The main aim of this article is to explain the methodology of the assessment of interpreting skills in detail. The assessment of skills was originally created solely for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the syllabus. However, the assessment might prove to be useful for other interpreter trainers in other contexts, as well as for replication of this experiment. It is therefore assumed that the article and the detail account of the methodology might be of use for interpreter trainers, who strive to strengthen and improve the interpreting skills of their students.

3.1   Methodology of the data collecting

The assessment took place in the interpreting laboratory. At the beginning of the assessment, the students were informed that the participation was voluntary and if they refused to take part, it would not affect their final grade from the seminar. They were then divided into smaller groups, so that each student could have an interpreting booth for himself/herself. Before the assessment itself, they were required to fill in a questionnaire with questions about their motivation to learn interpreting and interpret professionally in the future, about their previous experience with interpreting. Afterwards, they filled in a short self-evaluation survey and a questionnaire about knowledge and familiarity with certain topics. Later, they also evaluated each exercise and they rated their own performance. One of the exercises was performed in a written form (aimed at active listening and analysis) and remaining four exercises had oral form.

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The oral exercises were recorded, so that they could be evaluated later. The students were aware of the fact that they were being recorded and that the recordings would be used to evaluate their skills and used for the research.

The collected data from both groups were anonymized and each respondent received a random number. The data were then evaluated with the random assigned number, so that the evaluator would not be able to recognize which respondents belonged to the experimental and which belonged to the control group, and therefore the results would not be biased.

3.2 Methodology of the data evaluation

In this section, individual exercises of the assessment and the method in which they were evaluated will be described. The methodology of the data evaluation is a crucial step in the research and the author therefore believes that its detailed explanation will be useful for other interpreter trainers, as well.

3.1.1 Active listening and analysis

For the first exercise aimed at assessment of the skill active listening and analysis of the heard speech, a simple exercise was chosen, which, as the only exercise, was filled out on a paper by the students. The written form of the exercise was chosen due to the relative simplicity of assessment.

The exercise itself consisted of two parts: listening and answering. Firstly, the students listened to a short, carefully chosen speech. They were not allowed to write down any notes. After the speech, their task was to (a) write down the main idea of the text (i. e. main proposition) and (b) identify the four main arguments (i.e. propositions). Of course, the speech was written according to these requirements.

The total number of points that a student could score in this category was 10. To determine how many points an answer should receive, propositional analysis was used. The analysis is focused on the accuracy of the content (Ding 2017). The aim of the analysis is to „find out which information of the source text invariant was transferred into the target text by the interpreter"(Machová 2017, 55-56). The method of conducting the analysis was used as described in Machová (ibid.): the source text was written down into propositions. According to Ding, "a proposition is the smallest unit that can express a complete meaning, which can be in the form of a word, a phrase, a clause or a sentence" (Ding 2017, 19). Then, the target text was compared to the propositions and it was determined whether the answers of the students correspond to the flexible invariant of the source text.

For the assessment, one main proposition and four minor propositions were chosen. The points for the main proposition were awarded according to the following pointing system: 5 – perfect, 4 – almost perfect, 3 – adequate, 2 – inaccurate, 1 – very inaccurate, 0 – omitted. The points for

four minor propositions were awarded in the following way: 5 – perfect, no proposition is missing, 4 – very good, one proposition is slightly inaccurate, 3 – one proposition is missing or two or more are slightly inaccurate, 2 – two propositions are missing or more are inaccurate, 1 – three propositions are missing or more are very inaccurate, 0 – no proposition is correct or all are very inaccurate. The resulting number could be multiplied by 10 to receive a score on a scale of 0 to 100, which could be also expressed as a percentage, so that it could be compared to the results of other exercises.

3.1.2 Paraphrasing

The second exercise was done orally. It was again divided into two parts: listening and answering. At first, the students listened to a longer speech, approximately 3 to 5 minutes long. After the speech was over, the students were instructed to turn on their microphones and start paraphrasing the heard speech in the same language. The time to complete the exercise was not limited.

There were 10 categories in which points were awarded. The total number of points that could be awarded for this exercise was 50: 5 points in each category. The categories were divided into 3 groups. The pointing system was the same as in the first exercise: 5 – perfect, 4 – almost perfect, 3 – adequate, 2 – inaccurate, 1 – wrong/omitted.

The first group were semantic criteria. Among these were a) detecting the speaker's intention, b) completeness of the information, c) finishing sentences, d) coherence and cohesion. The second group of criteria were language criteria. There were three of them: e) grammatical and syntactical correctness, f) terminology and style, g) repeating, correcting mistakes, false starts. The last category were presentation criteria, namely h) fluency, i) hesitation sound and redundant words and lastly, j) voice management.

The resulting score was multiplied by 2 to receive a score which could be placed on a scale from 0 to 100, therefore comparable with results from other exercises.

3.1.3 Memory

This exercise was aimed at the "working" memory (Gile 2009). The students first listened to a short text, which consisted of three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. The purpose of the introduction and conclusion was to provide context. The body itself consisted of an alphabetical list of units (set in a context specified by the introduction and conclusion). The task of the students was to, after listening to the text, name as many units as they could remember.

The scoring of this task was straightforward – the students received 1 point for each correctly remembered unit. In the case of a small mistake, the student received half a point. The resulting score was divided by 23 (the total number of units) and multiplied by 100 to receive a score on a scale from 0 to 100. The final scores were rounded.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the assessment, the students were asked to indicate their knowledge, interest, and familiarity with several topics, one of them being the topic of the short text. This way, the link between previous knowledge of the subject and performance in memory exercise could be analysed and it could be determined whether the students who indicated higher familiarity or knowledge of the subject scored higher[4].

3.1.4 Anticipation

The fourth exercise focused on linguistic anticipation, defined by Daniel Gile as "knowledge of such rules, albeit unconscious, [that] helps reduce uncertainty and thus also reduces processing capacity requirements in speech comprehension" (Gile 2009, 173). This skill was tested on an oral close exercise (see Gerver et al 1984; Moser-Mercer 1985 or Lambert 1992).

The task was to listen to an incomplete speech. In a speech of about 2 minutes, five words were missing. The missing word was always announced by a beforehand-agreed sound. The students were required to say the missing word out loud simultaneously with the speech. They were being recorded for the whole duration of the speech.

In creating an assessment scale, inspiration was drawn from Pöchhacker's SynCloze test, where "two points were given for each completion, with one-point deductions for (1) grammar mistakes […]" (Pöchhacker 2013, 155). Furthermore, unlike Pöchhacker's latter deductions, one point was deducted for syntactical incorrectness, which, in the case of Slovak language, would mean either an incorrect choice of gender, case or verb tense. Also, the initial two points were only awarded if the word was semantically correct, as it was believed that awarding points to a word that did not semantically fit into the sentence might be appropriate for a SynCloze test, where the participants try to fill in as many options as possible, but would not be a good alternative for a cloze test where only one answer is accepted. Therefore, if the word was not semantically correct, it automatically received 0 points.

In total, there were 5 missing words. Each could be awarded a maximum of 2 points, which makes the maximum score for the exercise 10. Multiplied by 10, the number expressed as a percentage, which could again be compared to other results, was counted.

Furthermore, as the knowledge and familiarity with the topic of the anticipation exercise was also one of the topics which the students were asked to answer in the questionnaire, conclusions could also be drawn from the results: whether previous knowledge helps with the performance.

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[4] The results of this additional experiment have already been evaluated. The experiment proved a correlation between previous experience with the topic and positive attitude towards the topic, and the performance in an exercise aimed at working memory. The results of the experiment will be published in Prekladateľské listy 10, Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 2021.

However, for this exercise a topic with which most of the students would be acquainted was chosen.

3.1.5 Public speaking

The importance of public speaking for interpreting is indisputable, as "all the communication competences of the interpreter stem from the speech (rhetorical) competence" (Vertanová et al 2015, 57). The instructions for this exercise were quite simple. The students were told the topic of the speech. The topic was connected to the latest happenings and if the students followed the daily press (as they were repeatedly encouraged to), it should not have posed any problem for them. Their task was to, shortly after having heard the topic for the speak, fluently and coherently speak about the given topic for 60 seconds. They were encouraged to include an opening and ending, if they could manage to fit in into the relatively short time period. They were being recorded for the given 60 seconds. They were informed 10 seconds before the time ran out.

The recordings were assessed on an assessment scale similar to the one proposed for the paraphrasing exercise, but with minor changes. There were again 10 categories with maximum of 5 points awarded for each of them. The pointing system remained the same: 5 – perfect, 4 – almost perfect, 3 – adequate, 2 – inaccurate, 1 – wrong/omitted. The categories were again divided into three groups – semantic, language and presentation criteria.

The first category of semantic criteria included four sub-categories – a) topic of the speech (whether it was relevant to the given topic), b) content of the speech, c) coherence and cohesion and d) finishing sentences. The second category consisted of language criteria and had three sub-categories – e) grammatical correctness, f) terminology and style and g) repeating, correcting mistakes, false starts. The last category, presentation criteria, included h) fluency, i) hesitation sounds and redundant words and j) voice management.

The students were awarded maximum of 50 points. After multiplying the resulting score by 2, the final score was expressed as a percentage was comparable to other results.

4 Results of the experiment

Although the aim of this paper was to present the methodology of the experiment, it is also important to point out that the experiment was already successful in bearing preliminary results. The results of the first round of the assessment are described in more detail in the article *The assessment of the skills of students in introductory courses to interpreting* (Podlucká 2020). However, the author firmly believes that it is crucial for this paper to hint at the success of the research at least peripherally.

The written answers and recordings of the students were evaluated using the methods mentioned in previous sections. The resulting scores were then again divided into an experimental and control group, so that the results of the groups could be compared. The experiment aimed at comparing two sets of data: the data from the beginning and the end of the semester, and the data from the experimental and the control group. In the comparison of the data, two hypotheses were to be confirmed:

H1: The average score of the interpreting skills of the students from the experimental group at the end of the semester will be higher than the average score at the beginning of the semester, and therefore, significant improvement will be detected.
H2: "The students who received training according to the experimental syllabus would record […] significant improvement [more often] compared to students in the control group, who did not follow the experimental syllabus" (Podlucká 2020).

The results of the two groups, and their prospective improvement, were assessed using a paired t-test, which is a statistical method used for comparing two sets of data before and after an intervention (Morgan et al. 2004), such as learning with an experimental syllabus. The results of the paired t-test determined whether the improvement could be considered statistically significant. The results from both groups were then compared to evaluate which group recorded significant improvement more often.
In a simplified table, the results of the experiment are provided. A "+" stands for improvement, a "-" stands for lack of improvement.

	Experimental group	Control group
Active listening and analysis	+	+
Paraphrasing	-	-
Memory	+	-
Anticipation	+	-
Public speaking	+	-
+ together	**4**	**1**
- together	**1**	**4**

Table 1: Comparison of the results (Podlucká 2020)

The table shows that the experimental group recorded significant improvement in four of the five skills – all except paraphrasing. The control group, on the other hand, only recorded improvement in one skill, more specifically, in active listening and analysis.
It could therefore be concluded that the first hypothesis was partially confirmed to be true, as the students from the experimental group recorded significant improvement in almost all skills. The second hypothesis is fully confirmed by the fact that the experimental group recorded significant

improvement in four skills, compared to the control group which only recorded improvement in one skill, thus confirming that the improvement was recorded more often in the experimental group.

Those results prove that the syllabus was effective in improving the interpreting skills of the students. The effectiveness of the syllabus can therefore make it a great option for other interpreter trainers to consider in the introductory phases of interpreter training.

5 Future prospects of the research project

Originally, the research project was supposed to take place over the duration of two academic years, so that the data from the first year would either be supported or disproved by the data from the second year. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic in the second year of the experiment, the research could not be conducted in its original form. There were several reasons for this.

First, the assessment itself could not take place in the interpreting laboratory, in the identical setting to the first assessment. The first part, the "before" assessment, was conducted in the same way, which was unfortunately not possible for the second part of the assessment, as the building where the interpreting laboratory is was closed due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the university switched to distance learning, which also influenced the course Introduction to Interpreting from English. Moving to the sphere of distance learning, the syllabus also had to be adapted and the same syllabus from the year before could not be replicated in the same form. The lessons took place online via MS Teams in smaller groups for half of the original duration. Some exercises, which could not be performed during the lessons (either due to time constraints or physical limitations of distance learning) were either omitted or assigned as homework. The students therefore received less direct feedback and the interaction between students was very limited.

The second assessment therefore took place online, after the course was taught (for approximately 80%) online. The results of the assessment from the first and second year cannot be viewed as equal, as the teaching methods and assessment form were different. However, this presents a unique opportunity to compare the results of those two years and see whether a difference between the two appears. If the results prove to be different, they could point out the difference between regular, in-class learning and remote learning, and show which of these methods bear better results. If remote learning shows lower scores in interpreting skills, the syllabus of the remote learning would need to be adapted to better strengthen and practice the skills. If on-site learning records lower scores, the on-site syllabus would need to be improved using the techniques from remote learning. The research could in any case bring attention to comparison of the two methods to evaluate whether they are interchangeable in the view of the results they bring.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to introduce the research project, which focuses on creating, testing and verifying the effectiveness of a syllabus aimed at developing interpreting skills of students in the introductory phases of interpreter training, and to bring closer attention to the methodology of the interpreting skills' assessment. The paper thoroughly describes each step taken by the author of the research to evaluate the skills objectively and fairly. The methodology is a crucial part of the experiment and therefore the author believes that it deserves to be described closely, so that other researchers in the field might either draw inspiration from it or provide useful feedback.

The experimental syllabus and teaching methodology appear to be bringing the expected results. The students' interpreting skills have been proven to develop within the semester spent following the experimental syllabus, thus confirming its effectiveness. This will hopefully make the syllabus attractive for other interpreter trainers in Slovakia.

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