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WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE: HOW TO LAUNCH SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING TRAINING

Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk

Teaching simultaneous interpreting (SI) to beginners is often regarded as a daunting task. Having taught such courses for several years at the Institute of English, University of Silesia, many a time have I been approached by colleagues asking for some advice. With the growing number of students in our translation and interpreting (T&I) programme, these colleagues were required to start teaching such courses themselves, and I was somewhat surprised to see their reluctance, as, personally, I have always enjoyed initiating novices into the mysteries of the interpreting booth. Considering the limited format of this article, the main focus is on preliminary exercises which are generally considered the most useful by experienced interpreter trainers from a variety of T&I schools and which have proved enjoyable for our students. The discussion will necessarily be brief, but at many points the readers are referred to the bibliography, which can be followed in search of practical examples, more detailed argumentation in favour of or against each type of exercise, empirical research etc.

First, let me voice a complaint that our admittance procedures and curriculum are not ideally designed to provide for a successful launch of SI training. We are forced to accept candidates for our 5-year T&I programme exclusively on the basis of their high school results. The first 2 years account for intensive language training and philological education, and, although the students' linguistic progress is monitored through end-of-year practical English exams, no aptitude test is administered before the start of T&I classes at the beginning of the 3rd year. Consequently, we end up with student groups which are very heterogeneous in terms of their interpreting talent. Moreover, different types of T&I

classes — translation theory, written translation, consecutive interpreting (CI), SI — start all at once, which goes against the practice of most T&I schools (see e.g. NISKA, 2005). It is often strongly believed (SELESKOVITCH and LEDERER, 1989; DEJÉAN LE FÉAL, 1997) that SI should be preceded by a thorough grounding in CI. Many programmes include a preparatory phase with some written translation, liaison interpreting and sight translation classes (see e.g. GILE, 2005). At present, all this is not provided for in our curriculum, and, consequently, SI trainers need to make certain adjustments in their teaching methods.

Each October, we are faced again with a great responsibility. A group of 3rd year students make their first, generally enthusiastic, appearance in the interpreting lab. In the course of the next 6 semesters, we are supposed to teach them SI so that they reach the level required of professionals. This will not be an easy process, and it can also prove quite unpleasant for the students and, equally, the teacher if, at the very beginning, the students become discouraged or even scared of the task. At least 9 out of 10 beginners *will* immediately get discouraged if confronted, right at the start, with a typical, authentic conference text and are asked to try to interpret it in the simultaneous mode. So what can we offer instead of this “sink or swim” method?

Beginners are usually eager to get into the booth and start interpreting as soon as possible, preferably during the very first SI class. It is possible to grant this wish, demonstrate how SI works, and, at the same time, boost the students' confidence by showing them that they are able to interpret *successfully*. When entering the booth for the first time, the students actually do not need lengthy theoretical introductions. Of course, it is necessary to explain to them how the equipment works, but the only other theoretical component they get before they try their hand at actual SI is a short and general discussion on the nature of interpreting, much in the spirit of the deverbalization theory. At this stage, the students should just realize that neither SI nor CI is about transcoding words of the original message, but consists in analyzing the incoming message and re-counting it in the target language in the interpreter's own words. As emphasized by VIAGGIO (1992), beginners should not aim at completeness, but say only that which has been understood — in well-structured, finished target language sentences.

In order for complete beginners to be able to divide their attention between listening and production and still do a good job, they need to be confronted with an appropriate source language text which does not require much effort in terms of understanding and analysis. SELESKOVITCH and LEDERER (1989) suggest using popular fairy tales for this purpose, and I have settled on *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White*, in this order. All Polish students know these fairy tales from their childhood, so all they are supposed to do now is to listen to the story in English and, at the same time, tell it in Polish just monitoring if they are at the right stage in the plot. They do not need to worry about little de-

tails, such as the exact content of the Little Red Riding Hood's basket, but the story should be coherent, consistent with the original (no grandmothers swallowing up wolves!) and told in a natural language. As usually there are 2 students in a booth, the stories can be played twice so that each student gets to interpret a different part of the story each time. After only a few minutes of this exercise, practically all the students find themselves able to listen and talk at the same time. The exercise is highly enjoyable for them, although, at the same time, they realize that the texts they are working with are very different from real conference speeches. Once they have interpreted *Little Red Riding Hood* into Polish, I also let them have a try at interpreting it into English, although now I use a different, more sophisticated version of the same fairy tale (more details and some details vary, such as woodcutters vs. a hunter killing the wolf). Afterwards, the difficulty level is raised a bit higher when the students interpret *Snow White*, which is longer and usually not remembered as well as the first one.

This is what normally makes up the first 90-minute-long SI class. At the end the students are encouraged to do similar exercises at home, using improvised equipment (any player with earphones will do) and recordings of fairy tales or other easy texts, e.g. texts intended for listening comprehension at intermediate level. To provide for a more thorough background, they are also asked to read the chapter on SI from JONES (1998), which is a very appropriate, short introduction written from a practitioner's point of view in such a way that it can easily be understood even by outsiders. Useful theoretical concepts (such as GILE'S 1995 Effort Models and coping tactics) are introduced gradually during the first couple of SI classes, but in such a way as not to devote to them more than 15–20 minutes at a time.

The second SI class begins with a return to fairy tales, but now the students are asked to interpret a much less popular fairy tale, which is easy enough to understand, but not familiar to most listeners (I use the Grimm brothers' *Rumpelstiltskin*). After this warm-up, it is time to turn to more realistic interpreting assignments. The students will be confronted with some short authentic speeches which were actually interpreted at the time of their broadcast — but, for ease of understanding, these are related to very well known historic events from the not too distant past. The second criterion for choosing such texts is the presentation rate, which should be slow. I use, for example, President Bush's speech made on 11th September 2001, the British Queen's speech commemorating Diana after her death, and President Clinton's address to the nation in which he admits that, after all, he did have an affair with Monica Lewinsky. Everybody knows such events and has either heard the speeches or can easily predict what their content is. As the language is much more demanding than in the case of fairy tales, the students are allowed to listen to each text before trying to interpret it and to discuss potential problems they see, including vocabulary, al-

though it should repeatedly be stressed that SI is not about decoding individual words. Each text is interpreted twice or even three times according to the students' wishes, with the teacher's comments and a question time between subsequent renderings. Later in the course, the students also often interpret the same speech more than once, but they are encouraged to try to interpret it the first time they hear it. If the presentation rate of the original speech is fast, I record a slower version of the same speech, and the students are confronted first with my version and afterwards with the original.

VAN DAM (1989) discusses extensively the merits of working with the same speech over and over again; this type of exercise is also recommended by GILLIES (2004). If the speech used as the source text is downloaded from the internet, as is often the case nowadays, it is a good idea to simply give the students the URL and ask them to reinterpret the speech at home, preferably recording their rendering in order to listen to it critically afterwards.

Some exercises for beginners which do not consist in interpreting as such may also be used. Their primary goal at the initial stage of SI training is to teach speaking and listening at the same time. The best known of such exercises is probably shadowing, which also raises a lot of controversies among interpreter trainers. Shadowing is the repetition of the source text in the same language, which is supposed to facilitate simultaneous listening and speaking. Although advocated by many trainers (e.g. SCHWEDA NICHOLSON, 1990), shadowing is often criticized as teaching students mindless parroting and discouraging logical analysis of the speech (DEJÉAN LE FÉAL, 1997) and some empirical research shows that the skills which it fosters are not necessarily the same as required for SI (KURZ, 1992). As the students are likely to have heard about shadowing as a useful exercise for novice interpreters, I present it briefly and discuss the pros and cons, leaving them the choice whether to practice it at home or not. Even if not conducive to building up interpreting skills, shadowing in a foreign language may well perfect this language in terms of pronunciation, intonation etc.

Shadowing sometimes constitutes a basis for other pre-interpreting exercises, such as oral cloze (cf. GARIBI et al., 1990; VIAGGIO, 1991). Some words are deleted from the text and the students are required to supplement them as they shadow. This effectively promotes semantic analysis of the incoming message, thus doing away with the greatest disadvantage attributed to "pure" shadowing. Instead of deleting single words, it is also possible to stop a sentence in the middle and ask the students to supply a plausible and possibly neutral continuation (anticipation exercise as suggested by VAN DAM, 1989). Such exercises may be offered in the students' native language as well as in the foreign language, the former being, of course, considerably easier and therefore introduced earlier than the latter.

Paraphrasing (cf. DEJÉAN LE FÉAL, 1997) is another monolingual exercise bearing a close resemblance to simultaneous interpreting. The students listen to

a text in Polish and, at the same time, retell it in their own words in the same language. They are asked to depart from the form of the original as far as possible, employing synonyms, different sentence structures (e.g. active instead of passive voice) etc. This exercise undoubtedly forces the students to concentrate on the sense of the message and develops linguistic flexibility. The task is supposed to be easier than SI, as there is no need to switch from one language to another. However, some students experience considerable difficulties in discarding the form of the original, and, when practiced in a foreign language, this exercise was evaluated by them as more difficult than SI of the same text into their native language.

Answering a series of easy questions with no pauses between them (KURZ, 1992) can serve as an enjoyable warm-up exercise to be used at the beginning of an SI class. First, there is a series of yes/no questions (e.g. *Is the day longer in winter than in summer?*) which have to be answered with a full sentence (*No, the day is shorter/not longer in winter than in summer*). While giving an answer to one question, the students are already listening to the next one. The next step is a series of why questions (e.g. *Why do we have to feed our pets?*). The answers, starting with *because*, give the first reason that comes to the student's mind (*Because without food they would die*).

Another warm-up exercise which I employ is meant to train short-term memory. It needs to be preceded, however, with a reminder that true interpreting does not consist in decoding individual words. After this warning, the students are confronted with a string of disconnected words (e.g. *dog, cat, table...*) for which they are to provide target language counterparts. The difficulty lies in the fact that they are not allowed to give the translation directly after they hear the word in question. They have to wait until they have heard the next word. Referring to my example, they are not supposed to say anything when they hear *dog*, but to say '*pies*' when they have already heard *cat*, and to say '*kot*' when they have already heard *table*. The next stage is to make them always hold two items in their memory: they are only allowed to say '*pies*' when they have heard *table*.

It is also often suggested that other types of translation tasks, i.e. sight translation and CI, should be used as preparatory exercises for SI. In sight translation, the interpreter renders orally a written text, normally without being given a chance to familiarize himself or herself with it. The conditions resemble SI, while the time pressure is smaller and the input reception is visual rather than auditory. I often employ sight translation as a warm-up, giving the students a short written text introducing the topic of the oral text they are going to interpret next. For instance, when the class is primarily devoted to an interview with the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, the students start by translating at sight (in the same direction as the interpretation will be given or in the other direction) a biographical note on the interviewee and the actions for

which she was awarded the prize. Afterwards, there is some time for comments and questions related to the topic and to other issues, including vocabulary.

The use of CI may be a bit problematic, because the students attend separate classes in CI and therefore may feel it strange and unnecessary to employ this mode of interpreting in an SI class. Anyway, there are at least two good uses of CI. As suggested by DEJÉAN LE FÉAL (1997), a text intended for SI may first be rendered consecutively. Afterwards, the students interpret the same text in the simultaneous mode. At the initial stage of training they are allowed to use the notes they have made for the consecutive rendering, later on they perform without notes. As the learning process progresses, new fragments are added to the known text, and they become longer and longer in comparison with the previously interpreted fragments. VAN DAM (1989), on the other hand, advocates what she calls “distance exercise”, which is supposed to teach beginners to maintain a correct (not too short) ear-voice span allowing them good comprehension and preventing them from rendering the message word for word. In the first phase, the students interpret a text sentence by sentence, with gaps between sentences allowing them to complete the interpretation of each sentence before the next one begins. In the next phase, the gaps between sentences are reduced by half so that the interpretation of each sentence partly overlaps with listening to the next one. Finally, the gaps are removed and the students interpret fully in the simultaneous mode.

Various interpreter trainers also propose a range of “dual tasks”, which are meant to cultivate split attention. Unfortunately, some of these tasks seem to have too little in common with SI — e.g. “translating” number plates of passing cars while simultaneously counting cars in each colour (suggested by KORNAKOV, 2000). The exercise consisting in counting aloud backwards from a three-digit number while simultaneously listening to a story the comprehension of which is checked afterwards (DEJÉAN LE FÉAL, 1997) seems more appropriate, as it involves more verbal activity.

The students have to be reminded repeatedly that one 90-minute class per week is not sufficient to acquire the skills necessary for SI over one or two semesters and, therefore, they need a lot of self-training outside classes. They should be encouraged to do some of the types of exercises described above (paraphrasing, interpreting a known text) plus a number of other additional exercises which are designated for individual or group work (as described by GILLIES, 2004; NOLAN, 2005). The best way to ensure that the students do get enough practice outside classes is to set such exercises as regular homework assignments, which, however, has the drawback of a lot of time spent by the teacher on checking the recordings that are handed in.

Last but not least, a few words need to be said about the choice of source texts for initial interpreting exercises. Although fairy tales are an exception to this rule, I agree with numerous interpreter trainers (e.g. GILE, 2005) who are in

favour of using authentic material, intended for oral delivery and presented at events where it actually was or easily could have been interpreted. In the case of beginners, ideal texts are presented ad-lib at a slow (but not unnaturally slow) speaking rate and concern general topics which do not require learning specialist vocabulary first. The students get acquainted with typical, frequently interpreted genres such as an opening speech, a thank-you speech, a speech welcoming a foreign guest, a press conference etc. The source language is English, sometimes presented by non-native speakers with varying levels of linguistic competence, which reflects the present position of English as a conference language. Interpreting from Polish into English starts at a later stage (approximately at the beginning of the second semester) and I usually introduce it by using pairs of parallel texts in both the languages. First, the students interpret a text from English into Polish, and afterwards, a text on the same topic from Polish into English (e.g. independence day speeches delivered by the President of the US and by the President of Poland, respectively).

It is my hope that this experience-based and practice-oriented article, although short, throws some light on the first stage of SI training and offers a few useful ideas for interpreter trainers. I intend to return to the topic soon with a more in-depth study.

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