

A Setting-specific Analysis on Liaison Interpreters' Roles and Its Implications to Training

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Abstract: Liaison interpreting is a form of consecutive interpreting that takes place in dialogue situations, in which there are two or more parties speaking different languages, and the interpreter is physically present and interprets into both languages. This paper analysed three most common liaison interpreting settings (business dialogues, visits and tours, banquets and receptions) in local context from perspectives of setting-specific challenges and expectations in each setting, and summarizes the role of liaison interpreters as a “mediator”, which means the interpreter plays an active and flexible role to facilitate the communication. The paper then proposes that the liaison interpreting training should adopt a task-and-scenario-based approach, help students build communicative and cross-cultural competence and establish the awareness of professional ethics and the code of conduct through case analysis, discussion and debate.

Keywords: Liaison Interpreting; Interpreters; Roles; Training

1. Introduction

As China opens wider to the world, interactions with other countries and cultures on different levels are on the rise, creating an increasing demand for interpreters, especially liaison interpreters.

“Liaison interpreting” is a term used usually to distinguish from “conference interpreting”. As it lacks clear definition, researchers tend to describe its social and cultural functions in different settings such as business, legal, medical, educational, and tourism.^[1] It is a form of consecutive interpreting that usually takes place in dialogue—rather than conference—situations, in which there are two or more parties speaking different languages, and the interpreter is physically present and interprets exchanges between the parties. The interpreter interprets into both languages.^[2]

Given the wide-ranging variety of working environments and geographical distribution of this profession, liaison interpreting is given different labels.^[3] For example, ad hoc interpreting, public service interpreting, three-cornered interpreting, dialogue interpreting, contact interpreting or community interpreting.

According to role theory, role is defined as “a set of expectations society has of individuals in a given social position or status”.^[4] Since the 20th century, with the professionalization of interpreting activities, interpreters’ roles become an important part of interpreters’ code of conduct, ethics and norms. In interpreting studies, role is discussed with varying degrees of flexibility of social expectations.

Conventionally, in an interpreter-mediated event, interpreters are expected to be invisible “switching device” or “transmission belt”—that interpreters should be impartial and have zero intervention in communication.^[5] However, such views are increasingly challenged as more studies show that interpreters play roles beyond information conversion in the sense that they may act as “co-participants”, sometimes “cultural mediator” so to facilitate effective communication among people of different cultural backgrounds.^{[5] [6]}

Therefore, the interpreter’s active role fluctuates according to context and expectations.^[7] The notion of “context” is a multi-layered concept: it contains sociocultural layer (which puts the focus on interpreting in a given society), institutional layer (that sees interpreting in particular social institutions, within which more specific settings can be identified), and linguistic layer (which relates to the expressive resources used in communicative interaction).^[8]

As liaison interpreting is usually considered as a “simpler” form of interpreting as opposed to conference interpreting (in terms of form, not content), it is often regarded as a fundamental course in interpreting training, and the most possible practice and job opportunities that interpreting students may find. Accordingly, interpreting students should be familiar with all aspects of techniques and ethics and be aware of the difficulties in the profession. Therefore, the author believes that training liaison interpreter should focus not only on language transfer-re-

lated skills and knowledge, but also on the navigation among the different roles interpreters play, and the management of the clients' and/or service-users' expectations. In this article, liaison interpreters' roles are first discussed based on different "context", more specifically, the different settings within the context. Then, based on the discussion, the author proposes several suggestions to the training of liaison interpreters.

2. Liaison interpreters' roles in different settings

According to Smirnov,^[9] "liaison interpreting" is an umbrella term for "business liaison interpreting" and community (or "public service") interpreting, and liaison interpreters are quite often required in immigration, court and hospital settings. If put in a local context, liaison interpreters (especially student liaison interpreters) in most Chinese cities, is required mostly in cultural, tourism, educational and/or business environments, whereas less in court (legal), hospital (medical) and immigration situations.

2.1 An analysis of three liaison interpreting settings

In the following sections, the author is going to analyze three different communication settings from their respective challenges and expectations of clients and/or service users. The three settings are business dialogues, visits/tours and banquets/receptions, as these settings are most relevant to student interpreters practice, thus bear significance to liaison interpreting training.

2.1.1 Business dialogues

"Business dialogues" refer to meetings or negotiations conducted between two parties, each representing different interests. The purposes of such dialogues may vary from building partnerships, ironing out details of contracts, to resolving disputes and disagreements.

In this setting, apart from the usual challenges such as be familiar with relevant knowledge, jargon and other information of the parties represented in the meeting, interpreters also need to understand the "subtext" of the meeting, namely interests of parties, and expectations of the client. Also, the issue of "impartiality" should be noted as well. As the interpreter is usually hired by one of the business party but interprets both directions, the ethical principle of impartiality is sometimes under strain because, understanding both languages of negotiation, the interpreter is privy to much more information than either party.

The client's expectation of the meeting and of the interpreter is linked to the nature of the meeting. What is the expected result of the meeting? What kind of image does the client wish to build? What is the tone that should be set for the meeting? Understanding and be prepared for such issues are important and pertinent to the interpreter's role.

2.1.2 Visits and tours

Visits and tours are probably the most common liaison interpreting setting that can take place in cultural, educational, business and tourism situations. It may be tours and visits in/around factories, laboratories, office buildings, and scenic spots etc. Such setting usually involves multiple speakers, various types of information and different expectations of clients and/or service users.

Challenges specific to this setting may include:

1) diversified types of information. During one visit or tour, the information the interpreter receives may vary from professional and specific information (e.g. tour/scenic spots narration; onsite demonstration; operation of equipment in a factory; the design principle behind a clinical trial, etc.) to general and random information (e.g. taking on random questions that interpreters may not be familiar with; directions concerning itineraries, etc.). Besides, apart from verbal information, non-verbal information is more evident in such settings (e.g. hands-on demonstrations; gestures; visual inputs etc.).

2) Multiple speakers. During visits and tours, there are usually multiple speakers, whose public speaking skills and cross-cultural awareness may vary. Moreover, since communications may occur in different geographical places, interpreters are expected to not only interpret for speeches and demonstrations, but also discussions, impromptu questions and answers, even trivia conversations. Therefore, interpreters need to adaptive to different accents, styles and registers.

3) External interferences. Not all communications occur in a quiet and acoustically ideal conference room. During visits and tours, the interpreter may have to deal with different interferences, such as noise, temperature (outdoor environment), untimely interruption etc. Moreover, during visits/tours, it is unrealistic for interpreters to bring all their notes or materials prepared, and they also have to stand for most of the time, further challenging interpreter's performance.

In this setting, the client's and/or service-users' expectation of the interpreter usually goes beyond interpretation or translation. Sometimes the interpreter is expected to act as part of the organizing team, making sure the visits/tours proceed smoothly according to the schedule. Also, the interpreter is expected to be quick in response and flexible, and be prepared to last minute changes or adjustment, as are common in such setting.

2.1.3 Banquets and receptions

When one delegation from one country visits another, it is customary for the host to organize receptions to show hospitality. If it is a formal one, it usually starts with a short welcome speech or toast delivered by the host, then the banquet. During banquets, there might be casual conversations, and informal toasts.

Challenges specific to this setting may include:

1) External interferences. Receptions are usually hosted in big banquet halls, so there might be noises and disturbances from other people walking by. When delivering the short welcome speech, the host usually uses a microphone, but the acoustic effects in the hall may vary.

2) Varying topics of conversation. Apart from typical toast speeches, communications occur during a reception may range from national policies, arts and sciences to local customs, tourist attractions and customs, which may be challenging to the interpreter.

3) Table etiquette. Table etiquette has always been part of Chinese culture and customs, especially during formal receptions and banquets. Foreign guests may not always be well aware of Chinese table etiquette, especially drinking etiquette. Even though drinking is no longer a highlighted part during banquets, it is still customary to offer toasts to each other. Informing foreign guests of such etiquette may not exactly fall under the "interpretation" job description, but as the person who sits nearest foreign guests, interpreters can remind the guests of certain etiquette to facilitate communication.

As banquets and receptions are an important way to show hospitality, organizers expect interpreters convey the same level of hospitality and respect to foreign guests. Besides, interpreters are expected to be versatile, for example, inform the guests of certain customs or etiquette concerning cuisine, toasts, etc.

2.2 Liaison interpreters' roles and the challenges to training

Based on the analysis of the three most common liaison interpreting settings, it is believed that the interpreting process is built upon the interactions between the interpreter and the context, between information sender and receiver. Three levels of information interaction are involved: linguistic information, communication intention/expectation, and the relationship between interlocutors.^[10]

Therefore, liaison interpreters play a very dynamic, flexible and active role in the communication. The liaison interpreter's role can be summarized as a "mediator", which means the interpreter actively participates in the communication, and renders a translated version that can grasp the intention of the speaker and understandable to the listener. A very accurate metaphor is offered by Wadensjö, who compares the liaison interpreter to a "cook, who, striving to preserve taste, prepares goods to make them digestible to a particular consumer".^[11] Moreover, as the interpreter is playing a mediating role, he/she should conduct thorough preparation before the task, acquiring knowledge of the subject matter, as well as information concerning the purpose of the task, expectations, and backgrounds of the persons involved in the communication.

Therefore, liaison interpreters should be equipped not just with bi-lingual competence, but also bi-cultural competence, and are able to take active strategies (e.g. simplification, omission, ask for clarification, generalization, etc.) and be flexible and responsive to facilitate communication.

Currently, liaison interpreting course/training in most colleges or universities in China centers around interpreting cognitive processing theories, focusing on skills such as comprehension, memorization and information processing, and mostly are theme-based (for example, tourism and sightseeing, food and catering etc.). Language conversion skills and theme-based practice are indeed important, but such model ignores the impact of non-language factors on interpreting, and lacks awareness building of interpreters' roles.

3. Implications to liaison interpreting training

Liaison interpreting course is usually taught in the fourth semester in undergraduate programs, and as a fundamental course in inter-

preting training and interpreting professionalization, liaison interpreting training should focus not just on cognitive and language transfer skills, but also on cultural differences, non-verbal communication, coping techniques, ethics, and interpreters' roles. Therefore, the author proposes several suggestions to liaison interpreting training.

3.1 Task-based and scenario-based training

Since liaison interpreting is highly practical, and a liaison interpreter is usually evaluated not just by his/her interpreting or language skills, but also the cross-cultural knowledge, extra-linguistic knowledge as well as personal skills, therefore, liaison interpreting training should adopt a "learning by doing" model.

Instead of the conventional theme-and-skill-based training, a task-based and scenario-based approach could be adopted. Before each class session, the teacher can set a scenario and a specific task for students, while providing relevant background information for students to prepare, and ask students to assume different roles in such scenario and prepare accordingly. An example task is given here.

Step 1 (before class): scenario-setting

Scenario: a delegation from China Publishing Group is attending the New Delhi International Book Fair in India. The chairman of the book fair is welcoming the delegation at the airport and two sides will have a brief exchange in the VIP lounge at the airport.

Roles to be assumed: three students as members of the Chinese delegation, one as the chairman of the book fair, and one as the interpreter.

Information provided: background information about China Publishing Group and the New Delhi International Book Fair. Talking points provided to the "Chinese delegation" and the "chairman".

Roles of the Chinese delegation and the chairman are assigned before class, the interpreter is assigned randomly during class.

Step 2 (before class): preparation

For students assuming roles in the scenario, they should prepare their talking points based on given information and their own understanding of the role and the scenario; for other students, they are required to describe the task and list out the features and possible challenges of the scenario, and prepare accordingly.

Step 3 (in class): scenario simulation

The interpreter is assigned by the teacher. He/she will act as the liaison interpreter in the scenario while other students observe and take notes his/her performance.

Step 4 (in class): assessment and discussion

Both observing students and the teacher will provide their assessment of the interpreter's performance, and discuss the challenges of the scenario and the interpreter's role in the communication. For example, what is the tone of the communication? What are the expectations of the interlocutors? What is the interpreter's role in the communication? Did the interpreter adopt any strategies to mediate the communication? Observing students and the teacher will also discuss non-verbal elements of the interpreter, such as the standing/sitting position of the interpreter, his/her body language etc.

Step 5 (after class) task summary and preparation for the next task

Students are asked to summarize the task based on their pre-class work and in-class simulation and discussion.

3.2 Building communicative and cross-cultural competence

In addition to a profound and intimate knowledge of both languages of communication, liaison interpreters need to know the subject matter and to have extra-linguistic knowledge, that is, communicative and bicultural competence. According to Smirnov (1997), liaison and community interpreting are commonly viewed as forms of intercultural communication where the aim is human interaction.^[9] In liaison interpreting settings, it is the expectation that the interpreter plays a coordination and mediation role in the communication, thus more "visible" and "present" in the communication, assuming roles other than a "transmission belt".^[12] As an interlocutor, the interpreter should know (or learn) when to intervene, when to stop the flow of the talk in order to render a phrase into another language and when to render it from "a

culturally and socially established role, in specific cultural contexts”.^[13]

However, the ability of knowing “when” and “how” to intervene the communication, i.e. playing a more active role as a “mediator”, sets experienced liaison interpreter apart from less-experienced ones. Therefore, in liaison interpreting training, apart from language conversion and interpreting skills, students should also be trained to build communicative and cross-cultural competence.

Nevertheless, building such competence is far more difficult and time-consuming than training interpreting skills. Students should first be encouraged to think about the importance of such competence, ideally through real case analysis. For example, in the author’s class, the author would present real liaison interpreting case from her experience, and ask students to analyze and then propose their suggestions. For example, what if one of the interlocutors said things that are offensive to the other from a different culture? When to intervene if the interlocutor is talking for too long, forgetting the presence of the interpreter?

Students should also be trained specifically on the ability to do pre-interpreting preparation, not just on the knowledge level, but on communicative and cross-cultural level. Understanding the expectation of the interlocutors and/or clients and act accordingly is an important ability of liaison interpreters.

3.3 Establishing the awareness of professional ethics and the code of conduct

As liaison interpreting is the most likely form of interpreting students may take on, it is essential to help them establish the awareness to follow the code of conduct in terms of professionalism, confidentiality, integrity and reserve.

Such awareness could be built through case analysis, discussions and debates. Issues include but not limited to: assessing the job before taking it on; ways to guarantee the quality of interpreting (for example, how to ask for clarification or repetition; when and how to politely interrupt interlocutors etc.); ways to mediate the communication without taking the spotlight; how to maintain information confidentiality (e.g. what if a reporter asks the interpreter the content of the meeting; what if someone asks the interpreter if they can record the communication, etc.); how to politely reject tasks that are not interpreting-related or requirements that violate the code of conduct or simple out of your comfort zone (e.g. ask the interpreter to drink during reception/banquet; ask the interpreter to take them to out-of-itinerary places, etc.).

4. Conclusion

As a fundamental form of interpreting, liaison interpreting facilitates communication in the widest range of situations, from court, hospital, tourism to business context. Liaison interpreters are more “present” in the communication and usually play the role as the “mediator” that adopt different strategies to facilitate the communication. Moreover, liaison interpreters should be equipped with not only knowledge of both languages of communication, but also knowledge of the subject matter and extra linguistic knowledge. Therefore, the training of liaison interpreting should follow a practice-based and scenario-based approach, while incorporating case analysis, discussions and debates on cross-cultural competence. Furthermore, as liaison interpreting is the form of interpreting students or trainees may take on as jobs or practice, it is important to help them build the awareness of professional ethics and follow code of conduct. Nevertheless, a good liaison interpreter should hone his/her skills through both training and practice, and teachers/trainers should also continuously explore ways and methods to enhance students’ interpreting skills and cross-cultural competence.

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