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B free: Perceptions of Difficulty in Simultaneous Retour Interpreting

B libre: percepciones de dificultad en interpretación simultánea inversa

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ABSTRACT: The study of retour interpreting has evolved from the explanation of prescriptive viewpoints to a more empirical focus, and to the birth of a descriptive and emancipatory paradigm where traditional values and beliefs about interpreting from, and into, A and B are put to the test. Such changing values and beliefs affect ethical perspectives in the curriculum and also, at the classroom level, the motivational variables present in education. These motivational variables can be measured through testing student's perceptions of difficulty, interest, and usefulness. Empirical results show that retour interpreting is not perceived as more difficult than interpreting into A by student and volunteer participants, which may encourage the inclusion of retour interpreting as an integral part of the curriculum.

KEYWORDS: interpreter education; retour interpreting; ethics; difficulty; motivation.

RESUMEN: El estudio de la interpretación inversa ha sufrido una evolución, desde puntos de vista prescriptivos, a un enfoque más empírico y el nacimiento de un paradigma más descriptivo y emancipatorio, donde los valores y creencias tradicionales sobre la interpretación desde y hacia las lenguas A y B se ven cuestionados. Estos valores y creencias cambiantes afectan a las perspectivas éticas, a los planes de estudio y, en las aulas, a las variables motivacionales presentes en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. Dichas variables se pueden medir mediante la evaluación de las percepciones de dificultad, interés y utilidad. Así, los resultados empíricos muestran que los participantes no perciben la interpretación inversa como más difícil que la interpretación hacia la lengua materna, tanto en el caso de los estudiantes como de voluntarios. Estos resultados podrían alentar la inclusión de la interpretación inversa como parte integral de los planes de estudio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: didáctica de la interpretación; interpretación inversa; ética; dificultad; motivación.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons for the shift in the evolution of values and beliefs towards a more emancipatory perspective regarding retour interpreting and its teaching and learning is the fact that retour is essential for certain language combinations and settings (Pokorn and Južnič 2021). It is also crucial for the preservation of minority languages from a social justice perspective (Córdova-Hernández, Vásquez Jiménez, and Velasco García 2022).

These new ways of understanding how retour is conceived and studied have in turn affected interpreter education (Brander de la Iglesia and Opdenhoff 2014). In many schools, however, retour interpreting is still seen as elective, or considered as an optional subject for the elite, in the mistaken belief that only the very best can be trained to do retour, as elective subjects are often shorter than core subjects, and students are required to practice retour in a few brief sessions. Other schools have traditionally included retour as a core subject or have adopted it as a compulsory subject as they modernize (Brander de la Iglesia 2019).

In this paper, I will first contextualise the changing landscape of research into retour interpreting and its ethical implications. Then, as part of a larger study with the objective to improve educational practice by offering a deeper understanding of factors affecting motivational variables in students and volunteers (Brander de la Iglesia 2023), this paper focuses on the exploration of aspects pertaining perceived difficulty in simultaneous retour interpreting exercises in the language pair Spanish/English.

Specifically, we will be looking at whether students and volunteers perceive retour interpreting as more difficult than interpreting into their mother tongue. Are there differences between student and volunteer participants? Does the subject matter of the video change their perceived difficulty in retour interpreting? Is there a correlation between participants' perception of difficulty in retour and their perception of interest and usefulness of the exercise? And, lastly, does the language pair and the language combination matter in this instance?

2. THE SHIFT TOWARDS EMANCIPATORY RETOUR INTERPRETER EDUCATION

As Matthias Apfelthaler (2020) explains, the treatment of retour interpreting in the field of interpreting studies has taken on a more empirical angle in the last few years. In his summary of the more traditional scholarly works and the newest trends on directionality in interpreting, this author notes that the study of retour has evolved from comprising mostly descriptive contributions to a more emancipatory, less prescriptive approach.

Challenging outdated prescriptive beliefs is of essence in any field of study, albeit such beliefs may have been necessary and based on the reality of the time (AIIC 1979, 69). This may have perhaps been the case of the B-language level of many interpreters, which could have been perhaps insufficient to provide acceptable quality in retour (71).

Thus, it was said nearly fifty years ago to be preferable to do retour only as a linguistic exercise (Skuncke 1977).

Performing retour interpreting to a high standard does require a good level in the second language. That is why any empirical study on retour performance, on the product of retour interpreting or on the quality provided by interpreters into B should include an objective assessment of the language proficiency of the participants (for example, by means of external exams, or official academic studies where a pass grade means a specific level has been attained). It would be logical to assume that the language level of interpreters would have some effect in the quality of production in retour interpreting, at least up to a certain level of proficiency.

There has been sustained interest among scholars and teachers in finding empirical evidence with respect to traditional beliefs on the quality of retour, perhaps because of the opportunities retour may offer for future interpreters that join the market. Among key research looking into production quality in retour interpreting are the use of explicitation (Gumul 2017), linguistic expertise and lexical availability, together with the study of negative feelings such as stress or anxiety and the relationship of these factors with directionality (Rosiers et al. 2011, 64; Gumul 2021; Korpál 2021).

Other psychological research in interpreting may also give us clues to solve the issue of whether interpreting may sometimes create negative feelings, and why: it is perhaps the self-perception of the students, together with their feelings of attainment and self-efficacy, and only not their language level or their character traits, that may help students learn to control stress and anxiety (Jiménez Ivars et al. 2014; Liu 2021; Kyong-Jo and Hyang-Ok 2022).

If in the interpreting community the understanding is that retour is difficult, that students do not have the necessary linguistic level, and that the quality must therefore be insufficient, students' self-perception may be compromised and lead them to think they cannot possibly perform well, and therefore it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this scenario, any empirical evidence on the quality of student performance will show precisely what they themselves believe to be true.

If negative feelings such as stress, anxiety or perceived difficulty can be measured in interpreters or student participants, so can the positive feelings which compose the motivational equation in order to know if we are able to improve participants' self-motivation when performing retour. As part of a larger study (Brander de la Iglesia 2023), we compared the perceived difficulty when performing retour interpreting exercises to some of the positive factors affecting motivation (perceived interest and perceived usefulness of those retour interpreting exercises). We found that by choosing motivational didactic material the perception of difficulty could decrease regardless of directionality.

In this paper we will treat only the results pertaining specifically to the study of perceived difficulty when participants perform retour interpreting. As we will see below, some of the participants were students, and others were volunteer interpreters from a motivation-imbued context where retour interpreting does not have negative connotations, and has always been the norm.

3. OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND EXPECTED RESULTS

The objectives of the study pertaining perceptions of difficulty in students and volunteers are: firstly, to determine whether the participants' perceived difficulty varies as compared to interest perceived when interpreting in retour. Secondly, to determine whether perceived difficulty varies with perceived usefulness when interpreting in retour. Thirdly, to identify how ethical motivation affects participants' perceived difficulty in retour. Fourthly, to identify ways in which ethical motivation in students can be used to improve the learning process when interpreting into their B language. The objectives explained and the corresponding results are part of a larger study, where interpreting into the mother tongue, as well as other additional variables, were included (Brander de la Iglesia 2023). The empirical methodology used in the larger study is a mixed-methods approach: we triangulated by conforming an action-research spiral and focus groups, as well as the quantitative Likert-scale questionnaires and the qualitative feedback obtained from open-ended questions.

In this paper, we have chosen to focus solely on the empirical methodology used to obtain quantitative results from Likert-scale questionnaires measuring perceived difficulty, perceived usefulness and perceived interest, in a variety of retour interpreting exercises.

Research in other fields involving motivational variables in complex tasks such as matchstick riddles, or maths exercises (Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Jiang et al. 2020), together with our experience in the interpreting lab, allowed us to have a general idea as to what the expected results of our study may look like. We expected to find that the perception of interest and usefulness would increase as the perceived difficulty of the retour exercises decreased. In retour interpreting exercises, it was also expected that the subject matter of the exercises (the values and beliefs found in the speeches) would make a difference in the perception of difficulty of the participants.

Lastly, it was expected that there be a similar perception of difficulty of the students and that of the volunteer participants, although the latter could perhaps be more interested in the values and beliefs of the speeches used for certain retour exercises, together with the fact that volunteers may not be as aware of the supposed difficulty of retour interpreting as the students.

4. DESIGN, PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

First, we chose a specific instrument which operationalized the different motivational constructs we wanted to study (Eklöf 2021, 1302) in order to be able to gather empirical data, in practice, by working with the following variables: perceived interest, perceived usefulness and perceived difficulty. An adequate free, open questionnaire measuring those precise variables was selected (see Brander de la Iglesia 2023), as part of a larger mixed-methods study with a more complex design and different monitoring loops in an action research spiral, including periodical focus groups, etc. In the Likert-scale questionnaire, the questions on perception of difficulty are divided into perception of difficulty in content, presentation and expression.

The design of the day-to-day procedure was purposely simple, as it had to be repeated on a weekly basis in class, during nine academic years: the participants would perform an interpreting exercise (after adequate warmup), and then fill in a short questionnaire from their booths, answering Likert-scale questions about their perceptions of interest, usefulness and difficulty. The exercises chosen were initially 30 videos of speeches taken from different contexts, mostly institutional (for example, from the European Parliament) and Social-Forum related, classified in order of difficulty, in Spanish and English.

The participants were chosen mainly because of their language combinations, and due to the fact that they were being either taught by the researcher, or participating in a Social Forum as volunteers and so constituted the target group of the action research spiral designed. Thus, the purposeful sample for our study consisted of:

- a. Fourth-year simultaneous interpreting students, with Spanish and English as A or B language (that is, students who interpreted from and into A and B), as well as students about to finish an MSc in translation and interpreting, who had an equivalent interpreting level, at Heriot-Watt University (HW) during two academic years (2004-2006).
- b. Fourth-year simultaneous interpreting students, with Spanish and English as A or B language (that is, students who interpreted from and into A and B) at the University of Salamanca (USAL), from 2006 to 2014.
- c. Several groups of *ad-hoc* volunteers for Social Forums (Malmö 2008), and related events who also had similar language combinations.

After a nine-year phase of raw data gathering into a complex SPSS matrix, and the completion of several courses on statistics, the help of a professional statistician was enlisted in the form of a few tutorials to help interpret the data. The first matrix was trimmed (we took out videos we had not used every year; videos in French; a lone student who did not complete the degree that year, etc.), which resulted in a second matrix. In the end we retained 21 videos and 125 participants (312 columns, and 39000 entries) which allow us to present the following results.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

When evaluating their perceptions of interest, usefulness and difficulty, it seems participants did not seem to care whether they were interpreting into A or doing retour. Thus, retour interpreting was not perceived as more difficult by participants than interpreting into their mother tongue.

In the following tables we can observe how the pairwise comparison (between the groups of students and volunteers) do not bring any significant differences:

Perceived difficulty	Mean (SD)	F (stat.)	p-value	Result
1. Heriot-Watt (270)	3.22 ± .93	.60 ^{NS}	.547	Non significant
2. USAL (855)	3.15 .81			
3. ESF Malmö (162)	3.17 ± 1.03			

Table 1. Contrast test scoring: Perceived difficulty according to Context (group comparison), segment with Directionality: Retour

Group comparison		Post-hoc contrast test			
Group A	Group B	Mean diff.	T (stat.)	p-value	Result
1. Heriot-Watt	2. USAL	.07	1.10 ^{NS}	.516	Non significant
	3. ESF Malmö	.05	.53 ^{NS}	.857	Non significant
	3. ESF Malmö	.07	.28 ^{NS}	.958	Non significant

Table 2. Post-hoc contrast test table featuring Perceived difficulty according to Context (group comparison), segment with Directionality: Retour

^{NS} Non significant, † Approaching significance (p<.10), * Significant (p<.05), ** Highly significant (p<.01).

What did matter to the participants, and therefore shows in their answers on their perceptions of difficulty when interpreting each speech, was the topic or the context of the video (an institutional setting like the European parliament, or a Social Forum).

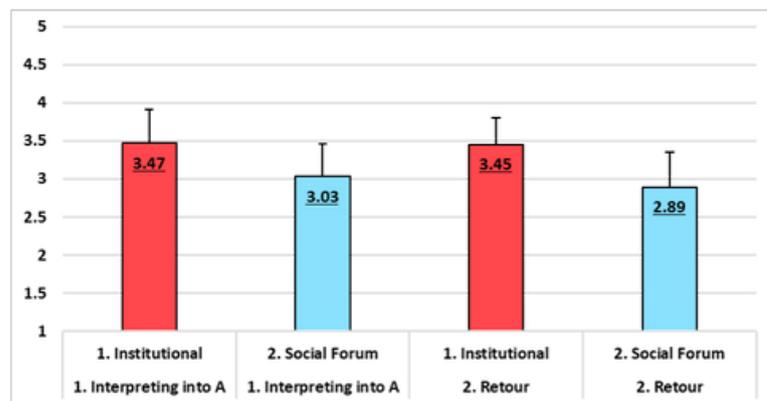


Figure 1. Confidence interval for Perceived difficulty according to Video context and Interpreting into A/B

It seems participants, whether students or volunteers, perceive it is more difficult to interpret institutional videos, whether into A or in retour.

The empirical data further demonstrates that there is a correlation, in performing retour interpreting, between perception of difficulty and perception of interest (as well as a correlation between perception of difficulty and perception of usefulness), and that this correlation is stronger when the participants are doing retour than when they are

interpreting into A. More interesting still: the correlation is even stronger when interpreting into English B, followed by interpreting into English A. This means that all participants (whether students or volunteers, regardless of whether their mother tongue was English or not, regardless of the subject matter of the exercise) found that interpreting from Spanish into English was less difficult.

Variables	Directionality	Bivariate	Value	Significance
Interest vs Difficulty	1. Interpr. into A Spanish	Spearman's Rho	-.122 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
		Kendall's Tau	-.143 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
	2. Interpr. into A English	Spearman's Rho	-.215 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
		Kendall's Tau	-.251 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
	2. Retour into Spanish	Spearman's Rho	-.141 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
		Kendall's Tau	-.164 * *(.000)	Highly Significant
2. Retour into English	Spearman's Rho	-.266 * *(.000)	Highly Significant	
	Kendall's Tau	-.309 * *(.000)	Highly Significant	

Table 3. Summary of nonparametric correlations. Variables: Interest vs Difficulty according to Directionality (Interpreting into A vs Retour) and Target language (into Spanish vs into English)

We can only speculate as to the reasons for this: perhaps the cognitive efforts when interpreting from Spanish into English (whether into their mother tongue or in retour) work in a specific way different to other language combinations. Why the language pairs would matter in this instance, and why they affect perceptions of difficulty in participants, merits further research.

6. CONCLUSION

The results demonstrate that retour is not perceived by participants as more difficult than interpreting into A in the language combination Spanish/English. Interpreting into English was perceived, in fact, as the less difficult language directionality to interpret into. More research into perceptions of difficulty and motivational variables is needed before attempting to answer some of the questions emanating from our results. Understanding the relationship between motivational variables and cognitive efforts would allow us to prevent the triggering of specific negative emotions when performing retour, and even to foster positive emotions in the classroom. It would also allow us to promote the normalization of retour interpreting in schools in the West.

The ethical and pedagogical implications of the normalization of retour interpreting can be very practical: from the use of liaison, bilateral or simultaneous retour interpreting in those schools or institutions where it is not yet present, to the inclusion of second languages other than English which are also necessary in the interpreting market, and which many interpreters need to add after their training into A, when retour is not present in the curriculum.

Retour interpreting is performed quite naturally, whether taught or not, in many settings throughout the world, as is the case of interpreting in languages spoken by

minorities and indigenous peoples who have a right to be heard and to understand proceedings in their own language. The emancipatory nature of retour interpreting can be depicted as a multifaceted liberation: from the constraints of conference interpreting in the West towards a more inclusive concept of interpreting as a public service for all peoples; from unidirectional classes into one's mother tongue to a connected interpreting lab where all accents are welcome.

Freeing retour would also mean further emancipation for research in interpreting: first, when scholars dispel prescriptive values and beliefs, they free our field of study from historical baggage, while improving the fostering of critical thought; second, the fact that the key to dispelling traditional values and beliefs about retour interpreting may lay in the management of self-efficacy and self-perception on the part of the interpreters is emancipatory in and of itself.

Soft skills such as self-efficacy are, furthermore, some of the main factors distinguishing the human interpreter from the machine in this new era of artificial intelligence, and fostering them in the interpreting class may give an edge of much needed empathy to our interpreting students (see, for example, Brander de la Iglesia 2023).

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