

On Conference Interpreting – A Complete Course/A
Trainer's Guide, by Robin Setton and Andrew Dawrant,
two volumes, Benjamins Translation Library, 2016.

A brief review on a well-founded, unabridged interpreting encyclopaedia
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Abstract

This is an attempt to point out the highlights of an ambitious and well crafted large work on the teaching of conference interpreting. Over two volumes, the authors touch on both the interests of CI students and on the guidance of teachers, considering the future of the discipline and the need to integrate theory into the teaching practice. Ideas for planning curricula or even the ongoing training of active interpreters are provided, and almost every type of professional environment is described for junior interpreters and teachers to take note of.

Key Words

Conference interpretation, training, education, interpreting curricula, theory of interpreting.

Abbreviations

CI: conference interpretation; A.C.C.= A Complete Course;
A.T.G.=A Trainer's Guide



Introduction

If I would start by describing these manuals recurring to informal language, I might say that this is quite a broad piece of work. Setton and Dawrant's course on conference interpreting covers most aspects and peculiarities of the trade,

and gives an insight to both students and trainers or even anyone who would like to broaden their perspective on this profession. As a conference interpreter myself and standing over a quarter of a century of professional experience, I have to say that it was plainly not possible for me to think of a scenario, problem, context or reference in the universe of interpretation I could think of that this work does not touch upon. The work is divided into two volumes which nevertheless allow independent reading: A Complete Course (470 pages) and A Trainer's Guide (650 pages); the *Course* may be situated beyond what regular courses in interpreting in printed format offer: it helps the student peep into the true circumstances in which professional interpreting takes place, and it gives ideas on how to access the market, which is the genuine context novices may find, etc. The *Trainer's Guide* could be considered as the ultimate *Bible* of what interpreter trainers and course planners would ever have to take into account when designing detailed study and work plans. No long ago, while preparing my PhD manuscript, I had to do a thorough review of the literature on conference interpreter's training, and I may state that the authors accurately identify what has been successful in this field and which are the current proposals for improvement. All that has been done considering the current trends in interpreter training theory. As the authors themselves assert, *On conference interpreting* is the only systematic work in the shape of a training manual which has appeared since the publication of Seleskovitch and Lederer's *Pédagogie raisonnée* (1989/2002) (A.T.G., ch. 3, p. 59).

The authors have tried not to allow for any leaks to appear when dealing with the various aspects of training. In the case of the *Course*, from the start they warn that their work is not oriented towards self-learning. Among various aspects, the volume is an effort to place students and teachers in each other's place, through the recreation of their respective environments: "Training must be student-focused and needs-based" (XXII, A.C.C.). Considering the current evolution of the profession which, on the one side, has become diversified and, on the other side, has lost part of the *mystery* which surrounded it (which translated into students partly losing their fear of entering the profession without sound preparation), one of the most relevant ideas is that of promoting professionalism. Such professionalism would in turn be made up of *craft*, *ethics* and *service provision*, all the more important when, in some markets, practitioners are confronted with old and new ethical dilemmas and with unfair competition. At all times does this work show a deep knowledge of the nature and practical, everyday reality of conference interpretation: for Setton and Dawrant, principles such as *neutrality*, *loyalty* and *fidelity* do not appear as clearly

defined nor are so easy to apply in practical terms as the words which stand for them (XXVII, A.C.C.), and they should be understood under the light of the diversity that professional practice adopts if it intends to preserve its ethical foundations.

One significant point which is made across several chapters is the lack of presence or influence of the theory of interpretation over the current pedagogical approaches and, in turn, on the curricula of conference interpreting courses. According to the authors, for those who might not have clear in mind the importance of theory in interpreter's education, they assert that, if theory is to nurture education in interpreting, an analytical approach, based on the training in complex cognitive abilities, would provide a more solid and scientifically-based platform.

Speaking on literature again, it is also of interest the review made on the literature in interpreting education. Stemming from it, these manuals point out that, rather than dividing interpreters' education into separate training compartments, an integrative method should be chosen. That would mean that students should practise different tasks taken as a whole; then, depending on the training stage, the emphasis would shift through the different components (p. 67, Fabiani et al, 1989; Gopher, 1989, 1992; De Groot, 2000). Another element of interest I share with the authors is that of helping students maintain their motivation, specially through resorting to incremental realism in the tasks developed, instead of fragmenting training into sub-skills. This would be further supported by scholars which opt for the training of complex skills without a significant linguistic or social-relational component: Students are more motivated if they can see the relevance of the exercises to the task (A.T.G., p. 68).

Let us now review some of the most relevant elements and chapters from both books from the perspective of someone who is both a conference interpreter and interpreter trainer.

A Complete Course

As it has already been said, this part of the work focuses on proposals for teachers and course planners, but also makes proposals for the ongoing education of active interpreters. It is the place to visit when there is the need to find a solid base on which to build a new step in the professional career or to

base interpreting courses at any level, from beginners' level to specialisation courses. Also, it might be of help for trainers who maybe have been away from the hands-on practice of the profession.

Chapter 9 is an attempt to bridge the gap between academic education and professional reality, specially thinking ahead on the first steps the junior interpreter must do in an unprotected environment such as the private, non-organizational market. A special emphasis is placed on teamwork, even if it might sound strange considering the competition which takes place among fellow students during the last course years in conference interpreting. It invokes the necessary step forward in terms of personal maturity students should make. Setton and Dawrant do not hesitate to show the student-reader the true circumstances of the most harsh environments that can be thought of, all of them with the genuine flavour of the experience gathered at real conferences. There are warnings which might be useful even for active, experienced interpreters, who might be falsely led to an unfounded security because of the language command achieved: it is the case of the use of casual language in English at conferences which does not take into account that English turned into a *lingua franca*, many of whose speakers cannot follow natural familiar registers which may be common either in the UK or the US. Mention is also made of the danger of not being empathic enough to adapt names of institutions instead of using acronyms which may not say anything to the final listener.

No environment is left for the reader to fantasize or imagine, especially when referring to the accumulation of difficult circumstances in the real interpreting environment: problems such as having to be confronted with a difficult accent, written material in the form of a handout, a series of slides to follow, issues regarding visibility and the room or having to adapt the voice to the tone of a newsreader for example, are accurately described (p. 321).

Almost all different mixtures of possible interpreting contexts are mentioned, and good care has been taken to accurately describe each and every one of these contexts, as well as to do so in an orderly manner, easy to follow by the novice interpreter. The effort made for future interpreters to place themselves in the right way to process certain situations seems to me an adequate method. Despite the necessary distance between what is in the minds of postgraduates and their maturity, and the actual reality of interpretation, the authors manage to dress their descriptions in a level of authenticity which may give the reader the impression of being exposed to the certainty of conference interpretation:

“... when the input is complex and in mixed format, the trick is to provide yourself with the kind of representation that will be most helpful and effective to produce the words you choose to convey the message” (p. 327).

Very complex concepts and processes are brilliantly summarized. It is worth highlighting the way in which the differences between seemingly close concepts such as *concision*, *compression*, *summarizing* and *abstraction*, are described, ending in a quote from Viaggio: “Only ten sentences out of a full speech may be little, but it is something; one thousand disconnected words is nothing” (1991).

A Trainer's Guide

This part of the two-volume manual involves a huge synthesis effort covering all prevailing theories on the training of conference interpreters, also being a well-founded description of the preferences the authors would establish among them. One should also praise the effort when giving reasons over any single point made, so the reader may also make personal choices:

As ordinary language users, we speak and listen casually and selectively in furtherance of our interests; as interpreters, we must listen and speak carefully and deliberately, even convincingly, to represent other people's interests (p. 77).

Chapter 2, *Teaching conference interpreting*, shows how the authors' detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the trade leads them to warn on the true reality of teaching, considering a series of phenomena which happened both in the past and the present times: “it is no longer enough to be a charismatic and experienced interpreter who tells a few anecdotes about the profession, reads out a text and points out everything that was wrong” (p. 11).

Chapter 3, *Curriculum and progression*, may be seen as a proposal for updating the traditional paradigm of interpreter education, which should tend towards looking for support in research and in the building of the trainer-student relationship. According to the text, up to a recent time theory was used just to confirm or support previous standing points and assumptions, rather than as a tool to effectively test and improve training.

Chapter 5, *Initiation to interpreting*, focuses on the actual process of starting an interpreting class, with specific examples of what can happen in the class, and

gives clues for the teacher to make most of moments in class when students become stuck. The "théorie du sens" or *Interpretive Theory of Translation* (ITI) is highlighted as a guiding principle at this stage, and not as something which could come later. The abilities of everyday communication are given a boost in order to develop them into professional tools for interpreting (p. 167).

Chapter 6, *Teaching consecutive interpreting*, points out the significance of being aware that students make progress at different paces, and that teaching materials must "always be adapted to perceived needs" (p. 212). Maybe this would be a positive element to stress before pedagogists and teaching guide designers, so influential once the Bologna plan has been fully implemented throughout Europe; such tools should never be thought of as stiff references tied to a rigid calendar. Fluctuations of student motivation and proficiency demand regular rotation of both contents and types of exercises.

Chapter 7, *Language, knowledge and working into B*, refers to the current evolution of the interpreting market in terms of possible language directions in interpreting, how some languages are entering the profession at the current time, and the consequences of all this. Language enhancement is at all times shown as a must, as well as something beneficial for the interpreter at any moment in their professional career. Elements such as self-monitoring through listening to their own recordings are also pointed out as elements yielding positive results.

Chapter 11, *Testing and certification*, is a descriptive chapter which refers to the two kinds of tests the interpreter must traditionally go through both during their training period and in their attempts to find a job in international institutions which require certification of their own. Linked to this, reference is made to the difficulties in finding some kind of an official, social recognition of the trade: "

(...) conference interpreting is a ... niche profession and one that, unlike medicine or law, or even court or community interpreting, is not seen as having a significant bearing on the wellbeing of the public at large. As such, the state perceives no compelling interest in devoting resources to a certification system (p. 377).

Also, proposals are offered for reliable examination tests, as the validity of current exams is questioned: there are no collated studies regarding the reliability of current tests.

Chapter 12, *Theory and research in interpreter training*, is an attempt to dismantle traditional resistance towards the development of a theoretical corpus from the

field of interpreting itself, which would also taking into account the production of different levels of adaptation of theory to both students and trainers and researchers. Reference is made to the possible role of cognitive sciences to this respect, as it would be an interesting field from which concepts and ideas might emerge to feed conference interpretation theory.

Chapter 13, *Institutional issues*, is a proposal for the development of curricula in conference interpretation, taking into account the current and possible evolution of this discipline. It is noted how the laying out of formal, postgraduate education in interpreting has been essential for the profession to acquire recognition (p. 515). The authors manifest that they have the impression that an old-fashioned perspective on training still exists: for some, the set of skills needed to become an interpreter is some kind of gift with which true interpreters are born or, on the other hand, only initiative and specialization are needed for someone to become an interpreter (visions which are for me utterly harmful). In my opinion, the current availability of formal courses based on solid curricula renders unacceptable the idea that an interpreter may access the profession through mere professional *landing* on the field or crash courses: the market should not be led to bear such professionals or points of view. Furthermore, referring to selection processes used in the past as models cannot be proposed as an all-case valid method. Examples such as the Nuremberg trials stand for exceptional cases, and some people forget that they were anyway covered by quality safeguarding mechanisms. Such mechanisms are no longer offered by international institutions counting on interpreting staff, or do it only in part; let alone the private market:

Self-teaching and in-house training alone would be hopelessly inadequate to meet the continuing, steady demand for those highly-skilled professionals from international organizations and private sector employers, neither of which seem willing or able to run even partial, let alone complete interpreter training courses, but rely on a supply of trained graduates from specialized schools (p. 516).

Also,

An interpreter training course has a responsibility to users of the service, and can only benefit from quality-driven employers and the profession (p. 517).

Chapter 14, *Lifelong and Teacher Training*, is an attempt to look into the future of the profession, into how professional reality may look like. After acknowledging the fact that there was always a bigger amount of active interpreters not counting on formal and academic education in interpreting

itself than that of specially trained interpreters, the authors make an adequate proposal for ongoing training as a way into the building of the profession: "reliable professionals with a full range of skills cannot be trained "from scratch" in a crash course" (p. 567). If one looks back into the history of interpreting, interpreters undergoing intensive training for specific events such as the Nuremberg trials, were never fresh, language studies postgraduates, but either mature students with vital experience in activities such as analysis, listening, translation, etc., or professionals with experience in other forms of interpretation. One of the most positive elements of this comprehensive work is that it allows interpreters of any proficiency level, even active interpreters willing to broaden their education by activating passive languages or shifting from consecutive to simultaneous interpretation, to find guidance at identifying their current position and choose the path to follow. This help goes as far as including guiding tables for interpreters to better structure the training that would best suit them depending on their situation. It must be warned that the detailed nature of the volumes demands a time-consuming search for specific information: no negative point should be made regarding neither the clarity nor the arrangement of the work, but the amount of information and the level of detail needs such an investment to be made.

Adequately enough, one of the problems mentioned regarding the profession is the scant availability of courses for interpreter trainers, and the lack of homogeneity that may be found in terms of the audience attending such courses: this would mean having to tailor such limited number of courses to people with very diverse interests and knowledge regarding the profession.

A positive element which could justify this chapter for itself is that it refers to something which is a common concern among many professionals: how is it possible to count on references on their performance, or how would it be possible to make improvements when approaching new fields of specialisation. Considering that most interpreters are used to working with a regular set of colleagues, for many of them it is difficult to test themselves or gain hints on their fulfilment of the job; the will of the interpreter to do assessment work of the job done in between shifts cannot be trusted as a reliable method of validation.

Chapter 15, *Conclusions and future prospects*, shows that the authors are brave enough in their conclusions so as to point towards possible future environments for conference interpretation, both under a positive and a negative light. Without committing themselves to stating fixed truths, they

nevertheless believe that "human interpreting may even blossom with globalization", but also that

as the pendulum swings back from multilateralism to a more bilateral, corporate and possibly conflicted world, we may see a profession more diversified (...) and a return to the historical norm of affiliated rather than neutral, independent interpreters (p. 591).

There is no evident fear when trying to provide their analysis with sound objectivity. Active interpreters may find some comfort in this depiction of what the future may look like, as Setton and Dawrant believe that machine interpretation will not replace interpreters in information exchanges full of content and nuances: they found it not in the lack of ingenuity on the parts of language researchers, but in the true nature of human language and communication: "we will survive at least as long as our profession involves persuasion or an interpersonal and relational component" (p. 593). They rather see the trend towards the globalisation of the English language as the killer of translation and interpreting as a better bet than machine translation or machine interpretation (p. 594).

Conclusion

Assessing such a comprehensive piece of academic work is not easy. The academic reader cannot help but feel a profound respect for the exactitude and close, real-life approach developed for writing these two manuals. Even then, I might be able to make some suggestions or cast a couple of ideas which could only stand as a humble polish to a masterwork. A little more emphasis could have been placed on the need for students to place their feet on the ground and avoid the arrogance that, once such hard work has been accomplished, some may feel after graduating from the few institutions which offer conference interpreting tuition. Once said that, the work is still aware of what is referred to as the dangers of *over* and *under* interpreting (p. 317).

In my specific case as an interpreter trainer, I may say that I feel content that there is at last a piece of literature which refers to real activities which can be done while in the classroom, and to the specific ways in which a teacher may help their students come out of potholes when it is difficult to specify which was the reason for them to stumble into transference troubles.

Another element I believe Setton and Dawrant will be happy to deal with in future publications in more detail is that of the training of interpreters for environments different to that of the traditional conference. The manuals do not anyway miss mentioning the broadening of the scope of the profession that is nowadays in progress. At least in the European interpreting context, local conference interpreting markets are too limited for teachers to merely focus on the teaching of classical interpreting techniques and environments, while there is growing demand for interpreters in the field of the provision of language services for expatriates in their contact with local administration, health and legal services, etc. If students are to enjoy a wider range of employment possibilities related to their interpreting training, teachers must take such possibilities into account. Also, conference interpreting subjects are compulsory in most Spanish universities, while there is usually a large group of students which are afraid of such subjects because of their limitations in terms of the use of oral language. Opening the scope would support the legitimate presence of interpreting subjects in the curriculum.

Once all the above has been said, it must be also duly asserted that both Setton and Dawrant perfectly know what they are referring to at any given point in their texts. Whichever the amount of information given on any specific aspect or issue, one always have the impression that it is neither randomly placed nor merely a token of what lies behind.

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