

## D-2. THE CONFERENCE INTERPRETING CURRICULUM AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPING 'ADAPTIVE EXPERTISE'

Rebecca Tipton

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, United Kingdom  
email: rebecca.tipton@manchester.ac.uk

This paper explores the subject of expertise in relation to conference interpreter training and reports on a preliminary study on the use of reflective practice as a pedagogical tool, specifically in the development of 'adaptive expertise' (following Moser-Mercer 2008). As a complex activity often conducted in high stakes environments of diplomatic and international relations and business, conference interpreter training entails a focus on expertise to an extent not commonly found in other areas of translation-related training. Positioning conference interpreters as autonomous arbiters of quality distinguishes them (although not in a hierarchical sense) from other agents of translation activity. Such positioning is promoted for example in the Quality Assurance Standards of the EMCI consortium<sup>a</sup> (2012), according to which 'the quality of the candidate's interpreting should be such that s/he can be recruited *immediately to work alongside accredited conference interpreters* in meetings in regional and international Organisations and on the private market' (emphasis added). While '[t] is understood that beginners are not normally assigned to the most technical or demanding meetings' (ibid), the EMCI Standards set out professional entry-level criteria that imply a mastery of *skill* particular to the field and a highly developed meta-cognitive *capacity* that allows the wider contexts of performance, among others, to be factored into development; 'expertise', then, is necessarily viewed as taking multiple forms.

Such multiplicity is evident in the work of Moser-Mercer (2008) on which this paper draws; she explores human performance theories and the extent to which they shape discussions on the nature and forms of expertise that are commensurate with the needs of the modern conference interpreting world. A distinction is made between 'routine expertise' (i.e. an ability to solve familiar problems) and 'adaptive expertise' (i.e. an ability to adapt to new situations and improve performance over an individual's career trajectory). Moser-Mercer also draws attention to the tendency for training programmes to focus on routine expertise, and observes that changes to the working environment of interpreters - in particular increased provision of technology-mediated interpreting activities - warrant the development of complementary forms of expertise. This is supported by several claims, for instance that 'skill acquisition is not coextensive with expertise' (Holyoak 1991: 312) and, further, that expertise is not solely the outcome of deliberate practice and good levels of motivation, although both are known to play a role (Ericsson 2002). Adaptive expertise is understood by Moser-Mercer (following Hatano and Inagaki 1986) as 'meta-cognitive' in the sense that adaptive experts are considered able to perform tasks efficiently *and* at a

higher level (2008: 8, emphasis added).

The development of adaptive expertise is explored by Moser-Mercer through an emphasis on the learning environment and in particular the potential of computer-based learning activities (individual and collaborative). The inclusion of self and peer assessment (or reflection) in the learning environment is described by Moser-Mercer as 'a mechanism to externalize [students'] meta-cognitive processes' (p. 14); however, there is scope to broaden her analysis of reflection in this training context and the rationale for its inclusion as a deliberate pedagogical approach.

The paradigm of reflective learning is well embedded in curricula across the HE sector, although is less commonly found in translator and interpreter training. Viewed by many as a means for 'dealing with complexities challenges and uncertainties inherent in professional practice' (Sumison and Fleet 1996: 121) and as an 'organising framework for professional preparation' (Boud and Walker 1998: 192), reflective practice nevertheless raises problems in relation to its promotion and measurement among others, and cannot therefore be invoked uncritically<sup>b</sup>.

Some scholars (e.g. Boud 2001, Moon 1999) highlight the importance of reflective practice for helping students to both understand their own learning processes and increase their *ownership* of learning. In the context of conference interpreting, it is perhaps understandable that students are likely (at least initially) to pay more attention to skill acquisition (and 'routine expertise') than the arguably less tangible meta-cognitive processes. In fact, as I argue in this paper, the ability to encourage development of the latter requires expert input or 'scaffolding' by teaching staff that has not been sufficiently recognised or even problematized within Interpreting Studies to date. The extent to which reflective practice can and does encourage greater ownership of all aspects of the learning process in conference interpreter training therefore is open to question.

Journal writing, which is a common tool of reflective practice, is promoted on the basis that learning necessarily entails connections between new and old knowledge, and that new learning stems from particular triggers or trouble spots; as such, it has echoes of core processes involved in interpreting, which should bring into relief the relationship between interpreting activity and the aims of reflective practice. Less evident perhaps is the connection between the development of meta-cognitive capacity mentioned earlier and reflective practice from the student's perspective. However, as Boud and Walker (1998) highlight, undue focus on isolated problems risks perpetuating the decontextualised approach to reflection on action that these authors and other

<sup>a</sup>The EMCI Consortium constitutes a network of higher education institutions delivering conference interpreting in the European Union.

<sup>b</sup>For example, the use of reflective practice as a summative form of assessment is open to debate but is beyond the scope of this paper

critics of Schön's (1983) early approach to reflective practice have identified, suggesting that a broader approach to reflection is warranted.

Moser-Mercer (2008: 9) asserts that the development of adaptive expertise depends on learning environments that foster meta-cognitive learning. Beyond the environment, greater consideration of the alignment between student learning and lecturer input is needed. In the last part of my paper I report on a preliminary study of reflective practice as developed on the conference interpreting programme at the University of Manchester. The use of reflective practice is incorporated into a module on professional development in which students focus on wider aspects of institutional life and start to apply their skills in a series of simulated multilingual conferences. The study aimed at evaluating the nature of preliminary guidance provided and student responses to it. In particular, it sought to shed light on the way in which students structure their approach to learning, take ownership of it and whether they placed more emphasis on routine as opposed to adaptive expertise despite being encouraged to focus on both. A small sample of 44 (500-word journal entries) was used in the analysis, and initial findings do indeed suggest that the meta-cognitive abilities associated with adaptive expertise are much less evident in the journal entries than reflection on routine expertise, some of the reasons for which will be explored in my paper.

### References

1. Boud, David (2001) 'Using Journal Writing to Enhance Reflective Practice', – *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 90: 9-17.
2. Boud, David and David Walker (1998) 'Promoting Reflection in Professional Courses: The Challenge of Context' – *Studies in Higher Education* Vol 23(2): 191-206.
3. Ericsson, K. Anders (2002) Attaining Excellence through Deliberate Practice: Insights from the Study of Expert Performance. – In: Michael Ferrari (ed.) *The Pursuit of Excellence through Education* – Mahwah, NJ.: LEA, 21-55.
4. Hatano, Giyoo and Kayoko Inagaki (1986) Two Courses of Expertise. – In: Harold Stevenson, Hiroshi Azuma and Kenji Hakuta (eds) *Child Development and Education in Japan* – New York: W.H. Freeman, 263-72.
5. Holyoak, J. Keith (1991) Symbolic connectionism: Toward third-generation theories of expertise. – In: A. Ericsson & J. Smith (Eds.), *Toward a general theory of expertise: Prospects and limits.* – Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 301-355.
6. Moon, Jennifer (1999) *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development.* – London: Kogan Page.
7. Moser-Mercer, Barbara (2008) Skill Acquisition in Interpreting: A Human Performance Perspective – *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* Vol 1(2): 1-28.
8. Schön, Donald (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* – New York: Basic Books.
9. Sumison, Jennifer and Alma Fleet (1996) Reflection: can we assess it? Should we assess it? – *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* Vol. 21(2): 121-30.