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Challenges in Interpreting Studies: Students' Perspective and Views

Marina Pappa

Abstract

Interpreting is a complex task that involves linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Interpreting is a skill that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. Interpreters must not only translate words but also capture the speaker's intent, tone, and emotions while maintaining accuracy and neutrality. In this paper, the challenges that novice interpreters encounter, particularly in political discourse, academic and professional training, in the framework of simultaneous interpretation, are explored. A questionnaire was administered to novice interpreters, and their views concerning their expectations were recorded. In theory and practice, there have been multiple approaches in order to enhance novice interpreters' training according to the findings and conclusions of extensive research in psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimensions of interpreting. In this study, we shed light on challenges in interpreting studies as perceived by students and graduates.

Keywords: Interpreting, challenges, psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimension of interpreting.

Introduction

Interpreting is a complex task that involves linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Interpreters must not only translate words but also capture the speaker's intent, tone, and emotions while maintaining accuracy and neutrality. We explore the challenges novice interpreters encounter, particularly in political discourse, academic and professional training, in the framework of simultaneous interpretation. A questionnaire was administered to novice interpreters, and their views concerning their expectations were recorded.

In theory and practice, there have been multiple approaches in order to enhance novice interpreters' training according to the findings and conclusions of extensive research in psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimensions of interpreting.

Weissmann (2012) considers that all forms of linguistic teaching contribute to the training and refinement of students' linguistic competences. The main issue is how to calibrate translation and interpreting training in order to meet the needs of the students.

Chen En Ho (2021) resumes the elements that are essential for effective interpreting preparation. "Developing situational awareness is essential, which entails the sensitivity to all contributing factors in a particular setting or context to the success of the task. Secondly, training in both languages is equally important, even for postgraduate-level programs, as it is the foundation of successful application of interpreting skills or strategies."

Franz Pockhacker (2023) insists on the contribution of Ingrid Kurz to interpreting studies, by insisting on her research on skills acquisition and expertise in cognitive psychology and studies on interpreters' personality.

The multidimensional dimension of interpreting is handled by Bendazzoli (2020). The concern to improve interpreters' performance is handled through materials, noting that there is a need to have multimedia and multimodal material, in order to have the springboard for further progress in the study of interpreting beyond the textual level.

In this study, we shed light on challenges in interpreting studies as perceived by students and graduates. Since students perceive the complexity of the interpreting skills, it is interesting to investigate their perceptions when dealing with political discourse and when calibrating their learning path in interpreting studies.

Research often registers the elements that add complexity and difficulties in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting and suggests pedagogical approaches to improve performance. Meanwhile, the perception of students in their initial approaches is important in order to have an outline of self-assessment, expectations, and weaknesses.

Interpreting is a skill that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. Political discourse, academic training, and simultaneous interpretation, especially in European institutions, present unique challenges, requiring specialized strategies to ensure accuracy and fidelity. This paper examines these challenges and discusses available methods to enhance conference interpreter training programs, integrating insights from a questionnaire conducted among novice interpreters.

Political discourse is inherently persuasive and strategic, having rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphors, and emotional appeals. Interpreters must handle these elements while ensuring fidelity to the original speech. For instance, in political discourse at the European Parliament, references to historical events and current international issues require careful rendering to preserve both emotional impact and diplomatic neutrality.

Interpreters must convey the speaker's emotions without internalizing them, maintaining professional detachment while reflecting the appropriate tone. This balance is particularly challenging in speeches addressing sensitive topics such as war, discrimination, or humanitarian crises.

Political speeches often involve rapid delivery, shifts in pitch, and pauses that add rhetorical elements. The challenge for interpreters is to match these nuances while ensuring coherence in the target language. To manage these challenges, interpreters employ strategies such as paraphrasing, adjusting emphasis, and omitting redundant phrases to maintain fluidity and focus on core messages.

In the framework of challenges of simultaneous interpreting for novice interpreters (Pappa, 2022), when handling political discourse at European institutions, the challenges were registered by novice interpreters (Kikides, 2025) based on political speeches by leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Nicolas Sarkozy. The political leaders use distinct persuasive techniques that interpreters must mediate, including logical structuring (Macron's approach) and emotional appeals (Sarkozy's style). In the framework of an effective approach to interpreting strategies from French into Greek, interpreting methods and approaches in simultaneous interpretation

in European Institutions, from French into Greek, were studied by comparing interpreting approaches to the speeches of the Presidents of the French Republic. This approach (Kikidis, 2025) revealed the various options concerning the choice of the most effective rendering of the meaning and the effective rendering of argumentation and emotional appeals.

Exploring Students' Expectations -Method

In order to explore students' expectations, questionnaires were drawn focusing on the communicative skills, the qualities students consider necessary for a successful interpreter, and their expectations in terms of the key pedagogical elements. The online questionnaire has closed-ended questions that were developed around questions concerning parameters that influence interpreters' performance and observations about Greek-speaking students' performance in interpreting. Data collection in interpreting studies is difficult because of the limited number of students, but 1st year interpreting students, 2nd year interpreting students, and graduates of a Greek-speaking university responded. The mother tongue was Greek, and students' working languages were English, French, and German in the Greek context. The questions focused on the perceptions of students concerning communicative skills, the need to improve sociolinguistic skills, the integration of professional ethics in training, issues of sociocultural awareness, phonetic awareness, personal practice issues, and active class participation.

The questionnaire (Valantasi, 2025) was administered to interpreting students and graduates. As some universities introduce interpreting studies at the third or fourth year of undergraduate studies, 1st year interpreting students were actually 3rd year undergraduate students. Most of them were C2 learners in English or French. The questionnaire was also administered to novice interpreters concerning their expectations for their training and views on acquiring skills.

Findings

The findings reveal perceptions of interpreting studies by students and novice interpreters. Regarding sociocultural awareness, there is consensus on its significance and the prioritization of its characteristics for interpretation. At the same time, it is emphasized that all aspects of sociocultural awareness are considered critical, as students are required to recognize and adapt them accordingly in every interpretative process. A similar agreement is observed concerning the improvement

of phonetic awareness, although perfection is expected to be achieved within the framework of professional practice.

As for communication skills, students agree that comprehensive familiarity with all aspects is necessary. However, there are variations in the priorities students set regarding the skills they wish to focus on, which contrasts with the views of graduates. On a practical level, graduates emphasize the need for in-depth training in all communication skills, given that they are required in various professional environments.

Additionally, there is broad agreement among students on the necessity of personal practice in interpretation. Everyone recognizes the importance of individual effort, both in the practical application and theoretical foundation of their skills. Furthermore, the value of classroom participation is highlighted, as it combines practical training with theoretical instruction on topics such as ethics and attire. These issues are deemed crucial for shaping their professional identity and are met with unanimous agreement. In summary, there is consensus among students regarding their expectations for academic training and professional achievements. Studies on students' perceptions of interpretation training reveal that:

First-year students focus on theoretical foundations and linguistic skills. Second-year students emphasize the need for more practical exercises and real-life exposure. Graduates acknowledge the value of academic training but identify gaps in professional readiness.

Graduates face significant challenges transitioning from academic settings to professional environments, including handling fast-paced speech in live interpreting, managing complex terminologies, and working without pre-session materials.

According to the questionnaire, a significant percentage of students and recent graduates expressed the view that their training did not sufficiently prepare them for real-world interpreting. The most common concerns were a lack of exposure to real-life speech variations, insufficient training in handling stress, and limited practice with specialized terminology.

Interpreters must be aware of cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and non-verbal communication to ensure accurate interpretation. Phonological awareness is also crucial for understanding various accents and speech patterns. More than 50% of survey respondents indicated that dealing with different accents and regional dialects was one of their greatest challenges, emphasizing the need for exposure to diverse linguistic variations during training.

Ethical considerations are often overlooked in academic training but play a vital role in professional practice. Incorporating ethics courses into the curriculum would help students address real-world dilemmas such as neutrality, confidentiality, and impartiality. The questionnaire results showed that 62% of interpreters had encountered ethical dilemmas in their careers.

Key issues concern familiarity with the field of interpreting requires a continuous expansion of knowledge and skills, both academically and professionally. The development of communication skills—both linguistic and sociolinguistic—as well as familiarity with current affairs that may relate to future interpreting assignments, are critical areas requiring ongoing deepening. At the same time, exploring the limits and potential of each trainee interpreter proves to be crucial for their professional advancement.

The majority of students, especially those in the early stages of their academic education, recognize that the successful completion of interpreting studies demands significant personal effort. This view is confirmed by graduates, who emphasize that intensive personal work during training is essential for successfully entering the professional field.

The importance of active participation in the educational process is reflected in student evaluations regarding their classroom attendance. From the sample, two first-year and three second-year students rated their participation with an eight (8) out of 10, and two graduates rated it with a nine (9), while all others gave a ten (10), where ten (10) indicates that class attendance is considered “absolutely essential.”

This overall evaluation highlights the significance of academic training as a foundational factor for the development of communication skills, the improvement of working languages, the enhancement of encyclopedic knowledge, and the awareness of current events. Through their academic education, students gain confidence and lay the groundwork for their future professional training, which will continue to grow through their work experience.

It is interesting to see the focus of students in the following question, where everyday life is considered crucial for sociocultural awareness. Rank, in order of importance, the 4 (four) characteristics of sociocultural awareness that you consider most important for interpretation.

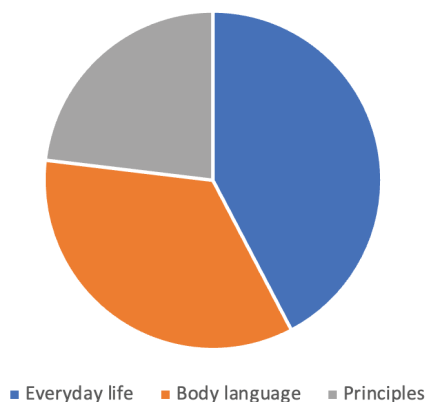
Values, principles

Body language

Living conditions

Daily life

Figure 1. Student focus areas



Interpretation constitutes a complex and demanding process that requires the development of various linguistic and communicative skills. Communicative abilities, which include both linguistic and sociolinguistic competencies, are considered fundamental for the effective practice of interpreting. From the beginning of their studies, students are called upon to recognize the importance of these skills and to understand how strengthening them can decisively contribute to their professional path as interpreters.

Specifically, among first-year students in the sample, it was observed that just one (1) student, having acknowledged the importance of interpretive skills, believes that an in-depth focus on phonology and articulation will significantly contribute to the development of their interpreting abilities. This approach ranks semantics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling as lower priorities. The remaining two (2) first-year students share a similar stance, with a slight variation between grammar and vocabulary.

Similarly, in a sample of second-year students, one (1) student places emphasis on phonology and articulation as the top priority, followed by semantics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. On a phonological level, students believe that once they

fully understand the meanings of the signifiers in their working languages, they will be able to adjust intonation and place emphasis in their speech accurately in order to express more subtle semantic distinctions.

At this stage, the enhancement of vocabulary and grammar is deemed crucial, as students focus on the precise use of syntactic structures and their expressive ability in order to produce concise and comprehensible interpretations. The ability to distinguish and convey subtle semantic differences in their languages constitutes a critical factor for their success in the professional field.

Conclusion

Interpreting is a multifaceted skill requiring cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. By refining training programs, emphasizing real-world exposure, and equipping interpreters with coping mechanisms for high-pressure situations, the field of interpretation studies can continue to evolve and meet the demands of an increasingly globalized world. The integration of findings from a questionnaire highlights key areas for improvement in interpreter education and professional practice, offering a data-driven approach to addressing common challenges in the field.

The answers revealed that the students' main concern was the distance between proficient performance in a foreign language and effective carrying out of mediation tasks, and especially interpreting. There are clear indications of the main areas that interpreting teaching should focus on in order to strengthen novice interpreters' performance. Further studies are needed in order to integrate specific tasks that enhance interpreters' performance and conduct calibration experiments in order to adopt the most efficient path towards successful acquisition of interpreting skills.

Appendix

The questions were as follows:

1. Do you believe that you will improve your communicative language skills? If yes, in which area do you think you will deepen your knowledge the most?

- a.) No, I do not believe so.
- b) Yes, I believe so. In language skills.
- c) Yes, I believe so. In sociolinguistic skills.
- d) In both.

2. In which area, in order of importance, do you think it would be desirable to deepen your knowledge?

- a) Vocabulary
- b) Grammar
- c) Phonology
- d) Articulation
- e) Spelling
- f) All the above

3. Regarding sociolinguistic skills, in which area, in order of importance, do you think it would be desirable to deepen your knowledge?

- a) Politeness conventions
- b) Expressions of folk wisdom
- c) Stylistic level
- d) Dialects/idioms
- e) All the above

4. Do you consider it important to have a course in the curriculum regarding the professional ethics of an interpreter?

- a) Strongly agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neither agree nor disagree
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly disagree

5. Rank, in order of importance, the three (3) characteristics of sociocultural awareness that you consider most important for interpretation.

- a) Values, principles
- b) Body language
- c) Living conditions
- d) Daily life

6. Do you believe that you will have the opportunity to perfect your general phonetic awareness of your working languages?

- a) Yes
- b) No

7. Do you believe that successful completion of studies requires a lot of personal practice?

- a) Yes, a lot.
- b) No, I will manage with little.
- c) I believe that everyone has a different way of studying and practicing.
- d) At a normal level, neither too little nor too much.

8. Is there another area you believe should be explored further in class?

- a) Improving language skills
- b) A more detailed approach to current issues
- c) Interpreter practice with videos
- c) All the above

9. On a scale from 1 to 10, how important do you consider active class participation?

10. Do you think your appearance plays an important role when providing interpreting services at events?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) My appearance does not matter, only my performance as an interpreter.

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