

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

INTERPRETER'S CONCENTRATION TRAINING IN FIRST-YEAR MASTER CLASSES: CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The paper presents theoretical and practical review of concentration training methodology in simultaneous interpreting in first-year master classes. The author offers his experimental STUDY OF CONCENTRATION STAGES IN INTERPRETER'S TRAINING CLASSES. THE four stages (concentration gain, concentration loss, concentration shift and concentration regain) demonstrate the process of human reaction towards various interpreting stumbling stones, circumstantial changes and stressful situations. The author describes these stumbling stones and offers his own vision of how to learn to overcome the obstacles during interpreting process. Two-year experiment in a group of first-year master students underpins theoretical relevance of the paper. The author offers exercises to train concentration at different stages to make concentration shifts happen more smoothly. Finally, concentration index is defined to explain the students' progress in interpreting training and to determine whether the students are ready for simultaneous interpreting. In the conclusion, the author gives his perspective of what is to be analyzed in the field of interpreting studies on the Ukrainian ground.

Key words: simultaneous interpreting, concentration shift, concentration factor, interpreting training, interpreting curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays interpreting services in Ukraine are becoming increasingly popular due to the rise in business relations with Europe and the USA. Recently, Ukraine has redirected its economic and trade ties closer towards the West rather away from the East. According to the statistics, after the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the number of business negotiations, official and unofficial visits, document circulation with the EU and the USA has almost tripled from 30% to 89% of all the business contacts with the world.

The Ukrainian legislation system is now being rearranged according to European standards. Every month officials from the EU and the USA come to Ukraine with their vision to change the Ukrainian laws and living standards. It means thousands of documents being translated every week and dozens of official and unofficial talks being interpreted. Governmental bodies need more licensed translators and interpreters. In addition, businesses immediately reacted to the increase in foreign contacts and started hiring more translators. However, this process is not that fast owing to the economic crisis touching all of the business sectors of the country. That is why employers

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would rather find a good speaker of a foreign language among their employees who could do translations or interpret talks rather than pay extra money to another staff member. Despite this, compared to 2013, the need for translation and interpretation services in Ukraine has drastically risen. According to official employment statistics, 40% more translation department graduates found a job in 2015 than in 2014.

The education market reacted immediately as well. In 1991, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, only several major higher education institutions in Ukraine trained translators. For 25 years, interpreting has become an omnipresent curriculum course within almost all language education institutions in Ukraine. There are more than a hundred institutes and universities in the country that advertise translation and interpreting as their major. Universities try to attract school leavers by offering them a range of translation and interpreting courses, which promise to train them to be broad-minded and efficient interpreters. Young people believe that obtaining professional interpreter's qualification will bring them money and fortune in the future. Once lured by glossy leaflets, students face various difficulties that stem from their psychological inability to interpret. In the aftermath, they drag through interpretation classes and consequently they are either dismissed from the university or obtain a diploma with low results and

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

bad skills, which do not enable them to land a respective job. The reason for this is twofold: 1. Economic rules that make universities run for money and accept any available students 2. Lack of teaching methodology traditions and efficient teaching staff at the universities that only declare their translation history.

This paper studies the main methodology to train professional simultaneous interpreters within the first-year in the master program. I want to describe the way I do interpreting classes at Kyiv National University (Ukraine) and how the curriculum plan is built up. I am going to focus mainly on students' concentration skills training, as well as concentration control, concentration index, concentration loss, concentration gain, concentration regain and concentration shift. I consider concentration an essential interpreter's skill to train in classes. The loss of it leads to total failure and inability to regain control over interpreting process. That is why I want to expand on this phenomenon in more detail.

The matter becomes more complicated when we consider students' language skills. The point is that the Ukrainian students are bilingual. They speak both Ukrainian and Russian equally well. These languages are grammatically very close. Therefore, the students need to overcome language interference. It is another barrier toward concentration control. Language interference – double-language interference – is a big

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issue of concern in the process of interpreting. Special attention should be paid to eliminating negative language interference. I am also going to show a two-year experiment carried out in a group of master students from 2014 until 2015.

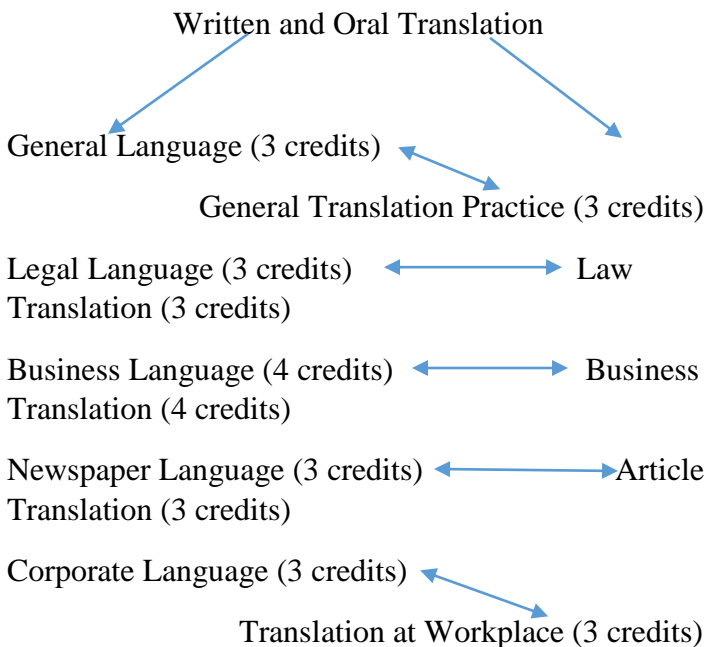
2. MASTER'S TRANSLATION CURRICULUM PLAN

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine) – the university I work at – has a long-standing translation teaching traditions. The Department of Translation was opened in 1961. Back then, translators were trained for military purposes. Up to 1991, translation-teaching methodology was not widespread.

Nowadays, the University offers a 4-year bachelor and 2-year master's course of translation with more than 500 students and 7 languages available. The Ukrainian tradition of interpreting training is a part of the Eastern Tradition of *retour* Interpreting (María Brander, 2014), which means that students learn to interpret both from a foreign language and into a foreign language. The curriculum plan includes obligatory subjects and several optional blocs of subjects that specialize a student in a narrower translator's field. Obligatory subjects: Source Language Practice, Target Language

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Practice (65 credits ECTS), Comparative Grammar of SL and TL (4 credits ECTS), Comparative Stylistics of SL and TL (4 credits ECTS), Written Translation Fundamentals (10 credits ECTS), Oral Translation Fundamentals (8 credits ECTS), Comparative Lexicology of SL and TL (3 credits ECTS), Translation into Foreign Language (4 credits ECTS). The curriculum plan has a combination of Terminology classes and Translation Practice classes, which means that the students study terminology together with applying this terminology on translation. Graphically it is:



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An optional bloc of subjects means that a student must choose among several sets of disciplines (minimum 30 credits ECTS) which offers different translator's training programs. They are:

1. Simultaneous and Consecutive Interpreting Practice
2. Written Professional Translation
3. Literary Translation Practice

I am going to focus on Simultaneous Interpreting Practice optional bloc of subjects (MA). This program is an intensive training course, which includes logically and methodologically linked disciplines. They are: Oral Translation Technique (5 credits ECTS), Consecutive Interpreting (5 credits ECTS), Note-taking (3 credits ECTS), Simultaneous Interpretation Practice (5 credits ECTS), Simultaneous Interpretation Technique (5 credits ECTS), Conference Interpreting (5 credits ECTS) and Audiovisual Interpreting (3 credits ECTS). The students study these subjects during their master course.

Oral Translation Technique, Simultaneous Interpretation Technique and Note-taking are the subjects to train basic interpreters' skills such as reaction, concentration, speech speed, memory, speech gap, information reproduction, utterance building, concentration control and stress management. Together with these subjects, the student apply these

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skills on interpreting during the Conference Interpreting, Simultaneous Interpreting Practice Classes and Consecutive Interpreting Classes. According to the curriculum, students have five classes of oral translation a week. Every class lasts for 120 minutes.

3. INTERPRETING AND CONCENTRATION

I consider simultaneous interpreting a translational activity, an immediate oral reproduction of an utterance into a foreign language that makes communication between two foreign sides possible. In addition, simultaneous interpreting saves time, money and makes negotiations, conferences and meetings run more smoothly. A speaker does not have to wait until translators interpret him/her consecutively. (Chen & Dong, 2010). An interpreter is an invisible intermediary between the audience and the speaker and he becomes invisible as Venuti's "pane of glass" (Venuti, 2008). Behind this "pane of glass", there is a hard mental activity of a human brain. It is a higher cognitive process of transmitting and receiving "coded" messages (Ribas, 2010).

An interpreter being in stressful circumstances has to

1. Listen to the speaker;
2. Perceive the speaker;
3. Process the information;
4. Interpret the information into a target language (doing all necessary grammar

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

transformations); 5. Say the information while simultaneously listening to the speaker. The point is that an interpreter does not have enough time to analyze the very process of interpreting or to get back in time and correct mistakes. The source text is presented only once and thus cannot be reviewed or replayed (Kade, 1968).

3.1. Stumbling Stones

There can never be ideal conditions for interpreting. The more obstacles there are the mental efforts are needed to do the five above-mentioned activities simultaneously. The interpreter's stumbling stones fall into two groups:

1. *Circumstantial*;
2. *Professional*.

Circumstantial interpreter's stumbling stones are always unexpected, unpredictable and thus are hard to train to overcome. For example:

1. Bad microphone in the booth that make interpreters speak louder, which is more energy consuming;

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2. Bad headphones, which makes interpreters speak in a low voice not to lose the speaker's utterance;
3. Noise in an adjacent booth which interferes with the listening process;
4. Fatigue;
5. Malaise;
6. Tense working schedule.

Professional interpreter's stumbling stones are predictable, clear, "trainable" and easy to overcome because they depend on interpreter's professional skills. For example:

1. Unclear speaker's accent that makes interpreters spend more concentration on listening rather than on interpreting;
2. Fast utterance speed that makes interpreters concentrate more on processing the information;
3. Complicated speaker's syntax takes more time on making grammar transformations;
4. Unknown terminology makes interpreters lose control over interpreting process;
5. Too much precise information;
6. Necessity to use notes (it makes concentration split);
7. Bilingualism (relevant for Ukraine).

All these stumbling stones are the factors that affect interpreter's concentration ability.

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

3.2. Concentration Factor

Concentration is the ability to give your attention or thought to a single object or activity: the ability to concentrate (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016). I consider an interpreter's concentration as *an ability to keep the process of interpreting under control*; to give one's attention to a single string of ideas; and an *ability to adequately make proper interpreter's decisions and react to changing situations in time*. If controlled, attention is a "capacity of distributing attention span or number of tasks that can be performed simultaneously" (Moser-Mercer, 2000). An interpreter's concentration is the ability to sustain different distracting stimuli and minimize information loss by easily switching from one distractor to another one. Interpreter's concentration is closely linked to the concept of working memory (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974), which are both assumed as cognitive processes at hand (Timarova, 2007) as the ability of an interpreter to keep the information storage under control and apply the information in the process of interpreting. Interpreting concentration makes it possible to apply working memory in a due and timely way. Therefore, I delineate concentration, attention and working memory as different facets of the same process.

By interpreting process, I mean:

1. Following the speaker's utterance;

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

2. Keep a 2-3 second lag behind the speaker;
3. Quickly correcting the previous mistake and catching up with the speaker;
3. Following the terminology;
4. Keeping the style of the event;
5. Missing unknown or unheard words and phrases;
6. Doing the right grammar transformations.

3.3. From Concentration Gain to Concentration Regain

The process of interpreting is a vibrant and constantly changing set of situations to react to and tasks to resolve. Interpreters can be compared to processors that have to settle semantic and syntactic equations. The string of processes is recurrent. However, a machine is by far not the same as a human brain. The human brain is vulnerable to changes of situations and outer irritations. That is why it is necessary to train a human brain to switch to a different situation with a minimum loss of concentration.

I would depict concentration scheme in interpreting like this:

Concentration Gain → **Concentration Loss** →

Concentration Shift → **Concentration Regain**

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

Concentration gain is an initiating period of any interpreting process when interpreters get used to given circumstances. The initiating period lasts from five to ten minutes. The shorter the concentration gain period is the smoother *concentration regain* moment happens.

I offer a series of exercises to train concentration gain period to last shorter. Students have to repeat a string of numerals and phrases at different speed. Most of the words are logically connected but some of them are irrelevant (2 words after each 7 ones). The students' attention is used to the logic and each time they hear an irrelevant word or numeral, their brain react with *a concentration loss*. This exercise should last for 15 minutes of every 120-minute class.

For example:

Students repeat after the teacher: thirty-six, forty-six, fifty-six, sixty-six, sixty-five (*pause*) twenty –six, two hundred and six, etc.

The speed should vary all the time.

Concentration loss – is a moment when interpreters lose control of one of the processes: either speaker's utterance, or they start lagging much behind.

Concentration shift – is a moment when interpreters switch to different circumstances. The exercises

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

should aim to make concentration shift happen smoother and quicker.

Another exercise trains concentration shift to the change in a speaker's utterance.

Students must listen to five – seven logically linked words or phrases (depending upon the interpreter's competence) and after that, they must quickly repeat these words or phrases to catch up with the speaker while the teacher continues reading the string of words in order to distract the students.

For example:

Students listen: black, night, coal, black coal, nightmare, white collar, black pencil ... *students have to repeat these words quickly and catch up with the teacher ... the teacher keeps on reading:* red fox, blue moon, great day, sunny day, green tree.

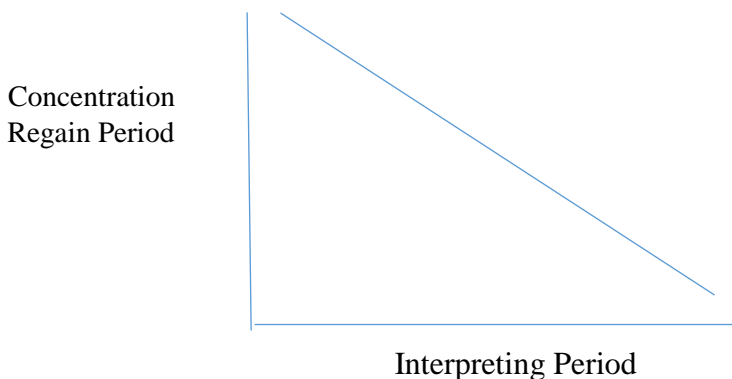
This exercise aims to adapt interpreters to sudden changes in speaker's utterance speed. As the experiment shows, after six months of repeating this kind of exercise, concentration loss happens 37% less than during the first class. Concentration shift runs smoother and *concentration regain* runs longer.

Concentration regain – is the concentration period in interpreting after concentration loss. Concentration regain lasts from 15 to 20 minutes. In fact, the longer

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

interpreters do interpreting the shorter concentration regain period is. If interpreters work for 40 minutes with no pauses, concentration regain period lasts for less than 10 minutes.

Graphically it is:



Every 30 minutes of interpreting takes away 1 minute from concentration regain period. As the experiment shows the students, who worked in pairs, could regain concentration quicker, because they changed each other every 20 minutes.

Another exercise aims to eliminate the effect of bad equipment and strange noises coming from outside. The students had to count down from 200 to 100 aloud thus making noise in a booth and preventing their

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

colleague from clear perception of the information. Such a stressful situation helps one go through concentration shift much quicker and have a longer concentration regain period. In 15 months, an average student does not pay attention to noises or their influence is much lower. I practice this kind of exercise at every second class for 10 minutes.

3.4. Stress Management

The most dangerous factor that makes interpreters have concentration loss is *an immediate stress*. It happens because the speaker uses unknown terminology or the syntax is too complicated. Young interpreters usually lose much time processing unknown phrases or clumsy syntax. A human brain does not notice easy, smooth and clear information, but it is stuck upon unknown or weird things. My task is to eliminate this effect.

For this, I suggest that the students should shadow the speech at different speed *leaving out* all the *nouns* then *leaving out all the verbs* then *muting up all the articles*. After that, I suggest that the students shadow the speech repeating only nouns, verbs and articles.

This kind of exercise aims to “tell” interpreters’ brains not to pay much attention to unknown words and phrases. In addition, the students learn to delineate

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

inner and outer speech by muting up and highlighting words. It puts away concentration loss for a longer period. At the average, the students need seven months of two classes a week to reduce the amount of mistakes by 38% on this ground.

The next step is to find the way to substitute the unknown phrases with close ones. I offer the exercise that trains immediate speaking.

I offer three words in a row, which the students have to use to build a situation. Every 20 seconds, I add a new word to use in a situation. The words should not be connected; otherwise, the situation is easy to build. For example, *train ... lose ... animal*. The students are to make up situation with these words. I may add more words or change the language to train them switch from SL to TL. It is recommended that the utterance speed is fast.

During interpreting classes, the students find themselves in stressful situations all the time – more stressful than real interpreting situations.

3.5. Concentration Index

It is necessary to understand when concentration gets it top and falls to its bottom. The students usually do not feel this moment, because they are in class – not in a real interpreting situation.

The interpreting training class usually contains: a) preparatory section (articulation training, reaction

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

training, and concentration training) b) glossary training c) unprepared interpreting.

Within the first thirty minutes students train interpreting technique, including concentration skills.

For methodological purposes, I single out three concentration stages:

1. Students are vulnerable to rapid circumstantial changes. Any unknown word or long numeral distracts them. Concentration loss happens on the first minute of interpreting. Concentration shift does not happen.

The first stage usually happens within 20 minutes during the first month of interpreting training. If concentration shift does not happen after two month-training, I usually tell the student not to participate in classes and change the specialization.

2. Students are slow to react to quick situational changes. Concentration loss happens on the seventh minute of interpreting. At the third attempt, students can adapt to unknown words and long strings of numerals.

The second stage happens during the next four months of intensive interpreting training. Concentration regain lasts for about 7 minutes.

3. Students can easily react to most changes and stresses. Concentration loss happens on the

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

fifteenth minute of interpreting. Concentration shift runs smoothly and takes minimum time.

If students reach the third concentration stage, it means they are ready to start interpreting solid speeches and memorize topical glossaries with almost no preparatory exercises.

This index, among all others, could be useful if teachers want to understand whether students are fit for interpreting.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

My study of concentration training in simultaneous interpreting allowed me to single out the following concentration stages: concentration gain, concentration loss, concentration shift and concentration regain. I offer a series of exercises to train every of them. Concentration index shows an individual level of concentration for every student working in class. The experiment of concentration training in simultaneous interpreting classes showed that the main scope is to minimize negative consequences of concentration shift and to make concentration regain run for a longer period. For this, it is necessary to put students into the most extreme circumstances with many distractors they are vulnerable to. Concentration index shows how students learned to cope with distractors. I single out three concentration indices; each of them is applicable

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

both during a class and during a longer period (during a term).

5. INTERPRETING SKILLS. WHERE NEXT?

Concentration is only one of many factors that can help train simultaneous interpreters. Interpreting training includes working on reaction gap, reaction split, memory span, speech gap, notes taking, notes using, anticipation, glossary building, pre-interpreting preparation, etc.

Ukraine is peculiar for its language situation. I consider interpreting bilingualism a crucial matter for Ukrainian interpreting studies. It requires applying more exercises and techniques to help students overcome double-language interference. It can be a new way we can look into interpreting teaching and learning on the Ukrainian interpreting ground.

Skrylnyk, S. (2016). Interpreter's Concentration Training in First-Year Master Classes: Case Study. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 140–161.

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