Mastering sight translation skills

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Abstract

Mastering sight translation (STR) skills is essential for conference, court and community interpreters. It is also a considerable asset to translators and, generally speaking, a valuable exercise towards the development of certain cognitive processes. Yet, as far as research and analysis are concerned, STR and particularly its teaching methodology still represent a relatively unexplored territory. In this paper we shall initially give attention to STR scenarios, taking into account some definitions and theoretical views about the nature of STR, its taxonomy and the skills and abilities it demands. We shall then focus on the teaching of STR with special reference to the methodological approach adopted in the Conference Interpreter Training Course from the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), Brazil.

Keywords: Sight Translation (STR) / STR Scenarios / Theoretical Views on STR / STR Teaching Methodology / Translator and Interpreter Training.

Introduction

This paper deals with the relatively unexplored territory of sight translation and its teaching methodology. We shall initially turn our attention to STR scenarios, taking into account some definitions and theoretical views about the nature of STR, its taxonomy and the skills and abilities it demands. We shall then focus on the teaching of STR with special reference to the methodological approach adopted in the Conference Interpreter Training Course from the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP).

The considerations in this study result from our preliminary research in the area and experience in teaching translation and interpretation to undergraduate and graduate students in Brazil.

STR scenarios

If in the more distant past STR was by and large a methodological tool for the teaching of classical languages, in more recent times the scenarios in which STR is practiced have to do mainly with the education and training of interpreters and translators, and, more importantly, with the professional environment in which they operate. Very occasionally, STR is used in advanced level foreign language courses - its use depending on the teacher being aware of the benefits of STR in enhancing their students’ bilingual communicative competence. In such cases STR may figure as a subsidiary or complementary component aimed at providing students with at least an overview of one more possible application of their newly acquired or developed communicative skills in bilingual/multilingual contexts. Unfortunately, however, very few language teachers are familiar with the intricacies
of this linguistic performance routine.

As for the education and training of translators and interpreters, a first point to be made is that although STR is rather common and has an established position in the field of translation and interpreting studies, even in traditional courses, no clear consensus exists about where STR belongs exactly. Even though training programmes usually include STR in their curriculum, the discipline is many times part of the translation but not of the interpretation course. Yet most teachers of interpretation do regular STR exercises with their students since they consider that oral translation variety a relevant skill in the preparation for the different interpretation modes. In other words, the rapid and efficient visual-brain-vocal coordination required by STR stands for the stepping stones towards consecutive and simultaneous interpretation.

To illustrate the point, according to a study conducted by Kim (2001) at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS), in California, as far as instructors are concerned, although there is no full agreement as to when, why and how to teach STR, students believe it is closer to interpretation than to written translation, and have suggested STR be incorporated into the course for interpreters. The study, however, recommends that STR should be an independent discipline applicable to both courses, a view we entirely agree with.

Another important consideration is that well-established and highly reputed interpretation programmes in the USA and Europe often have STR as a component of their entrance examinations in order to assess the linguistic and communicative potential of prospective students. This is also true of the Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil.

Concerning the professional environment, an important issue brought to our attention by Jiménez (1999) is that over these recent years the time and space borderlines that defined the traditional oral translation forms have been undermined and have become somewhat blurred. New and unexpected configurations combining different oral translation modes have emerged, bringing an impact on professional life. Depending on the circumstances, conferences with simultaneous interpretation may also include consecutive interpretation, liaison interpreting, chuchotage and STR. In court proceedings that demand interpretation services, we usually have consecutive interpretation, which is many times complemented by bilateral interpretation and STR; in court trials of a certain magnitude simultaneous interpretation, at times with relay interpreting, may also be required alongside the aforementioned translation/interpretation varieties. We could add that innovative hybrid forms of oral and/or written translation and/or interpretation interventions also emerge in video conferencing and focus groups settings, as well as in online and telephone bilingual/multilingual communication.

An issue of paramount importance is that in such situations STR is part of the scene, as observed by Jiménez (1999: 104):

La única modalidad pura constante que participa en todos los tipos de traducción oral es la traducción a la vista (...) La presencia constante de esta variedad de traducción marca su relevancia como actividad traductora (...).

Evidently, the translator/interpreter is expected to be able to cope proficiently with all varieties of oral translation, including STR.

Still focusing on the necessity of developing STR skills, it is worth mentioning that with the purpose of elevating professional standards, enhancing individual performance, and offering a credential to those with the knowledge and skills required for the practice of the profession, some certification boards hold public examinations, which include STR, to candidates seeking for a formal qualification, mainly in the legal area. An example of this is the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT), based in the USA, which offers a rigorous examination with written and oral components, including two STR tests from Language A (an individual’s mother tongue) into Language B (an individual’s second language), and vice versa. The STR exam focuses on high register formal language, and the usual sources are legal documents, insurance forms, letters, transcriptions, and so forth. Those who pass the exam are awarded the credential of nationally Certified Translators, and this must be taken into account in professional standards, enhancing individual skills, it is worth mentioning that with the purpose of developing STR professionals who wish to become Certified Sworn-in Translators and Interpreters in the legal, commercial and technical areas have to sit and qualify in similar public examinations, which include STR as well, held by the official Boards of Trade.

Indubitably, mastering the skills involved in the STR process stands for an essential component of professional competence for interpreters, and a most desirable asset for translators, and this must be taken into account in translation/interpreting training programmes. Thus, a well-conducted STR course equates with an opportunity for the development and refinement of such oral translation skills, particularly for those who wish to maintain their professional standing and broaden their
professional horizons.

Despite all this, as far as academia is concerned, till recently there was little direct research into the area, and references to STR would be of a subsidiary nature to be found in studies focusing primarily on other oral translation forms. Hurtado Albir (2001: 83) argues: 

A pesar de su importancia, en la práctica profesional y en la enseñanza de la traducción, [la traducción a la vista] ha sido hace poco una modalidad escasamente analizada.

The current situation seems to be more promising, though, since there are some recent papers, M.A. dissertations and doctoral theses focusing on STR, such as the studies by Agrifoglio (2004), Syysnummi (2003), Kim (2001), Jiménez (1999), just to mention a few.

Yet, we might still say, that studies, in special regarding teaching methodology for STR, are limited in number.

**Defining and categorizing STR**

Seen by many as a hybrid of translation and interpretation, STR basically consists of the oral rendering of a written text from one language into another. Moser-Mercer (1991:159) emphasizes that “(s)ince both aural and visual information processing are involved, sight translation could be defined as a specific type of written translation, as well as a variant of oral interpretation”.

In fact, STR demands the activation of a complex combination of mental operations, in which refined linguistic and cognitive skills, general and specialist knowledge as well as careful attention to contextual clues come into play.

It is also important to take into account that in STR we have a most special form of text production because the oral translation is practically concurrent with the reading of the text, that is to say, from a written input in the source language we have, as a practically concomitant response, a verbal output in the target language. Along the same line of thought but moving further ahead and giving us a clearer idea of what is expected from the translator and/or interpreter, Angelelli (1999: 27) remarks: “Sight translation is an oral translation of a written text that should sound as if the interpreter were merely reading a document written in the target language”.

Considering that the comprehension and production processes overlap and that consequently the interpreter has to be especially efficient in changing modes from reading to producing speech and in restructuring the message “so that the written form of the source text cannot be heard”, as pointed out by Syysnummi (2003: 9), STR might be said to be almost as difficult as simultaneous interpretation.

To make things a little more interesting (or complicated), there are different types of STR with varying degrees of complexity. Jiménez (1999: 188, 301), who views STR as an oral translation mode, mentions the following STR varieties: (i) STR proper (traducción a ojo): the oral reformulation of a text seen for the first time, with no time being given for a previous reading and preparation of the text; (ii) Prepared STR (traducción à vue): when a little time is given for a previous preparation of the text; (iii) Consecutive STR: which can be synthetic: an oral summary of a written text (or “gist translation”); or explanatory: the oral reformulation, of an elucidative nature, of much shorter and usually instructional texts; (iv) STR in Consecutive Interpretation: the non-linear oral reformulation of a written text, immediately after its being read aloud by the lecturer; in such circumstances, the text substitutes for the notes the interpreter would have taken and the STR must take into consideration the possible additions and/or omissions of parts of the text while it was read aloud by the lecturer; (v) STR in Simultaneous Interpretation with Text: this most complex form consists of a combination of simultaneous interpretation and STR, and occurs when the interpreter/translator has a copy, either printed or on the computer screen, of the text that the lecturer is reading. This variety is also known as sight interpretation, recited interpretation or documented simultaneous interpretation.

Prominent scholars and practitioners such as Seleskovitch & Lederer (2002), Gile (1995), and Ilg & Lambert (1996) comment on this last variety, emphasizing that it differs to a certain extent from ordinary STR in that whereas STR is internally controlled and the translator/interpreter can choose his own pace, sight interpretation is somehow externally controlled, that is, the interpreter/translator cannot simply rely on the text but has to follow the pace of the speaker, and furthermore, has to pay special attention to any omissions, additions, side remarks or even paralinguistic features in the speaker’s speech that might modify or affect the message to be conveyed and reformulated.

**Theoretical considerations on the nature of STR**

Taking into account the various cognitive steps and textual production processes embedded in its realization, STR is indubitably an arduous task. On reflecting about the characteristics of the various modes of interpreting and translation, Gile (1995:183) states:
In sight translation, the Listening and Analysis Effort becomes a Reading Effort, and the Production Effort remains, but there does not seem to be a Memory Effort similar to the one in the simultaneous mode or the consecutive mode, since the information is available at any time on paper.

It should be considered that according to Gile’s Effort Models theory, each effort in itself stands for an intricate cognitive process which implies a series of interlinked mental operations. It is not the purpose of this study to go into a deep analysis of this aspect of STR, but a few considerations must be made in order to clarify to a certain extent what STR is all about.

Starting from the Reading Effort, we could certainly say that any English language professional is (or should be) familiar with the steps required by the reading comprehension of a given text: besides specific and background knowledge of the language and the content area(s) in focus, reading comprehension strategies demand consideration of textual macro/microstructure, an ability to think ahead, hypothesize and read through and beyond the surface of the text, and a capacity to deal with the text as it comes, taking into account intersemiotic, cultural and cognitive elements which, in many cases, lead to more or less explicit undercurrents of meaning. Concentration and attention are also of paramount importance.

If all of this is true of an ordinary reading comprehension routine, in STR the situation is even more complicated for the translator and/or interpreter performing this linguistic operation is given very little or, in most cases, no time at all to analyse the source text in advance; thus the Reading Effort has to be carried out almost instantaneously, that is, under pressure and with minimal preparation time.

The Production Effort equates with the output part of interpretation. Gile (1995:165) states again: “In simultaneous interpretation it [the Production Effort] is defined as the set of operations extending from the mental representation of the message to be delivered to speech planning and the performance of the speech plan”.

In STR, as far as this “set of operations” is concerned, one of the points to be made about the “performance of the speech plan” is that, as we mentioned before, the text in the target language should sound as natural as if it were being read aloud from a text written in that same language. In addition, being a form of oral communication delivered before an audience, STR implies public speaking and presentation skills, as well as professional use of the voice, which, in turn, requires clear articulation of sounds, voice projection, adequate stress and rhythm patterns, and so forth. It must also be considered that in STR the translator/interpreter is exposed to mental and psychological strain.

As for the Memory Effort, despite the fact the text is right in front of the translator’s eyes to be reviewed and analysed at any time, considering that the oral rendering has to be delivered almost instantaneously, the translator/interpreter cannot possibly resort to what, as highlighted by Alves (2000), we might call “external support” elements, that is to say, glossaries, dictionaries, informants, reference materials, the internet and the like. Consequently, should the need arise, the essential problem-solving resources will be limited to and based on what we might this time call “internal support” factors, namely, the retrieving of previous information stored in long-term memory, familiarity with terminology and phrasing, an ability to focus on meaning rather than words and, as suggested by Angelelli (1999), excellent text analysis and reading comprehension skills. Inferential processes based on one’s cultural baggage and general/specific knowledge, along with the use of intuition, imagination, agility of mind, flexibility and resourcefulness, and above all self-control are also indispensable “internal support” elements.

The considerations presented so far, which are by no means exhaustive, should, however, suffice as a starting point for reflection upon what STR stands for and demands from the translator/interpreter.

As STR is a complex multi-task that requires close attention, self-control and precision, future translation/interpretation professionals need proper preparation for this bilingual communication mode, and this leads us to the issue of teaching methodology.

Teaching STR

STR is a multi-task that requires close intense concentration, specific skills and accuracy. Syysnummi (2003: 7) comments: “The interpreter has to read the source text, comprehend what he is reading, translate and produce the speech in another language, monitor his own speech, and as if these tasks were not difficult enough by themselves, the interpreter has to do all of them simultaneously”; therefore, considering that in the case of future translators and interpreters, there is an obvious need of a proper preparation for this complex oral translation form, it follows that it is the educators’ responsibility to provide opportunities for the acquisition, development or refinement of STR skills.

Hurtado Albir (2001) emphasizes that the essential
characteristics of STR are immediacy in terms of reading comprehension and oral re-expression, combined with an ability to shift from the written to the oral register. Consequently, the translator/interpreter will have to meet such challenges by means of strategies and tactics, which, in turn, stand for a very specific form of translational and interpretational competence.

In view of the fact that, except for a few guidelines offered by some examination boards and a few ancillary references in studies focusing primarily on other types of oral translation, there are practically no studies or literature focusing on the teaching methodology for STR, we shall from now on comment on some aspects of the approach adopted at the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) in the Course for Conference Interpreters, of which we have first-hand experience.

To make things clear, we should say that the course from PUC-SP is, on the one hand, a B.A. Degree course in Letters and, on the other hand, a specialization non-degree programme for students who have a First Degree in other areas, such as psychology, medicine, law, engineering, and so on. The working languages are Portuguese and English. The essential requirement for admission is that the candidate to the course is a fluent and proficient speaker of the English language, has full command of the educated register of Portuguese, has good general knowledge and is strongly motivated to build up his competence and performance in conference interpreting. Mature and specialist knowledge in a given field are considered a plus.

Most of the students in the course are either teachers of English and/or certified translators or professionals who make use of the English language in their daily work routine. Their reasons for enrolling for the course are, firstly, being adequately trained to become conference interpreters and, secondly, complementing their education and refining their bilingual communicative skills. Many times professional interpreters, whose languages A and B do not include English, enroll for the course so as to boost their competence and achieve a level of excellence in English, which will then stand for their language C.

In the course curriculum, STR appears in combination with Consecutive Interpretation in a 60-credit discipline entitled “Introduction to Interpretation”. Specific practice in STR covers one semester, that is to say, 30 credits or 2 credits per week along 15 weeks. The average number of students per class is 12.

As for the teaching methodology, the starting point is applying strategies that can, to a considerable extent, lead students to discover things by themselves, a sort of heuristic approach. In other words, a manner of dealing with STR that will make students realize what is a competent STR, what are their individual strengths and weaknesses, and what they will have to work on so as to reach their full potential.

Awareness-raising, providing models, reflection about the learning process and guidance offered by the teacher are the crucial and unequivocal steps towards this goal. Theoretical references permeate the course with a view to providing students with opportunities to reflect upon what they are doing and why they are doing it.

A set of clearly-established STR evaluation criteria is provided by the teacher. The main aspects taken into account in assessing the student’s performance are: (i) Comprehension of original: omissions or misunderstandings / coping with facts and figures / attention to contextual clues and cognitive elements; (ii) Interpreter’s Output (a): clarity of ideas / no hesitation / quality of voice, rhythm, fluidity; (iii) Interpreter’s Output (b): pronunciation, intonation, stress & rhythm: (word level / sentence level) / overall intelligibility; (iv) Message Reformulation: source <=> target language equivalence / quality of translation / accuracy / completeness of message / flexibility and resourcefulness / discourse management; (v) Global Achievement.

For each one of these items, the teacher provides detailed comments and gives a mark.

The same parameters are used for peer-evaluation, that is, when students assess their classmates’ live or recorded performance, as well as for self-evaluation, that is when individual students listen to and evaluate their own STR recorded in the language laboratory. Printed evaluation forms containing the aforementioned criteria are provided by the teacher, and students are strongly advised to pay special attention to the comments, corrections and suggestions made along the course so as to keep track of their progress.

The second point about the methodology is that students are given intensive formal training in STR. For that purpose, they are exposed a wide variety of informative, descriptive and argumentative texts in academic, journalistic, scientific and technical style, covering carefully selected specialist areas and topical subjects, at different levels of difficulty. Students do an average of three to four STR texts per week, amounting to around 50 texts in a typical semester. Each student’s individual performance is carefully monitored and
assessed. Presentations in class, recordings in the language laboratory and at home are an essential part of the process.

The standard practice concerning the choice of materials is to focus on a certain topic from different angles, making use of a variety of sources, registers and styles, and always working from Language B to Language A, and vice versa. Integrated consecutive interpretation exercises dealing with the same topic are often part of the lesson.

A third factor to be considered is that after the third or fourth week of the course all the aforementioned steps are practised intensively and recurrently, so that students progress and advance towards achieving excellence in STR.

Always bearing in mind a bilingual (or at times multilingual) context, students are stimulated to expand their specific and general knowledge by means of reading local and foreign quality newspapers in the working languages, viewing cable TV news programmes, interviews, documentaries and so forth, attending academic events, conferences, and lectures in any area of interest, and then reporting on their experience to their classmates. Vocabulary expansion and the widening of cultural horizons are the usual benefits of this procedure. On the last teaching day, each student has to present a comprehensive bilingual (or multilingual) glossary of their research work, and to submit a report and detailed commentary about their individual exploits, including reflections upon their progress throughout the semester.

Regarding the quality of performance in STR by prospective conference interpreters, results have been very satisfactory. More talented students with a natural flair for STR do reach a level of professional excellence, but what is particularly rewarding is that even those who at the beginning of the course stumbled through the text and presented more difficulty in tackling STR do in fact advance and reach at least a significant level of proficiency in STR, as attested in the final exams presided over by external examiners.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we expatiated on STR scenarios, presented a few definitions, referred to and commented on STR varieties and to theoretical views about the nature and specificity of this oral translation mode. We then commented on some aspects of the methodological approach used in the Conference Interpreter Training Course from PUC-SP. Our purpose was to highlight the need for proper training in STR, in view of the fact that mastering the skills involved in this complex textual reformulation process is a must for those seeking for qualification and insertion in the professional milieu of translators and interpreters, as well as a valuable credential for those who wish broaden their horizons in the world of bilingual/multilingual communication.

We expect the ideas, concepts and considerations presented so far, which result from our initial investigation into the field and practical experience in the teaching of STR, may lead to further reflection and study, and perhaps stimulate even teachers of foreign languages to experiment with using STR with their students.

Undoubtedly, the manifold linguistic, cognitive and communicative strategies, skills and abilities required by and developed through STR attest to the relevance of its insertion in the different scenarios referred to in this discussion.

References


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Notes

1 In the Brazilian educational system, one (1) credit stands for one (1) hour of class work. Thus, a 30-credit discipline comprises 30 hours of class work.

2 In Brazil, due to conditions imposed by the local job market, both interpreters and translators are expected to work from language A to language B as well.