



INTERPRETING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF WAILARI COLLEGE, KANO STATE, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Interpreting is a communicative event which occurs during cross-cultural communication when two interlocutors do not share a language. In the process of rapid information exchange from various languages and cultures, competent interpreters are mandatory. The major goal of interpreting is that a message makes the same impact on the target audience as was intended by the speaker in the source language (Angelelli, 2000). In their professional activities, interpreters encounter a wide variety of problems. Given that interpreting is a major communication skill, this research aims at investigating the challenges faced by interpreters using descriptive method. The study collected its data by recording two student participants who interpreted all deliberations in the course of the Parents-Teachers Association meeting of Wailari College, Kano from English to Hausa, as most parents present at the meeting did not understand English language considered to be the official language in Nigeria. The research revealed that the difficulties faced by interpreters when interpreting included cultural background, time constraint, interlocutors speaking speed and word memorisation among others. Furthermore, it had found some strategies to solve the difficulties in interpreting activities such as working as a team, preparation, using Dictionary and communication strategies.

Keywords: *Interpreting, Interlocutor, Communication challenges*

1. Introduction

The goal of interpretation is that a message makes the same impact on the target audience that a speaker intends for an audience of the same language. Interpretation like all other forms of communication is a multi-faceted activity; it involves a sender, a channel and a recipient. It is a form of communication between people with different linguistic and cultural background (Qian, 1994).

More often than not, the task of the interpreter is portrayed as one of “transcoding” - a simple changing of one code to another (Angelelli, 2000). This is not enough to meet the goal of interpretation since there is much more to communication than words or signs. According to Angelelli (2000) communication involves interaction, context, form, gist, gesture, tone and relations of power. The basic principle outlined in interpreting is the importance of language proficiency because interpreting is more than simply transferring words from one language to another. It involves understanding the meaning, the sense of what is being said before redelivering it into the targeted language. This means that to concentrate on the message, the interpreter has to be well acquainted with the topic at hand and integrate it in the communicative setting, to exploit not only the verbal information but also all other information implicit in the event. Hymes (1964) highlights that, most interpreters lack the necessary background with respect to language proficiency and world knowledge. Since it's a means of communication interpreting involves the transfer of meaning from one language (the source) to another (the target) language.

The transfer of meaning is identified as one of the basic problems in interpreting. The transfer of meaning involves relaying on lexical meaning, grammatical meaning and rhetorical meaning, including implied or inferable meaning (Hatim & Mason, 1990). The question that arises is: how



does the interpreter cope with this basic problem of transferring meaning from one language to another?

The source text sender transmits a message through the source language to the interpreter who in turn resends it through the target language to the target audience. Thus the interpreter is seen as a transitional point of contact between two languages. This task puts him in direct contact with the senders and receivers of the message. The interpreter has to assess the intention of the speaker and transform what is being spoken at all levels of communication, including intentions and implicature. Thus an interpreter holds a key position, in the field of communication (Herbert, 1978).

2. Literature Review

Interpreting may not be common in some monolingual societies but International events often involve interpreters to assist international participants in getting the best experiences. Being interpreters may appear easy, but without a doubt, they face challenges when performing their jobs.

2.1 Interpreting vs. Translating

In order for communication to succeed, language uses voiced symbols to pass a message from speaker to a listener and from the writer to the reader. However, in the event that one specific audience fails to understand a certain language, then there is need to get the message and to communicate with the speaker. In such context, for the message and communication thus so needed to be realized it will be necessary to employ an interpreter, in order to complete the communication process.

The interpreter then comes in handy as a communication bridge between the speaker of the source language and the audience who understands the second language. The translator therefore communicates the message from one language of the original speaker, to the audience using the language they understand. By so doing, the translator breaks the communication barrier which may be caused by a character in the communication process not understanding one of the languages used. The interpreter does not only take the role of bridging different people for communication purposes. He/she also has other roles in the community they serve. For example, the interpreter will also be passing cultural (traditional) messages from one community to another. Interpretation is also used as a skill and a way of teaching a second language or a foreign language. In this context, the second language thus used is then interpreted into the first language in order to make the learner understand the whole process faster (Newmark, 1988b; Appel & Muysken, 1987). Therefore, the interpreter is seen having an important role in communication; that the interpreter acts as a bridge over which communication and understanding crosses from the speaker, to reach his audience, suggesting that successful communication highly depends on the interpreter.

2.1.1 Challenges of interpreting

Although interpreters usually possess a high level of linguistic competence, they often find themselves grasping for the right vocabulary to explain the intended topic. This situation is in line with Gile (2009), stating that interpreters should master a high vocabulary level from different languages. Pratiwi (2016) maintains that lack of linguistic competence, i.e., vocabulary shortage, would hinder interpreters from delivering the interlocutors. It is because they fail to comprehend the message entirely. Nurfauziyah (2017) asserts that failing to convey the message from the interlocutors is likely caused by unfamiliar vocabulary. Accents also become one of the challenges faced by interpreters. As many scholars assert (Mahmoodzadeh, 2006; Ling, Chang, & Kuo, 2013; Baranyai, 2011), good interpreters should have the linguistic competence in terms of understanding a large variety of accents that may come up from dialects. Due to the interpreters' unfamiliarity with a specific accent, interpreting may not be achieved. Chang and Wu (2014) reveal that accents are perceived as the main difficulties when interpreting and that several accents are more challenging than the others.



2.1.2. Cultural Background

Interpreters' cultural backgrounds may hinder the process. Gile (2009) mentions that cultural background is closely related to the audience language. Thus, when the interpreter has a different cultural background from or unfamiliar with the audience's culture in which he has to perform his job, it can cause a problem. Pujiati & Zualiani (2014) also claim that cultural background influences international communication. For example, what is expected in one culture may be a taboo in the other culture. Thus, interpreters should be familiar with the language and the culture in which the language is mostly spoken to minimize misinterpretation.

2.1.3. Time Constraint

Interpreters have minimal time to convey the messages received from one speaker to another in a different language, especially in simultaneous interpreting. In contrast, Fugen, Waibel, and Kolss (2007) mention that interpreters will need time to adapt to the target language and area to get the best results, which is supported by Nurfauziyah (2017), stating that many interpreters could not convey the message nicely due to lack of time. Unfortunately, interpreters may not have the luxury of time. According to Pratiwi (2016), an interpreter's limited time should convey the message correctly, or the meaning will be likely missed.

2.1.4. Interlocutors' Speaking Speed

One of the most common challenges faced by the interpreters is the interlocutors' speaking speed. Since an interpreter deals with linguistic aspects and works with various factors (Amini, 2011), speaking speed does matter. Hasanshahi & Shahrokhi (2016) state that an interpreter ideally handles 120 – 150 words per minute; thus, when the interlocutors speak at average speed, the interpreter would have a full comprehension of the topic discussed (Yu, 2017; Nurfauziyah, 2017).

2.1.5. Issues with Word Memorisation

In general, people's memory is divided into two aspects: short-term and long-term memory. Phelan (2001) mentions that short-term memory is used to recall what is listed, and the other one is used to contextualize what is listened to. In terms of interpreting, memory is one of the most significant aspects that may cause challenges. Pratiwi (2016) & Nurfauziyah (2017) state that issues with memorization could cause interpreters to be not able to perform their job well. Interpreters must use short and long term memory simultaneously while working on translating from one language to another.

2.2. Strategies to Overcome Interpreting Challenges

This section discusses the general strategies commonly applied by interpreters when facing challenges.

2.2.1. Working as a Team

Working as a team can be one of the most effective solutions when facing challenges while interpreting, especially for memorization problems. Zagoto (2016) asserts that working in a team can better comprehend the target language to help each other. Similar to Zagoto (2016), Alghail & Mahfoodh (2016) also state that getting assistance from teammates will make it easier for interpreters to understand the topics when interpreting. Ma (2013) suggests a specific way for interpreters to work in a team. Ma (2013) proposes two interpreters – active and passive interpreters. The active interpreter is responsible for listening to the interlocutors and understand what is said, while the passive interpreter is the one who has sufficient time to supply the active interpreter with documents or extra information.



2.2.2. Preparation

The preparation can be done by familiarizing themselves with accents they might encounter when interpreting. In general, the interpreters have been informed about what they might encounter or who their audience are. The information can be used to feel comfortable with the accents, which, in the end, it will lead to more straightforward communication (Hough, 2010). Pradana (2018) also asserts that being familiar with an accent can help the interpreters to comprehend the language better.

2.2.3. Using Dictionary

Using a dictionary is a common strategy to face the challenge that relates to linguistic competence. Problems with lexicon, syntax, or semantics of a language can be solved with a dictionary. Mohamed et al. (2017) mention that a dictionary is a tool to solve problems with lexicon or vocabulary, find the meaning of unfamiliar words, and confirm the meaning of partially known words. Nowadays, interpreters do not use a printed dictionary anymore. Instead, they use their smartphone for a dictionary or an application to help them with the language (Wang, Teng, & Chen, 2015). In line with this situation, Xueping (2014) states that a dictionary is used to solve many linguistics problems when interpreting.

2.2.4. Using Communication Strategies

Interpreting is about applying communication strategies. Communication strategies are quite helpful for multilingual people to convey messages. Interpreting's ultimate goal is to maintain communication among the interlocutors. A communication strategy, such as finding the word's synonym, is probably the most common strategies to be applied. Li (2015) mentions that an interpreter will likely provide a similar term or synonym in the target language when he encounters linguistic problems in the source language.

The other communication strategy that is commonly used when interpreting and communicating, in general, is miming. Interpreters use body language or miming to make the meaning clearer. Moreover, Wang (2017) states that using body language is a useful tool for communicating with others and expressing their ideas. Besides, body language can give extra information that allows communication to take place effectively. The next communication strategy used by interpreters is to use language functions in social interaction, such as asking for repetition and asking permission to use the second language. Russel (2010) maintains that these strategies are used to confirm and clarify if interpreters need complete and suitable information because interpreters cannot make any assumption from the information received; thus, clarifications are needed.

3. The Study

This research is descriptive in its design and aims at exploring the experiences, personal opinion and perception of the interpreters about the challenges faced in the course of interpreting. Detailed information to gain a better understanding of the issues being researched needs to be obtained.

3.1. Participants

The research was conducted at a private secondary school (Wailari College) in Kano state, Nigeria. The participants were student interpreters who were made to partake in the Parents-Teachers Association of the college as at the time of one of the association's meeting. The two participants were selected because they were considered articulate and their availability for participating. Thus, rich data were obtained. The participants were Ibrahim Madaci Ayya, a science male student in the senior secondary class three who was 18 years old when the data was collected and Khajia Abubakar who is a female and was in class three of the Arts students in the senior secondary of the college and was aged 17 years. Both Ibrahim and Khadija are Hausa speakers by origin even though Ibrahim can speak Hausa, Fulani and English languages, Khadija could only speak Hausa and English as Hausa language is the mother tongue to both of the subjects.



Although all participants showed a high level of English competence, none of them used the English language in their daily life because, in Kano state, English is only used inside the classroom for these particular students.

All names used to address the participants were pseudonyms to protect the participants' confidentiality. Consent was obtained verbally before the event. Also, participants acknowledged their rights before the data were eventually collected.

3.2. Data Collection Method and Analysis

In-depth interviews were used to collect the data of participants' experiences. Mc Namara (1999) states that interviews are useful to obtain more in-depth information needed to answer the research questions. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in English to avoid misunderstanding. Member checking was conducted for trustworthiness purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) by sending the transcriptions to the participants to see if they would like to alter any information provided during the interviews to ensure the data's truthfulness. No alteration was made to the transcription. The data were then coded and themed based on the similar themes appearing in the data. The excerpts presented in the findings section were the translated version of the original data.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are interwoven through its presentation to answer the research questions. The first part of the section is to serve the first aim of the paper.

4.1. The challenges faced by student interpreters when interpreting

4.1.1 Lack of Understanding of Source Language

As the community in which they lived was Hausa, they naturally used the Hausa language to communicate. Ibrahim and Khadija shared their experiences when interpreting and stated that they found it challenging to interpret the meaning due to lack of linguistic competence of the English language. During the interpreting process, the students often mixed the Hausa and English languages, which became the student interpreters' most significant challenge.

The data showed that Ibrahim and Khadija found it difficult to interpret the proceedings due to lack of understanding of source language. In this context, the source language was English. English language alone has several politeness levels, with which many English younger people are not familiar – let alone non-English speaking people. It is common for people to use Hausa language when talking to strangers as it is also expected that many people in Kano do not use English language which is termed as one of the major languages in Nigeria. In the meantime, Ibrahim and Khadija are not familiar with some of the high level of English language used at the meeting. Besides, they are not initially from the area in which the English language is used extensively. As a result, they were not able to interpret exactly some of the words and sentences to audience correctly. The following are some of the words and sentences that posed challenges to the interpreters in the course of interpreting interpersonal communication during the Parents/Teachers association meeting of Wailari College, Kano, Nigeria on which this study was undertaken: *Abandon, Bullying, Circumvent, Graciously, Henceforth, Hustling, Proprietors, Peer group, Open day, Ridiculous*. The above mentioned words appeared in the following sentences, thus:

- i. Some Teachers *abandoned* their work, failing to report for duty without any tangible reason. Interpreted to mean: Decided
- ii. Some Senior Students are in the habit of *bullying* the junior ones especially on their way home after school.
Interpreted to mean: Playing



- iii. Any Parent/Guardian that fails to be in *consonance* with the school rules should be sanctioned.
Interpreted to mean: Break
- iv. As Parents, we *graciously* appeal to the school authority to live up to expectation by contacting us immediately on any matter that requires our attention.
Interpreted to mean: Sadly
- v. Any student that is habitual in coming to school late should *hence forth* be made to go back home.
Interpreted to mean: in the future
- vi. Our children are said to always *hustle* for break time instead of paying attention to the lesson.
Interpreted to mean: waiting
- vii. There are *Proprietors* of private schools that have not even attended primary school in their lives.
Interpreted to mean: Property owners
- viii. We should not be weary to find out who our children associate with because *peer group* influence can land one's child/children into trouble.
Interpreted to mean: Bad friends
- xi. I wish to call on the school authority to consider organising an *open day*, where both Parents and Teachers can interact face to face, discuss issues of common interest and even inspect the school environment with a view to rendering some assistance.
Interpreted to mean: Opening
- x. It is quite *ridiculous* for a teacher to demand financial assistance from his/her student rather, they should seek for any type of help from the school authority.
Interpreted to mean: Wonderful.

In this case, the interpreters' source language's linguistic competence, the English language competence, was relatively low, which hindered the student interpreters from performing their job well. The finding was in line with Ribas (2012), who claims that lack of understanding of the source language can be a problem in interpreting. Ribas (2012) adds that the interpreter cannot build the communication well because of a lack of understanding of source language.

4.1.2 Lack of Vocabulary

Another challenge faced by the interpreters was the lack of vocabulary. Ibrahim stated that he could not mention some of the vocabulary for daily life objects. For example, he did not know the Hausa word for courtesy. The same situation happened to Khadija, who explained that she suddenly realized she either forgot or did not know the Hausa words for some terms such as plead, circumstance, and prerogative. As a result, student interpreters could not perform speech because of a lack of vocabulary in English. The finding was similar to Pratiwi (2016), who asserts that when interpreters do not have many vocabularies, they will find it hard to deliver the speaker's message because they cannot get the meaning properly. Also, Nurfauziyah (2017) claims that the interpreter encounters problems interpreting the speaker's message when finding unfamiliar vocabulary.

4.1.3. Difficulty with Accents

Nigerian interpreters like their parents' counterparts had unique accents that sometimes made student interpreters got difficulties comprehending the language. Nigeria is a multicultural country with diverse cultures, races, and languages, such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Kanuri, Nufe, Tiv, Ijaw



etc., which likely influenced their accents based on the students' mother and or first language. The unique accents made student interpreters challenged to catch the points of conversation. The accents may entail unfamiliar pronunciation to student interpreters. They were more familiar with Hausa and Kanuri accents from among the speeches of parents who contributed at the meeting. The findings are in line with Asgari (2015) explaining that pronunciation is an essential aspect of interpreters' success.

4.2. The Strategies used by Interpreters to overcome difficulties in Interpreting.

The followings are to serve the second aim of the study.

4.2.1. Asking to use the second Language

This strategy was used to solve the lack of vocabulary in the source language. In this context, the first language used was Hausa, and the second language was the English language. The Interpreters asked the organisers to use the Hausa language because most of the parents had a low English language competency level. Ibrahim stated that he asked the organisers to speak in the Hausa language since he did not well understand English. It helped him interpret the language well. The same statement was mentioned by Khadija, explaining that she told the executives that she did not understand English, and they used a more significant portion of the Hausa language. It is similar to Russel (2010), arguing that the interpreters need to maximize the source language to interpret the speech without fewer challenges.

4.2.2. Increasing Focus on Source Language

The strategy overcame the difficulty in understanding speakers' pronunciation. One of the participants at the meeting, Halima, revealed that her strategy to cope with difficulty in understanding certain speakers' pronunciation was done by increasing focus to the source language. In this context, the source language was English, and the speakers were Hausa students. She listened to the points of conversation carefully. Also, she had to pay attention to the speaker whose accent was unfamiliar as he/she was a non-Hausa speaker. She believed this strategy was quite useful to assist conversation going on during interpreting. It can be said that the student interpreters employed the strategy by increasing focus to deal with main items in all speeches. The result is supported by Meliadin (2017), asserting that the interpreter should focus on what the speaker said to understand the content of the speech. An interpreter must focus and concentrate during interpreting and catching up on discussions on many topics (Nolan, 2005).

4.2.3. Using Body Language

This strategy was used to face the challenge due to a lack of vocabulary. The data revealed that one student interpreter used body language to overcome the difficulties in interpreting activity. Ibrahim argued that he used body language with the intention that the participants could get the point he was trying to explain. Additionally, Ibrahim said he used body language because he did not know the vocabulary. Thus, he tried to use body language to deal with a particular problem. This result is in line with Wang (2017), explaining that a body language is an excellent tool for communicating with others and expressing oneself. Besides that, body language can be a supplement or information and allow effective communication with language.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Since most student interpreters were not professionals, their competence cannot be equalised with professional interpreters. The challenges when performing their job can contribute to their experiences when they graduate and work with the community. The challenge of being unfamiliar with less popular accents can raise awareness of the different cultures. Also, understanding the local culture, including its language, as one of the challenges, can encourage student interpreters to be more mindful of the local language. Strategies employed by the student interpreters can encourage reflection on their learning. For example, when student interpreters used body language to explain



or describe some vocabulary. It is a communication strategy commonly employed by language learners to convey the message effectively.

The research implies that interpreters need to receive exposure to transferring from one language to another, especially foreign languages. Being interpreters can be an effective way to allow students to practice their language competence, but at the same time, they receive exposure to the local cultures. Nigeria, rich with diverse dialects and indigenous cultures, is a great place to provide interpreters exposure.

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