Deliberate Practice: The Unicorn of Interpreting Studies

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1. Introduction

Deliberate practice, as described in expertise theory of cognitive psychology, stems, at least in part, from Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer’s seminal 1993 study of violin students from the Music Academy of West Berlin. In their article, Ericsson et al. take issue with the belief that truly exceptional performers are unique because they possess different types of innate giftedness. They say such reasoning is oversimplified and suggest that a truly scientific account of such skills would have to describe the development leading up to exceptional performance, as well as the “genetic and acquired characteristics that mediate it” (1993: 363, italics added). Furthermore, they argue that a scientific mapping of exceptional performance must identify critical differences between exceptional and ordinary performers. And, finally, they suggest that when researchers argue that there are genetic differences, those differences must be proven to be genetically heritable as being hereditary. Because it would be difficult for researchers to provide this evidence, Ericsson et al. recommend researchers investigate environmental factors that could “selectively promote and facilitate the achievement of such performance” instead (1993: 363). Based on their research, Ericsson et al. suggest one crucial environmental factor is deliberate practice.

Of course, the issue of deliberate practice is not without controversy. One of the main counterarguments to Ericsson et al.’s proposal is that even if practice is important, researchers cannot rule out the contribution of ability factors. Some have suggested it is unfair to less able individuals to claim that hard work is enough to achieve excellence (Detterman 2014). Furthermore, several studies have shown that deliberate practice is a weak explanation of the variance in performance in many areas (Macnamara, Hambrick and Oswald 2014; Menz and Hambrick, 2010). Ericsson counters these studies by stating that the structure of expert performance is so unique it “cannot be
extrapolated from the performance–ability relations observed in the general adult population” (Ericsson 2014: 81).

Deliberate practice in interpreting poses another challenge for the researcher because the few studies done on the construct in this field have failed to show the mere occurrence (let alone the effect) of deliberate practice in interpreting (Tiselius 2013; Albl-Mikasa 2013). It is possible that interpreting researchers cannot find an effect for deliberate practice because they have incorrectly defined the construct. Alternatively, deliberate practice in interpreting may be a unicorn: a noble creature with the power to redeem novice interpreters be they only pure, which unfortunately exists only in fairy tales. With only two studies in the field, we do not have sufficient evidence to decide whether deliberate practice is an unproven fact or only a fiction.

This article describes the theoretical foundations of deliberate practice, differences between practice and deliberate practice, and how the construct has been studied in the fields of cognitive psychology broadly and interpreting specifically. It will also investigate criticisms of deliberate practice in the field.
2. Deliberate practice and interpreting

Practice has a prominent place in interpreting pedagogy. Interpreting classes are heavily focused on exercises of interpreting. Students are encouraged to practice at home or during informal seminar groups. Students are also either told (or instructed how) to evaluate themselves and each other during these practice sessions. This teaching method seems to be closely modelled on Ericsson et al.’s (1993) explanation of how to develop expertise.

In defining deliberate practice, Ericsson et al. (1993) divide activity into three types: work (defined as performing the activity and being remunerated as a professional), play (defined as performing the activity for pure pleasure), and deliberate practice. Based on activities of the violinists they observed, Ericsson et al. describe deliberate practice as an activity that occurs when time has been set aside only for practice, with the particular goal of practice and with exercises aimed at improving and refining the main skill. This type of practice is often coached either by peers or by trainers. Ericsson (2008: 991) states that “significant improvements in performance were realized when individuals were 1) given a task with a well-defined goal, 2) motivated to improve, 3) provided with feedback, and 4) provided with ample opportunities for repetition and gradual refinements of their performance.” He stresses the need for total concentration during deliberate practice, along with the importance of problem-solving and the development of better methods of performing the tasks to achieve a higher level of performance.

Methods used to teach interpreting seem to apply Ericsson’s postulates about deliberate practice. Students are told to practice during training, and classes are exercise based. Interpreting students practice both the main skill (interpreting or transfer of a message from one language to another)
and relevant sub-skills (language knowledge, general culture, note-taking, active listening/memory exercises). Ericsson et al. (1993: 367) suggest the first step an effective learning process involves providing students with explicit instructions. Then students perform under supervision to allow individualized diagnosis of errors, informative feedback and remedial part training. The student’s progression also needs to be monitored and challenges introduced at the appropriate moment. Traditional (conference) interpreting training is modelled on a pedagogical practice similar to what Ericsson (1993) describe as necessary for developing expertise.

Another feature of the deliberate practice performed by experts is that it is a life-long activity. Expert performers engage in deliberate practice throughout their career in order to continue and develop their outstanding performance (Day 2010). For the interpreting student, this means deliberate practice must become a life-long habit that continues throughout their work lives. Therefore, to understand the value of deliberate practice in interpreting, we need to investigate whether experienced interpreters practice their interpreting skills in similar ways as violin players practice their scales or soccer players their spin. What does the interpreting profession and performance reveal to us about deliberate practice? Can deliberate practice be defined in similar ways for interpreters as for soccer players? Tiselius and Hild (2017: 431) point out that “the impact of deliberate practice on interpreting and translation expertise has yet to be fully investigated”.

There are some important differences between athletic or musical professions and interpreting, teaching or medical professions. For one, the musician or the athlete have already, in their performance, two different types of activities (i.e., public performance on stage or on the field and private daily training sessions). The interpreter or the teacher, on the other hand, spends his or her working days performing in the booth or in the classroom, and private work sessions focus on things other than the main skill (i.e., preparation of background material or knowledge enhancement). Secondly,
most professional musicians and athletes start their training very young, and learn the routine of deliberate practice through their training, to a point where it almost becomes second nature. The onset of both training and professional practice for an interpreter is much later, and although, at least for interpreters, practice is included in the curriculum, it is not clear whether it becomes second nature. Finally, the extrinsic incentives for becoming an outstanding musician or athlete are many but the extrinsic incentives for becoming an outstanding interpreter are few. The outstanding interpreter will not earn any gold medals or prize money for his performance. One can argue that an interpreter who does a good job in the eyes of the customer will get more jobs, but this cannot be compared to the fame or money awarded to professional athletes. For these reasons deliberate practice may look different for interpreters, teachers or surgeons than for athletes, musicians or grand masters of chess. However, deliberate practice has not been studied extensively in the fields of teaching or interpreting.

3. Research on deliberate practice outside interpreting

Deliberate practice encompasses a number of components such as planning the practice, practicing different sub-skills, attending to reactions and incorporation of feedback. From a cognitive perspective, it may be challenging to break down deliberate practice into testable variables. It may be difficult to single out exactly which type of practice activity has an effect on performance or to understand which part of the practice activity is most directly linked to performance gains. Because deliberate practice is supposed to show effects over longer periods of time, the research design must take practice frequency, consistency and longevity into account as well. Deliberate practice is often studied using methods such as retrospective interviews (Sosniak 2007) or diaries (Deakin 2007), rather than controlled experiments. The use of retrospective interviews or diaries allow for the researcher to investigate how practice is planned and performed over time, but these methods
may not allow researchers to identify exactly what features of practice made a significant difference for the performer in question.

Sosniak (2007: 94 ff.) identifies some challenges of retrospective interviews (e.g., issues of memory), and highlights the difficulty of defining a sample and also a control group in these studies. She further explains that it can be tricky to control for historical factors and conditions that may lead a person to become an expert. For example, a retrospective interview with a particularly creative artist who grew up in a hippie collective in the 1960s might lead the researcher to falsely conclude that a hippie collective is necessary for gaining expertise in creative artistry.

Despite these concerns, Sosniak highlighted several salient factors from retrospective interview studies of deliberate practice, such as early onset, positive reinforcement, family situation and communities of practice. She also found crucial transition points or “phases of qualitatively different experiences” (2007: 297), when the future expert evolves from doing something just for fun to serious practice, or moves from developing competence to developing expertise. Even if we understand expert knowledge, Sosniak warns we should not try to teach what the experts are doing to novices, but rather adapt the knowledge to a level appropriate for the learner.

Deakin et al. (2007: 303) suggested deliberate practice may be studied at the micro-level of a practice event, where the activity is explored in depth with both objective variables (such as time spent on different practice activities or time spent listening to instructions or discussing with the instructor) and subjective variables (such as evaluating the quality of the activity). This micro-level investigation could be combined with macro-level study of the subjects’ diary notes on practice (cf. Ericsson et al. 1993). As Deakin et al. point out, one of the challenges is isolating relevant activities. In addition, it may be difficult to identify exactly which exercises have an effect on the development of expertise.
When Shreve (2006) proposed a theoretical framework for studying expertise in translation, deliberate practice was one of the cornerstones. Going a step further, Diamond and Shreve (2017) state that practice performed without the necessary conditions for it to be deliberate risk the development of expertise. Diamond and Shreve point to Ericsson’s list (see section 2) of the required conditions for deliberate practice and caution that the development of expertise is still subject to individual differences in psychological and behavioural characteristics, even if tasks are well-defined and feedback is optimal. The definition of the task being practiced may be a significant challenge in applying deliberate practice in interpreting because the interpreting skill is notoriously difficult to frame (e.g. Albl-Mikasa 2013). Consequently, we must ask ourselves, if a practitioner has planned for deliberate practise as postulated here, but is not clear as to which skill s/he is actually practicing, is that practice deliberate or not?

Cognitive factors may influence the ability to practice deliberately (Diamond and Shreve 2017: 477). For instance, Meinz and Hambrick (2010) concluded that working memory capacity may limit the ultimate level a performer can attain in a certain area. In their study of piano-players engaged in a sight-reading task, Meinz and Hambrick found working memory capacity accounted for 7.4% of the variance that could not be attributed to deliberate practice. This suggests deliberate practice may sometimes be insufficient to overcome limitations in basic abilities. The question is whether deliberate practice activities have an effect on, for instance, cognitive abilities. Diamond and Shreve suggest deliberate practice may optimize the neuro-cognitive condition for translation expertise. Ericsson (2014) argues general personality traits cannot be used to predict excellence in a field as future experts start young, and it may be difficult to tease apart previous training, environment and knowledge from actual ability, especially if the ability is tested at a mature age.
4. Research on deliberate practice in interpreting

Since the late 1990s several studies have focused on expertise in interpreting (e.g., Ivanova 1999; Moser-Mercer 2000, Liu 2001; Vik-Tuovinen 2006). Most studies on expertise in interpreting compare experienced interpreters’ performances with students’ or novice interpreters’ performances. This is a traditional methodology in interpreting studies in general (for an overview of studies on experienced interpreters and their performance see Liu 2008). Tiselius (2013) examined both cross-sectional and longitudinal data on expertise in interpreting and found that interpreters did not necessarily develop interpreting skill as expected over time. Differences in performance were found in the cross-sectional data, but not in the longitudinal data. This pattern of results may indicate that cross-sectional differences in performance between interpreters with longer or shorter experience may be due to individual differences rather than development over time. It may also suggest that characteristics that interpreting scholars use to define who is an expert, and to identify potential experts to study (e.g., years of experience, outstanding reputation among peers, professional achievements) may be misleading.

In in-depth interviews with the participants in the longitudinal group Tiselius (2013) also found that the concept of practicing the interpreting skill and deliberate practice were less clearly understood than expected. Participants did not have specific ideas about how they practiced the interpreting skill or what goals they had for improving it. Although the interpreters in the study all clearly stated that they strived to deliver excellent interpreting, and that they were constantly evaluating themselves, none of them talked about practicing the interpreting skill. They referred to many components of the deliberate practice process, such as getting feedback from colleagues, listening to interpreting and learning new topics or languages (c.f. Ericsson 2000), but none of them
were labelled practice, either deliberate or otherwise. Therefore, Tiselius called these skill enhancing activities instead of deliberate practice. In Meinz and Hambrick’s (2010) study, the researchers asked the participants to indicate for every year of their career, the number of hours per week spent on deliberate practice, with the only goal to improve their performance. In light of the results from Tiselius’ study, it is unclear whether the interpreters in that study could have been expected to answer such questions at all.

Diamond and Shreve (2017) suggest that exercises to strengthen working memory strategies may be beneficial for interpreters, and most interpreting programs include a memory exercise unit aimed at improving working memory. The literature does not seem to confirm that interpreters have better working memory skills than others (Signorelli and Obler 2013), but rather that functions related to the central executive functioning (such as attention split) have been shown to differ between interpreters and control groups (Timarová 2012).

Albl-Mikasa (2013) also investigated deliberate practice in interpreting using semi-structured interviews with experienced interpreters. In the interviews, respondents listed professional development courses they completed shortly after graduating from an interpreting program, but she notes that “in the later stages, the interpreters seemed to be too busy for such courses” (2013:23). The participants in Albl-Mikasa’s study responded, just as Tiselius’ participants, that they “did relatively little to further develop and cultivate their competence(s)” (2016:23), and that they were practicing on the job.

The interpreters in both Albl-Mikasa and Tiselius’ studies identified areas of competence development and skill enhancement, but these were not related to the interpreting skill, but rather to other skills such as language learning. On a direct question from Albl-Mikasa, respondents answered that they practice the interpreting skill on the job, but otherwise not: “Cultivating my interpreter skills
is not something I do particularly consciously or systematically, but as part of my assignments, […]

As far as interpreting proper is concerned, again it’s getting better by interpreting, I simply focus on not repeating the same mistakes” (2013: 26). Albl-Mikasa suggests this reflects the interpreters’ intuitive understanding that practice, routine and experience are the way to develop high-end competence in interpreting. Although these features are necessary for all type of experts they seem to pertain more to the development of routine expertise than of adaptive expertise. Routine expertise is the type of expertise that can be developed for well-known routinized tasks (e.g. for interpreting: same type of meeting and topics; same type of interpreting techniques; the same speakers, and; same type of interpreting challenges). Adaptive expertise on the other hand means that the expert can apply previous knowledge to new situations and handle new tasks using previously acquired skills (e.g. for interpreting; different topics; different speakers; different challenges, different techniques). Sonnentag, Niessen & Volmer 2007: 377 ff). One crucial difference between routine expertise and adaptive expertise would be how the individual applied deliberate practice. Adaptive and routine expertise have not been explicitly investigated in interpreting studies, but one could assume that freelance interpreters would be more prone to develop adaptive expertise given the constantly changing assignments of a freelancer.

Albl-Mikasa’s findings also support those of Vik-Tuovinen (2006), who found that experienced interpreters in her study reported less time engaged in preparation than inexperienced interpreters. This may suggest that experienced individuals draw on previous knowledge and skills, and therefore need less time to prepare. Another possibility is that Vik-Tuovinen’s experienced participants were more effective in their preparation, and could focus on exactly what was needed, (cf. the expert engaging in deliberate practice and focusing exactly on the practice needed rather than just repeating an exercise in a disconnected way).
Albl-Mikasa says the way an interpreter practices, or at least how he or she reports on their practice, may imply they are not interested in continuing to develop their competence. She therefore suggests that the way the interpreters go about competence development (e.g., that “they invest little effort in competence building, rely on on-the-job practice, and let regular work routine and experience take the lead rather than engage in systematic and more formal professional skills development” (2013: 32) could be linked to how Shreve (2006) suggests translation competence evolves to support expertise, and that cognitive changes are at the foundation of translation expertise (Shreve and Diamond described this for interpreters in 2017). Albl-Mikasa argues that since interpreters lack environments where they can get feedback, they develop what Shreve described as “a high level of self-directed ‘metacognitive activity’ related to performance assessment […] including self-regulation, namely, the ability to attend to, monitor, and reflect on the nature of the text and the task” (Shreve 2006:32). Furthermore, Albl-Mikasa suggests based on Shreve that as translation (or interpreting) competence increases the process becomes automatized and less effortful, which may explain why – after many years of practice and developed expertise – “experience without deliberate practice may suffice to uphold, stabilize, and even strengthen expert performance, because it is topped up with metacognitive regulation” (2013: 33). If this is true for expertise in interpreting and translation, why is it not the same for expertise in chess or soccer?

5. Conclusion

The results reported by Tiselius and Albl-Mikasa suggest we need to re-examination the application of expertise theory in interpreting. Albl-Mikasa propose that deliberate practice may not play a key role for developing expertise in interpreting that has been posited by Ericsson (2000). Considering what the profession of interpreting looks like, and considering how few studies there are about
deliberate practice in interpreting, I would argue that we can either assume that there is expertise in interpreting without deliberate practice, with a different kind of practice, or, maybe that there is too little deliberate lifelong practice in the interpreting profession. An interpreter who has passed a competition for an interpreting position at the UN or EU is no doubt a very highly skilled interpreter, but after taking up a position with an institution the incentives for setting time aside to practice the main skill may be less evident, than when the interpreter was practising for passing the entrance test. In comparison with athletes or musicians, the tradition of practice or access to practise activities is less obvious. In the institutional context of conference interpreting there are clear incentives for learning new languages or subject areas, therefore, the successful interpreter in those terms is maybe the one with the most diverse language combination or the broadest topical knowledge. Furthermore, in order to earn more money or climb in the ranks, administrative skills rather than expert interpreting skills are required. Hence, our understanding of expertise in interpreting in an institutional perspective may differ from the reality of what actually counts.

In the beginning of this paper I asked what the interpreting profession and performance tell us about deliberate practice. I believe that we cannot be sure what deliberate practice means to interpreters, but it certainly does not mean spending time alone focusing on mastering the main skill. Furthermore, it also tells us that the concept of deliberate practice may not be borrowed without problematizing or adapting from cognitive psychology. The mechanism, even if similar, can most likely not be defined in soccer terms. I also asked if the oblivious practitioner, who practices without knowing which skill s/he practices, would still see improvement in performance. Albl-Mikasa’s results suggest this would be true, but the data are qualitative and evaluative, and may be biased. It is thus difficult to know whether such oblivious practice is useful. Furthermore, one must ask oneself, if experienced interpreters can uphold expert performance without deliberate practice, then
why is it not the same for chess- and soccer players.

This paper has asked more questions than it has answered. Whether deliberate practice is the unicorn of interpreting studies or not remains to be investigated, but one thing can be concluded without doubt. Deliberate practice is not studied in a satisfactory way in interpreting studies. Deliberate practice in interpreting deserves more both quantitative and qualitative studies before we can remove it from the list of skills necessary to become an expert interpreter.
References


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