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On Common Ground?
The Swedish Experience with University Education of Interpreter Teachers

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On Common Ground? The Swedish Experience with University Education of Interpreter Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reports on participants’ experiences with a university-level course for teachers of interpreting, given three times at Stockholm University, Sweden. An important purpose of the course was to provide a collaborative learning environment and to support and promote a feeling of common ground between educators working within various branches of interpreting.

Drawing primarily upon a focus group interview and on students’ written evaluations, we have indications that the course did promote a sense of similarity between students across traditional borders. Also, an interesting difference between spoken-language interpreting educators and sign-language interpreting educators emerged. Educators with experiences from the first category of courses seemed to be much oriented towards preparing the students for a final exam, similar to the national certification test (basically, a teacher assessed proficiency test), whereas those working in sign-language-interpreting courses seemed to be more oriented to more frequent and other types of assessments of student performance (self-, peer and teacher assessments). Finally, the course seems to have provided a network for informal collaboration between interpreter educators that stayed intact over time.

Introduction – TÖI and interpreter training in Sweden

In Sweden, conference, public service and sign-language interpreting have a tradition of being treated as separate branches, much in line with how these practices generally have been and are described in the literature on interpreting. Obviously, established divides between various types of interpreting (and interpreters) partly follows from the various types of interpreter education (and interpreter teacher education) provided. In Sweden, courses in public-service interpreting and sign-language interpreting have been organised at a type of adult-education and vocational colleges (sometimes translated as folk high schools, see below) and study associations in fairly large numbers since the 1960ies. These courses are part of the so-called folkbildning educational system, a non-academic system:
Swedish folkbildning is the collective name for the activities conducted by the country’s folk high schools and study associations in the form of courses, study circles and cultural activities. Folkbildning is a part of the liberal non-formal educational system. (Folkbildning in Sweden, n.d., page 1)

Between 1986 and 2012, the overall responsibility for all areas of interpreter education (except the training of military interpreters) in Sweden lay with the Institute for Interpretation and Translation Studies at Stockholm University (TÖI), irrespective of interpreting branch or education level. The task of TÖI in relation to the folkbildning interpreter courses and programs was to distribute government grants and to supervise and evaluate the interpreter education. In parallel with this, TÖI also organized academic level courses, both for public service interpreters at Stockholm University and other universities, and, since the mid-1990s, courses in conference interpreting.

From July 1st 2012, TÖI’s organization has changed. Its former task to distribute government grants to non-academic level courses and to supervise and evaluate the interpreter education given in the folkbildning system has been taken over by The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Swedish: Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan).

Today, TÖI is therefore exclusively a university institute, running, in addition to translator training programs, interpreting courses at the bachelor’s and master’s levels, involving various language combinations. An important premise for organizing these courses is that interpreting is basically seen as one professional field, irrespective of the variety of settings, techniques and challenges implied, a view that has been strengthened by our experiences from the course for interpreter teachers in focus in this paper – the Theory and Methodology Course of Interpreter Trainers (the TMIT course, for short).

For various reasons, the TMIT course was given only three times. TÖI’s recent reorganization, however, reactualizes the needs for interpreting-teacher education, which makes the present study relevant. Arguably, such an education is necessary both for promoting the process of professionalization of interpreters (and translators), and for confirming and strengthening translation studies and interpreting studies as an academic discipline. Within Swedish academia, no more than elsewhere, this relatively new discipline has a relatively weak position. Hence, the education of educators is without doubt needed to also establish the field within the academic world.

Background – The TMIT course

The background of those who currently work as interpreter trainers in Sweden is quite diverse, but a common denominator is that they have some
interpreter training as well as extensive experience as interpreters. This implies that interpreter educators often are more of interpreters and less of theoreticians, pedagogues and educators. The TMIT course, a university-level course for teachers of interpreting, was designed precisely to fill assumed gaps in pedagogical training concerning theoretical aspects of relevance to interpreting and to the training of interpreters.

The TMIT course was developed at TÖI in the 1990s and was given in 1999, 2001 and 2004. The targeted students were interpreter educators active in all types of interpreting programs (conference, public service and sign language interpreters and interpreters for the deaf-blind). An important purpose of the course was to provide a collaborative learning environment and to support and promote a feeling of common ground between the various areas of interpreting. An important aspect of the course was the implementation of a research-based course design, answering to modern ideas about education, often phrased as student active learning, based on a sociocultural view of education (e.g. Ellis et al. 2010).

The TMIT course was also research-based in the sense that its syllabus reflected the latest developments in research in (linguistics and) interpreting, and the course literature was selected to give students ample opportunities to orient themselves to this research, dealing with aspects of cognitive processes, interaction, and also the teaching of interpreting. Examples of course literature (from the first time the course was given) are Alexieva (1994), Bell (1997), Gile (1995), Jones (1998), Mikkelsen and Mintz (1997), Neumann Solow (1998), Pöchhacker (1992), Seleskovitch and Lederrer (1995), Setton (1994), Tebble (1996) and Wittmer-Merithew and Mills Stuart (1998).

The TMIT course was given at the undergraduate level. Admittance required documented experience as an interpreter trainer or as an interpreter. The whole course consisted of 20 credits and was taken as half-time study during one academic year. (Twenty credits in the pre-Bologna system applied at the time, which corresponds to 30 ECTS in the current system.) The course was divided into 5 modules:

1. Language, communication and interpretation, 4 credits.
2. Language for specific purposes, terminology and lexicography, 3 credits.
3. Teaching the techniques and ethics of interpretation, 5 credits.
4. Assessment of interpretation, 4 credits.
5. Course paper, 4 credits.

The student group met in Stockholm for two days once a month, from September to May, for lectures, seminars, discussions, group work, and so forth. Students read general literature on language and linguistics, as well as spe-
cialized literature on conversation analysis, interaction, and, naturally, on interpreting and on how to teach it. When choosing literature dealing more specifically with interpreting, great care was taken to include more or less an equal amount of literature (books and articles) on all areas of interpreting. The same principle was followed in planning who should give lectures, and on what themes.

A joint course

The TMIT course hence was based on the assumption that interpreter-teacher students have various backgrounds and yet many common interests, concerning both the nature of the professional tasks of interpreters in various settings and the theoretical issues of relevance to them. There is, of course, also a growing awareness worldwide that there are many important aspects in common between what traditionally is sorted into different kinds of interpreting. This is clearly demonstrated for instance in the volumes of papers from the Critical Link conferences (see Carr et al. 1997, Roberts et al. 2000, Brunette et al. 2003, Wadensjö et al. 2007, Hale et al. 2009). Potential similarities, it was assumed, concern such aspects as interpreting techniques, interpreting ethics, memory skills, discourse management and terminology management, a range of competences which have to be taught and trained in any interpreter program. Two important aims of developing the course were:

- To test whether one program will suit interpreter trainers in different areas, and, as a sub-goal, to try to admit as equal numbers as possible of students representing each area of interpreting; and
- To give impetus to development and cooperation in interpreter training across the traditional boundaries between conference, public service and sign language interpreting.

Thinking on education and examination

Until quite recently, the dominating philosophy behind teacher education has been informed by dualistic understandings of the relationship between thought and action. In short, teachers have been thinking about their activities as a transfer of knowledge, of lectures and supervisory feedback as input and students’ learning and classroom results as outputs. In line with a sociocultural tradition, an alternative way of thinking about education is as situated social practices and that people learn by engaging in these practices. The sociocultural school of thought draws extensively on the psychologist Vygotsky’s ideas, concerning e.g. the relationship between human consciousness and practical activity (Vygotsky 1987). Put simply, according to the
sociocultural tradition, learning is impossible without doing.

These ideas go perfectly in line with the current view of interpreting as social practice, implying that interpreters are seen as responsible not just for providing renditions in another language of others’ utterances, but also for coordinating others’ talk-in-interaction (Wadensjö 1998), or, as Cynthia Roy (2000:3) phrases it, for managing “the discourse process between two participants who do not speak the same language”.

Hence, applying sociocultural ideas in a course for interpreter educators, it seems important to have the students engaged in some activity that forces them to think about and comment on the information presented, to synthesize and evaluate facts, ideas and ideals, with other students, through writing and discussions, not simply to listen and memorize.

For this reason, in the TMIT course, each module contained a project, constituting the examination for that module, on a topic selected by student, preferably having a close relation to their own daily or interpreting practice. For instance, the project in Module 3 consisted in the detailed planning of one teaching hour, and the course paper could e.g. be devoted to developing the syllabus of a completely new course, improving the syllabus of an existing one, planning one semester of a course, or developing new teaching and learning materials.

Focus group interview and students’ evaluations

As mentioned, the TMIT course was given three times, recruiting students with background from the various branches of interpreting as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community, health care, court interpreter trainers</th>
<th>Conference interpreter trainers</th>
<th>Sign language interpreter trainers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total 74</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Background of participants.

The total number of students who has taken the course is 74. Forty of these came with experience from public service interpreting education, six from conference interpreting courses and 28 from sign language interpreting programs.

The present paper draws partly on evaluation forms, filled in by students immediately after finishing the course in May 2000 and May 2001 (unfortunately only available from the first two groups), and partly on a focus group interview with six participants representing all three adminis-
trations of the course.

Table 2 shows the scores achieved in students’ evaluations. Following the standard formula, the students evaluated, on a scale from one to five, where five was the highest score, corresponding to “agree completely”, four basic ingredients: the course’s relevance for interpreter teachers, the course as learning environment, the suitability of the course literature and whether they considered a joint course for interpreter teachers representing various branches of interpreting a good idea.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course relevant for interpreter teachers</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with course</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with course literature</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint course for different interpreter teachers = good idea?</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The TMIT courses’ scores in students’ evaluations

The students’ evaluations done immediately after finishing the course show that the first group rated the program much higher than the second group. A possible explanation for this is the background of the students. The first group consisted almost exclusively of students with a substantial experience with teaching who were familiar with teaching problems and teaching routines and were therefore able to integrate knowledge gleaned from the course literature and the seminars and lectures into their knowledge and experience base. This experience also enabled them to participate in discussions, bringing forward examples from their own professional practice. The second group was less well-prepared in this respect. Although all of them are professional interpreters, only a few of them had experience in teaching interpreting.

What is most conspicuous in the written evaluations is that the first group unanimously praised the idea of having a joint course for all kinds of interpreter trainers and its execution, feeling that they had benefited enormously from the exchange of experiences. This was not so in the second group. To be sure, some of the students did think that it is a good idea to have a common course, but most thought that separate training courses are needed for different kinds of interpreter trainers. This was most conspicuous among the sign-language interpreters in that group, who thus, according to the evaluations, did not seem to have established “common ground” with their colleagues, the spoken language community interpreters.
Focus group interview 2010

The interview data was collected in February 2010, i.e. between 6 and 10 years after the students had finished the course. In the interview drawn upon in this paper two sign-language interpreter trainers and four (various) spoken-language community interpreter trainers participated. (For practical reasons, one participant with experience from conference interpreting courses was interviewed separately.) The focus group involved one male and five female participants. Three participants finished the course in 2000, two in 2001, and one in 2004.

When comparing results from the written evaluations with results from the interviews, it becomes clear that those participating in the interviews were all very positive to the idea of a joint course. A few quotes will highlight this.

The names are non-authentic. In our examples, the names of public service interpreters begin with a P, those of sign language interpreters with an S and the conference interpreter is given a name starting with C. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, but the quotes will here be presented in English translation. (For the Swedish original transcripts, see Appendix.)

More or less from the start of the interview, Sally provides an overall positive evaluation of the course, emphasising “the social part”, which she wasn’t the first to do, as can be seen in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

Sally: I thought the education was good. The best, just as Cindy says, was the social part. That we were different languages, where one could get ideas and tips and an exchange that means a whole lot.

Excerpt 2 quotes the interview with the conference-interpreter educator, stating the opportunities for discussions between various types of interpreters as her strongest and most positive memory from the TMIT course.

Excerpt 2

Connie: What I thought was very good, it were these, these discussions between the three groups, that is conference interpreters, community and sign language and interpreters for the deaf-blind. Is that four groups?
Connie’s reply confirms the overall positive image of a shared course, at the same time as it reveals a certain uncertainty concerning possible stratifications of the field of interpreting. Excerpt 3 shows an instance, where Sally, quoted in Excerpt 1, at the end of a longer sequence, wraps up by saying that “the advantage was that we were very… from different language groups”, hence actualising a stratification of the field of interpreting in terms of interpreting involving or not involving signed languages. Interestingly, Sally does not correct herself when asked, but Patty, teacher of public service interpreting, quickly fills in with her interpretation of what Sally must have meant.

Excerpt 3
Sally: But the advantage was that we were very… from different language groups.
Q: Mm. Different language groups?
Sally: Yes, with…
Q: Different countries? Different language groups?
Patty: Different educational background, both community interpreting and sign-language interpreting.

Sarah supports Sally’s positive evaluation, without touching upon, more precisely, how she relates to the talked about branches of interpreting. Without a doubt, she is in favour of mixing groups with people from other educational systems.

Excerpt 4
Sarah: ‘cause sometimes you can feel kind of locked up in a corner, in your own small world. Eh… that you are missing something that others in the business find important. And I felt that mixing was very rewarding. […] And I think, having worked now as a teacher for some time, I see that what I really need most is input from others.

The positive evaluation of the “joint course” thus seems to remain a salient and shared aspect, many years after finishing the course. Participants’
answers indicated that exchanges of ideas over traditional groups of interpreters were appreciated. Interestingly, we also found that the traditional grouping of branches of interpreting wasn’t altogether similar or clear for all participants.

Another positive aspect specifically mentioned is the project format of the examinations. This allows the students to specialize individually in their respective areas, but also to explore other areas. This meant that, as one participant phrased it, “You had to systematize your thoughts concerning how one can organize education”. Obviously, the fact that this was part of the examination implied that systematic and critical thinking was rewarded. Another participant appreciated the time they could spend on pondering upon teaching strategies and materials, instead of just repeating what they had done before, or experienced themselves as students.

Excerpt 5
Sally: And it was quite fantastic, wasn’t it, that you could put your thoughts about that [your own course] on paper. You first tried to figure out yourself and then discuss it in detail with… with the other participants in this course. You were supposed to present it and then get it criticized as well. And then I mean… that’s a positive thing to receive critique. People ask: why do you say like this and why do you think like that? And you can ask the same question to others.

All project texts were shared among the students of the group and have apparently continued to be a source of inspiration. Paul mentioned this specifically in his evaluation of the TMIT course, in the focus interview.

Excerpt 6
Paul: I still in my courses do the improvised role-play that we did [in the TMIT course] where the students are supposed to invent it all and do Swedish-Swedish interpreting. And it’s appreciated.
Cooperation between students was encouraged (within limits posed by the examination situation). Our hope was that there would be lots of project cooperation “across boundaries”, in accordance with the aims of developing the program. However, students tended largely to keep within the boundaries of their “own” area, or, perhaps more correctly, within the structure of their respective educational system. It should be noted that vocational courses in sign language interpreting are organized as three or four years of full-time studies at folk high schools. The students start by studying sign language, most of the time from scratch. Public service interpreting, on the other hand, is taught by study associations, folk high schools or vocational colleges in the form of part-time, one- or two-year courses and admittance is conditioned by students’ command of Swedish and another language. Mostly, the sign language interpreter programs and the public service interpreter programs/courses are given at different schools.

In the non-university public service interpreting courses, all examination tests are modeled upon the authorization tests and are also geared towards preparing the students to take these tests successfully. In other words, they are constructed as terminology tests and role-play tests, with the character of proficiency test (McNamara & Francis, 2000), checking whether the candidate has a potential to ultimately qualify as interpreter, rather than an achievement test (ibid.).

The issue of examination generated quite some discussion among our interviewees and took a direction we had not fully expected.

Excerpt 7
Sarah: Well, as for now we actually don’t do any exams. Rather, the analysis is done through all exercises, informally. […]
Question: The analysis?
Sarah: Yes, the analysis. We we... everything is recorded, what the students do. Then us teachers look at it, and the student looks at a classmate[‘s interpretation] and analyzes it and looks it through. Then the whole class is gathered for analysis. First the classmate says her comments, and then the student herself, and then the teacher says her comments. But it’s really no exam, because we are going
through it, exercise by exercise, continuously.  
[...], and all the students watch each other and hear each other’s comments.

The data on which this study is based is of course too limited to draw any conclusions at all concerning people’s attitudes towards examinations. Sarah’s description of how examination is performed (or not performed) might stem from her relatively weak identity as teacher or from the tradition of her college. For interpreter courses within the *folkbildning* system, the checking of the prospective students’ language skills, examinations and graded marks after finishing was introduced relatively recently. All Swedish sign language interpreter education with which Sally and Sarah have had their experience has so far been organized within the nationwide educational system of *folkbildning*, where the legitimacy of all kinds of exams has long been rejected, on the grounds that exams create competition and exclude people.

**Some conclusions**

What about the two important aims of developing the TMIT course that were mentioned in the beginning of this paper? The first aim, to test whether a joint course will suit interpreter trainers in different areas, can be said to be given a cautious but rather enthusiastic ‘yes’. We can see that this type of course has worked especially well when the students already had some teaching experience and were in need of continuing education as educators. Students inexperienced in teaching need a more basic education, in certain respects. They seem to need training of a kind which this course did not foresee. However, that would not, we think, exclude the possibility of having a joint course for interpreter trainers aiming to work within various social settings and domains.

The second aim, to give an impetus to development and cooperation in interpreter training across the traditional boundaries between conference, public service and sign language interpreting seems to have been reached, but mainly on an informal, personal level. Our interviewees attest to keeping up contacts within the group, discussing pedagogical matters and exchanging experiences. However, more formalized cooperation between different kinds of interpreter trainers is a matter which is largely out of their hands, since it does depend on structures higher up in their respective educational systems.

Finally, concerning the overall thinking about teacher education as situated learning, in the interviews, the participants hardly spend any time on even mentioning any of the quite numerous lectures or the course litera-
ture that were part of the course. Instead, they talk vividly about their interaction with co-students and about their project work. This is what stands out as what they brought back from the course, as the basis of their learning and knowledge. Of course, this does not mean that the course curriculum, as presented in lectures and course literature, was unimportant. It was highly important for those who planned the course and who did lots of the teaching. In choosing literature and planning lessons, we actually expressed our own ideas about interpreting, as one professional area, at a certain level. And the course expressed our conviction that a course designed for interpreter educators should reflect this. Our ideas and ideals are rooted in our own experiences, as interpreters, interpreter trainers, and researchers in this area. This conviction permeated the creation of the course and its curricular design, from overall aspects to the planning of single lessons and seminars. This conviction in the end gave the students a collaborative learning environment: it provided the occasion, the structure and the contents for student active learning.

References


Appendix – Excerpts in the Swedish original transcriptions.

Excerpt 1
Sally: Jag tyckte att utbildningen var bra. Det bästa, precis som Cindy säger, det här med det sociala. Att vi var från olika språk, där man kunde få idéer och tips och utbyte som betyder väldigt mycket.

Excerpt 2
Connie: Det första jag tyckte var väldigt bra, det var dessa, dessa diskussioner de tre grupperna emellan, det vill säga konferenttolkar, kontakttolk och teckenspråk och tolkar för dövblinda. Är det fyra grupper?

Excerpt 3
Sally: Men fördelen var ju att vi var väld... från olika språkgrupper.
Fråga: Mm. Olika språkgrupper?
Sally: Ja, med...
Fråga: Olika länder? Olika språkgrupper?
Patty: Olika utbildningar. Både kontaktutbildning och teckenspråk.

Excerpt 4
Sarah: för ibland så kan jag känna att man blir så inlåst i ett hörn i sin egen lilla värld. Eh... att man kan missa något som är viktigt i en annan del. Och det kände jag att det var jättegivande att få blanda sig. [...] Och jag tror, nu när jag jobbat ett tag som lärare, så ser jag att det är just kontakten med andra som jag verkligen behöver.
Excerpt 5
Sally: Och det var ju fantastiskt att få lov att sätta ner det [den egna kursen] på papper. Först sitta och fundera hemma på kammaren, att stöta och blöta det med... med andra som gick utbildningen. Och få lägga fram det och få det sen kritiserat också. Och då menar jag... det är ju positivt att få det kritiserat, att folk säger: Varför säger ni så här och varför tänker ni så här? Och att man hade möjlighet att fråga andra samma sak.

Excerpt 6
Paul: Jag kör på min utbildning fortfarande det där rollspelet improviserat, när studenterna ska hitta på själva liksom och tolka svenska-svenska. Och det uppskattas.

Excerpt 7
Sarah: Ja, som det är nu så har vi ju egentligen inga prov, utan analysen sker genom alla övningar informellt. […]
Fråga: Analyser?