Rodríguez Melchor, María Dolores. (2020). Developing quality tools for continuous assessment in conference interpreting training: A case study on the use of learning diaries. In: Barranco-Droege, Rafael (ed.). *Solving the riddle of interpreting quality: Dimensions and challenges.* Granada: Comares. 169–185.

7   Developing quality tools for continuous assessment in conference interpreting training: A case study on the use of learning diaries

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Abstract

In this paper we present an outline of the continuous assessment method used in the Comillas Pontifical University MA programme in conference interpreting, and discuss the results of an analysis of two comparable subjects from an ongoing research project designed to test the quality of a series of customized evaluation tools. Both trainers and students participated in the assessment by means of a set of evaluation tools embedded in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform to provide online feedback and ipsative assessment. The trainers were requested to share their insights on performances in class via a collective online feedback log-book. As for the students, a reflective learning diary template was available for them to submit their weekly comments by way of the Virtual Learning Environment platform. So far, our research indicates that these tools are useful in detecting problems and determining when and how to draw upon remedial coaching. They are also instrumental in providing information for the tutorial sessions, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the needs of each individual student. This approach, which involves e-assessment tools, is currently being tested in the framework of a three-year pilot project at Comillas Pontifical University. At the present intermediate stage of the process the results have been encouraging.

1. Introduction and objectives

Testing and assessment have long been topics of interest in our field, and the link between expertise development and assessment has been the subject of much academic attention (Sawyer 2004, Angelelli & Jacobson 2009, Liu 2013). In fact, the concept of assessment is central to the de-

velopment of interpreting expertise and can play a pivotal role in the success or failure of future interpreters. Interpreting involves a complex set of skills, and proper assessment of these skills requires the re-creation of real-world conditions. Traditionally, although interpreting students are confronted with several stages of assessment in the course of their studies, their chances of succeeding in practice ultimately depend on their showing in end-of-course tests/exams.

Entry-level assessment is diagnostic. It is designed to filter out those candidates that do not display the required linguistic and/or analytical abilities considered a prerequisite for success in interpreting. Concluding assessment is used to ascertain whether a student is able to produce a sound consecutive or simultaneous rendering at a proficient level of expertise. Recent studies have tested the reliability and validity of entry-level assessment (Russo & Pippa 2004, Russo 2014) and have found "several statistically significant predictors of interpreting aptitude which appear to show that interpreting-related cognitive skills and verbal fluency may be measured and may be predictive" (Russo 2011: 25).

In our study, the results of admission tests and of final exams have been duly taken into account. As they are selective, both levels of assessment carry special weight in interpreter training, but they do not provide much information about the suitability of the course design or progress in student learning.

Furthermore, face-to-face classroom feedback, i.e. formative assessment, if not duly recorded, is often elusive and fleeting. Our day-to-day teaching experience in the Comillas Pontifical University Master's programme convinced us that a thorough adaptation of our assessment tools was required in order to provide improved coordination among the trainers and a better exploitation of the information they were able to amass about student learning progress. A collective online logbook assembling the feedback and recommendations from our team of trainers was the result of the efforts reviewed here.

Basing our assumptions on the body of literature that recognizes the relevance of constructivist methodology in translator and interpreter training (Sawyer 2004, Kiraly 2000), and, given the fact that we are convinced that students' participation in their own training is of paramount importance, we decided to put into practice a twofold approach with the

▫ They provide quantitative data about the amount of time de-
voted to every single self-training activity that are directly exploit-
able for statistical purposes.

▫ They provide qualitative information on the students' perception
of their progress and their metacognitive development.

▫ Compared with the trainers' logbook, the learning diaries offer a
match between specific difficulties and solutions.

▫ Since they facilitate detection of malpractice such as a lack of
punctuality or copy-pasting the same information in the tem-
plates for different weeks, they are an important factor in the di-
agnosis of the students' interest and involvement in their own
learning.

In conclusion, the results that we have obtained so far indicate that we
may be on the right track and that in our future research we might use-
fully attempt to deepen our understanding of the association between
deliberate practice and metacognition in interpreter training.

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