

# On Interpreters' Intercultural Awareness

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## Abstract

In this paper, the author briefly states that interpretation as an intercultural communication bridge requires the interpreters not only master exquisite language techniques, but also rich and generous knowledge of different culture backgrounds and the important functions of interpreters with intercultural awareness during intercultural communication. It discusses the basic conceptions of intercultural awareness and the relationship between interpreters and intercultural awareness, explicates interpreters from different cultures have their own cultural perception, beliefs, values and social customs which greatly determine their communicative way – interpreting way and cultural difference that gives rises to many miscommunications. Therefore, interpreters should raise intercultural awareness of “the other culture” to build bridges across misunderstanding among different cultures and should be satisfied with the basic requirements for interpreters. Finally, several ways of training intercultural awareness are discussed in the paper so that the interpreter could strengthen their sensitivity to cultural differences and misunderstanding can be effectively reduced and intercultural communication can be successfully achieved.

**Keywords:** Interpreter, Intercultural awareness, Intercultural communication, Intercultural communication competence

## 1. Introduction

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another (Chen, 2010). International contacts have become more and more frequent. The society is in great need of personal who have a good command of knowledge and are able to communicate with people from different countries. Therefore, cultivating interpreters' intercultural awareness has been paid more attention to, because intercultural awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave (Chen, 2010).

Interpretation is one kind of language communication process with transforming one language form to another through oral expression, one of the primary communication manners among the exchanges between different nations with dissimilar cultures (Zhao, 2003). And Interpreting is a highly demanding profession. From the process of interpreting, it can be seen that interpreting involves a lot of difficulties and challenges. In the actual interpreting, the interpreters have to listen to the source speech, analyze the message and reconstruct it in the target language on the spot. They are usually not able to consult dictionaries or any other reference documents while interpreting the speeches. There, in order to achieve successful interpreting, interpreters must be highly qualified. In general, a professional interpreter is required to have a strong sense of duty, a high level of linguistic proficiency, wide encyclopedic knowledge and a good mastery of interpreting skills (Xu, 2006).

So, interpreters should have a good command of both the source language and the target language, and a good grasp of the cultures of the languages involved. In addition, interpreters should also have a good command of large vocabulary, flexible expression, good articulation and intercultural awareness. As it is not only a single translation between two languages, but also a kind of cross-cultural communication, interpretation is full of challenges. During the interpretation, what interpreters should do is not only to translate the languages, but also to explain the rich and generous culture connotations. While doing the interpretation, the interpreters have no time to think a lot and it is impossible for them to resort to the dictionaries or reference books. Although the interpreters are able to dope out the relevant subjects of the interpretation according to the situation of the site, they have no method to know about the details, especially in different interpretations. That demands the interpreters should not only master these two languages of source language and target language and relevant fields and different professional knowledge, but also be familiar with the two different kinds of cultures and the reflection of the differences in languages expression. At present, intercultural communication has become one obvious feature of the globalization.

The interpreters can only gradually improve their proficiency in practice through learning more and more cultural knowledge of different nations. As a result, the interpreters must pay more attention to the cultural differences while doing interpretation. What the interpreters need to do is to find a common joint point in native culture and foreign culture and make a proper adjustment according to the occasion so as to achieve the communication effect. Interpretation as an intercultural communication bridge requires the interpreters not only master exquisite language techniques, but also rich and generous knowledge of different culture backgrounds.

## **2. The Relation Between Intercultural Awareness and Interpretation**

Because of different cultural backgrounds, intercultural communication experiences, ways of thinking, norms of behaviors and customs, it is not surprising to find that people have many difficulties and obstacles in understanding one another and communicating with one another. Interpreters from different cultures have their own cultural perception, beliefs, values and social customs which greatly determine their communicative way – interpreting way. It is cultural difference that gives rise to many miscommunications. Therefore, interpreters should raise intercultural awareness of “the other culture” to build bridges across misunderstanding among different cultures. Furthermore, we study the relationship between intercultural awareness and interpretation. It will be benefit to further improve interpreters’ intercultural communication competences to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding and conflict in intercultural communication. First of all, interpreter should know some basic conceptions of intercultural awareness.

### *2.1 Intercultural awareness*

Walravens (1999) reminds the participants at the third Leeds conference in December 1998 of the difficulty in reaching a consensus over the very definition of “cross-cultural capability “. Parry (1999) refers to a “new interdisciplinary discipline”, perhaps illustrated by the variety of jargon applied to naming it. The list includes: “cross-cultural capability”, “cross-cultural skills”, “cross-cultural competence”, “cross-cultural awareness”, “inter-cultural studies”, “intercultural communication”, “intercultural effectiveness”, “intercultural awareness” and “intercultural communicative competence”. For the sake of this study and future nomenclature, we have chosen the term “Intercultural Awareness”.

For a long time, experts and scholars from different countries discuss intercultural communication awareness from diverse perspective. Intercultural awareness can be considered as a process of attitudinally internalizing “insights about those common understandings hold by groups that dictate the predominant values, attitudes, beliefs and outlooks of the individual” (Adler, 1987). This process can be integrated into three levels: (1) awareness of superficial cultural traits, (2) awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with ours, and (3) awareness of how another perspective (Hanvey, 1987).

Chen Guoming (2010) thinks “Intercultural awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave.

In spite of the variety defined by those scholars, some common features of intercultural communication awareness can be found. First, the influence of culture on human behavior is strongly signified in the definitions. Second, the importance of recognition of differences between cultures is highlighted. To summarize the various definitions, a definition of intercultural communication awareness can be : it is cognizance of different cultures in the process of communication (Liu, 2008).

Above the remarks, we know that the intercultural awareness is one of the basic requirements for an interpreter when he or she participates in the intercultural communication, which is a particular way of thinking, a criterion for judgment or an acute sensitivity cultivated by the interpreter. So, ways of expression differ from others if the speakers come from different culture backgrounds. Thus, successful interpreting is the result of accurate comprehension and reconstruction and application of various skills and techniques in a professional manner and to a professional standard that will be achieved at both discourse and cultural level.

### *2.2 Interpretation’s characteristics*

Interpretation is an extempore translation activity that interpreters have to finish their interpretation on the spot. Interpreters also have to overcome stage fright as they usually face a large audience, which means interpreting is therefore highly stressful. In addition, interpreting is an independent job and interpreters are seldom able to ask for help on the spot. They have to do the job by themselves. Meanwhile, interpretation demands interpreters’ comprehensive capacities, such as listening, memorizing, speaking, etc. Moreover, the interpreters usually encounter a wide range of topics, and they have to be both an expert and an encyclopedia who know “everything of something and something of everything”. (Xu, 2006)

In order to reflect different range of topics, the first thing interpreters must do is that they need to have a good

understanding of different topics represented by both source language and target language to eliminate intercultural misunderstanding. They must know how people with target language view things and express themselves then interpret the actual meaning with source language' cultural characteristics by using the proper expression of target language. For example, after presenting many nice dishes, the Chinese hostess always say, “饭菜不好, 请多包含”, ( Please bear with these poorly prepared dishes.) It is generally accepted that hostess says this to express her modesty and welcome. All Chinese guests may then admire her cooking. However guests from Britain might end up thinking, “Am I not good enough to get well-prepared dishes?” To avoid this uncomfortable situation, the interpretation should be.” These are the best dishes. I'm able to prepare, enjoy yourself.” Therefore, interpreters' job is to bridge the gap of the languages and also the cultures during intercultural communication.

### *2.3 Interactive relationship*

A British Professor Gillian Brown said, “Communication is a risky business,” which means the process of communication is the process of complete interaction. Yet it's not an easy thing to fully communicate, because of different histories, cultures, social habits in different groups. Communication is a complex process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction with symbols (Zhang, 2005).

Literally, intercultural communication refers to the communication between a native speaker and a non-native speaker, but more precisely, intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event. Frequently, the term cross-cultural communication is used when referring to communication between people from different cultures. People have differences in cultural backgrounds, living patterns, educational, political and economical conditions, even hobbies and characters, so there exist all kinds of problems and difficulties in intercultural communication.

We know interpreters play an important role as a bridge between intercultural communications. Through oral interpretation, the intercultural awareness of interpreters will be perceived and understood from the form of a language quickly and accurately into another language in the form of intercultural communication. The interpreters will finish their intercultural communication through their voice facial expressions and body movements. To convey the meaning of language interpretation, interpreters should have a high degree of flexibility. At the same time, it will also show the characteristics of interpretation decision itself that interpretation speed, on-site, timeliness, independence is strong. To face an unpredictable conversation topics, cultural background information, the interpreters have to have a relatively high degree of adaptability impromptu, but also the process of intercultural communication should continue to develop cultural factors related to intercultural awareness, grasp the cultural differences, so that the effective understanding of speaker from other cultural information.

“Interpretation is representation in one language of what is written or said in another language. It is a bilingual art because two different languages are involved in this activity” (Cheng, 2006, p. 84). As language and culture are closely connected and understanding one requires understanding the other, interpretation has to be regarded as an intercultural activity as well. After all, the interpreter must analyze the source language within certain cultural contexts carefully so as to use appropriate words in appropriate order to represent in the target culture the object or process the original writer describes.

Interpretation has been instrumental in transmitting culture, even since countries and language have been in contact with each other. Indeed, interpretation is a very important medium for cultural exchange between people using different languages. In brief, perhaps we can use the analogy employed by the famous British scholar Susan Bassnett-McGuire to illustrate the relationship of culture and the interpreter: in the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the interpreter treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril.

### **3. Cultivating Interpreters' Intercultural Awareness**

In the light of the previous discussion, it is clear that intercultural awareness cultivating – the development of intercultural awareness through education methods – needs to concern itself with knowledge, feelings, attitudes and behaviors.

Just knowing the role of cultural knowledge is not enough to improve interpreters' communicative competence. The key problems are concerned with the content and approach of intercultural awareness cultivation, that is, how to achieve the improvement. Thus we should follow these measures or ways while conducting intercultural awareness.

#### *3.1 To establish a right attitude toward cultural differences*

We know from our experiences that today's world is becoming smaller because time and space are “shrinking”, the result of the rapid advancement in the areas of telecommunication and transportation. Others factors contribute too, such

as international economic cooperation through regional organization, the movement of people, people's higher standard of living, and environmental issues that include over-fishing, global warring, deforestation, endangered species, waste disposal, and air and water pollution. All these indicate that we have come into more frequent, abundant and significant contacts with people from other countries. We are facing the reality of intercultural communication in a global environment (Zhang, 2008).

Everyone knows that attitude is a manner of facing and behaving and can form a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living. Therefore, a successful interpreter should construct a right and active attitude toward Chinese and western cultures and will be open-minded to them. Ignorance or prejudice should be avoided. Ignorance or prejudice in intercultural communication refers to an intolerant, unfair or biased attitude toward another culture. Regardless of the existence of ignorance and prejudice, intercultural communication may find it difficult to interpret foreigner's speech correctly and smoothly because it stands in the way of acquired knowledge in it. When facing a new culture or English speaker, interpreter should be flexible and able to adapt themselves to the new situation or target language speaker. Only the interpreters learn, know and understand the cultural differences, and then they will have an effective way to do their own duties well in interpretation. So, (being open-minded to cultural difference) learning, knowing and understanding cultural differences among China and other western countries, must be a prerequisite to a qualified interpreter.

### *3.2 To have a high level of linguistic proficiency*

Intercultural awareness is explored in terms of intercultural literacy in which teaching awareness of language plays an important role. Teaching awareness of language aims at out clear understanding of how language is designed and how people use language. Thus, it can be useful for students to become conscious of the function of language in multilingual and multicultural settings, thereby enhancing intercultural literacy, which is needed for improved mutual communicability among different varieties of English (Honna, 2009).

Therefore, interpreters should have a high level of linguistic proficiency that means a good command of both the source language and the target language, and a good grasp of the cultures of the languages involved. Specifically, it means acute hearing, exceptionally large vocabulary, flexible expression, good articulation and cross-cultural awareness. In addition, professional interpreters should constantly expose themselves to different varieties and various publications of the languages involved (Xu, 2007).

At the same time, in order to develop interpreters' intercultural awareness, interpreters should read authentic materials such as foreign newspapers, advertisements, journals, short stories, novels, plays and other types of literature works. Literary works are of great significance to foreign language learners. In many cultures, particularly those whose language are widely taught, literature performs an important role in society. They can reflect a culture, help readers gain deeper insights into the target society, enable them to have a better understanding the national character of the people who produce the literature, and of the values they cherish. If we regard literature as a treasures house, then paying a visit to it will enable us to absorb cultural information stored in it. Informative works relevant to national character studier are another source of cultural information. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists, who engage themselves in the study of the target society, usually write these books. Foreign language learners can benefit a lot from these books since the books provide them with a detailed explanation of the people's character in the target culture. There are some other reading materials, which are related closed to our daily life, such as newspapers and magazines. Because most contents of these materials are authentic, they expose to us various cultural backgrounds, ranging from geography, history, customs, religion and philosophy, to entertainment, fashion and tourism. This kind of reading materials will help foreign learners get a better understanding of the target culture and keep a keen eye on it.

And then, with the popularity of TV, interpreters can obtain news all over the world, watch, enjoy movies in original versions of the target language at home and get a vivid picture of what the people's life is like in the target culture. Such movies help interpreters with their vocabulary, listening ability as well as their intercultural communication. From the observation through the media, the features of everyday situations will impress them, such as, sightseeing, telephoning, shopping, or asking directions. While enjoying the attractive performance, interpreters have to observe details of everyday situations, in case of greeting, farewell, compliment, apology, requirement, etc. Though the media interpreters can also learn the polite behavior, etiquette, means to solve conflicts, techniques of negotiation, debates, ways of show love, dating and so on. Movies can also improve intercultural awareness by conveying the important values, communication styles and so on, so that they can apply what they have learned to real intercultural interpretation someday.

Interpreters should attend different lectures on intercultural topics given by both Chinese scholars and foreign ones who have experience in foreign countries. It will increase their intercultural awareness through the description of different

cultures and the techniques for proper behavior in intercultural communication.

### *3.3 To have a good mastery of interpreting skills*

It's essential for interpreters to have a good mastery of interpreting skills. In most effective intercultural communication, the interpreter should translate not only at linguistic level but also at cultural level. A good interpreter should enhance their competence in both verbal and nonverbal communicative aspects, cultivate intercultural awareness, and conduct cultural mediating accordingly in interpretation (Admin, 2010).

If you know how to interpret correctly, then you can emerge as a winner in all walks of your life. The skill varies from person to person but the following tips could make you better in developing your interpretation skills.

There are two different main modes of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. All two modes involve highly complex cognitive activity, the interpreter must immediately comprehend, analyze, and convert the source message into the target language spoken equivalent.

Simultaneous interpreting requires the interpreter to convey continuously the full and accurate meaning of what is said in the source language into speech in the target language, lagging just slightly behind the original message. Simultaneous interpretation may take place in settings where no pauses or interruptions are possible, and is typically delivered using specialized equipment in a sound-proof booth.

Consecutive interpretation requires the interpreter to convey the full and accurate meaning of speech from the source language into the target language after the speaker has concluded speaking. Depending on the setting, the speaker may pause periodically to allow for interpreting to take place or continue until the entire speech has been delivered. Interpreters generally take notes as memory aids to reconstruct the message and seek clarification if the request will not disrupt the event.

Language competence is a prerequisite, but it is not sufficient for successful performance as an interpreter. Specialized non-linguistic skills related to the workplace must be acquired through training, practice, or both. Because a high degree of concentration and stamina are required, interpreters must work in teams. Because interpreting takes place in a wide range of formal and informal settings (such as hospitals, courts, and international conferences), applicable protocols and conventions must be mastered and followed. The interpreter must also be able to use special equipment and follow accepted professional practices (such as setting aside personal opinion and maintaining the confidentiality of information).

To come up with a right conclusion by interpreting something, it also requires strong analytical skills and an open mind to conceive new ideas faster without affected by our own bias. It involves assimilation of knowledge and applying it properly to avoid any confusion later. Many questions have to be answered and matched with existing information to find that everything falls in place. This is especially true when dealing with past history to interpret and establishes some facts regarding a subject. To be successful in our professional and personal life we need to cultivate this skill by being open to new concepts and ideas and discernment of information to reach the correct conclusion without any biased attitude.

Another aspect of Interpretation is analyzing facts and figures for the right decision making. Take the case of a pilot navigating a huge airplane for a landing. Reading and understanding the input from complex instruments located in cockpit is vital for successful takeoff and landing of the plane. Each signal from the installed devices inside a cockpit has to be interpreted correctly to avoid a disaster as there is no room for a doubt here as everything is time-bounded.

Therefore, a successful interpretation is one that faithfully and accurately conveys the meaning of the source language orally, reflecting the style, register, and cultural context of the source message, without omissions, additions or embellishments on the part of the interpreter.

Prof. Wang Zuoliang said: "A translator must be a real cultural worker." Because language expresses culture, interpreter should be a bilingual cultural worker, not just bilingual worker. Maybe it is the reason why the interpreter is different from translation machine is that they understand and grasp two different language and cultures involved. It is very important for interpreter to have such a basic requirement of their counterparts.

## **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, we can see interpretation is not only a technology, but also an art which requires a more intercultural awareness of interpreter and overcomes language and cultural factors behind the barriers. Interpreter need to actively expand their across-cultural knowledge through extensive reading, and accumulate a great deal of across-cultural knowledge to enhance their intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence through constant practices, so that they need to pay much more attention to the language and cultural differences and to avoid

misinterpretation, so as to achieve the purpose of intercultural communication.

Interpretation is a special communicative process from understanding, analysis to convey and is a positive, complex and creative activity of language communication. The internationally well-known interpretation expert Daniel Gile once pointed out: "an interpreter is an actor." The interpreter must receive information from the original language as artistically as an actor, and then deliver it to the listeners on the podium (stage). So, after interpreters receive cultural information of special meanings, they need to complete the interpreting process effectively and accurately. The interpreter not only needs the basic skills and knowledge of language to enhance their language proficiency, but also effectively grasp the cultural differences, strengthen intercultural awareness cultivation and flexibly take an advantage of artistic interpretation strategy in order to avoid intercultural communication barriers.

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