

Interpreter education

In brief



SPA [Didáctica de la interpretación](#)

origins

This is a recent term, as is the formalization of interpreting as an academic discipline and in professional training. The first experiences of professional training in consecutive interpreting date back to the post-war period after World War I, and those of simultaneous interpreting are closer to WWII. Interpreter education was born in the 1930s and 40s, with the foundation of the first university schools and faculties of translation and interpreting.

other names

Although the denominations *training* and *education* are not divergent, the first (*training*) focuses on the acquisition of specific skills to face a given task, while the second (*education*), broader and typical of university education, seeks to promote the growth of the individual, developing their cognitive abilities and those attitudes and behaviors that allow them to navigate professional situations (Bernardini 2004; Amato & Mack, forthcoming); although both are mentioned, especially in the sections on historical evolution and pedagogical approaches, this entry focuses mainly on the latter.


abstract


Interpreter education is the process through which interpreting students are guided towards the profession of interpreting by promoting their growth and developing the cognitive abilities, attitudes and behaviors that will allow them to navigate different professional situations and scenarios (see Bernardini 2004 on translation and Amato & Mack, forthcoming, on interpreting). All bilinguals can interpret naturally, but this does not mean that we naturally know how to do it professionally (Muñoz 2011): professional interpreters need to acquire specific skills and competences in order to work in

specialised settings and meet quality and ethical standards. Interpreting is an ancient practice. It probably developed spontaneously in parallel with oral communication in points of contact between different languages and cultures. However, the formalization of interpreter education is recent. It started out as professional on-the-job training, and then it gradually moved into the academic arena, where it both grew stronger and gained recognition. As didactic practices became more consolidated, interesting debates have opened up in the academic community on aspects including skills to be developed, candidate aptitude and selection, pedagogical approaches, propaedeutic activities, didactic progression, evaluation and use and impact of technologies. The contribution of research to this field is paramount to evaluate and validate the effectiveness of teaching methods and practices, evaluation, selection and certification procedures, and to explore the interaction of teachers and students with technology, both in the classroom and in distance learning.

record

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Entry



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Introduction

[Interpreting](#) is an ancient form of communication used, especially in the dialogue mode, "since the fatal collapse of the Tower of Babel" (Niska 2002: 135). In an inscription on the island of Elephantine, a first mention has been found from 3000 BCE (Kurz 1985). As a matter of fact, it is a naturally occurring communicative practice that is part of everyday life in all multilingual societies (Niska 2002), although its professional practice requires the acquisition of cognitive adaptations and skills that need specific training (Muñoz 2011). However, the addition of interpreting to academic training programs is recent (Sawyer & Roy 2015) and followed the consecration of conference interpreting as a professional practice in the first half of the 20th century, when it was officially employed at the Paris Peace Conference in consecutive mode; in simultaneous mode, at the ILO conference of 1927; and systematically at the Nuremberg trial, after the Second World War (Baigorri 2014). Dialogue and conference interpreting are not different disciplines, but complementary modalities. Their pedagogy could entail a single process in which skills and abilities of one and the other modality are progressively acquired. However, didactically they have followed separate paths, so they are presented here in separate sections for the sole purpose of ordering contents.

The teaching of interpreting—we will focus here on oral languages—is structured at different levels: professional training, lifelong learning, higher education. We will begin with an overview of its historical evolution, then describe its main pedagogical approaches, and then outline the essentials of curriculum design and the didactic progression of conference and dialogue interpreting. We will then move on to outline the essentials of aptitude testing and student selection, which are fundamental when teaching concepts and skills that require solid foundations not only of linguistic knowledge, but also of cognitive, communicative, verbal and expressive skills. We will then move on to assessment, which is closely linked to proficiency, curriculum design

and education in general. Finally, we will present some considerations on the impact of technology on education, both in terms of Computer Assisted Interpreter Training (CAIT) tools, as well as platforms and media for [remote interpreting](#) and its pedagogy. The entry closes by presenting some promising lines of research on the subject.

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¶ Historical evolution

The formalization of interpreter education at higher education level is, as we have seen, a recent phenomenon. However, there were schools that, as early as the mid-16th century, trained young diplomatic interpreters, the so-called *jeunes de langues*, destined to serve in diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire (Sawyer & Roy 2015). This training began to be provided in embassies and legations of the Ottoman Empire itself, with schools founded in Constantinople and Smyrna, and later in Paris, in a school founded in 1669 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert; later examples of schools for diplomatic interpreters include the Oriental Academy in Vienna, founded in 1754, and the Department of Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin, founded in 1887 (Sawyer & Roy 2015).

However, while in these early instances of interpreter training the teaching focused on linguistic issues and background knowledge, conference interpreting training as a "stand-alone" discipline began in the 20th century, initially with on-the-job training for interpreters employed at the first interpreted international events, at the League of Nations and the Nuremberg trials (Stern & Liu 2019). The first examples of official training are the Mannheim commercial school program, founded in 1930 and transferred to Heidelberg in 1933, and the first *École d'interprètes*, founded in Geneva 1941 (Moser-Mercer 2015).



On the other hand, in the second half of the 20th century, the growing internationalization of business and the rise of international organizations, coupled with the birth of the first simultaneous interpreting system—the *hush-a-phone*, patented in the 1920s (Baigorri 2014)—spurred the need for specific training for conference interpreters. From this moment on, some conference interpreter training courses began to appear in the educational offer of European and American universities, initially, as postgraduate programs (Sawyer & Roy 2015). Two milestones in their development were the creation of the *International Standing Conference of University Institutes of Translators and Interpreters* (CIUTI 1960) and, in Europe, in 2001, the creation of the European Master's Degree in Conference Interpreting (EMCI).

Historical and technological evolution. Source Pavan Trikutam on Unsplash.

Dialogue interpreting is an older form of interpreting. However, the formalization of its education came after that of conference interpreting and has followed a different path. It began to acquire official form with short courses and vocational training for public services, and then progressively began to enter the academic environment starting in the 1970s, initially in areas with high

immigration rates (Northern Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) (Stern & Liu 2019). Training was offered for [interpreting in public services](#) in social, health, police and legal fields. Hence, (1) training was needed for migrant languages which, in most cases, were not those typically taught in higher education institutions and (2) students were native speakers of those languages, with the language of the host country as L2 (Stern & Liu 2019). In this case, training focused mainly on the practice of bidirectional interpreting with short consecutives (with or without notes) and on professional ethics.

The teaching of sign language interpreting followed a similar path to that of dialogue interpreting (Napier & Leeson 2015), of which it was actually a predecessor; there were didactic offerings before the 1960s, but sign language interpreting was primarily associated with volunteerism, offered by more or less skilled listeners. When the first evaluation and certification processes for sign language interpreters began to be instituted in the early 1970s, the didactic offer began to develop in parallel with vocational and academic training courses, with some variation from country to country (Napier & Leeson 2015).

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Pedagogical approaches

Although interpreting is a very old activity, for a long time it was considered that being bilingual was the only requirement for interpreting. The idea that being able to interpret effectively requires specific training and skills is relatively recent and dates back to the 20th century (Moser-Mercer 2015), when conference interpreting, first consecutive and then simultaneous with the Nuremberg trial (Baigorri 2014), began to be used regularly in international organizations, arousing interest in forms of communication that allowed access to short turns at talk and entire speeches in other languages.

The didactics of interpreting began with conference interpreting, with a practical, on-the-job, master/apprentice-type training approach, in which interpreters were trained by practicing the profession under the supervision of more experienced professionals. Over the years, this practical approach evolved with the profession and, in parallel, with research, whose contribution was that of introducing pedagogical models that were also based on adjacent fields, such as multilingual communication, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics and pedagogy (Amato & Mack, in press). Information on the training received by the first conference interpreters of the 20th century is rather fragmentary. They were very short training periods of a few weeks, with simulations in which trainee interpreters improvised speeches or read them at increasing speeds (Baigorri 2014) and received an assessment of overall performance, accuracy and voice quality (Moser-Mercer 2005).

The next step in the evolution of teaching methodology came with the first interpreting handbooks, such as Herbert's (1952), focused on consecutive interpreting, although he also proposed guidelines on simultaneous. Ilg (1958, 1959a and 1959b) published in successive articles experience-based guidelines on strategies and skills needed for conference interpreting. The first pedagogical proposal based on a theoretical framework was that of Seleskovitch and Lederer, who at the Paris school based their pedagogical proposal on the *Théorie du sens*, part of the [cognitive approach](#). Today, the pedagogy of interpreting is usually based on experiential learning models centered on

reflective learning, in which the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills is encouraged, identifying relevant general skills (Gile 1995, Carsten, Maskaliūnienė & Perreth 2020, Amato & Mack, in press).

The teaching of dialogue interpreting has been formalized as an academic discipline more recently. The evolution of pedagogical approaches is quite parallel to that of conference interpreting: after training courses of varying lengths and levels of expertise, with a teacher/apprentice pedagogical model based mainly on the trainers' professional experience, it has progressively evolved into an increasingly research-driven and research-based pedagogical model. This transition gained momentum with *The Critical Link* conference series, the first edition of which was held in 1995 as a conference of the eponymous *Critical Link* association, dedicated to fostering and encouraging the professional development of dialogue interpreting, especially in the public service setting (Sawyer & Roy 2015). Thanks to this and other conference series, research in dialogue interpreting has been gaining strength and importance, and has grounded its basic principles in the concept of the interpreter as an active participant in interaction (Wadensjö 1998, Mason 1999, Turner & Merrison 2016). This has led, on the one hand, to a paradigm shift in interpreting studies, thus beginning to see dialogue interpreting as a practice situated in "interpreted communicative events" (Angelelli 2004: 5) and analyzing it under the prism of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) and, on the other hand, has fostered the development of pedagogical proposals based on research and the didactic use of real data (Davitti & Pasquandrea 2014).

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Curriculum design and didactic progression

Designing a curriculum is a complex and multifaceted endeavour. Curriculum design is the programming of a course, usually academic, and encompasses two aspects: the sequence of activities to be presented and the learning environment (Sawyer 2015). As Amato & Mack (in press) explain, the goal should be to prepare interpreters capable of meeting the challenges of multilingual communication, which, moreover, often requires a considerable level of specialization in technical, legal or scientific subjects. Future interpreters need transversal competencies to be competitive and able to adapt to the continuous changes in the market and, consequently, in professional practice (Bernardini 2004; Sawyer 2004). One element that complicates curriculum design is the multiplicity of students' starting points, their level of preparation and general knowledge; effective selection at the beginning of the course is essential to ensure as far as possible a common starting ground in the cohort of students. Curriculum design varies according to these factors as well as to the country and the structure of its higher education system. There are, however, some general guidelines for dialogue and conference interpreting, following the most commonly employed didactic progression, which usually starts with dialogue and continues with conference interpreting.

Dialogue interpreting

Until recently, dialogue interpreting has enjoyed a position of lesser prestige, probably because it is used in contexts, such as public and commercial services, that are less visible than those of international organizations and conferences. For the same reasons, research and academic handbooks on dialogue interpreting teaching are much more recent. Dialogue interpreting is taught in a wide variety of contexts, from higher education level to professional training and lifelong learning. This is due, on the one hand, to its recent professional recognition and, on the other hand, to the characteristics of the dialogue interpreting market. Especially the public services sector often requires the language combinations that do not correspond to ones traditionally taught at higher education institutions. Thus, in many cases, untrained dialogue interpreters have been employed or even "ad hoc" interpreters such as friends, acquaintances and relatives, in many cases minors, have been used (Antonini, Cirillo, Rossato et al. 2017: 5). Hence, the need to elaborate and legitimize different higher education offers, in a *continuum* of interpreting modalities, but also others in professional and continuing education.

It is important to start with a theoretical framework focused on the characteristics of the dialogue interpreting process and on ethical aspects (Gentile, Ozolins & Vasilakakos 1996; Collados & Fernández 2001), as well as on the role of the interpreter, who is an active participant in a triadic conversation (Turner & Merrison 2016: 158; Niemants & Cirillo 2017: 3). Several authors propose to use real interactions, coming from dialogue interpreting research, for didactic purposes (Niemants & Stokoe 2017). To this cross-cutting theoretical knowledge, a deep knowledge of the systems (health, commercial, police, judicial, etc.) of the relevant countries and cultures necessarily needs to be added (Tipton & Furmanek 2016). As far as propaedeutic activities are concerned, many are the same as those used for conference interpreting, described below: comprehension of oral and written texts, sight translation, reading and memorization, listening and memorization, note-taking (if necessary), synthesis, etc. (see, among others, Pérez 2015), although they can be adapted to dialogue interpreting by adding, for example, the element of code-switching with oral texts and bilingual sight translations (González 2018). The distinguishing feature of dialogue interpreting teaching is the use of role-plays to simulate situations similar to real professional ones. Role-plays can be developed with a more or less detailed script or have a freer pattern, with guidelines from which participants can improvise (scenario). Regardless of the level of detail of the script and guidelines, students should experience situations close to a real interaction to identify and cope with power asymmetries and divergent expectations, developing their communication skills and their awareness of linguistic and cultural differences (Kadrić 2015).

Conference interpreting

Conference interpreting is a highly specialized cognitive activity and students need to undergo specific training to be able to perform it. After different vicissitudes and nomenclatures, interpreting courses are now usually taught at universities, but the teaching of interpreting differs substantially from traditional university teaching, since learning consists of both acquiring knowledge and intensively practicing interpreting modalities

in order to automatize the basic processes underlying interpreting or at least make them more efficient; this is what Lederer and Seleskovitch mean when they explain that "La pédagogie de l'interprétation établit des correspondances là où il y a lieu et crée des équivalences là où l'intelligence doit primer le savoir" (Lederer & Seleskovitch 1989: 6). Over the years, several authors have published handbooks for teachers and students with practical exercises based on experience or research. They usually state that it is essential for students to start with a solid foundation in interpreting theory, in order to understand the basic cognitive processes they will have to execute when interpreting (Lederer & Seleskovitch 1989, Gile 1995, Setton & Dawrant 2016a and 2016b among others). In addition to building the theoretical foundations, it is recommended to initiate students with propaedeutic exercises such as, for example, active listening, extraction of fundamental information, short consecutives without notes, analysis of the parts of a speech, etc., to move on to consecutive interpreting and, once consolidated, to introduce simultaneous interpreting (Lederer & Seleskovitch 1989, Pérez 2015, Setton & Dawrant 2016b). Sight translation deserves a specific mention, as it can be used as a propaedeutic exercise, but it also is an interpreting mode *per se*, to which, for example, Setton & Dawrant (2016) dedicate a specific chapter. The proposal and selection of materials for the practical exercise of consecutive interpreting first and simultaneous interpreting later should present increasing difficulty in terms of length, speed, register, linguistic variation, content density, topic complexity, discourse structure, presence of cultural cues and so on (see, for example, Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989; Setton & Dawrant 2016b).

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¶ Aptitude and selection

For an efficient selection of students, it is necessary to develop tests that aim at the candidates' academic success. The first ones started to appear in the literature from the 1960s onwards (e.g. Paneth 1962) and evolved over the years, thanks to contributions from teachers, scholars and professional associations, in particular AIIC (Russo 2011 provides an overview of the evolution of the skills assessed and the test batteries to assess them). The challenges of selection and aptitude are fundamentally twofold and concern the definition of what to test and how to test it (Russo 2022). The research effort in this field is directed at identifying the skills of an ideal candidate. It is necessary to define whether 1) to test acquired skills (e.g., sight translation or short consecutive) or the ability to acquire or develop relevant skills ("interpreter readiness", Angelelli & Degueldre 2007) and 2) to focus on hard skills (such as memory or linguistic knowledge), soft skills (such as learning ability, affectivity) or both. At the moment, selection tends to focus more on the former (Timarová 2015; Russo 2022). There are many types of tests in various institutions; they may combine short consecutive, interview, translation tests, sight translation, comprehension, summary and paraphrase, among others (for an overview of 18 university institutions in Asia, North America and Europe, see Timarová & Ungoed-Thomas 2008). Although student selection is common in higher education institutions, there is not much research on the efficacy and predictive ability of test batteries. To name but a few, see Russo (2014) and Pöchhacker (2011), with tests focusing mostly

on hard skills, while soft skills are the focus of Shaw (2011) and Timarová & Salaets (2011), among others.

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¶ Evaluation

Evaluating is fundamental for student selection and education, as well as for professional certification. It is an activity that raises difficult questions, such as what is quality in interpretation, what aspects should be considered, how are they measured, on what aspects should the focus be placed on at different levels of training? These are questions with different answers, depending on professional, didactic and even student experience. It is not easy to give definitive answers. The object of evaluation can be the product of interpreting or the process. In the first case, it is evaluated whether the interpreting performance meets certain quality requirements (e.g., correspondence with the original text, fluency, correctness, etc.). In the second case, the candidate's performance is evaluated in a situation as close as possible to a real professional task (Sawyer 2004). Once the object to be assessed has been identified, it is necessary to prepare a test that meets reliability and validity requirements (Setton & Dawrant 2016b). Reliability is the absence of measurement errors; validity is obtained if the test effectively assesses the skill or skills to be measured; in addition, the test has to be fair, transparent and feasible in its administration. Test validity entails defining the assessment criteria. Liu (2015) states that assessment usually focuses on the product, with quality criteria such as accuracy and fluency. Riccardi (2002) departs from Viezzi's (1996) four macro-criteria (equivalence, accuracy, appropriateness, usability) and fourteen micro-criteria (prosodic, phonological, production, morphosyntactic, logical, lexical deviations; errors, omissions, successful solutions, etc.). The selection of evaluation criteria is linked to the measurability of these criteria or parameters. Their evaluation is often subjective, and increases the risk of unreliable and biased assessment (Wu 2013). The problem can be minimized with the intervention of several evaluators or by trying to measure performance by error analysis, assigning severity levels to different types of errors (Liu 2015).

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¶ Interpreter education and technology



Work environment, configuration of the virtual environment and use of the equipment. Source [cetteup](#) on [Unsplash](#).

New technologies have a double impact on interpreter education: on the one hand, as a tool to support teaching and, on the other hand, as a channel for its transmission. Integrating new technologies into interpreter education can be a valuable support and tool for teachers and students. Moreover, as Rodriguez, Hórvath & Ferguson (2020: 1) explain, on the one hand, teachers must prepare students for a market that increasingly requires interpreters to know how to use these technologies and, on the other hand, the increasingly developed digital skills of the new generations of students must be considered when programming a course.

The technologies used to support interpreter education are known as Computer Assisted Interpreter Training tools (CAIT; De Manuel & Sandrelli 2007; Fantinuoli 2018). The first generation of these tools, from the 1990s, were terminology or speech databases with pedagogical resources for various interpreting modalities. Nowadays, the range of possibilities is wider, with multimedia resource portals (such as [ORCIT](#)), speech databases (such as [Speech Repository](#) and [SpeechPool](#)), interpreting corpora (such as [EPIC](#), Russo, Bendazzoli, Sandrelli et al. 2012), pedagogical software applications (e.g. BlackBox, [VIS](#)), virtual environments, as in the case of [IVY and EVIVA](#) and ÇEV-VİR projects (Kajzer-Wietrzny and Tymczyńska 2014; Riccardi, Čeňková, Tryuk et al. 2020). Added to these are general-purpose tools with potentially useful functions for the interpreting process, which are increasingly part of the interpreter's professional life and should be included in interpreter education: smartphones, tablets, smartpens, etc. (Riccardi, Čeňková, Tryuk et al. 2020).

On the other hand, communication technologies can be used as a medium for conveying education remotely, in part or in full. Virtual learning environments (VLEs, such as [Moodle](#)) and videoconferencing tools and didactic materials allow not only to transmit lectures, but also to simulate interpreting sessions in various modalities, covering also the didactic need related to remote interpreting, a booming phenomenon of the 21st century (e.g., [InTrain](#) and [ReBooth](#) and [Avidicus](#) and [SHIFT in Orality](#) projects).

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Research potential

There are several areas that are worth researching. Education remains largely unexplored: "interpretation pedagogy has led an existence in the shadows of academe since its inception" (Sawyer 2004: 2). There are many research gaps in pedagogical approaches and methods, assessment methods and scales, scientifically validated curriculum designs. Any empirical study in this direction would be a useful and precious contribution. For example, one could analyze the evolution of the performance of students in their formative journey, or follow the process of validation of selection tests (Russo 2022).

It is also possible to study the very process of interpreting and the identification, acquisition and development of skills and other cognitive aspects related to the reception of education by students, their interaction with teachers and with each other, and the effectiveness of collaborative learning processes in groups of students and teachers of the same language combination.

New technologies can change not only professional practice (as in remote interpreting), but also education, through the integration of CAIT tools and the measurement and validation of their effect, and through remote teaching, a modality that has gained significant momentum due to the 2020 pandemic. There is a clear need to study its impact, effect and modifications for the teaching and student communities when interacting and elaborating didactic proposals designed for distance learning.

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