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A Deliberate Practice Approach to Skill Development

By Rachel E. Herring

Interpreting is a performance skill that requires the interpreter to balance a number of competing demands for attention. This involves quickly and accurately carrying out the cognitive processes of interpreting (listening, comprehension, analysis, language transfer, and production) while concomitantly managing internal and external factors such as personal reactions to the speakers and the content of the interaction, fatigue, noise, speed, and the behavior of others. It also requires intense concentration, stamina, self-monitoring skills, and the ability to make quick and effective decisions related to both linguistic and non-linguistic issues.

Acquiring and maintaining competence at complex performance skills tends to be more efficient when the task is broken down into smaller units that can be addressed separately during training.

Given the complex nature of interpreting, it is not surprising that learning to interpret—as well as refining one's skills over time—requires dedication and practice. Indeed, the need for ongoing skill improvement is a common theme in the codes of ethics for translators and interpreters, including ATA's.[1]

The following provides a brief overview of skill acquisition and expertise, which is the subject of a growing body of scholarly literature, and introduces the principles of deliberate practice. Please refer to the resources listed on page 23 for a more in-depth exploration of these topics with regard to both translation and interpreting.

Acquisition of Performance Skills

Research into skill acquisition and expertise suggests that asking learners to perform a complex skill immediately may not be the most effective approach. Indeed, if you think about how people achieve and maintain competence of a complex skill, especially a performance skill, you'll realize that they don't just practice the skill itself. Tennis players don't only play games of tennis; they practice serving, refine their stroke, and engage in conditioning activities. Similarly, musicians practice scales, arpeggios, and sight-reading in addition to performing entire works.

Acquiring and maintaining competence at complex performance skills tends to be more efficient when the task is broken down into smaller units that can be addressed separately during training (and subsequently through ongoing professional development). That is, we identify subskills within the larger skill—in our case, interpreting—that need to be developed in order to perform competently or improve performance. These subskills are smaller, more manageable tasks that students can develop systematically in (relative) isolation before combining them during performance. In the case of advanced students or practitioners, such an approach can help trainers identify areas of weakness more effectively and focus on them during practice.

Some skills lend themselves easily to such an approach (e.g., talking about decision-making separately from interpreting skills). Other subskills—especially the cognitive processes of interpreting—may seem more difficult to isolate, but it is possible to do so as part of a systematic approach to learning and practice.

Performance Improvement through Deliberate Practice

While we know that practice plays a key role in developing interpreting competence, we also know that practice doesn't always pay off as much or as quickly as we might like. In fact, research has shown that while time on task is important, quality of practice tends to be a better predictor of performance improvement than quantity.[2]

One of the main jobs as an instructor is to identify goals clearly for students and to design activities to facilitate their progress toward each one in turn.

What makes for quality practice? K. Anders Ericsson, a well-known researcher of expertise and skill acquisition, argues that skill improvement is more likely to take place when "individuals, who {are} motivated to improve their performance, {are} given well-defined tasks, {are} provided with feedback, and {have} ample opportunities for repetition."[3] This type of practice is known as deliberate practice. The list below highlights key aspects of a deliberate practice approach to skill development.

Progressive: Identify subskills that build on each other in order to support competent performance, develop subskills in isolation, and gradually add new skills and increase difficulty.

Systematic: Approach practice with a clear idea of the goal for each exercise and where that goal fits within the skill progression you have outlined.

Contextualized: Take into account real-life work requirements and individual strengths/weaknesses.

Cyclical: View practice as a cycle rather than a checklist. This includes working multiple times with the same material in order to focus on different aspects of performance and integrate solutions to difficulties, as well as periodically working to improve current levels of ability at a given skill/subskill.

Reflective: Analyze performance to identify patterns, strengths, areas for improvement, and (un)successful strategies.

Focused: Work for short periods with specific goals and a high level of concentration. Avoid practicing while mentally exhausted, and take breaks when concentration wanes.

Motivating: Work at the edge of current abilities and provide opportunities to stretch skills as well as opportunities for success.

Goals and Goal-Setting as Part of a Deliberate Practice Approach

We often think of goals and goal-setting in terms of personal goals, such as exercising more or procrastinating less. Educators and students are also familiar with the idea of goals in the sense of setting learning objectives for an individual class session or an entire course. In order to talk about goals within the context of skill acquisition and deliberate practice, however, we need to define the concept somewhat differently.

In this context we are referring to specific, attainable, measurable, and progressive performance goals that underlie and are the focus of a given activity or practice session. These characteristics of performance goals for practice are described further in the box on page 21.

Goals can operate at a number of levels and can be set for individuals or groups. They may also be set both by students and instructors. Students are generally able to set higher-level goals for themselves (such as "complete the course with a good grade" or "get better at interpreting"), but as novices they need the instructor's knowledge of the skill to help them

identify and work on performance goals as part of the skill acquisition process. It is the instructor who understands how the skill is acquired and must lay out a coherent skill progression and prioritize different goals at different stages of training.

Novice performers also tend to become overwhelmed in the absence of clearly identified performance goals. They do not yet know how the skill should look and feel as they carry it out, and are not yet able to identify successfully areas to focus on during practice or performance. As a result, they might not focus on any particular aspect or, alternately, focus on an aspect of their performance that may not be particularly helpful to them in their skill development.

While time on task is important, quality of practice tends to be a better predictor of performance improvement than quantity.

One of the main jobs as an instructor is to identify goals clearly for students and to design activities to facilitate their progress toward each one in turn. Practicing professionals, for their part, may identify their own goals through reflective practice or may call on peers to help them identify areas for improvement.

Goals Should Be:

Specific:

What precisely is it that we are talking about? One salient characteristic of novices is that they do not know where to focus their attention. This is why it is important for trainers to focus learners' attention on specific aspects of performance, especially in the beginning stages. For example, telling students to "do a good job" is not a specific goal. Instructing them to "re-direct parties consistently and smoothly to use the first person and talk directly to each other" is specific, as it tells students which aspect of performance should be the focus of this particular exercise.

Attainable:

Does the goal lie at the edge of the students' current skill level? While focusing one's efforts on something that one can already do well is not an efficient use of class or practice time, attempting something that is too far above one's current level can be discouraging and demotivating. For example, telling students to "use appropriate strategies to manage the flow of communication" is probably attainable for beginners who have learned about dialogue interpreting standards of practice. "Successfully use note-taking strategies in support of accuracy and completeness during a three-minute utterance" is probably not an attainable goal for the same group of students if they have not yet had any training in note-taking.

Measurable:

How will the trainer and the student know whether the goal was met? Telling students to "produce a good target-language utterance" is not measurable, but telling them to "produce grammatically-correct target language utterances" is more specific, and therefore measurable.

Progressive:

How does the goal fit in with previous and future goals? The goals we set should fit together coherently, like pieces of a puzzle. They should build on existing skills and allow room for adaptation and increasing difficulty based on individual needs.

A Few Thoughts on Choosing Material and Exercises

Goal-setting and the selection of training material go hand-in-hand. Material and exercises are not necessarily "good" or "recommended" in and of themselves. Rather, their usefulness is a function of how well they target the skills being worked on at the current level of skill acquisition. Instructors are well advised to outline clearly a skill progression for their students and identify performance goals within that skill progression before selecting, modifying, or creating material and exercises. The box on page 22 lists some questions trainers can ask themselves when identifying material and exercises that will serve their purposes, whether as part of a training program or for individual practice.

Concluding Thoughts: The Benefits of Studying Skill Acquisition and Expertise

The purpose of exploring the differences between novice and expert performance is not to pass judgment, to categorize interpreters into different skill levels, or to identify "better" and "worse" performers. Rather,

Sample Questions for Activity Planning

1. What skill or subskill is this activity intended to train? What is the performance goal for the activity?
2. Is the material relevant? We make better use of our time if the material is related to the kind of work we do or are training to do.
3. What do I need to make the material appropriate for working on this goal? For example, if I am targeting delivery skills I might avoid using technical terminology.
4. Is the combination of a goal and (adapted) material within the range of what the students can do? Will the exercise be challenging but not impossible or overwhelming?
5. Is there content that needs to be taught before doing the exercise? Do my students have the knowledge and skills necessary to do what I am asking them to do? For example, students need to have been taught the basic principles of note-taking before I ask them to focus on note-taking during practice. Or, if I expect them to implement strategies for asking for clarification, then I must first teach them about such strategies.
6. What do I need to tell my students? Have I let them know what aspect of performance I want them to focus on, and how I expect them to do so? For example, if I want to ensure that students' first exposure to simultaneous interpreting leaves them feeling capable and motivated, I might ask them to focus on producing complete, grammatical sentences rather than on achieving 100% accuracy.
7. How will my students and I recognize a successful performance? What are the concrete, measurable criteria by which I will judge success? Are these criteria clear to the students? The answers to these questions must take into account the students' current skill level. For example, criteria for a successful performance will be different for a group of rank novices than for a group of practicing professionals.

research into cognitive and performance differences provides insight into how novices become competent performers and how competent performers may continue to improve their skills over time. This knowledge, in turn, informs our approach to training and practice.[4]

Understanding the complexity of the interpreting task and the mechanisms of skill acquisition is reassuring to students and trainers alike. For trainers, the ability to predict some of the problems that students will face allows them to highlight these issues through their choice of classroom exercises or, alternately, to prepare students to deal with them successfully. It is also helpful for students to understand that some of the difficulties they face are in fact normal parts of the learning process. There are certain behaviors we expect of novices because they are novices, and other behaviors we expect of intermediate students or newly-practicing professionals. For example, the fact that a student gets stuck on words or stops listening when asked to take notes does not mean that he or she is a bad interpreter or cannot learn to interpret well. These behaviors are characteristic of novices and understanding them as such can normalize them for students so that they do not jump to the conclusion that they are bad or incapable interpreters just because they face a given difficulty.

Approaching training and practice through a skill acquisition framework and implementing a deliberate practice approach to skill development can help learners, trainers, and practicing professionals take a structured, rational approach to analyzing and improving interpreting performance. ■

Notes

1. American Translators Association Code of Ethics and Professional Practice, www.atanet.org/governance/code_of_ethics_commentary.pdf.

2. For more information, see:

   - Hoffman, Robert R. "The Cognitive Psychology of Expertise and the Domain of Interpreting," *Interpreting* (Volume 2:1-2, 1997), 189-230.
   - Ericsson, K. Anders. "Expertise in Interpreting: An Expert-Performance Perspective," *Interpreting* (Volume 5:2, 2000), 187-220.
   - Moser-Mercer, Barbara. "Skill Acquisition in Interpreting: A Human Performance Perspective," *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* (Volume 2:1, 2007), 1-28.

3. Ericsson, K. Anders. "Expertise in Interpreting: An Expert-Performance Perspective," *Interpreting* (Volume 5:2, 2000), 193.

4. For more information, see:

   - Moser-Mercer, Barbara. "Skill Acquisition in Interpreting: A Human Performance Perspective," *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* (Volume 2:1, 2007), 1-28.
   - Motta, M. "Facilitating the Novice to Expert Transition in Interpreter Training: A 'Deliberate Practice' Framework Proposal," *Studia UBB Philologia* (Volume 56:1, 2011), 27-42.

Related Information on Skill Acquisition and Expertise

Englund Dimitrova, Birgitta. *Expertise and Explicitation in the Translation Process* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005).

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Herring, Rachel E. "Straight into the Deep End? A Systematic Approach to Skill Acquisition and Goal-Setting in Interpreter Training" (Free webinar offered by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care), http://bit.ly/Herring-webinar.

Hoffman, Robert R. "The Cognitive Psychology of Expertise and the Domain of Interpreting," *Interpreting* (Volume 2:1-2, 1997), 189-230.

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Motta, M. "Facilitating the Novice to Expert Transition in Interpreter Training: A 'Deliberate Practice' Framework Proposal," *Studia UBB Philologia* (Volume 56:1, 2011), 27-42.

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