Reading skills for sight translation in public-sector services

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Abstract: Interpreters in public-sector services in Norway report that they sight translate almost every day; a mode of translation that requires well-developed reading skills. Nevertheless, in interpreter training programs and assessments, reading skills seem so far to have been taken for granted. In this article we discuss reading skills for sight translation and suggest a way of testing these skills. Furthermore, we argue that there is a need to rethink assessments and educational programmes based on an assumption of skills in reading. We base our arguments on a study of public-sector interpreters' reading speeds in Norwegian. The results show that 70% of the interpreters tested did not have sufficient skills in one central component of reading, namely decoding; that there is vast variation in skills; and that decoding speed varies according to the interpreters' linguistic backgrounds. Our results are a strong indication of a specific need for training in reading skills amongst many public-sector interpreters.

Keywords: Reading skills, sight translation, public service interpreting, assessments, interpreter training

1.   Introduction

Unqualified interpreters present a serious obstacle to communication in the public sector, a situation that is challenging for both the professionals and their clients alike (see for example IMDI, 2007; Nilsen, 1995, 2001, 2005, 2011). A recent report on interpreting at the University hospitals in Oslo (Linnestad & Buzungu, 2012) demonstrated that only approximately 10% of interpreting assignments were performed by a person with appropriate interpreting competence.

Currently there is no general consensus regarding the qualifications necessary for public-sector interpreting (see also Nilsen, 2013). Within the field of interpreting studies, interpreting for public-sector services has so far mainly been studied and discussed as an activity requiring oral skills, in the sense of skills for interpreting between speech in two languages. For that reason, training in, and assessments of, interpreting also may be based on an assumption that interpreting requires oral skills only. Yet sight translation ("ST"), which is a hybrid combining interpreting and written translation, with the source text written and the target text spoken (Agrifolio, 2004; Dragsted, Mees & Hansen,

2011; Setton & Motta, 2007, p. 203), is a technique required in many public-sector interpreting assignments.[1]

The term ST may refer to slightly different types of activities depending on the conditions under which the ST is performed. Firstly, one may distinguish between ST with and without preparation of the text, also called unstressful and stressful ST (Lambert, 2004, p. 298). Secondly, a distinction also exists in the literature on ST between ST and *sight interpreting* (Lambert, 2004). The question is whether this special mode is actually interpreting or translation. Since both oral and visual forms of information processing are involved, ST can be defined as a specific type of written translation as well as a variant of oral interpretation. Sylvie Lambert (2004, p. 299) states that sight interpretation occurs when the message is presented both orally and visually. This activity is also known as *simultaneous interpretation with text* (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 19). It occurs when the interpreter sight translates while listening to the speaker's live delivery, a mode that is common in conference interpreting. ST, however, involves the transposition of a message written in one language into a message delivered orally in another language (Lambert, 2004, p. 298).

Above all, this specific mode of interpreting requires well-developed reading skills in addition to oral skills. However, ST has mostly been viewed as a pedagogical exercise for raising students' awareness of syntactic and stylistic differences between the source and target languages (Martin, 1993, p. 400; Viaggio, 1995, p. 34-35). Interpreters are rarely trained in this task per se (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 186). ST has also been considered useful in developing oral skills and language-transfer skills through the process of syntactically restructuring and paraphrasing the source text (Ilg & Lambert, 1996, p. 73). Furthermore, ST is used, not only for the above mentioned pedagogical tasks, but also as a traditional step between consecutive and simultaneous (SI) (Song 2010). It is considered an exercise to learn to anticipate (see among others Noel & Song, 2006; and Weber, 1990).

There is, however, a need for education and training in ST (Changmin, 2001; Ersozlu, 2005; Sampaio, 2007). Results from a study conducted by Marjorie Agrifoglio (2004) show that ST is a complex and unique technique, which places cognitive demands on the interpreter that are by no means less rigourous than those of simultaneous and consecutive interpreting. Furthermore, Agrifoglio's study indicates that the continuous presence of the source-language text seems to be the greatest obstacle for the sight translator, affecting target-language expression and the ability to coordinate the tasks of silent reading and oral translating. Visual interference seems to be stronger than audio interference (Agrifolio, 2004, p. 61; Shreve, Lacruz, & Angelone 2010). Based on the findings of the study presented in this article, we suggest that another cause of interference may be the sight translator's skills in reading. Clearly, the sight translator's reading speed will influence the flow and the speed of ST, while his or her reading accuracy will affect the accuracy of the ST.

More research on ST is needed, for this task has remained largely unaccounted for in interpreting studies. Moreover, the few studies that have been conducted seem to be from the perspective of conference interpreting, and with an emphasis on European language pairs, as noted by Jieun Lee (2012). Nevertheless, for interpreters in the public sector this mode of interpreting often forms part of the assignment. Public-sector interpreters in Norway report that they perform this mode of interpreting almost every day (Felberg, 2015).

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[1] We are aware that in some countries, e.g. Flanders, the ethical code for interpreters prohibits community or public service interpreters to sight translate from the page. They are allowed to interpret oral speech only. (See website of the Flemish accreditation body Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie: http://www.kruispuntmi.be/thema/sociaal-tolken-en-vertalen/ik-wil-sociaal-tolk-worden/sociaal-tolken).

The aim of our research is to provide knowledge that can contribute to the formulation of curricula to help student interpreters acquire the skills necessary for ST in the public sector, taking differences in local practice into account. This article has two aims. The first aim is to present a small-scale study from Norway on public-service interpreters' reading speeds. The second aim is to indicate what constitutes sufficient decoding skills in the context of training for ST and professional interpreting, and how these skills can be tested. The results from the study show a vast variation in the interpreters' reading skills, and that these skills vary with the interpreters' linguistic backgrounds. This variation in reading skills indicates that there is a clear need for specific training in these skills among many interpreters in the public sector. The results lend support to and supplement Jieun Lee's study (2012), which indicates that student interpreters need to develop their reading skills further. Lee argues that reading skills in general need to be developed to ensure that interpreters are able to understand the source text accurately and distinguish key ideas from ancillary ideas. Our focus, however, is on the particular skill of speed in decoding.

2. Background

The background to our study on interpreters' reading skills lies in concerns raised by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration's interpreting unit regarding ST. Interviewers conducting interpreted asylum interviews had complained that some interpreters were slow at sight translating. The Directorate of Immigration has its own interpreting unit responsible for the quality assurance of interpretation (Utlendingsdirektoratets regelverk, 2011), and the interpreting unit contacted the Department for Interpreting Studies at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences for help and advice. Against this background we initiated a small research project to investigate the causes of the alleged slowness of some interpreters. Our initial research question was: What is the cause of slow ST in some asylum interviews?

Understanding the problem seemed to require a thorough understanding of the specific nature of ST, since generally the interpreters were not reported as having other difficulties during the interviews, where for the most part they interpreted consecutively. Furthermore, due to the immigration authorities' quality assurance efforts concerning interpretation, we could assume that there were many well qualified interpreters represented amongst their interpreters in most languages. A recent report (Linnestad & Buzungu, 2012) shows that the Directorate of Immigration uses the highest number of qualified interpreters of all public sector institutions in Norway. Of the interpreters used in 2011, 38% had a state authorization (Mortensen, 2001, has written a report about the Norwegian Interpreter Certification Examination). Nevertheless, the quality of interpreting varies, even within the Directorate of Immigration. In 2011, the Directorate registered 5,435 interpreting assignments (Linnestad & Buzungu, 2012). These assignments were interpreted by 292 persons in 58 languages. Of these persons, 34% had a state authorization, 52% had undertaken various amounts of interpreting training, and 14% could be considered unqualified. On the basis of the low number of unqualified interpreters used by the Directorate of Immigration, we ruled out the possibility that the slow ST was being caused by generally unqualified interpreters. The answer seemed rather to lie in the specific nature of ST.

In the public sector in Norway, as in many other countries, reports are written following most encounters with clients. An example is a report from an asylum interview. The report is written in Norwegian and, in order to ensure correctness and accuracy, it is read by or to the client after the meeting, so that the client may correct any mistakes or inaccuracies. In cases where an interpreter is needed, the report is sight translated into the client's language.

Most of the ST is therefore conducted based only on a text written in Norwegian. In this paper, ST thus refers to the oral translation of a written text. The ST performed in dialogue interpreting has its own specific features (also discussed by Felberg, 2015), however, and so it does not conform neatly to the distinction between with and without preparation. Generally, the interpreter will have interpreted at the meetings on which the report is based, and accordingly will be familiar with the content of the written text. However, the interpreter will not be familiar with the actual form of the text, meaning that one cannot say that the text has been prepared. Another factor is that these reports follow a particular structure, and some interpreters will be familiar with this. Nevertheless, the reports seem to vary enormously in style (Bollingmo, Skilbrei, & Wessel 2014).

Returning to the question of the specific skills required for ST, Weber (1990, p. 50) states that ST requires rapid analysis of text; rapid conversion of information from one language to another, while avoiding word-for-word translation; and public speaking. Angelelli (1999, p. 27) states that ST should sound as if the interpreter were reading a document in the target language, which implies a smooth delivery devoid of hesitations and pauses. The interpreter needs to read the source text while translating. In order to produce smooth oral renditions, the interpreter has to read ahead to identify key words and units of translation while planning target-language expressions (Agrifolio, 2004, p. 54). Furthermore, the interpreter has to extract enough information from the source text to reformulate it into meaningful units in the target language. The obvious answer to the question of what specific skills are required for ST, as opposed to interpreting, is therefore reading skills.

Reading is often defined as a product of decoding and language-comprehension skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Decoding refers to the process of translating letters and language sounds into words. It is the technical part of the reading process, which develops in interaction with comprehension, semantics and background knowledge. One aspect of decoding is fluency, which refers to the degree of automation of the decoding process. A good reader is someone who is skilled in single word decoding and also actively uses his or her reasoning and background knowledge to create meaning in a text (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004). A good standard of reading requires speed and accuracy as well as good/adequate comprehension. Following the tightrope hypothesis (Gile 2009, p. 182), we argue that reading for ST demands the use of complex reading strategies based on automated reading skills. In other words, the interpreter must not be hindered by difficulties in decoding or understanding the texts. According to Gile, interpreters should automate as many processes as possible: the interpreter must not read first and interpret afterwards. The tasks must be done simultaneously.

Lee's analysis (2012) reveals that student interpreters need to make conscious efforts to distance themselves from the form of the source language and to develop translation skills to avoid literal translations. We suggest that a lack of automated reading skills may also contribute to literal translations, since an interpreter who lacks such skills must devote much of his or her cognitive capacity to decoding and understanding in addition to the translation itself. Reading speed will influence the flow and the speed of ST, and accuracy in reading will influence the accuracy of the spoken delivery in the target language.

On the basis of our knowledge that reading is a complex skill, the complexity of which has also been discussed by Angelelli (1999) in relation to interpreting, we suspected that insufficient reading skills among the interpreters represented a barrier to their performance and development of ST techniques. We set out to test the following hypothesis: Reading skills among some public service interpreters are not sufficiently developed for ST.

3. Method

In order to test our hypothesis, we decided to test the interpreters of the Immigration Directorate's reading skills. Reading, however, consists of two components: decoding and understanding. For a good reader, decoding takes place automatically and without effort (Samuels & Farstrup, 2002). Understanding is more complex, and for that reason also more complex to test. We therefore decided to use a decoding test, and to specify our hypothesis: Decoding skills among some public service interpreters are not sufficiently developed for ST.

The decoding test that we used was a screening test that would enable us to test the decoding skills of a large number of readers. We conducted the tests in November 2013 during a seminar on ST for interpreters working for the Directorate of Immigration. All the interpreters at the Directorate were invited, and interpreters who knew they had difficulties with ST were encouraged to participate by the Directorate. Both interpreters with and without education within interpreting studies and with various degrees of expertise were among the participants. The group was a rather mixed but good representation of the Directorate of Immigration's interpreting pool.

We used a decoding test based on word chains. A word chain is a row of words written without spaces, as in this example of our own making: "Whendooryoumouse".

The test that we utilized is called "Ordkjedetesten"/Wordchain test" (Høien & Tønnesen, 2008), and was developed to investigate decoding skills. It is used as a screening test to reveal difficulties with fluency and accuracy in decoding. The words used in the test are in common usage and are not "difficult" academic words. The test consists of 90 word chains, each consisting of four words. The task is to divide all the chains into separate words as quickly and accurately as possible, within four minutes. The test is standardized and normed based on results from 400 adults with Norwegian as their first language. The raw scores are transformed into stanine scores from 1 to 9. According to the standardized norms, a stanine score of 1 or 2 indicates risk of dyslexia or a serious decoding-related reading problem. A stanine score of 5 is a medium and acceptable result, while 9 is outstandingly good.

We anticipated that interpreters' reading skills might vary depending on their first language, and each interpreter was therefore asked to provide information about his or her first language on the front page of the test form. They were also asked to give their consent to the data being used for research, in an anonymous form. 92 interpreters with 28 different first languages participated in the test. For analytical purposes, we divided the respondents' languages into five groups according to their approximate linguistic distance from/resemblance to Norwegian, as follows:

1. Norwegian
2. Western European, represented by five languages (Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, German)
3. Eastern European, represented by five languages (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Hungarian, Albanian, Russian, Polish)
4. Asian, represented by thirteen languages (Azeri, Burmese, Nepali, Hindi, Chinese, Kurdish, Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Dari, Pashto, Urdu, Uyghur)

5. African, represented by four languages (Bilin, Somali, Swahili, Tigrinya)

Table 1 presents the number of participants distributed by language background.

Table 1. Participants

Language background	N
Norwegian	12
Western European, represented by five languages[2]	7
Eastern European, represented by five languages	9
Asian, represented by thirteen languages.	39
African, represented by four languages	25
Total N	92

4. Results

Table 2 presents the mean of stanine scores, standard deviation and range in stanine scores by language background.

Table 2. Language background, mean stanine scores, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores

Language background	Stanine score mean	SD	Min	Max
Norwegian (N=12)	7.67	0.78	6	9
Western European, represented by five languages[3] (N=7)	6.68	0.90	6	8
Eastern European, represented by five languages (N=9)	4.56	1.27	3	6
Asian, represented by thirteen languages (N=39)	2.59	1.60	1	7
African, represented by five languages (N=25)	2.20	1.44	1	6

The results reveal that stanine scores vary according to linguistic background and that participants whose first language is non-European have very low stanine scores. The standard deviation also indicates that a vast variation exists between participants in the study particularly in groups with non-European backgrounds. Table 3 presents a more precise picture of the distribution of scores from 1 to 9. The table also includes the incidence of mistakes made by test participants.

Of the 92 interpreters who participated in the test, 64 (69.6 %) had reading skills below a stanine score of 5, which we defined as a desirable result, according to the norms of the test. We consider a stanine score below 5 to be problematic and would anticipate that the reading skills of all the interpreters concerned would represent a challenge for ST because of low fluency. Furthermore, 37 (40.2%) of the interpreters had a stanine score of 1 or 2, which indicates a serious decoding-related reading problem. These interpreters' decoding skills would represent a serious problem for ST, related to both speed and accuracy.

The test also reveals a vast variation according to the 28 languages that were represented in the study. Since the test was conducted in Norwegian, the interpreters whose first language was Norwegian obtained, as expected, the highest scores.

In second place, after the group of interpreters whose first language was Norwegian, the next highest scores were on average found among interpreters whose first language most closely resembled Norwegian, i.e. Western European languages: Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and German. On average, the lowest scores were found among interpreters representing African and Asian languages as listed on page 6. This suggests that linguistic distance may be one factor in the low results. Educational background is another possible factor.

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[2] Not including Norwegian.

[3] Norwegian not included.

Educational background should therefore be added in subsequent tests to pinpoint the cause of the problem. Of course, the interpreters will very likely read faster in their first language. However, ST is seldom performed from a text in a foreign language into Norwegian in public-sector interpreting.

Table 3. Language background, stanine scores, and mistakes

Language background	Score									Mistakes
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Norwegian	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	7	1	0
Western European, represented by six languages[4] (N=7)	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	2	0	0
Eastern European, represented by five languages (N=9)	0	0	2	3	1	3	0	0	0	1
Asian, represented by eight languages. (N= 39)	17	3	7	9	0	2	1	0	0	8
African, represented by five African languages (N=25)	11	6	3	3	1	1	0	0	0	4
N according to stanine scores	28	9	12	15	2	10	6	9	1	
	30.4%	9.8%	13.0%	16.3%	2.2%	10.9%	6.5%	9.8%	1.1%	

We also looked at the number of mistakes in the test. Mistakes were registered and identified by one of the researchers when the chain was not correctly divided into separate words; 78 (84.8%) of the respondents made no mistakes. Mistakes were mainly found among respondents whose first language was non-European. There was a link between speed and mistakes, as seven of the respondents who made mistakes had stanine scores of 1 or 2. Mistakes may be an indication of difficulties relating not only to speed, but also to dyslexia and serious decoding problems. They may also indicate serious problems with comprehension.

5. Discussion

Claudia Angelelli (1999, p. 31) claims that many assumptions are made when ST is taught as part of a translation and interpreting curriculum, where invariably little time is devoted to it. Some assumptions are about the reader (his or her knowledge base and background); others are about assessment (validity and reliability issues pertinent only to ST are seldom considered); and still others are about the pedagogy of ST (e.g. the teaching of strategies that would help students perform better). Assumptions about reading skills seem prevalent both in research and in translation and interpreting curricula in the sense that a certain level of reading skills seems to be taken for granted.

So what are sufficient and insufficient reading skills in this context? It is obvious that a student interpreter must be able to read at some level, but how well must a student interpreter be able to read in order to benefit from exercises in ST? How well must a student interpreter be able to read in order to learn how

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[4] Norwegian not included.

to sight translate fluently? We argue that student interpreters should aim to have highly automated reading skills, because only by possessing such skills can an interpreter concentrate fully on the ST without being hindered by difficulties relating to the decoding or understanding of the text.

The next question is more complex: How well must a student interpreter be able to read in order to benefit from training in ST? We believe that a stanine score of 5 may be indicative, as this is the average score for an adult reader whose first language is Norwegian. Taking a stanine score of 5 or higher as indicative that a student interpreter has sufficient reading skills to be introduced to ST is a preliminary hypothesis that we would like to explore and test in further research.

At Oslo and Akershus College of Applied Sciences, interpreting for the public sector is taught in approximately eight different languages each year. The languages vary from year to year as we try to meet the demand for interpreters in different languages in the public sector. To qualify for admission to our interpreting courses, students are required to have followed secondary education. In addition they have to pass an oral admission test that tests their oral skills in both languages through an interpreted role play (Skaaden, 2013). As already discussed in this article, interpreters in the public sector do not rely solely on oral skills. ST demands well-developed reading skills. Our study has demonstrated that these skills cannot be taken for granted, as 70 % of the interpreters we tested may be described as having inadequate reading skills. Our results therefore suggest that many of our student interpreters lack the reading skills necessary to learn and perform ST. Hanne Skaaden (2012, p. 25) notes that 85-90% of student interpreters at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences are immigrants who have learnt Norwegian as adults. This new insight seems to leave our interpreter training programme with two options:

- To include reading training in the programme.
- To include a reading test in the admission test.

Choosing the latter option would create a risk of not recruiting enough students in many languages. In view of our study, we predict that many candidates would probably not pass the test without having undertaken a significant amount of training in reading in advance. One relevant factor when considering these two options is a study based on eye-tracking in ST conducted by Agnieszka Chmiel and Iwona Mazur (2013). Chmiel and Mazur concluded that an additional year of training is not a sufficiently long period to cause noticeable difference in the skills necessary for effective ST (Chmiel & Mazur, 2013, p. 203). Training in reading is time consuming, since reading is a complex skill, and because improving from a low level will involve reading large quantities of texts. Accordingly we argue that training in reading skills should form a separate discipline in interpreting training for the public sector, since the substantial effort involved may only realistically be included in a long-term training program. We therefore support Angelelli when she suggests that we reconsider the quantity of time allocated to ST in the curricula, the quality of instruction provided, and the specific forms of assessment (Angelelli, 1999, p. 30).

6. Conclusion

In this article we have shown that well-developed reading skills in Norwegian cannot be taken for granted when organizing training programmes for public sector interpreters. Such skills are important for sight translation, and interpreters in the public sector report that they sight translate almost every day.

Accordingly we argue that there is a need to rethink assessments and educational programmes regarding ST.

Firstly, we presented a small-scale study from Norway on the reading skills, or more precisely, the reading speeds of interpreters in public sector services. Secondly, we attempted to indicate what would be a sufficient reading speed in the context of training for ST and professional interpreting in the public sector, and we suggest a stanine score of 5. The results from our small-scale study show that a vast variation is apparent in the interpreters' decoding and that these skills vary according to the interpreters' linguistic backgrounds. The vast variation may also be related to different educational levels or to different educational backgrounds.

The variations in reading speeds that we identified indicate that a clear need exists for specific training in reading skills among many interpreters in public sector services, and that reading skills cannot be taken for granted in interpreter training programmes. Of the interpreters we tested, 70% have reading skills below those of the average Norwegian reader. This indicates that many student interpreters lack the skills necessary to benefit from training in reading skills before starting ST training. But how fast must student interpreters be able to read in order to benefit from training in ST from Norwegian into a foreign language? We believe that an indicative level is the average decoding speed of adult readers whose first language is Norwegian, i.e. a stanine score of 5. This finding is the basis of a preliminary hypothesis that we hope to explore and test in further research.

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