ROBERT G. LEE

From Theory to Practice: Making the Interpreting Process Come Alive in the Classroom

ONE OF THE greatest challenges in teaching interpreting is providing students with both an abstract knowledge of a theory of interpretation and a personal understanding of the application of the theory. The ability to recite the stages in a specific theory is not a particularly helpful skill for a student interpreter. Along with knowing the outline of a model, students must be able to experience the stages, thereby developing an awareness of their own control of the interpreting process. A primary goal of teaching the interpreting process is providing students with a feeling of control, something they can take away from the classroom and exercise on their own. The following exercise is designed to help students in both acquiring knowledge of the interpreting process and understanding their control of it. I begin by outlining the underlying model framing the exercise, then provide some preliminary notes, and finally explain the exercise itself.

BACKGROUND

Having taught interpreting in both workshop and university settings, I have been struck that many interpreters, novice or experienced, talk about the application of a theory of interpretation but rarely put theory into practice outside a learning environment. In

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working with student interpreters, I want to instill an understanding of the interpreting process from the very beginning to help them integrate the process in their work in and out of the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

The model I am working under is Dennis Cokely's *sociolinguistic model of the interpreting process* (Cokely 1992). I have chosen this model for a variety of reasons. First, I feel that the level of detail it offers is helpful in clarifying for students the discrete stages that interpreters proceed through in order to successfully interpret between two languages. Second, the model clearly delineates those specific skills needed at various points in the interpreting process. The ability to know and articulate one's work in terms of subparts can be very helpful in looking at successful and less successful interpretations. Third, Cokely's taxonomy of miscues is very helpful in having students discuss why a specific interpreted message is successful or not.[1]

Some have claimed that Cokely's model is too complicated for students to learn, let alone work with in a classroom setting. I disagree; I think we underestimate the ability of students to both learn a complex theory of interpreting and apply it. I have found that students may be somewhat daunted by the model initially but that clear presentation and examples of application help students to learn the model as outlined by Cokely as well as use it in discussing their own work and the work of their classmates. In addition, students have reported that the ability to look at the stages of their work and see successes in some stages is quite helpful. Often students perceive their own work in a binary fashion: as either all good or (more often, unfortunately) all bad. Having the ability to look for

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1. Cokely defines a miscue as "a lack of equivalence between the s(ource)L(anguage) message and its interpretation or, more specifically, a lack of concordance between the information in an interpretation and the information in the s(source)L(anguage) message it is supposed to convey" (Cokely 1992, 74).

Table 1. Stages of the Cokely Model

Cokely's stage	Short description	Reminder
Message reception	The act of physically receiving the source message through the appropriate channel	Perceive
Preliminary processing	The act of recognizing the source message as a linguistic signal	Recognize
Short-term message retention	The act of storing enough of the source signal to achieve an understanding of the message	Chunk
Semantic intent realized	The act of understanding the source message (Importantly, as Cokely states, "Ideally, of course, the semantic intent of the message realized by the interpreter is that originally intended by the speaker") (Cokely 1992, 127)	Understand
Semantic equivalent determined	The act of finding equivalents in the target language for the concepts expressed in the source message	Analyze
Syntactic message formulation	The act of (mentally) fashioning an equivalent target message	Formulate
Message production	The act of articulating the target message	Produce

success (or lack thereof) in stages of the process is empowering to students; they can see where they are using strategies that are successful and where they need to improve.

Table 1 provides a brief outline of the Cokely model. The reader is referred to Cokely (1992) for a more complete discussion. I have provided a description of each stage in terms of acts in order to underscore to students that interpreters are actively engaged in the work at all stages of the process. In addition, I have added a one-word reminder that captures the essential focus of each stage.

Discussion of the model is sometimes helpful in having the students grasp what the model is capturing. I begin with the idea that every day, almost automatically, students receive messages from other people, decode them, and understand them. In addition, students every day have ideas, encode them, and express them. There-

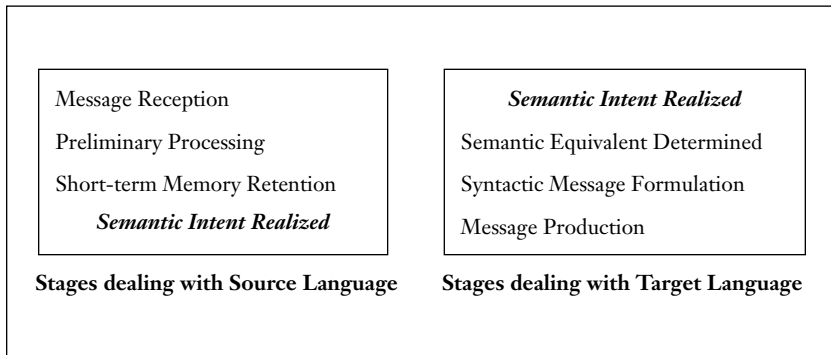| Message Reception	*Semantic Intent Realized*
Preliminary Processing	Semantic Equivalent Determined
Short-term Memory Retention	Syntactic Message Formulation
Semantic Intent Realized	Message Production
Stages dealing with Source Language	**Stages dealing with Target Language**

Figure 1. Process stages by language focus

fore, individual components of the interpreting process are already a part of the skill set that the student brings to the classroom (of course, students vary in their ability to deal with the languages they work with). Students begin to realize that when perceiving and understanding a message, they are going through the first four stages of the model (*message reception* through *semantic intent realized*). When expressing their own ideas, they go through the last four stages of the model (*semantic intent realized* through *message production*). *Semantic intent realized* is the stage when one understands what someone has said and also formulates what to say to another.

Another way to frame subparts of the model is to look at which language (source or target) is the primary focus at each stage of the process. This shift in focus is outlined in figure 1.

Note that semantic intent realized appears in both listings. This is the "overlap" stage, in which the source message is understood by the interpreter and in which the interpreter begins to cast the message in the target language. This stage can be considered both the *output* of the source language stages and the *input* to the target language stages. Figure 2, discussed more below, pictures it as the interface between the source and the target languages rather than as both of them.

One area that is not overtly addressed in the model is monitoring, which is the part of the task in which the interpreter makes sure

the process is going smoothly, checking for and repairing errors in both content and form as well as analyzing and incorporating feedback from the audience or a team interpreter. Monitoring is a metaskill; it requires a high level of knowledge of one's own work and the ability to analyze what is happening in the moment. I feel it is important that students realize, as early as possible in their training, that monitoring is a vital part of the interpreting process. In order to make the idea of monitoring more concrete, I use analogies to a factory, with the interpreting process being akin to an assembly line. I present students with the idea that an interpreter may do three types of monitoring:

1. Process monitoring: This type of monitoring is an "overall" monitor. It is the process by which an interpreter assesses the big picture, looking at the incoming source language and seeing if the overall process is going well. I compare this type of monitor to the supervisor of a factory looking down from overhead to see that all is flowing smoothly through the assembly line.

2. Preproduction monitoring: This type occurs between the *syntactic message formulation* and *message production* stages. In it an interpreter "tries on" the target interpretation before actually articulating it (I believe this is similar to what Betty Colonomos means by "rehearsal" [Colonomos 1989]). The analogy here is the final inspector, the person who inserts the "Inspected by Number 7" tag we often find in new articles of clothing.

3. Postproduction monitoring: Interpreters sometimes catch themselves after uttering something that is a mismatch between the source and target messages (or some other type of miscue)—something that prompts a repair in the interpretation.[2] This type of monitoring can be compared to a factory worker looking out the door, seeing a substandard product being shipped, and issuing a recall.

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2. Note that in this form of monitoring, it is the interpreter who recognizes the miscue. The fact that an end consumer of interpreting may catch a miscue is a similar issue but external to the interpreter's cognitive processes.

When interpreters are overwhelmed by aspects of the process (be it source message speed, density of information, or internal filters), monitoring is often the first element of the process to stop working. We have known for many years that the number of interpreting errors or miscues increases as an interpreter becomes fatigued, but recent research has shown that interpreters' recognition of errors becomes impaired as well. A recent article promoting the use of interpreters in teams cited a study of conference interpreters as follows:

> During the first 30 minutes the frequency of errors—as measured with an elaborate error scale—rose steadily. The interpreters, however, "appeared to be unaware of this decline in quality," according to the report, as most of them continued on task for another 30 minutes. (Vidal 1997, citing Moser-Mercer, Kunzli, and Korac)

Because the activity of interpreting, as well as the concept of monitoring, can be overwhelming, I have designed an exercise that separates the tasks while providing students with experiences of the interpreting process. In the exercise described below, some of the work of monitoring, usually done *internally* by an interpreter, is performed *externally* by a peer.

Figure 2 is a visual representation of the stages of the interpretation process grouped into source and target language tasks. It includes the one-word "reminders" of the focus of each stage as well as the location of pre- and postproduction monitors.

Preliminaries to the Exercise

Before introducing the model to the students, I discuss with them some background assumptions:

• We all have only a limited amount of cognitive energy for all the tasks we have to do (I often refer to this amount as a "bank" of energy). These tasks include, but are not limited to, getting the message, processing the message, remembering the message, self-talk, worrying, monitoring the process, monitoring the audience, predicting, repairing, looking for feeds from a team member,
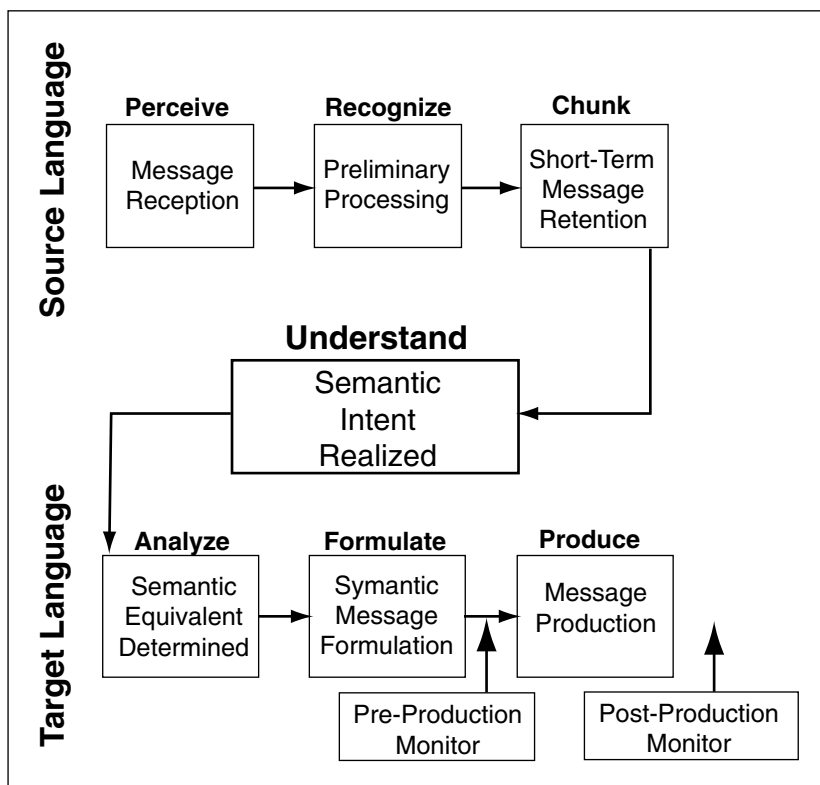
Figure 2. Modified Cokely model

deciding whether or not to take a feed, processing feedback from the audience, processing feedback from the team, and more.

- The more energy used at the beginning of the process, the less available later in the process.
- Conversely, using less energy at the beginning leaves more energy for later stages of the process.
- Using energy wisely is one of the most important skills an interpreter can have. Another term for it is *resource allocation*. (It has also been called *process management*, but it involves more than just the interpreting process, including, for example, self-talk.)

• Being aware of where they are in the process allows interpreters to control the process, not be controlled by it.
• Discussing the decisions that led to an interpretation is more helpful than discussing whether a particular interpretation is right or wrong.

To get students into the habit of looking at interpreting through the lens of this model, I ask them to draw the model on the board for every class meeting. Any student can do it; I just ask that it be on the board before class begins. Students can use notes to write the stages or do it from memory; they can also do it as a team. By drawing the model on a regular basis, students become used to the vocabulary of the stages. In addition, having the model above the area where the students will be working serves as a reminder that we are discussing the interpreting work, not the interpreter.

The Exercise

The objective of this exercise is for students to gain experience with the various stages in the interpreting process as well as with the concept of monitoring the interpretation. One student is responsible for providing an interpretation of a text, and two other students divide up the interpreting task based on the model described, one focusing on those stages dealing with the source language, the other focusing on those stages that deal with the target language.[3] I have called this the "three-chair" exercise because it involves the three students working together, seated in front of a television, as shown in Figure 3.[4]

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3. An additional benefit to this exercise was pointed out to me by Cindy Roy. It allows students to get used to the idea of team interpreting as well as how and when they may need to receive feeds. A component that can be added is having students look at the types of information they ask for and the types of information they give when working in a team.

4. I have done this exercise primarily with ASL as the source language and English as the target language because this direction is logistically easier and because students often feel they "don't know where to begin" when interpreting from ASL to English. With minor modifications, the exercise could be done with English as the source language.
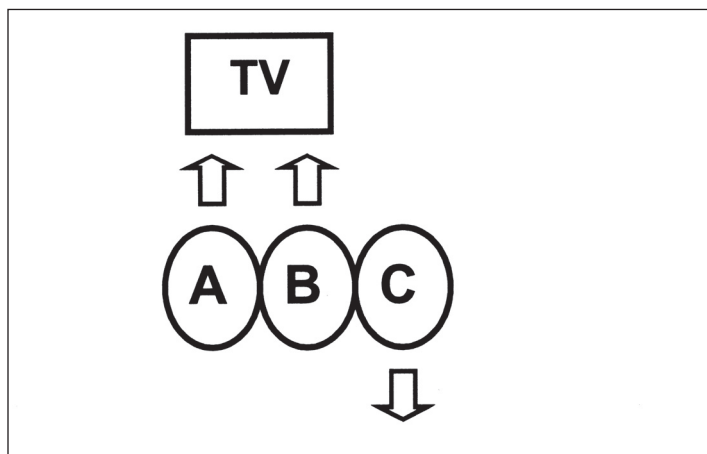
Figure 3. Student placement for interpretation process exercise. Arrows indicate the direction the students face during the exercise.

The source text that is on the television can be one that is familiar to the students, or it can be a novel text.[5] A fifteen-to-twenty-minute text is the right length for this exercise because it contains enough information for students to work with and provides them familiarity with the speaker and subject as the text goes on. The student in the middle, student B, is the one ultimately responsible for producing an interpretation of the text. Students taking a turn in the B position are given the remote control for the VCR and can stop (but not rewind) the tape when they feel they have enough information to provide an interpretation for the text up to that point. Student B can do this without any help but may get assistance from the other two students. Student A, who is also watching the text, can provide assistance with the source-language part of the task (i.e., the first three stages of Cokely's model). That is, student A can repeat what was said, paraphrase it, or in another way provide the

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5. There are benefits and drawbacks to using either a novel or a familiar text. One advantage of a novel text is that students can get a feel for applying the process as one would in real life. An advantage of using a known text is that students may have more time and energy to focus on the individual stages of the process. One approach is to start students with a known and predictable text and work up to using the exercise with completely novel texts.

information that student B needs, but only in the source language.[6] All communication between students A and B is to be in the source language. Student C, who is not watching the source text, can provide assistance only in the target language (i.e., the last three stages of Cokely's model). Student B can ask C specific questions about target-language production (but not interpretation of meaning), such as "What is the word for the person who runs an entire school system?" or "Does [example] sound like grammatical English?" In this way, student C can function as the preproduction monitor, assisting in the formulation of the target message.

   After student B provides the interpretation of the relevant portion of the text, student C can provide immediate feedback about the target-language production (but not the accuracy of the message vis-à-vis the source). Some examples:

• The interpretation is somehow not clear. For example, the interpretation contains a pronoun with an unclear or ambiguous antecedent. (Student B: "So John took it with him." Student C: "What does 'it' refer to?")
• The interpretation contains a word that seems not to make sense in the context of the utterance. (Student B, talking about building a house: "So he hit the nail with a haddock." Student C: "A haddock?")
• The interpretation is unintelligible or inaudible.

   When student B is satisfied with the interpretation of a portion of the text, he or she restarts the tape and continues, stopping when ready to interpret another portion of the text. Looking at a part of the text, getting whatever assistance is needed, and producing an interpretation of that portion counts as one whole turn. It is usually best to allow a student at least five turns (depending on the length of each portion of text).

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   6. Note that, should student A be unable to provide assistance, the instructor can serve as a backup, providing information in the source language that student B asks about. Indeed, one may start the exercise this way, with the instructor modeling the types of information the source-language assistant can give.

When first using this exercise with a class, I have found it helpful to have the students stop and talk about the experience, beginning with student B. This can be done after the first round of five or so turns, long enough to give the students a chance to get used to the exercise. It is important to guide students to talk about the work in a specific way: focusing on the process, talking about stages, and looking at decisions made. For example, a student who needs to have a portion of the source text repeated may say "I definitely got through *message reception* and *preliminary processing*; I am not sure if I had an issue with *short-term memory retention* or *semantic intent realized*" as opposed to saying "I missed it." Further discussion may help the student uncover what was problematic. The teacher can pose such questions as the following: Did you understand all the signs you saw but not realize what the speaker's point was? Were there any unfamiliar signs? Did you just not perceive some part of the message and therefore could not come to an understanding of it? Helping students evaluate what they just did provides them with tools to analyze their own work more thoroughly by themselves.[7]

After student B is finished, students A and C can talk about how they felt the process went. Finally, the rest of the students in the class should be noting how the process goes. Students should think about the following questions:

• What seemed to drive the interpreter's decisions to stop the text?
• How did the interpreter take advantage of the other two students in the process?
• Which stages in the process seemed fairly easy for the interpreter? Which presented more challenge? What is the evidence on which you base your observations?

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7. It is entirely possible for student B to complete this task without ever turning to A or C for help. In this case, the teacher can ask student B to reflect on the interpretation and the experience of going though the stages as an internal process. Because part of the goal is for students to experience portions of the task, it is important that student B be able to articulate the decisions made, not merely produce an interpretation. In addition, the teacher can ask students A and C about their experience of focusing on only one portion of the entire process.

After the discussion has run its course, the students should rotate roles: student A (who was watching the source text) becomes the interpreter, student B becomes student C, and student C moves to the role of student A. The process continues, allowing each student at least five turns and a break for discussion. After all three students have been in all three roles, a wrap-up discussion is helpful. The teacher can lead students to discuss the following questions:

- In which role did you feel most comfortable? Least comfortable? Why do you think that was so?
- At what point(s) did you need to turn to one of the other students for assistance? What drove your decision to get help? Did you receive the kind of help you needed? Why or why not?
- What was it like being in either of the "less active" roles (i.e., A or C)?

I have found that this exercise can also be diagnostic. Those students who struggle with the source language (due to either skill limitations or psychological factors) tend to turn to the source-language "helper" (student A) more often. Those who struggle with the target language (or who are less confident in this area) tend to turn to student C more often. Instructors can note both the type and the quantity of help that students elicit from the source- and target-language assistants. In addition, a student's self-report of comfort levels when in each role can be helpful in identifying patterns of strength and weakness as well as areas where students feel more confident or less confident about their skills.

Conclusion

The exercise presented here is an attempt to provide students with concrete experiences with the stages of an abstract model of the interpreting process (the Cokely model). In addition, introducing the concept of monitoring the interpreting process as a *part* of the process is key to helping students be in control of their own work. By laying a foundation of theoretical understanding, outlining basic assumptions about the purpose of models, and allowing students to

perceive the various subparts of the interpreting task, we can bring students to a deeper understanding of their own work as interpreters.

Acknowledgments

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