Chinese Interpreter Training in Context: Textbook Compilation as a Didactic Tool

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口译教程 *Challenging Interpreting: A Course Book of Interpreting Skills* (*2nd edition*), by Yang Liuyan and Su Wei (Eds.). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-7-5446-3774-9/H.1358

口译基础 *Basics of Interpreting Skills*, by Su Wei and Deng Yi (Eds.). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-7-5446-1434-4/H.0584

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed rapid growth in interpreter training courses in Chinese higher education, especially after Translation and Interpreting Studies was recognized as an independent discipline in China. Consecutive interpreting as a compulsory subject is now widely taught on Chinese undergraduate-level foreign language programmes. Statistics from the Translators' Association of China (TAC) show that by the end of 2013, more than 160 tertiary institutions across China had been authorized

to offer Bachelor of Translation and Interpreting (BTI) and/or Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) degrees, with an annual intake of 25-50 students per programme. The rapid growth of the Chinese T/I training courses, with frequently 25-30 students in one room, have brought up new challenges for interpreter educators, necessitating constant update of didactic approaches and curriculum design. Correspondingly, there has been a substantial increase in interpreting textbook compilations as didactic practice in the Chinese context, totaling 181 different publications in 2007 (Tao, 2008: 154). The compilation of textbook for training as a noticeable, and even perhaps a unique Chinese phenomenon, deserves more discussion in the interpreting studies circle.

As pointed out by Liu (2014), logistical or operational resources for teaching in most undergraduate-level interpreting training institutions[1] entail multiple constraints and limitations: low teacher-to-student ratios (in most cases, 1: 25), a relatively low level of students' B language proficiency, and most importantly, students' cognitive and affective needs in the teaching-learning process.

This article reviews two of the latest textbooks published within the so-called 'XiaDa' model of interpreter training developed at Xiamen University, one of the most influential Chinese institutions for interpreter training. These two books have been officially approved and recommended by the Chinese Ministry of Education, and they are useful to help illustrate how the interpreting training model has developed over time. After a brief overview of the historical development of this influential model in China, I discuss the most recent changes and updates in the didactic approaches, selection of training materials and curriculum design of the XiaDa model in these books. The pros and cons of what is effective in the updated XiaDa model are considered along with some of the particularly thorny

issues surrounding textbook compilation for training purposes. The overall objective of this review article is to critically assess the relationship between didactic modeling and its reception in a specific context.

2. The XiaDa Training Model in a Nutshell

The XiaDa model has been one of the most prominent training approaches and is one of the most frequently discussed in the Chinese Interpreting Studies (CIS) literature (see e.g. Lin et al. 1999; Chen 2009; Wang and Mu 2011; Liu 2014/2015). The model was developed originally from the comprehension formula of Daniel Gile (1995), who spearheaded the study of operational components of the interpreting process. It first appeared in the preface of ***Interpreting for Tomorrow: a course book of interpreting skills between English and Chinese*** (teachers' book) published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 1999, where the authors stated their purpose of developing a model to serve as the theoretical underpinning for their training course in interpreting skills (Lin et al., 1999). Since that time, the XiaDa authors have compiled a series of interpreting textbooks based on this model to guide their own training practices, which have been well-received and quickly adopted by many Chinese universities.

The original XiaDa model for interpreter training was built upon three overlapping circles—analysis (A), comprehension (C) and reconstruction (R)—in addition to a superimposed triangle of Skills and Professionalism (S+P) on top. It aimed to reflect the non-linear dynamic process of interpreting through demonstrating each and every component skill required in this process—on the basis of which a curriculum for training was built (see Liu 2014 for a more detailed

discussion of this model).

Guided by the chart of Progression of Skills, skills and techniques for consecutive interpreting are subdivided into various components including memory training, public speaking, note taking, figure switching, paraphrasing, coping tactics and sight translation. These skills are introduced to students in a step-by-step manner throughout the training course. Revision and integration of skills are provided at the end of each unit. Course materials for each unit are carefully chosen to match the skills practiced. This approach to the teaching of interpreting advocates a skills-led rather than language/content-based pedagogy. It is regarded as a model that opens a new window to interpreter training in China by setting a new training framework, emphasizing professional interpretation skills rather than linguistic skills *per se* (Chen 2009: 287-88).

Since its inception, the XiaDa model has been well received and has served as a useful tool to guide interpreting courses in China, especially at the undergraduate level. However, in the course of applying this model in classroom practice, certain flaws and deficiencies have been observed. These include an inappropriate didactic progression of skills acquisition, an overemphasis on certain skills in the curriculum at the expense of others, the selection of training materials, and most importantly, meeting the cognitive or psychological needs of students in the learning process (see more in Chen 2009; Liu 2014).

In other words, a key question is how to map out an effective way for Chinese (undergraduate) students to master the set of skills and techniques required for (consecutive) interpreting. Let's now turn our attention to the new textbooks.

3. The Updated XiaDa Model and Its Didactic Progression

Despite substantial success in guiding interpreter training pedagogy in undergraduate-level interpreting courses, the original XiaDa model lacks a nuanced appreciation of the teaching-learning process of skills acquisition (Liu 2014). By drawing on advances in cognitive psychology and their own classroom practices on skills training, the XiaDa scholars have adjusted their model to extend the training process to include both pre-class preparation and after-class monitoring. We can see in the updated XiaDa model (see Figure 1 below) that two modules have been added to the original: 1) **Foundation Building (FB),** and 2) **Quality Control (QC)**.

Foundation building, according to the authors (2009: 2-3; 2014: 4-5), requires three things from the students before and during the training process: consistent language enhancement, long-term encyclopedic knowledge build-up and short-term task-oriented preparation, as well as students' psychological quality training.

Quality control (QC), the second module added to the model, comprises a monitoring, testing and assessment scheme incorporated into the course in order to further raise students' awareness in the process, so as to improve the overall quality of training. Specifically, three kinds of monitoring are implemented in the course: 1) macro-monitoring for the communicative effect and micro-monitoring for language use and knowledge; 2) process monitoring: self-monitoring, peer review, group discussion, etc.; and 3) after-class monitoring on mid-term and final examinations, certificate tests and field interpreting practices.

In recent years an encouraging trend in interpreter training in China is that more training courses (including the XiaDa model) have recognized the importance of cultivating students' quality assessment

awareness by designing such a didactic component in actual training, geared towards what can be termed 'learner autonomy' in educational psychology.

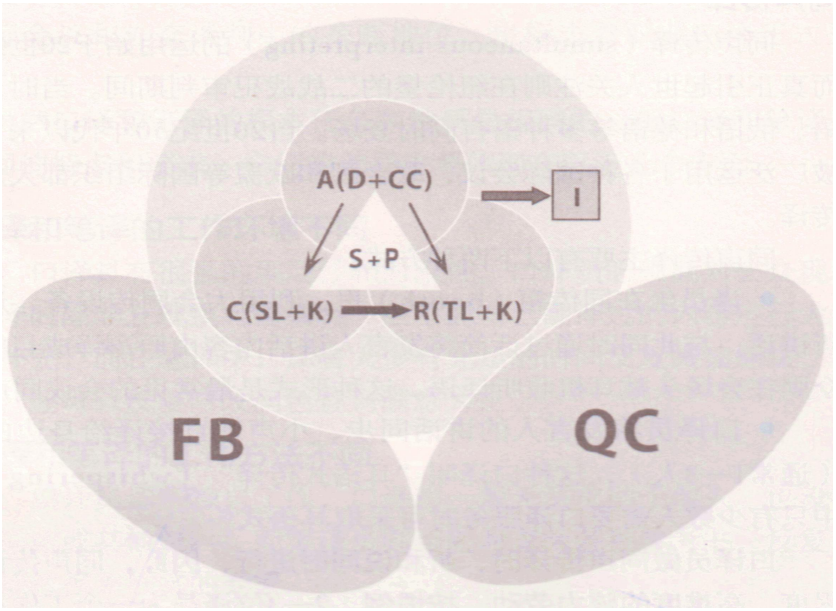

Figure 1 The Updated XiaDa Model for Interpreter Training (2009)

The updated model was first presented in a national symposium on interpreting held in 2008 and later published as the theoretical underpinning for the course books under review— *Basics of Interpreting Skills* (2009) and *Challenging Interpreting: A Course Book of Interpreting Skills (2nd edition)* (2014). First and foremost, these sets of textbooks are aimed undergraduate-level Translation or English programmes that have an interpreting module, lasting over a period of one year. As noted in the introduction, cultivating consecutive interpreting competence (rather than simultaneous interpreting) is the focus of most Chinese T/I training courses, despite a variety of

methods or approaches used.

The two books also provide weblinks for target readers/users to download MP3 audio recordings of practice materials. Interestingly, the preface (p. iv) of ***Basics of Interpreting Skills*** explains how to use the textbook: "[…] the course book aims to provide a basic framework for training […] and with the help of modern IT technology, teachers are encouraged to adapt, change or update the training materials or exercises provided according to the actual conditions or levels of competence achieved amongst the students in their respective classes or institutions." This statement alone is all the more noteworthy for interpreter educators in their attitude towards the function and functionality of a textbook for training (see more below in section 4).

For the discerning eyes of an interpreter educator, the course books and the teachers' manual offer much for consideration.

3.1. Overall Design and Pedagogic Objective

3.1.1. Challenging Interpreting (second edition)

To begin, *Challenging Interpreting (2014)* have extended the training process into five key interrelated components (from the previous three in *Interpreting for tomorrow*): 1) foundation building; 2) comprehension; 3) analysis; 4) reconstruction; and 5) monitoring. Based on the five key components, the textbook offers 10 units to cultivate consecutive interpreting skills and a brief supplementary section on career orientation for beginning interpreters with some practical guidelines (see Table 2 below). To be more specific, each unit contains four sections covering 2-3 sub-skills under the general skill in discussion, totaling 21 skills/techniques for consecutive interpreting in the whole book.

Table 2

Challenging Interpreting Course Units
Preface: Introduction to Professional Interpreting and the XiaDa Model
Unit 1 Getting the Message through Listening
Unit 2 Extracting the Gist
Unit 3 Memory in Interpreting
Unit 4 Public Speaking Skills
Unit 5 Note-taking
Unit 6 Interpreting Figures
Unit 7 Discourse Analysis for Interpreting
Unit 8 Reformulation Skills
Unit 9 Intercultural Analysis
Unit 10 Coping Tactics
Appendix: Career Orientations for Beginners

It should come as no surprise that in many ways this coursebook follows the pedagogical approach of its influential predecessor *Interpreting for Tomorrow* (1999): skills-led and theme-based, rooted in discourse analysis, text linguistics and intercultural communication (Chen 2009). By adding the two new components (FD and QC), the textbook ***Challenging Interpreting*** seems to have added more scientific and professional rigor to the course in terms of arranging skills progression and class activities. Following the newly approved BTI syllabus for interpreting, this course book concentrates fully on training consecutive interpreting skills (deleting the optional introductory part on simultaneous interpreting in the first edition). Each of the 10 units (2-4 class hours per unit) are structured along the same lines: a brief introduction or summary of a skill and/or relevant theory of interpretation, followed by exercises and practice materials targeted at the skill(s) being discussed. Notably, two types of interpreting exercises are chosen: dialogue interpreting and

consecutive interpreting (2 to 3 minutes long in one segment). The authors have specifically designed a language-in-focus (日积月累) section in each unit after the interpreting exercises to help beginning trainees acquire useful expressions by topic areas and help them grapple with complex sentence structures in interpreting in order to resolve problems specific to the language pair of Chinese and English. Each unit ends with some knowledge-based instructions on how to become a competent interpreter.

Although the overall design of the book looks logical and coherent, it is instructive to consider some of the deficiencies and flaws in order to make further improvement. First, Dialogue Interpreting as a new section is introduced as an 'interesting' class 'activity' to practice the skill(s) under discussion (not introducing as a separate set of skills?) in the textbook. However, the authors seem to have forgotten to first introduce to the students what dialogue interpreting is, before immersing them in a sea of practice. What is the difference between a conference interpreter (performing the 'classic' form of consecutive) and a dialogue interpreter? What special skills does a dialogue interpreter need to possess? These are important questions that are unanswered. More effort is required to make students aware of the 'role' of interpreter in different settings.

Second, although the sample translations provided in the language-in-focus section are generally accurate and reliable, the instructions on how to use this section for language enhancement might be confusing to some students. For example, in the preface to the book, the authors encourage students to "write down and recite these useful sentences" as a daily practice with a view to improving language competence. Yet there is no doubt that interpreting cannot be reduced to such a process of language switching. Every sentence or language group (or sense unit, the term the Paris school employs)

can have different interpretations in different contexts. Thus, the sample translations provided are certainly not the only 'standard' versions. The authors' instructions on sentence recitation might send misleading signals to beginning trainees, who could mistake interpreting as a process of linguistic trans-coding instead of meaning-based 'making sense'.

3.1.2. Basics of Interpreting Skills

After the establishment of BTI (Bachelor of Translation and Interpreting) programmes in China, interpreting has been upgraded from a single course in translation and interpreting to a series of courses. Efforts have therefore been made to devise a series of complementary courses targeting different phases of training. ***Basics of Interpreting Skills*** is a preparatory course introduced in an interpreting curriculum and is illustrative of the XiaDa authors' understanding of developmental stages of the training process. It is also a tentative solution to the issue pertaining to the majority of Chinese T/I training institutions: Can interpreting courses be offered when students' bi-lingual excellence is not yet up to AIIC-classified language standards?[2] If so, how?

Designed to further enhance undergraduate students' linguistic and cognitive language-processing skills, ***Basics of Interpreting Skills*** (2009) offers three units (15 lessons) and a section of reference answers/translations for the exercises. As the name of the book suggests, *Basics of Interpreting Skills* could serve as a preparatory course before consecutive interpreting is formally introduced. To that end, it only covers the most basic or fundamental skills: 1) active listening and analysis for message(s); 2) memorization skills as an interpreter; and 3) oral presentation skills in interpreting. Again, each lesson follows the same structure: theory explaining a skill(s) to be

mastered, pre-task preparation, targeted text for exercise, language in focus, and additional texts for after-class exercises. One highlight is the authors' emphasis on intensive exercises on sentence-to-sentence interpreting for beginners. This method is drawn from written translation, centering on the syntactical and structural differences between English and Chinese. Although such an approach was rejected outright by the Paris School of interpreting scholars (e.g. Seleskovitch and Lederer 1989/2002), Chinese interpreter educators still see it as an effective means to cultivate inter-lingual transfer awareness in translating.

3.2 Didactic Progression of Skills

The authors go a long way to restructure and rearrange the progression of different skills in *Challenging Interpreting*. Sequencing skills, especially distinguishing preliminary skills from more sophisticated ones, and structuring them progressively into a training course is by no means easy. This has also been a central focus for discussion amongst interpreter trainers in the past. Note-taking (Unit 5) as a sophisticated skill, for instance, is introduced in three sessions after preparatory skills such as listening for information (Unit 1), 'gisting' exercises (Unit 2) and memory training (Unit 3). In Unit 5, the authors go to considerable lengths to explain the layout of notes, what to write down, how to analyze and mark information units, as well as the coordination between memorization and note-taking. Two sample notes by professional interpreters (A-B/B-A) and a video on note-taking skills (to download from the Internet) are provided for reference in the textbook (121-22). While it is good to see hands-on examples of notes taken from professional interpreters incorporated in the textbook, one wonders if it would have been more

useful and important to explain to students (perhaps in the last session of this unit) the proper procedure of consecutive note-taking:

a) Listening and analyzing—this serves as the foundation for notes.
b) Remembering and Note minimum—the proper coordination of memorization and note-taking is the key to success. When there is a conflict, always put remembering before note-taking.
c) Recall—with the help of notes, the message and structure of the original speech can be reproduced.
d) Render—the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors will come into play for the final rendition.

In comparison with previous XiaDa coursebooks, it is good to see that both textbooks start with a unit called " Listening for Information" (信息听辨), thus dealing with the most fundamental skill or mechanism involved in interpreting: information processing and getting the message through listening. Several preparatory sub-skills under the headings 'listening for key words', 'grasping the line of logic', and 'gist exaction', are introduced separately in the first two units with targeted practice texts from B-A and A-B respectively. Unit 3, entitled 'memory training', which was introduced as the first skill for interpreting in Unit 1 in *Interpreting for Tomorrow (1999*), is reshuffled in the new course syllabus, because memory skills only work after the basic mechanism of listening for information is instilled in students.

3.3. Material Selection (Speech or Text?)

In the CIS literature, controversy surrounding the use of written materials for interpreter training has been a focus of debate since the

1990s (see e.g. Liu 2008; Chen 2009; Liu 2014). Some have argued against the adoption of any form of a textbook for training, since the oral features of speeches cannot be properly illustrated on paper, and materials compiled in a book cannot keep up with the times. This issue has pervaded discussions within the T/I training community for years. In my view, no single solution can be found.

As far as material selection is concerned, these course books have made some impressive improvements. In the previous coursebook *Interpreting for Tomorrow* (1999), for instance, many of the texts included were in formal written language with no consideration for difficulty progression from one level to another in terms of language use, register and the level of extra-linguistic knowledge involved. Previous research and my own teaching experience have shown that these kinds of 'texts' would probably intimidate many beginner students and might even send misleading signals to students that interpreting courses are no more than dealing with language issues and the oral reproduction of written texts. The XiaDa authors have realized this problem and made some technical changes and adaptations in the latest two textbooks under discussion.

Another commendable feature in both textbooks is the adoption of a sizeable bank of 'real-life' materials, drawn mostly from either the authors' own interpreting assignments or from the Internet (e.g. conference speeches, lectures and TV interview transcripts) on a variety of topics — many of which are complete discourses (instead of segmented texts) dealing with current affairs such as Barack Obama's speech on China or adapted speeches from a World Energy Forum. These speeches are adapted as 'tasks' for interpreting in the units. At the pre-task section, lead-in questions are sometimes provided as stimuli to help activate students' schema of extra-linguistic knowledge for processing the incoming speech (e.g. *Basics of Interpreting*: 20).

This also serves the purpose of the FB (foundation building) component in the updated model. Alternatively, a scenario description of the speech exercise containing the 'what, who, when and where' information in *Basics of Interpreting* (48) is provided to the students, before plunging them into interpreting exercises in each unit.

All these didactic arrangements illustrate a greater and more nuanced appreciation of the teaching-learning context, as some have recently called for (see Liu 2014). Arguably, however, more attention should be paid to informing students about how to select appropriate materials for self-study and after-class practice. The criteria for selecting materials (whether oral or written) for training should be clearly elaborated in any interpreting textbook. In her seminal work in interpreting pedagogy in the Chinese context, Liu Heping (2001/2005: 47) proposed three criteria for choosing skills-training materials:

1) Topics dealing with current issues: this encourages students to activate their extra-linguistic mental resources to process the speech, which helps them to better understand the interpreting process and working procedure.
2) Completeness in content: Although the actual length of interpreting materials is at the discretion of the teacher, one point needs to be made: all training materials used should be a complete discourse, as it helps students develop logical analysis and facilitates 'deep processing'.
3) Skill-content correspondence: this is already self-evident in our discussion and has been well demonstrated in the XiaDa approach.

Overall, these two course books have deepened the skills-led, theme-based approach to interpreter training. Skills from preliminary

sub-skills to more sophisticated ones have been restructured and rearranged in a progressive way to better reflect the teaching-learning process. The introduction of monitoring mechanisms and preparation has extended the training process outside of the classroom to include both pre- and after-class activities. In this way, the updated XiaDa model has helped to chart a steadier route to interpreting competence, and I look forward to seeing this updated model applied in more Chinese interpreting classrooms, possibly through adapting materials to the local context.

4. Textbook for Training: Towards an Interpreting Learning Package (ILP)

In my recent work (see Liu 2015), I examined major interpreter training models in both Europe and China, and argued that much still needs to be done to optimize Chinese consecutive interpreting didactics, especially when it comes to the teaching-learning context. Compiling textbooks for interpreter training in China, as discussed in this article, has arguably served as a solid step toward systematizing skills-training practices by setting up a pedagogical framework and charting out an effective way to interpreting competence. Within such an established framework shown in a textbook, teachers can better structure the training process and evaluate pedagogical results specified in different units stage-by-stage, while students can monitor their own progress against the goals of each unit or stage. In that sense, textbook compilation is encouraged and useful on the condition that trainers/teachers are discerning in their role in the training process. In countries or regions where the interpreting

profession is still in its infancy, writing on the know-how of interpreting skills and publishing in pedagogical books may serve as a tool to disseminate and promote its learning—a useful means to greater visibility and profile-raising for interpreter educators in academia.

However, I would like to emphasize that a textbook is no substitute for teacher qualification. As we know, interpreting is first and foremost a specialized skill. To teach interpreting skills, one must possess the operational expertise him/herself. Interpreter trainers are therefore preferably active practitioners in the field or at least have some interpreting experiences. The two textbooks, however, make no mention of teacher qualifications for the course. Regretfully, a recent informal survey[3] I conducted during a translation teachers' training workshop in Beijing suggests that instead of devoting more time and energy to interpreting practice, most university-level interpreting/translation teachers' top priority is to publish papers and increase their research output, especially under the current climate of 'publish or perish' in academic institutions. Under the current academic promotion system in China, interpreter training practices and research sometimes cannot sit well with each other. It remains to be seen whether there is any institutional breakthrough that can accommodate different interests when there is a conflict between practice and research.

Last but not least, the reviewer has to emphasize that the traditional teacher-centered, textbook-based classroom no longer meets the demands of the large-size classes with the new generation of students in the Web 2.0 era, that is, with web-based interactive learning. China's highly centralized educational system, demographics and students' learning psychology have given rise to new demands for developing interpreting didactics. In this discussion, the merits and

limitations of current interpreting textbook compilation have been underscored. In my view, one of the greatest challenges in China today is how to foster interactive learning, attend to students' learning habits and psychology, and utilize authentic 'real-life' data for training. Fortunately, the development of corpus linguistics with the use of ICT tools has now enabled us to create e-learning tools online and develop electronic corpora to document and classify large quantity of 'real-life' interpreting data. For example, the Italy-based Directionality in Simultaneous Interpreting Corpus (DIRSI-C) and the European Parliament Interpreting Corpus (EPIC) have been applied in training their in-house interpreters. This has shed light on the creation of corpus-based electronic interpreting training platforms for teachers and students in the Chinese context. If we want to properly address how textbooks can be kept up-to-date and reconcile with the oral feature of interpreting, developing corpus-based e-learning platforms to supplement textbook compilation may serve as a way forward.

NOTES

1. In most Chinese universities and colleges, one-year consecutive interpreting (a total of 72-124 class hours) is offered to third or fourth-year undergraduates majoring in English or Translation.
2. AIIC, the only worldwide association of conference interpreters, has strict rules classifying interpreters' working languages into A/B/C languages.
3. Informal interviews on teacher development were conducted in late 2013 among 17 Chinese interpreting teachers across 7 major T/I training institutions for my PhD project.

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