

Assessing Source Text Difficulty for Interpreter Education: With a Focus on Textual Factors of English Source Texts in English-Korean Consecutive Interpreting

Moonsun Choi

Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea

moonsun_choi@hanmail.net

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It is generally agreed that source texts (STs) used in interpreter education must be sequenced according to their level of difficulty. However, it appears that there is a dearth of research aimed at explaining ST difficulty based on specific textual factors, making highly impressionistic assessment of source text difficulty inevitable. The aim of this study is to identify and analyze textual factors involved in the assessment of ST difficulty in interpreter education, and to develop a more objective and reliable way of assessing ST

difficulty, with a focus on English source texts used in the teaching of English-Korean consecutive interpreting (CI).

Three research questions were set for this PhD research: first, to identify and categorize textual factors that affect the difficulty of source texts used in interpreter education; second, to test the methods for assessing ST difficulty and to discover the relations between the different methods; and third, to develop a more objective and reliable model for assessing ST difficulty to be applied in interpreter education.

To answer the aforementioned research questions, a literature review and a survey of interpreting teachers were conducted. Based on the review of previous studies on textual factors affecting text difficulty in second language acquisition, language testing and translation and interpreting studies, six groups of major textual factors were identified: topic related factors (topic-specific concepts and terminology); vocabulary (low-frequency words); sentence related factors (syntactic complexity, sentence length, sentence fragments); logic related factors (conjunctions, references, clarity, abstract ideas); information density; and target language re-expression (figurative language, idioms, culture-specific items, proverbs). In addition, previous studies relevant to text difficulty measurement were examined to determine the methods of source text difficulty assessment for this study.

Following the literature review, a survey of fifteen interpreting teachers was conducted. These interpreting teachers were asked to perform three tasks. First of all, the participants carried out an analysis of textual factors affecting ST difficulty with sample source texts; they reviewed five English source texts that had actually been used in major examinations at a postgraduate English-Korean CI program, and were asked to identify examples and provide

explanations of textual factors they deemed affecting the overall ST difficulty. Secondly, the participants compared the relative weights of the six major difficulty factors (hereinafter referred to simply as topic, vocabulary, sentence, logic, information density, and target language re-expression, respectively) in considering ST difficulty in the context of interpreter education. Lastly, the participants rated the level of difficulty of the five source texts on a ten-point scale. The final task was performed with a two-pronged approach: one was “holistic assessment”, in which the participants based the overall difficulty rating solely on their individual judgment without referring to any guidelines; the other was “analytic assessment”, in which they performed difficulty rating according to the six major aspects of source text difficulty mentioned above.

To identify the textual factors that affect the difficulty of source texts used in interpreter education (first research question), results from the first two tasks of the interpreting teacher survey were analyzed. A total of 464 participant comments and text segments linked to those comments were analyzed and categorized under the six major difficulty factors affecting ST difficulty, and 22 specific textual features were identified that explained the six major difficulty factors in more detail. The result of relative weight comparison of the six difficulty factors indicated that the interpreting teachers considered logic (22.1%) most important in assessing the difficulty of source texts used in the education of English-Korean consecutive interpreters, followed by information density (19.9%), sentence (17.4%), topic (15.5%), vocabulary (13.8%) and target language re-expression (11.4%).

To test the methods for assessing ST difficulty and to discover the relations between the different methods (second research question), various methods for subjective and objective assessment of ST

difficulty were conducted and the results were compared. The result of subjective difficulty assessment by the individual survey participants showed a marked inconsistency; in other words, the difficulty scores rated by the fifteen participants demonstrated little correlation with each other; however, inter-rater consistency was relatively higher in analytic assessment than in holistic assessment. The participants' average scores in holistic assessment were found to be significantly correlated with their judgment of difficulty in the text's logic, information density and sentence in this order.

Source text difficulty assessment by survey participants was followed by objective difficulty assessment, which was a more quantitative approach based on the measurement of readability (Flesch Reading Ease Score and Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index); lexical difficulty (percentage of low-frequency words); lexical variety (type-to-token ratio); syntactic complexity (average length of T-units, words before main verbs, mean number of modifiers per noun phrase); and information density (total number of propositions divided by total number of words) of the source texts used in the survey. Participants' difficulty assessment was found to be correlated significantly with the average length of T-unit, Flesch Reading Ease Score and type-to-token ratio of the source texts.

To answer the third and last research question, which is to develop a model for ST difficulty assessment for English-Korean CI education, a model for assessment of ST difficulty was designed, drawing on both the expertise of individual interpreting teachers and more objective and reliable text difficulty assessment methods. The model was built based on the results of the first and second research questions, with interpreting teachers' subjective assessment accounting for 70% of the final ST difficulty assessment score and quantitative indicators of textual factors of STs 30%. The model

requires interpreting teachers to conduct analytic assessment of source text difficulty with the six difficulty factors as assessment criteria; and quantitative indicators of text quality consist of average length of T-unit, Flesch Reading Ease Score and type-to-token ratio, all of which were found to be significantly correlated with interpreting teachers' judgment of source text difficulty in the second part of the study.

The model for source text difficulty assessment was tested with a trial application on ten interpreting teachers. Interpreting teachers agreed in general to the validity and usefulness of the model, and the difficulty assessment scores generated by the model showed higher inter-rater consistency than the method of using participants' subjective judgment alone. As some participants pointed to the need to further enhance the model's practical applicability in the field, a simplified version of the model was further developed: for practical and simple application, a checklist consisting of key components of the model was presented.

This study has implications for the practice and study of interpreter education. The ST difficulty factors identified in the study can serve as a set of criteria for describing and analyzing ST difficulty in textual terms, so as to help both teachers and students better predict the types of interpreting challenges presented by a given ST. Also, various ST difficulty assessment methods tested in the study point to the possibility of assessing ST difficulty in a more systematic manner. Most importantly, the model for ST difficulty assessment proposed in this study can be utilized for a more objective and reliable assessment of ST difficulty, as it incorporates the relevant quantitative indicators and is thus expected to improve inter-rater consistency.