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Developing Interpreter Competence of MTI Students with Interpreting Workshop: An Action Research Study

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Abstract: *This study conducts action research on an interpreting workshop course within the Translation Master's Program (MTI) at a university in China. The research data includes students' pre-translation preparations, interpreting performance, peer evaluations, post-interpreting reflections, course reports, and the teacher's teaching journal. The study aims to explore how action research can be applied to the teaching of interpreting workshops and how this course contributes to the development of MTI students' interpreting competence. The findings indicate that action research can help teachers optimize the teaching design in terms of teaching processes, content, and student experience. Through this course, students' interpreting competence, which encompasses interpreting skills, cross-cultural communication abilities, and professional capabilities, has been comprehensively enhanced. This study provides valuable insights into interpreting workshop teaching research and the application of action research in interpreting pedagogy.*

Keywords: *Action Research; Interpreting Workshop; Master of Translation and Interpreting; Interpreter Competence*

1. Introduction

The translation workshop was defined by American translation theorist Gentzler[1] as a kind of forum similar to a translation center, where two or more translators gather to engage in translation activities. It was later introduced into translation teaching by German translation educator Don Kiraly, becoming a method of translation instruction[2]. The translation workshop approach is student-centered and process-oriented, helping students engage in extensive practice and reflect on various steps in the translation process involving both linguistic and non-linguistic processing[3]. Through hands-on practice, it enhances students' ability to identify translation issues and appropriately apply translation strategies to address them, thereby acquiring translation knowledge and skills, and ultimately improving their cross-linguistic and cultural communication abilities and overall competence as translators[4].

Research in the academic field shows that translation workshop teaching plays a positive role in cultivating students' translation and interpreter competence[4][5]. However, there is a lack of related studies in interpreting teaching, and how translation workshop teaching contributes to the development of relevant skills for interpreting students remains an important topic for investigation. In light of this, this paper, based on the teaching practice of an interpreting workshop course in a Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program at a Chinese university, employs Action Research[7] to explore the implementation of the course and its teaching outcomes.

2. Interpreting Workshop Pedagogy: An Effective Approach to Enhancing Students' Interpreting Competence and Interpreter Competence

Translation competence and translator competence are core concepts in translation teaching. The composition of translator competence serves as the basis for the design of translation courses, while the acquisition of translation competence forms the theoretical foundation of translation teaching[8]. Specifically, in the field of interpreting, there is a distinct difference between interpreting competence and interpreter competence. It is generally acknowledged in academic research that interpreting competence refers to the ability to transform texts in the interpreting process, while interpreter

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competence emphasizes the interpreter's comprehensive ability to handle challenges beyond text conversion in real-world interpreting scenarios[8].

Kalina Sylvia[9] was one of the first to propose, within the teaching context, that interpreting competence refers to the ability of an interpreter to work in communicative situations where individuals use their own knowledge and intentions, while interpreter competence is the ability of an interpreter to handle text in bilingual or multilingual communicative contexts aimed at interlingual mediation. Wang[10] regards interpreting competence as a part of interpreter competence, asserting that interpreting competence is an internal system of knowledge and skills necessary to complete interpreting tasks. It falls within the cognitive module, including bilingual ability, extralinguistic knowledge, and interpreting skills, and works together with the non-cognitive module (physical, psychological, and professional qualities) to form interpreter competence[11].

Based on the components of translator competence proposed by Tao[12], this study suggests that translator competence primarily includes interpreting competence (language skills, sociocultural competence, subject knowledge, strategic skills, cognitive abilities, and tool usage), intercultural communication competence (non-verbal communication skills, collaboration with peer interpreters, interaction with other participants in the interpreter action network, collaborative learning skills, and negotiation skills), and professional competence (expertise: experience, intuition, and wisdom; professional ethics: ethical issues; self-awareness as a professional; sense of responsibility; market awareness).

Research on translation pedagogy has shown that translation workshop teaching is an effective approach to enhance students' translation skills and professional translator abilities. Based on Social Constructivism, Kiraly proposed the teaching model of the translation workshop, which includes the following three key features: (1) The teaching content is a real translation project selected by the instructor in a planned manner; (2) The instructor, as a member of the professional translation community, serves as a model for scaffolded reflective action when students face difficulties, offering guidance, support, encouragement, revising students' translations, providing feedback, and identifying and addressing potential issues; (3) Students improve their skills, develop critical thinking, and gain confidence through autonomous and interactive learning, ultimately achieving professional empowerment, which includes professional translator behaviors and the development of a sense of responsibility for translation[2]. Translation workshops focus on cultivating translators' professional skills and interpersonal communication skills, emphasizing the continuous accumulation and updating of linguistic and specialized knowledge. As such, they can enhance the development of professional abilities such as translation competence, translator competence, and collaborative spirit, as well as foster collaboration skills[4].

Compared to translation workshops in other fields, the study of interpreting workshops in China has gained less attention, with fewer studies and somewhat limited depth and scope. Existing research mainly focuses on the introduction of teaching models and instructional designs for interpreting workshops[13][14][15][16][17][18][19]. Additionally, while the application of action research in foreign language teaching has been extensively explored, its use in interpreting pedagogy remains under-researched. This study aims to conduct action research on an interpreting workshop course within a translation master's program (MTI) at a Chinese university, exploring how action research can be applied in interpreting workshop teaching practice. It also seeks to investigate the role of interpreting workshops in enhancing MTI students' interpreting skills. The specific research questions are as follows:

(1) How can action research assist instructors in refining the teaching design of interpreting workshops?

(2) How has MTI students' interpreting ability improved through the teaching of interpreting workshops?

3. Action Research on the Pedagogy of the Course "Interpreting Workshop"

3.1 Research Background

In the first semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, the author taught the Interpretation Workshop I course for the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program at a university in China. This course was a professional development course for the MTI program, open to both interpretation and translation students in their first and second years, and was worth 1 credit. A total of 10 students enrolled

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in the course, all first-year MTI students, with 9 specializing in interpretation and 1 in translation. These students had relatively similar levels of English proficiency and basic translation skills. All the students enrolled in the course viewed pursuing translation and interpreting practice as their career goal.

The course included two scheduled interpretation practice sessions with specified themes during the semester (which involved peer evaluation and teacher feedback). Prior to these sessions, students were required to conduct pre-translation preparation and submit assignments (including background information and glossaries). Afterward, they needed to reflect on their performance and submit assignments (including self-assessment and peer evaluations). The final assessment was in the form of a course report submission.

This action research was conducted in two rounds, from September 2024 to June 2025, with each round lasting one semester. The second round took place in the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, during which the author taught the Interpretation Workshop II course. The course nature and the student cohort for Interpretation Workshop II were the same as those for Interpretation Workshop I. Interestingly, the same 10 students who had enrolled in Interpretation Workshop I in the previous semester also chose this course. Based on the data collected from the first round of action research, the teaching arrangements for the second round followed the overall framework, with some specific adjustments made by the author. In general, the second round of action research also focused on two interpretation practice sessions, with students conducting pre-interpretation preparations and submitting assignments before each session, followed by post-interpretation reflections and submission of their work. The final assessment took the form of a course report.

3.2 Participants and Research Data

In both rounds of action research, the data collected for this study included: (1) the pre-interpreting preparation done by students (background information and vocabulary lists), (2) students' in-class interpreting performance (specific interpretations and teacher feedback), (3) students' in-class scoring sheets, (4) students' post-interpreting reflections (self-evaluations and peer evaluations), (5) students' final reports, and (6) the teacher's teaching journal. All enrolled students completed the course requirements as instructed.

This study followed the four main steps of action research: planning, action, observation, and reflection[7], and adhered to the principles of constructivism[20], viewing learning as the collaborative construction of knowledge. The methods of observation and reflection were used to identify students' optimal development zones (Zone of Proximal Development) and the necessary interventions, which constitute the planning and action phases.

3.3 Data Analysis

In both rounds of action research, the author applied descriptive coding[21] to the students' post-interpreting reflections in order to identify the support they received and the challenges they encountered during the course. For the students' final course reports, the author first conducted open coding, followed by selective coding (focused coding), aiming to uncover the structural framework of the students' reported gains and growth. Based on the challenges reported by students and the preliminary data analysis from the first round of action research, the author implemented improvements in the second round of action research.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Action Research Was Effective in Helping the Teacher Adjust the Teaching Design

4.1.1 Improving the Effectiveness of Peer Evaluation Form Collection

Before each round of action research, the author designed teaching activities, collected student assignments and feedback, and determined whether adjustments were needed in the teaching activity design. In the first round of action research, the author introduced the 16 principles of interpretation scoring[22] to the students before the interpretation practice and required them to score the interpreting performances of the students on stage. Prior to each in-class interpreting practice, the author selected authentic interview materials from native English speakers and divided them into 10 appropriately sized segments.

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During the classroom exercises, the author randomly assigned one student to serve as the host, another as the guest, and a third as the interpreter for each segment of the interview material. The three students were required to sit at the front of the classroom in chairs facing the audience, positioned for the interpreting practice. This process continued for all 10 segments, ensuring that each student assumed the roles of host, guest, and interpreter. During the exercises, the students acting as the host and guest could refer to the English interview transcripts and read them aloud. The students acting as interpreters performed consecutive interpretation for each segment.

When the interpreting practice began, the author observed the collaboration of the three students on stage and recorded the interpreting performance of the student serving as the interpreter. The students in the audience then scored the interpreting performance of the interpreter on stage based on the 16 principles of interpretation scoring. After each segment, the author randomly invited students from the audience to provide verbal feedback on the interpreter's performance, followed by the instructor's commentary. After all classroom interpreting exercises were completed, the author asked students to write a post-interpreting reflection journal on their own performance.

In the first round of action research, the author designed a mobile-based scoring sheet. However, during the post-class reading phase, it was found that the number of student feedback forms collected was insufficient. Therefore, in the second round of action research, the author printed paper versions of the scoring sheets in advance and distributed one to each student in class. The return rate of valid feedback forms significantly increased to 100%, with some forms containing handwritten student notes, providing additional data for this study.

4.1.2 Reducing the Pressure of English Listening on Students

In the first round of action research, students generally identified several challenges, including language skills (English listening, long and complex sentences, specific vocabulary), materials (numbers, terminology), interpreting skills (note-taking), and personal factors (nervousness, teamwork). Among these, English listening was the most significant challenge. For example, student D wrote in their post-interpreting reflection journal, "I encountered problems in recognizing the source language and did not fully understand it." Student C noted, "I still need to improve my ability to analyze long sentences during listening." Similarly, student L mentioned, "My English listening skills need further improvement."

Considering the students' actual listening levels, in the second round of action research, the author retained the interview-based interpreting exercise, which is interactive and features relatively simple roles, to avoid adding unnecessary pressure beyond interpreting itself. In terms of the language used in the practice materials, the author avoided using purely English or Chinese materials. Instead, the English and Chinese texts of the same material were integrated, creating a situation where the host and guest spoke in different languages. This adjustment helped reduce the excessive English listening pressure on students while making the interpreting practice in the workshop more aligned with real-world interpreting scenarios. This teaching design aligns with one of the key features of translation workshop teaching proposed by Kiraly, which emphasizes that the teaching content should be a carefully selected, real-world translation project[2].

4.1.3 Assessing Students' Ability to Adapt and Improvise

Nervousness was another major challenge reported by most students. For instance, student C mentioned, "During the simulated practice on stage, I felt very nervous, which led to misunderstandings in my listening comprehension, affecting the translation quality." Student Z stated, "In the second half, I barely understood anything, about 35% of the difficulty was due to nervousness." Student D reflected, "The situation created in class made me nervous, which is something lacking in our usual practice... The nervousness affected my energy allocation, so things I could understand in regular practice became difficult to comprehend in this situation... When translating, my prior preparations could not be quickly recalled due to the tension." In evaluations of other students' interpreting performances, "nervousness" was also frequently mentioned. For example, student L noted, "I think everyone, due to this being the first live translation session that would be evaluated, was somewhat affected by nervousness."

From the students' reflections, it is evident that the "live translation under evaluation" provided by the interpreting workshop is unique compared to other interpreting courses. The exercises in other courses were insufficient to simulate the kind of tension that real-world interpreting imposes on interpreters. This shows that the simulated interpreting practice offered in the workshop is crucial for students. The takeaway for instructors is that rather than reducing the difficulty when students report feeling "nervous," teachers should instead introduce the various pressures that real interpreting work brings. This helps students better prepare in advance, and through improved course design, enables them

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to experience these pressures during the learning phase, thus better preparing them for real-world interpreting.

Therefore, in the second round of action research, the author decided to introduce additional variables to the interpreting practice setting. To better create and control these variables, the teacher would no longer be a pure observer, but would take on the role of the interviewee. This was because the interviewee's speaking role is more substantial compared to that of the host, making it more suitable for designing on-the-spot changes. As the interviewee, the teacher would speak in Chinese to leave the opportunity for English speech to the students. In addition to the change in role and language of speech, the teacher would also introduce pre-designed changes to the teacher's performance as the interviewee without the students' knowledge, to assess whether the students acting as interpreters are capable of adapting to unforeseen circumstances.

4.1.4 Alleviating Students' Nervousness Due to Teamwork Division

In the second round of action research, the author assumed the role of the interviewee, while the student roles were limited to the host (speaking in English) and the interpreter (providing consecutive interpretation between the interviewee and the host). This led to an unexpected development. Most students had already pre-arranged their team divisions and proactively suggested partnering with a particular student to alternate roles as host and interpreter. Given that working with familiar peers could help reduce students' nervousness, improve their interpreting performance, and enhance the overall teaching effectiveness, the author agreed to their request.

In the teaching journal, the author noted, "I did not expect that several students had already pre-discussed their partners, and I agreed. If this helps them feel less nervous and perform better, I think this will make the course more effective. However, in real-world interpreting, one will not always work with familiar colleagues. Perhaps I should not allow students to choose their partners every time." The question of how to assign partners is an area that requires improvement in future iterations of this study. The author suggests that, in the first round of practice, the teacher should assign partners to ensure that every student works with each other at least once, allowing all students to experience each other's interpreting styles. In subsequent practices, students may choose their own partners to experience a more stable team collaboration model. If time allows, in the later stages of the course, the teacher can reintroduce the practice of assigning partners to help students adapt to working with unfamiliar partners, which is common in real-world interpreting.

It is also important to recognize that the students took the initiative to address this challenge in the teaching activity. This is a demonstration of the positive impact of action research on teaching. As part of the action research process, the teacher required students to write post-interpreting reflections. Through these reflections, students identified challenges such as "lack of familiarity with team collaboration," and actively took steps to resolve this issue by pre-selecting partners.

4.1.5 Increasing the Focus on Interpreting Ethics

In the feedback from the first round of action research, several students mentioned uncertainties about how to handle certain situations, such as not knowing how to interact with the speaker—e.g., suggesting the speaker slow down, repeat what was said, and so on. For example, student L noted, "Perhaps subconsciously, I wanted to maintain class efficiency and was afraid of creating awkwardness, which led me to neglect communicating with the speaker in a timely manner." Another student L expressed, "In this interview... both the interviewer and the interviewee tried to remain neutral, avoiding any emotional coloring. I had not paid much attention to maintaining objectivity and accuracy in language before, so I inadvertently included personal feelings while translating. When dealing with content that carries racial or social implications, I sometimes hesitated on how to maintain complete neutrality."

When evaluating other students' interpreting performances, some students also adopted the perspective of the audience rather than that of their peers, focusing on whether "as an audience," the interpretation might "feel odd" or whether they could "receive the accurate message." They also questioned whether the interpreter's voice was "clear" and "pleasant" and whether the tone was convincing to the audience. For example, student C commented while evaluating another student, "I feel like (the student) put themselves in the position of the speaker... the tone also made the audience very convinced."

The challenges reflected in the students' feedback extend beyond the scope of interpreting strategies for live interpretation and touch upon issues of interpreting ethics, including understanding the interpreter's role and how to assert the interpreter's agency. Therefore, in the second round of action

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research, the teacher incorporated additional content on interpreting ethics. This included introducing the concept and significance of interpreting ethics, discussing strategies that align with ethical principles in interpretation, and sharing personal professional experiences as well as real-life interpreting cases obtained from public sources.

4.2 Interpreting Workshop Teaching Effectively Improved MTI Students' Interpreter Competence

4.2.1 Interpreting Ability

Through the courses of Interpretation Workshop I and II, students' understanding of interpretation shifted from a simple "bilingual conversion" to a more integrated approach involving "language, context, logic, and emotions." For instance, student C mentioned in the course report, "I no longer do word-for-word translations or literal interpretations. Instead, I use more flexible expressions and sentence structures, no longer bound by the source text." Student P highlighted the most significant change as moving from a focus on "language-centered interpretation" to a "communication-oriented approach." Previously, P was concerned with whether the translation was "correct," often focusing on taking notes even when unable to fully understand, thinking that at least some notes were better than none. Now, however, P is more concerned with whether the meaning is "conveyed clearly and understood well." P also realized that "truly effective interpretation involves packaging and conveying language, context, logic, and emotions to the audience," a concept that P developed through the consecutive interpretation training in the workshops.

In an effort to improve their interpreting skills, several students have already taken specific steps to systematize the interpretation process, including both pre-interpretation preparation and post-interpretation reflection. For example, recognizing the frequent appearance of Chinese classical allusions in diplomatic interpretation, student C "intentionally created a 'common allusion reference library' during pre-interpretation." When encountering such sentences, if the standard translation is not immediately recalled, C would rephrase the meaning flexibly to ensure clarity of communication. Student G stated that they "established a systematic study and pre-interpretation preparation process, including the creation of a terminology database." Student L mentioned that their greatest improvement was in the "systematic enhancement of their evaluation and reflection abilities in interpretation."

4.2.2 Intercultural Communication Competence

Several students reported that, after completing the Interpretation Workshop courses, they were able to work better in teams. Student L mentioned, "I learned how to cooperate with my partner." During the interpretation exercises, if needed, L would decisively communicate with their partner to slow down or repeat phrases. Additionally, L would discuss aspects like speech speed and pause duration with their partner before the exercise and offer feedback after it. After the exercise, they would also give each other feedback on their performances. Compared to the feedback from the first round of action research, students evolved from not knowing that interaction was allowed to proactively communicating with their partner before, during, and after the interpretation exercises. This shift indicates a significant improvement in their collaborative abilities.

4.2.3 Professional Competence

After completing the Interpretation Workshop course, a noticeable change in students' feedback was their shift in self-awareness. Several students felt they had transitioned from being interpretation learners to professional interpreters. For example, Student G stated that the biggest change brought by the course was "establishing a professional interpreter's mindset." In addition, Student L realized that they were "not just an interpretation learner, but also an interpreter evaluator." Through the design of the Interpretation Workshop teaching practice, students played multiple roles—interpreter, speaker, peer interpreter, and audience—during the teaching activities. This allowed them to experience the various identities of an interpreter, a participant in interpretation, and an evaluator. They gained a preliminary understanding of the real-world interpreter network and obtained multiple perspectives on evaluating interpreters.

Among the multiple roles mentioned, the interpreter's role was the most prominent. Students' sense of responsibility as interpreters significantly increased, and they began to actively "judge" the content of the speaker's message, taking initiative to "verify" and "confirm" information. For example, Student G noted in their course report that their biggest change was becoming "more responsible in interpretation practice" and "actively verifying uncertain information." Student C mentioned that when listening to the speaker, they would "pay attention to logical inconsistencies" and, if they encountered unreasonable

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information, would use common sense to determine whether it was a slip of the tongue. If needed, they would confirm with the speaker. They stressed that "in uncertain situations, it is important to ask questions promptly rather than letting mistakes slide." Student L noted that while they had previously "relied more on language knowledge," they now "understood better how to make judgments based on context, the speaker's attitude, and current events."

One major challenge highlighted in the first round of action research was nervousness. By the end of the second round, many students reported a significant change in mindset, becoming "less afraid of making mistakes" and more "proactive." Before taking the workshop, Student C would experience "internal turmoil" after making a mistake. Now, they "identify the error, correct it, and make a plan for improvement."

Student W initially felt "very anxious" about the simulated interpreting exercises due to the "authentic materials, audience-facing seating, and lack of confidence in interpreting skills," even experiencing pre-class anxiety and momentary mental blocks on stage. After several rounds of practice, W gradually moved from "fear" to "acceptance" and finally to "habitual familiarity." The workshop helped W "adapt in advance to the high-pressure conditions of real interpreting scenarios," so they no longer felt "embarrassed" by mistakes but instead could "listen objectively to feedback from the instructor and peers and strive to improve."

Student D remarked that they previously "would not take the initiative to interpret first." However, because the workshop provided "highly valuable, constructive feedback from the instructor," D became motivated to "actively identify personal areas for improvement." This observation confirms one of Kiraly's key characteristics of the interpreting workshop model: the instructor provides guidance, support, encouragement, and feedback while identifying and addressing students' latent challenges[2].

Another notable enhancement in professional competence was students' awareness of interpreting ethics. Students developed a more concrete understanding of ethical issues and engaged in deeper reflection. The main factors influencing this change were "authentic scenario training," "instructor explanations," and "independent literature consultation." For example, Student P realized during exercises that "the boundary between fidelity and expressive strategy defines the space for ethical judgment," and that interpreters act as "gatekeepers of both content and context." Student Z, previously unclear on what interpreting ethics entailed, now recognized that both translation quality and the interpreter's stance fall within its scope.

Notably, three students reported independently consulting literature on interpreting ethics after class, indicating that 30% of students actively sought theoretical knowledge. This outcome exceeded the instructor's expectations and corroborates another feature of Kiraly's workshop model: students enhance their skills, reflect critically, and gain confidence through autonomous, interactive learning, ultimately developing professional behavior and a sense of responsibility as interpreters[2]. For translation instructors, this suggests that assuming MTI students are disinterested in theory or unwilling to invest effort may prevent genuinely motivated students from accessing learning opportunities. Instructors should proactively provide relevant theoretical concepts, frameworks, and high-quality literature to stimulate students' self-directed knowledge construction, thereby implementing constructivist principles in translation pedagogy[23].

5. Conclusion

This study employed action research to examine the teaching practice and effectiveness of MTI interpreting workshop courses. The findings indicate that action research can assist instructors in adjusting the course design by optimizing teaching processes, enriching course content, alleviating students' anxiety, and reducing their cognitive load. Across two cycles of action research, students demonstrated notable improvements not only in their understanding of interpreting but also in interpreting workflows, partner collaboration, self-perception, sense of responsibility as interpreters, attitude toward interpreting practice, and awareness of interpreting ethics. These findings show a comprehensive enhancement of interpreter competence, which encompasses interpreting competence, intercultural communicative competence, and professional competence.

The results align with constructivist theories in translation pedagogy[2] and support prior research indicating that interpreting workshops foster translation competence and translator competence[4][5]. Beyond this, the study specifically examined how interpreting workshops contribute to the development of MTI students' interpreter competence, confirming the feasibility and applicability of action research

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in interpreting pedagogy.

Due to time constraints and the limited scale of the study, the number of action research cycles and participants was relatively small. Future research could involve cross-sectional studies across MTI students from different universities, longitudinal studies within the same university, or case studies focusing on specific types of institutions or student populations.

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