

PROSODIC TRAINING BENEFIT FOR FARSI-ENGLISH INTERPRETER TRAINEES: DOES GENDER MATTER?

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the effect of gender on the quality of interpreting by 30 Iranian BA students of English translation and interpreting. In the experiment, the control group (7 males, 8 females) received the routine instruction of the interpreting curriculum. The experimental group (7 males, 8 females) spent less time on the routine syllabus and instead received explanation of prosodic concepts and did prosodic exercises as participants in the two groups were matched on the basis of their scores on a pre-test of general English proficiency. Interpreting performance was assessed in a post-test by having three experts rate ten aspects of interpreting quality. Then, t-tests were run on the male and female subsamples to see whether gender affects the performance of participants in the pre- and posttest and in the difference between the two test scores. There is a slight (but statistically insignificant) advantage for women both in the pre-test (8 points better on average on the scale from 0 to 700,) and in the post-test (3 percentage points, but again insignificant). These results have implications for designers of curricula for training interpreters, material producers and all who are involved in foreign-language study and pedagogy.*

KEYWORDS: Gender, Interpretation, Consecutive Interpreting, Foreign Language Learning.

INTRODUCTION

After the cultural turn in 1970, translation and interpreting studies started to flourish. One of the research topics was the gender issue in the communication of meaning. Feminism as a literary activity has had a great impact on translation and interpreting studies (Yang 2014). In western countries feminists investigated the relationship between translation/interpreting studies and gender, wishing to eradicate the traditional but incorrect (Von Flotow 1997) view that men are superior to women. They explicitly pointed out that this aspect is like the translation product that original work (men) is superior to translated work (women) (reported in Yang 2014: 374). At the same time, in most Asian countries feminists were trying to make women more visible in society by having them translate and interpret publicly in the mass media, e.g. in TV news casts. According to Pöchhacker (2004: 11) the most importance difference between interpreting and translating is the immediacy of the former. There are indications that men and women use different strategies when having to cope with the time constraints when asked to convert a text spoken in one language to a semantically equivalent text in a different language (Sabet & Rabeie 2011; Hilmioğlu 2015; Yang 2014; Castro 2013; MacDougall 2012; Stockwell 2002; Wodak 1997 & Simon 1996). Therefore, this aspect that gender differences affect on interpretation in different contexts and societies was necessary to be investigated systematically so that in training future interpreters this

important issue would be taken into account by policy makers in different academic settings in training future interpreters.

Gender and interpretation

If we look at interpretation as a transfer of meaning and ideas in the form of cross-cultural communication then the role of gender would be more evident since in different societies the expectations people have about the choice of structures and words from women and men in transferring their intentions are different. Sex and gender have been defined differently by the World Health Organization (WHO)). It has been stated that “sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.” and “gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.” (Hilmioglu 2015: 3). It follows from this definition that culture does have a determining role in the approach of the society in the choice of language for different genders. The choice of words and structures in delivering the same concept in different societies would be different according to the cultural norms of those societies. So, the issue of gender in the choice of words and structures will also play an important role when it comes to interpretation. In this regard, Hilmioglu (2015: 41) claimed that gender would be one variable which can influence interpretation. In another study about the role of gender in communication of messages by translators/interpreters in China about how womanhood and its language can be evident in translation/interpretation, Yang (2014: 375) stated that a “female translator/interpreter promotes gender neutrality in language and makes use of auxiliary words and emotive words of mood to strengthen the female’s features lively and vividly to challenge the patriarchal language and uplift women’s social status, to get equal right with men.” In similar vein, Simon (1996: 7) claimed that “gender is not always a relevant factor in translation. There are no a priori characteristics which would make women either more or less competent at their task. Where identity enters into play is the point at which the translator/interpreter transforms the fact of gender into a social or literary project.” Some scholars illustrate some of the norms that men and women generally have in different cultures and which society expects men and women to obey. Wodak (1997) mentions some norms men and women should obey within language in different societies. She claimed that “as stated by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), ‘women’s language has been said to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control (p.1).”

Castro (2013: 5) pointed out that “the fact that ‘gender is an omni-relevant category in most social practices’ (Lazar 2005: 3) lies at the very core of both feminist linguistics and feminist translation/interpretation studies. Admittedly, most of the scholarly works produced within these two dynamic fields in the last three decades emphasize the role that language and translation play in the construction of the social world. In particular, much attention has been paid to investigating how gender roles are discursively constructed through language and translation – both understood as social practices per se – and how gender definitions are constantly interacting with other similarly constructed parameters such as race, geography, class or sexuality, therefore having consequences at the level of material practice.” Moreover, Simon (1996: 2) stated that the “gender difference has been played out not only in the metaphors describing translation/ interpretation, but in actual practices of translation/interpretation, in the specific social and historical forms through which women

have understood and enacted their writing activities.” Supporting this claim, Stockwell (2002: 16) asserted that “the term *genderlect* is used to refer to the different lexical and grammatical choices which are characteristically made by males and females; e.g. women in their talks frequently use certain color terms, evaluative adjectives, insecure intonation, tag phrases and super-polite expressions, such as euphemism, less swearing and more indirect words.” Zoghi et al. (2013) investigated the effect of gender on English as a foreign language (EFL) with students at a language institute in Iran). Participants of this study were 100 guidance school students (50 males and 50 females). EFL learning achievement was to some extent related to gender. The results of the study showed that the mean score of the females in the final test was 15.59 out of 20, against 12.33 for the males. A meta study by Voyer & Voyer (2014) analyzed some 500 studies that were done between 2014 and 2011 in 30 different countries (with a total of over one million boys and girls) on the role of sex on scholastic success. The overall result is that girls outperformed boys in all subjects irrespective of the country, year the study was done, etc. Crucially, sex interacted with subject: the advantage of girls was largest in language-related subjects while the difference was smaller, though still significant, in mathematically oriented subjects. As a case in point, López Rúa (2006) showed that girls are regularly superior to boys in terms of overall achievement in languages in general (and foreign languages in particular). Girls consistently appear more interested in the study of a foreign language than boys, and manifest an evident liking for the culture, the country and the speakers of that language. Whereas boys’ reasons for studying the language are mainly instrumental, girls’ motivations tend to be integrative which is very important in overall achievement in second language learning. She also pointed out that the sex-stereotyping of jobs in society still endorses language learning as an accomplishment for girls. Consequently, girls tend to perceive languages as more vocationally relevant. In other words, they are generally more inclined to believe that languages will be useful to them in their future careers. Aslan (2009) stated that females were significantly more successful than males in terms of achievement tests, and that they used more language learning strategies in learning English. The results of the study showed that there is a significant connection between gender, language learning strategies and achievement in English and girls are better second language learners.

Therefore, on the basis of such persistent findings one might hypothesize that the female superiority will also extend to interpreting by young adult men and women. Since there are no systematic studies on the effect of gender on the performance of consecutive interpreters (not investigated anywhere around the world), there is a need for an experimental study to investigate the effect of gender on the performance of interpreter trainees so that according to the specific cultural norms of Iran this issue would pave the way for training future interpreters. Thus, this experimental study investigates the effect of gender in consecutive interpreting performance by interpreter trainees in Iran so that the results of the study would shed more light on modification of curriculum in interpreting studies and training qualified future interpreters as a result.

Research question

Recently, the gender issue in second language learning has been addressed by some researchers in different parts of the world (e.g. Voyer & Voyer 2014; Lopez Ru 2006). These studies were limited to certain variables which they were related to gender and translation accuracy, gender and motivation, gender and learning strategies that foreign language learners apply in learning the second language, or gender and overall achievements in

academic settings. Interpreting studies as a growing field needs to consider the issue of gender in training future interpreters and the effect of gender in interpretation needs to be studied systematically. Therefore, since the effects of gender on the performance of interpreters is not studied systematically, this study was done to open a new horizon in training qualified future interpreters so that in future policy makers in different societies consider gender differences in syllabus design and curriculum development. Thus, the following research question was raised: *does gender have an effect on the performance of interpreter trainees?*

METHOD

Participants

Thirty BA students (14 males and 16 females) of English Translation and Interpreting at the State University of Arak (Iran) participated. They were divided into two classes of 15 (7 males and 8 females in each group), one of which would serve as the experimental group and the other as the control group. All participants, aged between 20 and 22, were native speakers of Farsi.

Procedures

In order to ascertain that the two groups had command of English at the beginning of the study, all participants took a pre-test of general English proficiency. The test battery used was the standard Longman's TOEFL English proficiency test (paper-based version, <http://www.ets.org/toefl/pbt/about/content/>), testing the learner's skills as follows:

- (1) Listening comprehension: 30 questions about short conversations, 8 questions about longer conversations, 12 questions about lectures or talks (scores range between 31 and 68 points)
- (2) Reading comprehension: 50 questions about reading passages (scores between 31 and 67 points)
- (3) Structure and written expression: completing 15 sentences correctly and identifying 25 errors (scores between 0 and 6 points)
- (4) Writing: one essay with a length of 250 to 300 words (scores between 31 and 68 points).

The final test score ranges between 310 and 677. We report the raw scores on the four components as well as the overall TOEFL score (after weighting and conversion).¹

The control group received routine instruction in interpreting, i.e. the routine syllabus which has been used in the English Translating and Interpreting Department of Arak State University. The techniques of interpreting, different aspects of interpreting, and types of interpreting were normally instructed and practiced. The experimental group spent 20

¹ The score on the Listening, Reading and Structure parts of the TOEFL test is not the percentage of correct answers. The score is converted to take into account the fact that some tests are more difficult than others. The converted scores correct these differences.

minutes less time per session on the routine curriculum and instead received awareness training on prosodic features of English (stress at word and at sentence level). Altogether each group took part in 18 sessions (two hours per session and one session every week) for a total of 36 hours of instruction (for a detailed survey of the contents of the lessons see Appendix 2 in Yenkimaleki, 2017a, pp. 52–88). In both classes authentic extracts from spoken English (news, political discussions, social interviews) were presented to the students, who then interpreted the extracts consecutively.

The same post-test was administered to control and experimental groups alike to measure the quality of (consecutive) interpreting at the end of the treatment. The test included ten 30-second extracts (samples in Appendix) to be interpreted. In the choice of extracts attention was paid to sentences in which stress at the word and/or sentence level affected meaning. For instance, in ‘The market is an institution in which wealth acquires power. Wealth controls what gets produced and who gets it.’ *wealth* was accented on first mention but was de-accented in the second sentence, to indicate that the listener should not look for a new referent.

The post-test took place in a language laboratory in the presence of a classroom instructor. Students were seated in sound-proofed half-open cubicles. Source texts were presented over loudspeakers at a comfortable listening level; note taking was allowed. After every fragment participants were given two minutes to consult their notes and to record an interpretation in Farsi. Recordings were made directly onto a digital computer through individual, table-mounted microphones.

The same three out of the ten recorded texts per participant were evaluated independently by three experts, who were senior colleagues in the Department of English in the Humanities Faculty of Tafresh University, Iran, i.e., a different university than the one that hosted the experiment. The judges were experienced instructors in interpreting between English and Farsi, and did not know the students they judged. Evaluation criteria (based on Sawyer, 2004, see Table 1) were explained beforehand. The order in which the 30 student interpreters were rated was the same for all judges; subjects in the control group were presented before any of the students in the experimental group. The three fragments selected for each subject were presented in immediate succession. The materials were played back over small loudspeakers without interruption or repetition; judges noted down their marks (one for each criterion) on paper evaluation sheets as the fragments progressed.

Table 1. Criteria used in the quality judgment of interpreting performance. The numbers are the maximum score that could be awarded per criterion. The overall maximum equals 100. After Sawyer (2004).

Meaning		Language use		Presentation	
Accuracy	20	Grammar	7	Pace	10
Omissions	15	Expression	7	Voice	10
Overall coherence	10	Word choice	7		
		Terminology	7		
		Accent	7		

The ten evaluation criteria are defined and motivated as follows:

- (1) *Accuracy*: Interpreters should be faithful to the meaning of source language. An optimal and complete message should be output such that the content and intent of the source language is preserved without omission or distortion.
- (2) *Omission*: Interpreters may intentionally omit part of the source language and concentrate on transferring the essence of the message (Jones 2014). In our study omissions were not counted against the interpreter as long as the interpretation preserved the content and intent of the source language; if not, they were scored as errors.
- (3) *Overall coherence*: Coherence is the extent to which the interpreter's output is meaningful and purposeful. Message coherence includes conceptual connectedness, evaluative and dialogical consistency and textual relatedness.
- (4) *Grammar*: An attempt was made to evaluate the speech production of the participants observing the standard structural rules of Farsi.
- (5) *Expression*: Utterances should be a manifestation of appropriate use of the target language given a specific target audience, e.g., in terms of formality and informality.
- (6) *Word choice*: The choice of words in the target language should match the genre of the source language. The expectations of the audience (in relation to the social class they belong to) should be taken into account as well.
- (7) *Terminology*: Interpreters should be familiar with technical terms of the subject matter they are interpreting. An attempt was made to see to what extent the participants were choosing the technical terms when transferring the message.
- (8) *Accent*: Since the interpreter's intelligibility will depend on the quality of his/her pronunciation of the target language, the strength of the interpreter's accent was judged (in the case of *recto* interpreting, this criterion applies more or less vacuously – and will vary only in so far as a strong regional accent would compromise the interpreter's intelligibility).
- (9) *Pace*: An intuitive judgment was made of how optimal the interpreter's rate of delivery was, i.e. neither very slow nor so fast that intelligibility would be compromised.
- (10) *Voice*: An interpreter with a pleasant and relaxed voice is more appreciated than one with a strained or nervous voice. A global judgment was made of the extent to which the interpreter's voice was appropriate for transferring the message.

RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes the raw component scores of the proficiency test of the control group and of the experimental group.

Table 2. Raw component and overall TOEFL scores (means and standard deviations) obtained by control and experimental groups.

Control Group						Experimental group					
	LC	SWE	RC	Writing	TOEFL		LC	SWE	RC	Writing	TOEFL
Mean	52.2	53.1	51.7	3.76	518.00	Mean	53.1	54.3	53.3	3.91	535.77
SD	4.2	3.4	3.2	0.73	46.52	SD	4.1	3.5	3.1	0.84	47.58

A t-test for unrelated samples shows that none of the small differences on the pre-test and its components between the experimental and control group is significant, $t(28) = .415$ ($p = .682$) for Listening comprehension, $t(28) = 1.087$ ($p = .288$) for Structure and written expression, $t(28) = 1.421$ ($p = .168$) for Reading comprehension and $t(28) = -1.029$ ($p = .312$) for the overall TOEFL proficiency score.

Table 3 presents the summed ratings (averaged over the three fragments per participant) given by the three experts, as well as the mean of the three raters (see Table 4 for a breakdown by rating scale).

Table 3. Overall quality of interpreting in post-test (between 0 and 100). Ratings are listed per judge (RY, RA, RM) separately as well as averaged over judges, for control and experimental groups.

Control Group					Experimental group				
	RY	RA	RM	Mean		RY	RA	RM	Mean
Mean	57.6	57.4	57.4	57.5	Mean	70.9	71.3	71.8	71.3
SD	15.9	16.0	15.5	15.8	SD	15.1	15.2	15.8	15.3

Cronbach's alpha amounted to .997, which indicates excellent agreement among the raters. On the basis of this result, the mean rating score is considered a valid estimate of the students' performance.

Effect of gender

In order to check whether gender of the learner has any effect on the level of proficiency as an interpreter in the pre-test and post-test, Table 4 shows means and standard deviations of the scores of male and female participants in the experimental and control groups before and after the intervention.

Table 4 Scores on pre-test and post-test (mean and standard deviation) as well as the difference between (the z-transformed) pre- and post-test scores, broken down by gender of student.

Gender	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference (z-units)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Female	16	530.6	48.0	65.8	15.9	.006	.391
Male	14	522.9	46.8	62.8	18.3	-.007	.386

There is a slight advantage for women both in the pre-test (8 points better on average on the scale from 0 to 700, but with a standard error which is many times the difference between the

means) and in the post-test (3 percentage points, but again with a large standard error). A t-test for independent samples shows that the effect of gender is insignificant in the pre-test, $t(28) = .448$ ($p = .657$, two-tailed) as well as in the post-test, $t(28) = .480$ ($p = .635$). Moreover, also the difference in gain from (z-transformed) pre-test to post-test scores between male (loss of .007 z) of and female (gain of .006 z) students remains insignificant, $t(28) = .098$ ($p = .922$, two-tailed). The conclusion follows that gender has no effect on the students' performance in either pre-test or post-test nor does it interact in any way with the intervention (i.e. whether the students took experimental training in prosody awareness or belonged to the control group with more practice in consecutive interpreting).

CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that the interpreter trainees' gender does not have any significant effect on their performance. The results are in line with yenkimaleki & Van Heuven (2017b, 2016a,b,c,d,e,f) who pointed out that gender does not have any impact on interpretation performance by interpreter trainees. Anari & Ghodrati (2009) claimed that there is no significant difference between the translations done by the female and male translators in terms of accuracy. The results of this study showed that males and females do not have any significant difference in the quality of their performance in interpreting. However, this aspect is related to cultural differences in different societies considering the expectations of them from different genders in the choice of structures and words in communication of meaning. In recent years in Iran the women found in most of the cases the same position in society as men do have and in some case the women even do have higher social status than men. Therefore, in Iran gender differences have become less evident in the choice of words and structures by different genders comparing for instance with Turkey. As Hilmioglu (2015) claimed in Turkish culture the men do have higher social status and their language is harsher than women so the gender issue would be more evident in choice of words and structures in interpretation/translation in Turkey than in Iran. However, Simon (1996) pointed out that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman; she clearly stated that gender is not the same as the biological sex difference; rather it is a social construct that extends and completes the latter. Simon claimed that gender is often a major focus of thought and communication of message and automatically it can have a great impact on transferring the message in translation and interpreting. Moreover, MacDougall (2012: 33) believes that "gender is a socially constructed concept. Individuals learn to perform appropriate gendered behaviors, according to the social norms of their respective societies." Further research needs to be done to fill the gaps in gender-related studies in interpreting since in the study of gender effects in interpreting cultural aspects of societies play the important role. Therefore, the gender issue and its effect on interpreting depends on which society we are studying and what the cultural norms of that society are about women and men in the use of language. Moreover, the effect of gender on interpreting regarding the choice of language and structures and the impact of this should be studied within the cultural norms of specific society and in different societies. This issue demands much more investigation in different cultural settings.

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