

Understanding and Redefining Different Capacities Required of Professional Interpreters in the Gaza Strip, Palestine

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Abstract

Palestinian interpreters are facing big challenges as they are dealing with two languages that are different not only linguistically but also culturally. Things are exacerbated by the fact that the present situation in the Gaza Strip shows that practicing interpreters are lacking the theoretical and practical experiences as well as the interpreting skills. The lack of proper training coupled with a severe shortage in training facilities and equipment and the absence of translation and interpreting specializations in Palestinian universities have led to erroneous translations and interpretations provided by unqualified interpreters. This paper investigates the current interpreting situation in the Gaza Strip and redefines the skills and capacities required by professional interpreters in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. Specifically, the present study seeks to provide answers to the following three questions provided by thirty professional interpreters, making the population of the present study.

1. What skills and capacities should a Palestinian professional interpreter have?
2. What other additional skills an interpreter should have at their disposal?
3. What are the main challenges facing Palestinian interpreters?

Keywords. Interpreter training, Interpreting skills and capacities, Shortage in training facilities and equipment, Interpreting challenges.

1. Introduction:

Interpreting is the process where one spoken or signed language is transferred into another spoken or signed language (CiLT, 2006: 11). Interpreters interpret between two languages in such a way that effective communication takes place between the participating language speakers/signers. The interpreter interprets one-way (e.g. from Arabic into English during presentations and lectures) and/or two-way (e.g. during meetings, discussions and consultations). S/he interprets consecutively, i.e. in chunks or simultaneously, i.e. at the same time as the language is spoken or signed. In Palestine the demand for translation and interpreting has steadily increased. According to El Fagawi (2000), this is due to the Palestinians' belief that English has become the language of international negotiation through which they can tell the world about their problem. This motivational interest in English and especially in

translation and interpreting increased after the Oslo Agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis. As a result, Gaza and the West Bank have become a major focus of international media attention, with large numbers of journalists from all over the world visiting the area to cover the political situation. These journalists are willing to listen to all Palestinians, including ordinary people in the street. At the same time, the Palestinian people have shown much interest in talking with these journalists about their painful experiences with the occupation. In most cases, the journalistic delegations hire local interpreters in order to facilitate their communication with ordinary people. Palestinian interpreters are also employed by the local government to help facilitate discussion between leaders and dignitaries, meaning that their level of fluency is vital to translating nuanced and detailed meaning. However, the lack of qualified translators and interpreters and the absence of effective and systematic training in translation theory and interpreting have led to erroneous translations and interpretations, resulting in distorted communication and misunderstanding. In this regard, Masoud (1988: 10) is right when she says:

More often than not, new translators dive into translation work thinking that because they speak two languages, they are qualified for the task.

Masoud's statement makes it clear that translators and/or interpreters depend on their language experience to practice translation and/or interpreting, a view which is also shared by Baker (1992:4).

Translators need to develop an ability to stand back and reflect on what they do and how they do it. Like doctors and engineers, they have to prove to themselves as well as others that they are in control of what they do; that they do not just translate well because they have a 'flair' for translation, but rather because, like other professionals, they made a conscious effort to understand various aspects of their work (ibid: 4).

In the Departments of English of Gaza universities, the two translation modules which are a major requirement of the degree of BA in English Language and Literature are taught by specialists in EFL and linguistics; none of them has a qualification in translation or interpreting. Some graduates however have professional diplomas in translation and interpreting. The one -year diploma, run by the

Continuous Education and Community Service Unit (henceforth CECSU) at the Islamic University of Gaza, provides trainees with professional and practical training in translation and interpreting. However, most graduates (personal communication and through the questionnaire responses) have said that the training they received falls short of their expectations. As an interpreter trainer at the CECSU, I have realized that interpreters and translators lack translation competences and appropriate interpreting skills to properly qualify for the market. Given this situation, the graduates of English departments as well as the professional diploma graduates will join the profession dependent on their intuition and experiences, without possessing the appropriate training and theoretical tools needed for the job. In order to fully understand the situation of interpreting in the Gaza Strip and the training programmes available for translators and interpreters, this paper will discuss the following:

- An overview of the situation of translation and interpreting at Gaza universities.
- Survey participants and data
- Findings of the study
- Discussion and conclusions

2. An overview of the situation of translation and interpreting at Gaza universities.

Two translation modules are currently taught at Gaza universities which are a major requirement of the degree of BA in English Language and Literature. The Islamic University of Gaza and Al Azhar University have recently introduced a third translation module for the students at the Faculty of Arts as an elective course. These courses are taught by specialists in EFL and linguistics; none of them has a qualification in translation or interpreting. Although the course descriptions of these courses clearly state that the main objective is to introduce students to translation theory and train them to translate from English into Arabic and vice versa, the training students receive either at the undergraduate level or at the professional diploma in translation falls short of meeting the requirements of the markets. In a recent exam for sworn translators conducted by The Ministry of Justice, none out of the 33 candidates has passed the translation exam. Being part of a three - member committee who designed and marked the exam, the researcher noticed that the

candidates' answers showed poor mastery of the mother as well as the target language. The candidates also lacked the proper translation techniques as they had a strong tendency for literal translation, sticking to the source text word order without paying attention to the textual considerations of the target language (El Haj Ahmed, 2009).

The translation and interpreting modules taught at the professional diploma emphasize building students' linguistic competences rather than building their interpreting and translation skills. These modules are taught by specialists in EFL, linguistics and sometimes literature, who depend on their professional interpreting and translation experiences without having the proper translation or interpreting training. Some however have acquired on-the-job experiences though they do not have any qualifications in interpreting or translation. In addition, the interpreting rooms, where students practice interpretation, lack the proper equipment that enable trainees to improve their interpreting skills.

3. Survey participants and data

The questionnaire used in the present study is based on two previous studies. The first is Bontempo and Napier's (2007) and the second is Locker Mckee's (2008). The former identified several competences required by sign language interpreters as criteria of quality in interpreting, while the latter discussed quality in interpreting from the perspective of spoken and signed language interpreters. The anonymous questionnaire (See Appendix) was sent by email to thirty interpreters, providing a small but representative sample of local interpreters' views. The interpreters work in different settings across the Gaza Strip; twenty work with NGOs serving the local people, six working with journalists covering the current conflict, two working as conference interpreters and two are working with the Gaza-based government. Nineteen interpreters hold a professional diploma in translating and interpreting from the Islamic University of Gaza; eight hold BAs in English language and literature; two hold PhDs in Linguistics and one holds an MA in translation and interpreting. Twenty interpreters have a relatively short period of experience ranging between 1-4 years; two have between 5 to 10 years; one has over thirty years and seven have had no training.

As for the validity of the questionnaire, the researcher asked his colleagues at the department of English, Islamic University of Gaza to modify and give opinions about

the questionnaire items and how far they reflect the significance and purpose of the study. These colleagues are experienced. They lecture in translation and linguistics; they gave valuable feedback and suggested slight but important changes on some items.

After analysis, the researcher discussed the survey findings with a group of interpreters and translators currently doing a professional diploma in translation and interpreting at the Islamic University of Gaza; the feedback and the points raised by the group discussion reinforced the conclusions reported in this study.

4. Findings of the study

4.1. What skills and capacities should a Palestinian professional interpreter have? Rate the following interpreting skills in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 7 the least important:

- cultural awareness
- mastery of the mother tongue
- tact and diplomacy
- research skills
- familiarity with information technology
- communication management skills
- note-taking skills

Participants were asked to rank the previous interpreting skills in their order of importance. The participants' responses and their percentages are shown in the figures below.

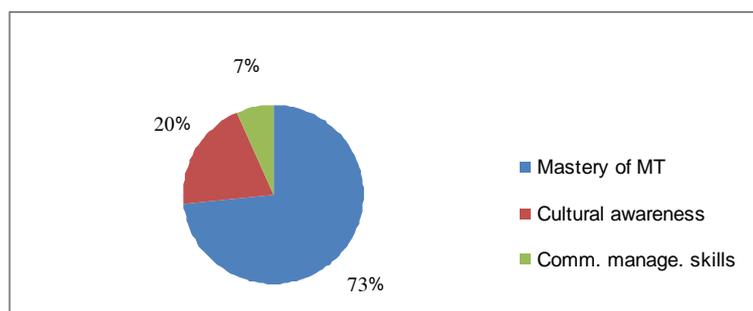


Figure 1: Interpreters' first important capacities

As seen in **Fig.1** the concept of *mastery of the mother tongue* came as the most important skill required by the interpreters with twenty-two responses (73%) followed

by *cultural awareness* with 6 responses (20%) and *communication and management skills* with 2 responses (7%). Giving the biggest number of responses to *mastery of the mother tongue* is a clear indication of the importance that the interpreters give to this concept as one of the main requirements for interpreting training.

In **Fig. 2** *Cultural awareness* was rated as second in importance with thirteen responses (44%) followed by *note-taking skills* with 7 responses (23%), *mastery of the mother tongue* with 5 responses (17%), *communication and management skills* with 4 responses (13%) and *tact and diplomacy* with 1 response (3%). In discussing the importance of cultural awareness with a number of interpreters they emphasized that a good knowledge of the source culture and the target culture is vital for interpreters to deal with any cultural incompatibilities that they may encounter in interpreting.

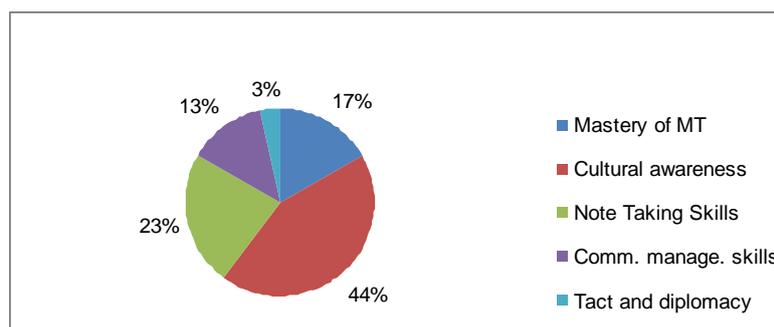


Figure 2: Interpreters' second important capacities

In **Fig. 3** *cultural awareness*, *note-taking skills* and *communication and management skills* came third in place with eight responses each (27%). This is followed by *research skills* with 3 responses (10%) and *mastery of the mother tongue*, *familiarity with information technology* and *tact and diplomacy* with one response each (3%).

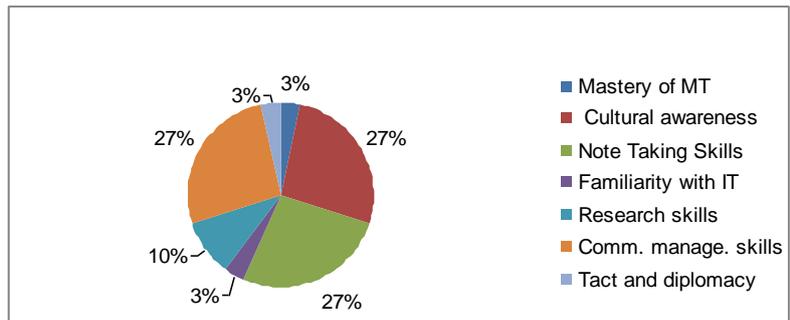


Figure 3: Interpreters' third important capacities

In **Fig. 4** *Tact and diplomacy* was in the fourth place with seven responses (26%) followed by *note-taking skill* and *research skills* with six responses each (23%). *Familiarity with information technology, communication and management skills* and *cultural awareness* had two responses each (8%), while *Mastery of the mother tongue* had one response (4%).

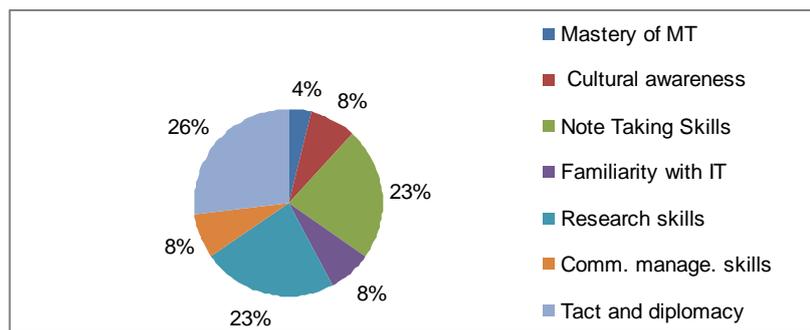


Figure 4: Interpreters' fourth important capacities

In **Fig. 5** *research skills* was in the fifth place with eight responses (28%) followed by *tact and diplomacy* with 7 responses (23%). This is followed by *note-taking skills* with 5 responses (17%), while *familiarity with IT* and *communication management skills* had 4 responses each (13%). *Mastery of the MT* and *Cultural Awareness* had one response each (3%).

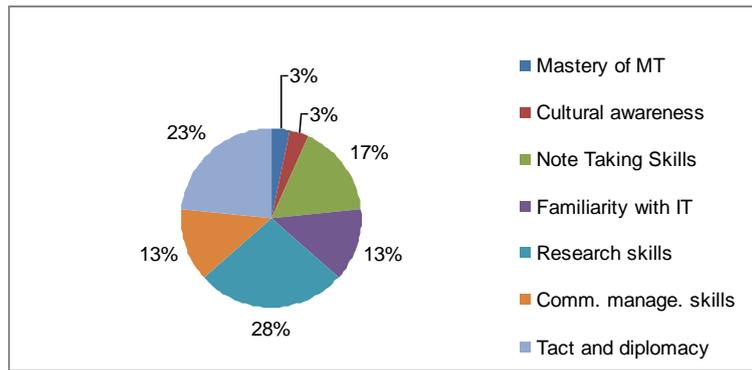


Figure 5: Interpreters' fifth important capacities

In Fig. 6 Familiarity with IT came sixth in place with ten responses (32%) followed by research skills with 8 responses (27%). Common management skills and tact and diplomacy had 5 responses each (17%), while Note-taking skills had two responses (7%).

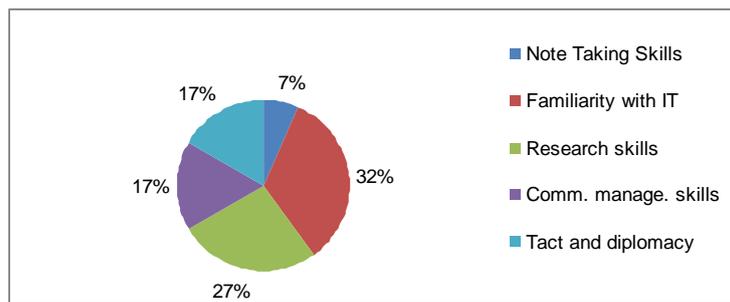


Figure 6: Interpreters' sixth important capacities

In Fig. 7 familiarity with IT came seventh in place with 13 responses (43%) followed by tact and diplomacy with eight responses (27%) and research skills with 6 responses (20%). Note-taking skills had two responses (7%), while common management skills had one response (3%).

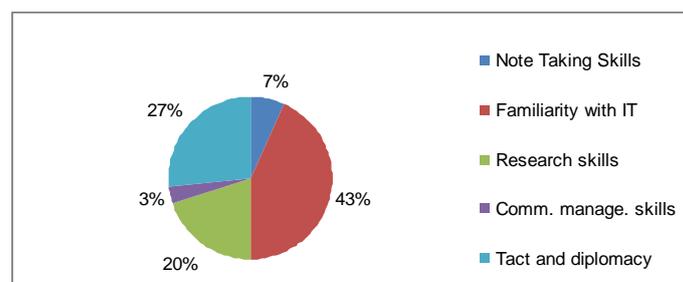


Figure 7: Interpreters' seventh important capacities

As shown in Fig.6 and Fig.7 interpreters gave least attention to *familiarity with IT*. Despite the importance of IT for interpreters (See Sandrelli & De Manuel Jerez, 2007: 274-297) one reason is that interpreters consider the other skills more important and should be given more attention.

4.2. Add any skills an interpreter should have at their disposal?

The participants were also asked to add other capacity skills that they need. The following are the skills that participants believe they need alongside those mentioned in 4.1 (with number of responses shown in brackets):

- Mastery (Good command) of the TL (13)
- Ability to concentrate (8)
- Background knowledge (7)
- Calm voice and public-speaking skills (7)
- Self confidence (7)

The participants' responses show that while the concept of *mastery of the mother tongue* came as the most important skill required by the interpreters (See **Fig. 1**), *Mastery (Good command) of the TL* was seen as the most important additional skills that interpreters need.

Other features that participants mentioned as important include:

- Ability to analyze and construe facts (6)
- Skills in summarizing large chunks of spoken discourse (5)
- Quick response (5)

Other features mentioned by fewer than five participants included:

- Good trained memory (3)
- Intuition (3)
- Punctuality (3)
- Impartiality (3)
- Qualification in interpreting (2)
- Having a wide-range experience and ample practice in different interpreting modes (2)
- Skills in different varieties of spoken English (*American, British, Australian, Indian, Irish, and others*) (2).
- Excellent listening skills (listening for main ideas- specific items) (2)
- Interpreter's physical and psychological state (2)

4.3. What are the main challenges encountering Palestinian interpreters?

This study asked participants to identify the most challenges encountering Palestinian interpreters. In order of frequency the interpreters' responses were as follows:

- Lack of training facilities and equipment (28)
- Lack of exposure and practice in different varieties of spoken English (9)
- Less opportunities to travel abroad to mix with native speakers due to the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip (8)
- Lack of translation and interpreting specializations at Palestinian universities (7)
- Not focusing on a specific field or an area of specialization (5)
- Lack of cultural knowledge (5)
- Non-existence of a league protecting interpreters' rights (4)
- Unfamiliarity of interpreting as a discipline among the Palestinian community (3)
- Employing interpreters on political affiliations and physical appearances of interpreters (3)
- Employers hiring interpreters with interpreting experience, a practice limiting opportunities for less experienced interpreters to find an adequate job. (3)

As seen above, the lack of training facilities and equipment is the biggest challenge encountering Palestinian interpreters. Most interpreters reported that the training institutions in Gaza lack the proper training facilities and equipment. They added that most of the training is carried out traditionally where trainers read texts aloud and student interpreters provide interpreting accordingly. Alternatively, trainers ask interpreters to listen to a recorded material and provide a proper mode of interpreting.

Lack of exposure and practice in varieties of spoken English came as the second biggest challenge. Interpreters reported that they find difficulties to interpret when they encounter varieties of English they are unfamiliar with, calling for more exposure to varieties of English. Lack of translation specialization as well as lack of interpreting and translation academics may affect the quality of interpreting and translation. Some added that the programs and courses available in Gaza are not as efficient as those available in other Arab or Western countries, either theoretically or practically.

While cultural awareness was reported to be one of the significant skills required by interpreters, the lack of cultural background knowledge affects the quality of interpreting. As a result, breakdown or misinterpretation usually occurs when the

interpreter cannot make sense of what is being said. Empirical analysis of interpreted communication has highlighted the primacy of interpreters' background knowledge and discriminatory listening skills (Miguelez 2000)

Other difficulties the participants noted include:

- Disregarding ethical values of the profession (2)
- Cultural and social differences between the source language and the target language (3)
- Linguistic differences between the source language and the target language (2)
- Some words having no equivalents in the target language and vice versa (2)
- Lack of communication skills and fluency (2)
- Speaking in a good accent (1)
- Absence of good models (1)
- Importance of developing interpreting service due to the Palestinians' desperate needs to explain their political problem worldwide (1)
- Difficulty of collocations (1)
- Difficulties in language fluency (1)

4. Discussion and conclusions

Interpreters in this study ranked and identified the most important capacities required by Palestinian interpreters as well as the main challenges encountering them. The competencies and interpreting skills identified in this survey are not dissimilar to the categories of ideal competencies identified by practitioners in Bontempo and Napier's (2007). Perhaps, most interesting in the survey results is the rating of the mastery of the mother tongue as the most important capacity, which is seen as an indication of the participants' awareness of the role mother tongue can play in maintaining proper rendition. Equal importance was given to the mastery and good command of the target language. The study also highlighted the significance of cultural background knowledge as interpreters believe that a sufficient knowledge of the cultures of source language and target language can make a difference for interpreters. Interpreters in this study identify the main challenges as lack of training facilities and equipment as well as lack of specialized academics. This supports Pym's findings (2002) that one of the constraints in translation departments is that one can find a generation of language teachers conveying communication skills of which they have virtually no professional experience". This finding highlights the need for basic training programmes for interpreter trainers that take into account the anticipated market needs as well as the needs of students. This should be followed by the

provision of the state-of-the-art facilities that help teachers offer appropriate interpreter education. The study also revealed the need for establishing a professional body for translators and interpreters that protects their rights and promotes their progress. The establishment of such a professional body will help Palestinian interpreters and translators be in contact with other colleagues, both nationally and internationally. In addition, the study calls for a shift in interpreter training – a shift from a teacher-centered approach towards a learner-centered. Hartley et al (2003:2) point out that though interpreter training relies heavily on self-directed study, classroom-based practice is almost entirely teacher-led. They further go on to say:

Currently, many if not most interpreter training programmes still apply a trainer-centered approach where expert-trainers, as the source of expertise and authority, play the major role in judging and assessing trainee interpreters' performance. However, the acquisition of interpreting skills by trainees requires not only professional guidance during classes, but also extensive practice outside these hours. In reality, therefore, trainee conference interpreters rely heavily on group practice and feedback from peers – targeting both language proficiency and communicative competence – to advance their interpreting skills and performance

The researcher hopes that the findings of this research paper will have significant implications for the training and education of Palestinian interpreters across many sectors.

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APPENDIX: Survey Questions

1. Gender: M F

2. Age:

3. What type of consumers do you usually work with? *Tick the ones that apply.*

NGOs Government International conferences Others,
please specify.

3. How long have you been working as an interpreter?

4. Have you got any interpreting and/or translation qualifications?

5. Have you received any professional training?

6. What skills and capacities should a Palestinian professional interpreter have?

Rate the following interpreting skills in order of importance, with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important:

- cultural awareness
- mastery of the mother tongue
- tact and diplomacy
- research skills
- familiarity with information technology
- communication management skills
- note-taking skills

7. Add any skills an interpreter should have at their disposal?

8. What are the main challenges facing Palestinian interpreters