Abstract

There is no agreed upon definition of the concrete linguistic skills associated with an A, B and C language in interpreters’ combinations of working languages. Frameworks for performance assessment in foreign languages, while providing clear guidance on relevant subskills, do not cover the range of proficiency required for conference interpreters.

In order to find out what characterizes an A, B or C language for the purpose of conference interpreting, we have analyzed the ACTFL performance descriptors, as well as written feedback given to interpreting students on their performance descriptors, as well as written interpreting, we have analyzed the ACTFL language for the purpose of conference interpreting, where incoming students are expected to 'self-declare' their language combination.

This work has allowed us to identify a set of subcomponents of language mastery that seem determining in setting apart the A language from the B language, and the B language from the C language.

Methods and Materials

Our study was divided into two main parts:

Part I: Analysis of the ACTFL and CEFR performance descriptors and adaptation to the requirements of interpreting.

Part II: Analysis of written feedback to identify relevant subskills for the A, B, and C language.

Findings Part I

Our analysis of CEFR and ACTFL Performance Descriptors shows that their relevance for interpreting is higher than initially anticipated, although some adaptations are necessary in order to adapt them to the specific level expected for interpreting students (Chart 1). Furthermore, the type, extent and frequency of language errors appear to be the most revealing criterion for language proficiency.

Findings Part II

Ten categories of relevant descriptors for A, B and C language proficiency emerged iteratively from the data (Chart 2). Based on the results for Part I the differences in frequency of errors between A, B and C language can be considered indicative of differences in language proficiency.

The most relevant categories to distinguish the B from the C language are Vocabulary (1), idiomaticity (3), and cultural awareness (6), while the A language differs from the B mainly with regards to Grammar (2), Style (4), Simplicity (8), and Accent (10) (Chart 2).

Conclusions

The A, B and C language can be characterized in terms of specific sub-components of language proficiency, which are testable and situated on a continuum.

A diagnostic test can therefore be developed to screen the language combination of interpreting candidates. The authors have developed such a test for the French language (Delgado Luchner and Loiseau 2014), which during calibration with native speakers of French, professional interpreters and interpreting students yielded accurate predictions and allowed for a distinction between French as an A, B or C language.

Further readings


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