

Intercultural Communication Issues in the Context of School Events and a Call to Involve Professional Interpreters

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Background

In recent years the need for interpreters in the field of education has gained considerable importance because of an increase in the migrant population. This is true for many countries of the West, particularly where English is the dominant language. One of the characteristics of families settling in their new homes is their multilingual background and experience. Thus, depending on the context of their interactions, they may communicate in different languages and operate in different cultural domains (e.g. family, community, neighbourhood, education, profession). Some family members may not have acquired proficiency in all the languages they use, particularly in the language of their school children. Therefore, they may not engage in the school environment as they may wish to. It has long been established that the absence of appropriate language accessibility is one of the major obstructions to parents' involvement in the education of their children. Providers of education are increasingly recognising this and piloting initiatives to improve the quality of their services in schools by making provisions for speakers whose first language or languages are not those of the mainstream society. One good example of such an initiative might be seen in the 'Dublin 7 Schools' Cultural Mediations Project' (2007), an initiative which brought together schools and community groups to provide translation and interpretation services with the aim of opening channels of communication between families and schools. One important finding was that parents often did not participate in school-related activities not because they did not wish to do so, but

because of a lack of adequate support. It was, moreover, found that the implementation of relevant initiatives and support systems made a marked difference in parents' involvement with the school. From this, the key actors concluded that providing interpreting services to all those involved helped foreign-born families to be on an equal footing with other families.¹ An article published in an American journal for bilingual education claims:

Providing equal educational opportunities within a multilinguistic society would be impossible without bilingual interpreters. However, many of these personnel are untrained for their roles within educational settings. The needs of the schools can lead to successful use of bilingual personnel, but cautions and limitations must be observed until they are fully trained.²

Clearly, this quote is a strong appeal to involve interpreters in education, yet, to date, apart from sporadically funded individual initiatives (such as the above mentioned project), little is being done to train interpreters for the educational field.

Questions to Consider

Despite the benefits trained interpreters are thought to bring to schools, a proposal to involve them in the education sector touches on several thorny issues, giving rise to a number of crucial questions: What type of interpreter would the school setting require and what exactly would their work entail? What abilities and skills may these interpreters need to have? Would they be members of the regular educational staff, externals employed by business agencies, or independent contractors? Who would they serve (e.g. pedagogical staff, parents, or students)? How might those who request their services perceive them? What cultural or ethical challenges may arise for all those involved? Several more questions could be posed to illustrate the complexities of the role of an interpreter working in educational settings. In addition, it is important to be clear about the fact that, depending on the type of assignments

¹ For detailed information, see 'Country Report Ireland' <<http://www.involve-migrants-improve-school.eu/index.php?id=9>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

² Victoria Medina, 'Issues Regarding the Use of Interpreters and Translators in a School Setting', in *Special Education and the Bilingual Child: Proceedings of Conference held at Pasadena Hilton, December 3, 1981*, ed. by Alberto M. Ochoa and Juan Hurtado (NODAC, San Diego State University, 1982), pp. 31-37.

encountered, a given interpreter may assume a range of different roles and responsibilities in their workplace. Although all of the above stated issues are important and therefore need careful consideration, in the context of this paper, however, it is not possible to address all these questions in detail, as this would require a much longer treatment. The scope of this paper, therefore, has been narrowed down to specific aspects, which are explained in the sections to follow.

Some Definitions

To begin with, it might be useful to clarify what type of interpreting may be necessary in school-related contexts. The type of interpreting required in such a context has generally been termed community interpreting. 'Community interpreting enables people who are not fluent speakers of the official language(s) of the country to communicate with the providers of public services so as to facilitate full and equal access to legal, health, education, government, and social services.'³ Other existing terms in the context of interpreting include dialogue and liaison interpreting. The concepts behind these terms have been looked at in a variety of ways.⁴ Some authors draw attention to the fact that this type of interpreting usually takes place in situations where there is an unequal distribution of power between those who require the public service and those who provide this service. 'A community interpreter [...] is responsible for enabling professional and client, with very different backgrounds and perceptions and in an unequal relation of power and knowledge, to communicate to their mutual satisfaction.'⁵

³ Sylvana Carr and others, *The Critical Link: Interpreters in the Community. Papers from the 1st International Conference on Interpreting in Legal, Health, and Social Service Settings, Geneva Park, Canada, June 1-4, 1995* (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1997), cited in Holly Mikkelsen, 'The Professionalization of Community Interpreting' (1996) <<http://www.acebo.com/papers/profslzn.htm>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

⁴ For a discussion of the terms and the concepts they entail, see Raffaella Merlini, 'Teaching Dialogue Interpreting in Higher Education: A Research-Driven, Professionally Oriented Curriculum Design', in *Tradurre: Professione e Formazione*, ed. by M.T. Musacchio and G. Henrot, (Padua: CLEUP, 2006), pp. 277-306.

⁵ Jane Shackman, *The Right to be Understood: A Handbook on Working with, Employing and Training Community Interpreters* (Cambridge: National Extension College, 1984), p.18, cited in Roberta Favaron and Raffaella Merlini, 'Community Interpreting: Re-Conciliation through Power Management', *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, 12, (Trieste: E.U.T, 2003) pp. 205-229 <<http://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/2485/1/10.pdf>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

Community interpreting as a profession is still a relatively new field and therefore not widely known. According to Bancroft, in most countries conference interpreting is far more known than community interpreting.⁶ To differentiate the various types of interpreting, the main differences might be explained as follows: whereas community interpreting is facilitated within a community setting where people from different cultures ‘are trying to communicate’ to ‘function effectively’,⁶ conference interpreting (often seen as the ‘more glamorous and eye-catching cousin’)⁷ is performed in international settings. It can take the form of consecutive or simultaneous interpreting (e.g. chuchotage or whispered interpretation). In this context it is important to note that the title ‘educational interpreter’ is generally reserved for those who have received specialized training in signing for the deaf, and therefore should not be confused with community interpreting (used at various occasions and also in school-related settings) or other types of interpreting mentioned here.

As for the professional background, skills, and abilities of interpreters, Freimanis points out that although they require proficiency in two or more languages, which serve as their ‘working tools’, language is not ‘the key element’, because interpreting ‘is not so much a field in languages as it is a field in communications’.⁹ The following example illustrates this point. ‘For an interpreter, language is necessary in order to perform, just as it is necessary for a biologist, a psychologist, or a nuclear physicist. In that respect, language is taken for granted, the only difference being that a biologist or a psychologist need only be proficient in one language.’⁸ Furthermore, apart from having undergone training and acquiring a wide range of general knowledge, all interpreters require ‘certain traits in order to become good professionals’.⁹ These include ‘analytical ability, intellectual curiosity, intercultural sensitivity, good concentration, and a good voice’.¹² In this context Freimanis critically remarks that whereas conference interpreters have meanwhile ‘acquired an aura of prestige’,

⁶ Marjory Bancroft, ‘The Interpreter’s World Tour: An Environmental Scan of Standards of Practice for Interpreters’, (2005) <http://www.hablamosjuntos.org/resources/pdf/The_Interpreter%27s_World_Tour.pdf> [accessed 31 May 2011].

⁶ Carolina Freimanis, ‘Training Bilinguals to Interpret in the Community’, in *Improving Intercultural Interactions*, ed. by Richard W. Brislin and Tomoko Yoshida (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), pp. 313-341 (p. 320).

⁷ Merlini, p. 277.

⁹ Freimanis, p. 324.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

other interpreters are still struggling with negative ‘preconceived ideas’ of their profession and ‘the population they serve’.¹³

The Structure of the Paper

Having clarified the type of interpreting this essay is concerned with, the following further aspects will be considered: after depicting the kind of events which triggered my interest in this topic, I will turn to the main focus, which deals with a school event known as parents’ evening (also called parent-teacher evening or parents’ conference). I will be using all these terms to refer to any type of arrangement where parents can speak privately to school staff (e.g. teachers, administrators, counsellors). Walker, who carried out an ethnographic study on parents’ evening, problematises these events

as familiar, routinised interactional events which are often taken for granted, which have received relatively little specific research attention, but which nonetheless constitute a point at which the boundaries between school and home cultures become permeable.¹⁴

Against the background of Walker’s study and some personal observations, issues commonly dealt with at these types of school events will be illustrated and relevant examples given. Following this, it will be shown that bilingual children often function as a communication medium between parents and teachers. The problems arising from this will be highlighted and the practice criticised, arguing that such charged intercultural interactions require the presence of skilled adults who have been trained to facilitate communication and who therefore might be better equipped than children to ensure that the needs of all those involved (i.e. the teacher and the foreign-born parents) are adequately and effectively met.

The Author’s Observations and Experiences

¹³ Freimanis, p. 329.

¹⁴ Barbara M. Walker, ‘Meetings without Communication: A Study of Parents’ Evenings in Secondary Schools’, *British Educational Research Journal*, 24: 2 (1998), pp. 163-178 (p. 165).

My interest in discussing this topic has been sparked by experiences gained through interpreting at community events where I have been involved in organising and delivering different types of educational programmes for people of various backgrounds. The purpose of these programmes was to raise parents' understanding of the school system and to offer a platform for them to voice their concerns about their role within the school structures. Due to the diverse nature of these events, interactions had to be interpreted in more than one language to ensure communication between the participants. However, those individuals who functioned as interpreters were not trained or certified people, but members of the community who had informally been asked 'to help out' on an ad hoc basis. These members had been selected because they were perceived as being fluent in the languages required or because they were simply available. The experiences I gained from these events were illuminating in many ways. For example, I was able to observe many of the challenges community interpreters were confronted with. At the same time, it was interesting to see how they managed to deal with the exchange of information amongst the participants. Often they took on the role of not only a linguistic, but also a cultural 'bridge', which others could cross to overcome their communication barriers.

Certainly, there were also many instances of miscommunication, often related to ineffective use of grammar or vocabulary, such as erroneous sentence structure, ambiguous words and phrases, or unintelligible accent and confusing intonation. However, far more miscommunications were caused by other factors (e.g. interpersonal or role understandings) than by improper use of language. As a result, sometimes an interpreted conversation had to be 'repaired' several times or negotiated in lengthy discussions until a message was appropriately received by the interaction partners. Such experiences made me reflect on the abilities and skills of interpreters and how a trained person may have dealt with such challenges, leaving aside the fact that working within budget constraints in community settings would not have allowed for requesting services such as those mentioned in the above example.

Children as Interpreters at Parent-Teacher Evenings

Trained interpreters are generally not sought after even at institutional events where one might expect their presence. For example, at important school events those interpreting are often regular staff members or those who are perceived as bilingual by others or who are otherwise thought of as linguistically versatile. One typical example, where untrained

individuals perform interpreting assignments, is at parents' evenings. Parents attending these meetings are sometimes accompanied by older children or acquaintances helping out with language issues. Sometimes, however, it is the very child whose performance is being assessed who functions as the helper. I gained this knowledge from conversations with parents, teachers, and students at community events, where I also discovered that the reason why a qualified interpreter is not present at such events is because those involved are unaware that schools are obliged to arrange for an interpreter, should this be desired by the parties. Interestingly, both parties often appeared to have little concern discussing complex or sensitive issues through the help of a child.

This cannot be considered an ideal situation, particularly because of the obvious limitations of a child who may or may not be proficient in either of the languages. Moreover, children have yet to develop abilities such as evaluating, analysing, selecting, synthesising, and concluding. These higher order thinking skills (i.e. metacognition) are generally required in order to reflect on what it means to bridge a communication gap. As one child states: *'The hardest kind of thinking is thinking about thinking.'*¹⁰ Moreover, children may not always be aware of the implications of a message they are supposed to interpret, and therefore may omit ideas or add their own opinion without marking it as such. Even if they did not understand an idea, they could regard it as unnecessary to ask for clarification because they might simply not know how to phrase it. A further issue to consider is the fact that a child might misinterpret subtle clues (e.g. use of humour, laughter, or allusions) and convey an inaccurate version of what is actually meant. Additionally, they might not impart the whole message, thinking 'that their parents did not need to know everything'.¹¹ An article giving tips to teachers on how to hold successful meetings with bilingual families warns them not to have students as interpreters: 'Some teachers have reported that a few of their Spanish-speaking students told their parents that 'F' stood for Fantástico'.¹²

Aside from these, other issues come into play when children are called upon to perform adult duties. For example, the question of power and hierarchy arises, possibly leading to a

¹⁰ Robert Fischer, 'Thinking about Thinking: Developing Metacognition in Children', (1998)

<http://www.teachingthinking.net/thinking/web_resources/robert_fisher_thinkingaboutthinking.htm> [accessed 31 May 2011].

¹¹ Clara M. Chu, 'Immigrant Children Mediators (ICM): Bridging the Literacy Gap in Immigrant Communities', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 5:1 (1999), pp. 85-94 (p. 90).

¹² Kristina Robertson, 'Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences with Bilingual Families', (2008)

<<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/27078>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

confusion of roles. This phenomenon has been called ‘the reversal of parent-child roles’.¹³ Such a role reversal can be a source of conflict, which may result in an imbalance in the overall family relations. One has only to consider a scenario where a juvenile is required to convey a message along the lines of:

Teacher: Mrs Pedro, Mario is incredibly intelligent, but, at the same time, he often misbehaves. He is unable to sit still, even for a moment, and constantly disturbs others. But most of all—now this is something I really can’t tolerate any longer—Mario often comes to class without having done his biology homework.

Mother: Even at home he continuously creates problems while doing his homework. I think he is not interested in biology at all. He wants to become an engineer, you know, and he says he doesn’t need biology for that, to which his father agrees. I have tried everything, asked his sister to help him, but he just won’t listen. I really can’t sit with him all the time.

Such a scenario may seem anecdotal; however, from talks with key actors, I know that conversations such as the above have taken place at school events. Thus, there appears to be a need for such types of communication to be documented and analysed, so that the practice of child interpreting may be critiqued based on systematically collected field data.

Despite the lack of appropriate research, it is clear that this practice is highly questionable. Children put in situations where they are asked to interpret their own concerns are bound to get confused with what role they are expected to play, particularly because interpreting conversations such as the above require them to switch between several roles (i.e. child, student, interpreter, cultural guide). Certainly, parents and teachers might not discuss sensitive issues (e.g. uncompleted homework or poor conduct) in front of the child. One could think of a plethora of other topics to talk about: for example, the child’s achievements, their learning style, what extra support may be required for further progress, how parents may help to prepare their child for the forthcoming term, or in what ways parents may get involved in school activities. Regardless of the content of these meetings, it becomes

¹³ Betty Lee Sung, *The adjustment experience of Chinese immigrant children in New York City* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1987), p. 183, cited in Chu, p. 85.

apparent that using the resource ‘child’ as a ‘bilingual dictionary’ may not be a very sensible idea, given the premise that the purpose of a parent-teacher meeting is to find ways and means to help the child learn and grow in the best possible ways. Viewing this dilemma from a slightly different angle appears revealing: if those involved had knowledge of the child’s background and their first and second language, then there would be no need for that child to play the role of an interpreter. Clearly, it cannot be presumed that everyone is a multilingual speaker equipped with interpreting skills, but what can be expected—particularly from educationalists—is that they make provisions with the school administration to involve other professionals to help them perform their duties competently.

The above arguments have not been brought forward to say that bilingual children should not help adults with language issues. On the contrary: examining their role as ‘cultural, linguistic and informational mediators’, interpreting was found to be a ‘critical activity’ in the lives of those who typically operate in more than one cultural context.¹⁴ Moreover, research suggests that immigrant children’s support of literacy interactions of others has on many occasions proved to be enriching for the community life in general. Based on these findings, some authors proposed that the skills acquired from such activities should be systematically identified and categorised, so that these are enhanced further for the benefit of the children and the communities they serve.¹⁵ In this context the cited author further asserts that within many migrant families literacy is assigned a high value and is seen as a valuable resource. As such, children’s language and mediation skills are generally ‘respected’ and ‘admired’ and well sought after.¹⁶ Furthermore, a German article on ‘Mehrsprachigkeit und Bildung’ appears to believe that most bilingual children enjoy their interpreting activities.¹⁷ Such findings and statements make clear that it is not the mediating or linguistic skills of the children which are being questioned here, nor is it being suggested that children ought to be excluded from parent-teacher meetings. What this paper is proposing is that an apparent language gap between teachers and parents should not be bridged by children. Rather, the whole communication process should be facilitated by bilingually trained adult interpreters.

Finally, it might be noted that whether a student attends a school parents’ evening or not should not depend on their linguistic skills. This should rather depend on such factors as

¹⁴ Chu, p. 85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁷ Janna Degener, ‘Kinder, die verstehen helfen’, (Goethe Institut, 2009)

<<http://www.goethe.de/ges/spa/prj/sog/mud/de4995996.htm>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

the policy of the school and on the age of the child. Whereas some schools prefer to see the parents alone, others encourage them to come with their children.¹⁸ Sometimes it is important for children to go because learning and behaviour targets have to be set in the presence of parent and child, aiming to teach them values such as duty and responsibility.

Communication Issues and the Role of Cultural Mediators

Trained interpreters in the context of education could take the form of cultural mediators, a term which is used in a variety of ways in the literature. Whereas some authors have suggested that interpreting and cultural mediating are different professions,¹⁹ others have hypothesised that interpreting is per se a form of intercultural activity which acknowledges communication gaps and fills these with linguistic and cultural knowledge.²⁰ However, debating the different usages is not considered necessary in the context of this paper. I am using the term cultural mediator in the sense of a trained or experienced ‘cultural link’ who is able to address culture-related issues in a professional manner.

The following paragraph exemplifies some instances where the influence of culture might play a role in the communication process involving parents and teachers, and what might it mean to act professionally in the educational setting being discussed here. In most schools in the UK, Germany, or the US, parental involvement is not only positively received and acknowledged, but also expected. Involvement, however, requires a certain degree of familiarity with existing rules, structures, and procedures. When parents who know the education system and the school policy meet the teachers, it is not uncommon to discuss topics such as forthcoming programmes, aspects of the curriculum, teaching methods used, or even topics which may be controversial and cause disagreement between parents and teachers. Given the fact that school systems differ around the world, foreign-born parents who are likely to have experienced a different school system, on the other hand, may not know that an open dialogue such as the above or disagreeing on certain aspects are acceptable ways of showing parental involvement. In the school systems of their origin, it may not be appropriate for parents to get so involved with school affairs, and schools in various parts of the world may view this as interference. Also, the teaching and learning approach parents may be

¹⁸ Walker, p. 173.

¹⁹ Cf. Martin C. Mayte and Mary Phelan, ‘Interpreters and Cultural Mediators: Different but Complementary Roles’ (2009) <<http://www.translocations.ie/Martin%20and%20Phelan.pdf>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

²⁰ Cf. Giovanna Pistillo, ‘The Interpreter as Cultural Mediator’, *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 6 (2003) <<http://www.immi.se/jicc/index.php/jicc/article/view/135/103>> [accessed 31 May 2011]

accustomed to could be different (e.g. more traditional or authoritarian), which means that they might not be aware of the specific principles and practices of the present school system. As a result, they may not know what is expected and customary and how they might approach certain topics of concern. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, these parents may have a certain perception or assumption of the school, the teachers, and their own role as parents within a given context. Walker's ethnographic study, entitled 'Meetings without Communication', reveals that even native-born parents have apprehensions concerning their role when they meet their child's teacher. She states that whereas '[t]eachers had a clear professional role [...] [p]arents found theirs more difficult to define and enact; it was an undervalued, untrained and unpaid one'.²⁶ Considering all this, it is possible that even if parents were dissatisfied with their child's school experience, they might be reluctant to voice their opinion, fearing that critical remarks would throw a negative light on them or their child. As a result, misperceptions and misunderstandings between teacher and parents are almost inevitable.

What is more, some parents, especially those without a background in pedagogy, only come into contact with the school when there is a complaint or an issue. It cannot be assumed that appropriate information is available to them or that they are able to access it. When, in such a case, parents meet the teacher, they might have problems in comprehending even the most commonly used terminology (e.g. SATs, national curriculum). Naturally, they would require meaningful explanations of these concepts by someone who is linguistically and culturally fluent and who is able to interpret key messages in a 'nonthreatening', empathic, and meaning-giving way. How else could any parent be expected to show commitment towards the school? However, if a given school lacks this awareness, it will not be able to acknowledge that an intercultural or cross-cultural encounter is a process that requires careful preparation if it is to be successful. Additionally, when a given teacher does not recognise that the parents might be deriving their knowledge and values from other school systems, and basing their assumptions and decisions on these systems, then the outcome of a parent-teacher meeting is bound to be unfruitful.

Apart from the above mentioned aspects, there are several other factors which may influence a given intercultural encounter: e.g. the style of questioning and expressing suggestions or criticism, the different ways of turn-taking, use of interruptions and silence,

²⁶ Walker, p. 174.

issues relating to the voice (pitch and intonation), eye contact, and facial expressions. All of these have been identified to differ greatly within and across cultures.

In case a school decides to involve interpreting services, it might be interesting to note that there are some relevant websites²⁷ which provide suggestions of what teachers could do to prepare for a given intercultural encounter, so that the outcome of a meeting may be more effective. For example, before the meeting, they could review educational vocabulary with the interpreter, create an interpreters' schedule with other teachers, consider over-the-phone interpreting for low-incidence languages, etc. During the meeting, they could, for example, pay attention to the following aspects: talking to the parents and not the interpreter, speaking evenly with frequent pauses, and offering relevant translated information should this be required in the course of the encounter.

Referring back to the interpreter or the cultural mediator involved in the meaning-making interaction, it can be assumed that a 'good professional'²⁸ is in a better position to identify and bridge culture-based differences affecting the process of communication than an untrained person would be. Thus, a professional may be able to negotiate a meaningful interpretation to both teacher and parents (even if the two parties lacked intercultural awareness), provided that this third person adheres to the general principles and ethical requirements of his/her profession. Part of being professional means to demonstrate qualities such as accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality, as well as a genuine awareness of one's limitations. However, regarding the issue of intervention and advocacy (both controversially debated topics in interpreting), drawing on Freimanis²⁹, I would argue that it is acceptable to intervene when notions are unclear to either party and, if not addressed in the appropriate sequence, would lead to misperceptions and ultimately affect the outcome of the interaction. Additionally, I would assume that an issue-based advocacy to help parents take the 'right' decision for their child may be acceptable and provided by either the teacher or the third party, so long as it is clearly defined as separate from the interpreting situation. Finally, it seems important to mention that all should be aware of the fact that a professional interpreter or a cultural mediator is only present in a given setting because it is the desire of those involved (i.e. the teacher and the parents) to communicate effectively with each other without the help of the child who is enquired about. Thus, it is entirely up to them to decide to what degree

²⁷ See for example <<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/27078>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

²⁸ Freimanis, p. 324.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 332.

they wish involvement from a neutral third person, and it is up to them to reach an agreement on this matter at the beginning of their communication exchange.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is acknowledged that the topic of this paper is most relevant to all key actors concerned with education in multicultural societies. Moreover, it is equally acknowledged that the issues discussed and the points critiqued are to some extent based on observations and experiences, rather than on structured data and tangible evidence. This is mainly due to the fact that the whole area of community interpreting, particularly interpreting in school-related contexts, is seriously under-researched. Against this lack, the study might be viewed as a call for more research and a tentative attempt at defining the issues relevant to such research.