

Analyzing Interpreting Strategies Used by Low-Proficiency EFL Students

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Abstract

Background:

This study examines low-competency EFL students' first-time interpretation performance, concentrating on how they use their limited linguistic proficiency to interpret the messages. Student interpreters often face difficulties due to limited linguistic proficiency, which can result in misinterpretations in their first performance. However, there is currently a dearth of studies in this specific context.

Methodology:

Since how students use various techniques needs to be revealed in detail, their performances are recorded in the form of videos. Purposive sampling was used to select students who lacked fluency and interpreting experience. A corpus-assisted discourse analysis was applied to a dataset of 281 instances to identify recurring patterns in students' strategies. The analysis process was divided into two cycles to prevent data loss due to careless attention and insufficient reflection on human language patterns.

Findings:


Approximation was the most used strategy, occurring 46 times, followed by substitution at 38 instances, and compression appeared 30 times. Other strategies included reproduction (31 times), word-for-word translation (24 instances), and stalling (18 instances), with ten instances of omissions. The results further show that students keep having difficulty with vocabulary and general language transfer, which causes them to misinterpret messages. Nevertheless, students can achieve a balance between meaning loss and compression even with their insufficient language abilities in interpreting. A significant finding is the discovery of a new technique—cultural reference—that students employ to interpret utterances through cultural adaptation, which fundamentally alters how students interpret the language.

Conclusion:

This study concluded that students' stronger cultural proficiency in one of their languages significantly affects their interpretation strategy. Students also frequently use wrong approximations to simplify complex information or manage time constraints while interpreting, leading to errors.

Originality:

The study's substantive findings clarify that inexperienced interpreters' strategies are influenced by cultural references, which contributes to fulfilling interpreting studies, particularly on first-time interpreting performance.

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of interpreting studies, many researchers have done fascinating studies on how one language could be converted to other languages while maintaining its original information. The speech products that resulted in interpreting performance are viewed as an important aspect to understand the dynamics of language in the human brain. This was referred to as “*to say what has just been said in another language*” (Pöchhacker, 2022, p. 149) and it assisted in overcoming the language barrier. In recent years, the importance of interpretation has taken many interests, especially in the topics of Technology for Translation and Interpreting, such as the addition of master’s degrees in several European higher education institutions and many conferences that highlight the use of technology in translation and interpreting, even the creation of a research and technology area to encourage the application of technology to interpretation by European Commission (Guo, Han, & Anacleto, 2023).

The interpretation has long been a topic of discussion. The rise of individual multilingualism, mostly in English, began to reverse the trend of the twentieth century toward multilingual multilateral conferencing with interpreters. There is less need for interpreting during multilateral contacts as conferences since English has become the *de facto* lingua franca in practically every industry and geographic region, similar to how it was in the 1920s. This is frequently the case when interpreting is needed between a target language and English. The widespread adoption of dialogue interpreting may be linked to the community's overall shift from conference to dialogue settings and a "return" to interpreting's dominance in bilingual communication scenarios (Pöchhacker, 2022). Consequently, interpretation is performed by the interpreter in non-verbal language such as sign language or a completely foreign language unknown by the speakers. This emphasizes the need for trustworthy, qualified-evaluated interpreters, which is how interpretation has been taught in various language majors or courses worldwide.

As interpretation presents various exciting challenges (Ehrensberger-Dow et al, 2020; Gieshoff & Heeb, 2023) and how fascinating it was when dealing with human cognitive (Ehrensberger-Dow et al, 2020; Lin, Lei, & Li, 2018), experts have done many experimental studies on interpreting performances. For example, they studied the interpretation by focusing on its cognitive process (Albl-Mikasa et al., 2020; Ehrensberger-Dow et al, 2020; Gile, 2021; Lv & Liang, 2019), other using multiple linear regression in *Praat* software to assess interpreting performance Yenkimaleki & van Heuven (2023) and even attempt to use machine

learning and various technologies to assess the interpreters' fluency automatically ([Defrancq & Fantinuoli, 2021](#); [Wang & Wang, 2024](#)).

In multilingual countries such as Indonesia, Interpreting is taught to undergraduate students as a subject or course. The material addresses interpretation from a theoretical and practical standpoint. Therefore, to determine if students have understood the theoretical portion of the course and applied it to their performance, they must perform well on the final exam. Since the interpreting performance is the way to measure both students' interpreting skills and knowledge ([Coombe et al., 2020](#)). Undergraduate students naturally anticipate this exam to be rather difficult. Given that Indonesia is rich in languages, cultures, and identities, students communicate differently, and the exact effect of their Indonesian identity on interpreting performance still lacks research.

For example, a student who comes from the Javanese ethnic group has their own Javanese language as their mother tongue. When they interpret, they must do so in a pair of languages that are different from their mother tongue: English and Indonesian. This is extremely difficult since, as multiple experts have pointed out, undergraduate students' interpretation skills are insufficient. ([López et al., 2021](#); [Zhao, 2022](#)).

In simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter usually deals with hard contexts and sensitive information. Therefore, the interpreter needs an appropriate strategy to interpret the messages so the information contained in the speaker's utterances is not altered in any way but converted to the most efficient yet reliable form in the target language. Both in interpretation and translation, translator competencies also dictate how they employ translation strategies in their job to produce the most accurate translation ([Arbain, 2023](#)).

Students must have a suitable method or approach to keep that information because interpretation practice still requires interpreters to convert and preserve as much information as feasible. The strategy to convey the messages plays an important role in the Interpretation course ([Dong, Li, & Zhao, 2019](#)). This is due to the fact that interpreters additionally depend on a variety of interpreting techniques that enable them to effectively produce the best interpretation. Because it requires little to no interference from the local language that affects the message conveyed, Indonesian students must avoid having their native language interfere with the interpreting process in both languages.

When students engage in simultaneous interpretation, they must pay attention to both the speech input and their own translation, encode speech information in short-term and working memory, access phonological and semantic representations in source and target

languages, switch between linguistic codes, and articulate appropriately in the target language (Elmer & Giroud, 2023). This made interpreting a hard task for the students and an interesting phenomenon to know how they decode between the native and target language with insufficient language proficiencies.

It also revealed that the degree of language proficiencies, anxiety, cognitive load, and external elements such as the situations, contexts, and settings could complicate the evaluation process. This fact has been clarified by a comprehensive yet flexible evaluation model that analyzes performance, preposition, or meaning units from students' performance as a whole (Gieshoff & Albl-Mikasa, 2024). These are the challenges that both students and teachers face. In addition to performance, speaking and listening skills are important aspects of interpreting. Most student interpreters lack the language proficiency required by professional interpreters Zhao (2022) due to the fact that not all Indonesian students complete a professional language training program designed specifically for interpreting before engaging in interpretation. This affects the complexity of cognitive function in the brain and alters the quality of the students' interpreting performances. For example, the anxiety that affects students' working memory leads to stuttering, resulting in speech disfluencies in interpreting (Zhao, 2022). Despite these complexities, the students' performance can generally be assessed by looking at their strategies while interpreting. It is acceptable to overlook the structural faults in the students' interpreting performance because the focus is on their ability to switch between a, b, and c language combinations (Loiseau & Luchner, 2021).

In recent years, many experts have studied the interpreting performance results in its relationship and conceptual confusion Bozok (2022) and Pokorn & Južnič (2020) which mentioned that the basic understanding of the interpreting act itself is important by Interpreter. Other studies that focused on the cognitive aspect of interpreting Elmer & Giroud (2023), Gile (2021) and Prezioso & Alessandroni (2022) are significantly associated with strategies Dong et al. (2019) and Zhang & Long (2023) that are important in determining the results of their interpreting performance. The substantive results of these studies are also connected to how students understand the messages in unfamiliar language, which stand as significant references in studying amateur interpreters such as student interpreters.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies do not yet examine students' interpreting strategies during their first simultaneous interpreting performance. This study is crucial because students are still learning and should not be dismissed as an essential part of the

learning process, thus, their first-time interpreting performances are likely to be riddled with mistakes and a lack of interpretation abilities.

Therefore, studying how students with inadequate language proficiencies perform simultaneous interpreting for the first time could shed valuable indicators on how multilingual learners process and convert the language, which is essential and has potential impacts in the accuration of students' interpreting performance assessment.

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed to be a qualitative content analysis using corpus-assisted discourse analysis. This design takes into account the possibility that the student's first performance in interpretation could be examined in their performance. Additionally, Biggs et al. claimed that corpus and discourse-based analyses of the recorded outcomes of their performances are the most effective methods for discovering patterns in scientific research when working with qualitative data, such as interpretation (Biggs et al., 2021, p. 67).

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis was used to analyze students' first-time interpreting, particularly their strategy, which necessitated focusing on finding patterns of error and interpreting the results. This analysis method is useful in interpreting studies as it is mainly utilized in Computer-Assisted Interpretation (CAI) tools (Guo et al., 2023). The analysis process was held in two cycles by adopting the coding process to avoid the loss of data caused by unmeticulous attention and not enough reflection on human language patterns (Saldana, 2013, p. 10). The analysis process takes into consideration professional interpreter strategies as displayed in the table below:

Table 1 List of Interpreting Strategies

No	Interpreting strategies	No	Examples
1	Preparing	12	Using formulaic expressions
2	Transformation	13	Inferencing
3	Visualization	14	Informing the client of an interpreting problem
4	Compression	15	not fixing information until it is necessary
5	Explicitation	16	Providing a parallel structural translation that is optional
6	Utilizing the source language's (SL) cohesive and coherent devices	17	Stalling
7	Anticipation	18	Skipping
8	Addition	19	Substituting
9	Reproduction	20	Word-for-word translation
10	Adaptation	21	Guessing
11	Personal association and involvement		
	Approximation		

Since the results of the interpretation alone are inadequate, research data on quietness, noise, affect, intra-actions, and material effects are all included (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 826). Information was gathered by scrutinizing the text of the tape and observing the student interpreter's visual movements on the camera to draw potential findings.

Purposive sampling was used in this investigation since the sample needed to meet a number of requirements: (1) the participants had to be students who lacked fluency in the target language, and (2) they had inadequate abilities in language interpretation, which resulted in bad interpreting performance; (3) the student never performed simultaneous interpretation before. With these characteristics, the purposive sampling resulted in 18 students in the Interpreting exam class, which provided valuable visual movement and recording as primary data.

Following the data collection phase, 281 datasets were produced that showed how each speech leaned toward a certain technique. These datasets which emerged from Motif Coding were seen to have the potential to help examine the patterned experiences and behaviors of samples, makes it much more possible to find specific elements, occurrences, traits, characteristics, actions, or distinctive term or phrase that appears repeatedly in a data set (Saldana, 2013, p. 128).

Additionally, tools were created to determine the approach they took in each effort at interpretation. To determine their approach and behavior, it is also necessary to watch the recorded footage. There are notes for each coded set of data. These notes are necessary to record the students' strategies. The coding process tool makes use of lists of expert interpretive techniques. (Dong et al., 2019). The table for coding the data is shown below:

Table 2 The layout of the data coding table

No	Source Language (Speaker)	Target Language (Interpreter)	Ideal Interpretation	Strategy	Notes
1					

Several intriguing pieces of information were successfully discovered throughout the coding phase, and these will be covered and summed up in the parts that follow.

FINDINGS

The results indicate that students' first-time interpretations were characterized by numerous errors, particularly in structural aspects and fluency. However, several interesting findings occurred in their interpretation.

The most used strategies

The corpus-assisted discourse analysis method used in this study determines the most popular strategies based on the interpretation strategies listed in the table, each of which is detailed below. As a result, students' usage rates of the most prevalent techniques vary.

Approximation was the most often used strategy among those that were observed, occurring in 46 cases. Substitution was observed closely and found 38 times, indicating that interpreters often substituted terms or sentences with other ones, sometimes changing the original utterance's intended meaning or focus. Both approximation and substitution are mainly caused by students' lack of vocabulary and tend to use synonyms or similar phrases. These two most frequent strategies indicated that students' word stock significantly affects their language production skill. To reduce the errors that may emerge from these particular strategies, students might be best to be informed about the better usage of interpreting strategies.

Compression was recorded 30 times, indicating a pattern where interpreters condensed information, likely to manage time constraints or to simplify complex sentences. While this strategy can help streamline communication, compression was significant to be taken into notice if the student has inadequate vocabulary in the first place as it may inadvertently result in the loss of critical details, affecting the overall fidelity of the interpretation.

Another common strategy was reproduction, which was used 31 times. On the other hand, the data showed 18 instances of stalling, which denotes pauses that interfere with the interpretation process. The use of word-for-word translation also stands out, with 24 instances. Ten different parts of the original message were left out, which could indicate that the writer was either unable to fully understand the material or purposefully chose to omit aspects that were thought to be unclear or irrelevant. Additionally, there were three instances when disfluencies were observed, in addition to repetition and redundancy.

The 'cultural reference' strategy

When students adapt phrases to fit the cultural context during interpretation, it reflects their effort to bridge the gap between the source and target languages in ways that go beyond mere translation. Even though the source speaker mistakenly spoke, the student adapted the utterances to deliver better information. This section is focused on how the student interpreter changing "*Take away or deliver?*" to "*makan disini atau dibawa pulang?*" that reveals how students intuitively adjust their interpretations and suit better the cultural norms of the target

language, where "take away" might not be as culturally relevant or commonly understood as "makan disini" in certain contexts.

Table 3 Data 4 of students' performances

No	Source Language (Speaker)	Target Language (Interpreter)	Ideal Interpretation	Strategy	Notes
4	Alright, that's all mam? Take away or deliver mam?	eem. Ngomong-ngomong, makan disini atau dibawa pulang, mam?	<i>Baiklah, hanya itu, bu? Diambil atau diantar, bu?</i>	Adaptation, Addition, Substitution	<p>Adaptation: The interpreter adapts "Take away or deliver?" to "makan disini atau dibawa pulang?" ("eating here or taking away?"), which makes sense culturally and contextually in the target language, as delivery may not be implied as strongly.</p> <p>Addition: The phrase "Ngomong-ngomong" ("By the way") is added to transition the conversation more naturally, which was not in the original utterance.</p> <p>Substitution: The word "deliver" is substituted with "dibawa pulang" ("take away") as a simpler and more fitting option in this context.</p>
47	Astaga! Apa yang harus saya lakukan sekarang!?	Crap! What should I do!?	<i>Oh my god! What should I do!?</i>	Approximation, Word-for-Word translation, Reproduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximation: The interpreter translated "Astaga" as "Crap!" which conveys a sense of frustration or surprise but alters the tone slightly. "Astaga" can carry a stronger emotional weight, while "Crap!" is more casual. Word-for-word translation: The phrase "apa yang harus saya lakukan sekarang" is translated as "What should I do?" which accurately captures the original meaning without loss of information. Reproduction: The use of "Crap!" in the translation introduces a colloquial and informal tone that may not fully align with the urgency or distress implied in the original Indonesian statement. However, this words could only be translated if the interpreter understands the casual words usually used in casual conversation in english language

The Balance Between Compression and Meaning Loss

Many students use compression as a strategy to simplify sentences during interpretation, often reducing the length or complexity of the source message. While this approach can make the interpreted message more concise, it frequently results in a loss of nuance or important details that are crucial to fully conveying the original meaning. For

instance, when students omit certain elements, such as adjectives or qualifiers, to condense a sentence, they may inadvertently remove key aspects of the speaker's intent, weakening the interpretation's precision and depth. Studying how students make these decisions—what they choose to retain versus what they leave out—can provide insight into their prioritization strategies during interpretation.

Table 4 Data 3 of students' performances

No	Source Language (Speaker)	Target Language (Interpreter)	Ideal Interpretation	Strategy	Notes
3	This is our menu	Ini adalah menu	Ini menu kami	Compression, Reproduction	<p>Compression: The interpreter simplifies "This is our menu" to "Ini adalah menu," dropping the possessive pronoun "our" to keep the sentence concise while still conveying the essential meaning.</p> <p>Reproduction: The core meaning of the message is preserved from the source language to the target language without significant changes although with a slightly different meaning.</p>

The data displayed in the table above gives examples of how students frequently resort to approximation or substitution when they lack the appropriate vocabulary or struggle to find the precise equivalent in the target language. This tendency is often seen when interpreters face idiomatic expressions, cultural terms, or complex grammatical structures, and they struggle to have direct translations or when their language proficiency is insufficient to recall the correct terms quickly. Similarly, when faced with complex grammatical structures, students might approximate the meaning by simplifying the sentence, which may lead to a loss of nuance or precision. The messages are delivered but the information is incomplete.

DISCUSSION

The analysis indicates that approximation emerged as the most prevalent strategy, which implies that interpreters frequently employed approximation to capture the core meaning of messages when specific lexical items lacked direct counterparts in the target language. The substitution was also found 38 times, revealing that interpreters often replaced terms or phrases, occasionally resulting in alterations to the original meaning or focus. Compression was noted 30 times, underscoring the necessity to condense information to navigate time constraints. However, both of these strategies lead to the omission of critical details. Even though the fatality of the errors varies between each student, these occurrences contrasted with [Loiseau's](#)

(2021) study, which concluded that it is acceptable to put aside the structural errors in their interpreting performance. Minimalizing students' errors needs to be contemplated as well.

Conversely, reproduction occurred 31 times, emphasizing the interpreters' commitment to preserving the message's original intent. Nevertheless, stalling was documented 18 times, indicating instances of hesitation that disrupted the fluidity of interpretation. Furthermore, the 24 instances of word-for-word translation suggest a reliance on literal interpretations, which may yield awkward phrasing. Identifying 10 omissions may reflect interpreters' uncertainty or deliberate decisions to exclude unclear information. Lastly, the presence of disfluencies and instances of repetition and redundancy highlights the cognitive challenges interpreters encounter throughout the interpretive process, which is similar to the other results of cognitive studies on interpretation (Gieshoff & Heeb, 2023; Hofweber & Marinis, 2023; Lv & Liang, 2019; Seeber & Arbona, 2020). These disfluencies are also matched with the classification of disfluencies that generally occur due to interpreter (Zhao, 2022). Collectively, these findings illuminate the complexities inherent in interpretation, especially in contexts involving limited language proficiency.

The students' overall interpreting performance demonstrates that students are not simply transferring linguistic units from one language to another; they are actively reshaping the message to make it comprehensible and culturally appropriate for the target audience. The opposite is also true in this phase; when the interpreter's understanding of the target culture or background knowledge is incomplete or underdeveloped, these adaptations can become imprecise or awkward, leading to misinterpretation.

For instance, "*Take away or deliver?*" will not be changed to "*makan disini*" instead of "Diambil," which changes the meaning to "*Diambil atau dibawa pulang*," that confuses another speaker as the meaning of both words is the same. This occurrence marked a finding that novice interpreters could navigate cultural adaptation when they lack full cultural competence, which is a completely new strategy similar to the adaptation strategy. However, the difference is that the adaptation strategy requires higher linguistic proficiency to make the words more appropriate, which students do not have. The usage of cultural relevance might be a completely new strategy that is not covered in Dong's (2019) list of professional Interpreter Strategies.

This particular finding is important for future research, especially on the pedagogic field. The interpreting cultural adaptation strategies could be viewed as students' act of implementing their cultural knowledge, which could not be disregarded from students' overall

competence as multilingual speakers. Their performances reveal whether students prioritize clarity, speed, or ease of delivery over completeness of meaning that affects the meaning. Interpreters may generally reconstruct statements in the syntactic order in which the speaker originally formulated them, especially when the grammar and syntax of the two languages are similar (Gile, 2021). For example, compression may occur more frequently when students feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the source language or when they are working under pressure, which forces them to make rapid decisions about what information is essential.

When students apply their cultural understanding to the decoding process, this way of decoding becomes interesting. According to Loiseau and Luchner (2021), a person can scale their performance in any language on a continuum after achieving a particular degree of skill in numerous languages (Loiseau & Luchner, 2021). This means that students' higher proficiency in their native language, especially in cultural context or background knowledge, could be used in another language whether the knowledge is sufficient or not. In another relevant field of study, several research studies on behavioral cognitive interventions have pointed out that a combination of receptive training with active, social, and multimodal aspects is most beneficial and indicates the most significant transfer benefits to cognitive tasks that are not learned, including episodic memory (Elmer & Giroud, 2023). In the students' case, this could also be assumed to be cultural exposure that helps them interpret the messages.

This may also suggest that the knowledge of structural or combining words to form sentences in some languages is placed and used differently from the cultural knowledge of some languages in the brain. To investigate whether cultural factors may influence the language conversion process, more research on these occurrences is necessary.

CONCLUSION

The overall interpreting performance of the students indicates that they are not simply transferring linguistic units from one language to another but are actively reshaping messages to ensure cultural appropriateness and comprehensibility for the target audience. However, when the students' understanding of the target culture or relevant background knowledge is insufficient, these adaptations can become imprecise or awkward, resulting in misinterpretations. A significant finding from this study is identifying a potential new strategy—cultural relevance—employed by novice interpreters to navigate cultural adaptation despite their limited cultural competence. This contrasts with the established adaptation strategy, which necessitates higher linguistic proficiency.

Furthermore, students' stronger proficiency in their native language may influence their performance in the target language, even when their cultural knowledge is incomplete. Another key observation is that students often prioritize clarity, speed, and ease of delivery, frequently resorting to compression when faced with the complexity of the source language or under time pressure.

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