Becoming an Expert FBI Interpreter

Preliminary research reveals common factors among the most successful interpreters

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Executive Summary

PURPOSE
Interpretation is one of the most challenging skills language analysts must acquire. To determine which factors contribute to high-level success in interpreting, the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) was tasked with conducting a case study of three expert interpreters at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Our research investigated expert interpreting skills in order to help identify potentially successful interpreters and develop training courses for novice interpreters and language analysts who might become interested in interpreting if given the training opportunity.

CONCLUSIONS
Based on three expert interpreters’ responses to a five-part interview, we can draw the following preliminary conclusions:

1. Multilingualism—Proficiency in (at least) two languages does not guarantee interpreter expertise. While high-level language proficiency in at least two languages is essential, interpreting requires additional knowledge, skills, characteristics, and experiences.

2. Knowledge—Lack of subject matter expertise and subject-specific vocabulary are the main challenges facing interpreters and can affect performance significantly.

3. Skills—Expert interpreters use dictionaries skillfully and rapidly, create specialized glossaries, and conduct background research. Other techniques interpreters use to complete their assignments are visualization, multitasking, precise note-taking, and implementing signaling and voiceover during consecutive interpretation.

4. Characteristics—Being a good interpreter requires motivation, extroversion, experience, attention to detail, a good memory, and dedication to the Bureau’s mission.

5. Experience—Interpreters need training and experience to do their jobs well. The three interpreters in this study frequently noted that not all individuals are able to excel in interpreting, that substantial practice is necessary to do the job well, and that it would have been much better if they had been trained at the outset.

RELEVANCE
The experiences and personal characteristics revealed in the three case studies are fascinating; however, the conclusions we can draw from these three cases are necessarily limited. Interviewing a larger group of interpreters would enable us to make broader conclusions regarding the similarities among experts.
Executive Report

Purpose

Interpretation—the process of orally rendering one language into another—is arguably the most challenging skill foreign language users must acquire. It requires not only advanced professional proficiency in two languages, but also highly specialized knowledge and unique skills to cope with memory load, physical demands, and environmental conditions.

In earlier research, to determine which factors contribute to high-level success in acquiring foreign language proficiency, the Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) conducted interviews with the National Security Agency and the Department of State. Results of these studies showed that analysts who were able to achieve advanced professional proficiency in at least one foreign language did so in diverse ways. Although their pathways to proficiency varied, they identified common factors that contributed to their success, including time on task, immersion and other kinds of exposure, perseverance and motivation, personal study, aptitude, previous language learning experience, creating a speaking environment, and being well read.

Recently CASL was tasked to extend our investigation to include the study of expert interpreters at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Investigating expert interpreting skills could help to identify potentially successful FBI interpreters. Such research could also help the FBI develop training courses for novice and experienced (but not yet high-level) interpreters or even courses for language analysts who might become interested in interpreting if given the training opportunity.

What this case study investigated

This study aimed to identify factors that contribute to expert interpreting skills among FBI analysts. To identify these factors, CASL interviewed three expert FBI interpreters, who represent a range of FBI interpreter backgrounds:

1. A Spanish-English bilingual
2. An English native speaker who has achieved high proficiency in French as a foreign language
3. A heritage learner of Russian, now dominant in English

The interview focused specifically on the following five areas:

- Relationship between foreign language proficiency and interpretation ability
- Factors that affect performance in interpretation
- Skills used in interpreting
- Characteristics of a good interpreter
- Benefits of interpreter training

Conclusions

The conclusions we can draw from this case study are preliminary; additional research will allow us to draw further and more robust conclusions. However, the preliminary conclusions help us identify the next steps for a more comprehensive study of FBI interpreters.

1 Multilingualism—Proficiency in at least two languages does not guarantee interpreter expertise.

Although high-level proficiency is necessary for interpreting, it does not guarantee the ability to do so. The three interpreters commented on the relationship and differences between language proficiency and interpretation ability:

“‘Ok, you’re bilingual’ one day ‘now you’re an interpreter or a translator’ the next day.”

“And that is a fallacy because, just because you have ten fingers does not make you a pianist. And it’s just the same because just because you speak two languages, it doesn’t make you’re an interpreter.”

“And that makes me crazy. They think just because you’re bilingual, you can do it all.”

Additional specific comments are reported in Table 1.

2 Knowledge—Lack of subject matter expertise and subject-specific vocabulary are the main challenges facing interpreters and can affect performance significantly.

Despite their high-level language proficiency, the three interpreters reported some language and job-related challenges that they faced while working:

- Anyone who speaks two languages can translate, but you need to be able to understand what is between the lines—what the reader wants to understand from the writer.
- It is important to keep up with the language as it is currently used through watching videos, reading news articles online, listening to music, communicating with friends who speak the language, etc.
- Even if an interpreter is proficient in a language, he or she still needs to be able to control the situation in order to interpret accurately.
- Specialized vocabulary (i.e., political, economic, legal, medical) is particularly challenging for nonnative speakers and must be studied in order to interpret successfully.

Table 1. Participants’ comments on language proficiency and interpretation ability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreters</th>
<th>Comments on Language Proficiency and Interpretation Ability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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at the FBI. The primary challenges reported by all three interpreters were subject matter expertise and subject-specific vocabulary. Interpreter 1 summarized this challenge best when she said the following:

“I’m not a scientist . . . I did the simultaneous interpretation for the weapons of mass destruction, and we all struggled very much because none of us knew what the scientists were talking about. We were always looking at a dictionary. When there is a specific subject matter that we are not well educated in, it’s always difficult.”

Other challenges mentioned by the interpreters were environmental factors, listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Environmental challenges identified by some or all of the study’s participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreters</th>
<th>Environmental Challenges Facing Interpreters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Time pressure and stressful situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Poor quality of audio or texts that need to be translated</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Managing the flow of communication when doing consecutive interpreting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hunger or thirst, room temperature (hot or cold), or difficulty in hearing the speaker</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exhaustion from standing and speaking for long periods of time</td>
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3  Skills—Expert interpreters use dictionaries skillfully and rapidly, create specialized glossaries, and conduct background research.

The three interpreters identified many materials, tools, and techniques they use to accomplish their job tasks and overcome their challenges. All three interpreters said they use dictionaries to learn new vocabulary, conduct background research, and create their own glossaries. They also use other techniques to complete their assignments, such as note-taking, visualization, multitasking, and implementing signaling and voiceover when doing consecutive interpretation.

Table 3 shows important interpreting skills mentioned by some or all of the three case study participants.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreters</th>
<th>Important Interpreting Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Note-taking, especially with numbers, dates, names, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>General preparation through building memory and vocabulary</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Assignment-specific preparation—researching the topic or subject beforehand “so it doesn’t catch you by surprise”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ability to make the communication flow and manage the situation</td>
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<td>Ability to signal the speaker to pause in order to interpret what was said</td>
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<td>Building individualized or personalized glossaries</td>
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<td>Multitasking—ability to listen and retain while writing at the same time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of when and how to do a voiceover during phone conversations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ability to focus on details and be extremely precise, especially in criminal cases when “one word can make a world of difference”</td>
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4  Characteristics—Being a good interpreter requires motivation, extroversion, experience, attention to detail, a good memory, and dedication to the Bureau’s mission.

The three interpreters interviewed for this case study all came to the FBI with very high-level language proficiency in at least two languages, including English. All three agreed, however, that being a good interpreter is more than just having high-level language ability. There are certain skills, characteristics, and experiences that have contributed to their individual successes. Interpreter 1, for example, attributed her success to training, years of experience, a good memory, and being an extrovert. Interpreter 2 cited strong personal motivation and exposure to a variety and large quantity of language assignments. Interpreter 3 said that training, dedication to and interest in the job, and willingness and ability to conduct background research helped her to become an excellent interpreter.

In sum, general characteristics noted by the interpreters are as follows:

- Motivation
- Extroversion
- Attention to detail
- Good memory
- Experience

5  Experience—Interpreters need training and experience to do their jobs well.

The three interpreters frequently noted during their interviews that not all individuals are able to excel in interpreting, that training and experience are necessary to do the job well, and that it would have been much better if they had been trained at the outset. As a professor of interpretation and translation, Interpreter 1 described components that should be included in training: posture, voice projection, dual-tasking, note-taking, endurance, intonation, paraphrasing, and vocabulary building. She also noted that, for translation, students are taught not just how to translate words, but also how to analyze what they are reading and make sure they understand it before they attempt to render it into another language.
Interpreter 2 suggested that linguists need support and encouragement from management to pursue the role of interpreter and to seek out training to do so:

“At the very least give them the basics of interpreting, and then find those who are capable and want to do more. And also encourage people to do more. I think that’s the biggest thing we can do is to encourage people to want to improve their language skills. Tell them how great it is that they improve their language skills. And tell them, here we can at least offer you some training to improve that if you want to. To me, it’s motivation. We have to motivate. We have to be a little more motivating.”

RELEVANCE

The job of an FBI interpreter goes beyond rendering spoken language and providing an adequate translation that might normally be acceptable in ordinary daily tasks. It requires precision, attention to detail, motivation, skills, and dedication to the mission of the FBI. Although understanding the experiences and personal characteristics that enabled the three case-study interpreters to become so highly skilled at their jobs is both interesting and important, the likelihood of finding individuals with identical characteristics and experiences is low. It is, therefore, important to conduct a more comprehensive study to investigate whether the reported characteristics, skills, experiences, and challenges of these three experts are also true of other FBI interpreters.

Interviewing a larger group of FBI interpreters could shed new light in the overall effort to understand both high-level foreign language proficiency and high-level interpreting skills. Additionally, a larger scale study would allow CASL to investigate and report on each of the five areas in more detail—revealing more about which characteristics define an expert interpreter and how the FBI could train analysts in the skills necessary to become expert interpreters.