What Is Interpretation and How Can I Perform It? – A Case Study of Assessing An Interpreter Training Program in Japan

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Abstract
Interpretation is a communication approach to making a personal meaning and connections with things, places, people, and concepts that an audience is experiencing and typically takes place at a recreational or informal learning setting. It helps the audience to better understand and appreciate the object being interpreted, and can be used for sustainable resource management and community development. Interpreter training is considered to be one of the most influential mechanisms for the improvement of the quality of interpretation. The purpose of the research was to examine the impact of an interpreter training course in Japan and uncover the perceptions of the training participants regarding necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to become a successful interpreter. Questionnaires with open-ended questions were administered with 17 training participants before, during, and after a four-day training course. The most frequently reported important learning was the principles of interpretation, followed by a theme/goal of interpretation, the diversity of interpretation, and experiential format to be taken in interpretation. In contrast, the most prominent difficulty for the trainees was developing a theme/goal of interpretation and designing interpretation. The trainees regarded interpretation as information transmission and an experiential activity. They were interested in developing their communication skills. These findings suggested the areas that a future training program can keep emphasizing on as strength, improve as weakness, and newly offer as an opportunity to grow, respectively. Overall, the training course helped the trainees to develop their knowledge and abilities to perform interpretation.

Keywords: Interpretation, training, impact assessment, SWOT analysis

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Introduction

Interpretation is an approach to communication with pleasant-seeking audiences in such places as museums, parks, historic sites, zoos, aquariums, and botanical gardens as well as in wineries, breweries, food factories, and any place that people visit to have a good time and possibly learn something of interest (Ham, 2013). It is often delivered at recreational and tourism settings and attempts to make a personal meaning and connections with things, places, people, and concepts that an audience is experiencing. Tilden (1957) defined interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships" and offered six principles of interpretation more than a half century ago, which has been a central concept of interpretation.

Interpretation can enhance audiences' understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural environment, and monitoring and role-modeling of ecologically and socially appropriate behaviors (e.g., Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Huang, Weiler, & Assaker, 2015). For example, in tourism settings, researchers have argued that managing visitors' behaviors minimizes the adverse environmental and social impact of tourism and that interpretation on site can help mitigate such deteriorating impacts and cultivate stewardship of the site (Moscardo, 1998; Powell & Ham, 2008). Many scholars have argued significant and substantial contribution of interpretation to sustainable tourism for which quality interpretation is necessary (e.g., Moscardo, 1998; Weiler & Black, 2003; Weiler & Ham, 2001). Assuring the quality of interpretation is indispensable for the success of sustainable tourism.

Interpreter training is considered to be one of the most influential mechanisms for the improvement of the quality of interpretation (Black & Weiler, 2005; Weiler & Ham, 2001). The US-based National Association for Interpretation (2009) analyzed the standards and competencies required in contemporary interpretive practice and recommended 12 categories into which the standards and benchmarks for interpretation practice should fall. These standards suggest that interpreter training should be offered at multiple levels based on specific required skill sets. Ballantyne and Hughes (2001) investigated ecotour guides' perceptions of their roles in Australia and found that the participated guides perceived provision of information and enjoyable experiences as an important function. They also reported that most of the participated guides viewed their interpretation techniques as weakness and suggested the interpretation techniques be emphasized in guide training programs. Focusing on the communicative role of tour guides, Weiler and Walker (2014) studied a tour guide training program in Tonga to identify training content and reported the impacts of the program on the trainees' perceptions. Their findings suggested that programs should include information on visitor expectations, the four domains of experience brokering (i.e., physical, interactive, cognitive, and affective), and the six principles of interpretation (i.e., involving, thematic, relevant, enjoyable/engaging, accurate, and logical) in guide training. The authors maintained that "training that focuses exclusively on the hard skills necessary for guides to lead and manage groups can fall short of enabling guides to be successful at meeting the needs and expectations of visitors and brokering a quality experience." Certain skills are necessary to become a successful guide.

Researchers have argued that the competencies and standards ought to be determined based on evidence available in the interpretation literature and in published research results (e.g., Ward & Wilkinson, 2006) and that training components should be determined based on what the literature has revealed with respect to good and best practices (e.g., Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Weiler & Ham, 2002; Weiler & Walker, 2014). This research focused on an interpreter training course in Japan and examined its impact on the training participants. It aimed at uncovering the perceptions of the training participants in terms of necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to become a successful interpreter.

Training course

An interpreter training seminar was conducted over four days in the summer of 2016 in Tokyo in Japan. It was offered in a Tokyo Metropolitan Natural Park that was surrounded by mountains and set aside on the Okutama Lakeshore. The park is one of the most active places of nature interpretation.

The training course was offered by one main trainer and several assistant trainers who gave a lecture or overviewed a training session. It was composed of chronologically the definition and principle of interpretation, self-history analysis, experiences of guided walks and personal interpretive programs, research on resources, delivering techniques, communication exercises, planning a short walk, theme/goal/objective, risk assessment and management, and performing a short walk. At an early stage of the training course, one of the authors offered a one-hour lecture concerning the definition and principle of interpretation (i.e., those of Tilden and Ham's) and the examples of interpretation offerings (i.e., talks, guided tours, exhibitions, wayside panels, and printings). The training participants included interpreters, pre-service interpreters, and individuals who were interested in interpretation with little or no interpretive experience. Ten men and seven women participated in the training course.

Method

The research was carried out with 17 trainees in a three-nights and four-days long training course in the summer of 2016. It included pre-, during-, and post-training questionnaires. Each questionnaire included three to five open-ended questions without identifying the name of the respondent. The pre-questionnaire asked the trainees about the expectation for the training course, perception of interpretation, and future plan in regard to interpretations. The during-questionnaire was administered in the end of each day during the training course in order to examine the impact of the course on the participants' understandings and perceptions. The post-questionnaire was carried out one month after the training course had ended, which was not included in this paper.

Each question in the pre- and during-questionnaire was classified within a SWOT analysis framework (Figure 1). This research provided the information only on strength, weakness, and opportunity, while another research result offered the information on threat. Strengths included (a) the important learning and (b) the understanding of interpretation. Weaknesses involved (c) the difficulty in understanding what was taught in training. Opportunities contained (d) the expectation for the training course and (e) skill and knowledge desired to further

develop in future. Threats encompassed (f) the challenges to interpretive profession to grow, which derived from the previous research conducted by the authors in 2012 and 2013 (Yamada, Yoshino, & Wilson, 2016).

Figure 1. Questions in the SWOT analysis framework with the timing when the questions were asked.

Strength What was the most important learning for you today? (Day 1, 2, 3, and 4) How do you understand what interpretation is? (Pre-training , Day 1, 2, 3, and 4)	Weakness What was difficult to understand or practice today? (Day 1, 2, 3, and 4)
Opportunity What do you expect of the training course? (Pre-training) What skills or knowledge do you wish to further advance? (Day 1, 2, 3, and 4)	Threat The challenges identified through interviews with trainers and trainees in the previous research in 2012-2013.

The following section describes the results of the pre- and during-training questionnaires.

Results

All responses were categorized into groups that share similar meanings and shown in Figure 2. The frequency of responses that consists of each category was also included in the table. The total frequency was larger than 17, the number of the trainees because the respondents were able to provide multiple answers and some of the questions were asked on multiple days. The question on the expectation of the training course was asked before the training course had started, while the questions on the important learning, understanding of interpretation, difficulty in understanding, and desirable skills and abilities to develop were asked at the end of each day during the training course.

Important learning

The most frequently reported important learning of the day was the principles of interpretation, followed by the objectives/themes, diversity of interpretation, being experiential, and the definition of interpretation. The principles of interpretation that were taught in the training course included the Tilden's (1957) six principles of interpretation and Ham's (2013) four qualities of interpretation. The responses on a(n) theme/objective and relevancy were independently categorized, as they were individually reported by the trainees, whereas they may have been considered to be one of the principles of interpretation. Others included a variety of subjects reported by one or two respondent(s), such as feedback, considering audience, passion and interests, design of interpretation, communication, interaction with others, and tangible and intangible concepts. These areas, which were perceived to be important by the respondent, indicated the effectiveness of the training course and were considered to be strengths of the training course.

Understanding of interpretation

The most frequently reported response on how the trainees understood interpretation was transferring information. This category differed from communication and denoted a purposeful information delivery. The majority of the trainees also understood that interpretation was being experiential, offering first-hand activities, rather than mere information transmission. They viewed interpretation as having a(n) theme/objective, making a connection between an object and audience, intriguing audience's interest, making audience aware of an issue, and producing a change in audience. For some trainees, interpretation was communication, being relevant, enjoyable, and organized, which were equal to Ham's four qualities of interpretation. These understandings of the respondents were regarded as strength of the training course, as they fell within the training subjects.

Difficulty in learning

The respondents were requested in the end of each day to describe any difficulties they felt to understand or implement what they were taught during training sessions. The most common responses were no difficulties. The respondents reported a(n) theme, goal, and/or objective was difficult to understand or incorporate into designing interpretation. They also perceived the design of interpretation as difficult. Some respondents reported difficulty in making interpretation relevant, comprehending the definition of interpretation, and understanding the usage or purpose of interpretation, and apprehending a training session. Other difficulties mentioned by the respondents included sense of wonder, exercising what was taught, adjusting for diverse audiences, and being organized and experiential. These difficulties reported by the respondents may be viewed as weaknesses of the training courses.

Although a(n) theme/objective was perceived as important, it was also reported as difficult to understand by some trainees, which may suggest an improvement in future training. Trainees may require an exercise opportunity to put this concept into practice during a training course in order to fully develop that ability.

Expectation for the training course

The training participants were requested to describe their expectations for the training course before arriving at the training venue. The frequency of the response to this question was the same with the number of respondent (n=17), as this question was asked only one time. The most commonly described expectations involved learning delivering techniques (n=11), followed by interacting with other participants (n=6), understating interpretation (n=4), communication (n=4). Two trainees respectively listed experiencing interpretation, the environment surrounding the venue, and something new. Satisfying these expectations should conceivably increase the level of satisfaction of the participants, which may indicate an opportunity for the training course to emphasize in future training.

Desirable skill and knowledge to further develop

The respondents were asked what skills and abilities they wish to further develop at the end of each day during the training course. Understanding interpretation, such as the design of interpretation and techniques to make interpretation relevant, organized, and enjoyable, was their major concern, followed by communication, delivering techniques, and public speaking. Performing Ham's four qualities of interpretation was reported as desirable skills to develop. Product knowledge was also reported as an area to be advanced. These desirable skills and knowledge may be viewed as an opportunity for training course to extend its focus in the future. Particularly the areas that were consistently reported as the expectation and desirable skills and knowledge to further develop can be foci of a future training course, such as communication skills and delivering techniques of interpretation.

Figure 2. Summary of the responses with SWOT Analysis framework

Strength				Weakness	
Important learning n=70		**Interpretation is n= 151**		**Difficult learning n=62**	
Principles of interpretation	10	Conveying/delivering	28	None	16
Theme/objective	9	Being experiential	19	Theme/goal/objective	10
Diversity of interpretation	8	Having a(n) theme/objective	11	Designing interpretation	8
Being experiential	7	Making a connection	10	Being relevant	5
Definition of interpretation	6	Intriguing interests	10	Definition of interpretation	5
Viewpoint	4	Making people aware of	10	Training session	5
Enjoying own interpretation	4	Change in audience	10	Use/purpose of interpretation	4
Being relevant	3	Communication	9	Others	9
Practice/field experience	3	Being relevant	9		
Others	16	Being enjoyable	9		
		Being organized	7		
		Sharing feeling/thought	5		
		Others	14		

Opportunity				Threat	
Expectation for the training n=31		**Desirable skill/ability n=69**		**From previous research**	
Delivering technique	11	Interpretation	27	Lack of training system/module	
Interacting with others	6	Design	15	Lack of learning other practices	
Understanding interpretation	4	Being relevant	4	Lack of opportunities to perform	
Communication	4	Being organized	3	Ambiguity of operational definition of interpretation	
Experiencing interpretation	2	Being enjoyable	3		
Experiencing the surrounding	2	Communication	10		
Experience something new	2	Delivering technique	8		
		Speaking	8		
		Public speaking	6		
		Knowledge of nature	4		
		Theme/goal/objective	3		
		Others	3		

Threat

In this research, threat was not investigated but was guided by the previous research findings on interpreter training in Japan (Yamada et al., 2016). Their findings through the interviews with trainers and trainees showed that interpretive profession had encountered three major challenges to further flourish in Japan: (a) the ambiguity of the operational definition of interpretation, (b) a lack of opportunity to perform, and (c) a lack of a training system. These challenges appeared to be not under control of trainers and require an external assistance in ameliorating them, which indicates the threats for interpreter training in Japan. The following descriptions included the findings of the previous research.

The interviews with trainers and interpreters showed a discrepancy between their views toward interpretation. The different viewpoints likely caused the ambiguity of the operational definition of interpretation. The ambiguity of definition and goals of interpretation is challenging for interpreters. It can lose a focus and provide unclear guidelines for interpreters to follow. Without a clear goal, it is not possible to know the success of an interpretive activity. Additionally, the ambiguity of the operational definition of interpretation may contribute to an insufficient recognition of the role of interpretation, as the interpreters and trainers reported paucity of social recognition of interpretation in Japan. Interpretive profession seemed to be inadequately recognized by managers and the public. The likely outcome of interpretation must be visible, or at least measurable, so that people would appreciate interpretation and then have a supportive attitude toward interpretation.

A lack of an opportunity to perform interpretation was reported as a constraint for interpreters to develop their skills by both the interpreters and trainers. This is also one of the challenges to the profession in the Unites States (Lackey, 2008) showing a lack of full-time positions and lack of practical field training. The lack of opportunity to perform may link to another issue – a lack of opportunities to interact with other professional interpretations.

According to the trainers, there was no nationwide training system that trainers and interpreters could follow and no certification program that assured the quality of interpreter's acquired skills and abilities. This issue introduced two outcomes to the field: instable quality of interpretation and training. Interpretive professions include a variety of tasks and thus require diverse competencies. Without a systematic training system that offers a framework and guideline, it is not easy to design and offer an effective training course that helps become a successful interpreter. A lack of a training system and/or guideline of interpretation is likely to contribute little to improving the quality and establishment of interpretive profession. The lack of training system may have contributed to the quality of trainers as well. Some of the trainers showed a desire to learn about training. Trainers may rely only on their experience and intuition when they design and conduct a training course. There may have been an issue of inadequate skills of trainers, which could contribute to the *ambiguity* of operational definition of interpretation because the necessary skills and abilities to be taught in training may not be articulated.

Discussions

Effectiveness of the training course - Strength

The areas frequently and consistently reported as important appeared to be a major impact of the training course. The trainees perceived being experiential and considering the principles of interpretation as most important and essential for successful interpretation. It is suggested that these areas remain being focused and strongly emphasized in future training. It was revealed that the trainees appreciate the principles of interpretation, which included Ham's four qualities: having a theme/an objective, being organized, being relevant, and being enjoyable. Incorporating these principles into the design of interpretation seems to be a next step to advance the trainees' abilities, as the principles and design were also reported as being difficult and desirable to advance.

Improvement of the training course – Weakness

Incorporating a(n) theme/goal/objective into designing interpretation appeared to be a difficult concept for the trainees, although it was regarded as important and a core of interpretation, as it was described earlier. These findings may indicate that this subject can be taught in a different way in order to facilitate better acquisition of this skill. In the researched training course, the trainees had a performance opportunity to design and deliver a short interpretive talk incorporating a theme and objective. Still, they seemed to have needed an opportunity to reassure their learned knowledge and skills. The definition of interpretation and being relevant may also need to be paid attention to in order to improve the trainees' comprehension in a future training course. A hands-on practice may be a key for effective learning in a training course.

Future opportunity to grow – Opportunity

The consistently reported skills and abilities that the trainees expected to learn in the training course and desired to further advance included communication and delivering techniques. These findings are consistent with the previous research findings (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001) that the trainees reported the use of interpretation technique as their weaknesses. It is suggested that a future training course focus on these two subjects in order to respond to the trainees' needs. In so doing, the trainees may wish to practice communicating with audience and delivering interpretation (e.g., talks and guided-walks) in a training course. Although the researched training course had involved such an opportunity and may have satisfied with the trainee's needs to some degree, such hands-on opportunities can be offered much more. Being experiential was needed in training.

The trainees in this research expected to interact with other interpreters and learn other's practice in the training, which was coincide with the findings of the previous research (Yamada et al., 2016). In that research, the interpreters lacked an opportunity to interact with interpreters at other settings and learn other interpretation practices, and the trainees also pointed out that interpreters lacked experiencing and learning other practices. It was reported in the previous research that few such opportunities had been available. This research finding may suggest that one of the purposes of participating in a training course is to meet other interpreters to broaden their views.

In the present research, the trainees reported that the definition and purpose of interpretation were important while they also perceived those subjects as difficult to understand. This finding may suggest that the trainees were not clear how to put these concepts into practice. Or, it may be an indication of the ambiguity of the definition and purpose of interpretation that were taught in the training course. The operational definition of interpretation may need to be thoroughly taught in a training course because it had been identified as a challenge to the interpretive profession in the previous research (Yamada et al., 2016). Interpretation is used at a wide variety of settings, including natural parks, museums, aquariums, zoos, and other informal learning occasions, and such variety may contribute to the confusion of the trainees who have little or no interpretive experience. If an interpreter does not clearly understand a purpose for which s/he designs an interpretive activity (e.g. talk and guided walk), s/he may encounter a difficulty in completing it. Additionally, as it was discussed earlier, the trainees viewed designing interpretation was difficult, and that difficulty may have come from the ambiguity of the operational definition and purpose of interpretation.

Lastly, in this research, the trainees had wished to practice what they had learned while they were in the training course, which may be an indication of a lack of performance opportunity for interpreters. It was reported in the previous research (Yamada et al., 2016) that interpreters had encountered a difficulty to improve their skills due to few or no opportunities to perform. Interpreters may expect exercising as much of their skills and abilities as possible during a training course to improve them. If so, a future training course may need to alter its approach: to provide trainees with more opportunities to perform rather than lectures, or to target at different trainees who are novice to the field and wish to learn the concept more than practical skills.

Conclusion

This research focused on an interpreter training course and examined its impact. It also investigated the trainees' perceptions of necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to become a successful interpreter. The trainees appreciated the principles of interpretation and delivering techniques of interpretation. It appeared that the training participants expected and appreciated a hands-on practice during the training course. As the society have changed and the demands and expectations of audience have grown, the skills and abilities expected of interpreters have also evolved. Such needs should be incorporated into interpreter training. Weiler and Walker (2014) maintained that guide training informed by theory and research can successfully deliver the knowledge and skills required by the guides (i.e., interpretive guides). The findings of this research suggested the areas that a future training course can emphasize and improve. There are much more that interpretation can contribute to a sustainable tourism, and enhancing the quality of interpreter is more than necessary.

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