What are good Japanese-into-English interpretations to the audience?

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Abstract

The present report deals with the listeners' preference of the Japanese-into-English interpretations performed by non-native English speaking interpreters. According to Collados [1] (1992), monotonous intonation affects the listeners' evaluation of simultaneous interpretation. Kurz [2] (1993) investigated users' assessment on conference interpreters and found that the native accent was the least important quality criterion. Meanwhile, according to Anderson, Johnson, and Koehler [3] (1992), prosody was the most frequently associated factors with the pronunciation scores of evaluations of students' speech. Rennert [4] (1993) suggests that fluency is one of the key features of simultaneous interpretation. In order to examine the factors affecting good interpretations, the study was designed and 11 native and non-native speakers of English were asked to listen to the interpretations performed by seven student interpreter in order to examine the audience's preference. The listeners were asked to grade the interpretations based on their own general impression by using a five-point scale and make comments on the interpretations. It was found that the factors suggested in the previous studies were important, yet there was another factor that affected listeners' preference.

Key words: Japanese-into-English interpretation, listener's preference, native-like pronunciation

1. Introduction

The interpreting services are very useful service to those who are not able to understand the language in which the message is delivered. For these people, the most important aspect of interpreting is that the messages are interpreted accurately (i.e., fidelity). However, besides accuracy, there must be some factors that make interpretations good to the audience in addition to the factors indicated in the previous studies. If the interpretations are not good from whatever the reasons, the audience must endure the service, even though the massages are being conveyed accurately when the only one interpreter is in charge of their interpreting service.

In the case of interpretations between the Japanese and English languages, there are two language directions of interpreting: that are English into Japanese and Japanese into English. Also in Japan, there are international interpreting settings where the audiences are not limited to native speakers of English, meaning non-native speakers of English are included as well as native speakers of English.

With such a situation as a background, what is good interpretation from the perspective of the audience, particularly in the settings where the audience includes native and non-native speakers of English? In order to solve the research question, the study was designed to explore the important factors to make interpretations good by examining the listeners' preference. In the present report, the focus of the study is Japanese-into-English interpretations. Thus, the interpreters must interpret into their second language. The context for the interpreting was designed to be in a factory where a Japanese PR manager gives brief remarks prior to the factory tour for international visitors. She is monolingual and thus needs to rely on an interpreter to convey the information on the factory. The results of the present study are expected to be of any use to the non-native speaking teachers who teach how to interpret Japanese into English.

2. The study

2.1. Participants

There were two groups of participants: interpreters and listeners. Interpreters in the present study were seven under-graduate students. They were 2nd graders and majored in foreign language and journalism. All of them had already finished one semester (i.e., 15 weeks) of interpreting classes at the time of the study with experience of interpreting short speeches in the classes that were similar to the material used in the present study. The participants were recruited in the class by an announcement made at the end of the semester, and the students who were interested in the study became the participants. Small gratuity was paid to them. As indicated in the Table 1, three out of

the seven participants had spent some time outside Japan in their childhood, and they were so called *kikoku shijo*, or returnee students. The other had never lived abroad except short stays (less than one month).

Table 1: Profile of the participants

Participant	Stay abroad over 1 year	Country	Age	Period
Sachi	No			
Kumi	No			
Erika	Yes	Singapore	14-18	3 years 8 months
Mari	No			
Yuki	No			
Yoko	Yes	Australia	0-8	8 years
Emi	Yes	Argentine	0-2	2 and a half years
		the US	2-4	2 years
		the US	12-15	3 years 5 months

*Their names are pseudonyms.

Listeners comprised 11 native and non-native speakers of Japanese, including both native and none-native speakers of English. They were three native speakers of English, both British and American English, seven native speakers of Asian languages and one native speaker of a European language. They were in their thirties and represented the kind of people who would be attending the factory tour in Japan as visitors, researchers or technical trainees. Actually, they were post graduate students, except one, recruited through word of mouth.

2.2. Material

The material was brief Japanese remarks. These were the likely greeting remarks usually made prior to the factory tour when the factory person welcomes the visitors. The remarks consisted of 396 morae or 334 Japanese characters and the content is greetings and a brief introduction of the company, including a brief history and the products of the company.

2.3. Procedures

The study was conducted with the interpreters one by one in a sound-proof room. The participant signed the consent form with some explanation and listened to the Japanese remarks read out by the experimenter firstly without interpreting them. Since they had finished one-semester interpreting classes and had gone through this kind of practice sometimes before, they were expected to be familiar with the material.

However, here were uncertainties as to whether the participants were able to interpret accurately like a professional interpreter with few errors. Therefore,

in order to control the accuracy of the interpretation, the participants were provided with an opportunity to prepare for interpreting and practice interpreting the material before recording. The time allocated for the preparation to each participant was five minutes. The preparation included the vocabulary checking.

The remarks were divided into eight sections and read out in a usual manner practiced in the real interpreting setting. A mock PR manager and the interpreter spoke alternately eight times. Their interpretations, together with the source speech were recorded. The interpretations were recorded after one rehearsal.

Meanwhile, the listeners participated in the study one by one and listened to the recordings which contained Japanese and English alternately seven times or seven interpreters in random order in the sound-proof room. No participant listened to the interpretations in the same order. After the listeners finished listening to each interpreter, they were asked to grade the interpretations using a five-point scale, based on their own overall impression (5 was the best score with 1 as the lowest score). They were then asked to make comments on the interpretations on any aspect except small grammatical errors. At the end of the study, they were asked to pick out the best interpreter.

2.4. Data analysis method

Four analytical methods were applied to analyze the data. As for the scores of overall impressions marked by listeners using the five-point scale, the mean scores were calculated. The results were examined in terms of a statistics test by using one-way ANOVA. Then, the total pitch ranges of each participant were calculated, followed by the fluency of the longest section of the interpreting (i.e., the third section). Based on these, a words-per-second was obtained by dividing the total number of the uttered words by the total length of interpreting. Finally, the open comments were analyzed in order to examine the listeners' frequently-used terms, and key words were extracted.

2.5. Results and discussions

The results of the data analysis (i.e., mean scores, fluency, and pitch ranges) in tandem with the comments on each participant's interpretation are as follows.

First of all, the results of the mean scores are reported (see Table 2). Emi's mean scores (4.45) was the top of the seven participants and Sachi's scores (3.36) was on the bottom of the list. According to the statistics test, there were significant differences among the participants (one-way ANOVA $F = 2.10$ $p < .05$). Also, there was a significant difference

between Emi (the top) and Sachi (the bottom), according to multiple comparisons (Tukey-Kramer, p <.01). Seven out of the 11 listeners appreciated the interpretation performed by Emi, saying that it was comfortable to listen to and good to listen to. Other positive comments included "good pace to follow" and "good matching with the speaker".

Table 2:   Mean scores

Participant	Mean scores
Emi	4.45
Mari	3.82
Yoko	3.73
Kumi	3.50
Erika	3.45
Yuki	3.45
Sachi	3.36

* 5 is the best score.

As Emi grew up outside Japan, being educated in English in her childhood, it is understandable that her pronunciation is near-native, or native-like pronunciation, however, there were negative comments like "monotonous", "rising tone is a bit disturbing". Moreover, although the interpretation performed by Emi was ranked top in terms of mean scores, her interpretation was not supported by all the listeners. There were two non-native speakers of English who did not select Emi as the best interpreter.

Meanwhile, the listeners complained about the interpretation performed by Sachi, the participant on the bottom of the list, commenting that she was difficult to understand, she was not clear, and the listeners needed to concentrate to listen to. However, there was a positive comment: Her interpretation sounded confident, despite those negative comments.

As far as the fluency of the interpretation of the longest section of the remarks is concerned, Emi's number of the words uttered per second (3.89) was the smallest among all the participants (see Table 3). This results supports the listeners' comment of "good pace to listen to". Therefore, it is not the case that the faster the interpreter speaks, the better for the audience in interpreting.

Table 3: Fluency of the longest section of the remarks

Sachi	Kumi	Erika	Mari	Yuki	Yoko	Emi
4.50	5.04	4.48	6.50	4.21	3.93	3.89

The second-best participant in terms of the mean scores was Mari (3.82). The fluency of her interpretation of the longest section of the remarks recorded the largest number of words. This is because Mari repeated the same words and phrases and made

self-correction, while interpreting. Examples are as follows.

"Thank you for coming today. I am Tomoko Kuwata. I am working at department, PR department (repetition). Thank you. I want you to see (wrong interpretation). I, you can enjoy today (self-correction)".

Despite this practice, the interpretation performed by Mari was appreciated by the listeners. Four listeners said that the interpretation performed by Mari was "good to listen to" and "comfortable to listen to". However, one native speaker of English criticized the interpretation performed by Mari, saying that it sounded childish and another native speaker of English said it sounded like a young woman. The other native speaker of English commented that her careless mistakes were acceptable as she sounded bright. This means that her cheerful interpreting manner could compromise her careless mistakes and frequent repetitions. However, her interpreting manner was not appreciated much by the two native speakers of English. These comments are a reflection of the results of the data analysis, that is of the pitch ranges (see Table 4). Mari recorded the largest pitch range among all the participants.

Mari grew up in Japan and was an EFL student, having no experience of staying in an English-speaking country at the time of study. Despite her repetitions, repeated self-corrections and careless mistakes, the interpretation performed by Mari was preferred by the listeners by non-native speakers of English in particular. It is an encouraging result for Japanese EFL students who have never lived and studied in the foreign countries, which causes their inferiority complex about their non-native pronunciation.

Table 4: Pitch ranges

Participant	Max	Min	Ranges
Mari	408	79	329
Emi	347	79	268
Yoko	324	93	231
Yuki	320	96	224
Kumi	313	103	210
Sachi	355	156	199
Erika	332	174	158

In terms of the pitch ranges, Erika (3.45) who was on the fifth from the top in terms of mean scores recorded the smallest pitch ranges among all the participants. Erika was educated at an international school outside Japan for four years in her late teens. Three listeners appreciated her pronunciation, one of

whom said that her pronunciation was native-like pronunciation. However, six listeners criticized the interpretation performed by Erika, commenting that it was flat, boring, and not enthusiastic.

Yoko (3.73) who was the third from the top of the list received the similar comments from the listeners. She grew up in Australia until she was eight years old. Three listeners appreciated her English pronunciation but six listeners criticized her delivery style, saying that it did not sound enthusiastic. Two listeners expressed their concern whether she understood the original message correctly. One listener said that Yoko was not able to catch the attention of the visitors. Another listener said "she might have been tired on that day". The other commented that the interpretation performed by Yoko was boring.

When making comments, the listeners frequently used such words and expressions as "pleasant to listen to", "a happy sounding voice", "a welcoming voice", "professional", "emotional", "good matching with a speaker", "enthusiastic", and "clear" as qualifiers of their judgment. These words were the key words for good interpretations from the listeners' perspective in the present study.

3. Conclusion

In order to explore what good interpretations are and identify the listeners' preference of the interpretations, 11 listeners, both native speakers and non-native speakers of English were asked to listen to the interpretations performed by seven student interpreters and to grade them by using a five-point scale with 5 as the best score based on their own overall impression. In addition to this, the listeners were asked to make comments on the interpretations.

Based on the results of the study, it was found that interpretation that were "good and comfortable to listen to" were preferred by the listeners. The listener preference was not always associated with the native-like or near-native pronunciation as was indicated by the interpretations delivered by Emi, Mari, Erica and Yoko, which supported the results indicated by the previous studies. Similarly, the interpretation that sounded confident was preferred over non-enthusiastic interpretation. As indicated in the previous studies, while the importance was placed on the intonation, the fluency, and the prosody, the native-like pronunciation was not associated with the important factors. In addition to these factors, however, the listening comfort, or "comfortable to listen to" was none the less important factor in such interpreting setting as interpreting welcoming remarks in the present study. The results are considered useful for non-native speakers of English in teaching student interpreters how to interpret. Based on the results, it is recommended that the teachers encourage student interpreters to deliver interpretations in a welcoming voice and an enthusiastic manner to make interpretations confident and comfortable to listen to. Moreover, the teachers are encouraged to let the student interpreters know that the native-like pronunciation is not directly a determinant factor of good interpretations.

However, the results are limited to the present study, and it is note that the results are not universally applicable to any interpreting setting. In the future study, the difference in the trend of the preference will be explored in a large scale with a focus on the listeners' first languages to consider better interpreting service in the global settings.

4. Acknowledgements

5. References

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