

PhD Thesis Abstract

**Assessing Source Text Difficulty
for Interpreter Education:
With a Focus on Textual Factors of English Source Texts
in English-Korean Consecutive Interpreting**

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It is generally agreed in interpreter education that source texts (STs) must be sequenced according to their level of difficulty. But it appears that there is a dearth of research aimed at explaining ST difficulty based on specific textual factors, making highly impressionistic assessment of source text difficulty inevitable. The aim of this study is to analyze textual factors involved in the assessment of ST difficulty in interpreter education, and to develop a more objective and reliable way of assessing ST difficulty, with a focus on English source texts used in the education of English-Korean consecutive interpreting (CI).

Three research questions were set for this PhD research: first, to identify and categorize textual factors that affect the difficulty of source texts used in interpreter education; second, to test the methods for assessing ST difficulty and to discover the relations between the different methods; and third, to develop a more objective and reliable model for assessing ST difficulty for interpreter education.

To answer the aforementioned research questions, literature review and a survey of interpreting teachers were conducted. Based on the review of previous studies on textual factors affecting text difficulty in second language acquisition, language testing and translation and interpreting studies, six major textual factors were identified, i.e., topic, vocabulary, sentence, logic, information density and target language re-expression. In addition, previous studies relevant

to text difficulty measurement were examined to determine the methods of source text difficulty assessment for this study.

Following the literature review, a survey of fifteen interpreting teachers was conducted. These interpreting teachers were asked to perform three tasks. First of all, the participants carried out an analysis of textual factors affecting ST difficulty with sample source texts; they reviewed five English source texts that had been actually used in major examinations at a postgraduate English-Korean CI program, and were asked to provide examples and explanations of textual factors affecting the overall ST difficulty. Secondly, the participants compared the relative weights of the six major difficulty factors (topic, vocabulary, sentence, logic, information density, target language re-expression) in considering ST difficulty in the context of interpreter education. Lastly, the participants rated the level of difficulty of the five source texts on a ten-point scale. The last task was performed with a two-pronged approach: one was "holistic assessment", in which the participants based the overall difficulty rating solely on their individual judgment without any guidelines; the other was "analytic assessment", in which they performed difficulty rating according to the six major aspects of source text difficulty (topic, vocabulary, sentence, logic, information density, target language re-expression).

To identify the textual factors that affect the difficulty of source texts used in interpreter education (first research question), results from the first two tasks of the interpreting teachers survey were analyzed. A total of 464 participant comments and text segments linked to those comments were analyzed and categorized under the six major difficulty factors affecting ST difficulty, and 22 specific textual features were identified that explained the six major difficulty factors in more detail. The result of relative weight comparison of the six difficulty factors indicated that the interpreting teachers considered logic(22.1%) most important in assessing the difficulty of source texts used in the education of English-Korean consecutive interpreting, followed by information density(19.9%), sentence(17.4%), topic(15.5%), vocabulary(13.8%) and target language re-expression(11.4%).

To test the methods for assessing ST difficulty and to discover the relations between the different methods (second research question), various methods for subjective and objective assessment of ST difficulty were conducted and the results were compared. The result of subjective difficulty assessment by the individual survey participants showed a marked inconsistency; in other words, the difficulty scores rated by the fifteen participants demonstrated little

correlation with each other; however, inter-rater consistency was relatively higher in analytic assessment than in holistic assessment. The participants' average scores in holistic assessment were found to be significantly correlated with their judgment of difficulty in the text's logic, information density and sentence in this order.

Source text difficulty assessment by survey participants was followed by objective difficulty assessment, which was a more quantitative approach based on the measurement of readability (Flesch Reading Ease Score and Coh-Metrix L2 Reading Index); lexical difficulty (percentage of low-frequency words); lexical variety (type-to-token ratio); syntactic complexity (average length of T-unit, words before main verbs, mean number of modifiers per noun phrase); and information density (total number of propositions divided by total number of words) of the source texts used in the survey. Participants' difficulty assessment was found to be correlated significantly with the average length of T-unit, Flesch Reading Ease Score and type-to-token ratio of the source texts.

To answer the third and last research question, which is to develop a model for ST difficulty assessment for English-Korean CI education, a model for assessment of ST difficulty was designed, drawing on both the expertise of individual interpreting teachers and more objective and reliable text difficulty assessment methods. The model was built based on the results of the first and second research questions, with interpreting teachers' subjective assessment accounting for 70% of the final ST difficulty assessment score and quantitative indicators of textual factors of STs 30%. The model requires interpreting teachers to conduct analytic assessment of source text difficulty with the six difficulty factors as assessment criteria; and quantitative indicators of text quality consist of average length of T-unit, Flesch Reading Ease Score and type-to-token ratio, all of which were found to be significantly correlated with interpreting teachers' judgment of source text difficulty in the second part of the study.

The model for source text difficulty assessment was tested with a trial application on ten interpreting teachers. Interpreting teachers agreed in general to the validity and usefulness of the model, and the difficulty assessment scores generated by the model showed higher inter-rater consistency than the method of using participants' subjective judgment alone. As some participants pointed to the need to further enhance the model's practical applicability in the field, a simplified version of the model was further developed: for practical and simple application, a checklist consisting of key components of the model was

presented.

This study has implications for the practice and study of interpreting education. The ST difficulty factors identified in the study can serve as a set of criteria for describing and analyzing ST difficulty in textual terms, so as to help both teachers and students better predict the kind of interpreting challenges presented by a given ST. Also, various ST difficulty assessment methods tested in the study point to the possibility of assessing ST difficulty in a more systematic manner. Most of all, the model for ST difficulty assessment proposed in this study can be utilized for a more objective and reliable assessment of ST difficulty, as it incorporates quantitative indicators relevant to interpreting ST difficulty assessment and is expected to improve inter-rater consistency.

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About the author

Moonsun Choi received her PhD in translation and interpreting studies from the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation of Ewha Womans University in Korea. She has an MA degree in conference interpreting from the same graduate school. She has over 10 years of conference interpreting experience and is currently teaching at Ewha as an invited professor.