English-Arabic and Arabic-English Interpreting Competence of Undergraduate Student-Interpreters: A Comparative Study of Directionality

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates interpreting directionality and interpreting competence of undergraduate interpreting students. It tried to answer the following questions: (i) Is there a significant difference between the beginners and advanced students' skills in Liaison interpreting from English to Arabic and Arabic to English, with Arabic as their L1 and English as their L2, i.e., which direction is easier? (ii) Is there a correlation between English-Arabic and Arabic-English interpreting competence of beginners and advanced students? Results showed a correlation between students' ability in English-Arabic and Arabic-English interpreting for both groups. The interpreting test median and mean scores of advanced students show that they are more competent in English-Arabic that Arabic-English interpreting This means that Arabic-English interpreting is more difficult for advanced students whereas beginners have comparable abilities in both directions. On the contrary beginners have comparable ability in both directions. Comparisons of beginners and advanced students using ANOVA showed no significant differences between both groups in their interpreting competence, i.e., both groups have comparable interpreting competence although the advanced group took more interpreting and translation courses. The factors that affect Arabic-English and English-Arabic interpreting competence and recommendations for developing student interpreting competence in both directions are given.

Keywords:
Interpreting competence, interpreting directionality, English-Arabic interpreting, Arabic-English interpreting, liaison interpreting, interpreter training.

INTRODUCTION

Students enrolled in the translation program at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, take two simultaneous, two consecutive, two liaison and one sight interpreting courses (2 hours per week each). In these courses the students practice interpreting in two directions: English-Arabic and Arabic-English in a variety of fields. Students enrolled in interpreting courses have numerous phonological, lexical, structural, and meaning transfer problems in addition to lack of background knowledge in the areas from which the interpreting texts are selected. Analysis of students' errors in the Interpreting I course at COLT by Al-Jarf (2018) showed that students had insufficient vocabulary knowledge. They had problems comprehending media reports and interpreting their content from English to Arabic and Arabic to English. They had difficulty in discriminating phonemes in unfamiliar foreign proper nouns such as place name, names of politicians, organizations, news agencies. They had difficulty comprehending the meaning of unfamiliar chemical names, names of diseases, organizations, measurement units, acronyms referring to international organizations, political posts and providing correct English or Arabic equivalents. They also made meaning transfer errors as well.

Another study by Ibrahim and El-Esery (2014) assessed Saudi EFL students' consecutive interpreting skills. Results of a consecutive interpreting test showed that the students' mean score was barely acceptable. The students lacked consecutive interpretation skills and found language interpretation a difficult and complex task. There were variations among the students in interpreting skills, with a need to focus on some skills more intensively in the interpreting and translation courses offered to EFL students by Faculties of Arts.

In Morocco, Akki and Larouz (2021) conducted a comparative study of English-Arabic-English translation constraints among EFL students at two Moroccan universities. The test results revealed difficulties students are having in translation. The researchers concluded that

having a good English-Arabic translation ability does not strongly predict good Arabic-English translation ability because of the differences between English and Arabic.

As for professional interpreters, Al-Salman and Al-Khanji (2002) found that they are more efficient when interpreting oral discourse from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Very few interpreters show a balance of their two working languages in the interpreting task, but the majority reacted more positively towards English.

In China, Chang (2005) investigated directionality in Chinese-English simultaneous professional interpreters and their experience of simultaneous interpreting in different language directions, with special focus on the effect of language direction on performance and strategy use. Ten professional Chinese-English interpreters participated in the study. They interpreted two speeches from English to Mandarin Chinese, and two speeches from Mandarin Chinese to English. The researcher found that 70% of the sample were dominant in Chinese and 30% were dominant either in English or having equal abilities in both languages. Professional simultaneous interpreters who interpret in both directions on a regular basis develop strategic approaches to cope with the different demands of A-to-B and B-to-A interpreting.

In Saudi Arabia and the Arabic interpreting literature in general, there is lack of studies that investigate directionality in liaison interpreting by beginners and advance student interpreters. Therefore, this study aims to investigate interpreting directionality and interpreting competence. It aims to answer the following questions: (i) Is there a significant difference between beginners and advanced students' level of competence in liaison interpreting from English to Arabic and Arabic to English (with Arabic as L1 and English as L2) and to find out which direction is easier? (ii) Is there a correlation between English-Arabic and Arabic-English liaison interpreting competence of beginning and advanced students? Can a high English-Arabic interpreting ability predict a high ability in Arabic-English interpreting and vice versa?

Results of this study will be beneficial to interpreting instructors. It will show them beginning and advanced students' interpreting competence and which direction is easier and/or more difficult. This will help them make changes and adjustments in the training material, and training strategies.

SUBJECTS
Subjects of the present study consisted of two samples of students majoring in translation at COLT. The Beginners Group (Level 5) consisted of 95 undergraduate students

enrolled in Liaison Interpreting I, which the author taught. The Beginners' Group never had any interpreting training courses of any kind before. They all had completed four levels of listening, speaking, reading, and writing courses and two levels of grammar and vocabulary building courses. They were concurrently taking the first level of the consecutive and simultaneous interpreting courses and 4 translation courses.

The Advanced Group (Level 9) consisted of 105 undergraduate students enrolled in the Liaison Interpreting II course that the author taught as well. in addition to the language courses, 2 Consecutive, 2 Simultaneous, and Liaison Interpreting I and translation courses in 18 subject areas. Students in both groups were native speakers of Arabic with English as their target language.

PROCEDURES AND TASKS
In the Liaison Interpreting I and II courses, the author used the same instructional procedures because the Advanced group took the Liaison Interpreting I course with another instructor. The training consisted of a series of graded exercises to train the students to interpret interviews form English into Arabic and Arabic into English. The exercises consisted of breathing exercises, speech shadowing exercises, sentence paraphrasing exercises, providing summaries of sentences, then whole paragraphs, memory training exercises, interpreting formal and informal interviews covering general topics in politics, business, economics, commerce, law, computer science, medicine, education, psychology, sports and Islamic studies. The material focuses on current affairs and developments in business, computer science, medicine, economics, politics…etc. Interviews are graded in length, difficulty level and topic familiarity (Al-Jarf, 2007; Al-Jarf, 2000).

In Liaison Interpreting, the guest and the host speak different languages (in our case English and Arabic). So the students listen to a question in Arabic and render the meaning in English then listen to the answer in English and render the meaning in Arabic and do the same with English questions and Arabic answers, without any previous preparation or knowledge of the interview content. Both groups practice interpreting in two directions. They are required to focus on the meaning rather than the exact words of the speaker. They listen to stretches of discourse in the interview only once. They are not allowed to take notes or consult a dictionary. The material for both groups covers the same subject areas except for the difficulty level, length and topic familiarity. But there is no overlap in topics and interviews (Al-Jarf, 2007; Al-Jarf, 2000).

Each interpreting course is taught twice a week for 14 weeks. In one class session the students practice liaison

interpreting in the language laboratory; in the other, they practice liaison interpreting in teams of three (role playing). Before this session, the students research a topic and bring sample interviews to class. For extra practice out of class, the students listen to and observe how professional translators work on T.V. and in YouTube video clips.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected over a period of 4 semesters. The English-Arabic and the Arabic-English interpreting scores for groups were collected from their Liaison Interpreting I and II final exams (at the end of the courses). Each final exam consisted of two sets of interviews consisting of a mixer of English and Arabic interviews. In one set, the questions were in Arabic and the answers were in English. In the other, the questions were in English, and the answers were in Arabic. The interviews covered different subject fields.

The students took the test in the language lab where they listened to the interviews through their headsets and recorded their interpretations. The author listened to the recordings and assigned marks using a scoring rubric which consisted of the interpreting skills (listening comprehension and meaning transfer, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, body language and tone of voice) and the performance (excellent, very good, good, poor). For each student, the English-Arabic and Arabic-English test scores were calculated separately and then converted to percentages. Descriptive statistics, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), T-tests and correlations were computed for the English-Arabic and Arabic-English interpretation test scores of the Level for the Beginners (Level 5) and the Advanced Group (Level 9).

RESULTS

Table (1) Descriptive Statistics of the Liaison Test Scores for Level 5 and Level 9 Students

	Level 5 (Beginners)			Level 9 (Advanced)		
	Arabic-English Part	**English-Arabic part**	**Total Exam**	**Arabic-English Part**	**English-Arabic part**	**Total Exam**
Mean	61.83	61.51	122.98	59.83	63.34	123.17
Median	61.50	62.50	123.34	58.00	65.00	125.00
SD	13.86	16.60	27.64	14.11	14.63	27.46
SE	1.35	1.62	2.75	1.49	1.54	2.89
Range	37-90	23-95	63-185	37-92	31-92	73-184

Findings reported in Table (1) show that for the Beginners Group (Interpreting I), the typical English-Arabic score was 62.5% and the typical Arabic-English score was 61.5%. The mean and median scores reflect comparable and below average liaison interpreting ability in both directions. The variance and range scores show variations in liaison interpreting competence within the group, with a range of scores between excellent, average and very low (normal curve). In addition, T-test results showed no significant differences in the students' competence in English-Arabic and Arabic-English interpreting which means that the students have comparable liaison interpreting competence in both directions. A positive correction was found between English-Arabic and Arabic interpreting scores, with a positive correlation coefficient of .64. This means that in the Beginners Group, if a student's interpreting skill in one direction is good, it is also good in the other direction and if it is poor in one direction, it will be also poor in the other direction.

For the Advanced Group, the typical English-Arabic and Arabic-English scores were 65% and 58% respectively. T-test results showed significant differences between the two directions. This means that Advanced students' ability in English-Arabic interpreting is better than Arabic-English. There is also a positive correction between English-Arabic and Arabic interpreting scores, with a positive correlation coefficient of .72. This means that Advanced students interpreting skills in both directions are related. It seems that Advance students in the current study may have trouble comprehending the message in spoken discourse delivered in English (L) and have no lexical, grammatical, syntactic problems in reformulating the message in Arabic (L1), whereas in Arabic-English interpreting, they have no difficulty comprehending the message delivered in L1 but their problems lie in reformulating the message in L2 due to lexical and grammatical difficulties.

As for Beginners and Advanced students' performance, Analysis of Variance revealed no significant differences in the total test mean scores of the Beginners and Advanced

groups in interpreting in both directions (Df= 198; F=2.9, P<.071). This means that Beginners and Advance groups in the current study have comparable interpreting competence in both directions. This is counter intuitive because one expects Level 9 students to have better interpreting skills than Level 5 students because the former group studied more interpreting and translation courses and hence received more training. Although both Beginners and Advance students received the same training procedures from the author but Level 9 students could not unlearn the previous habits they developed and apply the new strategies received from the author because they received different training strategies in Liaison Interpreting I from another instructor.

In grading the tests for both groups, it was noted that Level 5 students are more fluent and are more able to interpret the content (meaning) of the spoken text than Level 9 students who tended to listen for and try to interpret the exact words of the message rather than the meaning. The Level 9 students are slower and hesitate more.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study are consistent with finding of prior studies that were conducted with professional and student interprets in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting. Consecutive interpreting test scores of Saudi EFL students at Faculties of Arts showed that the students' mean score did not exceed the acceptable statistical level. They recommended that interpreting instructors focus more on interpreting skills (Ibrahim and El-Esery's (2014). In another study, Al-Salman and Al-Khanji (2002) found that simultaneous interpreters are more efficient when interpreting oral discourse from L2 into L1. Very few interpreters showed a balance of their two working languages during the interpretation task. The standard Arabic used by almost all interpreters revealed poor performance due to level of familiarity with the subject matter interpreted, speaker's speed, skill and others. In Jordan, Farghal and Shakir (1994) found that student interpreters in the M.A. Translation Program at Yarmouk University have insufficient lexical competence when interpreting from Arabic to English. In Morocco, Akki & Larouz (2021) indicated that student interpreters test scores in both English-Arabic and Arabic-English translation are not at the expected ability level due to difficulties they face in the translation process. This finding also applies to students' interpreting ability.

Unlike the present study which revealed variations within the scores of Level 5 and Level 9, the test scores in all the written translation courses for all the college levels, taught by different instructors at the same college (COLT) revealed no variations within nor between the 18 courses and

different college levels as in 96% of the courses, all the students passed (Al-Jarf, 2021b).

Furthermore, prior studies in the literature mentioned several factors that affect L1-L2 and L2-L1 interpreting competence. For example, Ibrahim and El-Esery's (2014) indicated that students' translation performance was affected by linguistic, affective and/or cognitive factors. The linguistic competence of their students was not high enough to take advantage of the syntactic and semantic features of the text. Al-Salman and Al-Khanji (2002) added that linguistic adequacy, strategic competence, and communication strategies affect interpreting quality. Al Zahran (2021), El-Zawawy (2021) and Al-Jabr (2006) specifically emphasized the role of syntactic complexity in translating to and from English and Arabic due to the syntactic asymmetry between English and Arabic which impose structural challenges in English-Arabic simultaneous interpreting. Farghal and Shakir (1994) emphasized the role of lexical competence in all interpreting programs.

Furthermore, students' translation and interpreting strategies play a role in their output quality. Alduhaim & Alkhaldy (2019) mentioned some strategies that Libyan students use in simultaneous interpreting such as: (i) omission and the loss of meaning during interpreting; (ii) tendency to add information for explaining purposes or emphasis; and (iii) approximation, i.e., using metaphors in the target text to interpret metaphors in the source text.

Finally, teaching approaches impact students' interpreting competence. In the UAE, the majority of translation students surveyed by Giaber (2018) reported that the teaching approach and the translation practice and assessment portfolio are useful for their learning, especially in developing their language, vocabulary, translation skills (i.e., text analysis, rendering and revision), interaction, collaboration and problem-solving skills, and awareness of translation and interpreting ethics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For developing student interpreters' interpreting competence in both language directions, the current study recommends the following:

- Raising students' awareness of the phonological, syntactic, morphological, word formation processes, and cultural differences between the students' working languages, viz English and Arabic (Al-Jarf, 1995).
- Raising students' proficiency level in English and Arabic languages and exposing students to their distinctive features in order to achieve more accurate and appropriate translations (Akki & Larouz, 2021).
- Developing students' lexical competence especially in specialized subject areas (Farghal, & Shakir, 1994).

- Developing students' background knowledge of current global events, unfamiliar place name, names of politicians, organizations, news agencies, meanings and equivalents of unfamiliar chemical names, diseases, measurement units, acronyms referring to international organizations, political posts and providing the correct English or Arabic equivalents (Al-Jarf, 2018).

- Develop students' metacognitive awareness of the limits of their language abilities, the strategies available to them, expectations of their audience, and the discourse structures of their working languages Chang, 2005).

- While listening to the students' interpretation, especially when they make lexical, semantic, structural and transfer mistakes, give communicative feedback that focuses on meaning and on the presence and location of errors, without giving the correct lexical, morphological, or structural forms. The students may correct their own errors. Peer feedback should be also encouraged (Al-Jarf, 2021a).

- Integrating TED Talks in interpreting practice (Al-Jarf, 2021d; Al-Jarf, 2020).

- Using multimedia language labs in interpreting practice where students can watch real meetings between delegates or foreign visitors and local hosts speaking different languages (Al-Jarf, 2021c).

- Integrating technology in student interpreter training such as videoconferencing platforms (Elluminate and Adobe Connect), relevant podcasts and YouTube videos, distance learning platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and WebEx which can be used for synchronous and asynchronous in-class and out of class interpreting practice (Al-Jarf, 2017).

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