

## LANGUAGE INTERPRETING ANXIETY AMONG TRANSLATION STUDIES LEARNERS

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### **Abstract**

Language interpretation plays a vital role in the Translation Studies classroom at the Department of Translation Studies, University of Jaffna. In general, Interpretation is a verbal communication which is a process of rendering a spoken or signed message into another spoken or signed language, preserving the register and meaning of the source language content. However, the learners' anxiety in interpreting is a frequent challenge, which is encountered by the instructors of Translation Studies, negatively affects the teaching and learning process. In this concern, the present study attempts to investigate the factors influencing target language interpreting anxiety in the perspective of learners. The sample group was 25 undergraduates belonging to the fourth year discipline at the Department of Translation Studies, University of Jaffna. A structures questionnaire was administered to the learners in order to identify their perspective on the language interpreting anxiety in the Translation Studies classroom along with the factors that cause and reduce their anxiety. The findings revealed that, the students agree that language interpreting activities are beneficial, their reluctance to communicate stems from inadequate vocabulary, fear of making mistakes in grammar and constructing sentences through appropriate choice of equivalence.

**Keywords:** *Language, interpretation, Language proficiency, Source language, Target language*

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## **Introduction**

According to the Webster dictionary, “interpretation is the action of explaining the meaning of something in the way something is explained or understood”. “In terms of language, the definition of interpretation is broader; rendering a spoken or signed message into another spoken or signed language, preserving the register and meaning of the source language content. Based on the previous studies, interpreting has traditionally been regarded as a branch of translation. A number of authors have provided different definitions of translation as a conversion process from one language to another, in either the written or the spoken mode. Most importantly, interpreting refers to the conversion of the spoken work or text in the source language into the target language. As explained in these statements, competency in both languages has become the need of hour with a vast variety of educational and career opportunities available for anyone possessing good translation and interpretation skills in the language field. With the purpose of addressing this essential requirement of language competency, a key area of focus in the translation studies classroom and a considerable amount of time are devoted to enhance the interpreting competency of the learner.

Various teaching strategies and resources are incorporated in teaching with the intention of equipping the learners with the necessary interpretation skills required for effective communication. However, despite the best efforts of the language teacher to encourage the students to interpret between official languages in Sri Lanka, anxiety in interpreting is often observed in the classroom. As revealed by various studies, this is a common situation encountered by the instructors of translation studies. No any researchers have attributed interpreting anxiety to a range of causes from mere lack of interest and unwillingness that require the instructor’s prompt attention and remedy including lack of confidence, poor guidance, negative reinforcement and the fear of communication itself. Addressing these concerns is a crucial requirement in language development because poor interpreting skills can have a detrimental effect on the language acquisition process preventing the learners from attaining the expected proficiency.

Interpreting anxiety may affect the quality of an individual’s communication or willingness to communicate which can hinder the learning process. In the Sri Lankan context where Tamil and Sinhala are considered the official languages and English is considered a linking language, interpreting anxiety is a major obstacle faced by translation studies instructors. This is observed in the undergraduate classrooms despite the fact that the students are

advanced learners who have been learning the languages for a number of years. Most of the learners display signs of nervousness, hesitancy and unwillingness to interpret in front of the classroom while some learners tend to avoid interpreting activities altogether by remaining passive or refusing to participate in the activities that require interaction in the languages. Since interpretation competency is essential for these learners in their performance in respective disciplines, anxiety has become a severe issue that the translation studies instructors confront on a daily basis. Hence, this study attempts to investigate the causes of language anxiety in the classroom through the perspective of a group of 25 mixed-ability undergraduates learning English as a core subject of their degree program. Special attention is given to the Department of Translation Studies. It is expected that the learners' perception will enable to develop a better understanding on language interpreting anxiety which will be beneficial in developing teaching materials.

### ***Research Problem***

Learners' anxiety in interpreting is a frequent challenge encountered by the translation studies instructors which negatively affects the teaching – learning process.

### ***Objective of the Study***

The main objective of the present study is to investigate the factors affecting the target language interpreting anxiety in the perspective of learners.

### ***Significance of the study***

No any research articles published in Sri Lanka highlighting the interpreting anxiety among the translation studies learners and the techniques or strategies to overcome those anxieties.

### **Materials and Methods**

A group of 25 fourth year undergraduate students following BA in Translation Studies degree program at the University of Jaffna was selected for the study. The participants were a mixed ability group representing 25 districts of the country. Further, their first language is Tamil and they all learn English and Sinhala as core subjects during the first two years of their respective degree program. The curriculum covers essential interpreting lessons and activities with emphasis on the interpretation skills required at an academic setting. The students were given a structured questionnaire to investigate their perspective on interpreting and anxiety in the translation studies classroom. The collected

data were examined to determine the causes of anxiety, the learners' opinion towards interpreting and the factors that increase and reduce anxiety in the classroom.

## **Results and Discussion**

The findings revealed that although the students have been learning English and Tamil for more than 10 years, they have made a little progress in relation to speaking and interpreting. As per the responses of most of the participants, interpreting had not been a prominent skill area in their language curriculum at school. They have had a little exposure to the actual use of language in a communicative setting and they have had a little practice in interpreting. In addition, the students have remarked that they translate English to Tamil solely in the written texts and only a few of them interpret between English to Tamil inside the classroom environment. It is evident that the lack of opportunities to interpret the languages is a problem they encounter in the university setting as well. Even though all the participants admit that they want to improve their interpreting proficiency, 73% of the students claim that they do not enjoy interpreting. Most of these participants have also commented that they feel scared and nervous in addition to forgetting what they want to interpret and not feeling their language proficiency is good enough. These responses signify that although the students are well aware of the importance of acquiring fluency in both languages, they are not willing to engage in any of the inside tasks and activities that are intended to develop their interpreting skill. Further, it is evident that they experience a considerable degree of anxiety and apprehension when asked to interpret in front of the classroom. It is vital to bear in mind that the students might naturally experience fear and anxiety to a certain extent especially when interpreting to a large audience. However, their responses to the questionnaire have implied that a variety of language-related problems have also triggered the aforementioned anxiety.

In relation to the language, it was identified that inadequate vocabulary is one of the major reasons contributing to the students' anxiety in interpreting. Majority of the participants in the present study have mentioned that they face difficulty with finding enough words to express source language ideas when interpreting between English and Tamil. Further, many of them were identified to be facing the problem of "getting stuck" while interpreting as they become unable to recall the right expression due to limited vocabulary and structured knowledge. The second cause of anxiety as per the responses of the students was the fear of making mistakes particularly due to the lack of familiarity with the language and culture in both languages. The learners are likely to feel anxious as they might "interpret incorrectly, mispronounce a

word, or simply not interpret fluently in the target language”. Since the learners selected for the study have limited exposure to the language being interpreted in a real-life setting, they were found to be encountering numerous problems related to pronunciation and grammar resulting in lack of confidence to interpret. The state of being “unsure” about the correct usage of language and cultural elements were revealed to be a major obstacle that discourages their interpreting ability.

The third contributing factor towards students’ anxiety was identified as the fear of testing. Based on some of the responses to the questionnaire, when they are aware of the fact that they are being tested on the interpreting ability, the students tend to become anxious as some mistake or poor interpreting performance might lead to loss of marks. As per the findings of the present study, students feel more anxious and threatened when being evaluated on interpreting rather than during a translation activity that involves writing. As a result, they were found to feel stressed resulting in more mistakes and an increased number of instances where they forget the right words to interpret. The present study revealed that the classroom environment and the language instructors are not contributing factors towards anxiety. Also, the participants’ comments have suggested that they are not affected by the peers’ response while interpreting. It can be assumed that as the participants are third year students and they have been exposed to the language learning setting for a period of time, the environment in the classroom is less threatening for them. Also, as they have been learning the language nearly for two years, the students are familiar with the teaching strategies employed in the classroom. In relation to the responses of the peers and the teacher, it was understood that they are familiar with both their classmates and the language teacher. As a result, the responses of both parties were observed to have a less impact on triggering the students’ interpreting anxiety.

Apart from the above learner centered problems, it was identified that certain classroom activities also contribute in increasing or reducing the students’ anxiety. Majority of the students have responded that speaking, presentations and individual speeches are the speaking tasks that mostly result in generating anxiety. It was evident that while the students do not enjoy the activities that allow them little or no time for preparation, the interpreting tasks that require them to stand alone in front of the class are equally anxiety triggering for the students. As per the responses gathered in the present study, it was understood that the students’ performance could be better if they are required to interpret in a less-stressful situation rather than interpreting in front of the classroom.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is evident that the interpreting anxiety is a key factor affecting the proficiency of the learners in the translation studies. Anxiety in interpreting can have an unfavorable effect on language acquisition since it prevents the learners from engaging in sufficient interpreting activities. Therefore, it is required to take relevant measures to support the learners in overcoming their apprehension and creating an atmosphere that might enable them to actively participate in interpreting tasks in their future professions. This target can be achieved by addressing the causes of interpreting anxiety and minimizing the factors that might provoke the students' anxiety when interpreting between the source language and target language.

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