An investigation into difficulties in learning Conference Interpretation encountered by English-majored students at Duy Tan University and strategies to cope with

Nghiên cứu những khó khăn trong quá trình học môn Dịch Hội Nghị của sinh viên chuyên ngữ trường Đại học Duy Tân và đề xuất một số giải pháp

Nguyen Thi Bich Giang[a,b*], Nguyen Thi My Duyen[a,b]
Nguyễn Thị Bích Giang[a,b*], Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Duyên[a,b]

[a]Institute of Linguistics, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, 550000, Vietnam
[a]Viện Ngôn ngữ, Trường Đại học Duy Tân, Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam
[b]Faculty of English, College of Foreign Language, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, 550000, Vietnam
[b]Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Ngoại Ngữ, Đại học Duy Tân, Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam

Abstract

In the era of global integration, interpretation plays a significant role in human communication. More and more international conferences are being held in many different areas; therefore, the demand for human resources interpreters has been increasing, especially English-majored students. They have to be well-trained and have a high level of communication competence in order to become professional conference interpreters. However, English-majored students at Duy Tan University have to usually deal with certain problems while learning Conference Interpretation. This study aims at investigating students' difficulties that often occur in learning Conference Interpretation and give some suggested solutions. Hopefully, the study will help learners find out and overcome their problems in learning this subject.

Keywords: English-majored students; Conference Interpretation; difficulties; solutions

Tóm tắt

Trong thời đại hội nhập toàn cầu, phiên dịch đóng vai trò quan trọng trong giao tiếp của con người. Ngày càng có nhiều hội thảo quốc tế thuộc nhiều lĩnh vực khác nhau được tổ chức; vì vậy nhu cầu nhân lực đối với phiên dịch ngày càng tăng cao, đặc biệt là sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Sinh viên phải được đào tạo bài bản và có năng lực giao tiếp tốt để trở thành phiên dịch hội nghị chuyên nghiệp. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên chuyên ngữ tại trường Đại học Duy Tân thường đối mặt với một số vấn đề khi học môn Phiên Dịch Hội Nghị. Nghiên cứu này nhằm điều tra những khó khăn sinh viên hay gặp phải trong quá trình học và đưa ra một số giải pháp đề xuất. Hy vọng rằng nghiên cứu này sẽ giúp người học tìm ra và khắc phục được những vấn đề khi học tập môn học này.

Từ khóa: Sinh viên chuyên ngữ; Phiên Dịch Hội Nghị; khó khăn; giải pháp.

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[*]Corresponding Author: Nguyen Thi Bich Giang; Institute of Linguistics, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, 550000, Vietnam; Faculty of English, College of Foreign Language, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, 550000, Vietnam
Email: bich_giang20@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Interpretation is the bridge for various nations and cultures to exchange their languages in multinational conferences. To become professional conference interpreters, they have to be fluent in languages and to be able to think quickly and speak clearly to interpret accurately. As English-majored students (students specialize in English for Interpretation and Translation) at Duy Tan University, we have had to learn a lot of subjects related to Interpretation such as Interpretation 1, Interpretation 2, News Interpretation, etc.; therefore, we can directly understand why interpreting is considered a hard task. All of these subjects seem quite difficult for learners though they may have professional skills in interpreting, especially in Conference Interpretation. During the process of learning this subject, students usually encounter difficulties as it entails more efforts and different skills in both consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation. With an aim of improving Conference Interpretation performance and the quality of teaching and learning, this research will discuss students' difficulties and suggest several possible solutions.

This study also tries to answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties do students usually encounter while learning Conference Interpretation?

2. What are the reasons standing behind such difficulties?

3. What suggestions can be offered to help students overcome such difficulties?

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. A review of previous studies related to the problem under investigation

Many previous studies have been conducted to study aspects of interpretation, such as processing overview, interpretation strategies, and obstacles when doing interpretation in many situations. However, after a certain period of time reviewing some former articles such as the research of Marta Arumi Ribas (2012), Debra Russell (2005), Franz (2004), Luong Ngoc Phuong (2019), Pham Hong Hanh (2006), and related studies of interpretation, I found that there are still some problems that the previous researches did not go into research. This is about common difficulties when learning Conference Interpretation for students who are in the process of training to become Conference Interpretation interpreters in the future. The majority of previous works have mentioned this topic, but in a larger category, and are more academic and professional. While in the environment of university training, especially at Duy Tan University, students do not have much experience; therefore, there has been a need for an investigation into difficulties in learning Conference Interpretation encountered by English-majored students at Duy Tan University and strategies to cope with. Since there are a limited number of specific researches about this field, it is a suitable context for me to conduct this study.

1.2.2. Theoretical background

1.2.2.1. Conference Interpreting

In reality, a possible scenario can happen for two people who may be politicians, businessmen or women, trade unionists or scientists sitting in a room together and speaking different languages.

They would like to discuss their work; however, none of them understands the other's language well enough to have a successful conversation. Therefore, they need someone else, who speaks both languages, to explain what each is saying in turn. That person is an interpreter. An interpreter must be a bridge to fill in the cultural and conceptual gaps separating the participants in a meeting.

Conference interpreters must be able to reproduce the original speech accurately and faithfully. Deviation from the original text is permitted only if it aids the audience's comprehension of the speaker's meaning. It should in no way involve the interpreter's adding their own opinions to that of the speaker. This work requires the conference interpreter to be able to do this work in two modes, consecutive interpretation, and simultaneous interpretation. [6, P.3,4,5]

1.2.2.2. Techniques in Conference Interpreting

1.2.2.2.1. Active Listening

The term "Active listening" was first mentioned by Carl Rogers and Richard Farson [2] in 1957 in a paper with the same name (reprinted in 1987 in "Communicating in Business Today"). In the article, they wrote: "Active listening is an important way to bring about changes in people. Despite the popular notion that listening is a passive approach, clinical and research evidence clearly shows that sensitive listening is a most effective agent for individual personality change and group development." [2, P.1]

1.2.2.2.2. Public Speaking

Public speaking is also a key skill to be practiced, as according to Herbert: "A good simultaneously is even harder. The reason is, an interpreter has to stay calm so as to hear and process what is said then find suitable equivalents, arrange the words in grammatically structured utterances to convey the message. An interpreter can benefit from speech-conducting skills and nervousness management in public. In fact, interpreters have to face many situations and they must be trained public speakers" [5]. Public speaking is very stressful in itself but dealing with interpreting and speaking people with different

backgrounds, a different understanding of the language exchange.

1.2.2.2.3. Memorizing

Memory is, one of the most crucial factors that affect language interpretation, "a skillful interpreter is expected to have a powerful memory", according to Mahmoodzadeh [7]. Greater memory capacity allows the interpreter to retrieve, and store more information for processing.

There are two main types of memory, short-term and long-term. Short-term memory is the contemporary central processing unit to retrieve provisional information from the speaker for later processing. Long-term memory allows the information to be held, not just for seconds but maybe for days, months.

1.2.2.2.4. Note-taking

During the interpreting process, memory and notes should be both used. However, memory is more crucial to the interpreter and notes can be certain support. Note-taking is very useful for consecutive interpretation since it helps to improve concentration and prevents the listener from being distracted by surrounding factors. Besides, notes are helpful to keep information due to the fact that short-term memory only stores details for a limited amount of time. By noting down some special information such as numbers, proper names, special terms, etc. Notes enable the interpreter to re-construct the idea for translation.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research methods

Throughout the study, qualitative, quantitative, and analytical approaches were used as the main research methods. The data was collected qualitatively and then quantitatively to identify the difficulties faced by English-majoring students when studying

Conference Interpretation. For final discussions and conclusions, the data were once again analyzed and evaluated statistically, qualitatively, and quantitatively.

2.2. Research procedures

➢ Choosing the topic to investigate by careful examination of previous research.

➢ Designing questionnaires answered by English-majored students and Conference Interpreting lecturers.

The questions mainly focus on students' difficulties in learning Conference Interpretation and suggested solutions. The questionnaire is designed based on our practical experience when learning Conference Interpreting, the lecturer's supports, and other related references.

➢ Hand-delivering questionnaires to students and teachers.

One hundred and thirty-one students chosen as subjects were given 20 minutes to consider and answer twenty-four questions. Actually, one hundred and thirty-one questionnaires were delivered but only one hundred of them are collected. On each copy of the survey, there is a clear introduction to the purpose and a simple instruction about how to respond to questions. The sample questionnaires are available in the Appendix 1 at the end of the study.

➢ Directly interviewing English-majored students and Conference Interpretation lectures.

➢ Observing students' interpretation performance during the process of learning this subject.

➢ Collecting and evaluating the data to find out students' problems and give several solutions.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Findings and discussion on the difficulties in teaching Conference Interpreting for lecturers at Duy Tan University

At Duy Tan University, the number of Conference Interpretation lecturers is limited, for this reason, their difficulties are quite similar. After collecting data from surveyed teachers, I got several results as follows:

- The classrooms are not equipped with modern facilities in teaching Conference Interpretation as labs, high-quality speakers, etc.

- Lecturers are not able to control a big class.

- Class hours are not enough for each student to practice.

- Teaching materials are not updated frequently.

- Lecturers have not had chances to experience in this field and from teachers teaching the same subject.

- Lecturers have not had opportunities to take training courses.

Studies show that school facilities have an impact on the overall school experience of students and teachers. However, at Duy Tan University, the teaching and learning facilities for Conference Interpretation are inadequate as labs, high-quality speakers, headphones, etc. Thus, this cannot ensure the quality of teaching and learning this subject at the best level. Then, the class size of Conference Interpretation is still large with more than 40 students per class. The large size classes have an adverse impact on the quality of teaching and learning. With large classes, teachers are not able to control the class. They have less opportunity to give individual attention or remembering all students' names. Also, learning in a large class negatively impacts on the students' performance. Due to the large number of students, teachers do not have enough time for each student to practice and pay attention to weaker students. Moreover, in large classes, students are more likely to skip classes. Additionally, the teaching materials are not

updated frequently. The material has been compiled for a long time and without being renewed. This can make teachers feel bored due to its old contents and format, and at the same time, they lack teaching resources to design interesting lessons. Finally, lecturers do not have chances to take part in training courses to experience to experience in this field. This is an important part in their teaching process due to the fact that joining in training courses or seminars

helps teachers not enhance their capacity but improve their teaching methods as well.

3.2. Findings and discussion on the difficulties in learning Conference Interpreting for English-majored students at Duy Tan University

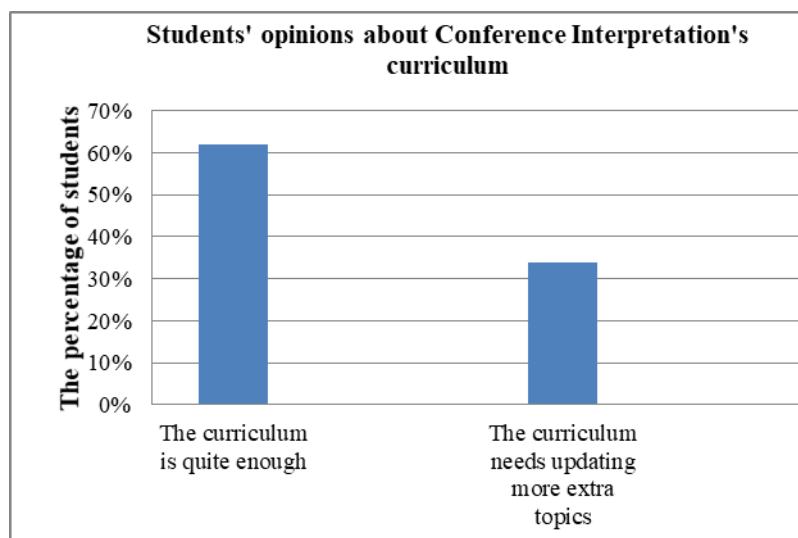*3.2.1. Problems of the Conference Interpretation's curriculum and the course duration*

Chart 3.1. Students' opinions about the Conference Interpretation curriculum

When being asked whether the subjects of the curriculum were suitable and adequate or not, more than 60% of the students answered "Yes. It's quite enough", and the remaining students answered "Yes. However, it needs updating more extra topics". There were different opinions among students. The students claimed that the curriculum was quite enough since it covered all the basic and essential topics, in accordance with their academic competence. Furthermore, besides studying this subject, they were learning other subjects at the same time, so they would feel depressed and stressed if this subject consisted of a lot of lessons. In contrast, the students wanted the course to be updated

with more extra topics due to the fact that these topics had appeared in some previous interpretation subjects, so they felt quite bored and required further topics in order that their class would be more interesting and effective. However, according to the survey for lecturers, they said that students were not still acquainted with different areas of the curriculum. The students ought to continue focusing on all topics of this subject though they had learned several topics in other subjects before. In conclusion, the present curriculum is sufficient and suitable, and it, if necessary, can be updated more extra topics to give great excitement among students during their learning process.

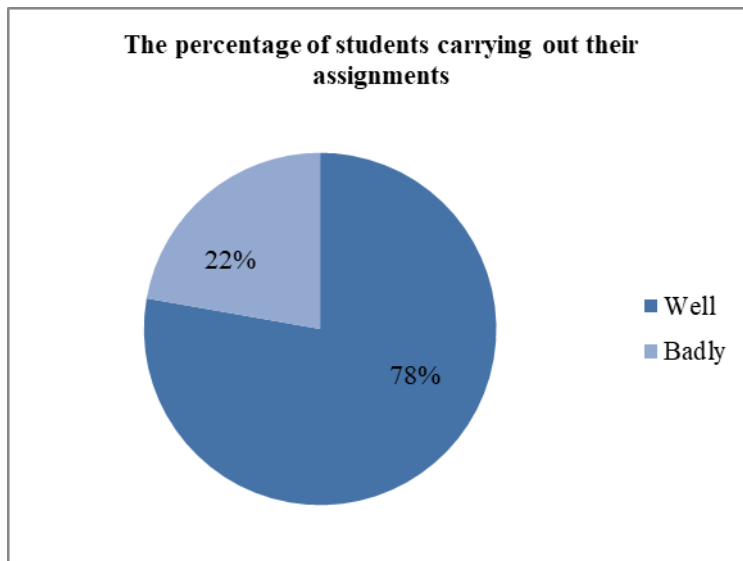*3.2.2. Problems of students' practice in the class*

Chart 3.2. The percentage of students carrying out their assignments well
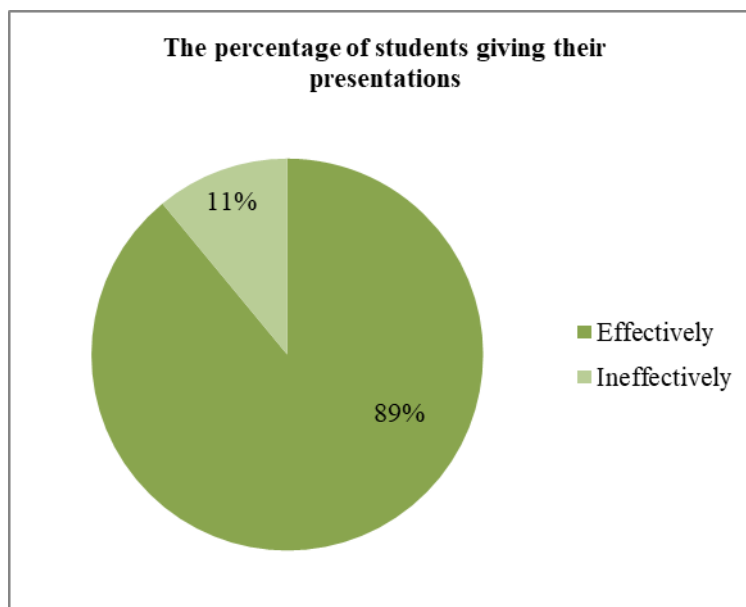

Chart 3.3. The percentage of students giving their presentation effectively

During the process of learning, nearly 100% of students agreed that teachers gave various interpretation tasks to them. There were approximately 80% of students carrying out their assignments well, and the percentage of students giving their presentations effectively accounted for nearly 90%. It was because lecturers fully provided the required theoretical foundational knowledge of Conference Interpretation and methods and strategies of this subject for students before they began practicing. However, students who performed their assignments ineffectively could have difficulties in their listening skills and their poorly prepared presentations. After each group's presentation, teachers always gave their comments to students, and most of them said that lecturers' feedback was really helpful.

3.2.3. Students' problems during the process of learning Conference Interpretation

Although the percentage of students carrying out their assignments well and the percentage of students giving their presentation effectively made up 80% and 90% respectively, students still encountered difficulties when applying learnt theory into classroom practice in the process of learning Conference Interpretation. Their problems included interpreting from Vietnamese to English, interpreting from English to Vietnamese, and both interpreting from Vietnamese to English and interpreting from English to Vietnamese. According to the survey findings in chart 4.4, about 20% of students had troubles with interpreting from English to Vietnamese, over 10% of learners dealt with interpreting from Vietnamese to English, and the remaining 66% of students had difficulties in interpreting from English to Vietnamese and vice versa.
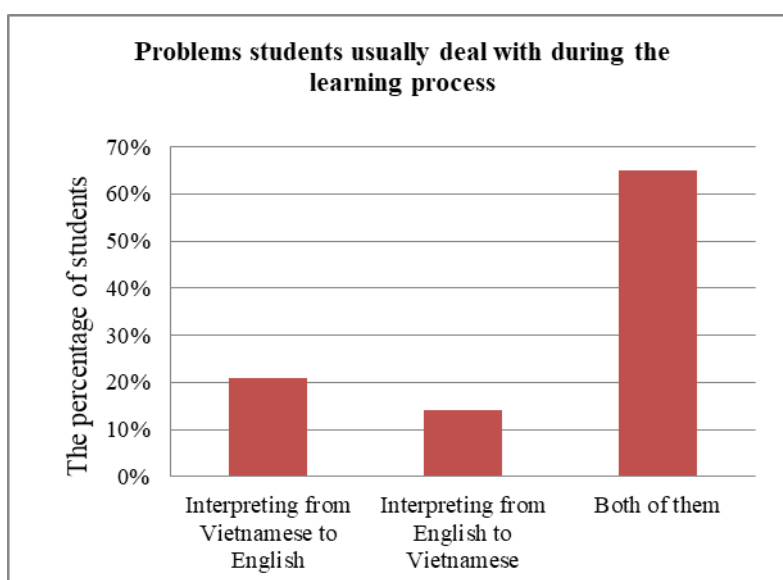

Chart 3.4. The percentage of students having problem with interpreting from Vietnamese to English and vice versa

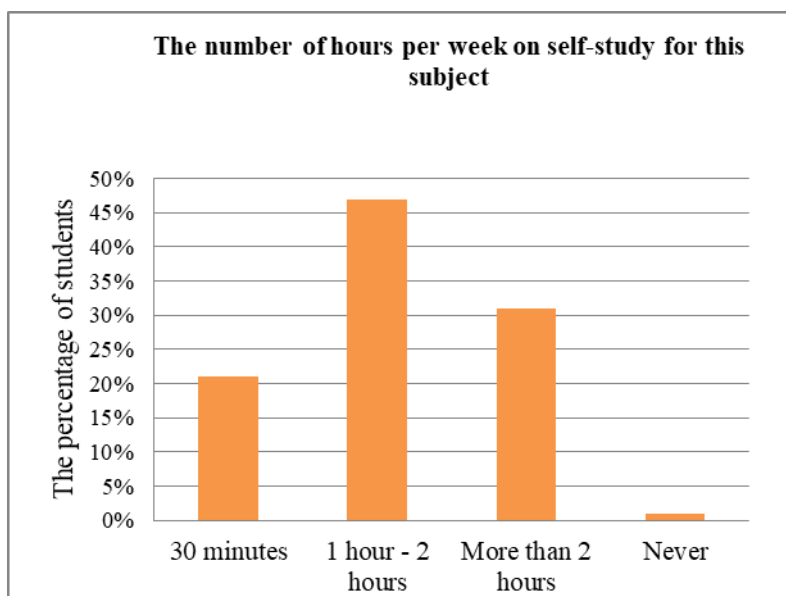### 3.2.2.1. Problems of students' self-study

Chart 3.5. Students' frequency of practicing Conference Interpretation at home

The survey results show that 31% of students said that they spent "more than 2 hours" practicing Conference Interpreting, 47% "1 hour - 2 hours"; however, 21% "30 minutes" and 1% of students "never" had the habit of practicing it at home. The number of hours that students spent on their self-study was quite limited. When being interviewed what the reasons were, they said that they had to learn other subjects while learning Conference Interpretation, and they needed to meet each subject's different requirements; therefore, they could not solely focus on practicing Conference Interpretation. Another reason was that most of the students were doing part-time jobs after school, so they didn't have much free time to study this subject at home. Furthermore, some students believed that several topics of this subject were familiar to them, so they were quite subjective and confident in their own knowledge and extend new knowledge by themselves. In short, without much self-practicing, students could not approach any improvement or good results in Conference Interpretation.

3.2.2.2. Factors causing difficulties for students in learning interpretation
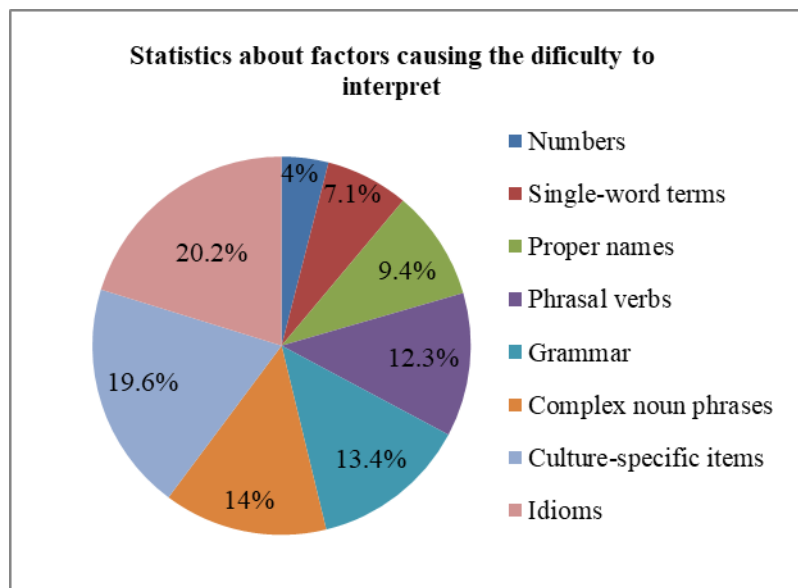

Chart 3.6. Statistics about factors causing the difficulty to interpret

The findings collected in chart 4.6 indicated that 20.2% of students chose *idioms* and 19.6% chose *culture-specific items* as the most serious barriers when interpreting, and only 4% of students experienced some difficulties with *numbers.* They sometimes met an unfamiliar expression which may cause them to stop and consider the meaning of that word, and they may forget the next section of the speech. As a result, they suffered from incomplete comprehension. There was no considerable difference among typical kinds of information: *complex noun phrases, grammar, phrasal verbs, proper names* and *single-word terms* which accounted for 14%, 13.4%, 12.3%, 9.4% and 7.1% respectively.

In fact, source-language speeches in the real context contain one (or more) of these information types, especially *idioms* and *culture-specific items* when mentioned a specific major or aspect. Therefore, it is very important for interpreters to be able to solve different types of language problems.

3.2.2.3. Problems making students unclearly understand the speaker when interpreting

Table 3.1. Statistics about problems from the learners

Problems	%
Lack of knowledge	24.5%
Wrong pronunciation	24.1%
Ineffective note-taking skills	17.1%
Slow-reacting speed	13.1%
Unpleasant accents of the speakers	11.8%
Low level of concentration	9.4%

The table above demonstrates that the primary issues students have are *the lack of knowledge* and *their mispronunciation*. There were nearly 25% of the students having troubles with these problems. Students lack knowledge since there are so many areas in Conference Interpretation, and each of them contains a vast amount of specialized vocabulary; therefore, it is impossible for students to have a broad understanding of all of them. Moreover, *pronouncing incorrectly* seriously affects students' listening. All surveyed lecturers complained that one of the most popular mistakes among the students was wrong pronunciation. They tend to concentrate too much on meanings of words and pay less attention to their articulation. Thus, they cannot identify or recognize the key words or the content words of the listening tasks.

When asking about their experience in *note-taking*, I was so surprised that there are more than 17% of all investigated students taking notes ineffectively. Being asked what prevents them from taking good notes, those students said that they had problems with the speakers' speed, the time limit of taking notes, and their memory before delivering interpreting. Due to lack of knowledge and their ineffective note-taking skills, 13.1% of students have *slow reactions* during their performance.

The table also illustrates that *unpleasant accents* cause difficulties to students in listening comprehension. Approximately 12% of the students confront this kind of problem. Another nearly ten percent of students cope with their *concentration*.

3.2.2.4. Problems from the classroom facilities

Sometimes the difficulties not only came from the kinds of message, listeners or speakers but the surrounding environment as well. Background noise on the recording, as well as ambient noise, might make students lose their focus during the listening.

4. Conclusion

The research aimed at finding out what the most difficult factors in learning Conference Interpretation encountered by English-majored students. Idioms and culture-specific items turn out to be the most challenging items for learners as idioms because their meanings are unpredictable and specific to a certain culture. Besides, lack of knowledge, wrong pronunciation, ineffective note-taking skills are primary issues students deal with during the

process of learning. In order to improve the quality of learning and help them overcome their problems, several below solutions are suggested as follows:

4.1. General suggestions for students' difficulties in learning Conference Interpreting

4.1.1. Enriching knowledge and update new information

The first and important thing students should do is to increase their practice time. Whenever they have spare time, they should develop their vocabulary by themselves. Additionally, students need to accustom the habit of searching and updating information in English. Also, lecturers should provide students with common terminologies during the process of learning as in some situations they may not be included in dictionaries.

4.1.2. Improving the pronunciation

Besides that, they have to improve their pronunciation by themselves and perform more interpretation tasks to get familiar with time pressure and the speed and accents of the speaker, and at the same time, exercise their memory. By articulating correctly, students can be better at listening skills. At the same time, it is important for learners to practice more in liaisons and elisions in order that they can get used to the acoustic form of rapid natural speech.

4.1.3. Taking notes effectively

When students are faced with a lengthy speech, note-taking seems to be the most useful skill. This will help students to remember the key words or the precise information. To do this requirement effectively, using abbreviations and symbols is very helpful. Besides, students can develop their own characters or symbols.

4.1.4. Being confident and keep calm

Before beginning interpreting tasks, students should be in a comfortable and confident mood.

This not only reflects conference interpreters' professional images but also helps them work more effectively.

4.2. General suggestions for lecturers' problems in the process of teaching

4.2.1. Improving the classroom facilities

Firstly, the Conference Interpretation classes have to be equipped with modern teaching and learning facilities. The specialized laboratory room is the best place for students to study Conference Interpretation. This somehow will bring out the better results, for the noise outside cannot get through the lab room.

4.2.2. Limiting the number of students

Secondly, the number of students should be reduced in each class. With smaller size class, teachers can get to know each student as an individual, working with them to enhance their strengths and improve their weaknesses.

4.2.3. Updating teaching materials regularly and providing out-of-class activities

Textbooks and other learning and teaching materials should be updated to enhance the quality of teaching. Also, lecturers should consult with the other departments about organizing out-of –class activities to give chances for students to experience different environments and real-life situations.

4.2.4. Giving chances for lecturers to join in training courses

By providing more training courses for teachers, they can contact professional interpreters to update their teaching methods and techniques when solving various interpretation problems, and at the same time, they can extend the networking among other Conference Interpretation instructors to exchange knowledge.

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