

# USER EXPECTATION SURVEYS: QUESTIONING FINDINGS AND DRAWING LESSONS FOR INTERPRETER TRAINING

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## Abstract

Interpreting literature, especially conference interpreting literature, often emphasizes that a better understanding of user expectations and real interpreting environments is vital for the profession. Within the studies conducted so far, user expectations have generally been studied with the questionnaire method. As questionnaires do not allow the respondents to express their own answers, most questionnaire results are obtained by the user selecting the best available choice amongst a number of alternatives predetermined by the researcher. This, in turn, renders the choices of the researcher most determinant. Furthermore, although the importance of understanding user expectations for the profession are often stressed, the way user expectations can be integrated to interpreting curricula remains undiscussed. This article focuses on the results of a user expectation survey conducted by the interview method rather than a questionnaire and explores ways the views and expectations of the user can be integrated into training curricula.

**Keywords:** Conference interpreting, user expectations, questionnaire, interview, training.

## Özet

Sözlü çeviri ve özellikle konferans çevirmenliği yazınında kullanıcı beklentilerinin ve gerçek çeviri ortamlarının daha iyi anlaşılmasının meslek açısından önemli olduğu sıkça vurgulanmaktadır. Bugüne kadar yapılan çalışmalarda kullanıcı beklentileri büyük oranda anket yöntemiyle araştırılmıştır. Anketler, yanıtlayanların kendi cevaplarını ifade etmesine imkan vermediğinden, anket sonuçlarının çoğu araştırmacının önceden belirlediği yanıtlardan birinin kullanıcı tarafından seçilmesiyle elde edilmiştir. Bu durum araştırmacının seçimlerini çok belirleyici hale getirmiştir. Ayrıca bu konuların meslek için önemi vurgulansa da, eğitim programlarında nasıl ele alınacakları neredeyse hiç tartışılmamıştır. Bu makalede, anket yerine kullanıcılarla birebir mülakat yöntemiyle yapılmış bir beklenti çalışmasının sonuçlarına değinilmekte ve kullanıcı beklentilerini eğitim programlarına entegre etme konusunda bazı öneriler getirilmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Konferans çevirmenliği, kullanıcı beklentileri, anket, mülakat, eğitim.

## Introduction

Many of us who are involved in interpreter training would agree on the importance of training interpreters who can rise to the challenge of satisfying end users' needs and expectations in a variety of settings.

For years, professional organizations such as AIIC have underlined the importance of using professional interpreters as trainers and examiners. AIIC's Training Committee has underscored that professional interpreters are best equipped to assess the needs of the market and to transfer their knowledge of real-life conditions to budding interpreters ([www.aiic.net/community/print/default.cfm/page60](http://www.aiic.net/community/print/default.cfm/page60)).

Thus, we seem to take for granted that professional interpreter trainers will convey the expectations of real-life interpreting situations to the students. However, we do that without

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really questioning whether we know who our customers are, what they expect from simultaneous conference interpreting (SI) and critically reviewing our training curricula to allow for such an exchange.

In this paper, I first take a brief look at some of the user expectation surveys to date and compare and contrast their findings with the results of an interview-based survey I conducted. I then discuss the implications of my findings regarding user profiles and expectations on interpreter training, presenting some preliminary proposals on incorporating knowledge of social contexts, expectations and demands to interpreter training programs.

### **A Review of Previous Research on User Expectations**

In Interpreting Research, the needs and expectations of the users of SI have been explored by around a dozen small- to medium-scale user surveys carried out by individual researchers and one large-scale survey commissioned by AIIC.

In SI Research, the first calls for taking a closer look at the views and expectations of users came quite early. In 1983, Catherine Stenzl drew attention to the fact that, except for Gerver's (1972) survey on expectations from SI and consecutive interpreting, "we have only anecdotal and impressionistic indications on what conference delegates expect from interpreters and how satisfied they are with the service they receive" (Stenzl 1983: 31).

In 1986, Hildegund Bühler devised a questionnaire with 16 linguistic (semantic) and extra-linguistic (pragmatic) criteria for the evaluation of conference interpretation and interpreters. She carried out her survey with 41 AIIC interpreters and 6 members of the Admissions Committee. Although Bühler made use of pre-determined quality criteria, she was quite sensitive regarding 'validity' and underlined that questionnaires needed to be supplemented with interviews to check for possible misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the criteria by individual respondents (Bühler 1986: 234).

In 1989, Ingrid Kurz took eight criteria from Bühler's survey and devised a modified bilingual questionnaire. While adopting her criteria, Kurz was skeptical of Bühler's assumption that one could explore the expectations of users from a questionnaire given to interpreters alone and, hence, administered her questionnaire to conference delegates (Kurz 1989, 1993).

Her findings from three conferences and the results of Bühler's survey suggested that users attached the greatest significance to 'sense consistency with the original message', followed by 'logical cohesion of the utterance', 'correct terminology', 'completeness of interpretation', 'fluency of delivery', 'correct grammatical usage', 'pleasant voice' and, finally, 'native accent' (Kurz 1989, 1993). She saw the importance attached to 'sense consistency' as a confirmation of Seleskovitch's 'theory of sense' (Kurz 1996: 61).

In 1990, Daniel Gile distributed a bilingual questionnaire in a conference on ophthalmology, asking users to rate the general quality of interpretation, linguistic output quality, terminological usage, fidelity, quality of voice and delivery. He also allowed the participants to comment on the interpretation (Gile 1990).

In 1994, Franz Pöchhacker published the results of a bilingual questionnaire from a 3-day conference, asking the delegates to rate the 'overall impression', 'quality of verbal expression', 'mastery of technical language', 'voice quality and accent', and 'rhythm and intonation'. His analysis suggested that 'quality of verbal expression' was deemed most important by users, followed by 'mastery of technical language' and the prosodic features of SI output such as voice quality, rhythm, intonation. (Pöchhacker 1994).

In 1995, Anna-Riitta Vuorikoski published the results of her MA thesis, which – by means of field observations, questionnaires and supplementary interviews - evaluated the views of five seminar audiences on the usefulness and quality of the SI service. In her questionnaire, Vuorikoski used Bühler’s criteria as modified by Kurz, but made one interesting change: She omitted the criteria of ‘sense consistency with the original message’, which was rated as the main expectation in Bühler’s and Kurz’s surveys, for she thought it was self-evident. Vuorikoski contended that, “listeners of SI expect professional interpreters to perform in such a way that sense consistency with the original message is guaranteed” (Vuorikoski 1995: 172). With ‘sense consistency’ taken for granted by the researcher as the main expectation, the respondents ranked ‘informed delivery’ as their main expectation. They also relied on the same criteria in assessing actual SI performance.

In contrast to Kurz, who argued that a specific ‘recipient group’ would have common expectations, Vuorikoski underlined the importance of the ‘individual user’. She suggested that individual expectations could differ greatly, even among the members of the same audience and emphasized that audience expectations could vary greatly from one meeting to the other, even when the topic and interpreters were the same. She also contended that most of her respondents had a rather functional view of SI, which led them to use SI according to their immediate needs.

In 1995, Lorella Cattaruzza and Gabriele Mack published the results of their user survey based on Vuorikoski’s quality criteria. Accordingly, when asked to judge an SI performance on whether it was ‘informed’, ‘easy to follow’, ‘accurate’, ‘pleasant speech rhythm’, ‘fluent’, and ‘correct terminology’, Italian delegates attributed the greatest importance to ‘correct terminology’, followed by an ‘informed delivery’ (Cattaruzza and Mack 1995).

Although Cattaruzza and Mack’s survey was based on a structured questionnaire where users were asked to rate quality criteria, the researchers raised “reasonable doubt” on a number of critical issues, especially with regard to the validity of the quality criteria used in user surveys. Their simple but striking question “Are we sure we were all talking about the same thing?” clearly revealed their doubts regarding the possibility of a ‘common’ understanding of quality criteria by all parties (ibid: 47).

In the same year, AIIC published the results of the largest user survey to date (201 interviews at 84 events) which relied on highly structured oral interviews based on a questionnaire. According to the results, ‘faithfulness to the original’ was the main expectation ‘spontaneously voiced’ by the users (Moser 1995: B-4).

In 1998, Yanez and Weller published the results of a user survey they carried out in Mexico. Their ten point questionnaire suggested that ‘correct terminology’ seemed to be the overriding concern of the participants with more importance attached to linguistic than paralinguistic criteria (Yanez and Weller 1998).

Converging with Vuorikoski, they claimed that, “the audience using the interpretation services is not necessarily one uniform body” and underlined that even members of a single audience tended to have highly individual expectations from SI (ibid: 79)

### **Exploring user profiles and expectations at a philosophy conference with semi-structured interviews**

Against this background and in what follows, I will discuss the results of semi-structured interviews held with users of conference interpreting at a two-day conference on politics and philosophy. My corpus consists of interviews with 13 users (6 men and 7 women), who

correspond to around two-thirds of the total number of users during the conference. Given the difficulty of carrying out on-site interviews during a conference, the selection of the interviewees has been constrained by the time and convenience factor (i.e., I have not managed to interview all users due to time constraints and the sample only consists those I could approach during the coffee breaks. None of the users I approached refused to take part in the study.

All of the questions in the interview were formulated as open-ended questions in an attempt to receive spontaneous responses from the users:

- What is your area of interest? How is that related to your participation at this conference?
- Have you listened to SI before?
- How dependent were you on SI in listening to the speeches?
- As far as you have listened to it, what do you think about the SI at this conference? What did you like or dislike about it?
- What kind of a performance do you expect from the interpreters in this conference?
- Can you elaborate on your expectation? What exactly do you mean when you say you want the interpreter to (*'expectation'*)?

## **Discussion of the findings**

### ***User Profile***

In contrast to community, sign language or court interpreting, simultaneous conference interpreting is generally depicted as taking place in settings where participants come from homogeneous backgrounds and enjoy equal access to power.

As the conference was focused on politics and philosophy, took place in the campus of a university and all of the speakers were academics, I initially assumed that it would host a relatively 'homogeneous' group of participants, mostly consisting of scholars and students.

Conference typologies also supported my initial assumption. For instance, according to Pöchhacker's typology, this conference was most akin to a 'Fachkongress' which tends to display a moderate degree of structuredness, low degree of information flow, high degree of group homogeneity and high degree of information load and visual aid (Pöchhacker 1994: 51).

In my case, the typology proved correct regarding information flow, load of information, and degree of structuredness. However, it proved quite wrong with regard to the homogeneity of the audience. Among the users I interviewed, there was one writer, one publisher, one assistant professor from the Faculty of Law of another university, six students from various departments (law, environment, philosophy, cinema and television), one respondent who called himself a 'political activist', one respondent who said she was just interested in philosophy and two others who said they were members of Mevlana Kardeslik Cemiyeti – a spiritual community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The working languages of the conference were English and Turkish. Simultaneous interpretation between these languages was available all the time. Furthermore, there was one session with French-Turkish interpretation. During this session, there was no interpretation into English.

Thus, my findings coincided with Vuorikoski's (1998), indicating that 'homogeneity' of the audience could not be taken for granted.

### *Use of Simultaneous Interpreting*

My interviews pointed at the fuzziness in the way users benefited from simultaneous interpretation: All of my respondents said they knew some English. Three said their English was "insufficient" to follow the floor. One said he could follow the floor most of time and put the headset on, "just out of curiosity". Another respondent said she had listened to SI in a previous session, but would have understood the discussions better had she listened to them directly. All of the others said they shifted between the floor and SI depending on the speaker. Two respondents, who said they shifted between the floor and SI, also mentioned following the speakers' texts which had been distributed earlier. These findings also complied with results from previous surveys, which suggested that conferences hosted different categories of listeners who shifted from one mode of listening to another in the same meeting (Moser 1995; Vuorikoski 1998).

### *Expectations from and Assessments of SI*

When asked to say what they expected from the interpreters at that conference, users spontaneously referred to two main expectations: Eight of them (R1,3,5,7,8,9,10,11) said they expected the interpreters to be "familiar with the topic and/or concepts", while seven (R4,5,7,8,9,10,13 – some are overlapping) expected the interpreters to focus on "conveying the meaning in the original".

These findings were also in line with the findings of a number of previous surveys (Kurz 1989, 1993; Cattaruzza and Mack 1995; Moser 1995)

What I found most interesting, however, were the answers I received when I asked users to expand on what exactly they meant by "familiarity with the topic and/or concepts" and "fidelity to the original meaning". Everything started looking fuzzy once respondents started telling their understanding of seemingly generic criteria.

For instance, R7, who defined himself as a political activist and expected the interpreters to "convey the meaning of the original speech", believed that the meaning of the original speech could only be conveyed by rendering the "feeling behind the concepts". He said, "They are talking about such concepts here that you have to live them and feel them. The interpreters have to feel the meanings of the concepts to reflect those on to you".

However, For R13 and 14, who were members of a spiritual community, "conveying the meaning in the original" was all about conveying the "spiritual world of the philosopher". R13 contended, "What matters most is conveying the meaning, that is, the spiritual world of the philosopher".

R4 and R8, who said they expected the interpreter to "render the original meaning and not the words", thought the 'original meaning' resided in a "summary of the original speech". R8 said in conferences of this kind, the focus was always on a few ideas and it did not matter if the interpreter skipped some parts when summarizing because those few ideas would surely be repeated later on.

In complete contrast to R4 and R8, some respondents were firmly convinced that “rendering the meaning in the original” was all about correctly transferring terms and concepts. They believed the interpreter had to be very exact about rendering the original wording. R10, for instance, said, “philosophy is always characterized by a plurality of meanings and options”. She believed it was the duty of the interpreter to “choose the correct correspondents for the terms in Turkish”. Similarly, R9 believed that the meaning in the original could only be transferred with a correct rendering of the terms, arguing that, “the whole meaning changes with the way the terms are interpreted”.

In fact, some respondents were openly critical of the interpreters for “missing many sentences and not catching up” (R10) “missing important nuances” (R2) and “skipping critical terms” (R3). Here is what R3 had to say:

“The whole discussion was on the philosopher’s terms and concepts. For instance, [Speaker X] used the word ‘a priori’ (...) That term was very important in that paper. And when they miss concepts, the meaning in the interpretation becomes disconnected. Moreover, they don’t see what they miss. When they miss a concept, they wait, say um... uh...but when the concepts are gone you lose the whole meaning. Especially in this conference, they should be careful about not skipping concepts.”

There was also little consensus among the respondents on what constituted ‘correct’ and/or ‘familiar’ terminology. This came out very clearly in the way users assessed actual SI performance. While R10 said he preferred New Turkish concepts and terms, R 9 thought “those new coinages hung in the air”. R5 also thought old terms (usually derived from Arabic or Persian) sounded more “familiar” than New Turkish terms.

Two respondents (R6, R9) were critical of the interpreters for trying to interpret German concepts into Turkish and another respondent (R6) was really annoyed that the interpreters had used a Turkish word for ‘Ereignis’. He contended, “Not every term but important ones like ‘Ereignis’ should be kept in the original language”. Naturally, he did not problematize how the interpreters were to distinguish between ‘important’ and ‘unimportant’ terms in a conference full of German references.

R 10 was disappointed because the interpreters had not resorted to the Latin versions of the concepts when translating German words into Turkish. R 11, on the other hand, believed interpreting German concepts into Turkish was the correct choice because it “helped to improve thinking in Turkish”.

There were also differences in assessing other aspects of the interpreters’ performance. R8, who was very satisfied with the interpretation, said, “the sentences were grammatical and the interpreter sounded relaxed when talking”, but thought that was because the interpreters were “either reading from the texts or making use of them”. In complete contrast, R2 thought that the interpretation carried the flaws of a “spontaneous” delivery, which she found inexcusable “given the fact” that the interpreters had the texts to work on before the conference. She was most disturbed by the “ungrammatical sentences which did not fit into the Turkish sentence structure”.

R7 had complaints regarding the “tempo of the interpretation with all the ups and downs, prolonged sounds, abnormal slowness at times and occasional pauses”, whereas R5 thought just the opposite and believed that “the voice and intonation of the speakers were at times unattractive and the interpretation made it bearable”. R4, on the other hand, believed that the interpreters could have been more “entertaining”. Drawing attention to the difficulties

of one of the speakers, R4 said, “if the interpreter could play a bit on the speaker’s delivery, it would have added some color”.

To sum up, firstly, semi-structured interviews with users of SI at a philosophy conference suggest that ‘homogeneity’ of the users cannot be taken for granted even in conferences, which initially foster that impression. Secondly, they point at the complexity of the way users make use of SI, suggesting that many users tend to shift back and forth between the floor and SI according to their immediate needs. Thirdly, they hint at the fact that there is not a common and objective understanding regarding quality criteria and, fourthly, that users seem to perceive quality criteria as intertwined constructs with fuzzy borders.

Going back to Cattaruzza and Mack’s provocative question, the findings of this study suggest that we are not necessarily “talking about the same thing”, even when we seemingly refer to the ‘same’ criteria.

### **Implications for Interpreter Training?**

If simultaneous interpreters have to function and survive amidst complex and fuzzy network of relations, demands and expectations with little of their task pre-defined and much subject to *negotiation* on site, it is probably important to question whether and how our current training programs respond to this need.

Most training programs in CI place great importance on providing students with practice hours. The European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI) which aims to develop and implement ‘best practices in CI training’, for instance, advises and requires its member programs to devote a majority of their time to interpreting practice ([www.emcinterpreting.org](http://www.emcinterpreting.org)).

The curricula of member schools indicate that most schools offer these practice sessions in their premises. The need to supply students with speeches tends to be covered by live speeches made by the interpreter trainers and/or invited speakers. Some institutions also organise mock conferences. Those that have videoconferencing equipment, organise multi-nodal mock conferences, thereby exposing the student to new conditions, speakers and assessors. Many make use of the speech repository and the webstreaming of EP’s plenary sessions with their interpretation into 23 languages. However, all of these means are to some extent either virtual or artificial in the context they offer to the student.

As far as curricula suggest, few universities have a regular program of taking students to real conferences to observe actual settings and to work in dummy booths. Member institutions which are located in cities that host an international organisation (IO) seem to be luckier because they usually make internship or study visit agreements with these IOs. The EMCI attempts to cover this ground by organising student visits to the EU institutions where students observe the complexity of relations in an actual setting and work in dummy booths. Though very successful and much appreciated by students and staff alike, these visits last one week and therefore only constitute around 0,5% of the total hours taught in an EMCI member program.

Given that the success rate in the EU accreditation tests is around 25-30%, there seems to be reason enough for all training institutions to question whether the training they provide sufficiently equips the students with the necessary skills and professional conduct required in a wide array of contexts. Naturally training institutions, even those within the EMCI, do not only train for international organisations. However, it is not all that clear whether graduates fulfil the expectations and requirements of the private market or stakeholders either.

In conference interpreting, deliberate practice in classroom conditions might be the main means of ensuring skill progression in mastering a multi-faceted and complex cognitive skills. However, in order to avoid limiting training to, what Shepard calls, ‘classroom routines’ (2008: 248) only, conference interpreting programs should also attempt to extend the exposure of students to as many real-life interpreting situations as possible. As Shepard succinctly puts it:

“ All too often, mastery appears pat and certain, but does not travel to new situations because students have mastered classroom routines (...)” (ibid).

Especially in today’s complex world, the relationship between truly *mastering* a skill and *using* it in new, real-life situations seems to be growing in significance. In the age of ‘info-glut’, where the flow of information has reached overpowering levels, knowledge itself is no longer only defined as the depth of what one knows in a specific field, but as the extend of interconnections one can make between different fields and settings (Luker 2008).

**A proposal** – The response of Boğaziçi University to the need to expose students to real-life events has been to organise a course (“Interpreting in Conference Situations”) that allows students to take part in real-life interpreting events as observers. If there are dummy booths, students also get a chance to work and be observed/assessed by professionals.

In order to give a structure to the process and to encourage them to organise their comments and thoughts, students are asked to keep journals, where they note down their views and observations on the impact of the social context on the performance of interpreters, impact of the interpreters’ choices on the interaction between participants, relations with end users and employers, etc. If students work in dummy booths, they also comment on their experience, performance, what they felt, as well as what they see as their areas of strength and improvement. In that sense, journals allow encourage self-reflection and progress-tracking (for use of journals in education, see Holly 1989, Moon 1999)

Our current experience suggests that such a course nurtures and is very much nurtured by students’ knowledge of theoretical frameworks that provide critical concepts and tools for analysing social contexts and behaviors. The course thus acts as the testing ground for the course on the ‘Theory of Interpreting’ – a compulsory course for EMCI programs- where students make critical readings on ethics, role, agency, ideology and power in interpreting.

Weekly de-briefing sessions allow students to discuss both personal and theoretical issues that arise in conference settings. Class discussions which explore such issues tend to extend students’ awareness of social settings with visible or even very invisible but influensive power differences. They create an awareness regarding the difficult but determining role of the interpreter in unequal and/or ideologically loaded situations. Time is also spent on role plays so as to further reinforce students’ critical awareness of the roles interpreters may (have to) assume.

Although the course can no doubt be improved in different ways, its high ratings throughout the years in students’ assessments indicates that it is covering an area which students consider to be useful. Furthermore, the progress in the way students keep journals also shows that observaton coupled with semi-structured reflection can help students link practice and theory while fostering critical self-reflection.



## Conclusion

User expectation surveys indicate that conference interpreters work and function in complex environments which can host fuzzy expectations and contradictory interests. Under these circumstances, interpreter training programs can and probably should help students make more learned decisions by creating a critical awareness of real-life demands and expectations. Challenging the fallacy that we can *transfer* 'pure skills' and 'universal truths about how to put these skills to practice', especially in classroom settings, can at least allow educators in this area to develop more sophisticated means of coming to terms with the complexity of the task at hand.

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