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## Creating Your Own Interpreting Materials for Use in the Classroom

Fatima Cornwall  
*Boise State University*

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# Creating Your Own Interpreting Materials for Use in the Classroom

Fátima María Cornwall<sup>1</sup>

*Boise State University*

## Abstract

Currently, there are a few excellent manuals and books on the market for practicing the 3 modes of interpretation. However these materials are more appropriate for advanced spoken language students of court interpretation or practicing interpreters interested in polishing their skills. The speed of the recordings (105–165 words per minute) are very challenging for inexperienced but long-term prospective court interpreters. In this article, the author focuses on how to develop activities that require students to create their own scripts and recordings—that is, their own classroom materials—for use in an Introduction to Court Interpretation course. The author also reflects on the problems that arise from having students become authors in the classroom.

Keywords: classroom materials; skill-building and practice; recordings

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: [fcornwal@boisestate.edu](mailto:fcornwal@boisestate.edu)

# Creating Your Own Interpreting Materials for Use in the Classroom

In the United States, according to the rosters on the Idaho Supreme Court's (2011) web page, at the time of writing there are currently 24 certified court interpreters, but only 17 of those are living in Idaho. Every year, many individuals sit for the certification exam but fall short of the coveted 70% score mandated by the Idaho Supreme Court. Many of these talented and assiduous individuals ask me—as one of the in-state facilitators for the Idaho Court Interpreter certification program and a professor at Boise State University—if there are any university courses that could help them polish their linguistic and/or interpreting skills. Unfortunately, there were not any specific classes in interpretation in the state until spring 2008.

In fall 2007, in response to these inquiries and to a growing need in the community, I was awarded a grant by the College of Arts and Sciences at Boise State University for the development of a remedial program preparing students to participate more fully in the state's program, as students in the state program struggled with legal terminology, and this class allowed them to expand their legal vocabulary and extend and polish their basic interpreting skills. In spring 2008, Boise State University offered the subject Spanish 381 (Introduction to Court Interpretation) for the very first time. The class is now offered every spring as part of our regular undergraduate catalog (typically, the state's program starts in mid-May). To enroll, students must have successfully taken English 102 (English Composition), Spanish 303 (Advanced Spanish Conversation and Composition), and Spanish 412 (Advanced Spanish Grammar and Syntax). Most the students are current undergraduates, but the class is open to community members as well, provided that they can demonstrate the equivalent knowledge and skills as those shown by students who took all three required classes. In spring 2011, I had 27 students enrolled: Eleven were native or heritage speakers, and 16 were Spanish-language learners. The student population is usually composed of students who have tried and failed to pass the certification exam or who are planning to initiate the process of becoming certified. Furthermore, I have students who attend simply because of what they call the "practicality" of the vocabulary. "Practical" is the buzzword of choice because many of our elective classes are literature based, and students become very familiar with literary vocabulary. However, there are always a few students who plan to live and work abroad, yet they greatly lack the terminology to carry out daily tasks in a Spanish-speaking country.

The class curriculum focuses on vocabulary development and skill building. Regarding vocabulary, each week students are assigned thematic lists of about 30 words that they must memorize. We start with legal vocabulary, clothing, car parts, and appliances. Later, we cover weapons, drugs, action verbs, insults, and state-of-mind adjectives. To practice the vocabulary, we use activities such as crossword puzzles, word searches, Pictionary, and charades.

One of my main challenges has been finding level-appropriate materials for use in the classroom to practice interpreting skills. During the class-planning stages, I reviewed several books and manuals published on the subject; these publications were accompanied by CDs for oral practice. I was already familiar with Holly Mikkelsen's *The Interpreter's Edge* (1995), considering that the Idaho Supreme Court requires use of the book during their skill-building workshops. Although all books reviewed were excellent and provided ample opportunities for in-class activities and self-study, all of them seemed more appropriate for a more advanced class.

Faced with the dilemma of what materials to use in order to make the class a productive experience to inexperienced but enthusiastic prospective interpreters, I decided to integrate activities that would require students to create their own materials. This strategy would allow us to use only vocabulary that had been introduced in previous class meetings versus vocabulary that had not been covered in class. Reusing the vocabulary is paramount so that it becomes part of the students' active vocabulary, and it reduces the *affective*

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*filter*—a term coined by Stephen Krashen in 1981 (Wilson, 2000). The hypothesis was that anxiety lowered the language-learning students' ability to retain comprehensible input. Using student-created materials with vocabulary previously covered "provides the necessary comprehensible input to those students who are not at a level yet which allows them to receive comprehensible input from 'the real world'" (Wilson, 2000). Student-created materials also enable easier assessment through mock oral certification exams. In my experience, if in the exam I introduce a word that students have not learned in my class, or in previous university classes, it creates unnecessary stress that negatively affects the students' performance.

After the initial weeks, which are dedicated to interpreting protocol and theory, we move on to simultaneous interpretation. We start with the simultaneous mode because, in Idaho, the oral certification exam is usually administered in two phases, starting with only the simultaneous portion. If an examinee scores at least a 50% on this first portion, then he or she may continue with the second phase of the exam. Idaho Administrative Court Rule 52 (2008) states that "an individual who has received an overall score of 55 percent or higher on the certification exam without reaching the certified or master level, with no single score falling below a 50 percent" will be considered a Conditionally Registered Court Interpreter.

Before students actually start interpreting simultaneously, they must create scripts to be used by themselves and their colleagues. The first step in creating materials for use in the classroom is to have each student draw five flashcards from a pile that I previously prepared. Each flashcard contains a word from the thematic lists. Then individually—and using the words that they drew—students must write a short story (several paragraphs) in English using, at minimum, all five words. (Students are encouraged to add more words from previous assignments.) In this short story, they must pose as an eyewitness, a defendant, or a victim. I ask the students to underline the five words that they drew as well as any word that has been already covered in class. I remind them once more that during our first class exam, they will be assessed only on the words underlined. Figure 1 demonstrates some examples of students' work.

Figure 1: Examples of students' work

I was making the perfect meal for my husband one night. It was really late at night and I was really tired, so after work I changed into my 1) nightgown. I went to the kitchen and started to prepare dinner. I put on my 2) apron and started to cook. All of the sudden, I heard a loud noise outside and saw that my husband got into a wreck and hit a tree. I ran outside in my nightgown and apron and saw that the car was not ours. The police came soon after. There was so much damage to the car, the 3) airbag went off, the 4) windshield was broken, and the whole front 5) bumper was smashed in. I did not know what was going on. The police took my husband away, and the next day he was charged with 6) grand theft. He was sentenced to 5 years in 7) prison without 8) parole.

Every morning the 1) alarm on the 2) coffee maker wakes me up for school. I pull the coffee out of the 3) freezer, so I can make coffee for my mom. Personally I only drink tea, so I also take out the 4) teakettle too. Today, however, I woke up late and didn't make my mom the coffee. She was pretty sleepy as she drove me to school in her 5) robe and 6) nightgown. Right before we got to school someone ran a stop sign and hit us. Luckily the 7) air bag went off, but because of it we were unable to see the person's 8) license plate as they drove away. Now they are being charged with 9) hit and run, which is a 10) misdemeanor.

I then ask the students to type and submit their stories electronically via Blackboard, a website-based course management system that enables students and instructor(s) in the same course to share materials such as document and audio files. Students also record their short stories using downloadable free software such as Audacity. Students are given specific instructions on not only how to use the software to record their voices but also how to make a recording that can be used by inexperienced interpreters—that is, a recording with about 90–100 words per minute. These recordings are also shared through Blackboard itself: The students' recordings allow multiple opportunities for students to use the same vocabulary that we have previously covered but in different contexts.

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After approximately 6 hours (or 2 weeks) of instruction, we move on to consecutive interpretation. Once again, we create new scripts for this mode, sometimes using the previous simultaneous scripts and converting them into question and answers and at other times, using completely original scripts integrating the vocabulary that has been introduced in the last 2 weeks.

At this time, I introduce the concept of *scoring units* based on the overview of the exam content by the National Center for State Courts. “Scoring units are particular words and phrases that are selected to represent various features of language that interpreters encounter in their work, and that they must render accurately and completely” (National Center for State Courts, 2005, p. 5). I refer back to the words that I had asked them to underline as an example of general and technical vocabulary. I then ask the students to try to incorporate a few more scoring units such as a name, date, or number. Examples can be seen in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Further examples of students' work*

- Q: Could you please state your name and address for the record?
- A: My name is Maria Santos. I live on 355 Main St., here in Boise.
- Q: What were you doing the night in question, that is, January 12th of the current year?
- A: I was in the kitchen preparing a delicious meal for my husband Juan.
- Q: Did anything out of the ordinary happen while you were in the kitchen?
- A: Yes, yes indeed. I heard a loud noise outside.
- Q: And what time was it?
- A: It was about 11 or 11:15 at night.
- Q: So you heard a loud noise. And what did you do then?
- A: I ran outside in my nightgown, with my apron on and all, and saw that my husband had had an accident.
- Q: What kind of accident?
- A: He hit a tree with the car.
- Q: So, Mrs. Santos, while you were working the night of February 5th, did you observe any suspicious behavior?
- W: Well, I saw two teenagers standing by the teakettles and the coffee makers. They were looking all around them and then they hid something in their backpacks. I knew they were trying to steal something, otherwise why would they be in the appliances department?
- A: Objection, your Honor, the witness is speculating.
- W: Sustained. Mrs. Santos, please answer only the questions and refrain from giving your opinion.

Once these scripts have been typed, students again must submit them electronically via Blackboard. However, for the recordings, students must now work in pairs to record the questions and answers. The first semester in which the class was offered, I allowed students to work alone, but the two different voices seem to ensure a better rendition/interpretation. It appeared that when students heard two voices, they could more easily interpret from Spanish to English and from English to Spanish versus repeating what they heard in English.

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We dedicate the last 3 weeks of the semester to sight translation. Once more, we either revisit the old scripts or create new ones with the vocabulary introduced during the previous weeks. Students are asked to write a new script or edit an old script but to type it as if it were an affidavit. In doing so, students must incorporate some formulaic expressions such as “I attest,” “I swear or affirm,” “in witness thereof,” and so forth. An example can be seen in Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Example of an affidavit script*

I, John Smith, 43 years of age, domiciled in 357 Main St., Boise, Ada county, state	
my	of Idaho, <u>swear or affirm</u> that on January 12th at about 11:00 pm I was working in
twenties run	garage when I saw a car hit a tree. Soon after that I saw a woman in her early
since	outside in her nightgown and apron. It appeared to me she knew the man in the car
the	she started yelling at him. She was calling him a drunk, a looser. I immediately called
true	police fearing that this may be a drunk driving incident. <u>I attest</u> that the foregoing is
<u>witness</u>	and if I were to testify in court my testimony would be essentially the same. <u>In</u>
	<u>thereof</u> , I sign my name below.

Students submit the scripts for sight translation via Blackboard, but no recordings are made. We do use them for in-class practice.

In reflecting on these class activities, it is true that it provided me with many scripts and recordings for simultaneous interpreting practice as well as consecutive interpreting and sight translation practice. However, I did have some doubts in working with this material. One of my fears was, for instance, is it “accurate”? That is, could a person really be sentenced to 5 years in prison without parole for grand theft auto? Or would an attorney object if a witness were merely speculating? May a wife testify against her own husband? I found myself in a quandary: Do I sacrifice content for vocabulary and skill’s sake? Is quantity more important than quality? Would these scripts mislead students as to what really happens in court? After much thought, I decided that I need not jeopardize content in order to have an abundance of easy, short scripts for the class. I opted to invite a guest speaker every semester to enlighten all of us. The first semester, when I (as well as students) needed the most guidance, I invited a judge, a prosecutor, and a defense attorney. The last two semesters, I have had either a defense attorney or a prosecutor who helped point out all the legal blunders the students made—blunders that I did not feel qualified to correct. These experts have been kind enough to read through the initial 25 scripts and provide us with a wealth of information that we probably would not have sought or received had we not come up with questions of our own. In other words, all the legal inaccuracies of the scripts become catalysts for discussion. In one particular instance, a student mentioned that the defendant had received his fourth charge of driving under the influence (DUI)—a misdemeanor. The defense attorney jokingly said that most of his clients who had been charged with a fourth DUI really would have hoped that was the case, but in Idaho, the third DUI (not the fourth) becomes a felony (not a misdemeanor).

The course has now been offered four times. Although enrollment was rather low the first 2 years, the class in spring 2010 had 24 students. Instead of a final in-class exam, students take the written screening English exam at the Idaho Supreme Court. In spring 2010, 11 of 24 students passed. Of those 11 students, 2 students decided to take the oral certification exam in fall 2010. One of those students passed the first portion but did not pass the second portion. I invited that student to a debriefing session for some feedback on the class and classroom materials. Some of the questions I posed included “Did the material help him prepare adequately for the oral certification exam?” and “Were there any shortcomings?” The student stated that he thought more individual practice was needed on his part—not only with student-generated scripts but also with other scripts available for purchase. He added that he had continued making his own scripts and recordings to memorize vocabulary, instead of using only index cards. He thought it was very beneficial to memorize words in context and to practice the skills, as well.

In conclusion, creating our own classroom interpreting materials do provide us with many learning and practicing opportunities. In my opinion, the student-created scripts are not detrimental to the students’ progress. After all, this class was originally designed, in part, as a remedial, 300-level class. Although none of my university students have yet become certified court interpreters, I have seen significant improvement between the first in-class interpreting exam and the final in-class interpreting exam— not only in the amount of vocabulary learned and retained but the in the accuracy and completeness of their renditions. I have also observed that when students were asked to simultaneously interpret one of the recordings from *The Interpreter’s Edge* (Mikkelson, 2011)—which had been recorded at 125 words per minute—the level of anxiety and stress

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was minimal, and the delivery was much smoother than what I had experienced while teaching straight from *The Interpreter's Edge* during the Idaho Supreme Court's workshops.

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