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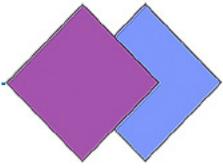
Re-examining "Practice" in Interpreter Education

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Abstract

In this commentary, the authors explore "practice" in interpreter education. They outline differences in meaning and usage of the term, including the notions of "reflective practice" and "deliberate practice," discuss the importance of high-quality skill development-focused practice (SDFP) in skill acquisition, and call for a systematic program of research into SDFP in interpreter education, particularly within the context of dialogue interpreting.

Keywords: skill development-focused practice, deliberate practice, reflective practice, interpreter education, dialogue interpreting

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Practice activities aimed at skill acquisition and development ("skill development-focused practice," or SDFP) are fundamental to the attainment of professional-level ability in interpreting (Motta, 2011; Schafer, 2011; Tiselius, 2018). As a group, the authors of this commentary have varied backgrounds and experiences with SDFP[1] in interpreter education, encompassing spoken language interpreting (conference and public service) and signed language interpreting, in settings ranging from vocational to university-level. In this commentary, we draw on our collective knowledge and expertise to define SDFP and argue for more systematic exploration of it in interpreter education of all types and levels, but particularly in the context of dialogue interpreting.

One challenge we face in discussing practice is the fact that the term has several commonly used meanings. To illustrate a few, we may put knowledge into practice (that is, apply or make use of), practice a profession (that is, exercise or carry out), engage in good business practices (routine habits or ways of doing things); and practice piano or sports or even interpreting (engage in activities aimed at increasing skill or proficiency). In addition, two compound terms including the word practice are frequently encountered in research and education: *deliberate practice* and *reflective practice*. The sense in which the word *practice* is used and the concept being described are different in these two compound terms, as further explained below.

Deliberate practice is a term used in research, primarily within the area of expertise studies, to describe and identify the type of exercises that very successful performers engage in to become highly proficient and to sustain their level of performance. If we apply this concept to a pianist, it would be understood as the complement of exercises and activities that the player carries out with the specific aim of improving their skills. These may consist, for example, of daily arpeggios, rehearsal of a new piece, private classes, playing together with peers, and so forth. These exercises are also characterized by the fact that they are goal-driven and often include feedback. The concept of deliberate practice was introduced by Ericsson et al. (1993) and has been challenged by, for example, Hambrick et al. (2020) and Miller et al. (2020). In interpreting, deliberate practice has been used as a concept in research on expertise in interpreting by a number of authors, including Hoffman (1997), Ericsson (2000), Moser-Mercer (2000), Ivanova (1999), Motta (2011, 2013), and Tiselius (2013).

Reflective practice, on the other hand, is a term used primarily in the contexts of teaching and professional activity and refers to how professionals carry out their work. A professional who applies a reflective framework is one who allows time for discussion and evaluation about their work to learn from previous experiences. As Tipton and Furmanek (2016, p. 29) explain, "[I]n continuing professional development, reflective practice can be a useful way of evaluating experiences in the workplace as it encourages their externalization and verbalization." To carry out one's work reflectively also implies having an open mind or an open climate, if working in groups, to allow for unbiased discussions and debriefings and receptivity to new ideas. The concept of reflective practice has been discussed in connection with interpreting by, for example, Tipton and Furmanek (2016), Dean and Pollard (2013), and Bancroft et al. (2015).

As becomes clear from these descriptions, there is a notable potential for confusion, given the need to distinguish between deliberate practice as described by researchers, skills-focused practice (as part of skill acquisition and development), and reflective (professional) practice in general. In this paper, our focus is on the sort of practice activities carried out in interpreter training programs, which are aimed at developing the skills needed to competently carry out a complex performance task (namely, interpreting). We argue that use of the label *deliberate practice* in classroom/educational settings is potentially problematic and that *reflective practice* is a professional rather than a training concept. Therefore, we suggest the label SDFP for the type of activity we describe. Admittedly, SDFP is closely related to, and in some aspects overlaps, deliberate practice and reflective practice. Research focused on deliberate practice and expertise in interpreting undoubtedly informs SDFP as carried out in training environments, but we believe that defining and labeling the goal-focused practice typically present in a learning environment is valuable and necessary.

Given the consensus that practice (in the sense of engaging in activities aimed at increasing skills or proficiencies) is a sine qua non for skill acquisition (Anderson, 2015), one important question to consider is whether all practice is created equal. The literature on expertise and skill acquisition suggests that the answer to this question is "no"—that high-quality practice that is more likely to lead to improvements in skill has certain characteristics. This view

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1   We recognize that this name and acronym may prove unwieldy; it does, however, clearly describe the concept.

of practice is closely associated with Ericsson et al.'s (1993) notion of deliberate practice (see also Ericsson, 2006, 2021), as previously mentioned.

Multiple definitions of deliberate practice appear in the literature; see Hambrick et al. (2020) and Ericsson (2021) for in-depth discussion of the concept. For the purposes of this commentary, we quote Ericsson (2000), from the journal *Interpreting*:

> Improvement of performance was uniformly observed when individuals, who were motivated to improve their performance, were given well-defined tasks, were provided with feedback, and had ample opportunities for repetition. (p. 193)

This definition highlights a number of important features of high-quality skill-focused practice:
- it requires motivation, a desire to improve one's skills;
- the tasks given to the learner are structured and clearly delineated;
- practice is seen as a cycle, rather than a 'one-and-done' task;
- learners are provided with opportunities for practice;
- feedback is provided to the learner

To these we would add (see also Herring, 2015; Herring & Swabey, 2017; Motta, 2011)
- systematic planning and structuring of the learning experience--individual practice activities fit into a planned, coherent learning progression
- goals for practice activities that are specific, achievable, measurable, and clear to the learner
- feedback that is regularly provided to the learner and is tailored to the goals of the activity and its place/purpose in the learning progression
- learners engaging in self-assessment and reflection
- practice is seen as an integral part of skill acquisition, requiring sustained focus and investment of time and energy
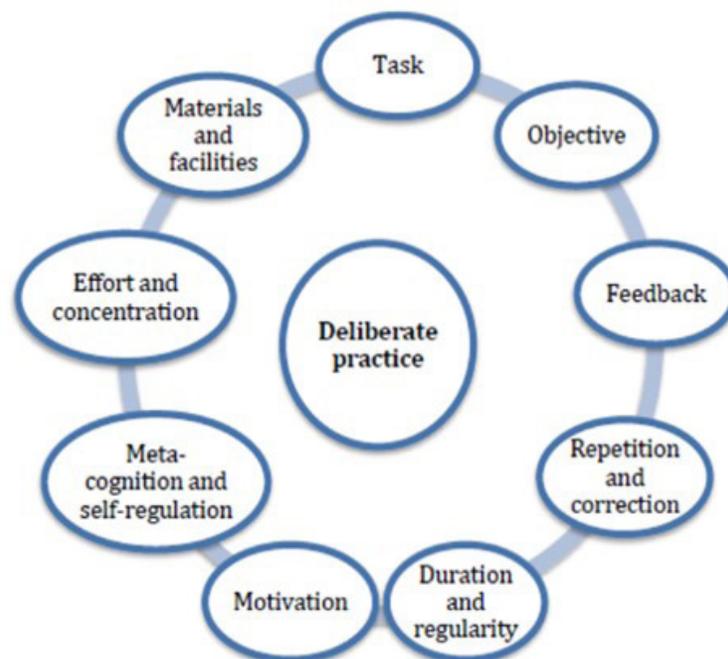
See also Figure 1.

Figure 1. The building blocks of deliberate practice (Motta, 2013).

At this point, it is important to clarify a couple of points related to the notion of deliberate practice. Ericsson et al. (1993) argue strongly for deliberate practice as the crucial mechanism explaining superior performance (see also Ericsson, 2006, 2021). Other scholars (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2020) take issue with this view, arguing that although practice may be an important factor in the development of expertise, it is not the only determinant. However, even those who are skeptical about deliberate practice being the sole explanation for development of expertise do not dispute the importance and effects of sustained, focused practice. The issues pointed out by such authors as Hambrick et al. (2020) are primarily related to the definition of deliberate practice employed in research studies, the relative size of effects in study groups, and so forth. We argue that the point made by these authors—that deliberate practice is not the only explanation of expertise—does not mean that high-quality SDFP is useless or unimportant or that educators should abandon approaches that are informed by the notion of deliberate practice. We can recognize that practice is only one component of the development of skilled performance ability and that not all practice is created equal and still work to better understand and implement approaches to practice that will effectively support learning and performance.

Research carried out within the framework of expertise studies focuses, to a large extent, on the identification of 'experts' whose performance meets specific criteria that allow them to be identified as such, description of said experts' performance, and investigation of the factors that led to or enabled development of their expert-level performance. The notion of deliberate practice is closely associated with this research paradigm; indeed, as described above, some researchers identify it as the primary explanation for the development of superior (expert) performance.

In the context of interpreter education and education-focused research, the primary goal is not to identify or separate 'expert' performers, study their performance, evaluate and compare more- or less-expert performers and point out the characteristics of their performance, or establish where one stands in relation to a given level or criteria for performance. Rather, the goal is to support learners (novices) as they develop their skills and become proficient practitioners of interpreting and to prepare them for continuing development throughout their careers. The educational focus on acquisition and improvement of skills is compatible with the expertise paradigm and the idea of deliberate practice, but the focus of educational activities should, in our view, be first and foremost on learning and development. Moreover, given that deliberate practice is a (somewhat controversial) accepted concept—a term of art—within expertise studies, borrowing it wholesale for application within the context of interpreter education may, in our view, lead to confusion and muddying of the concept. Thus, although we support and advocate for the inclusion of high-quality practice, characterized by the features mentioned above, in interpreter education and training, we prefer not to employ the term *deliberate practice*. Rather, in the interests of clarity and precision, we use the term SDFP to refer to activities and exercises employed to improve and develop interpreting skill, whether inside or outside a classroom environment.

Although reflective practice is by no means as controversial an issue as deliberate practice, in this context, it differs in scope, as discussed above. Tipton (2014) describes it in terms of growing into a reflective professional and taking ownership of the learning process. She also ties it to the metacognition of the learner. Hetherington (2012) describes reflective practice used in a professional context through supervision and debriefing. Compared to deliberate practice, the teaching and exercising of reflective practice have received less research focus in interpreting studies (although they are more frequently addressed by authors focused on interpreting signed languages; see, for example, Dean & Pollard, 2013). In our case, we argue that SDFP contributes to becoming a reflective practitioner and that some parts of SDFP surely overlap with reflective practice. Yet, just as argued in the case of deliberate practice, we put forward that in interpreting training, there is a need for the more specific concept that we call SDFP.

Given the relevance of high-quality SDFP for interpreting skill acquisition, we would expect it to be a subject that generates considerable interest and research. A number of papers discuss or touch on skills-focused practice in interpreting, often in the context of assessment, self-assessment, and metacognition (e.g., Cañada & Arumí, 2012; Gile, 2009; Maximous, 2017; Moser-Mercer, 2008; Motta, 2016; Ozolins, 2017; Postigo Pinazo, 2008; Schafer, 2011), but, to our knowledge, no systematic program of research into skills-focused practice has been implemented.

A scan of didactic materials suggests that inclusion of material related to effective skills-focused practice is more common in textbooks/manuals aimed at students of signed language interpreting and conference interpreting than in those aimed at dialogue interpreter trainees. For example, such textbooks as Patrie's (2000–2018) 10-book *Effective*

Interpreting series, Taylor's (2002, 2017) *Interpretation Skills: ASL to English*, and Maroney et al.'s (2019) *Integrated and Open Interpreter Education* encourage trainee signed language interpreters to engage in systematic, skills-focused practice to improve skills and remediate areas of weakness. Such manuals as those of Gillies (2013) and Setton and Dawrant (2016) focus heavily on the role of practice in the development of conference interpreting skills and include recommendations for effective practice and detailed instructions for learners. Arguably, the books mentioned above can also be used by dialogue interpreting students, but the knowledge and skills required in dialogue interpreting contexts differ slightly, as do the usual conditions of work. Moreover, it is reasonable to have on the market textbooks tailored to specific needs and contexts that contain examples designed for the intended audience of students.

In contrast, in many manuals aimed at spoken-language dialogue interpreting students, skills-focused practice is implicit or briefly touched on but is not a major focus. In particular, many authors focus on setting-specific aspects of dialogue interpreting (e.g., context, setting, vocabulary, cultural dimensions, ethical dimensions, interactional dimensions) and discuss classroom activities, including role-playing, but they do not generally dedicate significant space to presenting the core cognitive skills of interpreting as a set of skills and knowledge to be developed in a systematic, stepwise fashion. Self-assessment and reflection are also discussed, but generally not in depth or with extensive exploration of relevant theoretical frameworks. The following, from Lee and Buzo (2009, p. 1), is illustrative:

> In all modes of interpreting, interpreters need to monitor their performance. Accurate interpreting of the source message and smooth delivery without hesitations, long pauses, or frequent self-correction are essential hallmarks of quality interpreting.
>
> Therefore, we strongly recommend that you record your interpreting from the passages in each unit for self-monitoring. Whether consecutive interpreting, dialogue interpreting or sight translation is involved, your client or the person who depends on your interpreting should find your rendition smooth and natural, not hesitant and repetitive. The aspiring interpreter should be under no illusion about the enormous amount of work required to achieve this standard.

We agree with the premise that self-assessment, reflection, and development of critical-thinking and self-monitoring skills are fundamental to skill acquisition and the development of professional-level interpreting skills. However, simply instructing learners to "reflect" and "self-assess" is not sufficient. Although we quote from Lee and Buzo (2009) as an example, their approach to the topic is not unique. We certainly do not wish to single out or criticize their manual, or any other volume. Rather, our wish is to point out a gap in the available materials. Critical reflection and self-assessment are skills to be acquired, just like interpreting skills, and learners are likely to require active support and scaffolding from instructors to develop their abilities in this area (see, for example, Beard & Wilson, 2013; Bown, 2013; Evans, 1999; Han & Fan, 2020; Li, 2018). We cannot expect learners to automatically know what we mean by the instruction to "self-assess"; rather, they need guidance with regard to such aspects as relevant parameters and benchmarks for their current level of skill. Despite this need, there is a dearth of research—especially within the field of community/public service interpreter education—focused on effective structuring of SDFP and scaffolding of learners as they develop their ability to practice effectively.

We also argue that although the existing literature provides a theoretical basis for considering the characteristics of deliberate practice discussed above to be sound approaches to encouraging the development of effective SDFP habits, many questions remain. Tiselius (2018, p. 141) notes that "deliberate practice is not studied in a satisfactory way in interpreting studies. Deliberate practice in interpreting deserves more quantitative and qualitative studies before we can remove it from the list of skills necessary to become an expert interpreter." This observation applies equally well to interpreter education if we insert "SDFP" in place of "deliberate practice."

We thus encourage educators and researchers to engage in research and discussion aimed at increasing our understanding of the place and function of SDFP in interpreting skill acquisition and of effective practices for developing SDFP skills in interpreting trainees, particularly in the context of dialogue interpreting. Research questions that merit further investigation include the following:

- Does an approach modeled on the characteristics of highly effective practice, as discussed above, lead to greater/more efficient gains in interpreting skill acquisition?
- What factors or characteristics of the learning environment, with specific reference to SDFP, tend to support or hinder the acquisition of interpreting skills?
- How can learning and practice activities be structured and scaffolded to increase the efficacy of SDFP?
- How do individual characteristics influence the learner's ability to engage with and benefit from SDFP? Areas of specific interest might include motivation, mindset, anxiety/stress, metacognitive/self-regulatory characteristics, and linguistic fluency, among others.
- What role does feedback play within SDFP approaches to teaching and learning? What are the characteristics of effective feedback on SDFP?
- How can SDFP be contextualized in order to form an effective part of a range of learning environments (e.g., differences in course length, course setting/level, learner profiles)?
- What role does SDFP play in continuing education/lifelong learning?

A systematic program of inquiry focused on such questions is necessary, in our view, to clarify the characteristics, structure, and effectiveness of SDFP in interpreter education, with the end goal of facilitating learners' acquisition of interpreting skills and, thereby, improving the quality of the interpreting services they will one day provide.

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