

Abstract

This thesis investigates how study abroad experience (SAE) and working memory (WM) influence interpreting performance. Using a second language (L2) is cognitively demanding because it involves activation of a new language and the inhibition of the first language (L1). This is a general issue with all bilinguals, who have to suppress or control whichever language is currently not in use. As a special subset of bilinguals, interpreters are expected to efficiently switch between the two languages by analysing input sound signals, extracting meaning, transforming, storing and retrieving the message in the input language, and then retrieving the lexicon in the target language that will be appropriate for expressing that message, (re)formulating it and finally conveying it in the target language. Moreover, some or all of these operations take place in parallel, and this multi-tasking heavily taxes interpreters' WM. The quality of interpreting performance is known to correlate with several variables, such as language proficiency, duration of training, and interpreting experience. One factor that has received little research attention is the effect of overseas experience: Does studying in a target-language environment benefit interpreting performance? Language learners, including interpreting students, are often advised to study abroad, but the benefits of this experience, especially for interpreters, is not well understood.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the present thesis examines the relationship between SAE, WM and interpreting performance. The main research questions examine whether students with SAE outperform those without such an experience in consecutive interpreting (CI), and how WM may be involved. To answer these questions, 25 Chinese (L1)-English (L2) interpreting and translation students were recruited in Australia and 25 were recruited in China. They were asked to complete CI tasks (in both directions), an online vocabulary knowledge test, and a self-report questionnaire evaluating their own language experience and proficiency. Two psycholinguistic experiments were also administered with the aim of assessing, more objectively, word translation efficiency and WM resource availability.

The results show that students with SAE surpassed their non-SAE counterparts in word translation efficiency, L2 fluency and L2 grammatical accuracy. A similar trend was observed in study abroad participants' overall CI performance from L2 to L1. It is worth noting that the tendency was independent of participants' WM. Concerning WM, the results indicate that it was strongly correlated with interpreters' bidirectional CI performance. That is, a larger WM ensured a better CI output in both language directions. Taken together, these findings suggest that two factors turn out to significantly influence CI performance, namely, prolonged and effective overseas study, and larger available WM resources. This research illustrates the importance of SAE and WM in interpreting, and sheds light on the relationships between language context, cognitive resources and interpreting performance. A better understanding of these relationships may have implications for future interpreting training and practice.