

Interpreting Courses in the English Language and Translation Program at Qassim University: Do They Qualify Students to be Competent Interpreters?

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Abstract

The need for interpreting services has increased dramatically in the last two decades. In order to respond to this increase, many programs have been launched in different countries around the world. For these programs to adequately prepare their graduates to get into the profession, there are some pillars that they should be built on. Interpreting trainees need to practice interpreting in an authentic environment that is similar to what they will really encounter in the profession. Students should also be exposed to the different technological programs and software that enhance their learning. This paper aims to evaluate the interpreting courses in the undergraduate program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University to see if it has achieved the goal of qualifying its graduates to be competent interpreters. The courses specifications have been analyzed in addition to a survey which has been given to students who graduated from the program to look at their attitude toward the program. The findings show that there are some defects in the courses taught in the program regarding the implementation of technology and the learning environment. At its conclusion, the paper suggests some solutions to develop and reformulate the courses to have better outcomes regarding interpreting trainees' competence.

Keywords: authentic environment, curriculum design, didactic tool, interpreter training, technology.

1. Introduction

Translation and interpreting are often confused and mistakenly considered as one discipline. Many people believe that a competent translator will definitely make a good interpreter. However, this is not true. Translation and interpreting are two distinct disciplines and each

discipline requires different skills. In the time that translation deals with written texts and allow time for revision, interpreting involves immediate oral transfer of meaning under time pressure. Interpreting demands a high level of listening comprehension, memory retention and delivery skills that go beyond what is required for written translation. Thus, being a competent translator does not mean necessarily that an individual is qualified to perform effectively as an interpreter. We need to understand the relationship between translation and interpreting. Renfer (1992) explains this relationship saying that, “translation and interpreting are interdependent in the sense that interpreting can build upon sound translating abilities and that interpreters can use their interpreting experience in translation work” (p. 173). This should help us to be aware of the relationship between translation and interpreting and not to lead to the wrong assumption that being good in one profession will automatically qualify you to be good in the other.

As a field of study, Interpreting is offered in many universities and institutions around the world to cater for the increasing demands for different kinds of interpreter (i.e., community interpreters, conference interpreters and so on). Interpreters need to develop certain skills for them to be competent in their field, so it is not possible to blindly assume that each one who speaks two or more languages fluently is capable of carrying out an interpreting task, because as Sawyer (2004) explains “teaching interpretation is an activity fundamentally different from teaching foreign languages” (p. 3). There are so many aspects that should be covered in an interpreting program which a program of teaching foreign languages cannot handle. For example, interpreting curriculum should take the cognitive ability of interpreters into account when teaching and training interpreters. Another issue is the sequence in teaching the different modes of interpreting and the techniques of “Note-Taking”. Additionally, interpreting training institutions need to enhance interpreting competence which is not only limited to the linguistic and educational competence, but also includes the socio-cultural and psychological competence in addition to their competence in the professional ethics (Niska, 2005). Thus, we should not look at interpreting as a bilingual person who transfers the message linguistically between two or more interlocutors. The situation is more complicated and interpreting trainers should be aware of this complex task in the first place.

Interpreting trainers should provide students with an authentic environment to practice interpreting. This should start with the size of the classroom. Interpreting classrooms should not

have too many students. The number of students should be reasonable to give each one of them the opportunity to practice interpreting as much as he/she can during his training phase. Among the scholars who are in favor of this idea is Niska (2005) when he comments on the issue saying that “it is usually agreed that the number of students in interpreting classes should not be too high” (P. 48). In this classroom’s environment, trainers need to adopt a more “student-centered” approach toward teaching and try to abandon the traditional “teacher-centered” approach. In training interpreters, the focus should be on those interpreters and courses objectives should be written based on their needs and abilities. Trainers should also guide trainee interpreters through their learning because “a student-centered approach is certainly more effective especially if it is accompanied by explicit guidance in assessing performance” (Sandrelli, 2015, p. 116). We need also, as interpreting trainers, to explain to students that their role as interpreters is not only to transfer the meaning of one language into another mechanically, but also to look at the larger context of the utterance and try to communicate the meaning pragmatically and culturally. Sandrelli (2015) admits that “this makes it easier for trainees to develop the correct approach to interpreting, i.e. remembering that interpreters are supposed to communicate the message to the target audience and not translate it ‘mechanically’” (p. 114).

2. Literature review

Different schools of interpreting around the world have different curriculum components including the way of teaching and the degree of including technology in their classrooms in addition to an important factor which is the use of theory in interpreting training. It is still a debatable issue whether the manner of interpreting training should solely depend on providing a practical environment to trainees or introducing interpreting theories to build their work on. Gile (2005) admits that “there are differing views about the contribution of theory in the interpreting classrooms. Some consider that it is indispensable for self-improvement. Others claim that theory has not been able to improve either training or the practice of interpreting” (p. 140). We believe that it is important to give interpreting students some basic theoretical concepts to rely their work on when they graduate. Sometimes, theories work as a solution to certain dilemmas in the real practice and having this theoretical background will definitely help students to overcome these obstacles in the workplace. Takeda (2010) comments on the usefulness of equipping interpreting

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trainees with theoretical knowledge saying that “in addition to teaching strategies and tactics for specific problems students face, teachers should be encouraged to equip students with relevant theoretical tools for adaptive and autonomous learning” (p. 44). Niska (2005) looks at the ideal interpreting classroom as that which is divided into two sections; 50% theory and the other 50% practice. Although introducing theory to students is an important factor in their learning process, we would argue that we should not focus too much on theoretical aspects of learning. The largest portion of class time should be devoted to providing a real-life environment to students to practice interpreting. So, we believe that we would argue against Niska’s perspective of devoting half of the course to theory. The introduction of theory in an interpreting classroom should be looked at as Gile (2005) explains when he comments saying that “it seems reasonable to expect a modest amount of theory in the classroom to be helpful, insofar as it places various phenomena encountered by students, as well as strategies recommended by instructors, in a cohesive conceptual framework” (p. 140). Another issue that we need to explain to students is that knowing theories is not the only thing that they need to improve in their work. Theories work as a basic ground that interpreting students need to build upon. They are useful for them to work out some ethical as well as vocational situations when they work as professional interpreters. Theories are also useful for the interpreting trainers to help them assess their students learning and progress. Prágerová (2012) best describes this issue when she says, “we must make clear to students that knowing theory does not immediately improve their performance, but when you want to look back and assess what they did, to gain understanding of what in fact they do when they interpret, a theoretical framework is an essential tool” (p. 151).

For learning to be more effective, interpreting trainers need to provide an authentic environment for students in the classroom. Since it is hard to exactly bring the real experience of interpreting into the classroom, there are some alternatives to imitate this environment such as using simulation (mock conferences), using authentic recordings, or using class practice with live speakers. Thus, trainers could invite guest speakers from different domains such as medical practitioners or legal representatives to talk about their work and give the students the opportunity to practice interpreting in an authentic setting. As interpreting trainers, we need as (Moser-Mercer et al. (2005) underscore to move away from the teacher-centered (transmissionist) approach to the more learner-centered (socio-constructivist) approach because interpreting could not be taught

solely by copying a teacher who passes on his own solutions and rules. They also insist that “knowledge is actively constructed by the student and future trainer in interaction with his learning environment and that it is our responsibility to create a rich environment to fuel the constructive process” (p. 193). Additionally, providing an authentic environment for students will help trainers to reflect on their curriculum and assess it because as Takeda (2010) suggests, when providing such an environment, “student input is a valuable resource to help teachers reflect on their practice and modify it, if necessary, for continuous improvement” (p. 38). So, one of the main pillars of interpreting curriculum should be providing interpreting exercises that resemble real-life events as much as possible to promote the authentic environment for students. Kiraly (2000) claims that “for learning to be authentic and productive, learning tasks need to be embedded in their larger, natural complex of human activity” (p. 43).

Another debatable issue in training interpreters is the sequence of introducing students to the different modes of interpreting. Pöchhacker (2016) insists that “one of the basic tenets of the Paris School Approach is to require considerable mastery in consecutive before students are allowed to progress to training in [simultaneous interpreting]” (p. 194). Gile (2005) gave a three-stage model of teaching interpreting starting with “consecutive without notes” to enhance the students memories, then moving to a second stage in which notes are allowed to be taken by students in consecutive interpreting, and finally with a last stage in which students are trained simultaneous and consecutive interpreting in addition to sight translation. Trainers need to be careful when allowing students to take notes because, as Gile (2005) explains, “as soon as they are allowed to take notes, many take too many at the expense of listening, and their performance drops dramatically” (p. 138). Taking notes is a helpful tool in consecutive interpreting, thus students need to be taught how to take notes in a correct way. Finally, an important thing that must be kept in mind is that each interpreting mode has a certain cognitive load and students should not be allowed to the next mode unless they perfectly master the previous one.

Interpreting should only be taught by those who are specialized in interpreting studies. Some scholars may even go further admitting that only specialized and professional interpreters should teach and train interpreting. Kurz (2002) claims that “it is recognized that interpreting should be taught by professional interpreters, as someone who does not have the skills and aptitudes to interpret cannot teach interpreting effectively” (p. 65). Being aware of the market’s

needs is an essential feature that an interpreting trainer should possess and that what drove Sandrelli (2015) to insist that “it greatly helps to have trainers who are practicing interpreters themselves and are thus capable of providing market-related training” (p. 114).

Another issue that must not be overlooked in interpreting training has to do with the use of technology in classroom. The history of Computer Assisted Interpreter Training (CAIT) is relatively recent since it only began around fifteen years ago (Sandrelli, 2015). Interpreting technology in all its kinds offers students with an authentic environment to practice interpreting. Degueudre and Angelelli (2013) discuss the use of some technological tools in the interpreting classroom such as the use of Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) which is a software that enables students to record their interpreting and upload it for the teacher to listen to and assess. It also works as a platform for all students to share their recordings and comment on each other’s. Another technology that they talk about is ‘Sound Studio’ which is a recording program that enables students to record their tasks easily. Another technology that can be used in interpreting is ‘videoconferencing’ which, as Pöchhacker (2016) comments, “can be used to bring speakers, teachers and students in different locations and institutions together in a virtual classroom” (p. 198-199). Interpreting technology can help trainers to provide students with the authentic environment they need to practice their future work. It is growing rapidly and curriculum planners need to be aware of this rapid change and equip their students with the latest technological tools in the field.

Interpreting programs should bear the market’s needs and requirements in mind when setting up their curriculum. A great attention should be paid to the interpreting market before writing the objectives of interpreting courses. Aldea (2011) claims that “it is crucial for curriculum planning that this knowledge of market requirements and recent developments within the profession be translated into precise aims, goals, and objectives underlying the program” (p. 75). One of the basic criteria that AIIC Training Committee talks about is that “the course syllabus and curriculum, as well as language combinations offered, should reflect market requirements” (Niska, 2005, p. 51). So, as interpreting curriculum planners, we need to cater for the market’s needs and be aware that these needs are changing rapidly, thus we need to cope with those changes. Interpreting trainers should provide flexible programs that are able to meet the market’s needs for

today, tomorrow and even after 40 years (Niska, 2005; Fiola, 2013). We need to prepare students to work adequately in the language industry when they graduate, otherwise “employers will not employ the graduates of such a program if they do not think that the graduates will come to them well equipped” (Malmkjær, 2006, p. 4). So, as Kurz (2002) insists, “a university department or school that wants to ensure that its curriculum corresponds to the demands of an increasingly complex world cannot just sit back and watch such developments occur. Rather, it must do everything it can to match supply (by the university) and demand (by employers)” (p. 74).

3. Statement of the Problem

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing demand for interpreting services that has led to the establishment of numerous interpreting programs worldwide, including Saudi Arabia. These programs are expected to equip students with the necessary linguistic, cognitive, and professional skills required to perform effectively in real-life interpreting settings. However, designing a curriculum that successfully bridges the gap between academic training and market expectations remains a significant challenge.

Effective interpreter training is not limited to theoretical instructions as it requires exposure to authentic interpreting environment and the integration of modern technologies and specialized software that reflect current professional practices. Without these essential components, graduates may find themselves insufficiently prepared to meet the demands and expectations of the interpreting profession.

In the context of the undergraduate program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University, it is unclear to what extent the existing interpreting curriculum fulfills these requirements. While course specifications may outline intended learning outcomes and instructional strategies, they do not necessarily reflect the actual effectiveness of the program in preparing students for the labor market. Furthermore, the perspectives of the program’s graduates who have experienced the curriculum and, in some cases, transitioned into professional settings remain underexplored.

Accordingly, the problem addressed in this study lies in the potential mismatch between the design and implementation of interpreting courses within the program and the practical competencies required in the interpreting profession. Specifically, there is a need to evaluate

whether the curriculum provides adequate training in terms of authentic practice environments and the use of interpreting technologies, and to assess graduates' perceptions of how well the program prepared them for professional work. Addressing this issue is essential for identifying gaps in the current curriculum and proposing improvements that enhance the competence and employability of interpreting graduates.

4. Research Questions

This research paper asks two questions:

- 1- How does the practices of the interpreting curriculum in the program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University prepare its' graduates to the labor market?
- 2- How does the graduates of the program perceive the interpreting curriculum and its potential to prepare them to the labor market?

5. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to evaluate how effective the interpreting curriculum in the undergraduate program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University in its' mission to prepare its' graduate to be competent in the labor market. The methodology combines document analysis and survey data to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the intended curriculum design and the graduates' real experience.

5.1 Research Design

The study employs a descriptive-evaluative design. It aims to assess the alignment between the objectives of the interpreting courses and the competencies required in professional interpreting contexts, as well as to explore the graduates' perceptions of the program's effectiveness in preparing them for the labor market.

5.2 Data Collection Methods

5.2.1 Document Analysis

The first phase of the study involves a systematic analysis of the specifications of the interpreting courses offered within the program. This includes examining course descriptions,

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intended learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. The analysis focuses on identifying the extent to which these courses:

- Promote practical interpreting skills in authentic or simulated professional settings.
- Incorporate the use of relevant interpreting technologies and tools.
- Address competencies required in the labor market.

5.2.2 Graduates Survey

The second phase consists of collecting data from graduates of the program through a structured questionnaire. The survey is designed to gather information about:

- Graduates current or past experiences in the labor market.
- Their perceptions of how well the program prepared them for interpreting tasks.
- The strengths and weaknesses of the interpreting courses, particularly in terms of practical training and technological exposure.

The survey questions were created using Google Forms Platform and sent to the graduates online to answer it at their convenience. They take the form of close-ended questions using a Likert Scale in a five-point scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

5.3 Participants

The participants of the study are graduates of the undergraduate program of English Language and Translation at Qassim university. A purposive sampling method is used to target individuals who have completed the program and, where possible, have had exposure to the labor market.

5.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from course specifications are analyzed qualitatively through content analysis to identify key themes related to skill development, authenticity of training, and technological integration. Moreover, the data drawn from the survey were analyzed quantitatively

as a way to collect information about how students perceive the program and its' effectiveness in preparing them to work effectively in the interpreting labor market.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey is voluntary, and respondents are informed of the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity are insured, and the collected data are used solely for research purposes.

6. Interpreting Courses in the English Language and Translation Program at Qassim University:

After being admitted to the program, undergraduate students go through two years of intensive English language learning skills. For the whole two years, the focus is only on the language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar) that students should be equipped with to master the second language. Students are supposed to have a reasonable mastery of the English language after this intensive course. In the fourth semester, students are introduced to different introductory courses including “Introduction to Translation” and “Introduction to Literature” because starting from the fifth semester each student has to choose a track to be specialized in one major either translation track or literature track. Table 1 shows the different courses students are supposed to take during their four-year study. The focus of this table is on the translation track.

First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
First Semester	First Semester	First Semester	First Semester
* English Grammar 1. * Listening & Speaking 1. * Reading & Vocabulary Building 1. * English Writing 1	* English Grammar 3. * Listening & Speaking 2. * Academic Reading. * Academic Writing.	* Phonetics & Phonology. * Applied Linguistics. * Translation Theories 1. * Computer Assisted Language Teaching.	* Semantics & Pragmatics. * Discourse Analysis. * Interpreting. * Translation in the Humanities.
Second Semester	Second Semester	Second Semester	Second Semester

* English Grammar 2. * English Writing 2. * Reading & Vocabulary Building 2. * English Phonetics.	* Introduction to Linguistics. * Introduction to Translation. * Introduction to Literature. * Computer Assisted Language Learning.	* Morphology & Syntax. * Translation Theories 2. * Translation in the Humanities. * Sociolinguistics.	* Second Language Acquisition. * Literary Translation. * Issues & Problems in Translation. * Research Methodology.
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Table 1: The study plan for the program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University.

As we can see from the table above, only one course is devoted to teaching interpreting in the program, which is inadequate. In order to develop what Shreve (2006) called “expertise”, students need to have more *deliberate practice*. Shreve (2006) defined deliberate practice as the “regular engagement in specific activities directed at performance enhancement in a particular domain” (p. 29).

7. Discussion

Looking at the program’s mission and the courses’ objectives, we can see a consensus on preparing highly qualified students with skills and expertise in English language and translation and providing them with the necessary linguistic, translation and interpreting skills that can enrich their intellectual, cultural and artistic vision. This is the written objective; however, we need to look at the hidden curriculum which is the application of this objective in the classroom.

In a survey that includes 56 students who graduated from the program, 48.2% believe that the program failed in preparing them to be competent translators and interpreters, and 35.7% are not sure whether or not they are qualified to do the translation and interpreting jobs adequately. Only 9 students are in line with the program’s objective and believe that it succeeds in making them good translators and interpreters (see figure. 1).

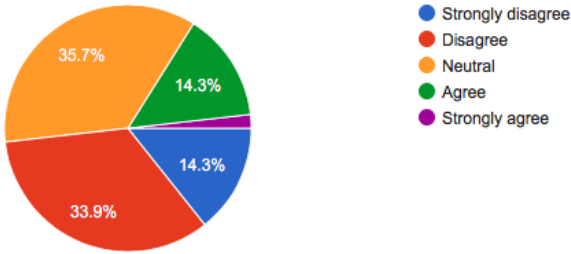


Figure. 1: The program of English language and Translation at Qassim University has prepared me adequately to be a good Translator and/or interpreter.

This was reflected in the students’ choice of jobs when they graduate from the program.

Only six students out of the 56 are working as a translator or interpreter (see figure. 2)

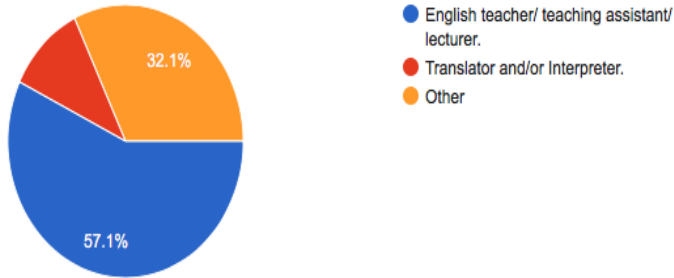


Figure. 2: At the moment, I am working as:

Another important issue to talk about is the use of technology in classroom. In the courses’ objectives, there is an emphasis on using technology as a didactic tool in translation and interpreting classrooms. However, when it comes to the actual setting of the classroom, there is no such thing. As the survey shows, translation and interpreting trainers do not use technology in classroom. The only technology that is being used, if we can call it a technology, is the bilingual dictionaries. When we asked students about their familiarity with the term “CAT tools”, most of them said that they are not familiar with 57.1% who are not familiar at all (see figure. 3). The case is also applied to interpreting classrooms. As we discussed earlier, trainers need to adapt a new way of training interpreting which is Computer Assisted Interpreter Training (CAIT). Students need to be introduced to various technological tools and software such as Moodle, Sound Studio and Videoconferencing. These applications will help trainers to provide students with an authentic

environment to practice interpreting in an appropriate way before they graduate. They will also help to recreate the interpreter’s working environment as closely as possible. Unfortunately, this is not the case in teaching interpreting courses in the program. Teaching is conducted using the traditional way of playing a recording and asking students to write their translations on a piece of paper then asking some of them to render their translations orally. The large number of students in the classroom does not give the trainer the leeway to focus on students’ performance individually. Almost all the interpreting training takes the form of consecutive interpreting without introducing students to the other modes of interpreting such as simultaneous interpreting and sight translation. Some trainers also do not equip students with the useful techniques of “note-taking” to carry out consecutive interpreting effectively. Only 30.4% of students think that they were taught how to take notes appropriately while carrying out a consecutive interpreting assignment (see figure. 4).

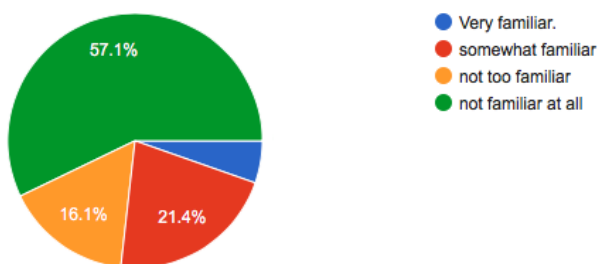


Figure. 3: How familiar you are with the term “CAT tools”?

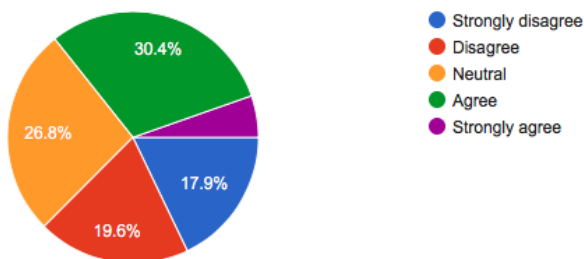


Figure. 4: In interpreting classes, teachers or trainers have taught us some techniques on “note-taking”.

Providing students with an authentic environment is an essential factor in teaching interpreting. When they graduate, students will work in an environment that is full of obstacles and difficult situations in which they need to make quick yet wise decisions that serve in keeping the communication going on between interlocutors. We do not have to wait until the last moment in where students are surprised by this dilemma. Instead, as interpreting trainers, we need to provide a simulation of the work environment in where students can experience the difficult situations and work them out before going to the real profession work. The way of interpreting training in the program does not provide students with such an environment. Only 8 students are satisfied with the practice they received during their study time and believe that trainers were successfully able to provide them with an authentic environment (see figure. 5). We would argue that the large number of students in the interpreting classrooms may not allow trainers to provide this authentic environment in the classroom. The average number of students in interpreting classrooms in the program is around 40 students which is far larger than the ideal number that we talked about earlier.

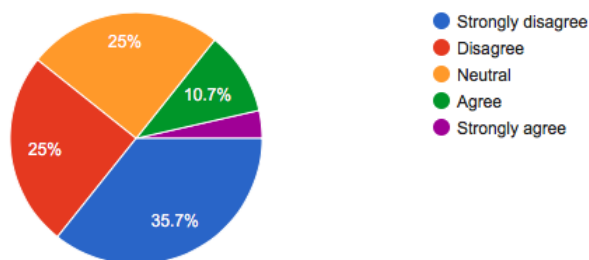


Figure. 5: During my study at Qassim University, translation and Interpreting teachers or trainers provide us with a real-life environment When it comes to practice.

One last point that is worth mentioning is that interpreting should only be taught by those who are specialized in the profession. Interpreting trainers should have a theoretical background in the field to explain to students how their work is commenced. They need to equip students with some theoretical basis to enable them to build upon these theories when doing their work. In the program, some of the interpreting courses are taught by instructors who are not specialized in interpreting or even translation. They, most of the time, have a literary or teaching English as a second language background, so they are not aware of the other factors surrounding the utterance to be interpreted. They have the idea of interpreting as a linguistic meaning in one language that

needs to be transferred into another. This will certainly adversely impact the way students learn interpreting. Another issue that we must pay attention to as curriculum planners for interpreting courses is the interpreting market's needs. The program should establish a collaboration with the language industry and be alerted by the continuing changes of that market. We need to invite guest speakers from different domains such as medical practitioners and legal representatives to talk to students about their fields and hold workshops to educate them about their needs and expectations. There is almost a divorce between the program and the translation and interpreting market. This can be illustrated in figure 6 and 7.

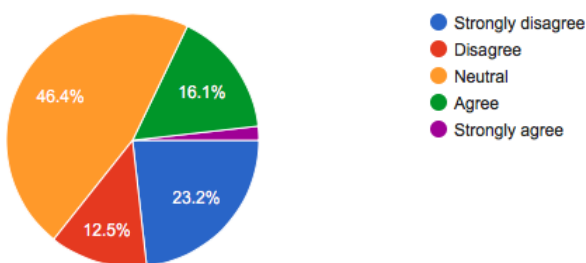


Figure. 6: The translation and interpreting market's demands were taken into consideration in the translation and interpreting curriculum at Qassim University

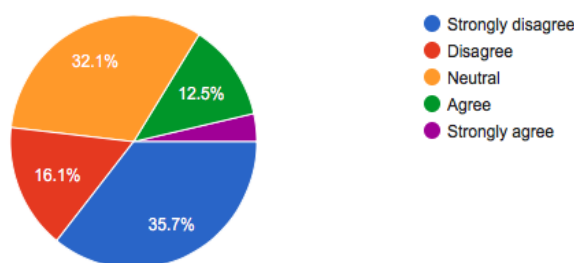


Figure. 7: There was a collaboration between the program of English and Translation at Qassim University and the translation market.

8. Conclusion

For any interpreting program to be successful, there are certain pillars that the program should rely on. Firstly, the most important thing is that the program should provide students with an authentic environment to practice interpreting in a regular basis. This environment can be provided in many ways such as implementing technological tools in interpreting training. Students need to be introduced to the notion of Computer Assisted Interpreter Training (CAIT) because this training provides them with the necessary software and programs such as Moodle and Sound Studio for an effective learning environment. The program should also make trainees familiar with the different modes of interpreting and present these modes gradually for the best learning. Finally, the program should also be aware of the interpreting market's needs and be alerted by the rapid change in labor market because students will ultimately work in this market place, so we need to make sure that they are ready to take place in the profession when they graduate.

Through analyzing the syllabi of the interpreting courses in the program of English Language and Translation at Qassim University, we can easily see that the courses objectives are promising to prepare students to be competent translators and interpreters when they graduate by offering them with an optimal environment of learning with an implementation of technology to enhance their learning. However, the hidden curriculum proves the opposite. The graduates survey prove that the program suffers from many defects regarding its curricula and the way of teaching. Many instructors, in addition to that they are non-specialized, adapt the traditional teacher-centered approach of teaching which hinders students from practicing interpreting in an authentic socio-constructivist environment. Students are only introduced to the consecutive mode of interpreting and are rarely taught certain techniques of note-taking for an effective learning of interpreting. Instructors do not use technology in their classrooms and trainees are not familiar with the technological programs and software that would greatly help in their learning. Curriculum planners in the program need to reconsider the situation and reformulate their objectives to be reflected in the students learning. This should not be done only on the written papers of the courses, but should also be implemented in the real practice.

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