

**Note-taking Know-how:
A Processing Perspective on Consecutive Interpreting**

逐步口譯筆記知識技能之探討

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Abstract

This paper analyzes note-taking in consecutive interpreting. According to Gile's Effort Model (1995), note-taking is considered as an intermediate step bridging the gap between information encoding and decoding in the process of consecutive interpreting. Inappropriate notes, however, may impede the interpreter's attention and often result in interpretation errors. Without the development of a simplistic, economical mode of note-taking system, the coding and explicating operations in consecutive interpreting can be cognitively demanding and are likely to overload the interpreter's processing capacity. The strategic training of note-taking is widely regarded as an essential coping tactic in the interpreting profession. This study examines the impact of note-taking strategies implemented in consecutive interpreting. From the findings of the notes taken by graduate participants involved in consecutive interpretation training, theoretical and practical guidelines of note-taking are suggested from a processing perspective to enhance the interpreting skills in consecutive interpreting.

Key words: note-taking, consecutive interpreting, processing capacity

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摘要

逐步口譯的過程當中，基於短期記憶的不足，譯者需藉由筆記的記錄，來促進口譯的效能。本文根據 12 位研究生的口譯筆記實例，針對其筆記的內容及格式，從心理語言學的角度，在資訊處理的機制上分析探討筆記知識技能在逐步口譯過程中所扮演的重要性及其意涵，提出筆記訓練時語言使用、格式及思維上所需注意的要項與策略。

關鍵詞：筆記，逐步口譯，資訊處理

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Introduction

Interpreting is a face to face communicative act consisting of complex tasks. International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) defines consecutive interpreting as the interpreting process in which the interpreter assists the speaker transferring from the speaker's source language into the requested target language. It is a process involving listening to the input of the source language to producing the target language output, either simultaneously or consecutively. The length of the speeches varies from short consecutive interpretations, barely lasting more than 30 seconds, to long ones around 20 to 30 minutes.

The interpreting process places great demands on the interpreter's memory effort, as the interpreting requires interpreters to retain the heard information instantaneously for further interpreting tasks. Short-term memory alone can not possibly keep all the necessary details and fulfill the intermediate process of decoding in the act of interpreting (Mahmoodzadeh, 1992). Notes are therefore suggested as a means of an aid to assist the interpreter in retaining and retrieving the information. Note-taking, especially in long interpretation, is a skill employed in the process of conducting consecutive interpreting to better the quality of the interpretation. Note-taking skill has the direct, consequential effect of the interpreter's rendition. Qualified Interpreters are expected to be proficient in taking notes in order to carry out consecutive interpreting efficiently and effectively. As note-taking is a must-have skill for interpreters to acquire in performing consecutive interpreting, it is necessary for an interpreter to be well versed in the skills.

Proficient note-taking skills require specific know-how (Mead 2005). Note-taking serves as a bridge connecting the gap between the interpreter's memory and the production. In much the same vein, it is a filter helping sift through meaningless or unimportant messages (Lambert, 1989; Mackintosh, 1990). If note-taking does not fulfill the function of a filter, consecutive interpreting tasks may turn out distracting to the extent that it affects the mental operations of other cognitive efforts engaged. The written notes therefore need to reflect how interpreters organize and analyze the messages of the source text into the target language and what they do to distinguish core messages from peripheral ones and ultimately reconstruct the notes logically and meaningfully. From interpreters' well-written notes follows a successful path of well constructed messages for final rendition.

Components of Cognitive Efforts

Information processing involves a composite of cognitive efforts. The intake of the information entails the reception of stimuli from the listener's sensory input. As the input is deemed important in the long run, short term memory is accordingly formed for further consolidating processes. When an experience is recalled, various related elements are retrieved from the storage areas of the brain, forming an integrated composition which ultimately constitutes our memories. If the corresponding information is not reanalyzed or reformulated during the retrieving process, it will be ultimately discarded (Anderson, 1983; Carroll, 1993).

Grounded in a perspective on mental operations of human processing capacity, Gile (1992, 1995) analyzes consecutive interpreting along three cognitive dimensions: the Listening Effort, the Production Effort, and the Memory Operation Effort. In light of the three efforts, the Effort Model is accordingly proposed. Within the model, the consecutive interpreting process is carried out in two phases. The first phase is mainly a reformulation phrase, while the second, a reconstruction phrase. In the reformulation phrase, the Listening Effort attempted by the interpreters enables them to listen and analyze the source language text. The Memory Effort consists of mental operations regulating and retaining the received information for further note-taking and interpreting tasks. The Memory Effort is not only responsible for retrieving information stored but reconstructing the content of the text for the final rendition. The Production Effort across the two phrases involves producing notes and transferring notes into the target language in context.

The cognitive efforts employed in the phases of consecutive interpreting are complex and inextricably intertwined. The interpreting rendition is sometimes compromised due to inefficient processing which results in cognitive overload. Among the cognitive efforts is the note-taking skill that could determine how successful the interpreting would turn out. As the short term memory does not work in sync with the notes, interpreters, with deficient note-taking skill, often easily digress into the writing process but not the interpreting task itself.

Efficient note-taking is a must skill for interpreters to acquire. However, notes are conducive to interpreting only when they are written in legible organization with logical structure. Good notes need to be effort saving. Myers (1976) contended that two elements of note-taking skill are especially important for consecutive interpreting: good notes to supplement memory and understandable notes as an aid of message recall. In essence interpreters' notes must be readable and understandable for themselves. Integrating note-taking into consecutive interpretation is a delicate issue. The critical elements of what strategies by the interpreter and how successful they are is worth the effort of investigating.

Processing-based Note-taking Guidelines

Note-taking is a coding process from which interpreters can put the source language into the interpreting context. Among the written notes, words, symbols and signs serve as “codes” for interpreters for further interpretation at the later stage. After, encoding, these codes are subsequently mapped onto the semantic meaning and the corresponding linguistic structure in memory (Stenzl, 2002). Development of note-taking skill is of strategic importance to achieve successful consecutive interpreting. The main use of notes in interpreting delivery is that they serve as memory reinforcers, providing visual cues, and access difficult elements beyond recall at a later stage. Without developing a simplistic mode of note-taking system, encoding and decoding notes are likely to complicate the processing efforts. Individual as note-taking may be, the strategies that the interpreter adopts in analyzing and formulating the source language text could have an impact on developing an effective note-taking system.

Information processing encompasses cognitive processing patterns of mapping components of phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics for the target output. By associating meaning with linguistic forms, consecutive interpreting can be facilitated as meaning retention is increased through the perceptual linguistic mapping enhancement. With the enhancement of language mapping encoding, the proposed processing-based note-taking guidelines aim to reduce the cognitive loading in consecutive interpreting. There are six guidelines on note-taking skills suggested for consecutive interpreting:

- Keep meaning in focus
- Move from sentences to connected discourse
- Use homophones as well as simplified written input for symbols and abbreviations
- Jot down readable codes for interpreting output
- Use consistent written chunking device
- Map semantic input to syntactic output

The processing-based note-taking skills consist of strategies that guide learners’ processing paths through effective note-taking techniques. Without placing excessive demands on cognitive resources, employing processing-based note-taking skills is not only effort-saving but has the benefit of reducing the cognitive efforts allocated to note-taking in consecutive interpreting.

Findings from Consecutive Interpreting Notes

There are 12 first year graduate students participating in this study. After 8 weeks of lecturing and practicing the essentials of note-taking in consecutive interpreting, three Consecutive note-taking tests are administered in class, ranging from 30 to 80 words of the English source text to the Chinese target text. Criteria adopted to assess students note-taking skills are based upon the proposed processing-based note-taking guidelines and the elements in Dollerup & Loddegaard (1992). The assessment criteria include what need to be jotted down in notes and how they are structured. The notes are compared and contrasted to see if they are meaning-based, pattern-based, selective, legible, unequivocal and consistent. The average of the results is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Note-taking Skills Employed by Students

Note-taking Skills	Number	Percentage
Meaning-based (Meaning chunks)	4	33%
Pattern-based (Phrasal/Sentence chunks)	4	33%
Consistent use of Condensation (abbreviation, symbols or signs)	3	25%
Selective (Key words)	6	50%
Legible (Written notes)	4	33%
Unequivocal (Spacing arrangement)	10	83%

In Table 1, it was found that the sample’s note-taking techniques and the text comprehension were reflected fairly in their notes. There were three out of 12 students who passed the consecutive interpreting qualifying exams three months after the study. In their notes of the interpretation from English to Chinese, most subjects used key words to retain the information of the source text to save cognitive efforts for later interpreting. Moreover, the results also revealed if the subjects used larger meaning chunks, it indicated that they could deal with more information in their notes without stopping to backtrack while taking notes. For some subjects, some meaning and structural chunks can even extend over for two clauses. Few subjects used abbreviations either in Chinese or English. Some even adopted Chinese phonetic symbols for the sake of message

condensation as it is effort-saving, and unequivocal. Most subjects did use spacing arrangement to break down sentences into subjects and predicates. The syntactic relationships among words of sentences were salient as the spacing was mostly employed. Only some commonly used symbols and abbreviations were used in the notes for meaning chunks and discourse connection. It is worth mentioning that not many subjects did code-switching, as it might probably cause confusion for some interpreters in training. The major distinction between the successful notes and the rest was that those subjects who were not proficient with note-taking invented new symbols in the course of interpreting. Not being able to read the notes for message reconstruction lead to interpreting failure, reflecting the performance they had on the tests.

From the results of the findings, three main components of teaching note-taking skills of consecutive interpreting:

- Train interpreters to use explicit functional cues/meaning chunks about the source text to associate meaning with linguistic form for later rendition
- Make interpreters become conscious of the input structure and the use of processing patterns and able to note down the message with symbols and abbreviations to enhance note-taking skills
- Structure the output of the note-taking instruction as to guiding the interpreters to notice the input form-meaning connection and employing correct strategies to encode the message in chunks.

Conclusion

Note-taking in the process of consecutive interpreting requires active analyses for information retention and subsequent rendition. The vital issues of note-taking for interpretation concern how notes can pave the way for successful interpreting; thereby it should include the elements of when, what, and how. The experiment conducted in the study shows that students who take notes with strategic planning perform better than those who do not. The implication is that note-taking plays an important role in saving excessive cognitive efforts.

Note-taking in consecutive interpreting is no easy task. In order to cope with the demand of multi-tasking engaged in consecutive interpretation, interpreters are expected to be equipped with solid linguistic and cultural aspects of knowledge about the languages in practice. If the notes are simply words taken from source text without categorization, analysis and organization, the efficacy of consecutive interpreting is to a greater extent compromised.

As the processing capacity is limited, to respond to both attentional and linguistic demands engaged in the interpreting task can be overbearing. This study addresses the linguistic and processing issues required by the consecutive interpreting task. The proposed note-taking guidelines center on reducing the cognitive efforts to the extent that

they can release the excessive attentional digression to focus on processing compatible factors. Note-taking is partly the processing efforts attempted for the consecutive interpretation, including text analysis, gist extraction and effective message recall. Through the regulation of the proposed guidelines, it is expected that self-regulation can be facilitated in performing the consecutive interpretation. With the assistance of appropriate notes, the interpreter can develop the output with less distortion and omission. The proposed guidelines hope to mobilize the interpreter's existing linguistic resources, to reduce processing load and to enhance the interpreting performance. For novice interpreters, it is suggested that strategic planning and technique practices are crucial to the interpreting training. Note-taking makes a valuable contribution of improving the accuracy of the interpreter's rendition to consecutive interpreting. The establishment of a systematic note-taking mode allows interpreters to gain access to composite memories and be able to deliver the interpreting in an efficacious manner.

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