New Perspectives of Note-Taking Training in Consecutive Interpreting  

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Abstract. This paper attempts to expatiate upon some commonly known and accepted concepts and practices that are not targeted, and sometimes not feasible, 70%-30% allocation of efforts, for example. Since senior interpreters take notes in a way so different from novices or those without better-than-the-average retention, I argue that notes are indispensable for consecutive interpreters and herein offer some new perspectives of the specifics of note-taking, and propose a few practical approaches to note-taking training.

Introduction

Background  
China’s growing role in the world has led to increasing contacts with other countries and greater international interest in its politics, economics, and culture, which has contributed to the interpreting market. Thus the Ministry of Education of China has in recent years approved over 150 institutions of higher education of undergraduate and graduate degrees, respectively.

Consecutive interpreting, though not a major form of interpreting, still survives and will survive in many situations, such as ceremonial speeches, working meetings without equipment, accreditation tests, and press conference. Note-taking, an indispensable part of consecutive interpreting, is not taught in many institutions of higher education offering courses of interpreting.

Consecutive Interpreting and Note-Taking Defined
Consecutive interpreting (CI) involves listening to what someone has to say and then, when they have finished, reproducing the same message in another language. The speech may be anything between a minute and twenty minutes and the interpreter will hinge on a combination of notes, memory and general knowledge to recreate their version of the original [1].

In interpreting studies, it is a consensus that note-taking in CI is by definition different from shorthand. Shorthand is a fast method of writing using special signs or shorter forms to represent letters, words, and phrases (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). The shorthand system commonly used in China do not apply to note-taking in CI, since it is phonetically based, rather than meaning-based and used to write down everything, for post-meeting written documents [2, 3, 4].

Literature Review

A hotly debated issue is whether note-taking should be taught to interpreters and students of interpreting. Many scholars hold that note-taking is a personal affair and there is no need to teach it, that paying too much attention to how to take notes is bound to distract interpreters’ effort, and that too many notes will hamper our recognition of information, thereby adversely affecting the speed and quality of our production.

There are, however, some scholars having a preference for note-taking and trying to help others learn the skill. Rozan (2003) argued that note-taking can easily be learned if the fundamentals are in place. No senior interpreter does not resort to note-taking, but unfortunately only a small number of interpreters master the skills [5]. Albl-Mikasa (2008) proved the process of note-taking as the reception and production of a notation text [6]. Lin Chaolun (2004) maintained that he benefited
from note-taking since he embarked on the journey of using note-taking [3]. Also in favor of the view are Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer[4], Li[2], Andrew Gillies [1], etc.

New Perspectives of the Principles of Note-Taking

Automatization

Automatizing an activity means repeatedly using a consistent system for the completion of a task so that it requires less intellectual effort, (becomes automatic), thus leaving time and capacity for other tasks. In regard to learning, automatization is also called internalization [1]. If a skill has internalized, it requires less effort, less intellectual capacity to complete it. If one can speak fluent correct English, which by definition means without stopping to think about particular grammar rules, then he/she has internalized all the rules. Internalization does not come from an intellectual understanding of how to complete a task but from repeated practice of the completion of the task until it is completed correctly without thinking. Note-taking is a mechanical activity that can be made automatic, internalized. It takes considerable efforts to master the skill [4]. Novice interpreters may soon forget an abbreviation or a symbol after they are told how to note. Senior interpreters, or at least those who have been trained for some time, though, are likely to note down automatically “bk” for bank(s), “π” for policy(ies), or “rx” the two initials for “荣幸”, honor (ed), privilege(ed), etc. All these can be internalized via regular intensive practice, especially at the initial stage.

Speech Analysis during Note-Taking

In this context, to analyze the speech means looking at the framework, the skeleton of the speech. An interpreter will listen to speeches in a way quite different from an ordinary listener. And the interpretation process includes: 1) listening to the words and the content as the normal listener does; 2) dissecting the speech in the head, and; 3) analyzing its structure and progression to find out what fits with what and why. The interpreter will identify the communicative function of different parts of the speech, recognize the main idea and secondary ones, and spot the links between them [1].

I believe that speech analysis should be conducted throughout the note-taking process, in that:

1) Speakers, especially well-educated westerners, even if improvising, often follow certain conventions, and therefore interpreters can decide which parts of speech to memorize or to set down on the notepad. A speech, regardless of the topic, will have three main parts—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Besides, it will follow a chronological, topical, spatial order, etc. Moreover, a preview statement and transition can easily be found, in English speeches [7]. An (trainee) interpreter apt to remember things of spatial order, for example, can store in most of the information he/she hears in his/her short-term memory and take few notes.

2) It helps to create a sense of anticipation/prediction. Speech analysis contributes to building a pre-linguistic meaning structure with the help of various types of knowledge. It then serves to activate target-language elements for syntactic and semantic word and phrase processing on the way to the output of articulation [8]. Many speeches to be interpreted consecutively are about training courses, discussions, or ceremony, i.e., speeches of welcome, inaugurations, or after-dinner speeches. Take a Chinese political speech, for example, once there is “为地区乃至世界的和平(或发展、经济发展、人文、反恐等等)”, the following is highly likely to be“作出了重要贡献”. And a toast speech by foreigners will certainly end with best wishes, god bless you, or good luck; if by Chinese, however, with sound health, smooth work, etc. With speech analysis from the beginning to the end, one can anticipate many words and henceforth relieve the burden of memory.

The Proportion of Notes

Many scholars and students mistakenly believe that normally interpreters are supposed to allocating seventy percent of the content or effort to their memory, and the rest to notes. This is unduly general and indefinite, though. The proportion of notes pertains to the complexity, logic, and familiarity of the speech, as well as the speed of speakers.
Complexity. Consecutive interpreting is rendered as "short CI" or "long CI". In short CI, the interpreter relies on memory, each message segment being brief enough to memorize. In this kind of CI, short-term will suffice; no note-taking is needed. It does not entail note-taking even for a longer segment like this:

I was walking in the park with a friend recently, when his mobile phone rang, interrupting our conversation. They are walking and talking on a beautiful sunny day, and I became invisible, absent from the conversation. The park was full of people talking on their cellphones. They passed other people without looking at them, or saying hello, or paying attention their babies or stopping to pet their puppies. Obviously, the electronic voice is preferable to human contact.

For complex ones, more notes will be needed. See the following case:

中国货币化的另一个方面是货币发行规模的惊人膨胀。以每年净投放的现金看，1981 年为 50 亿元，2007 年为 3300 亿元，增长了 66 倍，这还没有考虑银行卡对现金的巨大渗透和替代效应。以广义货币 M2 余额来看，1987 年为 1.9 万亿，2007 年为 40.3 万亿，增长了 21 倍。

In such passages or segments as the above, numbers and many important elements are bound to be noted.

Logic. Western speeches, as mentioned above, always follow some conventions, and they are logically connected.

Not all regions have benefited equally from economic growth. The eastern region was strategically better positioned to benefit from economic liberalization and opening up. Consequently, the east coast grew faster than the rest of the country. Also, the central parts of China grew more rapidly than the western parts. As a result, during the last two decades, there have been growing disparities in regional living standards.

Regarding such a segment of a spatial order, the interpreter needs to put down only a few keywords.

Familiarity. All interpreters have their own fields they are familiar with. In these fields, they barely need to note down anything. An interpreter familiar with Chongqing, for example, may write down a handful of key elements or nothing with regard to the following:

重庆两江通衢, 舟楫便利, 自古以来就是西南地区物资集散地和繁荣的商业重镇。今日重庆也是长江上游和中国西部地区最具活力与竞争力的商贸中心，商品流通兴旺发达。

最近几年，重庆经济飞速发展，2015 年第一季度，重庆经济增速为 11%，位列全国第一。

Under these circumstances, the interpreter’s short-term memory and long-term memory are best co-ordinated [9]. Besides, in accordance with Gile’s effort model of CI: Interpreting=L(Listening and Analysis) +N (Note-taking) +M (Short-term Memory operations) +P (Coordination) [10]. When the content is familiar to the interpreter, long-term memory prevails and therefore “M” in the model increases; the others decreases, i.e. fewer notes are needed! This is also why trainee interpreters have been shown that senior and veteran ones take few notes.

The Speed of the Speaker. The speed of a speaker also exerts tremendous influence on how much notes his or her interpreter needs to or is able to take. When interpreting for a slow speaker, or practicing such materials by oneself, the interpreter has sufficient time to note down almost all important information. When listening to a slow or a dull speaker, our attention is inclined to be distracted, thus declining the effort to listen, and the effort to take notes increases.

The aforementioned arguments elucidate that the proportion of notes and the effort to take notes vary greatly.

Symbols

It should be clarified, first and foremost, that if an interpreter does not have a sound, consistent and meaningful note-taking system, then no amount of symbols will be of help, because a symbol can be a picture, a short word, pair of letters, or a single letter [4]. A capital B or a zigzag, for example, can represent but, however, nonetheless, on the other hand, etc.

Interpreters with good retention may write down many Chinese characters and few symbols and
still produce good interpretation, senior and veteran ones even more so. There are, however, many symbols that help note rapidly. It should be noted that some symbols are used commonly by the mass interpreters, others personally. I hereby propose some easy ways of taking notes, i.e. using Chinese radicals (部首), or the first letters of Chinese Pinyin to represent meanings. “扌”, for example, can be used to represent any verb that begins with the radical, and “疒” for all diseases, etc. “JZ” can be used for 競争 (competition), and “rx” 榮幸 (honor, privilege, and their adjectives). Another two are to use parentheses to enclose all adverbial parts, and a long underline to figure out all attributive clauses. They will further help present clearly the framework and logic of notes.

My suggestion is to: 1) learn some symbols commonly used; 2) create some that suit oneself; 3) practice to internalize them, and; 4) avoid using too many symbols.

Choice of Note-Taking-Language

Some argue that interpreters should take notes in the target language, while novice interpreters feel inclined to note down words of the source language, a time-consuming process in which they may not know the correct rendition. Nonetheless, if they cannot remember the corresponding words or characters, take in source language instead. Those that help us to remember senses should also be taken in the target language because they propel us to think and then articulate in another language [4]. Szabó (2006) proved that interpreters with Hungarian as their A language and English B have a strong tendency to take notes in English, irrespective of the direction of interpreting, and that the interpreter’s language combination itself also plays a pivotal role, though perhaps not a primary one, in an interpreters choice of note-taking language [11].

Note-Taking Training Methods at a Macro Level

Now that I have discussed some major new perspectives that may have been overlooked in interpreting training, I will discuss the methods of training and practice. I will not re-emphasize the noting of ideas/ senses rather than noting words, since this have been accentuated indisputably.

Two Phases

In general, there are mainly two phases: written texts; spoken speeches. In each phase, practice speeches in mother tongue and foreign language alternately. Using written texts in the initial phase is because when commencing learning to take notes, one’s ineffective note-taking spares an enormous amount of energy/ effort. Once note-taking is internalized or at least materially improved, however, interpreters will have much more effort focused on production, style, reformulation, etc.

At the beginning, interpreters should be trained intensively on certain topics for several weeks. In this way, they will have at least formed a basic structure of their notes and noted rather rapidly. This entails around two hundred pieces of A4 paper (both sides). Still, note-taking have to be consolidated in subsequent periods.

Noting Nouns and Tenses

Verbs generally generate more activeness of brain than nouns do [12]. Interpreters thus do not need to take down too many verbs, only those very unfamiliar ones. In this way, they will have more effort focused on listening and take down difficult information.

The Chinese language does not have too many marks for tenses, only “将” and “会” signifying future, and “了” and “已（经）” indicating the past or past participle, though they are sometimes omitted, as in “我明天来” and “联合国于七十年前成立”. English, however, has sixteen tenses, so much more than those in Chinese. Consequently, Chinese interpreters tend to overlook tenses in their interpretation. We are therefore obliged to put down tense marks to prompt our memory in the subsequent reproduction phase. It should also be noted that tenses in Chinese-English CI are all the more difficult; hence we need interpreters have to analyze the insinuated tense signals before taking them down. This process is also inextricably linked to listening.
Note-Taking Half Sentence behind Listening

Interpreters should maintain a harmonious note-taking pace to better coordinate listening, note-taking, and thinking/processing. In Chinese-English CI, that pace is easier to maintain since normally our mother tongue does not build a barrier to listening. Nevertheless, in interpreting the other way around, from English to Chinese, we will have difficulty in listening comprehension more or less. Albeit the fact, there is a shared point: half a sentence slower than what is heard! This leads to the second phase in which interpreters have to practice listening, note-taking, and the coordination between them as well [13].

Some pivotal concepts to bear in mind herein: practice to build your own internalized system of notes [3]; practice to coordinate with listening and whittle down the number of notes, not try to note down everything (I would note “坚持不结盟、不对抗、不针对第三方的方针” as “3X” with “X” for “no”); practice to analyze key information.

Conclusion

This paper looks into some long-held viewpoints and proposes new insights with reference to the proportion of notes, symbols, and factors affecting them. Also, it lays stress on some new perspectives, such as automatization, speech analysis, together with suggestions on methods of taking notes that have been ignored in class and during practice. I wish the paper could provide (trainee) interpreters and teachers of consecutive interpreting with more or less useful concepts or methods.

References