Note-taking for consecutive conference interpreting

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Introduction

When providing an interpretation in the consecutive mode, interpreters deliver the speech in the target language once speakers have finished one speech segment in the original language and pause for the interpreting to take place. The duration of the speech (segment) can vary from a few sentences to stretches of several minutes or even to a full delivery of, for example, 10–12 minutes (Kalina 1998: 23). This is the reason why most interpreters working in this mode take notes, which they use as memory triggers for retrieving the content of the speech and the message to be conveyed. The interpreter’s memory is thus a crucial element and asset in consecutive interpreting.

Since a consecutive interpretation can be rendered without technical equipment and without notes, consecutive interpreting is the most ancient mode of interpreting. Its ‘Golden Age’ was the 1920s when the profession of conference interpreters as we know it today was still very young. When simultaneous interpreting became the standard and usual mode of interpreting in international organisations and at multilingual international conferences after the Nuremberg trials (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2, in this volume), consecutive interpreting became less universally used in professional conference interpreting settings. Today, though, it is still often used in bilingual high-level political or diplomatic meetings and bi-laterals, or also in meetings without equipment, for example, in settings such as business or academia (e.g. Gillies 2019: 6; Luo & Ma 2019: 9).

Consecutive interpreting is taught in training institutions for conference interpreters since it continues to be in demand in some segments of the professional interpreting market. It is also seen as a relevant tool to teach and assess basic interpreting skills such as text analysis, text comprehension, summarising, the ability to abstract, memory skills, interpreting strategies, linguistic skills (i.e. the idiomatic reformulation of the original message in the target language without the influence of the original language, register, and style) and speaking/rhetorical skills (Kalina & Ahrens 2010: 150). For all these reasons, it is also part of the final exams at interpreter training institutions and is tested in accreditation tests for conference interpreters by institutional employers such as the UNO, the EU or national ministries (European Commission 2009; Gillies 2019: 8).
Over the last two decades, consecutive interpreting practice has changed considerably in the different market segments where it is being used (Kalina & Ahrens 2010: 153–154). Financial constraints, the demand for less frequently spoken languages in interpreting assignments, and new technological devices that can enhance the interpreter’s work, such as digital pens or tablet computers, can explain these changes. It is also worth noting that the nature of source texts in consecutive settings has changed inasmuch as, to keep the dynamics of the source speech as well as communicative interaction, speeches or parts of a speech that have to be interpreted tend to be shortened (Kalina & Ahrens 2010: 147).

Note-taking and practice

Early contributions on consecutive interpreting and note-taking were written by experienced conference interpreters who were focusing on practical aspects relating to the performance in the mode and on how to take notes (Herbert 1952; Matyssek 1989; Rozan 1956; Seleskovitch 1975). Many of them considered notes to be an instrument supporting the consecutive interpreter’s memory and, as they also worked as interpreter trainers, they suggested a number of note-taking principles.

Basic principles of note-taking

Traditional note-taking literature presents some basic principles, which are shared by almost all authors and ‘schools’ (Bowen & Bowen 1984; Gillies 2017; Herbert 1952; Ilg & Lambert 1996; Matyssek 1989; Rozan 1956; Seleskovitch 1975). Among these principles are noting down the following:

• ideas, not words/source text formulations;
• a clear and unambiguous separation of ideas;
• logical links;
• temporal markers;
• negation markers;
• an indented structure of the notes on the notepad (verticality/diagonal notes).

As to the structure of the notes, several different suggestions have been made. For example, Matyssek (1989: 74–81) recommends a margin at the left-hand side of the notepad for jotting down logical links and the principal agent of the respective idea, since these two triggers are needed for quick retrieval when reading notes back. This is also why Gillies (2017: 43–59) suggests using a simple structure for the ideas that are noted down, namely S(subject)–V(erb)–O(bject), which is written down diagonally, and supports text analysis—as ideas with an originally complex structure have to be simplified—and retrieval—as a simple structure is easier to read back.

 Whereas all note-taking schools recommend reliable and unambiguous rules of abbreviation (Gillies 2017; Matyssek 1989; Rozan 1956; Setton & Dawrant 2016a, 2016b), they differ considerably in the amount of symbols they suggest (Ahrens 2005). For Rozan (1956: 27–35), with his ‘abbreviation-oriented’ approach, 20 symbols for the most frequent concepts in speeches are sufficient; Matyssek prefers numerous pictographic symbols in order to have a ‘language-independent’ system. Following the Russian symbol-oriented approach to note-taking (Min’jar-Belorucev 1969), he advocates for simple, clear, pictographic, economic and unambiguous symbols (Matyssek 1989: 155–164). Gillies (2017: 109) discusses why and how
to use symbols, and where to find them but also emphasises that symbols should not be learnt like vocabulary and that “[t]here is no right or wrong number of symbols to use”.

Abbreviations and symbols, however, can never be a means in themselves. According to Matyssek (1989: 158) and others (e.g. Herbert 1952; Rozan 1956; Seleskovitch 1975; see also Albl-Mikasa 2017: 74, for an overview), notes are not an additional ‘language’ with the symbols being its ‘vocabulary’, which would be imposed on the source and target text. Learning them by heart does not help one to perform successfully in consecutive interpreting (see also Gillies 2017: 109; Sanchez 2018: 151). The key to a successful rendition of the source text message in the target language is text comprehension and analysis, as well as the interdependence between memory and notes. Notwithstanding, this traditional view of notes as the deverbalised meaning of the original text has been questioned several times since the end of the 1970s. Kirchhoff (1979: 122–124), for example, describes notes as being determined by language (rules) and linguistic categories and, for Allioni (1989: 191), notes are “the expression of a communicative code”. On the basis of her empirical study, Albl-Mikasa (2007: 384–387) argues that notes are a sort of (notation) text made of linguistic means of expression and characterised by its structural similarities with the original text and the target text alike.

As to the language to be used for notes, the different ‘schools’ defend opposite views. Matyssek prefers source-language notes if not ‘language-independent’ symbols (Matyssek 1989: 132–141), whereas Herbert (1952), Rozan (1956) and Seleskovitch (1975) favour notes in the target language. Other authors, like Ahrens (2002: 4) or Gillies (2017: 19) recommend a mix of languages. There is indeed empirical evidence that neither the latter nor the first option is actually exclusively found in practice. Notes are often a mix of the languages the interpreter knows, not necessarily just the target language of the respective performance (e.g. Szabó 2006). Empirical research also shows that interpreters have individual preferences as to the choice of language(s), symbols, words or abbreviations (e.g. Cardoen 2012; Chen 2017a) and develop and adapt their own and personalised system, consisting of a multilingual mixture of words, abbreviation, signs and symbols (Ahrens 2015: 284; Alexieva 1994: 204; Ilg & Lambert 1996: 80). According to Someya (2017a: 170), the source language is likely to serve as the “base language”, because “it is more accessible than the TL [target language], because the SL [source language] exists in a more activated state in the short-term memory in the interpreting context”.

**Empirical research into traditional note-taking**

Note-taking has been the focus of research since interpreting research came into being (for an overview, see Ahrens 2015 or Albl-Mikasa 2020; references of research-based articles and contributions written over the past 10 years can also be found on the CIRIN n.d.). Empirical studies of note-taking very often use experimental design. Memory, as one object of study in traditional note-taking approaches, clearly revealed the importance of the cognitive dimension in consecutive interpreting (see below). Access to data from authentic and real-life consecutive interpreting is not easy to get in empirical research (see, for example, Ahrens 2009, for notes taken in authentic settings) for reasons of confidentiality, copyright and personal rights, lack of audio/video recordings and/or transcriptions, etc. (Hale & Napier 2013; Kalina 1994).

Because the question of the language of notes had been discussed dogmatically, as mentioned above, conducting research into the directionality of notes seemed to be a logical way forward. Dam’s (2004a) small-scale study showed that the five professional interpreters taking part in it preferred to take notes in the target language, but switched to the source
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language when the incoming message was ‘difficult’, whereas four interpreting students in her second study (Dam 2004b) mainly opted for notes in their A language. Szabó (2006) was not able to confirm such findings since the eight student interpreters in her study preferred to take notes in English also when interpreting into their A language, Hungarian. In a study within the novice-expert paradigm (Moser-Mercer 2015), Abuín González (2009, 2012) analysed the notes of 30 subjects of three different levels of expertise in consecutive interpreting (beginner students, advanced students and professional interpreters) and observed more synthesising note-taking strategies, as well as a more frequent use of target language notes among those subjects with a higher level of expertise. From these empirical findings—although they are limited in number and only refer to European language pairs—it can be hypothesised that the actual language combination, the actual processing requirements, as well as the status of the interpreter’s working languages and expertise in interpreting, condition the language notes are taken in. So far, no exclusive rule of note-taking directionality has been evidenced and demonstrated as superior to others.

Note-taking and cognition

Speech processing, as it is needed in consecutive interpreting, was related to human cognition for a long time before cognitive theories found their way into interpreting research. Several early studies focusing on interpreters’ notes illustrated the cognitive dimension of consecutive interpreting and note-taking. One example is Seleskovitch’s (1975) study with 13 professional conference interpreters, which focused on the relationship between note-taking and memory and came to support her Interpretive Theory of Translation (1968, 1975), also known as the “Théorie du sens” (García-Landa 1981). Later, Lambert (1989) concluded from her own experiment that consecutive interpreting involves deeper processing of information than simultaneous interpreting since notes seemed to support memorisation and recall. These early studies highlighted the important role played by memory in note-taking, which practitioners had been emphasising already in the early days of the debate on note-taking without referring explicitly to cognitive theories. From her understanding of cognitive-psychological theories of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Ericsson & Kintsch 1995; van Dijk & Kintsch 1983), Ito (2017) supported the concept of deverbalisation—the key factor of the interpreting process according to Seleskovitch’s (1968, 1975) Interpretive Theory of Translation. Albl-Mikasa (2020: 383), however, concluded from her cognition-based study that deverbalisation is rather the exception than the norm in the interpreting process (see also below).

Correlation between notes and memory

Consecutive interpreting challenges the interpreter’s cognitive resources. During the first phase of the consecutive interpreting process—analysis and comprehension—the source text content is stored in the interpreter’s memory. To avoid overburdening, the interpreter uses notes, which serve as triggers for information retrieval. Notes are not a substitute for the interpreter’s memory; they are an auxiliary means, a so-called ‘material storage’ (Kirchhoff 1979: 121), used to note down ideas and concepts, but also names and figures, since memorising these requires an important cognitive effort. Generally speaking, notes reflect processes of source text comprehension (Mackintosh 1985: 40–42; van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 189–196) and comprise more or less detailed information and (micro-)propositional contents (Albl-Mikasa 2020: 383; Kirchhoff 1979: 122; Someya 2017b: 202–205), which are necessary for a reliable and accurate retrieval of the content stored in the memory. Ideally, only 20–40 per cent of the
source text message are noted down, all the rest is stored in memory (Matyssek 1989: 41). The quantity of notes has also been commented on in the interpreter training literature (e.g. Gile 1995: 178–183; Gillies 2017: 113–126; Ilg & Lambert 1996: 78; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989: 60–62). In her empirical study with three student interpreters taking their final exam in a postgraduate programme in conference interpreting, Cardoen (2012) observed the relationship between the quantity of notes and the presentational quality of the target text production. She found fewer notes in more fluent target text passages whereas more disfluencies were reported in passages with more notes.

Memory, therefore, plays a crucial role in consecutive interpreting. For Kirchhoff (1979: 121), the source text information to be remembered is not put into either memory or notes but is memorised and stored in two different parallel ways: one mental, the other material. Both ‘storage types’ are interdependent in the two phases of the consecutive interpreting process. During listening and analysis, the interpreter listens to the incoming source text and analyses its unfolding logic while taking notes. This allows the understanding and memorisation of the overall text message and its logical structure (Matyssek 1989: 47). During reformulation, notes help to reactivate memory whereas memory helps to retrieve meaning from notes.

Awareness of the unfolding logic of the incoming source text in consecutive interpreting was illustrated by Andres’ (2002) study with real-time recordings of note-taking of 14 professional conference interpreters and 14 student interpreters. Student interpreters processed information at a micro level—and therefore struggled with micro-level problems (e.g. words, numbers)—whereas professional interpreters always ‘kept an ear’ on holistic processing of the source text message, which helped them to solve micro-level problems more successfully. These findings were similar to what Abuín González (2009, 2012) observed in her experimental study with 30 subjects of different levels of expertise where only the professional interpreters were able “to take notes in a synthetic manner (noting down key elements and primary information, using effective criteria for suppressing information and noting down new elements or those with a high informative load)” (Abuin González 2012: 61).

Broadening the cognitive perspective: notes as text

Although the cognitive perspective was clearly present in earlier contributions on note-taking and consecutive interpreting (e.g. Gile 1985, 1991, 1995; Kirchhoff 1979; Seleskovitch 1975), it was not until the 1990s that it was finally taken into consideration by interpreting studies scholars and researchers in general (e.g. Danks et al. 1997; Gran & Dodds 1989; Kalina 1998; Kohn & Kalina 1996; Setton 1999). The cognition-focused input coming from other linguistic (sub-)disciplines, such as text linguistics and discourse analysis (e.g. Brown & Yule 1983; de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; van Dijk & Kintsch 1983), as well as from psycholinguistics and speech processing (e.g. Levelt 1989; Rickheit & Strohner 1993; Sperber & Wilson 1995), helped to underpin the cognitive perspective of note-taking (see also Okoniewska & Wang, Chapter 31, and Hodzik & Williams, Chapter 26, in this volume).

Allioni (1989) looked at notes from a text-linguistic point of view and as subject to certain grammatical rules. Taking this approach further into a cognition-based perspective, Albl-Mikasa (2008, 2017) developed a “cognitive-linguistic model of consecutive interpreting” by applying cognitive theories of text and discourse to consecutive note-taking (Albl-Mikasa 2017: 72–75). In her study of five student interpreters’ notes, she demonstrated that notes are a text (rather than a ‘technique’), written down according to linguistic rules and criteria, on all levels of linguistic sub-systems (lexis, syntax, discourse). The components of this notation text
are lexical and grammatical elements of the notation language, be they words, abbreviations, signs or symbols. She also shows that interpreters process the notation text, as well as the source and the target text, at a micro-propositional level.

The cognitive approach of note-taking in interpreting was also studied by Someya (2017a, 2017b) who posited that the interpreter’s notes are “a reflection of his/her ‘understanding’ of the target text” (Someya 2017a: 148). Notes as a propositional representation of target text elements allow inferences about the interpreter’s comprehension of the source text. The propositional approach reported on by Someya (2017a) was put to the test in an experiment with four professional interpreters (Someya 2017b). Results of the study indicated that the subjects’ notes were text-based (Someya 2017b: 196–198), and “basically organised along the Theme → Rheme continuum” (Someya 2017b: 206). Someya also measured the timing of actually writing down relevant lexical items. His analysis of this timing suggests that jotting down relevant words or phrases followed the order of the items in question in the source text and happened immediately after these items had been heard and understood by the interpreter. However, this immediate note-taking was interrupted in passages where the content was not immediately clear to the interpreter who had to wait for more information to construct meaning (Someya 2017b: 198–202).

Cognitive load and note-taking

Interpreting is a demanding task which draws strongly on the interpreter’s cognitive resources. Studies on cognitive load in interpreting have mainly focused on simultaneous interpreting, defining cognitive load as “the amount of capacity the performance of a cognitive task occupies in an inherently capacity-limited system” (Seeber 2013: 19). The limitation of cognitive processing capacity and the need to manage it were described by Gile (1995) in his *Effort Models* (see Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume). He noted that “[n]ote-taking is an area in which the concept of processing capacity can be useful but has seldom been used” (Gile 1995: 182). Relevant aspects of note-taking that have an impact on processing capacity are the choice of source vs. target language, the choice of words vs. symbols or that of full words vs. abbreviations (Gile 1995: 182–183). A number of empirical studies of these aspects have been conducted since (e.g. Alexieva 1994; Cardoen 2012; Dam 2004a, 2004b; Szabó 2006), but the focus was often on the interpreting product, not the process—with the exception of Andres (2002) who measured the time between the spoken word and the corresponding written element. Results have been inconsistent and the small number of subjects per study did not allow generalisation. Chen (2017b) discussed the concept of cognitive load in interpreting and included it in her empirical small-scale study (Chen 2017a) with five professional interpreters with Chinese as A and English as B language (see also Chmiel, Chapter 33, in this volume). She applied a mixed-methods approach to investigate the choice of language and form of notes and the relationship between note-taking and interpreting performance, leading her to question the existence of “a relationship between the note-taking choices and cognitive load in CI [Consecutive Interpreting]” (Chen 2017a: 7). The analysis of her ear-pen span data, recorded with a digital pen and a tablet (Chen 2017a: 8; see also the section below), could indicate that “the cognitive load induced by different note-taking choices … appeared to be: symbol higher than language, full word higher than abbreviation, and Chinese higher than English” (Chen 2017a: 20).

Cognitive load in note-taking for consecutive interpreting remains a challenging but promising topic for future research into the underlying processes.
Note-taking and technology

As the mode does not require specific equipment, consecutive interpreting has long been considered the ‘non-technological’ mode of interpreting. However, technology-assisted interpreting (see Fantinuoli, Chapter 36, in this volume) has been of particular interest to trainers and practitioners seeking to find ways of integrating technological applications to assist them in their everyday professional life (Orlando 2015a). Technology started being considered in consecutive interpreting and in note-taking when digital devices became more advanced, smaller and easier to use. Technological advances have provided practitioners and researchers with opportunities to investigate new approaches to the mode and the technique.

Hybrid consecutive interpreting and note-taking

At the end of the 1990s, for example, Michele Ferrari, a SCIC interpreter, was the first to trial ‘Simultaneous-consecutive’, a hybrid mode of interpreting (Gomes 2002). Using a digital device to record an original speech, he subsequently interpreted it by listening to the playback via earphones, doing the consecutive simultaneously, without notes. Following this first attempt, the application of this hybrid mode was tested in several studies (Chitrakar 2016; Ferrari 2007; Hamidi & Pöchhacker 2007; Kalina 2007; Pöchhacker 2007). Despite some advantages in the technique and genuine interest among some practitioners (Orlando 2015a), the mode never really gained popularity, possibly because the actual consecutive performance was rather “quasi-simultaneous” (Kalina & Ahrens 2010: 148) as far as strategies and presentation were concerned, but did not contribute to saving time. Gillies (2019: 227) believes that it could be better understood and used more often “if a generation of interpreters learn to use [the technique] as part of their studies, something that doesn’t happen systematically yet”.

Beyond the intention to fully respect the original speech, the “radical innovation” (Pöchhacker 2016: 83) also allowed the interpreter not to take notes, as he or she would usually do for a traditional consecutive rendition. Indeed, with this ‘digitally remastered’ interpretation, the interpreter can hear the speech twice (first, when it is delivered and, second, when it is played back from the recording) and therefore can decide that traditional note-taking becomes superfluous. However, as pointed out by Pöchhacker (2015: 382): “though the method was intended to do away with the need of note-taking, the interpreter can still use the notepad for memory support”, especially with new technological developments like digital pen technology, which facilitates both recording and note-taking with one single device (e.g. Smartpens, or a tablet and a stylus), as described by Orlando (2010, 2014, 2015a), or Goldsmith (2018).

Digital pen technology and simultaneous-consecutive

While investigating the use of digital pens in interpreter training, Orlando (2014) carried out a pilot study to compare the interpreting performance of interpreters who used the conventional consecutive interpreting mode and this new hybridised mode with the aid of a digital pen. The main differences between this study and previous ones lay in the equipment used and the fact that the interpreters could take notes with the pen. Using Gile’s (1995) Effort Models, in which Gile conceptualised the interpreting act as a series of efforts to be coordinated and managed to perform well (see Riccardi, Chapter 27, in this volume), Orlando mapped the processes involved in ‘Simultaneous-consecutive’ as shown in Table 3.1.

During phase 1, the effort components are identical to those involved in a traditional consecutive performance except that the interpreter knows that he or she will hear the speech a
second time and interpret it simultaneously. The interpreter may decide to take notes or not; or to take notes in a different way as this ‘anticipatory’ knowledge may lead to more economical note-taking, with a focus on the macro-linguistic and structural elements of the speech, for example. During phase 2, the effort components that are usually required and coordinated in simultaneous interpretation are facilitated by the fact that the interpreter hears the content of the speech for the second time. The familiarity with the content, coupled with specific notes the interpreter may have taken, should facilitate the management of the extra load that the added coordination of operations may bring (e.g. anticipation, re-reading notes from the first hearing, using the functions of the recorder). It is worth noting, in relevance to this chapter, that note-taking, and therefore note-reading, are optional as interpreters may decide to rely only on what they memorise and on the recording.

The findings of this study corroborated results from previous ones in terms of increased accuracy and completeness, as well as comfort in interpreting. As for note-taking, all participants indicated that they took fewer or different notes when interpreting in the hybrid mode, but that having this possibility in case of any technological glitch reassured them. In a recent study with advanced interpreting students trained to work in ‘simultaneous-consecutive’ over a few weeks, Orlando and Hlavac (2020: 13) conducted an enquiry after that period of training and surveyed the 25 trainees. The aim was to elicit their note-taking individual preferences while interpreting in the hybrid mode, and, in particular, discover whether they would take notes and whether these notes were useful. During the delivery of the source speech, 19 students took notes (76 per cent), 6 did not (24 per cent). Four took full notes of the speech (as for a traditional consecutive) and 15 only noted down numbers, names and key terms, “striking” and/or “important information”, or structural aspects of the source speech. Seventeen reported that they consulted their notes while providing the interpretation and that they considered their notes “useful”. Two said they did not because they were focusing on listening and interpreting and did not feel the need to refer to their notes.

Investigations on the note-taking preferences of interpreters when working in this mode should be encouraged as these studies would certainly open new doors for both interpreting training and practice.

**Table 3.1 Efforts in the ‘simultaneous-consecutive’ mode of interpreting**

| Phase 1 | Listening 1 and analysis 1  
|         | Short-term memory operations  
|         | Note-taking (optional)  
| Phase 2 | Listening 2 and analysis 2  
|         | Short-term memory operations  
|         | Long-term memory operations (reconstructing the speech)  
|         | Note-reading (optional)/Retrieving information/Anticipation/Operating the recorder (playback)  
|         | Production  

*Source: Orlando (2014: 41); based on Gile (1995).*

**Consecutive 2.0: tablet computer as notepad**

Tablet Interpreting, or Consecutive 2.0, implies the use of a tablet computer and a stylus instead of a notepad and pen. Technological progress in this area has allowed the use of smaller and lighter computers and of facilitated handwriting recognition.
The first commercially viable tablet computers were released in the early 2000s (Goldsmith 2018: 342). Today, tablets are omnipresent in our daily lives. With the development of a number of applications for handwritten notes, some conference interpreters have been interested in testing the use of tablets for note-taking (Altieri 2020; Goldsmith 2015, 2018; Rosado 2013). The tablet computer is used as a digital notepad in combination with a stylus configured depending on the user’s preferences (Rosado 2013). Goldsmith’s (2018: 348) pilot study showed that after having practised note-taking on a tablet and having used it in various assignments, some interpreters considered the tablet to be more effective and amenable than a traditional notepad. Among the pros, practitioners mentioned the screen size similar to paper, having no paper and ink limitations, smooth writing, scrolling options, storage of all documents on one device, internet connectivity, ease of use, and a more professional appearance. As for the cons, they pointed out a limited battery life, the device being breakable or uncomfortable to hold, the screen not being easy to see in certain light conditions, and high costs (Goldsmith 2018: 350–352). In Altieri’s (2020: 33) study, the respondents, though acknowledging highly promising possibilities, were less enthusiastic about the use of tablets in this mode, mainly because of lack of training and familiarity with the instrument.

Although only a few studies have been dedicated to the use of tablets for note-taking in consecutive interpreting so far, it has become already clear that tablet interpreting is being considered by professional interpreters, and that the number of practitioners who are using the tool may rise even more in the future, provided they are trained in using it. Technological appreciation and personal preferences seem to be the crucial factors for deciding on using a tablet for note-taking or not. Further studies should be carried out in this area too, in particular to “investigate whether note-taking styles differ in tablet interpreting” (Goldsmith 2018: 363).

Despite the fact that very little attention has been devoted to this area of practice, it has been posited that digital technological advances have also influenced the work of interpreters with disabilities, with some evidenced advantages but also some disadvantages. For example, in his study, Figiel (2018: 37) showed that technological progress has allowed blind and low-sighted interpreter students to move from using “Braille slate and stylus to take notes” to more advanced technologies such as “digital Braille note-takers”. However, he also argues that such advances “demand more skills and abilities from blind students” and that they “still do not live up to the expectations” (Figiel 2018: 36).

Note-taking and training

In the past, some training institutions decided not to teach note-taking as they considered the interpreter’s note-taking system as highly personal, developed and adapted to each individual’s needs and skills. However, a number of authors who taught in these institutions recommended specific techniques to take notes (e.g. Bowen & Bowen 1984; Gillies 2017; Herbert 1952; Ilg & Lambert 1996; Matyssek 1989; Rozan 1956; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1989; Setton & Dawrant 2016a).

A pertinent approach in teaching consecutive interpreting and note-taking is a trainee-centred one, aiming to provide student interpreters with input and ideas on how to develop and reflect on their own system of notes (Dingfelder Stone 2015: 165; Schweda Nicholson 1990: 140). Students are familiarised with different techniques and basic principles of note-taking (Dingfelder Stone 2015; Gillies 2017), are trained in text analysis and memorising (Ahrens 2001; Liu 1994; Viaggio 1992), and develop their personalised conventions.

Chmiel (2010) explored the effectiveness of teaching note-taking. She found that the majority of the tested students adhered to traditional principles such as noting down numbers and logical
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links or clearly structuring notes on the page, but also that symbols were not so easily transferred and adopted into the students’ individual system. This raises the following question: How could suggested syllabi for note-taking classes (Dingfelder Stone 2015: 157–165) be adapted and shifted towards a perspective which would take into consideration cognitive-linguistic findings in note-taking in general and cognitive load in particular? Indeed, studies with a cognitive perspective indicate that the cognitive load of note-taking and note-reading is affected by factors such as directionality, use of symbols vs. words, etc. (Chen 2016, 2018). In teaching, these findings could be beneficial to understand how note-taking techniques could be applied. The main factor being comprehension, it should be the main focus in the teaching/learning process; the question of how to note down—language, symbols, words—plays a secondary role as long as notes represent the meaning of what is being said (Zhang 2012: 183). Albl-Mikasa (2017: 108–109) also emphasises the need for a more cognitive-linguistic teaching of note-taking which focuses on the intertextual relations between the source text, the notation and the target text. Students have to be made aware of these relations instead of being taught one or a mix of the traditional note-taking techniques.

Other approaches to note-taking: patterned notes/mind mapping

The structure of the notes on the notepad is to facilitate the retrieval of cognitively memorised information. Since the lateralisation of the human brain involves both linear-sequential and non-linear processing, the sequential way of taking notes has been questioned. Sequential notes do not reflect the weight of certain elements in the same way as patterned notes, e.g. in the radiant form of a mind map (Buzan 1974; Buzan & Buzan 1996). Although mind mapping has not been developed as a note-taking technique for conference interpreters, it could offer some relevant advantages compared to traditional note-taking, since in radiantly patterned notes, key ideas and elements can easily be identified and the graphical representation of ideas supports memorisation (Buzan & Buzan 1996).

Norton (1981) was the first to carry out research into the application of mind mapping as a note-taking technique for conference interpreting. Mind map features, such as the size of the notepad or the use of colours, are difficult to apply in a consecutive interpreting setting where the interpreter depends on the speaker’s elaboration of ideas. Despite these restrictions, mind-map-like passages can be found on interpreters’ notepads which, in general, are structured sequentially. The use of this technique depends largely on the individual interpreter’s preferences.

Radiantly structured notes support the analysis of the source text and the transformation of ideas into notes which leads to a deeper processing of source text information. The use of patterned notes is thus recommended for teaching consecutive interpreting (Norton 1981: 70) and for text analysis in interpreter training in general (Gillies 2017: 21–25), but has also been discouraged for reasons of adding to cognitive load because of the dissonance with source and target text linearity (Albl-Mikasa 2017: 86–87).

The use of digital pen technology in training

As mentioned earlier, a favoured approach in interpreter training aims at putting the student at the centre of the teaching/learning act. Any such constructivist intention relies on various pedagogical elements that will assist trainees in their learning process: metacognitive strategies, process-oriented and product-oriented evaluations, feedback mechanisms among others (Orlando 2016). In the teaching of note-taking, the use of digital pen technology has been a crucial technological advance to achieve such objectives. With their unique technical features

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allowing the simultaneous recording of both what is said in the room and what is written by the user, digital pens make it possible to capture live the process of note-taking of an interpreter at work. As the data can be uploaded on any type of computer, or played instantly on tablets or smartphones, this offers the possibility of viewing the notes of trainees and discussing them as a classroom activity and, combined with other technologies, to pinpoint the qualities and defects of the notes in relation to the source speech and the interpretation (Orlando 2010). Various pedagogical activities and sequences can be developed and implemented to allow students and trainers to identify issues in the note-taking technique of a trainee (e.g. self- or peer-evaluation), but also to develop personalised and effective remediation strategies through cross-fertilisation (Orlando 2016: 117–121). Several experiments have been conducted in the consecutive interpreting classroom (Kellett Bidoli & Vardè 2016; Orlando 2010, 2015b; Romano 2018). All concur on the many pedagogical and metacognitive benefits the use of such technology brings: the access to ‘live’ notes allowing one to identify at once and better understand what part of the source speech is misunderstood, not memorised or missed, how long the lag/ décalage is, etc. The possibility for students to visualise the process of note-taking and identify better their own qualities or deficiencies, to share ideas and get inspiration from other students and trainers, to understand better and analyse what can go wrong if they take excessive or disorganised notes, is also an incentive to use such technology. Whether digital pens are used at the very start of training (Romano 2018) or at a later advanced stage to assess progress and efficiency (Orlando 2015b), they can benefit trainees throughout the duration of their course.

Finally, yet importantly, the technology can also offer new insights for research, for example, if used combined with other technologies as a new way of collecting data for research projects on note-taking and cognitive load, noting preferences and conventions, or on the process of writing and pen movements (Chen 2018, 2020).

Conclusion

In this chapter, note-taking for conference interpreting has been considered through different dimensions: practice, cognition, technology and training. Mastering the skill and competence of note-taking is crucial during a traditional consecutive interpretation as notes are an indispensable means that supports the interpreters’ memory and will generally help them to render the source text message correctly, comprehensively and linguistically appropriately in the target language. This being said, it is also the view of the present authors that the most important thing interpreting trainees and trainers need to understand is that notes are not an end in itself. There are too many elements and variables at play in a consecutive interpretation—topical knowledge/preparation, text analysis, memory capacity, expression and presentation, coherence of the rendition, just to name a few—to limit its quality to the mere use of a well-elaborated system of notes. The better all these different components are well managed and coordinated, the better the chances of performing successfully in each consecutive interpreting assignment.

Further reading


Note-taking for consecutive conference interpreting

References


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