TEACHING SIMULTANEOUS AND CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETATION: TECHNIQUES AND METODS

Ana-Maria STOICA
Universitatea din Piteşti

Abstract*: The article represents an insight into the very complex and difficult field of simultaneous and consecutive interpretation. We will mainly emphasise the basic techniques and methods to be used when presenting students with simultaneous and consecutive interpretation, such techniques as the active listening, mnemonic strategies, taking notes, etc.*
Keywords: *Interpretation, conferences, symbols.*

Simultaneous and Consecutive Interpretation represent branches of the larger field of translation. While translation refers to the result of a written activity, interpretation is a reproduction of the message, limited to the oral level. An exception is give by the sight translation which combines the characteristics of the written and the oral text.

There are certain compulsory conditions to be met for the interpretation to be successful: a. the complete understanding of the original message; b. the control of information; c. the appropriate presentation of the message into the target language. In its turn, the interpreter must have certain special abilities (Del Pino Romero, 1999) to properly operate the active language, good knowledge of passive languages, good memory, rich culture, national and international up-to-dateness, curiosity, synthesis abilities, ability to focus, etc.

Simultaneous and consecutive interpretation has been practised in a modern acoustically-assisted form for about fifty years and has become the standard medium of multilingual communication in international organisations, both intergovernmental and private.

Conference interpreters constitute a distinct profession and are usually first trained in consecutive interpretation, in which discourse is rendered in five or ten minutes segments with the help of notes.

Consecutive and simultaneous interpretation differ in that the consecutive interpreter is not forced by the requirements of immediate reproduction as in the case of simultaneous interpretation, a case in which there is no time for structuring the discourse. On the other hand, in the case of simultaneous interpretation, the short time memory is permanently at work because of the rapid succession of information. Another distinction is to be seen in the result of the understanding phase. In the case of consecutive interpretation it can take the form of notes, whilst for the simultaneous interpretation, the processing of information and the understanding result in the immediate production of discourse, making the task much more difficult. The consecutive interpreter also has time to analyse the discourse and its nuances while on the contrary, the simultaneous interpreter cannot have an overall image of the discourse to be interpreted.

All interpreters find this profession demanding and challenging. The interpreter needs a good short-term memory to retain what he or she has just heard and a good

BDD-A5660 © 2008 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:15 UTC)

long-term memory to put the information into context. Ability to concentrate is a factor as is the ability to analyse and process what is heard.

For students the tasks that consecutive and simultaneous interpretation imply seem very difficult. That is why teachers should present the students with clear theoretical but also practical information, with strategies and methods. Practice is however the most important as each individual, following general information and principles, very often finds his or her own strategy to work with.

The first principle to be taught is that of the active listening, as a very important step in the process of consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. Theoreticians consider listening to be fundamental because it offers us the raw material, that is the data we will operate with. Bowen and Bowen (1984) identify four types of listening, out of which only one makes the interpretation process possible: passive listening, protective listening, selective listening, active or focused listening. In their opinion active listening is characterised by a permanent state of alert and interest, an exact assessment of the speaker's position, pro or opposite the topic in discussion, by the ability to identify the main topic from the possible examples in the discourse. It is considered that "This form of listening is not a natural gift; it is something that has to be learned and trained. Even when it has been learned it requires great power of concentration and stamina in any but the shortest of meetings held in Consecutive, hence the need for interpreters at all times to be fit and mentally alert"(Jones, 1998)

Some specialists talk about another stage within the reception-understanding process and that is the understanding of the significance of the discourse and others include it within the understanding of the message. To understand the message means to understand the intention of the speaker, the subjectivity of the speaker and the information that the speaker provides, that means to analyse the discourse, to identify the type of discourse and all additional information that comes from the speaker. Memory is also very important and it has to be trained. The purpose of memory training is to achieve a better understanding of the source language, which will lead to adequate interpreting. Psychological studies of human brain, for our interest, in memory, make a distinction between short-term memory and long-term memory. In case of the short-term memory it means that the brain retains information for a short period of time without creating mechanisms for later recall. Long-term memory occurs when one has created pathways for storing ideas and information which can be recalled weeks, months, or even years. To create these pathways, one must make a deliberate attempt to encode information. Long-term memory is in fact a learning process. The duration of the short term memory is very short, up to 30 or 40 seconds. Memory in interpreting lasts only for a short time. Once the interpreting is over, the interpreter moves to another one. Therefore, the memory skills which need to be taught to students are short term memory skills.

Understanding is the first step in successful interpreting. So, it is to be provided in the early stage of interpreter training.

In classroom students should start with exercises of active listening followed by processing the information that comes from a certain discourse and memory training. For example, students are given a taped discourse of maximum three hundred words and the task is to listen carefully and write down the main ideas, and all the elements that indicate the speaker's intentions.

BDD-A5660 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:15 UTC)

After a certain period students will be asked to do the same but this time they will not be allowed to take notes. They will be encouraged to retell the text in the same words as the original to the larger extent possible.

To come even closer to the possible conditions in a conference hall students will have to do exercises with interference, for example noises. Recording speeches with inserted noises as a background is a recommended classroom practice, being very effective for enabling students to concentrate on the discourse.

After analysing the discourse in order that the interpreter decide what strategies to use in order to activate his or her anticipatory mechanisms, the next stage of the complex process of interpreting is that of processing the information. At this phase the message is prepared for retention using mnemonic strategies and the physical support of notes. The interpreter must determine the basic elements and the additional, secondary information. Otherwise he or she won't be able to omit elements, something often necessary because of the difficult content or because of the high speed. However the interpreter cannot omit important ideas and that it's why he has to develop a scheme. Jones indicates a classification as follows:

- main ideas- that correspond to the fundamental necessities of the receptor – for example who does what and when, who says/thinks what;
- secondary ideas- that are of a certain importance and thus they cannot be eliminated- for example adjectives and adverbs indicating special characteristics of people or actions;
- external elements that give colour to the discourse.

Bowen and Bowen consider that the activity of the interpreter is very similar to that of an archaeologist who has to dig for the main idea out of its external stylistic clothing. For that, certain factors are to be taken into account: connections reflected by the content of the message (who does what?, who is affected? When?, where? Why?); the new elements (what part of the information is unusual? What part is already known by the receptor?); anticipation (what elements can be anticipated, depending on the type of discourse?).

It is important to give students exercises for processing information because they will exercise their abilities of selection and analysis of information. The exercises will consist in structuring information from a certain discourse in main ideas, secondary idea, external elements, elements that cannot be eliminated, elements that they can omit, etc.

There are controversies related to teaching interpretation in the part of notes taking: some authors suggest the omission of notes because students can create their own system of taking notes, even if some specialists include detailed descriptions, principles and symbols for recurrent concepts. It is considered that (MATTHEWS, 1984) "the second stage of consecutive interpretation is the most debated. Opinion here is split between the teaching of a system of note-taking and the non-teaching of one, leaving the students to devise their own mnemonics. But even here, there is general consensus on a good main points. The most important ones are: 1. The interpreter must make an objective analysis of the text as a prerequisite to note-taking, and 2. Note-taking is seen as an aid to memorisation and not a substitute for it. I believe the question to be one of the degree rather than of difference. It seems to me that either approach strictly applied will give rise to different "styles" of interpretation rather than better or worse interpreters. "

BDD-A5660 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:15 UTC)

It is obvious that note-taking is not a purpose in itself but a tool and students must be aware of this fact. On the other hand there are no universal rules for note-taking. Rozan and others indicate few principles necessary to any consecutive interpreter in developing his/her own way of taking notes: 1. Write down the main idea instead of words; 2. Abbreviation rules; 3. Chains; 4. Negation; 5. Emphasise; 6. Verticality; 7.Diagonal change of place and disparity.

There are certain categories of words that should be however noted because of the difficulty in memorising. Those are: the numbers- as abstract entities, difficult to memorise, especially when the speaker mentions them in hurry or in a longer series; the names- can be considered abstract entities with the exception of the names the interpreter is familiar with; the enumeration- usually the speaker speeds up the rhythm when he or she enumerates and it is indicated that the interpreter writes them down on a vertical line.

Students have to remember to take notes in a simplified form. And for that reason symbols are appropriate. They have to know that the more time they save, the more room brain will have to operate- to understand the speech better, digest its message more quickly and recall it more easily.

The literature renders several special symbols, grouped in generic categories:

1. symbols of expression: thinking; debate; judgement;
2. symbols of movement: movement from a point to another; increasing; decreasing;
3. symbols of correspondence: equality, difference, indication.

Students should be presented with the examples of symbols and note-taking but they should also be encouraged to create their own system of noting and test its functionality during exercises in classroom. They should also become aware of several target aspects such as:

- to reproduce the source discourse exactly and with no stress, to offer a complete and correct target version;
- to get minimum effort with a maximum of visual stimuli in order to make reconstruction of the message easier;
- to extract the significance of sentences which once processed will become the frame of the new discourse;
- to feel confident using a simple method of taking notes, that will help memory and will function as an immediate visual tool.

Besides being a very difficult task, interpreting could involve a very disturbing factor such as stress. Talking to students we can identify various sources of stress such as: apprehension because of lack of experience, fear of not being able to understand, fear of not being understood, or of inadequate memory, anxiety about being wrong, agitation cause of not being able to find the “right” word, dread of speaking in public, horror of judgement of peers. For such reasons classes should start first with easy tasks, games, jokes in order to create a relaxed atmosphere. Simple exercises of passive and active listening which might seem at a first sight too simple but which in fact are not trivial at all.

Interpreting is not a recent field, but conference interpreting is. And recently, simultaneous interpreting is more fashionable, also due to the high technical support. However, consecutive interpreting is not be neglected as being an essential part and a primordial stage when teaching interpreting. Working conditions are more and more

BDD-A5660 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:15 UTC)

stressful, especially in high-level conferences. Trainees should be aware of the very difficult task an interpreter has to deal with and also of the many years of work necessary to become a specialist.

Bibliography

Bowen, D., M. Bowen, *Steps to Consecutive Interpretation*, Washington: Pen and Booth, 1984
Del Pino Romero,J. *Practical Guide for Studying Interpretation*, Madrid, 1999
Gile, D, *The history of research into interpreting: a quantitative contribution*, 2000
Iliescu Gheorghiu, Cătălina *Introducere în interpretariat*, Institutul European, 2006
Jones, R., *Conference interpreting Explained*, Manchester: St Jerome, 1998
Matthews, J, *Notes on consecutive interpretation 1*, in Cuadernos de Traduccion e Interpretation 4, 1984
Rozan, J.F, *La prise de notes en Interpretation Consecutive*, Geneve: Librairie de l'Universite Georg, 1956
Setton, R., *Simultaneous Interpretation: A cognitive-pragmatic analysis*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999
Wadenslo, C., *Interpreting as Interaction*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1998

BDD-A5660 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:58:15 UTC)