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The role of first language as a hindrance in consecutive interpretation

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Abstract

Interpreters are increasingly being called upon to interpret into their first language and into their second language as a matter of course. Interpreters have to deal with a large number of cognitive, psychomotor, and affective processes simultaneously, all of which pose major challenges for the interpreter who must deal with them simultaneously. It is therefore crucial that interpreter training should be as effective as possible and that during their training period, future professional interpreters should develop a series of strategies or tactics that can be used to solve the problems encountered. The findings suggest that interpreters may face different challenges depending on whether they are working from the first language into a second language or vice versa. The use of formulaic phraseologies, which are stored in memory as single lexical units, can facilitate fluent speech production for interpreters, particularly in stressful contexts.

Keywords: first language, consecutive interpretation, strategies, fluent speech.

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1. Introduction

The demand for mutual understanding across different countries is increasing as the world becomes more globalized and interconnected. However, language and cultural differences pose significant barriers to communication. To overcome these obstacles, effective interpretive skills are needed to serve as a bridge for human communication (Quoc, 2022). Consecutive interpreting entails a large number of almost concurrent cognitive, psychomotor and affective processes, all of which pose major challenges for the interpreter who has to deal with them simultaneously. The interpreter is constantly confronted with unexpected situations that must be dealt with while he/she is already working at the limits of his/her available processing capacity. It is therefore crucial that interpreter training should be as effective as possible and that during their training period, future professional interpreters should develop a series of strategies or tactics that can be used to solve the problems encountered. Gile (1995; 2009) describes a series of tactics and strategies interpreters apply when problems in the interpreting process arise. He establishes a distinction between the terms tactics and strategies. According to this author, strategies are planned actions with specific objectives and tactics refer to online decisions and actions taken by the interpreter during the execution of the task to overcome the difficulties encountered. He restricts the use of these two terms to deliberate decisions and actions aimed at preventing or solving problems (Arumí Ribas, 2012). Consecutive interpretation is one of the most important and commonest interpretation areas. Interpreters are often required to have excellent language skills, memory, and the ability to convey the exact meaning of the speaker. However, most interpreters, especially inexperienced ones, inevitably make mistakes in consecutive interpretation which will make communication lack efficiency and professionalism. Some of the common problems, their causes and coping strategies in consecutive interpretation are: 1) Listening and analysis problems. Its causes include lack of language skills and poor timing in note-taking. Strategies for dealing with this problem include allocating energy and content prediction; 2) Difficulty decoding notes. It can be caused by the formatting of notes and abbreviations. Strategies such as improving overall comprehension and refining the notetaking system can help; 3) Information loss or redundancy. Its causes include short-term memory problems, cultural differences and so on. Strategies for dealing with this problem include doing English to Chinese conversions and so on; 4) Mishandling of logic. It is caused by note-taking and listening errors and over-stimulation. Strategies like analysing the logic of the source text can help. By analysing these problems, interpreters can identify their specific problems and consciously reduce the number of mistakes. Improving the interpreting skills based on strategies can help them convey the speaker's meaning more accurately when doing consecutive interpretations. The hindrance in consecutive interpreting is caused by problems such as listening and analysis issues, difficulty decoding notes, information loss or redundancy, and mishandling of logic (chen, 2023).

Interpreting can be seen as a form of language production, where interpreters extract conceptual information from the source language and express it in the target language. Hence, like language production, interpreting contains speech errors at various (e.g., conceptual, syntactic, lexical and

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phonological) levels. The process of speaking involves several stages, starting with conceptualizing a pre-verbal message and selecting words and sentence structure to convey the intended meaning. Errors can occur at any of these stages, resulting in different types of linguistic errors. Conceptual errors happen when the semantic information expressed does not match the intended message, while lexical errors occur when an incorrect lexical expression is used. Syntactic errors arise from improper word order or grammatical function assignment, and phonological errors involve mistakes in pronunciation, such as anticipation, preservation, and phoneme exchange (Zhao et al, 2023).

The practice of interpreting into a second language, also known as "retour interpreting," "active interpreting," "service translation," or "inverse translation," has long been a subject of controversy. These terms reflect the historically critical views towards this practice. Some scholars argue in favor of one interpreting direction while dismissing the other as inferior. However, recent research indicates that extralinguistic factors may influence an interpreter's performance differently depending on the interpreting direction. This may help explain the conflicting findings in the literature (Dose, 2017). First language refers to an individual's native language, while second language, also known as passive language, refers to their non-native language. Although it is widely acknowledged that interpreting from L2 to L1 produces superior quality, L1 to L2 interpreting is deemed to be more "cognitively economical" due to the interpreter having fewer options to choose from. In certain cases, interpreting from A-language to B-language has proven to yield more satisfactory results. However, despite this evidence, there is still a bias against into-B interpreting in interpreter training, and a disparity exists between the training provided and the needs of the market. "Consecutive interpreting" (CI) as a term began to be used after the 1920s. It is frequently used in opposition to simultaneous interpreting (SI) by classifying interpreting based on the working mode. CI is different from SI in two aspects, mainly: for one thing, CI involves note-taking in Phase I; for another, CI needs an interpreter's note-reading in Phase II. Therefore, many CI studies focused on note-taking, particularly notetaking skills and techniques, language choice in note-taking, and the relationship between working memory and note-taking (Lu et al, 2023). Since the very existence of interpretation, language command was a major skill for any interpreter. The first interpreters were working with the L2 to L1 combination, meaning that they interpreted into their mother tongue. In the 1930s, when referring to the "language skill", most researchers (e.g. Rozan, 1956; Seleskovitch, 1975) meant the level of mastery of L2 that allows consecutive interpretation from L2 into L1. Half a century passed before interpreters finally started to work both-ways. Even now in political talks, for example, the interpreter is only allowed to work one-way from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Needless to say, the mother tongue principle was officially stated in numerous codes of conduct for interpreters and translators' associations all over the world (e.g. the Netherlands Society of Interpreters and Translators, Institute of Translation and Interpreting (U.K.), American Translators Association) (Sasaki, 2018). In support of first-language interpreting as the exclusive interpreting direction, many practising interpreters and interpreter trainers in Western Europe have argued that interpreters can only

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produce a target language product of linguistically and idiomatically impeccable quality when working exclusively into their first language. Harris (1989) goes so far as to suggest that this preference for first-language interpreting can be considered a norm amongst Western European interpreting schools. However, in South Africa, as in many countries worldwide, market dictates have begun influencing the working conditions of interpreters, who are increasingly being called upon to interpret into their second language as well as into their first language as a matter of course. As most conferences in South Africa are conducted mainly in English, necessitating interpreting into the African languages, Afrikaans, and/or European languages, interpreters with two working languages (one active native language and one active non-native language, typically English) are usually recruited for these assignments. These interpreters are then also routinely required to work into their active non-native languages. Advocates of second-language interpreting have presented various arguments in support of this practice. Denissenko (1989) suggests that only interpreting in a second language, where the interpreter receives the source language input in their native language, ensures perfect comprehension of the message. This, in turn, leads to higher accuracy and completeness in the interpreted rendition. However, proponents of first-language interpreting challenge the validity of this argument. They believe that while interpreters may not possess perfect production skills in a non-native language, they do have perfect comprehension skills in their second language, which guarantees accuracy and completeness during first-language interpreting as well. Additionally, Viaggio (1991) argues that receiving the source language input in a native language does not necessarily result in better comprehension or improved accuracy and completeness of the interpreted rendition. According to Viaggio, a higher level of linguistic understanding of the source speech can make it challenging for interpreters to detach themselves from the linguistic form of the message, ultimately leading to lower quality output in the target language. This belief in the superiority of first-language interpreting follows from the assumption that an interpreter will always have better comprehension than production skills in a second language and that linguistically faultless target language production, particularly under conditions of stress, can only be achieved in a native language (Dose, 2017). Many researches investigated the language in consecutive interpretation. McCarthy et al (2013) investigated Conversations through barriers of language and interpretation. The findings indicate that communicating with people who do not share the same first language is challenging, in particular the participants (nurses) were concerned about their ability to make a comprehensive assessment that ultimately forms the basis for quality care provision. The use of interpreters can inform the assessment process, but there are challenges in accessing and utilising these services. Further continuing education is required to promote culturally appropriate care. There is a need for increased discussion between nurses and interpreters to maximise communication with patients. Dose (2017) investigated Assessing directionality in context. The study analyzes the performance of eight interpreters who completed a postgraduate simultaneous interpreting course. The participants were recorded interpreting speeches in both their first and second languages on familiar and unfamiliar topics. Examiners assessed their individual performances, and the results were compared. The findings suggest that interpreters' familiarity with the context of a speech has a direction-specific effect on interpreting

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quality, with more consistent benefits observed for second-language interpreting than for first-language interpreting. Ruíz & Macizo (2019) conducted to evaluate the possible interaction between syntactic and lexical properties of the target language (TL) in consecutive translation. To this end, participants read sentences in the source language (SL) to translate them into the TL (reading for translation) or to repeat them in the same language (reading for repetition). The cognate status of words at the beginning and at the end of sentences and the congruency in the syntactic structure of sentences in the SL and TL were manipulated. The results showed coactivation of the syntactic and lexical properties of the TL in the middle and final regions of the sentence. In addition, in the reading for translation, an interaction was observed between the cognate status and the syntactic congruency at the end of the sentence. The pattern of results suggests that the time course of syntactic and lexical activation in translation is interactive.

Zhao et al (2023) conducted the impact of language proficiency, working memory, and anxiety on the occurrence of speech errors across these linguistic strata during consecutive interpreting from English (a second language) into Chinese (a first language) by student interpreters. They showed that speech errors in general decreased as a function of the interpreter's proficiency in the source (second) language and increased as a function of the interpreter's anxiety. Conceptual errors, which result from mistaken comprehension of the source language, decreased as a function of language proficiency and working memory. Lexical errors increased as a function of the interpreter's tendency of anxiety. Syntactic errors also decreased as a function of language proficiency and increased as a function of anxiety. Phonological errors were not sensitive to any of the three cognitive traits. The purpose of the given text is to discuss the challenges and strategies in consecutive interpreting. It also mentions the importance of mutual understanding across different countries in a globalized world and the need for effective interpretive skills to overcome language barriers in communication.

2. Literature review

2.1 consecutive interpretation

Consecutive interpreting is a flexible method of verbal translation between languages. Interpreters deliver messages in a target language when a speaker pauses, either with or without taking notes. It was the primary interpreting service at the United Nations until simultaneous interpretation technology became available in 1927. While consecutive interpreting is less common in large conferences and meetings, it remains in demand elsewhere due to its lower technological requirements compared to simultaneous interpretation. Both professional and non-professional interpreters with limited training and proficiency, such as those in conflict zones, practice consecutive interpreting. Different user groups in different settings have varying needs and expectations from interpreters with different training backgrounds. Some interpreters, like Andrè Kaminker, receive applause for their exceptional consecutive interpreting skills, even without taking notes. However, note-taking restrictions due to confidentiality can significantly strain an

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interpreter's memory. The challenges of mediating communication without dominating or guiding it, taking notes while listening to a fast-paced speech, reading notes while simultaneously planning a target-language version, and being concise without losing the intended impact on end users all pose practical, training, and research challenges in consecutive interpreting (Russell & Takeda, 2015). The International Association of Conference Interpreters (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence – AIIC) defines simultaneous interpreting as follows: "the interpreter sits in a booth, listens to the speaker in one language through headphones, and immediately speaks their interpretation into a microphone in another language" . Professional interpreters often have three or more working languages. However, this does not mean that they work in all possible directions. The different working languages of interpreters can be subdivided into active and passive languages. Two types of active languages can be distinguished, namely A-languages and B-languages (Staes, 2016).

Table 1: Language classification - Interpreters' active languages (Staes, 2016)

A-language	AIIC members are required to interpret from their mother tongue or an equivalent language into other working languages using both simultaneous and consecutive interpretation modes. They must have at least one A language.
B-language	B language is a language that an interpreter works into from one or more of their other languages. It is not their mother tongue, but they have a perfect command of it. Some interpreters only work into their B language in one of the two interpretation modes.

Key skills at each stage of CI training (Russell & Takeda, 2015):

- Active Listening

According to Setton and Dawrant (2016), effective listening is the foundation of learning interpretation. During the Initiation stage of training, trainees must understand the difference between passive listening and active listening, which is essential for the first four to five weeks of training. By practicing exercises such as Idiomatic Gist, Listening Cloze, Discourse Modelling, Outlining, and Compression, trainees can gradually develop active listening skills. Gillies (2005) also proposed similar exercises, but students model written discourse instead of spoken discourse initially. Gillies's exercise is less time-pressured, making it suitable for trainers to demonstrate the procedure of spoken discourse modelling and for students to become familiar with the process before attempting more challenging spoken discourse modelling.

- Public Speaking

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At the Initiation stage of interpreter training, public speaking is a crucial skill to introduce and practice. As Herbert (1952) notes, a good interpreter must also be a trained public speaker. However, students are often not given adequate information about the relevance of public speaking exercises, especially when they are asked to create and deliver semi-prepared speeches. The primary benefit of public speaking training is better verbal and non-verbal presentation. Still, it also provides instruction in conducting the appropriate "background work." Well-selected example speeches on various topics can illustrate different types and purposes of public speeches. These speeches might be opened, elaborated, and concluded differently in style and rhetoric to meet different purposes, as exemplified by Aristotle's three appeals of argument. To make a point, speakers give talks, and the way points are connected or signposted, along with their supporting information, should reach listeners who rely on the interpretation service. Practicing active listening and delivering semi-prepared speeches can help students develop a note-taking system that seamlessly incorporates keywords, connectives, and phrases captured in an outlining exercise. Active listening and contextualization to support comprehension are impossible without a solid knowledge base. Seleskovitch (1989) used the word "alone" in an example speech to illustrate why the speaker chose this word deliberately, the historical episode associated with it, and how the single word can help interpreters pack in information for later interpretation. Without awareness of the referred episode, an interpreter's interpretation can sound dry and out of context. Therefore, conducting exercises on active listening or public speaking without any background knowledge is futile and has been a leading cause of students' frustration.

- Short CI without notes

After the Initiation stage, the next stages in interpreter training are Coordination and Experimentation with individual skills. Setton and Dawrant (2016) recommend using appropriate materials such as monologues and lively dialogues ranging from ten seconds to ninety seconds in duration. The use of relatively short and engaging dialogues allows students to focus on the meaning rather than the exact wording. Since the training materials are not intentionally memorized and retrieved, discussions between trainers and students will likely revolve around accuracy or precision, ensuring clear learning objectives. This approach aligns with Baxter's argument that consecutive interpreting is a "natural" process and a task that people regularly perform. As the source text (ST) becomes longer, there is a higher chance of secondary information being present, tempting beginners to attempt a verbatim relay of the entire ST. At this stage, students should be encouraged to prioritize doing the minimum well rather than attempting to do the maximum poorly. The Coordination and Experimentation stages provide an excellent opportunity for trainers and students to identify areas for improvement in their rendition and public speaking skills.

- CI with notes

The interference mechanism of note-taking during the comprehension phase of consecutive interpreting (CI) is not entirely understood. However, it is typical for note-taking to cause frustration among students who misunderstand CI as a memory and note-taking exercise. Despite this, students often demand earlier introduction and hands-on practice of note-taking. CI textbooks often devote a considerable amount of space to illustrating CI notes for speeches on various topics, perpetuating the myth that note-taking is a gift bestowed only on a few. However, notes are traces that mark individual interpreters' thinking styles and analytical skills. Before students have a full grasp of the basic tasks required of them, note-taking can represent an additional effort, hindering rather than aiding comprehension. Therefore, note-taking explanations and demonstrations should come as late as possible in the curriculum. Even after note-taking has been introduced to CI classes, trainers should offer timely reminders of the pivotal skill of active listening whenever there are signs of an inadequate grasp of the ST discourse structure and key points. CI without notes can be brought back into classes to expose hidden problems and force a retreat from the words back to the message and point of the speech. To develop the skillset of CI note-taking, it is essential to understand what it is and what it is not. Notes are structured and condensed idea-by-idea recall cues for the meaning, reflecting the interpreter's analysis of the speech and supporting memory. This skillset cannot be developed or discussed independently of interpreters' knowledge base and language proficiency. Adequate preparation and systematic training under excellent guidance can help interpreters capture effective cues at the best timing.

2.2 Familiarity with the context

Limited research exists on the relationship between interpreters' familiarity with the context and their performance in first- and second-language interpreting. However, some authors provide empirical evidence supporting the advantages of context familiarity on interpreter performance. For instance, Dose (2014) demonstrates that interpreters who are familiar with the speech topic are more successful in transferring cohesive links from the source language to the target language. Similarly, Al-Salman and Al-Khanji (2002) find that interpreters perform better when they are familiar with the context of the source language speech. On the other hand, Vuorikoski (2004) observes that interpreters unfamiliar with the context make more omissions and errors. While context familiarity can positively influence interpreting performance, it remains unclear to what extent it can compensate for comprehension and production gaps that interpreters may face when interpreting in different directions. Some scholars argue that interpreters' familiarity with the context can benefit either their limited production skills in second-language interpreting or their limited comprehension levels in first-language interpreting. Acquiring a better understanding of local and specialized contexts related to the event being interpreted may partially compensate for gaps in second-language production proficiency (Setton, 2004). Similarly, Gile (2009) suggests that a high level of extralinguistic knowledge can compensate for a relatively low level of linguistic knowledge in achieving comprehension (Dose, 2017).

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3. Results

The first language plays a role in hindering consecutive interpretation in several ways. First, when interpreting from a second language (L2) to a first language (L1), the interpreter may encounter difficulties in finding equivalent expressions or idiomatic phrases in the target language. This can lead to delays or inaccuracies in the interpretation. Second, the first language may influence the interpreter's pronunciation and accent in the target language, potentially affecting the clarity and intelligibility of the interpretation. Third, the interpreter's proficiency in the first language may affect their overall language skills and ability to produce fluent and accurate interpretations. Therefore, the first language can pose challenges and limitations in consecutive interpretation (Zhao et al, 2023).

However, it is worth noting that L1 interference can pose challenges for interpreters during consecutive interpretation. Interpreters may encounter difficulties in accurately transferring meaning from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) due to interference from their L1. This interference can manifest in various ways, such as interference in syntax, vocabulary, or cultural references. Additionally, interpreters may struggle with maintaining a balance between the SL and TL, as they need to comprehend the SL while simultaneously preparing the TL output. L1 interference can potentially impede the smooth flow and accuracy of consecutive interpretation (Zhao et al, 2022). The results suggest that interpreters may face different challenges depending on whether they are working from their first language into a second language or vice versa. Familiarity with the context of the speech being interpreted appears to have a direction-specific effect on interpreting quality, providing more consistent benefits for second-language interpreting than for first-language interpreting (Tu et al, 2020). Additionally, the use of formulaic phraseologies, which are stored in memory as single lexical units, can facilitate fluent speech production for interpreters, particularly in stressful contexts. It is suggested that interpreters should focus on acquiring and using phraseological units to enhance their performance, even when working into their first language (Dose, 2017).

arguing that the language of fluent interpreters relies heavily on recurrent formulaic phraseologies. Since formulaic phraseologies are seemingly stored in memory as single lexical units with default prosodies, they can therefore be produced (or indeed slightly modified) with little processing work, providing a resource which facilitates fluent speech production in particularly stressful contexts. The literature however suggests that the formulaic repertoire of second language speakers is generally much smaller than that of first language speakers, hence pointing to the need for interpreters working into their second language to enlarge this repertoire as far as possible. Even where working into their first language, extending their second language repertoire may facilitate the task of the interpreter by reducing the processing load in reception. In consequence it is suggested that the training of simultaneous interpreters should place considerable emphasis on the acquisition and use phraseological units, many of which have default lexicogrammatical and prosodic structures which go beyond the traditional emphases in terminology, both in size and in scope. This need emerges clearly from the analysis of European Parliament interpreting transcripts,

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where we find such recurrent phraseologies used as give the floor to (linked to turn-taking management) and we need to ensure that (linked to justification) (Aston, 2018).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, effective interpretive skills are essential in overcoming language and cultural barriers to communication. Consecutive interpreting involves numerous cognitive, psychomotor, and affective processes, which can pose significant challenges for interpreters. Common problems encountered in consecutive interpretation include listening and analysis issues, difficulty decoding notes, information loss or redundancy, and mishandling of logic. Interpreting into a second language has been a subject of controversy, with some arguing in favor of first-language interpreting as the exclusive interpreting direction. However, recent research suggests that extralinguistic factors may influence an interpreter's performance differently depending on the interpreting direction. Further research is needed to improve interpreter training and develop effective strategies for overcoming the challenges of consecutive interpretation.

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