Strategies for Note-taking in Consecutive Interpreting: A Case Study Based on Effort Model

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Abstract: Note-taking plays a significant role in consecutive interpretation. Due to human interpreters' limited brain capacities, note-taking system largely determines whether consecutive interpretation proceed smoothly or not. Note-taking in consecutive interpreting represents the main structure of the speaker's speech, which is a group of ideas in a certain order rather than an arbitrary muddle of unrelated ideas. On the basis of Daniel Gile's Effort Model, the paper conducts a case study on The 2022 Government Work Report, analyzes the problems of the author's own interpreting notes, and then puts forward the corresponding solutions and strategies for interpreters to optimize their interpreting notes.

1. Research Background

Consecutive interpreting is one of the modes that constitute conference interpreting, of which the process is listening to what the speaker says and reproducing the same message in another language after they finish speaking. Consecutive interpreting usually involves a speaker pausing after several sentences for the interpreter to translate. The speech given by the speaker could last for 1-20 minutes and the interpreter can only relies on a combination of notes, short-term memories and knowledge to convey messages in another language[1].

Note-taking in consecutive interpreting represents the main structure of the speaker's speech, which is a group of ideas in a certain order rather than an arbitrary muddle of unrelated ideas. However, the interpreting output will fail if cognitive demands exceed the interpreter's mental workload. Sometimes, note-taking can be so confusing that even the interpreters themselves aren't able to organize a reasonable and fluent speech, leading to misinterpretation and failure of the interpreting task. But such mistakes can deeply undermine the interpreting quality, resulting in misunderstanding among speakers. Due to its destructiveness and seriousness, the study's intention is to figure out how to take interpreting notes in a more effective and organized way under the instruction of scientific theories.

2. Literature Review and Research Methodology

Daniel Gile proposed his Effort Model in 1970s. This theory mainly focused on simultaneous interpreting at the beginning, but it was later extended to consecutive interpreting. In previous studies, this well-known theory has been widely studied for exploring feasible methods to improve simultaneous interpreting, yet relatively few studies applied it in consecutive interpreting.

Chen Youxun mentioned in his thesis A Cognitive Account of Note-taking in Interpretation that if interpreters can understand and take down the input information during listening and analysis process, then they can be sure of the quality of their interpretation[2], which means that the interpreters need to coordinate their effort allocation. Xu Qilu studied note-taking language choice based on Effort Model. He figured out that skillful interpreters may take in abundant B language that requires more listening efforts in comparison to A language, thus B language becoming the dominant language in note-taking[3]. Kang Xinyin conducted an empirical research on the correlation between the note's logic and the quality of interpretation on the basis of Daniel Gile's Effort Model[4]. After analyzing their relationships, Kang discovered that interpreting notes with clear logic structure was effective in overcoming the difficulties of complicated long sentences. She suggested that interpreters should strengthen their logical thinking and deliberately write down the logical structures of the original speeches.

Xiao Xiaoyan noted that Effort Model was based on cognitive science and it aimed to explain the difficulties faced by interpreters during the process of interpretation[5]. She also believed that Gile's theory is a challenge to the interpretation theory represented by Seleskovitch, and brings enlightenment to interpreting teaching. Zhong Weihe compared Gile's interpreting training model and that of Xiamen University in his book Interpretation Training: Models, Contents and Methods[6]. He reckoned that skills training should be the core of interpretation courses in universities. Wu Xiaolong believed that Gile's theory greatly helped teachers to prepare targeted training for students and minimize the effort spent on taking interpreting notes, thus allowing them to allocate more effort on comprehending speeches[7].

The paper adopts the qualitative methods and the case study approach to illustrate the overload phenomenon in consecutive interpreting. The case chosen by the paper is The 2022 Government Work Report and all of the language phenomenon studied by the paper derive from it. The case study begins with an introduction of the case's background, in which the meaning and significance of conducting this study are specified. Then the problems in the author's own interpreting notes are presented and classified into three categories: Insufficient Key Information in Notes, Indecipherable Notes and Unstructured Notes. The problems' causes are explained in detail with examples.

3. Case Analysis of The 2022 Government Report Under Effort Model

3.1 Case Background

With the rise of its comprehensive national strength, China is now playing a more and more significant role in handling and coordinating global issues. *The 2022 Government Work Report* (hereinafter referred to as *The Report*), a typical Chinese official document, mainly includes a review of China's achievements in politics, economy, society, people's livelihood and other aspects over the past year[8]. *The Report* points out the shortcomings that the Chinese government still has in certain aspects and addresses these questions by putting forward overall development requirements and the government's working rules, plans, policy orientations, task priorities, etc. in the upcoming year. Basically covering all aspects of China's society, *The Report* can fully reflect China's society appearance at a certain stage. It has always been the focus of attention and an important official window for the rest of the world and their people to understand China's recent developments in various fields.

Due to the uniqueness of The Report's nature and the universality of the audience, as well as the fact that China has witnessed unprecedented development in economy, politics and culture over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, the translation of the Report has been closely followed by readers at home and abroad.

As a student majoring in translation, conducting mock interpreting practices is an essential learning

part and an important means to improve English-Chinese interpreting skills. Therefore, the author has selected The Report as the study case of this paper and will conduct mock practice in the form of consecutive interpreting. The author aims to analyze the problems of her own interpreting notes and discover the causes under the guidance of Daniel Gile's Effort Model, then give corresponding strategies.

3.2 The Problems of Note-taking

3.2.1 Insufficient Key Information in Notes

Insufficient key information in notes is equal to information losses. It usually happened at the end of each segment, or when numbers were mentioned too many times in a sentence. According to Gile, the causes for information loss in notes may be the imbalanced effort allocation, which means that the total amount of processing capacity available for each effort is actually limited. If an interpreter focuses too much on listening and analysis, then he or she will not have enough capacity for memorizing and taking notes. It will put more pressure on cognitive load and eventually lead to miss information. He believed that the consequences of imbalanced effort allocation are not only the missing of phrases or sentences, but also a series of mistakes that he calls as failure sequences. Failure sequences may result in possible losses of information. These phrases might not be difficult to understand or interpret under normal circumstances but they happen to be processed in a wrong way at that moment. Next, the author will illustrate with examples.

(1) ST: You hua he luo shi zhu qi shu kun zheng ce, gong gu jing ji hui fu ji chu. Shang yi shi chang zhu ti cheng zai zhe shu yi ren jiu ye chuang ye, hong guan zheng ce yan xu zhi chi lu jing he zuo fa. (In Chinese) (The Report, p7)

TT: We refined and implemented our policies on enterprises,we consolidate (sc) consolidated the foundation. The (sc) the market has created many jobs for millions of (sc) hundreds of millions of people, and we will continue with our macro policy approaches.
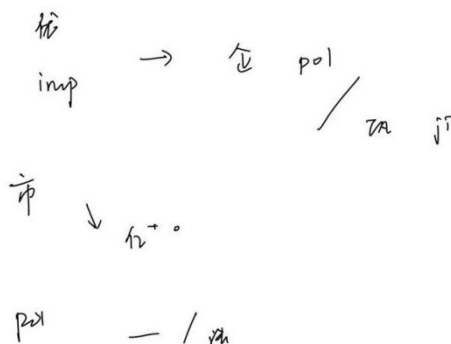

Figure 1: The Interpreting Note of ST (1)

This segment was selected from Page 7 of The Report. It summarized the second goal that the Chinese government has achieved in 2021. The speaker used more economic terms and talked rapidly. When the author heard the phrase "shu kun zheng ce" at the beginning, she spent several seconds to digest its meaning and didn't figure it out until she heard the whole sentence, resulting in a lag between note-taking and the speech. That means when the speaker finished this segment, the author only noted down "gong gu ji chu" and missed the opportunity to digest the next phrase "shang yi shi chang zhu ti". In the next segment, the processing capacity available for taking down "jiu ye chuang ye, hong guan zheng ce yan xu zhi chi lu jing he zuo fa" wasn't sufficient, because the author consumed too much processing capacity on listening and anlyzing the phrase "shu kun zheng ce".

And the time lag not only required the author to devote effort on memorizing what was said before, but also on understanding what is being said. All these steps took time and capacity at the expense of capacity left for taking notes. That is why the last sentence was missed. (in Figure 1)

Revised version: We refined and implemented policies for easing the difficulties of businesses and consolidated the foundation of economic recovery. Hundreds of millions of market entities have given several hundred million people the opportunity to be employed, and we have continued with the supportive macro-policy road maps and approaches.

(2) ST: Chuang xin neng li jin yi bu zeng qiang, guo jia zhan lve ke ji li liang jia kuai zhuang da. Qi ye yan fa jing fei zeng zhang 15.5%. Shu zi ji shu yu shi ti jing ji jia su rong he. (In Chinese) (The Report, p3)

TT: Innovation strengthen has been further consolidated, and the national strategy (sc) strategic technology power has been improved. R&D costs have risen 15.5%, digital technology and entity economy has been merged.
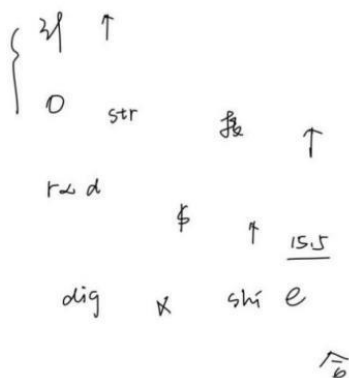

Figure 2: The Interpreting Note of ST (2)

This segment was not a difficult one as the four SV (subject and verb) structures are clear, and the speaker stressed each of them while speaking. However the problem trigger is that the author failed to figure out the implied logic of the phrase "shu zi ji shu yu shi ti jing ji jia su rong he". This phrase is actually taking about the fact that digital technologies' integration speed in the field of real economy was accelerating. The misunderstanding might be due to the saturation in her processing capacity. The segment was information-intensive, so the effort consumed by memorizing and taking notes exceeded the limitations, thus resulting in the author not having sufficient effort to analyze the implicit meaning and render it to the audience. (in Figure 2)

Revised version: Our innovation capacity was promoted and our strategic science and technology capabilities were expanded at a faster pace. Corporate spending on research and development grew by 15.5 percent. Integration of digital technology in the real economy was accelerated.

3.2.2 Indecipherable Notes

Clear and understandable notes can shorten the time spent on note-reading. However, indecipherable notes will not only fail to help, but also interfere with the interpreter and distract attention from comprehension and memory. In the author's notes, the main cause of indecipherable notes is that the author couldn't recall the meaning of her notes because she used non-standard and unfamiliar abbreviations or symbols. As a result, these notes caused inappropriate pauses and self-correction during interpreting process, leading to information losses.

According the Gile, indecipherable notes was due to the deficiency of fixed abbreviations and symbols in interpreter's note-taking system. Some of the abbreviations or symbols the author used

were chosen causally. The author was not familiar with those symbols created by herself at that moment, which increased the difficulty of note-reading.

(3) ST: Long zhong qing zhu zhong guo gong chan dang cheng li yi bai zhou nian, sheng li zhao kai dang de shi jiu jie liu zhong quan hui, zhi ding dang de di san ge li shi jue yi. (In Chinese) (The Report, p2)

TT: We celebrated the centenary anniversary of the CPC, and we successfully convened the session and formulated the third historical resolution.

Figure 3: The Interpreting Note of ST (3)

The loss of information in this segment was because the author paid too much attention on wondering how to take down "shi jiu jie liu zhong quan hui". The author only jotted down "19/6" to refer to the phrase. However, the author couldn't exactly recall what "19/6" represented, so she blurred the phrase and only interpreted "session". The problem occurred because the author didn't have a fixed abbreviation for the terms with Chinese characteristics. (in Figure 3)

Revised version: We celebrated the centenary of the CPC. The 19th CPC Central Committee convened its sixth plenary session and passed a third historical resolution.

(4) ST: Can yin, zhu su, ling shou, wen hua, lv you, ke yun deng hang ye jiu ye rong liang da, shou yi qing ying xiang zhong, ge xiang bang fu zheng ce dou yao yu yi qing xie. (In Chinese) (The Report, p32)

TT: Food, accommodation, retail, culture, travelling, transport and other industries have a large employment capacity and they are all severely affected by COVID. Because all kinds of support (sc) supportive policies should be favourable to them.

Figure 4: The Interpreting Note of ST (4)

In this case, the speaker mistakenly used a wrong conjunction "yin wei" to link the sentence. What she really wanted to say in the second sentence was not "because all kinds of supportive policies should be favourable to them", but "Therefore, all kinds of..." The author inappropriately allocated

too much efforts on taking notes, and the processing capacity for comprehending the underlying logic was not enough. She delivered her interpretation mechanically based on her false notes, resulting in an unsatisfactory delivery of the original speech. Similar logic fallacy occurred in comprehending the logic between "jiu ye rong liang da" and "shou yi qing ying xiang zhong". The two phrases were not parallel relations but adversative relations. Yet the author failed to comprehend it. (in Figure 4)

Revised version: Catering, hospitality, retail, culture, tourism, and passenger transport sectors have a large capacity for employment, but they have been severely affected by Covid-19. Therefore, support policies will be weighted more heavily toward enterprises in these sectors.

3.2.3 Unstructured Notes

The structure of notes should be a diagonal axis with three components separated clearly, allocating from left to right, from top to bottom[9]. Notes taken down like this can reveal the structure of the speech and make it easier for interpreters to read. In order to ensure a clear SVO (subject, verb and object) structure. Another principle that interpreters should follow is "note the meaning, not the word". Choosing what to note is the most important thing in learning consecutive interpreting notes.

However, the author hasn't fully grasped the skill of noting SVO structure, so some of the interpretation delivered by her couldn't analyze the syntactic structure of the source text or form sentences with her own logic.

(5) ST: Luo shi luo xi wen jiu ye ju cuo. Yan xu zhi xing jiang di shi ye he gong shang bao xian fei lv deng jie duan xing wen jiu ye zheng ce. (In Chinese) (The Report, p33)

TT: We will implement measures to ensure stable employment. And we will continue to lower the rates of unemployment and the costs of work-related injury insurance. Moreover, stabilized employment policies will be implemented.
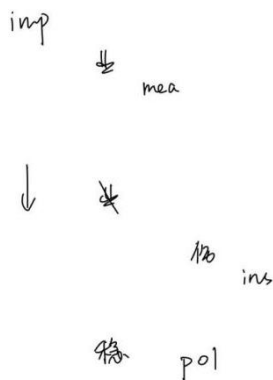

Figure 5: The Interpreting Note of ST (5)

The note structure of this segment was confusing and chaotic because the logical relations between "ye", "shang" and "wen" were almost vertical paralleled. In fact, they were containment relationships. Consequently, the unstructured notes puzzled the author, making her mistakenly use "and" to link these phrases (in Figure 5).

The note structure can be improved by listing the information at the same level vertically, which refers to "jiang di shi ye" and "jiang di gong shang bao xian fei lv" in this segment. (in Figure 6) The revised note is as followed:

imp

₵ mea

↓   ₵
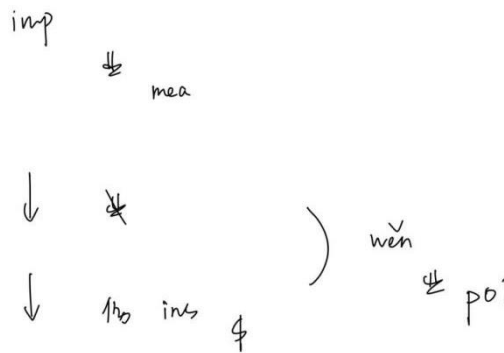
↓ Ins ins ₵

) wěn ₵ pol

Figure 6: The Revised Interpreting Note of ST (5)

Revised version: We will fully implement all measures to stabilize employment. Policies such as reductions to premiums for unemployment insurance and those to lower the unemployment rate will be extended.

4. Coping Strategies

4.1 Enhancing Listening Comprehension and Short-Term Memory

Listening Comprehension is the basis of interpretation. The interpreter can't decide what to note down if he or she couldn't understand the original speech. After analyzing the problems of the interpreting notes, the author found that an important factor that led to low-quality interpretation is her weak listening comprehension abilities and short-term memory.

The first and most important way is to continuously improve one's language skills. For instance, accumulating commonly used expressions and idioms by repeating sentences heard from television programs, radio, etc. The general knowledge of the interpreters can be very helpful in both comprehending source speeches and delivering smooth, clear interpretation.

As for short-term memory, the nature of consecutive interpreting needs the interpreters to rely on memory to interpreter information from one language to another. Although note-taking in consecutive interpreting gives the interpreters more freedom than that in simultaneous interpreting, it's hardly possible for them to completely depend on their own notes. Based on the author's personal experience, short-term memory can be improved by proper training, such as retelling broadcasts.

4.2 Improving Note Structure

Note-taking in consecutive interpreting is a representation of the skeleton structure of the speech. The original speech is a group of ideas in a certain order. The structures used to express these ideas are limited, so the interpreters need a quick and consistent way of noting them[10]. Based on the case study, the author's unstructured notes greatly affected her delivery of interpretation.

There are three ways to improve note structure. First, use diagonal notes. Writing from left to right and from top to bottom is a practical way to highlight the note's structure. Second, reserve room for taking down logical links, such as "but", "because", "therefore", "although" and other conjunctions. By doing so, the structure of the notes will be prominent. Third, if the speech is confusing because of its logic, information density or the speaker's accent, the interpreters can wait for a moment before taking down notes so that they will have more time to deal with comprehension. Thus, if the interpreters can understand the main idea of the original speech, it would enable them to produce structured notes.

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