

Professional Interpreters' Notes in Persian-English Consecutive Interpreting on the Choice of Form and Language

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Abstract

Note-taking plays a pivotal role in consecutive interpreting, particularly where methodical note-taking is used. In the absence of Iranian research in this respect, the present study investigated the process of note-taking in Persian-English consecutive interpreting in order to clarify how exactly the notes are taken by the professional interpreters and how much they are familiar with note-taking and the related concepts. For the purpose of this study, five professional Iranian interpreters were participated and through the observation and phone interviews, the required data were collected. Next, the notes taken by the professional interpreters were reviewed and classified based on several factors such as the use of abbreviations and symbols and the source or target language preference; also, the replies given via the phone interview were transcribed, codified and later analyzed. The research findings showed that the majority of Iranian professional interpreters had passed no course regarding to the note-taking skill in general and they rarely used symbols in their notes and wrote words in letters, mostly in full forms in target language. The findings showed that they took notes based on their experiences irregularly rather than the rules and principles. The findings of the study suggest that there is an urgent need for a note-taking guideline, especially for Persian-English consecutive interpreting venture. Considering the effect of note-taking on their performances, Iranian interpreters should be more familiar with the academic aspect of this skill which could be gained through workshops or some guidelines given to the students and practitioners of this field.

Keywords: Iranian professional interpreters, Note-taking, Note-taking guideline, Persian-English consecutive interpreting.

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of history, language has been one of the significant phenomena which has evolved alongside human evolution. Gradually, due to genesis of different languages, as well as developing relationships among nations, language translation has been taken into consideration more broadly. Before the 1950s, translation studies focused only on written translation till the concept interpreting, as a translational activity, was defined by some scholars like Hermann (1956/2002) and Vermeer (1992). In practical point of view, interpreting happens when a person translates orally what he or she hears from utterers who have another languages. Increasing the studies in interpreting, this field divided into two commonly used forms: simultaneous and consecutive. In simultaneous, the message is swiftly expressed after it is heard by the interpreter. In a sense, the listening and speaking process occur at the same time; therefore, there is no pause during this procedure.

But in consecutive interpreting, the role of vocal pause is important. That is, the interpreter starts when one of the parties finishes or completes his or her statement. Actually unlike the previous one which has one direction, this mode of interpreting is used when communication between gatherings includes a two-way exchange of statement. At first, the message is produced in the source language, concurrently the interpreter takes note, and then it is carefully changed and delivered in the target language.

Though this type of interpreting does not require special tools, such as electronic devices and booths, the interpreter needs many essential skills including language proficiency, listening comprehension, short-term memory and, more exclusively; the note-taking skill. Regardless of different viewpoints about note-taking, one of the most common challenges for interpreters is human memory shortage. The mentioned skill plays a vital role as a memory-supporting technique during the process of consecutive interpreting. Jones (2002) believes that the role of interpreters' notes is to assist memory. In other words, note-taking prevents the interpreter's memory from overloading which can lead to his or her improved performance. Much as note-taking listed predominantly among the essential skills for consecutive interpreting; on the contrary it is sometimes regarded as an obstacle to interpreter's fluency and some researchers believe that note-taking is critical for consecutive interpreting (Gile, 2009; quoted in Chen, 2016). They claimed that it may decrease the power of consideration and interfere in interpreter's listening.

Even though the history of interpreting goes back to the ancient time, literature in consecutive interpreting and subsequently in note-taking has no longstanding background. Nevertheless, studies in this issue can be classified in several aspects like cognitive, linguistic, choice of form, and choice of language. Undoubtedly, Kirchhoff (1979) and Seleskovitch (1975) are the first two investigators whose works largely focused on the cognitive and linguistic aspect of note-taking and they attempted to theories consecutive interpreting and taking notes. Seleskovitch (1975) in particular, tried to develop a theory to schematize the ESIT's training methods. Analyzing the notes taken by 12 professional interpreters, she observed that there were few words in notes in the source language and found some items seemed in different forms. Consequently, she claimed the formal independency of the source speech, notes and target speech referring to deverbalisation.

Four years later, Kirchhoff (1979) took issue with Seleskovitch's viewpoint about deverbalisation in note-taking and indicated that this technique has its own linguistic surface structures. She supported her idea by referring to the microstructures of the source language and described note-taking as a kind of physical storage contrary to the cognitive storage of memory. Her statement about the language effects on note-taking was maintained by Kohn and Albl-mikasa (2002) and Albl-mikasa (2006, 2008). They argued that although in taking notes process the idea should be noted rather than the words, the entire work done based on the source text microstructure.

Furthermore, in the respect of choosing form and language, Andres (2002) was one of the pioneer investigators who compared notes taken by 14 professionals and 14 students interpreting from Danish to German in the respect of choosing form and language. She found that the former group wrote more target language than the latter. Then after, Dam's series of studies can be mentioned as the most comprehensive series on note-taking including different investigation as follows: Her first research conducted in 2004 and consisted of four students note-taking performances, showed that language choice for writing notes was generally related to A or B language status rather than source or target one, irrespective of the direction of interpreting process. Her second study in the same year included five professional interpreters' acts concerning the choice of form, asserted that more percentages of notes belongs to the symbols by 41%, then to the full words by 35% and lastly to the abbreviations' by 25%. But, because those studies only focused on Danish and Spanish, their results were widely criticized due to the impossibility of generalizing to the other languages. However,

similar studies in this area were done by other specialists such as Lung (2003) with Chinese and English, Szabo (2006) with Hungarian and English and Gonzalez (2012) with Spanish and English language pairs (Chen, 2016).

Evidently, in many countries such as Iran, in spite of diversity of varieties and languages, geographical and political situations which have resulted in expansion of the use of consecutive interpreting merely in experiential basis, minimal related research studies have been conducted with the focus on localized approach in the field of note-taking. More particularly, there is noticeable lack of note-taking research related to the Persian-English consecutive interpreting which needs some essential efforts in research, theory, and practice. Having a comprehensive look at all aspects of note-taking studies including prescriptive, descriptive, and explanatory (Chen, 2016), it is clear that for professional interpreters, a useful guideline in Persian-English note-taking covering all features of issue such as systems and principles, pedagogy, cognitive and linguistic facets, could not be find. So, describing the present state of utilizing note-taking by professional interpreters in cited context, this study attempted to attract and increase the attention of Iranian researchers to this subject. Therefore the following questions were posed:

1. What are the professional interpreters' opinions about note taking in Persian English consecutive interpreting?
2. How are notes actually taken in Persian English consecutive interpreting by professional interpreters?

3. Methodology

Classification of research depends on several factors proposed by different scholars and regarding to those factors each study can be categorized differently. Consequently, because the present study collected the data by means of observations and phone interviews and derived knowledge from actual experiences rather than from theories or beliefs, it is an empirical research (Chesterman & Williams, 2002). Moreover, in this paper the researchers attempted to answer some questions like: (a) How are notes actually taken in Persian-English consecutive interpreting by professional interpreters, (b) What are professional interpreters' opinions about note-taking in Persian-English consecutive interpreting; Therefore, according to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2010) the present investigation is labeled as basic qualitative (interpretative) study. They believed that the main question in this kind of research is how processes and activities are done by participants.

3.1. Participants

Considering the above mentioned research questions, professional interpreters were selected as the participants. To determine this sample based on their criterion related to the purpose of this investigation the purposeful or purposive sampling method was used. Having the right and the correct choice, simultaneous interpreters were excluded and the target population were selected among Iranian interpreters who were expert in consecutive interpreting. Due to the limited sample, no certain characteristics of participants like the years of experience, sex, age, and educational background were taken into account. Finally, five specialist were asked to take part in this research. Table 1 presents concisely the demographic characteristics of the all the participants in terms of their sex, number, age, and so on:

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

| Types of Participants | No. | Age Range | Sex | | Educational Background | | | Nationality | Native language |
|---------------------------|-----|-----------|------|--------|------------------------|------|------|-------------|-----------------|
| | | | Male | Female | Ph.D. | M.A. | B.A. | | |
| Professional Interpreters | 5 | 27-50 | 5 | - | 1 | 2 | 2 | Iranian | Persian |

3.2. Instruments

Depending on the type of study and based on the posed research questions, two most widely used instruments were assigned for data collecting: observation and phone interview. It should be noted that according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the role of the researcher as a primary instrument in qualitative research is undeniable. They believed that the qualitative research deals with human experiences; therefore, to capture all complexity of situations and to have a comprehensive data collection, a flexible instrument is needed which should be adaptive enough to respond to the environment. In doing so, just human instrument is the capable one. Nonetheless, in the following sections, the two cited instruments will be explained meticulously and precisely.

3.2.1. Observation

As Ary et al. (2010) stated that in qualitative research, the goal is to describe a behavior in a specific setting and to understand complex interactions in natural settings completely. To

do so, observation is a basic method which has preliminary steps that should be completed one by one. At first, the researchers asked the participants to hand over their notes taken during the simulated process of Persian-English consecutive interpreting. It can be assumed as choosing an observation site. Then, as the next step the researchers' role should be determined in this observation which is a kind of complete observer. Some points should be highlighted here: (a) because the present observation was a kind of indirect one, there was no observer's effect on the participants' performances; (b) although the participants were associated with certain characteristics, no expectation created by the observer and the observation proceeded in its natural way; and (c) all the observer's personal attitudes and values were omitted in order to prevent observer's bias effect on the results. Lastly, the gathered data via observation was used to answer the research question.

3.2.2. Phone Interview

Typically, researchers may use interview to collect information which cannot be obtained by observations or it can be used to prove them. Besides, to understand professional interpreters' opinions, beliefs, and feelings about note-taking in their own words, the researchers decided to use interview as the second instrument in which attention span was limited and a set of questions were structured in an open-ended format. Therefore, the interviewees were able to understand what are important to talk about note-taking concept and process. This is what Ary et al. (2010) referred to as the semi or partially structured interview.

Obviously, arranging an appointment with all participants to conduct a face-to-face interview was not only a time-consuming work but also was impossible in some cases because of the scattering of interviewees. Accordingly, to overcome these difficulties, phone interview was replaced with face-to-face type. Despite the fact that in phone interviewing both parties are divested of nonverbal channel of communications and this method is rejected by some scholars such as Arksey and Knight (1999), its advantages like being cheaper and quicker than other types, availability of respondents from a dispersed population, deletion of travel costs, reduction of interviewer's effects, and so forth, persuaded researchers to use this method (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

3.3. Materials

According to Kohn and Albl-Mikasa (2002), consecutive interpreting is used at different situations such as after-dinner speeches and press conferences more particularly. So,

in the present study, in order to make similar conditions, the process of a real consecutive interpreting, a five-min audio file were mixed and edited from an interview by a group of American journalists with the previous president of Iran which was about the world's common economic, political, and cultural issues in Persian English pair of language, retrieved from www.npr.org (National Public Radio of USA) and was given to participants as a sample. It is necessary to mention that, the content of the cited file was controlled on the case of language directions, clarity of speeches, the local pauses during speeches and other effective factors.

3.4. Procedures

After determination of the participants and selection of instruments, the next step was collecting data. First of all, the professional interpreters were asked to hand over their notes taken during the process of consecutive interpreting, but the lack of any archive from notes posed a real challenge to the researchers. To tackle this problem, the researchers downloaded a complete 24 minutes interview containing a political meeting with the speakers of both Persian and English languages from a website (www.npr.org) and prepared a relatively edited short five-min audio file. Then, by the some electronic means of communication, that was submitted to interpreters and they were requested to take notes exactly same as the task in a real consecutive interpreting situation. Then, the delivered notes were utilized as the raw data and analyzed to answer the research question.

Moreover, because the investigators could not find the similar interview questions done or stated by other researchers previously, a set of questions were prepared and for the each participant an interview session was conducted one by one, by one of the researchers as the interviewer. Each session lasted approximately 15 minutes. Five professional interpreters were interviewed to collect information on their opinions of Persian English note-taking in consecutive interpretation, as well as their familiarity with this skill, the courses they have passed related to it, and more relevant questions which will be explained later. To ensure that the participants could share their ideas precisely, the entire interview sessions were held in Persian. All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed.

4. Results

4.1. Results of Observations

In order to examine how exactly the notes were taken by the professional interpreters, the taken notes were collected and analyzed from different aspects which will be described in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2.

Analysis of Notes Taken by Professional Interpreters

| Participants | Choice of Form | | Choice of Language |
|--------------|---------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Letters vs. Symbols | Full words vs. Abbreviations | Source vs. Target |
| A | Letters | Full words | Source & Target |
| B | Letters | Full words | Source |
| C | Letters | Abbreviations | Target |
| D | Symbols | Abbreviations | Target |
| E | Letters | Full words | Source & Target |

Notes. Source= Source language, Target= Target language

As can be seen in Table 2, the collected notes were examined in two aspects including the form and the language selected by the interpreters. Actually, choice of form means interpreters' preference between letters and symbols as well as full words and abbreviations, whereas choice of language refers to the choice between source and target language. Among all, only one of the interpreters preferred to use symbols rather than letters. Further, instead of using abbreviations, three participants jotted down words in full patterns. As the last point, notes were taken in absolute target language by the two, in complete source language by the one, and in combination of both languages by the two rest of the participants. To sum up, the summery of findings are presented in Table 3 which shows the interpreters' preferences of note-taking style during a process of Persian-English consecutive interpreting. They rarely used symbols and wrote words in letters mostly in their full forms. A general tendency towards taking notes in target language can also be seen in Table 3.

Table 3.

Summary Results of Notes Analysis Taken by Professional Interpreters

| Participants | Tasks | | | Results | |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------|---|-----------------|
| | Language Pair | Direction | Duration | Form | Language |
| 5 Prof. | Persian & English | Both directions | 4'56" | Letters > Symbols Full word > Abbreviation | Source < Target |

Notes. Prof= Professional interpreters, Source= Source language, Target= Target language

4.2. Results of Phone Interviews

Regardless of the general introductory question which was about the interviewees' background in interpreting, the phone interview continued with following questions.

4.2.1. Interview Question Two

Are you familiar with methods and general principles of note-taking in consecutive interpreting? Almost all of the participants were not familiar with common methods and principles of note-taking except two interpreters whose answers showed that they just have general knowledge about how to take note in consecutive interpreting. Actually, note-taking is done based on their experiences and intuitions rather than applied and approved rules.

4.2.2. Interview Question Three

Have you ever been trained about how to take notes in consecutive interpreting? The answers given revealed that all interpreters had passed no course regarding to the note-taking skill. Only one of them pointed out his attendance in a workshop in which some essential techniques of interpreting such as note-taking were taught briefly.

4.2.3. Interview Question Four

Do you believe that note-taking is a kind of supporting technique in order to improve the performance of interpreters or it can break their concentration and consequently results in loss of speakers' speech? Answering to this question, all responders agreed that due to the limitation of human short-memory, note-taking can be helpful only if this technique be used methodically. Surely, note-taking in an empirical use without any obedience to its rules could lead to reduction of interpreter's concentration and loss of speakers' speech subsequently.

4.2.4. Interview Question Five

Do you use any special method or principle while taking notes in Persian-English consecutive interpreting? Since the overwhelming majority of participants were not familiar with note-taking systems and they were not trained in this respect as well, they usually take notes according to their self-provided methods. Moreover, they use some simple principles such as writing known abbreviations or symbols just according to their personal experiences. Most probably, they do not aware of the theories developed in this issue.

4.2.5. Interview Question Six

Do you believe that note-taking is an individual technique or the similarities of notes taken by interpreters rejects the individuality? All responders believed in individuality but with different reasons. One opined that the interpreters' goal is to perform well as much as possible, so following personal patterns rather than any certain and specific rules can lead to achieving this purpose. Another interpreter argued that the existing rules and principles of note-taking are so general and are not applicable without personalization in different context.

4.2.6. Interview Question Seven

Do you believe that the existing methods and principles of note-taking are applicable in Persian-English consecutive interpreting or they should be localized for that situation? There was an agreement among all interviewees about the localization of note-taking systems and principles. All affirmed that the existing methods should be complied with Persian language specifications such as grammar rules, part of speech and so on.

4.2.7. Interview Question Eight

Do you believe that teaching note-taking is a need for interpreters or their related experiences avoid this necessity? Responders answered this question from two different points of view. Some of them asserted that the standard and applied methods should be presented for interpreters and then useful experiences would obtain through those techniques. Others got into a dispute over this necessity and stated that practice makes perfect, thus interpreters' note-taking skill could be improved by gained personal experiences.

5. Discussion

Unlike the prescriptive research in which the researcher can reach the conclusion simply based on the findings, in descriptive studies such as this one, the researchers could describe and report the outcomes as exactly as they are (Heidari Tabrizi, 2008). Findings from the observation and phone interviews revealed that since the great majority of professional interpreters have not passed any special course related to note-taking and consequently being not familiar with common systems and principles of this technique, they take notes based on their experiences haphazardly.

However, the results seem to suggest that regardless of the direction, during a process of Persian-English consecutive interpreting the interpreters mostly take notes in English.

Additionally, they do not widely use symbols and usually write down the words in full format rather than the abbreviations. Also, skimming the taken notes indicated that none of the interpreters get help from linking words in order to preventing the idea distortion which is concerned by Rozan (2002) as the third principle of note-taking. Similarly, despite of the existing several techniques for making notes essay to identify when reading them back such as writing in a vertical, indented and terraced way or mind-mapping method (Torres, 1997), interpreters only prefer to write their notes vertically. Moreover, no localization or domestication occurs to adjust the existing note-taking principles to the basic Persian language rules. Also, the findings about dissimilarities of taken notes are compatible with the individuality theory developed by some scholars such as Ilg and Lambert (1996) and Thiery (1981).

In addition, having the useful experiences, professional interpreters believe that note-taking is the most helpful technique for consecutive interpreting. Generally speaking, all agree that the only way to solve the memory shortage problem is to write down the speakers' speech. So it should be done as fast as possible to avoid losing any part of speeches and in order to use notes easily and quickly they should be written legibly. Besides, a popular opinion among interpreters is that sticking to all principles and following all strategies of note-taking may affect their performances adversely. That is, just general rules should obey and the rest of the task should be done according to the interpreters' convenience. By doing so, each interpreter write in his or her style which asserts the individuality theory in note-taking.

Furthermore, most interpreters believe that the existing methods should be localized, since notes may be written in Persian language which is not complied with all strategies. For example borrowing commonly famous abbreviations from everyday life, using international suffixes such as -tion, and other similar rules which are largely based on the European languages are problematic for native Persian speakers and because of the differences in languages' nature, in some cases they are impractical. They also argue that when the task direction is English into Persian this inefficacy is less considerable.

6. Conclusion

As previously discussed, this study constituted an attempt to investigate the act of taking notes by professional interpreters, especially during the process of Persian-English

consecutive interpreting. From the analyzed data and interpreted results, it can be concluded that there is a widening gap between what should be followed as the note-taking rules and principles and what is done by Iranian professional interpreters in consecutive interpreting. Moreover, there is no applicable guideline for interpreting experts to use in cited situation, consequently, notes taken by skilled interpreters are mostly based on the methods developed according to the repetition and experiences. So, the investigator hopes the findings of present study throw new light on the subject of note-taking in consecutive interpreting especially for Persian-English pair of languages which could result in the better performance of professional interpreters.

Suggestively, there are clearly further research agendas here, which could fruitfully be pursued in order to answer other questions. One variable that was not investigated here was the effect of language mastery on the need for taking notes during a consecutive interpreting. It means that the hypotheses ‘the most language mastery, the less notes taken’ can be generated and be tested through further research.

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