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(Over)Note-Taking in Consecutive Interpreting

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ABSTRACT

Interpreting trainees usually need some time and a lot of practice before they fully realize that note-taking in consecutive interpreting is only an aid to memory and a result of fully understanding *what* has been said, without paying too much attention to *how* it has been said. One full implication of this process is that a near-native knowledge of the foreign language(s) is indispensable, given the fact that a poor understanding of what the speakers are saying is incompatible with remembering it and, for that matter, even with taking proper notes. The purpose of this article is to insist on the need to start interpreting training after the foreign language and culture have been fully assimilated and to make sure that students realize from the start that note-taking is not an end in itself. Two practical examples are discussed, one from a business interview and one from a medical situation.

Keywords: *Note-Taking; Memory; Comprehension; Retention; Discrimination*

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1. Introduction

The importance of note-taking as an integral part of the process of consecutive interpreting is acknowledged by all professional interpreters and specialists in interpreting studies. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the *when* and the *how* to take notes is something in constant need of emphasizing given the abundant bibliography on the subject, whose starting-point can be considered to be Rozan's well-known classic of 1956, and at present complemented by a number of books and articles specifically devoted to note-taking – Alexieva (1994), Lung (1999), Gilles (2005), Heimerl-Moggan and John (2007), Valencia (2013) – plus several books dealing with conference interpreting which also contain chapters devoted to note-taking – Jones (2002), Iliescu Gheorghiu (2004), Nolan (2005), Gillies (2013), Downie (2016). Outside the field of conference interpreting, there are also works devoted to note-taking for non-interpreting students; see, for example, McPherson's *Effective Notetaking* (2012), which stresses note-taking as the most important group of study skills and memory strategies, and which explains how to take notes from texts, although there is one chapter on lecture note-taking, or Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson's *Note-Taking Made Easy* (1982), which deals with note-taking from texts and

from lectures, and even with minutes from meetings.

My purpose in this article is to examine why students' instinct – and not necessarily in their initial stages of training – inevitably seems to be to start taking notes as soon as the speaker they are meant to interpret opens his/her mouth, and why it usually takes them rather a long time to realize that an abundance of notes is detrimental to their purpose. My comments will be based on many years' experience of teaching Spanish / English / Spanish conference interpreting to MA students, and I shall concentrate on liaison consecutive interpreting, which seems to me to be the obvious context for a discussion of superfluous note-taking.

2. Note-Taking and Language Discrimination

All writers on the subject of note-taking in consecutive interpreting go out of their way to stress the fact that notes are only an aid to the process of understanding, analysis and re-expression, and that an interpreter who relies too much on notes will not have paid enough attention to proper understanding and analysis of the original speech (see Jones, 2002, pp. 39-65, for a full discussion). The point of not having concentrated on a proper understanding of what is being said is crucial because what it really means is that, in fact, the interpreter

has not *heard* everything and, still worse, he or she is not even aware of it until they realize that there are gaps in the information they are trying to transmit. Gillies, among others, has summarized this characteristic:

In fact not hearing something is much more common among student-interpreters than not understanding something. You do not hear because you are concentrating too much on deciphering the original or on taking notes. The overload makes you deaf for a moment. (Giles, 2005, p. 7. See also Jones, 2002, p. 44; Iliescu Gheorghiu, 2004, p. 108; Valencia, 2013, p. 6)

Closely related to the question of taking too many notes, with the unavoidable result of missing parts of the spoken message, is the question of what to listen for – in other words, having to pay attention to the sense of what is being said rather than to any individual words. This is also something that writers on note-taking, beginning with Rozan's well-known '*la transposition de l'idée plutôt que du mot*', have never failed to insist on. Rozan made his meaning completely explicit by comparing the interpreter's work with that of a translator:

Prenez un texte français, et confiez-en la traduction écrite à dix excellents traducteurs anglais. Le résultat représentera dix textes très bien traduits, mais dix textes qui seront assez différents quant aux mots qui les composent. L'on obtient dix traductions justes, mais dix textes différents, et cela prouve que ce qui compte c'est de traduire l'idée et non le mot. Cela est d'autant plus vraie pour l'interprétation que l'interprète doit assurer la production instantanée d'un texte dans une autre langue. Il est essentiel qu'il soit libre de la contrainte souvent trompeuse que représentent les mots. Et c'est en analysant la pensée et en la transposant qu'il évitera en même temps les contresens et les lourdeurs de style. (Rozan, 1956, p. 14)¹

One is reminded of Jorge Borges's instructions to his translator: 'Don't translate what I've written but what I intended to say' (Pontiero, 1992, p. 305), or of saint Jerome's well-known injunction to translators not to translate '*verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu*'. And Rozan's successors in the field leave no doubt as to the interpreter's attitude in respect of what to listen for: 'the interpreter does not so much ask What did the speaker say? as What did the speaker mean?' (Jones, 2002, p. 85. See also Iliescu Gheorghiu, 2004, p.105; Gillies, 2005, p. 109 & 2013, p. 168; Nolan, 2005, p. 294; Downie, 2016, p. 69).

3. The Teaching of Note-Taking

'Before we start looking at how note-taking is done, it is important to remember that note-taking can only work together with memory / retention skills' (Heimerl-Moggan and John, 2007, p.13). It is appropriate to begin any consideration of the teaching of note-taking with the preceding quotation because, in my view, this, together with the reminder that we are listening for sense, not for words, should be drummed in students' ears at the beginning of each lesson on the subject. It is usual in postgraduate courses in Translation and Interpreting to have a few sessions specifically devoted to note-taking as a technique, and, while there is no doubt that this is a useful component of the course, over the years I have little by little come to the conclusion that either the tutors – probably unintendedly – give the impression that note-taking is an end in itself or students, somewhat misled by the fact that a whole class concentrates on how to take notes, with plenty of examples, feel that absolutely everything they hear in an interpreting situation ought to be noted down. It is true that good professionals rightly insist that 'There are no rules to note-taking, only ideas that can help, which you choose to use or not' (Gillies, 2005, p. 146), or that we must not forget that note-taking is only a tool to help memory and that we cannot have symbols for everything:

Note-taking is a tool to help you recall the original speech; it is a memory technique. But we often overlook this because of the intricacy of note-taking techniques, sometimes getting led astray by the search for symbols for everything under the sun, rather than trying to develop a technique that requires fewer symbols, but ones that help our memory work more effectively. (Gillies, 2013, p.149)

Symbols are not the only tool for note-taking and they are normally used together with words in a shortened form, but Gillies is right to criticise wanting to have symbols for absolutely everything, even if the same thing could be said in respect of shortened words because the real point, as has been repeatedly said, is to put down sense, not words. As to the symbols themselves, specialists tend to vary a lot. Valencia offers a list of 177 symbols, while Kirsty-Moggan and John give a total of 409 symbols divided into categories over 52 pages (pp. 62-114). At the other extreme, in his summary of note-taking, Jean François Rozan had stated that twenty symbols were quite enough to cover everything, while, in fact, only ten of them (:, ", ⊙, OK, →, ↗, ✓, /, =, ≠) were indispensable. (Rozan, 1956, p. 35)



4. Is Note-Taking Necessary? A Few Examples

If interpreting is defined as a special form of translation in which ‘the interpreter must not try to write down word for word for everything the speaker says because a hundred words may contain only one idea, while one word may imply several ideas’ (Nolan, 2005, p. 294), one aspect which is clearly becoming more and more important is the students’ knowledge of their foreign language(s). A practical consequence of this, as has been shown by tests involving both professional interpreters and student interpreters, is that professionals get a global image of the message, even if they come across the occasional unknown term, whereas students get a number of partial images in which the appearance of an unknown lexical item tends to be fatal (Iliescu Gheorghiu, 2004, p. 29). As it happens, and as a well-known aspect of students starting an MA in Interpreting and Translation – or simply of students finishing a BA in Modern Languages – their knowledge of their foreign language(s) is not what it used to be just a few years ago. This is an invidious subject because official statistics relating to academic achievements do not show any downward trend, yet tutors dealing with Modern Languages postgraduates know well enough that standards have dropped to the point that students starting an MA in Translation and Interpreting used to have a solid linguistic knowledge of their language(s), whereas at present an inevitable part of starting a postgraduate course simply means having to start by trying to improve the purely linguistic knowledge of the foreign language(s) – a fatal situation for somebody trying to train as an interpreter and who, in general terms, is supposed to have left behind the stage of language learning.

This is an unfortunate situation that brings an enormous complication to the process of note-taking because it is simply logical that the better the interpreter knows the foreign language the more he or she can rely on their memory in order to remember what they have heard. The less familiar one is with the vocabulary one is listening to, the more difficult it is to understand and to remember. After all, the starting-point of note-taking is to have no comprehension problems.

A related aspect that has to be mentioned is whether note-taking should be carried out in the source or in the target language. Specialists are divided between

those who share Rozan’s preference for note-taking in the target language and those who say that notes should be made in the source language because trying to do it in the target language adds the effort to translate to the effort of understanding (Alexieva, 1994, p. 206). Ultimately, this is something very personal that means each interpreter has to decide what proves more convenient, even the point of mixing languages in one’s notes.

In what follows, I shall discuss a couple of examples taken from, as I said at the beginning, consecutive liaison interpreting, and taken from one of the various fields covered by community or public service interpreting. I am using these terms in a broad sense because, as Phelan says, after having mentioned ‘the spheres of health, social services, the law and education’, coming under community or public service interpreting, ‘There is a certain amount of confusion about what term to use to describe this type of interpreting’ (Phelan, 2001, p. 20). Some people use either ‘community’ or ‘public service’ interpreting to cover what we could practically call any type of liaison interpreting, while other people distinguish between contexts such as medical interpreting or police interpreting. Whatever the best terminology may be, I have always adopted a purely practical approach by telling students at the beginning of their course that our liaison interpreting classes would cover all sorts of scenario, namely, court interpreting, police interpreting, legal interpreting, health/medical/hospital interpreting, business interpreting, and community interpreting – meaning by this the type of interpreting which usually involves a social worker.

In my discussion of these examples I shall not be concerned with *how* to take notes. Rather, my interest is *when* to take notes, and even more, bearing in mind, Gillies’s words quoted above, *whether* notes are required. Both examples will be taken from scenarios used in the first weeks of interpreting practice because they rarely include long speeches or involved vocabulary. In any case, the students are given the scenario in which they are supposed to act as interpreters twenty-four hours beforehand.

4.1 Business Background

Scenario: Mrs Teresa Valdaura, general manager of a large firm of frozen seafood in the northwest of Spain, has been invited to visit an important wholesale firm

of iced products in Birmingham in order to discuss the possibility of reaching a business contract convenient to both firms. Mr Frank Egerton, her English counterpart, has a meeting with her the morning after her arrival.

A1. Good morning, Mrs Valdaura, and welcome to Birmingham. I hope that you had a pleasant flight yesterday and that you found the hotel comfortable.

B1. Buenos días, Mr Egerton. Encantada de conocerle y de estar en Inglaterra. Ante todo, muchas gracias por haberme reservado habitación en un hotel excelente.

A2. I am very glad to hear that. Well, to come to practicalities, you already know that we are interested in discussing with you the possibility of importing frozen seafood from your firm.

How do you see this possible business relationship?

B2. El nuestro es un mercado en expansión y estoy segura de que no tendríamos ninguna dificultad en satisfacer las necesidades de los clientes ingleses.

A3. One of the things we are concerned with is guaranteeing a good presentation of the product, especially when you think that we supply some of the top supermarkets. You know that people are very much influenced by how the food is presented.

B3. Totalmente de acuerdo con usted. No son solo los ingleses que dan importancia a la presentación del producto, sino también los españoles. No se preocupe, que eso es algo que siempre hemos tenido muy en cuenta.

A4. I know this is short notice, but do you think that we could get some samples of your products in the next few days? There is an important meeting next week precisely on the quality and presentation of frozen food. A representative from our firm is going to this meeting and he could show the people attending how you do it in Spain.

B4. Sí, me parece una excelente idea. Si le parece, podemos incluir muestras de toda la variedad de nuestros productos congelados. Todos típicos de España.

A5. That is a fantastic idea. It will be a very good opportunity because not only wholesalers but delegates from some supermarkets will also be there.

B5. Esta misma tarde me pondré en contacto con mi secretaria y le daré instrucciones para que mañana mismo mande una buena selección de nuestros productos.

A6. Excellent. Well, as you already know I have arranged lunch with two of my colleagues who, all being well, would be in charge of our business dealing with your firm. We'd better leave now because our restaurant is at the other end of town,

B6. Muy bien. Por el camino puedo empezar a explicarle el tipo de contrato que me parece resultaría totalmente satisfactorio para nuestras respectivas empresas.

It will be appreciated that this is very clearly the sort of liaison interpreting that should pose no problem to beginners. The exchanges are short and present no complication either syntactically or semantically. The Spanish vocabulary needed should be familiar and, in any case, the scenario supplied beforehand contains some of the basic cues such as 'seafood', 'wholesale/wholesaler', 'counterpart'. Rather than knowing specific vocabulary, students have to start reacting quickly in order to adapt something which is clearly understood but may not need a word for word translation: 'practicalities' = 'lo práctico/los aspectos prácticos'; 'short notice' = 'es poco tiempo/hay poco tiempo'; 'business dealings' = 'relaciones comerciales'; for 'supply' they should be familiar with 'suministrar/proveer', but it is easy to say simply 'vender'. From Spanish into English there is really no problem, unless 'tener en cuenta' causes some hesitation, but, since the meaning is obvious, a related idea should come to mind without any difficulty: 'pay attention to/consider/be careful with'. In short, the interview is a good example of an interpreting situation intended to develop mental agility, rather than to decide what notes to take. In this respect, one could even say that no notes are required. Are things like 'presentation', in **A3**, or 'samples', 'meeting', in **A4**, really needed as notes? Not to mention, to give a very specific example, that the first speech, **A1**, is a typical case of students – beginners, of course – trying to write something down as soon as a speaker opens his/her mouth.

Let us now look at a somewhat more complex interview.

4.2 Health/Medical Background

Scenario: Antonio Navárriz is a Spanish exchange student spending an academic year in the University of Leeds. Back from a football match against the University of Manchester, he needs some medical attention.

A1. Hello, Antonio. Please take a seat and tell me what the matter is. I see that



you are limping quite badly. What have you been doing to yourself?

B1. Es que esta tarde hemos tenido un partido de fútbol contra la Universidad de Manchester y hacia el final del segundo tiempo nos hemos caído tres jugadores uno encima del otro. Al principio no he hecho caso, pero durante el camino de vuelta he notado que me dolía la pierna y también el hombro cuando intento mover el brazo.

A2. Goodness me! Well, take off your shoe and sock and I'll take a look at your leg first. Yes, you've got some nasty bruising there. Did you twist your ankle as you fell? I'm just going to rotate your lower leg gently and tell me if it hurts.

B2. ¡Ay, cómo duele! ¿Me he roto el hueso? Como ya le he dicho, me sentía dolorido por todo el camino, pero parece que el dolor va en aumento. ¿Puede darme algún analgésico?

A3. Well, I'm going to give you a fairly strong painkiller to make you feel more comfortable and I'll send you down to X-ray to see what the damage is. But before you go, I'm just going to take a look at that shoulder if you don't mind taking off your shirt for a moment. Oh, dear, I think we are going to need an X-ray of that too. There is quite a bit of swelling and tenderness here.

[An hour later]

A4. Hello again, Antonio. How are you feeling now after the painkiller? I'm afraid the news is mixed. You have a hairline fracture in your tibia just below the knee, and you have sprained your ankle. The sprain is fairly minor and won't take long to heal if you follow my advice. The hairline fracture is more serious. On the other hand, when you fell all your weight landed on your right shoulder and you have a simple dislocation.

B4. ¿Tendré que ingresar en el hospital o es cuestión de algunas sesiones terapéuticas en el ambulatorio? Lo pregunto porque dentro de una semana pensaba irme a España para las vacaciones de Semana Santa. Yo soy de Sevilla, ¿sabe?, y me gustaría estar bien para la Feria, aunque me parece que este año no voy a poder montar a caballo.

A5. Well, first of all, let me reduce that dislocation for you. With a little gas to relax your muscles and with the assistance of the nurse, I shall put the bone back in place. It won't hurt. It may just feel a little tender for a while afterwards. Rest for a day or two to be on the safe side.

B5. Muy bien. En cuanto a la pierna, me imagino que tendré que andar con muletas.

A6. For the sprain and the hairline fracture I am going to have to put your leg in plaster for a minimum of four weeks. I'm sorry that you will be using crutches for some time, so if you go home take things easy and stay well away from horses for a while!

First of all, this is a rather interesting interview from the point of view of vocabulary because it takes us back to the question of how good the students' knowledge of the foreign language is, but what really concerns me here is the related question of how good they are at guessing the meaning of an unknown word in its context. Initially, one's eye is caught by words such as 'limping', 'bruising', 'twist', 'analgésico/painkiller', 'swelling', 'hairline fracture', 'tibia',

'sprain(ed)', 'dislocation', 'ambulatorio', 'muletas/crutches', 'plaster'. (Although irrelevant to the main point here, one has to mention the two occurrences of the irritating situation when the interpreter may not know or may not remember a given word, but the translation comes up in the following intervention: 'analgésico / painkiller' and 'muletas/crutches'.)

Should one expect postgraduate students to be familiar with this type of vocabulary? I think it is fair to say that at this stage they should be fairly familiar with the basic vocabulary relating to anatomy, physiology and common illnesses; in any case, the scenario given beforehand should have prompted a little medical research. But my main interest here, directly related to comprehension, retention and whether any notes are needed lies in the development of one of the crucial aspects of interpreting: resourcefulness. As a practical example, let us look at the vocabulary just mentioned and, for the sake of argument, let us assume that the student does not know the equivalent in the other language and somehow or other has to provide an intelligible interpreting.

For 'you are limping', if unavoidable, the student could say something like 'you are not walking properly/well'. For 'you've got [...] bruising', something of the type 'you hit yourself'. For 'twist' they would probably know 'doblar' or 'torcer', but, *faute de mieux*, they could use 'hit' again. I have mentioned 'analgésico / painkiller'; if they really don't know 'analgésico', the context clearly suggests something of the

type ‘can you give me something for the pain’ – and by the time they come across ‘painkiller’ they will have already learnt the Spanish for it! For ‘swelling’, again if nothing better can be thought of, ‘this looks hurt / delicate’. For ‘hairline fracture’, bilingual dictionaries have things like ‘fractura fina’ or ‘pequeña fisura’, but ‘fractura superficial’ would probably be easy to think of; or, if one feels so lost, ‘el hueso (‘la tibia’) está un poco/ligeramente roto (rota)’. For ‘sprain’, if the word is not known, ‘you have hurt your ankle’. Another extreme equivalence for ‘dislocation’ (probably known, anyway), could be ‘you have the bone out of place’. Is ‘ambulatorio’ not known? The context clearly suggests ‘clinic’, ‘medical centre’. ‘Muletas’ has been mentioned above. Again, an extreme example would be something of the type ‘I shall need something to walk with’. Finally, ‘plaster’, even if it clearly poses no comprehension problem, looks like a probably unknown word in Spanish, although it will be worth mentioning the three possibilities of its being a known word. First of all, it is always possible that a student has had direct experience of the situation to be interpreted, and I am basing this statement in the fact that once, in one of the interpreting groups, there was a student who knew ‘escayolar’ and ‘enyesar’ (both meaning ‘to put in plaster’) because of having broken his wrist while on a Spanish placement as an undergraduate. Secondly, the Spanish verbs may simply be a part of the students’ overall knowledge of Spanish – rather unlikely these days. And in the third place, it may well be that, in the course of the vocabulary research stimulated by the information given in the interpreting scenario, students have thought of the possibility of a broken limb. But in any case, and remembering that the only real problem, semantically speaking, that faces the interpreter is lack of comprehension, let us go back to the point already made of having to provide, somehow or other, an intelligible interpreting of something that has been clearly understood. Antonio’s leg in plaster presents no comprehension problem, and, incidentally, this has a direct effect on the need for notes

(for example, is a ‘4 wks’ note necessary?), but what about translating ‘plaster’, if the Spanish equivalent is not known? This has no simple answer, but I would suggest that, in the worst of cases and stretching ‘resourcefulness’ to the limit, a quick-thinking student could always try

something of the type ‘we shall have to keep your leg immobilized/still for at least four weeks’.

Some of these examples may seem rather exaggerated, but I hope that they have made my point clear: so long as one understands the context, it is not very often, thank God, that a specific word leaves the interpreter totally in the dark.

When it comes to note-taking, and always bearing in mind that this is ultimately a personal matter, it seems to me that all the examples in the interview are easy enough to remember. As in the previous interview, there is no syntactic or semantic complexity and, within its own context, everything follows in a logical sequence. Is there any point, for example, in writing down ‘tibia’, ‘ankle’, ‘shoulder’ in respect of A4? Surely, no unusually good memory is needed to remember such a short speech and its contents. I can only repeat that my point is to make students realize that they should listen attentively and more often than not they will realize that, apart from specific cases such as figures of all sorts and proper names, or possibly fairly long speeches, they have no serious problem remembering what has been said and they are much better off listening carefully rather than distract their concentration by writing notes

5. Conclusion

It should be clear by now that my concern with note-taking in consecutive interpreting could be summarized in four basic points: (i.) Postgraduate students undertaking training in interpreting should have a perfect command of their foreign language(s); otherwise and strictly speaking, they are attempting the impossible. (ii.) From the start, and specially in note-taking classes, they should be made perfectly aware of the fact that notes are to be taken not systematically, but when and if required. (iii.) Also from the start of practical classes, they should be trained to listen for *what* is said, not for *how* it is said. (iv.) As a result of all this, students will automatically become more reliant on their memory and less dependent on notes, while developing the really basic component of interpreting which undoubtedly is linguistic/conceptual resourcefulness.

Notes

¹ Take a French text and ask ten excellent English translators to provide a written translation. The result will be ten texts very well translated, but ten texts which will be rather different in respect of the words that make them up. One gets ten good translations but ten different texts, and this proves that what counts is to translate the idea and not the



word. This is even more true for interpreting because the interpreter must make sure of the instantaneous production of one text into another language. It is essential that he should be free of the often misleading constraint represented by words. And it is by analyzing the thought and transferring it that he will avoid at the same time contradictions and a clumsy style.

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