

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

MEMORY ENHANCEMENT IN CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the issue of memory enhancement in consecutive interpreting. The theory of memory and its characteristics will provide readers with more insights into how it is applied in consecutive interpreting. The paper reviews the issue from different angles, making clear the obstacles to memorizing, uncovering the principles of memory skills, and offering some solutions and suggested exercises to help interpreter trainees, especially those at the Faculty of English, Phenikaa University to make the best use of memory in consecutive interpreting. With all the knowledge and analysis discussed in this paper, the writer has no desire but helping interpreter trainees as well as those who are interested in the topic or wish to be interpreters have a trustful and systematic source of information for reference, and find their own efficient ways to enhance their memory.

KEY WORDS: memory enhancement; consecutive interpreting; interpreter trainees.

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1. Introduction

Memory plays a necessary role in everyday life activities. However, in such fields as interpreting, its role cannot be described with the word necessary but crucial. It is even widely agreed among professional interpreters that without good memory skills, there is little hope for anyone to become an interpreter. It is easy to say that practice makes perfect, but locating the point of departure and how to do it are tremendously difficult tasks. For interpreter trainees, experience is something luxurious but practical guidance is a close friend.

Interpreting is one of the major training programs in Phenikaa University. Becoming a professional interpreter is not easy; it requires a lot of efforts. And for most students of English, it is the matter of using memory that makes them hesitate to become interpreters. Researchers prove that memory is the key to interpreting. We rely on it to reproduce utterances in spoken form. Recognizing the usefulness of memory as a tool to enhance the quality of interpreting and the challenges posed to interpreter trainees of utilizing this helpful tool, this paper aims to help the students of the Faculty of English in enhancing their memory in consecutive interpreting. The paper will review the issue from different angles to point out the memory challenges involved in consecutive interpreting and identify concrete ways for interpreter trainees to improve their performance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consecutive interpreting

Consecutive interpreting (CI) is the transferring of a source language to a target one by means of speaking. Suryasa (2016) indicates that interpreting process implies an entire process of how an interpreter produces equivalences between a spoken and portions of a utterance into another language in spoken too. Mahmoodzadeh (1992) indicates that interpreting consists of presenting in the target language. This is the presentation of the exact meaning of what is uttered in the source language either simultaneously or consecutively, preserving the tone of the speaker.

According to Gillies (2013), CI consists of two phases: a listening and reformation phase and a reconstruction phase. He makes it clear that in phase 1 the process is reflected through the formula: $I = L + M + N$. In the formula, “I” represents interpreting, “L”: listening and analyzing the source language, “M”: short-term memory (STM) required between the time information is heard and the

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time it is written down in the notes, and “N”: note-taking. In phase 2, the formula to reflect is: I= Rem + Read+ P. In this phase, interpreter has to retrieve information from their STM and construct the speech, read the notes and produce the target language speech.

Jones (2002) points out that in any CI, interpreter has to follow 3 basic stages and the names for these stages are different among linguists. He names them *understanding*, *analysis*, and *re-expressing*, or in other words, they are *input*, *analysis*, and *output*, irrespectively.

In the stage of *input*, the interpreter’s task is to pay attention to listening to understand the meaning as well as the message made by the speaker. At this stage, concentration and listening skills are required and it can be said that this stage is the necessary condition for the success of an interpreting as without understanding the message, how can interpreter transfer them into the target language. Phelan (2001) mentions that interpreter needs STM to retain what she has just heard and a long-term memory to put the information into context. Concentration ability is an important factor as it decides the analyzing and processing of what is heard by an interpreter.

The *input* stage is followed by the *analysis* process. In this process, the interpreter has to do two things at the same time. On the one hand, s/he has to listen for understanding. On the other hand, s/he has to decide what to note, how ideas are linked or separated, and how to organize them in the easiest way for his/her recalling later in his/her reproducing. This stage explains the confirmation made by many people that good listening skills do not mean the success in CI. That is because the decisive component lies in the ability of analyzing which, as explained earlier, requires memory skills in CI.

Thirdly, the last stage agreed by most researchers is the process of retrieval and reproducing the message made by speaker. Interpreter has to recall what he has retained and select the language for addressing audience (Mahmoodazadeh, 1992). At this stage, with a good note, the interpreter will find him/her in the enabling situation for re-expressing.

2.2. Memory

As explained by Baddeley (1986), memory is the ability to recover information about past events and knowledge. While Bolles (1988) points out what we call memory is the faculty to reproduce unconscious contents, and it is the first function we can clearly distinguish in its relationships between our consciousness and the contents that are actually not in view.

Memory falls into 2 types: short-term memory (STM) and long-term one. Norris (2017) explains STM is the ability to store a bit of information in the brain for a short time. Miller (1956) elaborates more on short term memory:

- i. STM lasts for about 20-30 seconds without rehearsal of the information.
- ii. It is also limited in terms of the number of items it can hold.
- iii. Capacity is about 7 items.
- iv. STM capacity can be increased by “chunking” (combining similar material into units).

Zhong (2003) points out that short - term memory, sometimes referred to as “primary” or “active” memory, is the part of memory which stores a limited amount of information for a limited amount of time, roughly 15-30 seconds. Roberts (2014) has also mentioned that the information is retained for between 15 and 30 seconds, which is just long enough for it to be reused.

Information stored in STM can be passed into long-term memory (LTM) through several ways such as rehearsal. He also explains 2 kinds of rehearsal: maintenance rehearsal and elaborative rehearsal. Unlike short-term memory, LTM is the ability to remember information, knowledge that we studied or learned a long time before.

Regarding long-term memory, Cherry (2021) explains that long-term memory refers to storing ideas and information which can then be recalled weeks, months, or even years later. Long-term memory tends to be stable and may last for minutes to weeks, months, or even an entire life.

Regarding nature of memory in CI, Jones (2002) points out the difference between memory in general and memory in CI in particular. Normally, memory means “remember things”, dates, names,

telephone numbers, vocabulary in foreign languages which are useful and can be used in exams at school, university and also in other professional activities. He argues that the word “memory” for consecutive interpreting is a misnomer for the intellectual faculty to be exercised by the interpreter. It is, in fact, the ability to order ideas in their brain so as to be able to be recalled and reproduced in a significant way.

The overall picture of memory in CI would be incomplete without addressing elements of memory in CI. Researchers have agreed that memory in CI is the ability to organize ideas in the brain in such an appropriate way for recalling and reproducing. In other words, it is the establishment of a structure of ideas in the interpreter’s brain after receiving the utterances. Therefore, for a piece of information being stored in the memory of an interpreter, s/he has to do three consecutive things which are listening, understanding, and reconstructing. The process is reflected in the formula: $M = L + U + R$. In this formula, “M” represents memory, “L”: listening, “U”: understanding and “R”: reconstructing information. For this reason, three elements affecting the process of memory in CI are listening, understanding, and reconstructing.

3. Obstacles to memory in CI

As explained earlier, elements of memory in CI are listening, understanding, and organizing ideas in the speech. Obstacles to memory often originate from these components. Among various obstacles, to enhance memory in CI, three most common problems that students may often encounter include failing to concentrate on listening, failing to understand the speech, and abusing note-taking.

3.1. Failure to concentrate on listening

Many students often complain that their interpreting would have been much better if during the listening period, their concentration had not failed them. There are several factors that have been adduced to explain failure to concentration. Their physical problems can be one reason. When facing physical problems which encompass health problems, stress, lack of sleep, and unhealthy situations, students’ ability of concentrating decreases dramatically. Besides, physical problems, environment can be an attribute to the failure in concentration of interpreter. When one is madly busy or has too many things to keep in his/her mind, their concentration capacity also decreases. Cherry (2021) points out that our brain capacity to concentrate is somewhat similar to a box capacity to store things. The more things there are, the less space for storing new things.

Concentration or attention in CI involves the ability to focus on the information that one would like to keep active and the ability of not being distracted by competing and irrelevant stimuli (Albrecht, 1992). The role of attention or concentration in CI is obviously vital to an interpreter as when interpreter fails to concentrate on listening to the utterances or the speech, the encoding of information is therefore unable to be processed. As explained earlier, three stages of any CI are input (listening), analysis, and output (re-expression), the failure of concentration means the input of the interpreting is not inserted and eventually leads to the total failure of the interpreter. Moreover, as “ability to concentrate is a decisive factor since it is the ability to analyze and process what is heard” (Zhong, 2003, p.1), concentration on listening can be seen as a crucial precondition for anyone who pursues the interpreting career.

3.2. Failure to understand

In English-Vietnamese interpreting, interpreter trainees sometimes do not understand the message given by the speaker. They tend to be unsuccessful in understanding the speech when speaker’s voice is too low or too high with unclear pronunciation. This is common in such cases as listening to an Indian, a Chinese or an Irish speaker. Sometimes, students are not familiar with the voice of speakers from non-English speaking countries. This situation worsens when speaker makes grammatical mistakes or/and addresses the issues indirectly.

Moreover, there are other cases of students’ failure to understand the speech due to their lacking knowledge in the field mentioned in the speech. Even when the teacher gives them the script, many

still cannot understand it because of new vocabulary and concepts. In practice, the lack of new words and knowledge of a certain issue is understandable because there is an ocean of knowledge for mankind to study and what we know is just a small drop in the ocean. And studying is a life-long learning task. The interpreter trainees should be well aware of the importance of vocabulary and background knowledge in CI. Also, vocabulary enrichment should be an integral part in the training process of interpreters.

3.3. Abusive note-taking

Beside concentration and understanding the speech, the abuse of note-taking is also a great obstacle to memory recalling in CI.

The note in the appendix is an example of student's note taking abuse. The student tried to take note of as many words as possible with an aim to help her/him remember ideas. However, s/he failed to read back the note. There were numbers, proper names, subjects, verbs, places, but she/he could not interpret what they meant and how they linked with each other.

Chase & Ericsson (1982) pointed out that note taking is a useful tool to help remember things. Jones (2002) also shares the same view when he stated that memory in CI is an aid to memory recalling. When listening, interpreter's mind has to do many tasks: analyzing, understanding, and so forth, s/he needs a note to keep detailed elements: numbers, figures, proper names, which are important for the speech's message.

However, in reality, it can be an obstacle to memory retrieval if it is abused. When interpreters try to take as many notes as possible, they are using most of their valuable time writing. Instead of listening to understand the speech, identifying the main ideas, and restructuring them orderly, interpreters choose writing notes. They have followed a misleading approach to develop a good memory in CI. One golden rule of CI is that the reading work must already have been done when interpreters start reading back the notes: the text, its meaning, and the links within the text. These must have been perfectly understood and organized by the interpreter.

In short, the abuse of note-taking is really an obstacle to the interpreter's memory. The only way to help interpreter trainees to deal with this is to train them how to listen and organize ideas within the brain and develop notes necessary for recalling the organization of those ideas.

4. Solutions to enhance memory in CI

The suggested solutions are to tackle three major obstacles commonly encountered by students of the Faculty of English, Phenikaa University. The solutions that are to be presented include: improvement of short-term memory and concentration, enrichment of vocabulary and knowledge, and a strategic approach of listening and note-taking.

4.1. Improvement of short-term memory and concentration

Since failure to concentrate can be attributed to physical problems, environmental factors, interpreter trainees should identify their sources of failure. If physical problems inhibit their concentration, it would be a good idea for them to relax and maintain a healthy life-style, working out a suitable schedule and balance between working and relaxing. However, if the reason is trainees' inborn low concentration ability, they should seek the way to better the concentration skill. Following are some suggested solutions to help trainees. It is worth noting that a solution may work with one but not with the others. Therefore, solutions are on a case-to-case basis.

As short-term memory has a supporting role in effective interpreting, there are a few exercises to strengthen it. One of the exercises is 'attentive listening for key elements'. This exercise helps the interpreter to recall the information later (Roberts, 2014). In this exercise, the interpreter listens to a descriptive or narrative text of about 100 words and then answers 'Wh' questions like Who? Why? How? Where? When? and What? The second exercise which is believed to be good for short term memory is visualization or creating mental images. In this exercise, a mnemonic device can be used to visualize the description which will help the interpreter to recall information.

In addition to the discussed exercise, others can be the immediate measures for effective concentration. Sometimes, one may lose calmness and become distracted from the job by external factors, s/he should employ an immediate solution that can be done right away. It is advised that the interpreter should sit still in his/her place, keep a steady gaze at a picture or focus the eyes on the scene of the whole conference. Then the interpreter closes the eyes and visualizes the picture in the center of the head or in the space between the eye brows. This type of practice will help keep the mind firm at one place instead of “letting it go here and there”. It will also reduce strain on the mind and increase mental strength to concentrate.

Last but not least there are exercises aiming at strengthening interpreter trainees’ ability to concentrate through training to listen to materials with noisy background. As interpreters may be distracted by the environment, listening materials with “specially inserted noises as background” will train interpreter trainees to concentrate and prevent the loss of information in the short-term memory.

4.2. Enlargement of vocabulary and knowledge

Vocabulary and knowledge play important functions in facilitating memory in CI in the process of input (help interpreter understand the speech) in English-Vietnamese interpreting as well as in the process of output (choose words for reproducing) in Vietnamese-English interpreting. Therefore, the enlargement of vocabulary and knowledge should receive due attention from interpreter trainees.

The first principle that trainees should bear in mind is that quality wording is of greater importance than the size of vocabulary. When studying new words, they should learn meanings of words, phonemic form, word formation, related idioms and phrases, and so forth. An interpreter who does not clearly understand the meaning of words and their pronunciation will face difficulty in their job. This explains why in many interpreting practice lessons, the listening itself is not difficult (the sound quality is good and speaker’s voice is clear) but many trainees cannot do well. Here is an example:

“Vietnam has become one of Asia’s best economic performers, with GDP growth averaging an impressive 7.4 percent since 2000. Supported by a nearly 20 percent growth in domestic consumption, favorable trade agreements, highly-productive manufacturing and textile sectors and increasing amounts of foreign investment, Vietnam’s future has never looked so brighter”.

If the interpreter understands only one meaning of “favorable” in Vietnamese is “*thuận lợi*”, the meaning of the utterance will be illogical: “*các hợp đồng thương mại thuận lợi*”.

“Việt nam đang là một trong các quốc gia có nền kinh tế hoạt động có hiệu quả nhất trong khu vực Đông Nam Á với mức tăng trưởng GDP đạt mức trung bình ấn tượng là 7,4% kể từ năm 2000. Với mức tăng trưởng tiêu dùng trong nước/nội địa gần 20% cùng với các hợp đồng thương mại thuận lợi, các lĩnh vực dệt may và sản xuất có năng suất cao và lượng vốn đầu tư nước ngoài ngày càng tăng, tương lai của Việt Nam chưa bao giờ tươi sáng hơn”.

This way, word has effects on the quality of interpreting. Students need to target at mastering all the denotative meanings of new words. One meaning of “favorable” in Vietnamese is “*triển vọng*”. Therefore, the suggested interpretation is “*các hợp đồng thương mại triển vọng*”.

The second principle that interpreter trainees should follow when studying new words is to try to study words in different fields as they are expected to work in various fields in the future. They should try to make their vocabulary bank covering from technology, biology, medicine, and archeology to maternal health, social evils and so forth.

Following are suggested practices to help interpreter trainees to enlarge their vocabulary and knowledge.

The most effective solution to enlarge vocabulary is reading quality documents of various fields. Interpreter trainees should develop a topic-based approach when reading documents. Whenever they find a new word, they are advised to note it, study its pronunciation and meanings.

A tool for effective word building is dictionary. Beside hundreds of good dictionaries for learning new words, one good dictionary that should be utilized by students of Faculty of English is Oxford Advanced Learner's Compass. This dictionary has three advantages over other dictionaries. Firstly, students, after understanding the meanings, pronunciation and many examples of the word searched, can find lists of idioms and common phrases with examples. Secondly, students can do vocabulary exercises with any word they want, just by choosing the item "exercise" on the interface. Thirdly, it has links with the 6th edition of Oxford Dictionary which is the priority choice for almost all students learning English.

Beside dictionaries, there are various sources of information and quality documents that students should further utilize such as e-documents from websites: www.bbc.co.uk, www.cnn.com, or www.voanews.com. Besides, students can also broaden knowledge on different topics, events happening in Vietnam and in the world by logging such websites as <http://www.workbank.org.vn> or <http://www.undp.org.vn>. For example, by accessing the item "learning" or "knowledge sharing" on the World Bank's website, they can broaden their knowledge on almost all issues related to the development of Vietnam and links to hundreds of websites in the region and the world in terms of economy, culture, and so on. Thus, interpreter trainees will have an overall picture on each issue in Vietnam as well as in the region and in the world. This kind of knowledge is very helpful for those who want to follow the career path of an interpreter.

Other valuable sources that many students in Hanoi should take full advantage of include publications and documents from the World Bank and Embassy of the United States. These publications and documents are on national, regional, and international development issues which are updated on a monthly basis. Students can also get discs of bilingual languages regularly offered by these two institutions. These discs can be useful tools to help students broaden their knowledge.

4.3. Solutions to abusive note-taking

4.3.1. Development note-taking skills

This part is about some practical recommendations towards effective note-taking so that interpreter trainees/students could make the best use of notes. There is no more repetition of the theory of note-taking. Instead, they are simple points that are not easy to remember.

First and foremost, students need to distinguish 3 types of taking notes including reading and taking notes, listening and taking notes and lastly interpreting and taking notes. Students have been so familiar with the two first types since the school time. Only when learning interpreting, they get to know the third type of taking notes, which is very much different from the other two. However, students are not used to adopt the way a consecutive interpreter should take notes. Looking at their notes, the overall impression is that they still take as many notes as they can. But notes are not dictation taken in hurry or neither short hand which is time consuming to decode. Notes in interpreting are supplementary to, not replacing memory.

Second, because notes are products of comprehension, students should note what they understand, not what they hear. They should never follow the speaker passively, but always think with the speaker. Otherwise, the risk of talking non-sense or illogical things is likely to happen.

Last but not least, notes are visual aids, not text aids. Students should try to be creative with symbols, borrow what is useful for them. They should remember that notes are inventive set of anything which take minimal time but carry maximal meaning to the interpreter.

In short, note-taking in consecutive interpreting is like a small gift offered by the precious time lag between the speaker and the interpreter. Such magic gift is always there to help the interpreters if they use it intelligently to make it no more than "*a means to an end*" (Jones, 2002, p.39) towards good interpreting. Those, who are so attracted by the magic and tend to abuse notes, in contrast, unconsciously become 'notes' slave'. Therefore, note-taking is a skill to be learned and trained.

4.3.2. Effective listening in CI

When it comes to listening for CI, it is necessary to distinguish listening in CI with that in general situations, i.e., for comprehension. Different from listening for understanding, in CI, the interpreter, while listening, has to decide what to remember and how to store them in his/her brain. This is why interpreter has to do “two tasks at the same time”, which are listening for main ideas and organizing main ideas for recalling later. Zhong (2003) elaborated on the brain’s mechanism for this ability. He indicated that the two hemispheres of people’s split-brain are capable of learning two different things at exactly the same time. Therefore, developing the ability to listen and analyze the speech, or in other words, a listening strategy, is something that can be achieved and this will benefit the interpreters.

4.3.3. Suggested exercises for effective listening in CI

Since effective listening plays a key role in the process of CI, the next section will suggest some exercises to enhance interpreter trainees’ listening.

Exercise 1: While practicing listening for main ideas in CI, trainees should follow the step-by-step principle. They should listen for a sentence then summarize the idea without note-taking. When mastering this first step, they can proceed with practice listening 2, 3 and more sentences without note-taking. During listening process, they should try to pay attention to answering WH questions such as who, what, where, when, why and so forth. After that, the trainees should practice re-expressing in the original language before interpreting in the target language. They should spend more time practice listening. In doing so, interpreter trainees have trained themselves how to listen for main ideas, rather than meaning of individual words. This, in turn, will help them avoid word-by-word interpreting as well as missing main ideas. Students will also have chances to train their brain to remember ideas and ideas linking and develop a note system for themselves.

Exercise 2: Interpreter trainees are encouraged to try to practice listening to speakers of English from different countries. This will help trainees get familiar with voices of speakers. Students may also search the net to download free reports or audio files with speakers from different countries and practice listening to these files as much as possible. Students can find many free audio and video files from national audio or video’s websites in such countries as China, India, Germany, UK, and US.

These are some practical solutions to help improve memory skills for consecutive interpreter trainees. By combining short-term memory and concentration improvement, enrichment of vocabulary and knowledge, and development of a strategic approach of listening and note-taking, the mind of the interpreter will become more analytical, which will eventually facilitate memory enhancement.

5. Conclusion and suggestions

This paper has discovered and presented some feasible solutions and exercises to enhance memory of interpreter trainees, especially those at Faculty of English, Phenikaa University. The solutions are mainly derived from three most common memory hinderances, namely inability to concentrate, failure to understand, and abusive note-taking. Hopefully, awareness of the most common culprits and effective remedies would help interpreter trainees to be more confident in the interpreting process and thus avoid making unnecessary mistakes.

Memory is an important part of interpreting, but memory training has long been ignored by training institutions. Therefore, it is necessary for the institutions to develop practical exercises to help interpreter trainees to enhance their memory. Having a good memory, the interpreter trainees are actually equipped with an effective tool for the encoding and decoding information. It is, therefore, suggested that “memory training” needs to be incorporated in the curriculum of all interpreter training institutions in Vietnam.

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Cải thiện trí nhớ trong dịch nối tiếp

Tóm tắt: Bài báo đề cập vấn đề cải thiện trí nhớ trong phiên dịch nối tiếp. Lý thuyết về trí nhớ và các đặc điểm của trí nhớ sẽ cung cấp cho bạn đọc những hiểu biết sâu sắc hơn về cách sử dụng trí nhớ trong phiên dịch nối tiếp. Bài báo phân tích vấn đề trí nhớ từ nhiều góc độ khác nhau, chỉ rõ những trở ngại trong quá trình ghi nhớ, trình bày các nguyên tắc của kỹ năng ghi nhớ, đồng thời đưa ra một số giải pháp và bài tập gợi ý để giúp sinh viên học phiên dịch, đặc biệt là sinh viên tại Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Phenikaa sử dụng trí nhớ hiệu quả nhất trong phiên dịch nối tiếp. Với tất cả những kiến thức và phân tích được trình bày trong bài báo này, người viết không mong muốn gì hơn ngoài việc giúp các bạn sinh viên học phiên dịch cũng như những người quan tâm đến chủ đề này hoặc mong muốn trở thành phiên dịch viên có một nguồn thông tin đáng tin cậy và có hệ thống để tham khảo và tìm ra những cách hiệu quả để cải thiện trí nhớ của mình.

Từ khóa: cải thiện trí nhớ; phiên dịch nối tiếp; sinh viên học phiên dịch.