

Consecutive as a Stepping-stone for Simultaneous Interpretation

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Interpreting, the human activity of translating oral discourse between two languages, has existed since times immemorial. As a professional activity *per se*, however, it is less than a century old. It dates back to the end of World War I, at the Paris conferences held in 1918, which resulted in the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the League of Nations. The first professional interpreters were all self-taught, but with the development of the profession and the advent of more international meetings, interpreter training began to be considered an important activity to prepare future interpreters better and faster. The first school dedicated exclusively to the training of interpreters was founded in Geneva, in 1941, by Antoine Velleman, an interpreter at the League of Nations (BOWEN e BOWEN, 1984). Many other appeared in the following decades.

As consecutive interpretation between English and French was the only mode of interpreting used at the League of Nations it is only natural that this is what was taught in the beginning. However, with the increased use of simultaneous interpreting after it was used (not for the first time) at the Nuremberg Trials at the end of World War II, not only Geneva but also the schools created later on began to add training in simultaneous interpretation as part of their curriculum. One major consensus in most training programs has always been that training in consecutive should not only precede that in simultaneous but also continue throughout the training process, together with that in the simultaneous mode. Since simultaneous interpreting is used in international conferences much more frequently nowadays than consecutive, students are often eager to start it in their training programs, and usually are not extremely willingly to go through the consecutive exercises, which many of them, with the naivety of beginners, think will be useless in their professional life. They should bear in mind that, despite the fact that simultaneous is more common these days than consecutive in the conference setting, this is not the case in the legal, medical, and community settings, for instance. Even in the international conference setting, consecutive can't always be ruled out. But the interpreting booth may seem to be more glamorous and attractive to students than the notepad used for consecutive.

However, the most important issue is that, as a training tool, consecutive interpretation should precede simultaneous, since it is consecutive that will push the trainee-interpreter into learning how to leave words and sentences behind and concentrate on the sense of the original message to be interpreted) a necessary skill for any kind of interpretation, in whatever setting. In other words, consecutive interpretation forces the interpreter to “deverbalize”, to use the core concept of the *Théorie du Sens* (Interpretive Theory of Translation), spearheaded by Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer, at the ESIT – Paris III University (see, among many others, SELESKIVITCH and LEDERER, 2002).

It should be noted that Seleskovitch's theoretical thinking arose from her observation of what happens during the process of interpretation—or oral translation—most notably from her reflections on consecutive interpretation, which would eventually serve as the basis for her PhD research, in the first half of the 70's. (Seleskovitch 1968, 1975.)

Says Seleskovitch in her first published book:

... let us imagine that we have just delivered a brief, three-minute speech. We would be incapable of repeating those four or five hundred words verbatim with the original gestures and intonation, even if we were asked to do so immediately afterwards. More often than not, we would not even know what words or gestures we had used, and neither would our listeners. What sticks in our minds is the meaning [sense], clear and precise because it was spoken aloud, but already largely amorphous in memory. Most of the words that were uttered and all the sounds which shaped the tone of the statement are blotted out in the memories of both speaker and listener, and only the meaning [sense] which they conveyed lingers on (Seleskovitch: 1978, p. 16).

According to Lederer (1998),

Deverbalization is a natural phenomenon in oral translation, at least in consecutive interpretation. ... Clearly visible in interpreting, deverbalization is more difficult to observe in written translation. ... Deverbalization is a natural feature of interpretation; it requires an effort of the translator (p. 40-41).

We can infer here that Lederer admits that deverbalization happens naturally in consecutive interpretation, due to the natural constraints of the situation, but may not, necessarily, happen so automatically in simultaneous. As such, trainers should insist upon intensive training in consecutive in order to help trainees develop deverbalization as an automatic skill. In other words, students should be comfortable with leaving words and sentence structures behind before they ever step into the interpreting booth. If this does not happen, they will unconsciously develop the habit of calquing the sentence structures of the original speech and/or that of using cognates as much as possible, eventually ending in word-for-word translation, which functions as a sort of "surviving technique" for people with the appropriate training. Once acquired, such a bad habit is very difficult to get rid of.

The consensus that consecutive precedes simultaneous in training has existed for a long time as can be seen from the training curriculum of most well-established European schools. Ilg (1959) makes this very clear

when describing the training process used at the Geneva Interpreting School. In 1967, the Canadian interpreter Thérèse Nilski (NILSKI, 1967) stated that

the best European schools, the ones that turn out a high ratio of competent, practicing interpreters, have discovered that, in order to teach acceptable simultaneous interpretation, they must go back to one of the older, and gradually vanishing forms of interpretation: consecutive (p. 48, italics in the original).

The reason for such a consensus is very simple: it is through solid training in consecutive that the student will learn to listen to a message, analyze and retain its sense, and then reproduce the original message without undue attachment to the linguistic shape in which it was conveyed. When this stage of training fails, problems are most likely to arise later on.

Although Gile (2005) states that there are no solid research data to corroborate this consensus, it is Gile himself who states in the same article: “Simultaneous interpreting is seen by students as the culmination of their training. Indeed, when it is taught *after consecutive has been fully mastered*, [my italics] it provides them with the final technical skills required to enter the labor market” (GILE, 2005). Further ahead in the same article, when mentioning problems that might arise at the moment of transition from the consecutive to simultaneous mode in training—already showing by his comment that he believes that consecutive precedes simultaneous—Gile suggests that, when such problems appear, “it is desirable to take the students through intensive exercises in consecutive to put them back on the right track” (Gile, 2005). There seems to be no doubt that Gile agrees, that developing solid consecutive skills is a preparatory stage for that of effective simultaneous training.

So, how can one move along the training sequence of future interpreters in the lines of the concepts mentioned above? Obviously, there are many ways to approach it and what follows here is but a suggestion of a training sequence often used by the author of this paper in his daily professional exercise as an interpreter trainer. Basically, the first emphasis is on developing *memory*. What memory, one may ask? With the principles outlined above in mind, the instructor should help students develop memory for the message of a speech, turning it “inside out”, making it their own.

The following exercises should be used in the sequence they appear below. The source of passages is almost infinite these days, with all that is available on the Internet. Still, language-teaching manuals offer a wide array of possibilities as sources of passages with low informational content or already organized by rhetorical styles such as narrative,

description, argumentation, and so forth. Also, the trainer should keep in mind that passages should be presented in normal speed. Artificially low speeds will add an extra hurdle for students to overcome, contrary to what some may think, since the translation units will be artificially stretched over the time continuum, thus leading students to try to remember and/or translate words individually.

Paraphrasing sentences in the same language, be it the “A” language or the “B” language of students, possibly in both, one after the other.

1. Listening to short passages and summarizing them (same language and/or in translation). Again, the emphasis here is not on translating, but on retaining the message.

2. First exercises in consecutive without notes. Use passages with low informational content (mostly narrative). It is extremely important that students are not allowed to take notes at this point or they will tend to write as many of the words they here as possible. The main focus at this stage is to force them to concentrate on memory and not on note-taking.

3. Starting exercises with the note taking of names and numbers only. Choose passages that are relatively simple in content, but which include some dates or other figures and/or also include some proper names.

4. Introducing wider note-taking **only when** concentration skills are stronger. Keep informational content low, so not to add one more difficulty. It is suggested that this exercise is done in two stages: (1) students listen without taking notes; then, they may make some notes to organize their thinking before delivery; (2) after the previous mode has been practiced intensively, students can begin to take notes while they listen, which is way more difficult since they will have to balance their attention span between listening/analyzing and note-taking.

5. Increasing informational content of practice passages gradually (by slowly introducing descriptive passages, for instance). The instructor may alternate the note-taking process after listening and during listening, as suggested for the previous exercise.

6. Introducing talks given by students themselves or by guests and/or pre-recorded talks (with picture instead of just the sound, if possible).

The instructor should insist that notes be taken in the target language so as to force the processing of the information rather than the retention of the wording. Although this is not what really happens in professional practice all the time, it is important that students learn to take notes in the target language to prevent them, among other things, from noting the words they hear, which will eventually lead to transcoding (or the translation of words individually, rather than the sense). It also helps them to process the message while taking notes, instead of transferring the processing to the delivery stage.

Also, the instructor should always bear in mind that the main purpose at this stage of training is to develop the interpreting technique (with emphasis on sense and not on wording) rather than enlarging students' vocabulary. Along these lines, instructors should not overemphasize glossary building until the interpreting technique itself has been mastered. Usually, vocabulary/glossary development is the subject of a different class in interpreting programs and this skill should not be overstressed when a class is really concerned with developing consecutive or simultaneous interpreting. Also, the instructor should always keep in mind that notes are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. In other words, directions should be given on note-taking mainly as guidance for students, rather than the instructor trying to impress upon their minds that there is one perfect and efficient system for note-taking in interpreting.

In short, the teaching of consecutive should precede that of simultaneous because it forces deverbalization and makes the trainee analyze the message and concentrate on sense rather than wording. If simultaneous is introduced before consecutive has been mastered, the trainee, in a sort of "survival technique, tends to translate words rather than the sense of the message.

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