

An Empirical Study of Relationship between Forms of Note-Taking and Interpreting Quality in C-E Consecutive Interpreting: A Case Study of Student Interpreters at Inner Mongolia University

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between forms of note-taking and interpreting quality in C-E consecutive interpreting. 12 students majoring in MTI interpreting at Inner Mongolia University are asked to interpret a diplomatic speech in the way of C-E consecutive interpretation and write down their notes on 5 pieces of A4 paper. The results indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between incomplete Chinese characters, symbols, and interpretation quality. Incomplete Chinese characters and symbols that can improve interpretation quality are those easy to stimulate association to activate the interpreter's memory that have fewer strokes and are easy to write, which can reduce the student interpreters' energy allocation when taking notes and reading notes. Therefore, student interpreters can devote more energy to listening analysis and language conversion so as to improve their interpretation quality. Based on the above research results, pedagogical implications are discussed to help students achieve better command of note-taking.

Keywords

Consecutive Interpreting, Note Forms, Interpreting Quality, Incomplete Chinese Characters, Symbols, Effort Model

1. Introduction

With the in-depth development of globalization, communication between coun-

tries in the world nowadays has extended to all fields of society. Therefore, interpreting has become increasingly common and extremely important in our life (Yang, 2015). One of the most common ways of interpreting is consecutive interpreting, in which interpreters take notes while listening to the source language. Before the mid-1990s, consecutive interpreting was the dominant form of interpretation in various foreign exchange activities. Till now, consecutive interpreting remains the major way of interpreting in diplomatic conferences, business negotiations, press conferences, and large-scale outdoor activities (Ren, 2012). When the speaker finishes his speech and stops to wait for interpretation, the interpreter reproduces all the speaker's information accurately and naturally in the receptor language. In the process of interpreting, interpreters can only rely on short-term memory and notes to understand, analyze, store and convert the source language. How to effectively use notes to store source language information and provide high-quality information extraction and transmission services has become the focus of interpreting research. The interpreting performance depends on the interpreter's ability to record information they have heard (Wu, 2013). However, limited short-term memory may be difficult or even impossible for interpreters to remember and interpret all the information they hear. Besides, it is worth noting that the time duration for speakers can last 2 - 3 minutes or even 15 - 30 minutes (Wang, 2011). While related psychological research indicates that the working memory of interpreting is limited, and the time for information storage lasts only around 30 seconds (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). In that case, judicious use of note-taking is essential in consecutive interpreting, which is often used as an auxiliary tool for interpreters to write down critical information and stimulate memory. Therefore, it is necessary and meaningful to conduct research on the relationship between note-taking and interpretation quality in consecutive interpreting. This empirical study is designed to have a deep exploration of the relationship between them. Accordingly, by exploring the relationship between the form of note-taking and interpretation quality in E-C consecutive interpreting, it is hoped that this study will present some pedagogical suggestions for the teaching of note-taking after its exploration of the features of note forms that promote the quality of E-C consecutive interpreting.

2. Literature Review

There is abundant literature on note-taking and its relationship with the quality of interpretation, most of which has been conducted from the perspective of note-taking quantity, note-taking language, note-taking form, etc.

A large number of studies on note-taking and interpreting quality have been conducted by Western scholars and researchers who have made significant contributions to this field in theory and practice. Those scholars argue that note-taking plays an irreplaceable and essential role in consecutive interpreting (Herbert 1968; Gile, 1995). In the late 1970s, the experiment on the relationship between note-taking and interpreting led by Gerver and Sinaikoand, and Se-

leskovitch ended in failure because of the subjects' differences and various reasons. [Andres \(2002\)](#) conducted empirical research and found that interpreters tended to use the source language when taking notes. In [Dam's study \(2004\)](#), five interpreters were asked to perform Spanish-Danish consecutive interpreting. The results concluded that since the number of strokes of symbols was less than that of complete phrases, hence the use of symbols could improve efficiency by saving time so that interpreters could note down more source language information. On the basis of Dam's research, [Abuín González \(2012\)](#) further explored the choice of languages in note-taking. The study showed that interpreters of different professional levels had different language choice tendencies when taking notes. With the improvement of interpreters' levels, their language choice had also shifted from the source language to the target language. [Cardoen's study \(2014\)](#) focused on the quantity and form of notes and their influences on the fluency of interpreting. The study concluded that the more notes and abbreviations, the lower the fluency of interpretation, but the higher the accuracy. The more complete words, the higher the fluency, but the lower the accuracy.

Domestic research on interpreting is relatively later than that in foreign countries ([Bao, 2005](#)). Research and published papers of Chinese scholars mainly focus on interpreting skills and the features and techniques of note-taking. [Cai \(2001\)](#) conducted an empirical study to disclose the essence of skills in consecutive interpreting, which indicated that a good mastering of interpreting skills and techniques had much to do with the quality of interpretation. [Dai and Xu \(2007\)](#) mainly studied the features of note-taking of six professional interpreters and six non-professional interpreters in C-E consecutive interpreting and the relationship between the features of note-taking and the performance of interpreting. The results showed that professional interpreters used fewer Chinese phrases than non-professional interpreters but used more words, abbreviations, and various symbols than non-professional interpreters. The study also concluded that professional interpreters and non-professional ones had different habits of note-taking and the relationship between note features and interpreting efficiency was complicated, and the variety of note features could not simply measure the interpreting efficiency. [Xu and Chai \(2008\)](#) aimed to investigate the difficulties encountered by native Chinese interpreters in taking notes in their C-E consecutive interpreting. They analyzed the specific reasons for their difficulties encountered in taking notes. The research put forward some pedagogical implications to help students achieve better command of note-taking, which is to instruct the students to form a personalized, highly consistent, and fixed note-taking system to avoid fuzzy and invalid notes. [Liu \(2010\)](#) explored the features of note-taking and analyzed the relationship between the features of note-taking and interpreting performance. Liu studied the note-taking of 62 undergraduate students majoring in English from three perspectives which are the quantity and form of notes and the language used. The study found that the symbols and clear separation marks were positively correlated with interpreting scores. [Zheng \(2013\)](#) analyzed the note-taking characteristics of 24 first-year

postgraduates majoring in interpreting and the correlation between note-taking characteristics and interpreting quality in C-E consecutive interpreting. The results showed that students used more single Chinese characters and symbols. [Deng \(2018\)](#) investigated the relationship between the quality of lines and arrows used in the note and the quality of interpretation. According to the results, it could be concluded that using lines and arrows was not directly related to interpreting quality. [Liu \(2019\)](#) mainly focused on the impact of note-taking on the quality of interpreting in C-E consecutive interpreting, and the experimental and interview data were collected from six subjects at a graduate school of translation and interpreting. The results showed that the number of single Chinese characters was negatively correlated with interpreting quality, and there was little correlation between the form of notes and interpreting quality ([Liu, 2019](#)).

The current study aims to extend and build upon their work, which delves deeper into the relationship between the notes and interpreting quality of diplomatic interpreting in C-E consecutive interpretation. It selects an excerpt of the keynote speech by President Xi Jinping at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2021. In terms of theoretical guidance, relatively few researches are conducted under the guidance of Gile's Effort Model and from the perspective of the Schema Theory or some other theories. Therefore, taking Gill's Effort Model as the guiding theory, this study elaborately focused on the two questions: 1) which forms of notes can promote the quality of interpretation in C-E consecutive interpreting? 2) what are the common features of note forms that promote the quality of interpretation in C-E consecutive interpreting?

3. Methods

3.1. Subjects of the Experiment

The subjects were 12 second-year MTI students majoring in interpreting at Inner Mongolia University, China, who were selected in strict accordance with the following criteria to guarantee their representativeness. Firstly, their professional courses were instructed by the same professor, and the scores of their professional courses of consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation were all above 80 points. Besides, they all passed CATTI-3 and TEM-8. Furthermore, they had all received professional guidance and training in consecutive interpreting for more than one year and formed a basic foundation and understanding of taking notes. Hence, they had developed and formed their own habits and ways of taking notes, favoring their interpreting a diplomatic speech in the way of C-E consecutive interpreting. The criteria can ensure that the subjects are all middle-level or upper-level student interpreters. In this way, the whole experiment and its results are typical and representative among student interpreters with intermediate or above interpretation ability.

3.2. Interpreting Materials of the Experiment

The material for the C-E consecutive interpreting is an excerpt of the keynote

speech by President Xi Jinping at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2021. The excerpt lasts 4 minutes and 27 seconds and is divided into 9 parts in the process of consecutive interpreting, and student interpreters start interpretation during the pause time of each part (**Table 1**).

3.3. Research Procedure

The research procedure comprises pre-experiment preparation, experiment process, and post-experiment work.

In the preparation stage, an excerpt was selected from the experimental materials and a pilot study was conducted on three student interpreters. The aim was to test the degree of difficulty of experimental materials for student interpreters. The pilot study results showed that the materials' content and format were neither quite difficult nor extremely easy for the subjects. Then, the materials of C-E consecutive interpreting in a formal experiment were selected and prepared. The scoring criterion for interpreting quality proposed by Yang Chengshu (2010) was adopted in this empirical study. Finally, an interview was designed according to the research purposes to have a better understanding of the use of student interpreters' notes, the reasons for their use of different note forms, and the energy distribution in the process of their consecutive interpretation.

The formal experiment began with a series of introductions to explain the purpose and basic rules, and the researcher served as a moderator to guide the students to complete the experiment. Besides, all the subjects were given 5 pieces of A4 paper to write down their notes. After finishing the interpreting, the subjects were required to recall and tell what their notes meant. Then, all the subjects took part in an interview. A video camera recorded the whole process of the experiment, and the student interpreters' interpreting recording and note recall recording were also submitted.

After the experiment, the researcher transcribed the interpreting audio. Then, the researcher analyzed the note forms and scored the interpreting quality. Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) 26 window version is used for the statistical analysis. One tool in SPSS is called Partial Correlations, which can be used to calculate the relationship between two variables. Partial correlation analysis is to measure the correlation between the two factors again after deducting the effects of other factors on the basis of correlation analysis. The method is to eliminate the transmission effect of the purpose of this method is to eliminate the transmission effect of correlation of other variables.

Table 1. Interpreting material.

Number of words	792
Time of recording	4 minutes and 27 seconds
Speech rate	178 words per minute
Quality of the audio	clear

3.4. Data Collection

The entire interpreting process was recorded synchronously, and subjects' audio recordings were saved as audio files. After the experiment, the researcher collected 12 interpreters' notes and completed the transcription for the consecutive interpreting. Moreover, the answers to the interview were also noted. Finally, the videos and audio were collected and stored.

4. Results

After careful analysis and summary of the collected notes, eight types of notes were identified in student interpreters' notes, including complete Chinese phrases, single Chinese characters, incomplete Chinese characters, complete English words, English abbreviations, symbols, end tags, and figures. However, after summarizing the number of every single note form, the researcher found that the number of end tags and figures was much less than that of other note forms, and almost all the end tags and figures that appeared in the notes were no more than ten. Then, it could be inferred that there was little significance in exploring the relationship between note figures, end tags and the quality of interpretation. Therefore, this empirical research only analyzed the other six note forms, which exerted influence on the quality of interpretation, which are complete Chinese phrases, single Chinese characters, incomplete Chinese characters, complete English words, English abbreviations and symbols. They are divided into three categories. Here are **Table 2**, **Table 3** of note forms and numbers.

Table 2. Three types of note-taking form.

Type 1	Chinese characters and phrases	Complete Chinese phrases, single Chinese characters, incomplete Chinese characters
Type 2	English words and abbreviations	Complete English words, English abbreviations
Type 3	Symbols	Different kinds of note symbols

Table 3. The number of each single note form and the total number of note form.

The form of note-taking	A	B	C	D	E	F
Chinese characters and phrases	2 + 58 + 25	5 + 65 + 6	7 + 22 + 0	12 + 63 + 3	5 + 29 + 3	0 + 0 + 0
English words and abbreviations	9 + 27	8 + 52	20 + 50	5 + 21	18 + 46	11 + 86
Symbols	98	75	70	64	71	69
Total	219	211	169	168	172	166
The form of note-taking	G	H	I	J	K	L
Chinese characters and phrases	3 + 111 + 1	4 + 119 + 1	9 + 84 + 0	2 + 84 + 2	8 + 98 + 0	5 + 41 + 2
English words and abbreviations	4 + 30	3 + 35	10 + 12	1 + 10	2 + 32	4 + 20
Symbols	70	42	60	70	65	64
Total	219	204	175	169	205	136

Furthermore, the researcher scores the interpreting quality of student interpreters based on the scoring criteria proposed by Yang Chengshu. The final scores of each subjects are presented with **Table 4** as follows.

The correlation between the six-note forms and interpreting quality was statistically analyzed. The data results showed that there was no correlation between single Chinese characters, complete English words, English abbreviations, and interpreting quality in the experiment. The specific data were illustrated in **Table 5**.

In **Table 5**, $p = .042 < .05$ and $r = -.592$, showing a significantly negative correlation between complete Chinese phrases and interpreting quality, that is, the more complete Chinese phrases, the worse the interpreting quality.

Table 6 shows the correlation results between incomplete Chinese characters and interpreting quality. In the table, $p = .43 < .05$, showing that the data are statistically significant. Besides, $r = .590$, ranging from .5 to .8. Therefore, it could be concluded that there was a significantly positive correlation between incomplete Chinese characters and interpreting quality. In other words, using incomplete Chinese characters could promote the interpreting quality.

In **Table 7**, $p = .042 > .05$, proving that exploring the data and correlation between the variables is meaningful. Besides, $r = .594$, showed a significantly positive correlation between symbols and interpreting quality. Therefore, symbolic notes affect the quality of interpretation: the more symbols are used, the better the quality of interpretation output.

Table 4. Interpreting score.

Subject	A	B	C	D	E	F
Score	92	89.5	79	74	80.5	80
Subject	G	H	I	J	K	L
Score	90.5	80.5	79.5	84	81	84.5

Table 5. Correlation between complete Chinese phrases and interpreting quality.

Correlations			
		complete Chinese phrases	interpreting quality
complete Chinese phrases	Pearson Correlation	1	-.592*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.042
	N	12	12
interpreting quality	Pearson Correlation	-.592*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.042	
	N	12	12

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Correlation between incomplete Chinese characters and interpreting quality.

Correlations			
		incomplete Chinese characters	interpreting quality
incomplete Chinese characters	Pearson Correlation	1	.590*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.043
	N	12	12
interpreting quality	Pearson Correlation	.590*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.043	
	N	12	12

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

Table 7. Correlation between symbols and interpreting quality.

Correlations			
		symbols	interpreting quality
symbols	Pearson Correlation	1	.594*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.042
	N	12	12
interpreting quality	Pearson Correlation	.594*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.042	
	N	12	12

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

In conclusion, in C-E consecutive interpreting, note forms that could improve the quality of interpreting include incomplete Chinese characters and various note symbols.

5. Discussion

In this study, note forms that promoted interpretation quality in C-E diplomatic consecutive interpreting were explored. The results indicate that the more incomplete Chinese characters the student interpreters use in their notes, the better the quality of their interpretation output. The note form of incomplete Chinese characters has its distinctive features that the use of them by student interpreters could significantly promote their interpreting quality. One reason is that incomplete Chinese characters do not have too many strokes and some of them even could be written with one stroke, so the subjects could comprehensively write down the source language information. Accordingly, in phase one, they could save the energy consumed in their task of note-taking. Secondly, the simple note form of incomplete Chinese characters could also express many meanings of the source language. Therefore, the energy for the task of short-term memory in phase one could also be saved to some extent. Thirdly, incomplete

Chinese characters are very common in Chinese people's daily life since they use Chinese characters every day. Hence this note form could also help student interpreters save energy in note-taking and short-term memory. Lastly, some Chinese characters originated from hieroglyphics, and incomplete Chinese characters can also express the same meaning as the original complete Chinese characters. For example, subject B uses “扌” to refer to challenges since it is a part of the Chinese character of “挑”; some of the subjects also use “亻 彡” to represent the meanings of health and well-being. Incomplete Chinese characters easily activate the interpreter's memory in the way of association, thus saving their energy consumption in phase two in which the interpreters retrieve and deconstruct the information in the source language while reading the notes, and finally reproduce the information in the target language.

In student interpreters' notes, there are several kinds of note symbols, such as mathematical symbols, graphical symbols, arrow symbols, and line symbols. The note forms of symbols can promote interpretation quality in their C-E diplomatic consecutive interpreting for the following reasons. Firstly, note symbols are simple and easy to write, so student interpreters can note down the information in a short time, avoiding the missing of some important source language information. What's more, simple note symbols can also express rich and comprehensive information content, hence the energy distributed in note-taking could be greatly reduced for student interpreters do not need to take too many notes. Secondly, various note symbols are common to use in the subjects' daily life and most of them are not so unique or strange. That means student interpreters can master some note forms in advance, and do not need to improvise them in the interpreting process. Therefore, student interpreters can record more comprehensive information in a short time, reducing the energy pressure on note-taking and short-term memory. In addition, the note symbols are easy for the interpreters to recognize, and generally do not lead to misunderstanding or confusion, which can activate the interpreter's memory in the way of association, reducing the energy in note-reading.

This finding is supported by the Effort Model of Gile (1995), which advocates interpreters should make a reasonable allocation of their energy in two phases of consecutive interpreting to ensure a relatively high quality of interpreting. This theory could explain why the note forms of incomplete Chinese characters and note symbols could improve the quality of interpretation in this experiment. The major reason is that these two forms of notes could significantly save student interpreters' energy in their note-taking and note-reading. In phase one, the strokes of incomplete Chinese characters are short and the note symbols are easy to write down. These features of note forms could significantly reduce the energy allocation required for student interpreters to take notes so that they could distribute more energy to listening and analysis and short-term memory operations. Besides, the notes could also help reduce the energy consumed in short-term memory. Chinese characters are based on hieroglyphics, so the

meaning of a Chinese character could also be guessed through the structure or the composition of Chinese characters. Similarly, incomplete Chinese characters could also refer to a certain meaning and the meaning of note symbols is also obvious. Therefore, the use of incomplete Chinese characters and note symbols is easy for student interpreters to associate and recall the meaning of the source language, which could greatly reduce the energy consumed by them in the task of note-reading. In this way, in both phases of consecutive interpreting, student interpreters could have more energy for other tasks, especially for listening and analyzing as well as language transfer.

Furthermore, when answering the first question in the interview, nearly all of the student interpreters approve of the positive role of notes in their C-E consecutive interpreting. The following is a summary of their explanations. Firstly, notes could help them write down the key information of the source language to ensure that the content of the source language could be interpreted as accurately and comprehensively as possible and to achieve better interpreting quality. Secondly, taking notes is also a process of analyzing the logic of source language information, which could ensure the logic of interpreting production. More importantly, taking notes could reduce the energy required for short-term memory and remembering tasks, and good notes could also reduce the energy required for the tasks of note-taking and note-reading. If the energy could be better distributed in consecutive interpreting, the quality of interpreting would be relatively improved. Such light would certainly be of significance in interpreting pedagogy, as a large part of consecutive interpreting training is dedicated to teaching rational distribution of energy.

Note symbols that could promote consecutive interpreting quality in this study include mathematical symbols, arrow symbols, punctuation symbols, and graphic symbols, which can help promote the interpreting quality. In terms of mathematical symbols, they use “.” to express the reason, “∴” to express the results, “√” to refer to the good future or success, “?” to express the question or problem. For arrow symbols, they use “↑” to express increase, promoting or something good, “↓” to express decrease, the next step or the results, “→ ←” to refer to the relationship. For punctuation symbols, they use “:” to express the following contents said by people or the illustration, “!” to express the important things or the degree of something, or use “.....” to express that they do not remember information comprehensively or show some missing information. In terms of graphic symbols, they use a small circle to represent a person, a smile to show a good attitude, or a big circle to emphasize an event. Chinese characters, which originated from pictures, are based on hieroglyphics. One of the methods of creating Chinese characters is ideographic characters. That means the components of Chinese characters could also refer to certain images and meanings, and student interpreters can quickly recall the meaning of Chinese characters through association. For instance, in the experiment, “晷” is used by student interpreters to refer to “瘟疫”, and “凶” is also used to represent “来势汹汹”.

Another method of “huiyifa” means that this kind of Chinese character is composed of two or more complete or incomplete Chinese characters. The meaning of the Chinese character is the combination of several Chinese characters. For example, “泪” is composed of water and eyes, so its meaning of it is clear to recognize even through the incomplete component. Students can use this method to take notes. In a word, as long as interpreters can find the form corresponding to the source language in a short time, the different components of a Chinese character can be used to take notes to help them recall the meaning and information of the source language. Student interpreters can learn about these incomplete Chinese characters mentioned above and use them to take notes, and constantly learn and master new and different forms of note symbols, so as to improve the ability of note-taking and promote the quality of interpreting.

For teachers, on the one hand, could instruct students to take notes with more incomplete Chinese characters and symbols, and encourage them to take notes with source language; on the other hand, they could also try to change students’ habits of using source language, and guide them to use the target language to take notes since professional interpreters tend to take notes in that way. More importantly, in the interpreting classes, the interpreting teachers generally spend several classes explaining and teaching notes, but that is far from enough. It is necessary to set up the course of interpreting notes for one semester.

6. Conclusion

Note-taking is an important auxiliary tool in consecutive interpreting. This empirical study is designed to explore the relationship between different note-taking forms and interpreting quality and get to know the note forms that could promote the quality of interpreting. In the experiment and the interview, nearly all the subjects approve that note-taking plays a positive role in the interpreting process. Therefore, after getting the note forms that could promote the interpreting quality, the study also gives suggestions for note-taking to improve the interpreting performance. In C-E consecutive interpreting, there is a significantly negative correlation between complete Chinese phrases and interpreting quality, a significantly positive correlation between incomplete Chinese characters, note symbols, and interpreting quality, and no significant correlation between single Chinese characters, complete English words, English abbreviations, and interpreting quality. Therefore, in this experiment, both incomplete Chinese characters and symbols could promote interpreting quality. This study has achieved some results as well as enriched the related research on improving the way of note-taking and promoting consecutive interpreting quality. The inclusion of 12 student interpreters at Inner Mongolia University in this experiment delimits the study. Professional interpreters at Inner Mongolia University could also be selected to conduct comparative research in future studies. A comparative study between student interpreters and professional interpreters might be a good research perspective, which could help to find differences in notes between

student interpreters and professional ones and might have better and unexpected results.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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