

# The Skill-Focused Approach to Interpretation Teaching: An Empirical Exploration\*

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This paper conducts an empirical study to testify the necessity and feasibility of the skill-focused interpretation teaching for undergraduate English majors, aiming at probing into the issue of accurate positioning of interpretation course. The participants in the experiment are 72 fourth-year students with 36 in the experimental class and 36 in the control class. The pedagogical principles and procedures between the experimental class and control class are rather different. The former follows the language-focused approach while the latter implements the skill-focused one. Results indicate that the mean of experimental class (77.69) is higher than that of the control class (72.48) in the post-test, and there is significant difference between them ( $p = .000$ ). On the whole, experimental class produces better overall interpreting performance than control class, especially in terms of completeness, accuracy, re-expression, and adaptability. There are significant differences between all of them ( $p < .05$ ). Empirical evidence shows that the skill-focused approach has its advantages over the traditional language-focused approach.

*Keywords:* Interpretation Teaching; Skill-Focused Approach; Empirical Study

## Introduction

China has experienced increasing contact and exchange with the outside world since the late 1970s when the policy of reform and opening up was adopted. Understandably, Chinese society finds itself in urgent need of qualified interpreters to play the role of bilingual communicators between China and other countries. As a result of this need, interpreting instruction programs of miscellaneous types have mushroomed in China, producing a booming market for both the trainers and trainees. According to Liu Heping (2001: p. 30), presently, interpretation teaching and training in China can be divided into four major categories: 1) Undergraduate interpreting courses for students majoring in foreign languages. 2) Interpreter training in the postgraduate program in translation colleges. 3) Undergraduate interpreting courses for Non-English majors. 4) Spare-time interpreter training programs offered by public educational institutions.

In 2000, "interpretation" was made a compulsory course for undergraduate English majors in Chinese universities and colleges, and is now taught in most BA programs as a half-a-year course in the third or fourth year. This new requirement has generated a great deal of interest in interpretation instruction among the researchers and teachers in the interpretation field, and such topics as the pedagogical reform, curriculum development, and innovation of teaching strategies have created a heated discussion. Over the past few years, there has been a

debate going on over the issue of the positioning of undergraduate interpretation program. Some people argue that interpretation teaching is an integral part of translation teaching, distinct from language teaching in terms of teaching objectives, principles, and methodology. The objective of language teaching is to cultivate students' bilingual communicative ability while that of interpretation teaching is to improve students' interpreting skills by using their communicative competence acquired. They advocate the implementation of skill-focused approach to interpretation teaching, which puts more emphasis on skills training than on language training (Liu, 2001; Cai, 2001; Zhang, 2007). Others argue that the essence of the undergraduate interpretation program is largely pedagogical translation (Bao, 2004; Mu, 2008; Gile, 1995b). It is due to two primary factors: firstly, students' language proficiency is far below the required skills for consecutive interpretation; secondly, the existing program with very limited class hours is too short for the interpretation instruction to produce the desired result. They maintain that the priority should be given to the cultivation of students' language competence instead of the mastery of interpreting skills (Mu, 2008: p. 42; Gile, 1995b: p. 137). It is believed that any attempt to use skill-focused teaching without taking into account the actual teaching circumstances would lead to failure (Zhang, 2008: p. 93).

Owing to the hot controversy over the positioning of interpretation instruction, many teachers nowadays find themselves at a loss as to what pedagogical principles to follow for undergraduate interpretation course. As a result of the absence of the scientific training system, the current interpretation teaching gets bogged down in confusion (Liu, 2005: p. 129). In the face

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of such a dilemma, this paper attempts to conduct an experimental study to probe into the issue of the accurate positioning for undergraduate interpretation course. With Anderson's ACT-R theory and Gile's Efforts Model as its theoretical foundation, it aims to testify the necessity and feasibility of skill-focused approach to interpretation teaching.

## Theoretical Foundation

### Anderson's ACT-R Theory

The ACT-R (Adaptive Control of Thought-Rational) is a production system coupled with a three-stage theory of skill acquisition, namely the cognitive stage, associate stage and autonomous stage. According to the ACT-R theory, the acquisition of a cognitive skill is a progressive process cognitive stage to autonomous stage, which, in terms of the ACT-R theory, is the transformation from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge. At the beginning of the process of skill acquisition, new information enters in declarative form. In this stage, participants develop a declarative encoding of the skill. The processing in cognitive stage is conscious, deliberate, and slow and requires full attention. The major development of associate stage is knowledge compilation. It is a process of converting declarative facts into production form by composing sequences of steps into one single action. According to Anderson, there are two things happening in this second stage. First, errors in the initial understanding are gradually detected and eliminated. Second, the connections among the various elements required for successful performance are strengthened. After a skill has been compiled into a task-specific procedure, the learning process involves an improvement in the search for the right production. In autonomous stage, the procedure becomes more and more automated and rapid (Anderson, 1995: p. 282).

ACT-R theory concerning the acquisition of skill can also accommodate the acquisition of interpreting skills. Take note-taking training for example, at the beginning of note-taking skill training, teachers give students a series of note-taking strategies and tactics such as using symbols, conventional abbreviations, and acronyms. Students at this stage learn these note-taking tactics as declarative knowledge. They would spend quite a lot of mental energy to relate these symbols into their notes consciously and deliberately. However, through long time practice, students have accumulated a large number of symbols and can quickly choose one symbol to indicate one meaning in short time. At this point, the declarative knowledge is proceduralized. Compared with cognitive stage, learners in this stage take notes in a relatively quick speed with less consumption of mental energy, but there is still room for perfecting in order to reach the autonomous stage. In the autonomous stage, the procedure becomes automated and rapid, which consumes little mental energy. Professional interpreters take notes in a rapid speed with little energy given to searching a symbol in mind or deliberately design a layout. They do it subconsciously or automatically. With the support of Anderson's ACT-R theory, we can further prove that interpreting skills can be acquired through a great amount of training and practice to the level where each effort becomes autonomous and consumes little processing capacity.

### Gile's Efforts Model

According to Gile's *Basic Concepts and Models for Inter-*

*preter and Translator Training*, interpreting is a multi-task activity in which limited processing capacity is overwhelmingly competed by several tasks involved. Gile held that mental energy is limited in supply, and any channel serving to transmit information has a finite transmission capacity beyond which information loses. And when the processing capacity available for a particular task is insufficient, performance deteriorates. Besides, he argued that consecutive interpretation (CI) is performed in two phases, namely, listening phase and reformulation phase (Gile, 1995a: p. 159).

#### Phase One: CI (Listening Phase) = L + M + N + C

1) Listening and Analysis Effort (L) is defined here as consisting of all comprehension-oriented operations, from the analysis of the sound waves carrying the source-language speech to the final decisions about the "meaning" of the utterance. 2) Memory Effort (M) is the high demand on short-term memory component. It occurs between the time of incepting and note-taking, or while the interpreter decides not to take note. 3) Note-taking Effort (N) essentially serves as a reminder to help the interpreter trigger memory of the listening text that was heard and understood previously. 4) Coordination (C) refers to the mental effort of harmonizing and optimizing the three L, M and N efforts.

#### Phase Two: CI (Reformulation Phase) = Rem + Read + P

1) The Rem (remember) component refers to the efforts devoted to recalling the successive parts of the original speech. 2) The Read component means the reading of the notes which have been taken while listening. 3) The P (production) is the reproduction of speech in TL. It is the output part of interpretation.

Gile held that interpretation is a multi-task activity where limited processing capacity is overwhelmingly competed by various tasks involved. Any channel serving to transmit information has a finite transmission capacity beyond which information losses. And when the processing capacity available for a particular task is insufficient, performance deteriorates (Gile, 1995a: p. 161). This model offers a cognitive explanation for emergence of errors and omission in interpretation. It also inspires us to think that effective allocation of limited mental energy cannot be achieved unless the processing capacity of individual task is improved. Therefore, we must seek to find approaches to facilitating each skill (e.g. listening, note-taking, recalling, and reproducing) so as to reasonably control the allocation of limited processing capacity in the first phase.

### Skills Training for Consecutive Interpretation

Based on Gile's Efforts Model and Anderson's ACT-R Theory, Liu Heping proposes four stages of consecutive interpretation training, namely listening training, memory training, note-taking training, and re-expression training (Liu, 2005: p. 120).

#### Listening Training

In the listening stage, the interpreter not only listens to the sounds but also tries to figure out the meaning of the speech. Gile calls it a comprehension-oriented process (Gile, 1995a: p. 162). Listening and comprehension are the beginning of the whole interpreting process, and they play a fundamental role in the performance of interpreting.

Listening training, aiming to separate language and ideas,

can proceed by raising questions, generalization, and reconstructions of the main paragraph. "Listening training without taking notes" will help students develop their mind in listening to the meaning of the source language and the techniques of extracting main ideas from the source language.

### Memory Training

The essence of memory in interpretation is to remember the major meaning and key words of a discourse in SL rather than copying mechanically in mind the isolated phonetic symbols and lexical symbols. It consists of three store mechanisms: Sensory Store (instant memory), Short Term Store (short term memory, STM) and Long Term Store (cognitive memory, LTS).

Short term memory and note-taking skills are among the top difficulties that students encountered in interpreting. Short term memory training is actually closely related to listening comprehension skills. According to Liu Heping, "Listening recognition, without being analyzed, will not acquire the complete information. The information without being processed integrally is likely to be in disorder and illogical. The random information will increase the pressure and burden for the memory of interpreters, causing obstacles to the expression" (Liu, 2001: p. 37). In memory training, argumentative and introductory discourse can be used as training materials, since both of them are more featured by logical thinking. In addition, information visualization should also be taught to the students, in which narrative discourses can be used.

### Note-Taking Training

The role of interpreter's notes is to assist memory to retain and recall messages. Since STM is limited in its capacity and featured by rapid memory loss, it is necessary to use note-taking as a supplementary approach to STM, serving as a memory reminder and activator. With the proper use of note-taking skill, students would be able to redistribute the processing capacity from note-taking effort to listening effort, which makes the mind capable of handling more complicated information input.

As an information carrier, STM and note-taking should work closely with each other in retaining messages. However, the role of STM should outweigh that of note taking in information storage since note-taking just serves as a memory reminder and activator, thus note taking should follow the principle of economy.

In order to facilitate the acquisition of note-taking skill, the teacher should introduce to students frequently-used abbreviations and symbols for the meaning of a constituent structure which is gained in the parsing phase. At the same time, importance should be attached to the logical layout of the notes, that is to say, these abbreviations, symbols or keywords should be taken in a logical and meaningful way. In note-taking training, there are some tactics that can be used to strengthen the role of notes as a memory activator, namely photographic notes, retrieval cues, and the use of Chinese characters, etc.

### Re-Expression Training

Re-expression refers to reformulation or the information output in consecutive interpretation. The job of interpreter is to convey the speaker's meaning as faithfully as possible. But any translation, written or oral, necessarily changes the form of the original. In light of the Interpretive Theory, the most faithful

interpretation will merely be the transformation that comes closest to respecting the speaker's intended meaning. The interpreter does not necessarily have to copy the exact words of the speaker, nor the order in which the speaker says them. On the contrary, he/she sometimes has to betray them so as to be faithful to the speaker. In this sense, some adaptations at the level of syntactic, semantic and discourse processing should be made in order to achieve the desired effect. Such tactics as paraphrasing, restructuring, simplification, and generalization are often used in re-expression training.

## Research Design

### Research Questions

Specifically, one question is addressed in this study: *Does the skill-focused approach lead to more gains in undergraduate interpretation instruction (compared with the language-focused approach)? In other words, does experimental group produce better overall interpretation performance than control group?*

### Subjects

The participants in the experiment were 72 fourth-year students majoring in English in Nanchang Hangkong University, with 36 in the experimental class and 36 in the control class. They belong to two different parallel classes which were randomly arranged when they first came to this university. Since both classes were randomly selected from the enrollment of 4 classes, they were believed to represent the whole population discussed here. Among the 72 subjects, 16 were males and 56 were females.

### Instruments

The present study integrates quantitative and qualitative research methods to probe into the two research questions. The following research tools are used in this study.

### Test

In the quantitative research, tests were conducted to measure the subjects' interpretation proficiency, and the pre- and post-test results produced by the subjects in both experimental and control classes were compared. For the purpose of this study, the same marking criterion was adopted in the pre- and post-test, which was initially proposed by Xiamen University.

### Data Analysis

The performance of the 72 subjects in the experimental class and the control class was put to the descriptive statistical analyses and the differences in the two performances made up the sample for inferential statistical analyses. Firstly, the pre- and post-test ratings given to the interpreting performance produced by the students in both experimental and control class were compared. Statistic techniques such as descriptive statistics, and independent t-test, and Pearson Correlation Coefficients were used to compare and analyzed the data of the pre- and post-test.

### Teaching Design

The control class in this experiment followed the traditional

language-focused approach in which the interpretation course mainly focused on language training rather than skills training, aiming at improving student's applied linguistic competence. It began with the introduction of interpretation theory and methods, then moved on towards a great amount of interpreting practice on different topics.

However, the pedagogical principle and procedure for the experimental class were rather different. This procedure was intended to equip students with basic interpreting skills by implementing the skill-focused approach. More emphasis was put on skills training instead of language training. It mainly involves the training of four basic interpreting skills, including listening training, memory training, note-taking training, and re-expression training.

## Results

Results indicate that the mean of experimental class (77.69) is higher than that of the control class (72.48) in the post-test, and there is significant difference between them ( $p = .000$ ). On the whole, experimental class produces better overall interpreting performance than control class, especially in terms of completeness, accuracy, re-expression, and adaptability.

Means for the pre-and post-test ratings are presented in **Table 1** for the two classes. Clearly, at the time of pre-test, the control class has scored slightly higher in mean (52.06) than

experimental class (51.3). No significant difference is found in the pre-test ( $P > .05$ ). However, for the post-test this picture changes considerably in that the mean of experimental class (77.69) is higher than that of the control class (72.48). Significant difference is found between them ( $p = .000$ ).

Students' performances are analyzed in terms of completeness, accuracy, re-expression, adaptability, fluency, articulation and clarity. Itemized results of the post-test show that the means of experimental class are higher than that of the control class in terms of completeness, accuracy, re-expression, and adaptation. There are significant differences between all of them ( $p < .05$ ). Itemized results of post-test are presented in **Table 2**.

The statistical data presented above are in line with the findings in Feng Zhilin & Huang Yuelin' study (2001: p. 184). Once again, empirical evidence shows that the skill-focused approach has its advantages over the traditional language-focused approach.

## Implication of the Study

This study has both the following important theoretical and practical implications.

## Theoretical Implications

Firstly, two theoretical implications can be drawn from this study:

**Table 1.**

Overall results of pre- and post-test.

Class	pre-Mean	pre-SD	post-Mean	post-SD	N	pre-Sig. 2-tailed	post-Sig. 2-tailed
Experimental	53.6	2.31	77.69	5.67	36	.223	.000
Control	54.8	3.13	72.48	7.30	36	.223	.000

Note: significant difference  $p < .05$ ; greatly significant difference  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.**

Itemized results of post-test.

Dependent variable	Class	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig. (2-tailed)
<b>Completeness (30%)</b>	Experimental	36	24.08	2.07	.641	.001
	Control	36	22.27	2.59		
<b>Accuracy (30%)</b>	Experimental	36	23.30	1.87	1.697	.002
	Control	36	21.73	2.65		
<b>Re-expression (10%)</b>	Experimental	36	7.56	.752	.001	.002
	Control	36	7.02	.816		
<b>Adaptability (10%)</b>	Experimental	36	7.32	.88	1.899	.000
	Control	36	6.34	.70		
<b>Fluency (10%)</b>	Experimental	36	7.71	.790	.432	.187
	Control	36	7.49	.842		
<b>Articulation &amp; clarity (10%)</b>	Experimental	36	7.72	.816	2.312	.675
	Control	36	7.63	.978		

Note: Significant difference  $p < .05$ ; greatly significant difference  $p < .01$ .

1) This study corroborates the argument that the essence of the undergraduate interpretation program is the translation teaching, which is determined by the characteristics and law of interpretation. The skill-focused approach is congruous with the nature of interpretation. External factors, such as students' linguistic competence, class hours, and class size, cannot exert a decisive influence on the positioning of the interpretation course.

2) The findings of this study imply that separate training of interpreting skills is beneficial in upgrading the trainees' processing capacity of individual tasks and optimizing the allocation of limited mental energy, thus leading to performance enhancement in terms of completeness and accuracy.

### Practical Implications

Secondly, some practical implications are summarized as follows:

1) According to ACT-R theory, interpreting skills can only be obtained through a large amount of practice with consistent efforts. However, the existing interpretation program with 36 class hours is far from being enough to develop and perfect the interpreting skills. Inadequacy in practice inevitably undermines effectiveness of skill-focused interpretation instruction. Therefore, autonomous learning should be designed as an integral part of interpretation teaching course, aiming at facilitating the acquisition of interpreting skills. As Gile (1995b: p. 137) puts it, "Most of the things were done in student groups, not in the classroom".

As our society grows more technologically oriented, it is important for teachers to take advantage of the newest and most advanced teaching tools available. It has been proved in this study that "Campus Interpreting Network" can be used as an effective medium for students to conduct self-directed learning activities, mainly including "pre-class interpreting preparation" and "after-class autonomous learning". Preparations made beforehand are highly significant to alleviate the students' burden of interpreting resulting from inadequate linguistic competence. If students are familiar with the technical terms and background of the topic, they can perform much better in memorizing, note-taking and re-expression. The "after-class autonomous learning" can speed up students' skill acquisition through a large amount of after-class practice.

2) Interpreting skills are marked by highly professionalism; therefore they must be acquired through specific and concentrated trainings. In light of the findings of this study, we can find some useful pedagogical implications as follows:

1) "Principles of understanding" and "identification of main ideas" are fundamental listening comprehension skills, which deal(s) with "what to listen for" and "how to listen". In the trainings of these two skills, students are made to be aware of the fact that interpretation process is to catch the ideas by deverbaling from the form of the language. The practice of "listening training without taking notes" proves to be helpful and effective for students to improve their ability to discern main ideas and follow trends of thought patterns. It helps students learn how to summarize concepts into key-words and to retrieve non-written passages.

2) There is a key principle in note-taking training that can

never be over emphasized-the training of short-term memory (STM) must go before the training of note-taking skills. Only through STM training can learners really use notes as a memory reminder and activator instead of a memory carrier. The note-taking training can start only after students are capable of storing big chunks in STM instead of on paper.

3) With regard to the training of re-expression, more emphasis should be put on dynamic adaptation in discourse meaning rather than static adaptation in sentence structure. And the ultimate purpose of interpretation is to find "sense equivalence" rather than "word correspondence". Paraphrasing exercises prove to be an effective and helpful practice. It aims to reproduce something which is equivalent to the original meaning and acceptable from the linguistic point of view. By means of paraphrasing, students can overcome the cultural obstacles and peculiar language uses.

### Conclusion

The present study is far from being adequate due to the limitations of the researcher's ability, small sample size, and inadequate class hours. Therefore, in-depth research is absolutely needed. First of all, the similar study should be replicated with some larger-scale groups, for example among more universities or interpretation training schools, to investigate the effectiveness and feasibility of skill-focused approach to interpretation teaching. Secondly, the similar study should be conducted in a Non-English interpretation program to see whether there is discrimination between them, and if any, which one is better. It is hoped that the present study can offer some inspiration for further studies on skill-focused instruction from different perspectives, with a view to improving and perfecting the skill-focused approach.

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