

Note-taking for consecutive interpreting – why and how? How I came to Brazil with a ruthless red pen

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Brussels, 2014

In the beginning there was the dragoman... as we all know, interpreting is as old as the hills, older in fact. People have always needed to communicate and to do across language frontiers.

In his paper on the history of interpreter training, my former colleague Dick Fleming refers to the fact that writing has been around for less than 6000 years so interpreting should by rights be older than translation. Humans started writing and producing what came to be reported history in the 6th Dynasty Egypt, 3rd millennium before Christ, when the presence of the dragoman was first recorded. So interpreters existed way back then but we know little about how they were trained nor what such notes as they may have used looked like. It would be fun to peek over a shoulder at such an ancient 'notebook'.

We do know that twelve conference interpreters, working in consecutive mode, appeared - according to Dick Fleming's extensive research - at the Paris Peace Convention in 1919 and that neither they, nor those working at the League of Nations over the next 25 years, had followed any formal training.

We also know that simultaneous interpretation was first used at the ILO Conference in 1927 and thereafter, famously, at Nuremberg at the trials of Nazi war criminals.

But we may never know how consecutive interpreting began, who told Rozan how to invent symbols, abbreviate, go for the message, not the words.

And in this modern, iPad, iPhone, computer-led age, is there still a need for an interpreter with a notebook, relaying a message from one language into another? Well, evidence tells us that there is – and more now than ever before.

So what is consecutive interpreting for? In what situations is it used? Why bother to learn how to do it at all? Isn't it automatic? Surely you just write down what the speaker says and translate?

Many questions and a few pertinent answers may help us to understand the whys and wherefores of consecutive note-taking and why words and translation of words are hopelessly inappropriate concepts in this art form.

Ideally notes are taught as part of a bona fide interpreting course, MA, BA or diploma, it matters little. What does matter is WHO teaches and HOW.

Only a conference/PSI trained interpreter can teach interpreting. There are no exceptions to this so before we proceed, this is the basic premise for our approach. Why? For many reasons. I prefer to liken to interpreter training to teaching someone to pilot an aircraft, even drive a car. If you don't know how to do it yourself, if you don't know how it FEELS to stand up there writing notes and then to relay a speech, or turn on a microphone and know that people are depending on you, if you cannot imagine that burst of adrenalin the interpreter experiences, you CANNOT explain it to anyone else either. Interestingly, all bona fide interpreter trainers agree on this so that ought to suffice as a good reason.

Teaching note-taking means sharing. It means working WITH your 'students' (of whatever age), and with your colleagues, exploring different ways of noting, comparing symbols and abbreviations, what works for one may or may not for another. As trainer or more experienced practitioner you can guide and take the lead, but students (or participants) should throw their own ideas and suggestions into the mix. This makes everyone feel more at ease, since it is not like learning Latin or math – i.e there is no correct or incorrect answer – but all about exchanging. It also means exposing yourself and your weaknesses, most of which are shared by all present, as every teacher or student of interpreting knows.

In a good, bona fide interpreting course, the focus on notes will follow an initial period of learning how to concentrate 100% – not part of our usual behaviour – and how to listen actively, that is, listening with a view to becoming the speaker and adopting his or her approach, feelings, convictions. Notice that I do not mention ‘words’, as they are not important at all. What a speaker expresses is often revealed in the intonation or the body language, rather than the actual words.

So we begin by learning to interpret short speeches, of 2-3 minutes, with a clear structure, without numbers or other distractions, with a line of thought and with the speaker’s opinion somewhere in there. This is not easy to start with, nor part of our daily routine at all, in fact. On a university course involving, say, 3-4 full days of teaching a week, this initial period would take up to 3 or 4 weeks. By then an average student will have learned how to listen actively, follow the line of argument and even – in some cases – adopt the feelings of the speaker – and do so from memory, for up to about 3 minutes, even 4, if the speech is well structured.

So how can we put all that into notes? Start with the same premise, how should a speech be structured? As before, this means a clear outline, a start, middle and end and the speaker’s view imbedded in there somewhere. The same principles are followed as for ‘memory speeches’ (which are more to do with concentration and analysis than memory). Only this time, we introduce a new element, NOTES.

Notes should, in the words of Nick Roche, another former EU colleague, be approached with 5 key questions:

Why? Where? When? How? What?

It’s easy when you know how.

Let us start with:

Why? Students are often confused by the question, it seems so obvious, but it is worth thinking carefully about the answers. Yes, certainly, to get down names and numbers, details etc.

But also to extend the memory, to enable us to go further than 4 minutes and to recall not just the points, names etc but also the order of events, the 'sub' ideas – extra details not part of the main narrative, and to do so with just a gentle jog of the memory – or, in this case, the notes.

Where? is easy. In a notebook - one that is easy to handle, steno spiral bound is best for the ease of turning pages fast and not losing flying papers etc. Better to have a standard size notepad like this without the fear of balancing a larger pad or losing loose leaf papers... every support helps to deliver a clear, accurate and well presented message. One glance at a page and you should know where you are coming from and going next.

When? Worries people. Students and often seasoned practitioners tend to start scribbling as soon as a speaker opens his or her mouth, a natural reflex to avoid missing anything but can be over hasty. Note when you have to. If the speaker is close by or at least visible, LOOK at him/her first. Note the greeting, good morning, welcome, titles and forms of address so you have something ready, to launch you into the speech, but note once you have understood. And what happens if you do NOT understand something? A novice will probably scribble even faster and harder! But in fact, he or she should do just the opposite – stop, look up, watch the speaker; much can be gleaned from body language and if all else fails, you mark the spot clearly in the notes – middle of the page or right hand side, so you can go quickly back and ask a short question. You note when there is something TO note, not before.

What? Now this is the meat, the big question. Words? Names? Dates? These are the standard replies from students. Actually none of these as important as:

- LINKS between the ideas, the glue that holds everything together. No point building a house of bricks without the mortar, the cement, it will just collapse in the wind. Same thing applies to the links; they are what hold the entire structure together.

- Tenses – vital. Take a sentence like this:- ‘Had I not seen that she had taken my book, probably a good while ago, I would never have realized that the copy I was about to borrow, one I had seen many times, was mine and one I was meant to pass on to a friend the following week.’. If you do not note the tenses clearly, using arrows and other tricks, you will NOT remember when, where or how when you look at our notes a few minutes later – I guarantee it!

- Who? is doing or saying. ‘The government has been discussing the issue for weeks now, the mayor has said he disagrees with the PM’s view and the Leader of the Opposition has spoken out in favour of what the US President said last week, though I personally think that they are all wrong and what I read in ‘The Economist’ made more sense...’

You had better note clearly WHO said or thinks what and what the speaker feels about it all very clearly indeed, otherwise you will come a cropper!

- Verbs, especially modals and conditionals, must, may want, should, can, could, know, etc. They crop up so often and are so important we need abbreviations for them. Mo Wo, Ko, Co Cd, Wd, Shd, - this is how I abbreviate. You can choose whatever you like but find a clear, recognizable way of making these key words jump out at you.

- Dates, names etc of course, but I put them last, the other items being more important to the general meaning, the recall you should have when glancing at your page and the system you will adopt to get you through a 10 minute speech without turning a hair.

How? This is more easily said than done, you note economically and analytically. It helps to be creative with your notes if you can and if course, the notes should be legible to you for at least for the next few minutes, hours in some cases, at any rate, as long as they are needed.

Roderick Jones and Andy Gillies, two friends and colleagues who have published excellent books on the subject of interpreter training, suggest that notes should ideally follow a natural line of vision top left to bottom right, and with a structure that is easy to see and natural, so, e.g

Subject

Verb

Object

Notes go down the page, one thought UNDER the next, not across the page as we are used to from report and letter writing – if anyone still writes letters these days?

What do these notes look like then? They may well contain a series of squiggles and a good many arrows to show trends, also to indicate a movement from A to B or to denote an increase/decrease, upswing or downturn etc.

The use of symbols is undisputed for many reasons. If you have a symbol for, say, meeting, for agreement, for President, country, policy, meeting and I could list hundreds of more or less commonly used concepts – you will see a picture not a word. This is the main purpose of the notes, to give rapid recall to an IDEA, as opposed to a series of words one could take down in shorthand – but would then need to translate, laboriously and probably clumsily. We do not deal in words but in ideas, notions, thoughts.

It is true that some people have a natural feel for symbols and use them easily, some much less so. But as long as your notes reflect a picture of the speaker's thoughts, be that as a character, symbol or just an abbreviated word, that is your guide, a jog to your memory and not a scribbled page of indecipherable hieroglyphics!

An example, quite a simple one, would be:

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Cos

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cos

<) -> ec ☺☺

I- ☺!! Recn W

Which should read, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! Today we are discussing EU employment policy because we know it is very important. In addition, we are happy to see that the economy is picking up after a long downturn and recession all over the world”.

There are books and papers galore on notes, I will mention three in English, at the end of this chapter, which I recommend because I know the authors and the books personally but there are many more available in different languages too.

The two workshops I gave most recently and which may be of interest to readers were in Brazil, organised by Marcelle Castro and Mylene Queiroz and by Branca Vianna on behalf of AIIC in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

Participants ranged from newly qualified graduates to seasoned professionals, all age groups and both sexes were represented, which I personally welcomed as in many countries, the profession has, to my mind, to its detriment, become increasingly feminised.

The workshops each covered three days and were attended by around 18 participants. The main purpose for me as trainer was to have everyone involved actively, so that all of us shared in the learning process, myself included. The background was as I have outlined in the preceding paragraphs, an explanation of what notes should be for and how they can – and should – be a help rather than a hindrance to the interpreter. Many who attended were professionals who learned consecutive note-taking some years ago, used it rarely and had become rusty to say the least.

A great many, and not only in Brazil, have never learned any technique and just muddle through as best they can. However, consecutive is in demand, proper consecutive, not just sentence by sentence interpreting. My valiant participants were all agog to learn and almost all

were ready to bare all, go up to the board and expose their weaknesses – but also their talents, in front of peers. That takes some courage and is the biggest compliment I can pay them – because as I had said from the start, and continued to repeat throughout the three workshops, it is ONLY by making mistakes that we can all learn.

This message is one that Nick Roche always hammered home in his note-taking classes in the European Commission in Brussels, when teaching in-house trainees. It applies to all learning situations, but it is difficult for people to swallow as losing face is not something most of us are happy to do. In this kind of interactive workshop, it is essential and I am convinced that with the right kind of coaching, with a good smattering of collective laughter and a few bravehearts who will set the ball rolling, it can work.

What exactly did we do? Once the introduction was over, as above, and practical guidance had been given, e.g how to place notes on the page and the like, we went straight into ‘live’ mode. That meant providing the right kind of speeches for participants to be able to note down easily and enable them to put into practice what we had been discussing in theory. To lead by example, I began by making short speeches which lent themselves to notes, e.g on the economic downturn, employment etc.

I never read a speech, rather I speak freely using bullets and I encouraged my merry bands to do likewise, to prepare ‘learning’ speeches in Portuguese or English (or Spanish) of about 4 minutes, with a clear structure, start, middle and end and including the view of the speaker – i.e the famous “I” (or whoever is the subject of the idea) that must feature clearly in the left hand column of the page.

Columns are a subject of much heated discussion among interpreters, the ‘pro’ camp, who swear by them and the ‘anti’ who pooh-pooh the idea. I have no strong feelings either way, but the notion of a column or space on the left side of the page, in which the main leaders into an idea, say,

the person (I or we or you, for example) and thereafter the links are shown, is essential, whether real with an actual line down the page or conceptual. On the left side, therefore, are your pointers, the signs that jog your memory and give you the key to what follows.

Thereafter it is a matter of knowing WHAT you need to note and how to do so as quickly and briefly as possible. We collected some key symbols, many from the 'bible' Rozan, known to most as the first interpreters' guide, put them on the board and then started noting my speech. I gave the whole thing and then went through sentence by sentence, very slowly, to give each person the time to reflect on how best to note, how to abbreviate, incorporate some symbols if possible and do so calmly, not under the usual stress and pressure of speed.

The purpose of this sometimes-tedious method is to allow everyone to play around with their notes and to try out new systems. As I famously said to a group of student interpreters many years earlier 'do not write it all out long-hand, only an idiot would do that!' At that time and in another setting altogether, that exhortation nearly cost the university damages, but the Brazil participants got the point entirely – and followed suit. The hard bit was when I asked each one in turn to go up to the board and note down what he or she had in their notebook, then to 'take us through' those notes, loud and clear.

This way the 'noter' had to show to all what he or she had put down. After each turn, I went up with famous (or rather infamous) the ruthless red pen and, with the help and input of all participants, added corrections, amendments, possible improvements to the notes. Since most contributions lent themselves to such improvements and corrections, which we all supplied together, the final version looked more like useable consecutive notes.

In this manner we proceeded, one by one, sentence by sentence, with participants asked, at the end of the day, to go through their notes again and to rewrite them in a clearer, more usable form – at least for one speech we had worked on. No one was meant to spend their evenings

slogging over homework, but a quick look back at what we had done during the session and a few moments building on what we had learned together was a good way to prepare for the next day's session. Participants had by then understood the kind of speeches that were needed (no newspaper articles read out!) and brought their own next day.

The last stage of our three-day sessions was a role-play setting - to go from theory to practice, even if the situations were difficult to stage convincingly. We tried out a few, from the classic situation of a tourist who has been mugged, sitting with her interpreter and a 'cop', complete with Rayban shades, interviewing her with his interpreter, to a discussion between the Brazilian President and a member of the opposition. In both cases the limitations were evident, the natural tendency to whisper or interpret sentence by sentence without using notes at all rather diminished the veracity of the scenes we had dreamt up. Still, to their credit, the actors proved worthy of Oscars, playing with brio and feeling the traumatised victim and the none-too-bright cop, as well as the impatient and imperious leader; they were all rendered brilliantly. The rest of us laughed a good deal and tried in vain not to disrupt the performances.

The point was to try to demonstrate how what we had discussed and tried to improve on for 2 days would actually work in practice in a real-life situation. On the whole that objective was met, despite the slightly artificial feel and the desire to 'ham it up', a tendency, which, one has to admit, is not uncommon in many interpreters!

We had begun each session by collecting participants' expectations and at the end, by checking whether these had been met in part, wholly or not at all. It seemed that people were not disappointed and indeed, several felt that the workshop could have been a day longer, as, ideally, it probably should be. However, professionals are busy people and in three days, the main points were thoroughly dealt with and the main message clearly received. Feedback forms were gratifyingly positive, and just as during our sessions together, laughter added that vital spice that

any bland dish needs, so their replies reflected the good humour and honesty they demonstrated, in all three workshops, with such enthusiasm. They were, in short, a joy to work with and one can only hope that some of the lessons learned will serve them in their professional lives in future.

The three books I recommend on note-taking for consecutive are:

Andrew Gillies - Note-Taking for Consecutive Interpreting - A Short Course. Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 2005

Roderick Jones - Conference Interpreting Explained, St. Jerome Publishing, 2002

Note-taking for Public Service Interpreters, Kirsty Heimerl-Moggan, Vanessa Ifeoma John, published by Interp-Right, 2007

There are many others no doubt also worth reading, also in other languages, but from first-hand experience I would suggest these to anyone interested in a practical approach to the subject. All three authors have my permission to quote them, as, indeed, I have often done and I salute them for the excellent, clear guidance they have produced on this subject.