On Building Expertise in Simultaneous Interpreting

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What is Simultaneous Interpreting?

Simultaneous interpreting (SI) is “a service which allows participants at international meetings to speak and follow proceedings in their own languages, and is widely viewed as a particularly impressive form of rapid and instant translation” [1] It is a complex cognitive task where the interpreter is constantly involved in concurrently comprehending, translating, producing and monitoring linguistic information. Large institutional employers such as the European Commission require that professional simultaneous interpreters render the message “naturally and fluently, adopting the delivery, tone and convictions of the speaker and speaking in the first person.” [2]

Studies in Cognitive Psychology have revealed that human information processing capacity per unit of time is limited. The difficulty of SI, such an indispensable activity for international conferences, derives from the conflicts between the interpreter’s limited cognitive capacity at any moment and the great demands of the job: simultaneous use of two different speech systems: listening and speaking; increasing technicality of today’s conference subjects; limited predictability of the speech content, large quantities of information units that must
be processed in a short amount of time; syntactic and representational differences between language combinations such as Chinese and English and so on. In addition, the concurrent nature of Source Language (SL) perception and Target Language (TL) production means the interpreter needs to “start the translation process before the SL utterance is complete”. Since SI is performed under extreme time constraint, transformation from SL to TL has to be “fast”. The pace of the SI activity is “externally set and controlled” by the speaker, not the interpreter. The speaker and interpreter are under unequal circumstances to produce speeches because the former is far more knowledgeable and prepared than the latter. The multi-tasking nature of SI implies the need for coordination and executive management: Sufficient mental energy must be allocated to these different tasks and effort must be made to minimize the interferences of concurrent cognitive systems and language systems. If the interpreter’s processing capacity cannot meet the demands of these tasks and balance their requirements, interpreting errors will appear. (cf, Daniel Gile’s “Effort Model”, 1995)

The challenges mentioned here and others have made SI one of the hardest types of translation. In order to reach the “apex”, interpreters need to develop special skills or expertise aside from having necessary language proficiencies and knowledge backgrounds.

**What are the Components of SI Expertise?**

There are different paradigms in the academia to the study of this subject: from the early “holistic” approach of acquiring expertise through “apprenticeship” proposed by the Paris School of Interpretive Theory, to the more “scientific” approach of a “cognitive process-oriented paradigm”. Researchers in the field have recently come to recognize SI as a “complex skill” that is made of some “component skills” or “sub-skills”. Years of deliberate practice on singular sub-skills must be taken to build the general expertise in SI.

Internationally, researchers, by the late 1970s, have adopted the view SI as a multi-stage cognitive process that includes “speech recognition, storage mechanisms, transfer, production, and output monitoring.” At each stage, strategies have been designed and deliberate exercises carried out to deal with the innate difficulties of SI. The interpreter training manuals, both domestic and foreign, have all based the development of SI expertise on that of Consecutive Interpreting (CI: this working mode has interpreters do the job whenever speakers pause while
in SI, speakers don’t pause for the interpreter and carry on as if they were speaking to a homogeneously native audience). The specific CI skills would include listening and analyzing information, identifying the most important message and the logical links among information units, working memory and memory aids (i.e. note-taking), public speaking, discourse analysis, inter-cultural and inter-personal competence, coping tactics, professional code of conduct, etc. Based on these CI techniques, further SI strategies are then developed: multi-tasking, parallelism, segmentation, anticipation, waiting, repetition, paraphrasing, stressing, simplification, addition, conversion, opposition, generalization, summarization, adjusting the ear-voice span (that is the time lag between hearing and speaking), preparation before SI, teamwork, etc. (cf interpreting textbooks compiled by Ren Wen, et al. 2009; Zhong Weihe, et al., 2008; Lin Yuru, et al., 2004; Zhang Weiwei, 1999.)

It must be pointed out that many of the components of SI expertise are not that different from the skill-set of other types of interpreting or translation in general. The key lies in the lack of response time in SI. The extreme time constraints and unfriendly working conditions stipulate that all the sub-skills have to be automated and synthesized. The strategies have to be fully internalized through practice and experience so that they can operate by themselves with the mental “central executive” always making the sound judgment and choice at minimum cost of energy.

**How to Build Expertise in Simultaneous Interpreting?**

Experts in a certain field often have specific education, training, and knowledge, required qualifications, ability to assess priorities in situations, capability to improve themselves, intuition; self-assurance and confidence in their knowledge. [12]

There are broadly two approaches to the study of expertise. The first understands expertise as a property of “communities of practice” [13]. In this view expertise is socially constructed; tools for thinking and scripts for action are jointly constructed within social groups. In the second view, expertise is a consequence of the individual human capacity for extensive adaptation to physical and social environments. It emphasizes that expertise comes about through long periods of deliberate practice, sometimes of 10 years or over 10,000 hours.

At the University of Texas in Austin, Minhua Liu, Diane L. Schallert and Patrick J. Carroll did an experiment that aimed to determine if performance differences exist in simultaneous interpreting by individuals with similar general cognitive
abilities, but different skills specific to the task of simultaneous interpreting. Professional interpreters' performance in simultaneous interpreting from English into Chinese Mandarin was compared to that of two groups of student interpreters, beginners and advanced. The results showed that the professional interpreters who were not different from students in their general working memory capacity outperformed student interpreters. This difference was attributed, at least in part, to the development of specific skills in managing competing demands on limited cognitive resources. One important SI skill observed in this study is the ability to select more important ideas from the speech input under poor working conditions where completeness and accuracy of the output becomes impossible.¹⁴

Ericsson (2000) proposed an expert-performance approach that is based on findings from many traditional domains of expertise, such as chess, music, medicine, and sports and proved that expert-performance was primarily acquired through the engagement in designed training activities, namely deliberate practice.¹⁵

Researchers (Ingrid K. Christoffels and Annette M. B. De Groot, 2004) from the Netherlands studied the two factors that are likely to be the major sources of complexity in SI: 1) the simultaneity of comprehension and production, and 2) the translation of the input. They compared repeating sentences (shadowing), reformulating sentences in the same language (paraphrasing), and translating sentences (interpreting) of auditorily presented sentences, in a simultaneous and a delayed condition. Output performance and ear–voice span suggest that both the simultaneity of comprehension and production and the translation component affect performance but that especially the combination of the two components results in a marked drop in performance. The study suggested that articulation of speech may interfere with memory in SI.¹⁶ In a different study, the same researchers (2006) compared the performance of trained interpreters to bilingual university students and to highly proficient English teachers. The interpreters outperformed the university students in their speed and accuracy of language performance and on their memory capacity. The interpreters also outperformed the English teachers, but only on the memory tasks, suggesting working memory as a critical sub-skill for simultaneous interpreting.¹⁷

The above experiments seem to emphasize that the key of building SI expertise lies in improving the efficiency of the interpreter's working memory to make better and automatic selection of best possible scenarios. Special techniques are developed
by SI experts to manage multi-tasking and the interference among different speech systems and minimize response time. The expert performance of the working memory is achieved through deliberate practice of well-designed activities and the accumulation of real-life problem-solving and decision-making experiences.

**How to Establish an Expertise-oriented SI Training Paradigm in China?**

Many interpreting scholars and trainers on different occasions have pointed out the flaws in the conventional pedagogy of interpreter education in China: interpreter training was confused with language training; know-what (impacting knowledge) rather than know-how (training skills) was the focus; curriculum and course design was lacking and so was quality control, etc.

The “silver lining” in this case is that in recent years, with the rapidly expanding translation service market and higher demands for quality and professionalism from the clients, with the more in-depth discussions of pedagogy and other research themes by interpreting scholars, and with more consensus-building through the Training-of-Trainers (TOT) programs, the Chinese interpreter training community have become more convinced that SI training is an expertise-building process.

Looking ahead, specific SI component skills should be further identified and trained. Professional training programs such as the Masters in Translation and Interpretation (MTI) and Bachelors in Translation and Interpretation (BTI) should be set up and popularized so as to remove the institutional barriers against implementing the expertise-oriented and skill-based SI training paradigm. Interpreting teaching and/or research teams must be established to promote knowledge renewal and sharing. Curriculum and course design and quality control in student selection and certification must be further studied. The time frame for the deliberate practice of each component skill should be lengthened and extended outside the classroom and the concept of the “SI community of practice” must be introduced into the classroom.

**Summary**

Simultaneous Interpreting (SI) is a complex multi-taking cognitive mission-impossible that fascinates both interpreting and psychological researchers. It is also an effective and efficient linguistic service that modern international conferences cannot live without. The expertise in SI takes years or thousands of “tape hours” to build. The simultaneous interpreters are a small but elitist
community of professional practice. China’s rise as an emerging global player offers and will offer many opportunities for the practicing and would-be simultaneous interpreters to become an expert in this special field.

Notes:

[1] Robin Setton, Simultaneous Interpretation: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Analysis, Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999,1.

[2] Directorate General of Interpreting of the European Commission at http://europa.eu.int/comm/scic/interpreting/faq_en.htm.

[3] G.V. Chernov, R.Setton, & A. Hild, Inference and anticipation in simultaneous interpreting. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004, 15.

[4] Ibid., 16-17.

[5] D. Gile, Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995.

[6] F. Pochhacker, Introducing Interpreting Studies, London: Routledge 2004, 177-178.

[7] Moser-Mercer, B. "Beyond Curiosity: Can Interpreting Research Meet the Challenge?" in J. H. Danks, G. M. Shreve, G. M. Fountain and M. K. McBeath (Eds.), Cognitive Processes in Translation and Interpreting, London, Sage Publications.1997, 176-195.

[8] Ren Wen, et al., A Course-book of Consecutive Interpreting, Beijing, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2009

[9] Zhong Weihe, et al., A Course-book for Simultaneous Interpreting, Beijing, Higher Education Press, 2008

[10] Lin Yuru, et al., Challenging Interpreting: A course-book of Interpreting Skills, Shanghai, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2006

[11] Zhang Weiwei, English-Chinese Simultaneous Interpreting, Beijing, China Translation Press Co.,1999.

[12] M. L. Germain, Development and preliminary validation of a psychometric measure of expertise: The Generalized Expertise Measure (GEM). Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Barry University, Florida, 2006

[13] Etienne Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, Cambridge University Press, 1998

[14] Liu Minhua, Diane L. Schallert and Patrick J. Carroll. “Working memory and expertise in simultaneous interpreting”, Interpreting, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004, Vol. 6, No.1, 19-42.

[15] Anders Ericsson, “Expertise in interpreting: An expert-performance perspective”, Interpreting, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 2000, Vol. 5, No. 2, 187-220

[16] Ingrid K. Christoffels and Annette M. B. De Groot. “Components of simultaneous interpreting: Comparing interpreting with shadowing and paraphrasing” Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 2004, Vol.7, No.3, 227-240
[17] Ingrid K. Christoffels and Annette M. B. De Groot, “Memory and language skills in simultaneous interpreters: The role of expertise and language proficiency”, *Journal of Memory and Language*, Vol. 54, No.3, 2006, 324-345

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