

Sink or Swim: Five basic strokes to E - J Consecutive Interpreting

Minako Kuwahata

University of Queensland

The acquisition of any new skill is a challenging process and this is also the case with interpreting skills. While there is common understanding for the need to undertake preparatory work prior to the introduction of actual consecutive interpreting (CI), no consensus is seen in how to lead the students through the first stages of CI. At that stage, students need to learn to cope with a combination of external factors such as stress, anxiety and performance pressures in addition to the developing actual CI skills. It is the view of the author that if some of the initial processing obstacles were removed, the students are able to progress in their learning with greater ease and confidence. In this paper, consecutive interpreting is likened to swimming, where a combination of mechanical skills is necessary in the first instance to achieve an outcome. The skill set was broken down into five basic 'strokes' which are the initial steps that the student interpreter is led through in order to help them through the transitional process between the preparatory phase of interpreting and actual interpreting training per se. It is a gentle lead-in process to allow students to begin attaining greater competency in CI. Each of these 'strokes' is explained, and practical examples of how they can be taught are provided. While the paper deals specifically with techniques applied in an English-into-Japanese interpreting environment, the main principles are applicable to other language combinations.

1. Introduction

The very beginning of learning any new skill is a challenge to both the learner and the teacher. There is a mixture of anticipation, expectation and anxiety on the part of the student. An interest in attempting to help remove some of the more mechanical obstacles that beginner students struggle with, led to an investigation in pedagogical methods that may assist in this process. The resulting five 'strokes' are simply five identified steps to facilitate the transition into consecutive interpreting for students who are attempting oral code switching for the first time.

KUWAHATA Minako, "Sink or Swim: Five basic strokes to E-J Consecutive Interpreting."

Interpretation Studies, No. 5, December 2005, Pages 173-181

(c) 2005 by the Japan Association for Interpretation Studies

2. Consecutive interpreting into Japanese

At the tertiary institution that I teach at, consecutive interpreting is introduced in the 2nd semester of the first year, after the completion of some background subjects. Students undertake two consecutive interpreting (CI) subjects in the second half of first year -- one subject from Japanese into English and the other from English into Japanese. This paper is based on the curriculum strategies employed in the latter.

2.1 Sink or swim?

The introductory phase of consecutive interpreting can be handled in a number of ways. Just as you can throw a beginner swimmer into a pool without prior instruction and see what strategies they instinctively employ, it is possible to commence actual interpreter training by giving students real speeches right from the beginning. In fact, this is the traditional way that it has been taught. However, just as you would not put a non-swimmer into a very deep pool or the sea with all its waves and currents, the speeches given to a beginner student will probably not be linguistically demanding or technical in content. Nevertheless, students are expected to come up with some sort of rendition in the target language (TL).

So, what are the most effective strategies in teaching beginners of CI? Ilg and Lambert (1996) both argue strongly for preparatory exercises prior to introduction of CI. The exercises they advocate include monolingual exercises in syntactic restructuring and paraphrasing, and these are obviously essential in the preparation stage. What I am looking at here, however, is actual introduction to CI. What form should the first lessons take? Once the preparatory phase is over, does it then mean we can launch into full-scale real speeches from word go? Although there are a number of publications touching on the preparatory phase itself, there has not been substantive discussion of actual induction or lead-in process, and that is what this paper will outline.

After a preparatory phase, students commence the two CI subjects in different directions. There is no oral language transfer component during the preparatory phase of the training course, these subjects are the first classes in which students need to *code-switch* aurally. The load that the students carry in attempting this first time task is considerable -- in addition to the usual beginners' load, some students are working into their B language, as Japanese is a language that necessitates *retour*. To assist the students in this process, some of the micro skills necessary for a professional performance have been isolated. The idea is to apply these pedagogically by creating teaching modules where these skill subsets are dealt with. These micro skills complement the preparatory work undertaken previously and facilitates the transition to a code-switching environment.

As Ilg (1996,73) states, the assumption is that “trainees do not have the ability to carry messages across linguistic barriers.” The skills introduced in the first five weeks of the course are pragmatic and mechanical processing skills, in contrast to the broad preparatory groundwork covered previously. These pragmatic skills are a subset of the skills students will need to bridge the gap between the two languages, and are what is being referred to as ‘strokes’ in this paper.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of ‘stroke.’ One is skills related to what Setton (1994: 60) terms ‘understanding,’ and the other is ‘information-handling’ skills.

1) **Stroke One – ‘The Dog Paddle’**

The very first lesson is termed ‘dog paddle.’ The aim here is merely to *attempt* to interpret, so that students are able to gain a general feel for what they are trying to do. No notes are used, and very simple short segments are given. The content is kept general and familiar. Output quality is not critiqued at all; so as to remove any kind of performance pressure.

Just as attaining great speeds or beautiful form is not the goal of dog paddling, this is a mere introduction to consecutive interpreting. It is sufficient to attempt it and experience some of the possible difficulties.

Note taking is deliberately discouraged. The material used is cut into short enough segments to allow memory. When note taking is allowed at an early stage, students expend much energy on taking notes and trying to decipher what has been written down, when in fact a much better performance could have been produced by simply relying more on their memory. Lambert (1996: 78) emphasises that note taking is a means to help overcome the memory’s shortcomings. She likens note taking to a crutch, the use of which should be restricted. While students seem to feel some sort of psychological security in having copious notes (Setton, 1994), it is more beneficial for them to be made aware of how unnecessary this is.

2) **Stroke Two – Background Knowledge and Preparation**

There is no doubt that one of the most fundamental elements of consecutive interpreting is comprehension (Bowen & Bowen, 1984; Ilg & Lambert, 1996). However, comprehension without depth, where one just hears and recognises the words is not enough (Jones, 1998). Interpreting without ‘true’ comprehension and analysis produces a superficial interpretation akin to the word substitution that many machine based translation systems provide. For genuine comprehension to take place, contextual knowledge of the subject matter is essential. This may be what Gile (1995:5) calls

“extralinguistic knowledge” or “world knowledge,” and is an essential skill component for an interpreter. This is why Stroke Two covers background knowledge and preparation.

It is a common view amongst those with no knowledge of the world of interpreting that being ‘bilingual’ or ‘multilingual’ automatically qualifies one to be an interpreter. There are researchers such as Visson (1996) who go as far as saying that “bilinguals often make extremely poor interpreters,” because of “their frequent inability to code switch” (1996: 92). It is clearly a misconception to believe that competency in two or more languages immediately equates to an ability as an interpreter, but quite understandable that a layperson should think so. However, students of interpreting are not necessarily immune from this misconception. Some clearly feel that any shortcomings in their interpreting performance are solely due to their insufficient B language skills. Certainly, this is true for some of our students but it is not always the case. In fact, there are many instances in which a student does not fully understand a text in his or her A language. This situation can only be effectively addressed having sufficient knowledge of the subject matter and being familiar with the types of ideas and concepts that might arise. Thus, the importance of background knowledge is highlighted and appropriate research and preparation strategies are discussed.

The actual method employed in class is:

1. introduce a speech
2. have students attempt Stroke 1
3. ask students to submit one item of background material that they think will be useful as preparation for the speech
4. ask students to prepare a glossary on the topic.

The students would have listened to about 10 minutes of the tape in steps 1 and 2, then they are asked to do steps 3 and 4 for homework. In the following lesson, the types of material that students have brought are discussed. We look at the items chosen by the students and talk about the differences (type of publication, year of publication, language, etc.). We then discuss the merits and demerits of each type (eg. books take longer to read, journal articles are more up-to-date but can have a narrower focus, publications by government departments can have a particular slant, internet is convenient but not necessarily reliable). This process seems to make students aware of the differences in the types of material and their varying degrees of usefulness in terms of preparation for interpreting.

The glossaries that the students prepare are copied and passed around the class. We then look at the way in which they are organised to determine the optimal format for our purpose. The user-friendliness of the glossaries is assessed by looking at language direction

and sorting method (eg. alphabetical, separate column for acronyms, topics). This exercise is aimed at highlighting the range of possible glossary formats, thereby helping the students work out the most useful format for them at this stage.

3) Stroke Three – Place and People Names

The third module covers strategies to cope with the names of places and people. It deals with conversion strategies, the skills needed in the actual *code-switching* task between English and Japanese rather than note-taking techniques for names as touched upon by Bowen and Bowen (1984). Reference sources where these proper names can be verified such as specialised dictionaries, atlases and registers are introduced. The internet is a very useful tool in this – it is possible to search for names in all fields quite easily. Memorisation of significant names and place names is encouraged. This can be done by taking particular note when watching the news or reading newspapers. It is essential to keep abreast of current renditions in Japanese of the names of foreign dignitaries and politicians, as the Japanese version can change over time. There are also certain patterns of ‘Japanising’ foreign names and locations, so these patterns are also highlighted in this session.

Overall, the main aim in this third stroke is to raise awareness of the treatment of place names and people names. Although it is obvious to a professional interpreter or any other experienced linguist that merely saying an English place name with a Japanese pronunciation does not automatically achieve the correct outcome, some students are not fully aware of this fact. It is also true that it will take some time before they can be comfortably familiar with significant place and people names from around the world. This is why these proper names are dealt with as one of the basic strokes before commencing interpreting on a wider scale.

There is a set of exercises to use as practice for this skill (see Appendix 1). A recording is played, and students are required to record an interpretation into Japanese at the end of each paragraph. The paragraphs are kept short, the sentence structures are not grammatically taxing, and vocabulary other than people and place names is kept general.

The main objective is to raise awareness for the need to study these proper names and increase one’s knowledge bank. Quite a number of students are unaware of how few proper names they know until we enter this module. Follow-up self-study is recommended at the end of the lesson.

4) Stroke Four – Numbers and Years

The fourth lesson deals with numbers and years. Unlike the exercise mentioned in Bowen and Bowen (1984), this again has conversion techniques rather than notation as its focus.

In Japanese, the base unit for numbers is 10,000 rather than 1,000 as is the case in languages such as English. This presents a specific challenge to Japanese-English interpreters, who must convert large figures into units of 10,000 (*man*). This conversion can pose difficulties with greater effort needing to be allocated in the interpreting process until one develops the necessary skills to cope with it proficiently. Past experience with interpreters unable to handle figures competently has driven Keegan (1980: 129) to state in his book *Multinational Marketing Management* that users of interpreters should 'assume that all numbers over 10,000 will be mistranslated.' Thus, numbers are given a particular focus in the fourth session.

Students are asked to devise ways of coping with numbers. Some make up conversion charts, others use index cards. Whatever the tool they choose, much practice is needed to utilise it fully. Past preference has been to not prescribe any set method or conversion sheets, but to encourage students to come up with their own that best suits their individual needs. At the same time as numbers, I also bring up the treatment of decimal points, percentages and other numerical expressions.

Another item that needs specific attention is the conversion of years. In Japan, as well as the use of Anno Domini, calendar years are also designated by the ascension of the reigning emperor. For example, 1868 was the first year of the *Meiji* era, 1912 the first year of the *Taisho* era, and 1926 was the first year of the *Showa* era. The current era name is *Heisei* and so, 2005 is also the seventeenth year of Heisei. Usually, the interpreter would automatically convert any Japanese era denominated year into A.D., as the Japanese year would have no significance for delegates listening to the English. In the opposite direction (J to E), there is no need to convert Western years into Japanese years, as the A.D. style is also used widely in Japan.

5) Stroke Five – Numbers and Units in Sentences

As a further extension of stroke four, where numbers were practised in isolation, for the fifth stroke, students are required to interpret paragraphs containing numbers with various units of currency or measurement (eg. 243,000 dollars, 3.6 million kilometres). Here the students encounter the difficulty of having to grasp additional information related to the number. After several practice sessions, they are usually able to handle isolated numbers quite well. However, when they need to also comprehend, memorise and note additional information such as what that number stood for, what the unit was and what happened to that figure (eg. *Interest rates were raised from 3.56 % to 4.2 % for housing mortgages yesterday, and it is estimated that 2.6 million home owners will be affected by this change.), their ability to cope with the figure itself deteriorates. Therefore in this step, we increase*

students' cognitive load somewhat so as to better simulate what practitioners encounter in real interpreting situations.

3. Conclusion

The 'Five Stroke' method currently adopted has been useful so far in facilitating the transitional phase between preparatory work and actual interpreting. One of the main aims in introducing these 'strokes' has been to equip trainees with some basic mechanical skills prior to launching into full scale interpreting sessions.

The introductory/preparatory phase completed before this lead-in period is the equivalent of building up general fitness in readiness for the actual task of swimming. Once they are fit and ready, do we throw them into the water? I believe not. Interpreting is a performance oriented activity and self-confidence of the interpreter plays a very important role in the outcome. As Halliday (1992) notes, badly handled classes 'could damage students' confidence' (Halliday, 1992: 41). This is why I favour the 'lead gently into the water' approach as opposed to the 'sink or swim' type method. It is particularly important when teaching interpreting in languages such as Japanese where bilingual interpreting is the norm (as opposed to multilanguage) and thus, *retour* into one's B language is routinely undertaken. In a classroom situation, this means that you may have a mixture of students who are working into their mother tongue and those who are not. The latter group can be more hesitant to begin with because they are working into their non-A language, and the induction process should be handled cautiously. Halliday (1992:38) describes the first few weeks of his course as "gentle but intensive." I believe he is correct when he states that, "the first few classes are of vital importance" as it "would be easy to dent a student's confidence to the detriment of his or her work throughout the year" (Halliday, 1992:38). With our five stroke system, the aim is for the sessions to be gentle, but intensive and challenging.

Unlike language teaching where a plethora of how-to books exist, there is a shortage of manuals and text books on interpreting as a whole. (Visson,1996). One certainly is unable to run a tertiary level interpreting course based on widely available textbooks and supplementary exercise books. There have been some articles which describe the training methods adopted by I/T training institutions to date. However, further exchange on current pedagogical techniques will be of significant benefit to not only academics but also to students, practitioners and the profession. It is hoped that this paper will provide an impetus for future development in consecutive interpreting pedagogy, particularly in the leading-in phase of novice trainees.

Minako Kuwahata received a Masters of Literary Studies in Japanese Interpreting and Translation, University of Queensland, Australia, and is currently a lecturer in conference interpreting at UQ. She is also a practicing conference interpreter.

Email: m.kuwahata@uq.edu.au

References

- Bowen, David & Bowen, Margareta. (1984). *Steps to Consecutive Interpreting*. 2nd Edition. Pen and Booth, Washington D.C.
- Gile, Daniel (1995). *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Halliday, J. (1992). 'Doing it all wrong': Simultaneous interpreting on the ab initio. Russian undergraduate degree. *Russistika*, No. 6, December 1992.
- Ilg, Gérard & Lambert, Sylvie (1996). Teaching Consecutive Interpreting. *Interpreting*, Vol. 1(1), pp. 69-99.
- Jones, Roderick (1998). *Conference Interpreting Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.
- Keegan, Warren J. (1980). *Multinational marketing Management*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Setton, Robin (1994). Training Conference Interpreters with Chinese-Problems and Prospects. *Translation and Interpreting: Bridging East and West: Selected Conference papers*. Seymour, Richard K. & Liu, C.C. (eds.), University of Hawaii, Honolulu. pp. 85-95.
- Visson, Lynn (1996). Interpreter Training: The Stepchild of Language Teaching. *Language Status in the Post-Cold-War Era*. Muller, Kurt E. (ed.), University Press of America. pp. 91-96.

Appendix 1. Exercises used for people and place names

The Prime Minister Dr. O'Neil announced in Canberra that she expected interest rates to fall within two weeks.

This announcement took Paul Hudson, the Treasurer, by surprise as he had been away on a tour of South East Asian countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Reserve bank officials were also surprised by the Prime Minister's decision to make this announcement now as their Governor, Brett Simpson, is away, holidaying in the Greek Islands.

However, Senator Cooper, who is the Minister for Trade Negotiations, was aware of this upcoming event, as he had been in Canberra for the past week, not in Cyprus as originally scheduled.

This past week has been busy for all politicians but particularly so for Senator Harrison from Tasmania. He visited Adelaide, Melbourne and Auckland in the space of 5 days.

