



The role of consecutive in interpreter training: A cognitive view

Revisiting the frequently debated question of whether consecutive interpreting should be taught systematically in all interpreter training programs.

Daniel GILE.

Published: September 21, 2001 Last updated: August 10, 2016

1. Introduction

Whether consecutive interpreting should be taught systematically in all interpreter training programs is a frequently debated question. One argument made forcefully against including CI training is that consecutive is gradually disappearing from the market. This claim is made mostly in Western Europe; in other markets, and in particular in Asia and in Eastern Europe, consecutive seems to be as lively as ever, due to its distinct advantages over simultaneous (less costly, less cumbersome in terms of equipment, more flexible over time and space).

A further argument made against CI training is that in programs serving a market where this mode of interpretation is not required, learning consecutive means devoting much time and energy to the acquisition of skills not relevant to the market, time and energy that would be better invested in simultaneous. Some, however, counter this argument by claiming that simultaneous is just an "accelerated consecutive" and that the skills of consecutive are therefore relevant to simultaneous.

This paper looks more closely at the nature of consecutive in cognitive terms, and brings this analysis into the debate.

2. Is simultaneous an "accelerated consecutive"?

In cognitive terms, the most fundamental problem in interpreting is that it is composed of a number of concurrent operations each of which requires processing capacity (PC), and the amount of PC required is often as much as - or even more than - the interpreter has available at the time it is needed.

In simultaneous, such operations can be pooled together into "Efforts", such as:

- The Listening Effort (listening to and analyzing the source speech);
- The Production Effort (producing a target-language version of the speech);
- A short-term Memory Effort (storing information just received from the speaker until it can be rendered in the target speech).

All three "Efforts" include operations that require processing capacity, as is well known to psycholinguists. Seemingly "effortless" speech production does require attentional resources, as evidenced inter alia by hesitation pauses, which reflect intensive efforts to find an appropriate word and/or an appropriate syntactic structure to start, continue or end a sentence. This is true even in one's native language. Similarly, the seemingly "spontaneous" and "automatic" comprehension effort also requires attentional resources. If these are not invested into listening, words can be heard and forgotten without leaving meaningful traces in the listener's mind, as can be seen in consecutive when too much attention is devoted to note-taking and not enough to listening.

In consecutive, during the listening phase, operations can be pooled together into:

- The Listening Effort, the same as in simultaneous;
- The Production Effort (producing notes, not a target-language version of the speech);
- A short-term Memory Effort (storing information just received until it is noted - for that part of the information taken down as notes).

During the reformulation phase, we have:

- A Note-Reading Effort (some PC is required to understand - and sometimes decipher - the notes);
- A long-term Memory Effort for retrieving information stored in long-term memory and reconstructing the content of the speech;
- A Production Effort, for producing the target-language speech.

On the basis of these "Effort Models", as they are known in the literature, **the following differences between simultaneous and consecutive can be pointed out:**

(1) *In simultaneous, two languages are processed at the same time* in "working memory" (roughly, the cognitive resources engaged in short-term processing of information just received). This requires devoting some attention to inhibiting the influence of the source language when producing the target speech in order to avoid interference. In consecutive, this constraint is much weaker, or even non-existent, depending on the way the notes are taken (even if notes are taken in the source language, they are generally single words rather than full sentence structures, hence the likelihood of less interference). Moreover, while speaking, the interpreter can devote more attention to monitoring his/her output in consecutive than in simultaneous as part of the Production Effort.

(2) *In simultaneous, target-speech production occurs under heavier time pressure* than in consecutive, where the interpreter can pace him/herself. This is particularly important for speech segments with high information density, where the pressure in simultaneous is particularly high. In consecutive, it is also high during the listening phase, and therefore affects Note Production, but loses its urgency during the reformulation phase.

These two differences explain and justify the fact that some colleagues are willing to work into their B language in consecutive, but not in simultaneous.

(3) *In consecutive, while listening, interpreters have to decide what to take down in their notes and how.* They also have to devote some attention to the writing process itself. These operations, which require specific know-how, are not found in simultaneous.

(4) *In consecutive, the slowness of writing* and the resulting delay between the moment information is heard and the moment it is noted *submits working memory to high pressure* in a specific way that is not present in simultaneous, at least in language pairs not requiring extensive word-order changes. (In language pairs requiring extensive word-order changes, the lag-related cognitive load in simultaneous may be similar to that in consecutive.) Coping with this writing-induced load requires specific strategies and know-how.

(5) *In consecutive, there is much more involvement of long-term memory* (in the range of a few minutes) than in simultaneous.

These and other differences mean that it takes time to reach proficiency in the specific skills of consecutive, and that good simultaneous interpreters are not automatically good consecutive interpreters and vice-versa. In particular, there is no reason to assert that good mastery of consecutive should be a pre-requisite for simultaneous.

3. Pedagogical considerations

Given the above, why should it make sense to teach consecutive to students whose market does not require it?

The advantages of consecutive are the following:

(1) Separation between the listening phase and the reformulation phase in consecutive leaves reformulation free of heavy time constraints. Students can therefore be taught fundamental methodological principles related to "translation" problems (fidelity norms, linguistic norms, reformulation strategies, etc.). In simultaneous, time pressure may make students less receptive to suggestions in this respect, as many object that they do not have time to think of all the solutions proposed by instructors.

(2) Separation between the listening phase and the reformulation phase makes it possible to use time more efficiently than in simultaneous for basic instruction in listening and reformulation strategies: in simultaneous, the number of students practicing at the same time is limited by the number of available booths in the classroom; in consecutive, all students in the room are engaged in the listening phase at all times, when listening to the source speech *and* when listening to its interpretation by a classmate (provided the instructor tells them to listen to the interpretation and comment on it).

(3) In consecutive, it is possible for students to focus more easily than in simultaneous on the listening component and see what they missed: indicators of one's comprehension of the source speech are found in the notes, and in the students' ability to reconstruct the speech from their notes while following the target speech of the student who is performing in class. In simultaneous, the students' recollection of their comprehension is more blurred.

In-depth analysis has long been recognised as a major quality component of interpreting (and translation). The importance of this advantage of consecutive should not be underestimated.

(4) In consecutive, it is easier than in simultaneous to work on target-language production, since, as explained above, there is much less interference from the source language and from time pressure. Working on target-language production means working on correctness, on linguistic norms, on flexibility enhancement, and on the eradication of linguistic interference.

Incidentally, the separation between the two phases makes it easier in consecutive than in simultaneous to detect weaknesses in the students' mastery of the target language. In simultaneous, language problems in the output may also be linked to processing capacity saturation and/or wrong decision-making, and it is difficult to do an accurate diagnosis.

(5) More generally, separation between the two phases also makes it easier to control target-speech fidelity. In simultaneous, correcting for fidelity takes much longer and is more complex, requiring either the use of transcripts or alternately listening to source-speech and target-speech recordings.

4. Conclusion

As I hope to have demonstrated through this synoptic discussion, on the one hand, consecutive corresponds to a partly distinct set of skills which require time and effort to master, and on the other, it offers distinct advantages in the classroom. What should the proper strategy be, then, in those programs serving markets where there is no (perceived) need for consecutive?

My personal opinion is that consecutive is too valuable to dispense with, at least during the first half of a program. I do not believe, however, that perfect mastery of consecutive should necessarily be institutionalized as a mandatory requirement for the conference interpreter's degree. A range of compromise solutions can be contemplated, starting with a minimum solution, which would entail several weeks of training in consecutive on relatively brief and easy speeches (in terms of speed, technicality and logic), enough to work on the listening and production components and to detect and correct major weaknesses in students, but not enough to reach maturity in note-taking and in the processing of difficult speeches in consecutive. Alternatively, consecutive could be taught throughout the training program, but not be tested as a requirement for the degree, except as a special option. The option of keeping full mastery in consecutive as a requirement for the degree is legitimate as well, at least in those markets where consecutive is still present. Decisions should be left to program leaders, depending on the length and status of the program, on the students, and on the markets to be served. The one trap to avoid is a dogmatic attitude, one way or another.

5. Bibliographical tips

This short paper only briefly raises the main issues. Colleagues who wish to gain more insight into ideas, concepts and research on consecutive will find many interesting texts explaining the fundamental ideology of consecutive as the basis of conference interpreting and giving pedagogical advice in writings by authors from ETI, Geneva (Ilg, Rozan) and ESIT, Paris (Lederer, Seleskovitch, Thiéry). The issue of processing capacity and the Effort Models are explained inter alia in texts by Gile. A few recent books on consecutive were written in Italy (Claudia Monacelli, Falbo et al.) and Spain (Catalina Iliescu). Interesting empirical research (experimental and non-experimental) has been and is being carried out inter alia by Cai Xiaohong and other researchers in China, by scholars in Japan, and by Peter Mead and others in Italy. A rather comprehensive bibliography was prepared by Gérard Ilg and published in 1996 in *Interpreting* 1:1 (88-99). For a relatively comprehensive list and some details about more recent studies, consult issues of the [CIRIN Bulletin](#).

Recommended citation format:

Daniel GILE. "The role of consecutive in interpreter training: A cognitive view". *aiic.net* September 21, 2001. <<http://aiic.net/p/377>>.