Effective Strategies for Teaching Consecutive Interpreting

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Abstract

Current research in the field of spoken and signed language points us in the direction of using consecutive interpreting; however, signed language interpreter education programs report inconsistent approaches to incorporating this research (Russell 2002b). This paper describes a frame of reference used to shape learning activities that help students to acquire the competencies required for proficient use of consecutive interpreting. This framework includes guidelines for structuring observation and analysis of interpretations. In addition, we present a typical progression of skill sequencing and material selection criteria. Finally, we suggest that programs that structure the teaching of consecutive interpreting from a holistic integrated approach across their curricula and throughout the entire program contribute to shifting practices in our profession toward incorporating research and best practices.

Keywords: consecutive interpreting; simultaneous interpreting; blending consecutive and simultaneous interpreting; discourse analysis; teaching approaches

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1. Introduction

Current research in the field of both spoken and signed language interpreting points us toward consecutive interpreting; however, signed language interpreting programs report inconsistent approaches to incorporating this research (Russell 2002b). Some programs are consciously striving to shift the dominant paradigm away from simultaneous interpretation as the ultimate goal for interpreters. As well, the past few years have seen a shift in the certification of interpreters. For example, the Canadian certification system of the Association of Visual Language Interpreters offers interactive test segments that allow candidates to use consecutive interpreting (CI) or a blend of CI and simultaneous interpreting (SI). This same approach is used for some provincial screening tools, thus bridging research and best practices within the testing process (Russell & Malcolm, 2009).

This paper describes how educators can create meaningful learning activities that allow students to develop a strong foundation in consecutive interpreting. This approach allows them to later use consecutive interpretation in interactions best suited to CI and also to determine when the interaction is best suited to a combination of consecutive and simultaneous modes. Such a blended approach demonstrates the ability to bridge CI research (Russell, 2002a, 2005) with effective practices. In our interpreting and teaching practices, we believe that when interpreters recognize interpreting options based on discourse requirements, we can make choices about using simultaneous or consecutive interpreting. We recognize that spoken language interpreter education programs have always approached the learning of consecutive interpreting in a structured manner, however, one of the unique elements of signed language interpretation is that an interpreter can be working with the two different language modalities (i.e., a spoken and a signed language) at the same time without interference, which has led to much more use of simultaneous interpreting in our field.

While research has demonstrated the effectiveness of consecutive interpreting, educators and interpreters often view CI as only a stepping-stone to simultaneous interpreting (Cokely, 2005; Russell, 2002b). Many experienced interpreters have had little training in CI, and few workshops address the issue. As well, interpreters and educators may have limited exposure to seeing interpreters successfully use CI in their practice, and thus believe they should use CI but lack the skill to do so (Russell). Therefore, students need to be firmly grounded in consecutive interpreting.

During the 2008 Conference of Interpreter Trainers convention in Puerto Rico, we led a workshop on effective strategies for teaching consecutive interpretation and have since responded to numerous inquiries about our work. This article describes some of our approaches to help practitioners acquire proficiency in consecutive interpreting. Such proficiency in teaching will allow interpreters to examine the discourse event and select strategies for successful interpretation by blending CI and SI.

2 Please note that the information in this article applies to deaf and non-deaf educators, practitioners, and students. “Interpreter” and “teacher” are used to refer to both deaf and non-deaf persons unless otherwise specified. In addition, we use the singular for teacher and interpreter, although we acknowledge that courses are often team-taught and more than one interpreter may be present.
2. Our frame of reference

We approach interpreting and teaching with a view that meaning is created and co-constructed by participants in the interaction/conversation (Halliday, 1976; Mishler, 1986; Roy, 2000; Schegloff, 1982), and interpretation is a “meaning-making event.” During an interaction, participants and interpreters rely on contextual knowledge, schemata or interpretive frames (Goffman, 1974), and linguistic and cultural knowledge. This meaning-making process takes time, in order to work with all of these variables, and underscores the need for consecutive interpreting. We define consecutive interpreting as the rendering of interpretation after the participant has produced a complete response, question, or idea(s). Using this frame of reference, we want students to:

• consider the mode to be used, the rationale, and how to incorporate consecutive and/or simultaneous modes throughout an assignment according to a meaning-based model (Russell, 2005; Shaw, 2007)
• assess the requirements of an assignment prior to accepting it (this requires obtaining sufficient information)
• analyze the impact of their decisions and actions before, during, and after assignments
• provide effective consecutive interpretation

To learn consecutive interpretation, students must first acquire the theory and experience of using CI. Students gain fundamental skills by studying and applying discourse and text analyses. With this foundation, students are ready to acquire additional interpreting skills. Our first step is to help students understand the evidence from spoken/signed language research that supports the use of CI for accuracy, precision, and effectiveness. Next, we link research with practice, through educators modeling CI, students practicing CI, and educators and practitioners sharing their CI experiences.

This approach assumes the instructor has an understanding of CI research; that research should include work by Alexieva (1991), Bruton (1985), Cokely (1992), Gile (1995), Leeson (2005), Mikkelson (1995), Napier (2003), and Russell (2002a, 2002b, 2005). The instruction should also have the ability to link evidence to practice, model consecutive interpretation, and analyze student work per a meaning-based model. In the next section, we describe how we structure teaching activities.

3. Teaching approaches

Ultimately, our goal is to equip students with competencies to effectively choose if and when to use CI and SI within a given interaction. Dialogic interpreting situations are particularly suited to developing these skills, allowing the interpreter to attend to discourse demands and choose the mode that allows effective interpretation. We do not employ monologic discourse at this stage (except for teaching text chunking). What follows is a typical progression of skill-based activities.

3.1. Typical progression

We structure the learning environment sequentially, with the understanding that overlap occurs, and learning is an iterative process. Our programs are philosophically rooted in discourse analysis approaches (Roy, 2000, 2005), and this is where we begin. The students first engage in learning based on discourse and text analysis approaches, in which they acquire foundational knowledge through exploring existing research and theories pertaining to

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3 It is outside the scope of this short paper to provide a complete review of the literature about consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, discourse analysis, and cognitive models of interpretation. Readers are encouraged to see Gile (1995), Janzen (2005), Pöchhacker (2004), Roy (2000), Russell (2002a), and Wilcox and Shaffer (2005).

4 See Russell (2005) for an overview of the Meaning-Based Interpreting Model and the role of context in shaping the decision to use consecutive or simultaneous interpreting and Shaw (2007) for the role of context in locating and discerning meaning.
discourse analysis, linguistic features/analysis, and text analysis principles. Student outcomes focus on (a) mapping interactions/texts, (b) building contextualization and construal strategies, and (c) dealing with cross-cultural approaches to purpose, goals, and information in interactions. At this stage, students are exposed to models of interpretation, including interactional and cognitive models.\(^5\)

Translation skills are the second major subset. Our goal is to introduce translation strategies to and from both languages\(^6\) across various genres. Translation steps include (a) planning, (b) understanding text, (c) using research/resources to deepen comprehension, (d) using conceptual mapping, (e) creating an outline/structure (associated with the target language), (f) preparing initial drafts, and (g) revising drafts after consultation with target language native users, producing a final translation product. These translation skills require students to consistently apply their knowledge of discourse analysis approaches and focus on discrete skill sets, work collaboratively, and analyze their work (process and product) for effectiveness in achieving a desirable meaning-based product.

Consecutive interpreting skills form the next major subset, which is introduced after discourse/text analysis and translation skills are achieved. Our philosophical approach here is that we want students to see consecutive interpretation as a viable approach throughout their careers, not just for learning simultaneous interpreting. Once more, we bridge research and practice by exposing students to existing research in both spoken and signed language communities. Consecutive interpreting competencies require students to (a) appropriately describe the need for CI in both languages and culturally appropriate ways, (b) create effective recall notes, (c) chunk or segment participant messages appropriately, (d) use culturally appropriate signals to have participants pause at appropriate points, and (e) use strategies to create meaning-based interpretation while minimally altering participants’ interaction patterns.

Simultaneous interpretation skills are taught once students have a solid base in consecutive interpreting. If students are permitted to move to simultaneous interpreting prior to internalizing the consecutive process, we see typical error patterns emerge, including the absence of construal and comprehension due to short processing times resulting in lexical transcoding and absence of meaningful linguistic use.

Finally, based on this progression, students are ready to practice blending consecutive and simultaneous interpreting within a given interaction. This requires (a) application of discourse/text analysis skills, (b) consecutive and simultaneous interpreting abilities, and (c) decision-making schemas. Beginning in the foundational courses, students are guided through analysis of their work. Self-analysis is an essential learning component.

### 3.2. Skills

Ideally, students come to the interpreting task with bilingual competence (Witter-Merithew, Taylor & Johnson, 2002). Then, through systematic exercises designed to develop cognitive and interactive processes for translation and consecutive interpreting, we can help students master the interpreting process. Such training, whether in the classroom, workshops, or community practice, includes the following (Russell, 2005):

- text analysis that includes identification/control of linguistic aspects such as genres, registers, semantics, cohesion, grammar, and prosody
- memory development through structured practice exercises designed to enhance short-term memory
- text mapping for linguistic elements and interactive patterns among participants
- note-taking and mapping techniques
- identification of strategies to segment linguistic and meaning-based interactive chunks suitable for interpretation, and to recreate the same linguistic aspects in the target language (e.g., affect, cohesion, linking questions and answers, and dealing with new or shared information)
- creation of culturally appropriate signals to ask participants to pause for interpretation

\(^5\) For a complete overview of interpretation models, see Pöchhacker (2004).

\(^6\) While our context for teaching involves American Sign Language (ASL) and English, we understand that readers will be approaching their teaching from a variety of language pairs. The teaching skills outlined here apply across all languages.
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• effective discourse-based decision making within interactions and selection of an interpretation mode best suited to discourse/interactional goals
• awareness of the need for consecutive interpreting when content is complicated, detail laden, presented using linguistic structures and/or contextual cues that challenge the interpreter’s ability to construct meaning, or situations in which error consequences are grave
• describe CI in ASL and English and introduce the rationale for consecutive interpreting or a blend of CI/SI to participants prior to an assignment

Beyond acquiring the above skills, students must learn to manage logistical issues such as positioning, the use of pen/paper, and teamwork. We also consider eye gaze an important variable and skill, and differentiate between its linguistic use and other purposes. Non-linguistic eye gaze considerations include (a) the interpreter’s need to see the non-verbal message produced by the non-deaf participant, thus requiring both participants to be in his/her range of vision; (b) direction of gaze while attending to the message; (c) direction of gaze while producing spoken interpretation; and (d) use of eye gaze as a cueing device (e.g., to ask for repetition or clarification). Students must develop an awareness of the footprint their decisions and actions leave on the interaction and the ability to lessen that footprint. Finally, students must develop a keen sense of self-analysis and the ability to articulate the effects of their decisions and actions.

3.3. Activities

Multiple teaching activities can be used; in this paper we describe the use of role-plays as one approach. Other classroom activities include working with DVD samples to show successful and less successful interpretations and to practice interpreting, teacher-modeled examples of discrete skills and CI/SI blends, and the modeling/sharing of perspectives by experienced practitioners. We have also organized three-day retreats involving multiple student role-plays. These retreats require numerous deaf and non-deaf participants, and multiple teams of co-teachers (deaf and non-deaf). In our experience, these immersion-style retreats, where teachers lead analysis and feedback conversations after small-group role-plays, can dramatically improve student performance in ways not possible in regular classes.

3.4. Creating practice scenarios

Learning activities must be carefully considered and selected in terms of materials, scenarios, and role-playing participants. We invite deaf and non-signing participants who can play various roles and create natural, spontaneous interactions. Whenever possible, we ensure that guests have insightful conversations with students after role-plays, describing their perceptions of the interaction.

We create scenarios and provide participants with cards describing their roles and offering contextual information (e.g., interactional goal, time/place, ideas for conversation). Scenarios range from hiring a party planner or returning defective equipment to a store to holding a parent-teacher interview or organizing hospice care. We use simple interactions to start and increase complexity as students acquire competencies. We cultivate relationships with deaf and non-deaf community members to make this successful.

Besides designing classroom scenarios, we take students into the community to practice interpreting in local businesses, such as the post office or insurance agency. We cultivate relationships with community business owners; they are delighted to see us return and usually allow us to film the interactions.

3.5. Role plays

Prior to working with filmed interactions, we introduce consecutive interpreting through role-plays, beginning with CI demonstrations. Demonstrations are twofold, showing the CI process and showing discussion of the work with the interpreter. We begin by interpreting a typical non-complex interaction between a deaf person and a non-signing hearing person. In the first interpretation, the teacher models inappropriate behavior and demonstrates a few strategies that produce effective and ethical interpretations. In other words, we do what is not appropriate.
This includes directing participants where to sit; physically touching participants; producing source language intrusions; adding, omitting, and skewing information; neglecting note-taking or writing copious notes; interrupting mid-sentence; and using inappropriate language to ask participants to wait.

After the interpretation, we model an analysis discussion in the same vein. The teacher-interpreter models undesirable behaviors, including being defensive and justifying every mistake; blaming participants for ineffective interpretation; claiming obstacles to proper preparation; citing lack of preparation for poor decisions and errors; focusing on lexical choices for equivalence; and dismissing any suggested link to cognitive or interactional interpretation models. This demonstration provides students with a frame of reference, offers a contrast for later work, and provides a way to think about the range of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

In the second CI demonstration, deaf and non-deaf participants redo the first interaction while the teacher models effective interpreting strategies. An analytical session follows, in which the teacher-interpreter models discussion of her work with behaviors that we are teaching. The second demonstration provides students with an exemplar and template; for some, it is the first observation of consecutive interpreting. They have the opportunity to discuss the work, the interpreter’s strategies, and how the interpreter handles unforeseen issues. This exercise provides students with ideas to try and often dispels fears that consecutive interpretation is simply about memory and that it is too difficult. Once they have seen effective CI, many report they can envision providing CI successfully.

During both demonstrations, students observe and take notes for later conversations. We explicitly guide students with our expectations of appropriate observation protocols. We require them to take notes and seek evidence of effective decision-making strategies. We ask them to link their observations to interactional or cognitive models and to provide examples from the actual interpretation. We encourage students to note the impact of interpreter decisions on participants and the interaction and how those decisions influenced participant dynamics and goals. Students may comment on interpretation strategies, cultural appropriateness of signals, turn-taking processes (including length of turns), and whether the interpreter inhibited participants’ interaction patterns. We ask them to note evidence of accurate, equivalent, and precise interpretation that conveys essential elements of meaning and target language discourse features. As well, students comment on natural chunking or segmentation in the discourse, additions, omissions (Napier, 2003), and skews. When commenting on language use, students cite examples of semantics, cohesion, coherence, adjacency pairs, and other linguistic and discourse features.

Prior to inviting student-observer comments and questions, we invite deaf and non-deaf participants to comment. Participants can offer valuable information about what worked and what did not and how they experienced the interaction. For example, either participant might say, “I wasn’t sure who was asking for clarification when you asked me to repeat my address.” We cultivate relationships with participants who are especially insightful about their interactive experiences and invite them to return for further role-plays. Participants also benefit; this experience fosters acceptance of, and the desire for, consecutive interpretation in the community.

During discussion, we sometimes need to point out and reframe inappropriate student comments. For example, when a student says, “You weren’t clear when you said x, y, and z,” reframing might take the form of, “In your work when you said, “X, y, and z,” can you tell me why you chose to do what you did?” Another student comment could be “I would have signed that this way.” Our response here might be, “Our discussion is focused now on this interpretation and this interpreter’s decision-making process.” We are purposefully teaching and modeling interpreting strategies and processes, interpersonal interaction with participants and colleagues, and interpretation analysis, so students can understand and effectively manage the interpreting without interfering with participant interactions. We do not assume that students, whether novice or longtime interpreters, have these necessary knowledge or skills.

Often during discussion, a student will ask how to do something, such as explain the need for CI. Whenever possible, we adopt the roles of interpreter and participants and practice an actual conversation. Several students might practice the conversation, and/or the teacher might model an effective conversation. If and when we encounter resistance, it is usually short lived and due to observations or experiences of inadequately performed CI, or fear of forgetting information. We discuss the resistance but quickly replace talk with action. When students experience the work directly, they become immersed in learning while practicing. Their resistance is replaced with pride at the efficacy of their work.
Role-plays are followed by teacher-guided discussion. The analysis discussion includes (a) addressing participants’ goals, (b) discourse goals of specific utterances, (c) examples of successful work and why they were successful, and (d) how interpreter strategies supported or impeded effective interpretation.

We film the practice-interpreted interactions 95 to 100 percent of the time, so we can return to the work for further analysis and to see student progress. Taped scenarios have multiple uses—additional consecutive practice for students, more detailed linguistic and interpreting analysis of their work, later simultaneous interpreting practice, samples of effective or ineffective practice, and inclusion in student portfolios.

On occasion, students take on the roles of participants in role-plays. Students become adept at playing various roles and staying in character. Non-deaf students can and do depend on the interpretation, whenever they look down, write notes, or distract themselves from the deaf participant’s signed message. They can contribute valuable information to the discussion from the perspective of hearing persons depending on interpretation. When students take on participant roles, they also gain experience embodying various characteristics and ways of using discourse. This broadens their perspectives and prepares them for interpreting in diverse contexts not previously experienced.

Overall, role-plays provide invaluable opportunities for students to learn from each other, creating collective knowledge and enhancing understanding through hands-on work. Analysis of their work leads to insightful discussions that provide a foundation for the rest of their careers. We continue role-plays and analysis discussions throughout the students’ education.

4. Selection of filmed materials

We carefully select filmed materials for student practice and encourage students to follow suit. Criteria for creating DVDs or using pre-made DVD materials include:

- • authentic interactions/discourse vs. scripted/read (may be simulated for filming)
- • complete discourse interactions of 12–15 minutes in length so students experience conventional approaches to interaction, including greeting and leave-taking
- • materials with natural, complete, lengthy chunks of discourse so students gain experience deciding when to interrupt for interpretation
- • materials that lend themselves to pausing in realistic places
- • materials filmed using CI
- • inquiry narratives, such as job interviews or medical scenarios
- • materials that reflect realistic interactions for effectively using CI/SI blends

We recommend avoiding materials filmed using SI and edited to include timed pauses, as the pauses may not support effective decision making about processing time required. We do use materials filmed using SI to teach chunking, but not to practice CI.

5. Why this approach?

For many dialogic interactions, consecutive interpretation is the most appropriate mode. These include medical appointments, Video Relay Service (VRS) calls, and interviews. Many interpreters use CI when interpreting for children, seniors, and foreign sign language users, or situations in which the interpreter lacks contextual knowledge or does not know the participants well. In some of these situations, a combination of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting can be most effective.

We suggest that the interpreting task requires ongoing evaluation to determine the most appropriate mode at any given time. This choice cannot be definitively made at the beginning of the assignment; it needs to be re-evaluated as the discourse unfolds. To best translate meaning, an interpreter may move seamlessly between consecutive and simultaneous as the situational demands warrant. Describing teaching approaches for blending CI
and SI is beyond our scope here; however, we can say with certainty that teaching a blended approach cannot occur until students first acquire proficiency in consecutive interpretation.

We recognize that certain myths have shaped our interpreting and teaching practices, and may have contributed to educators not teaching CI as a viable mode for interpreter use across settings. These myths include:

- Only less skilled interpreters use CI.
- CI takes (much) longer.
- CI is not necessary for signed/spoken language interactions because the modalities are different; we can use both languages, simultaneously, without interference.
- CI is used only by hearing children with their deaf parents.
- Participants don’t like CI (so we shouldn’t do it and/or non-deaf people won’t tolerate silence).
- CI isn’t used in the “real world.”
- SI is the ultimate goal.

Our particular frame of reference and teaching approaches reinforce that consecutive interpreting is a viable mode, not just a pedagogical tool leading to simultaneous interpreting. We believe our approach equips students with tools to significantly enhance interpreting services. Lastly, we emphasize that programs are best served by integrating consecutive interpreting instruction throughout skills classes for the entire program. By doing so, we begin to move from “consecutive interpreting as a stepping stone to simultaneous interpreting” to integrating consecutive interpreting across and throughout the curriculum.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have described our frame of reference that guides the design of learning processes to support the teaching of consecutive interpreting. We have highlighted considerations for designing learning activities, material selection criteria, and structuring linguistic/interactional analysis conversations. When interpreters possess a solid foundation of consecutive interpreting, they are much more able to make appropriate decisions to integrate consecutive and simultaneous interpreting into meaning-based work. The field is in the process of rethinking what interpretation means and how best to offer effective service based on the modes of interpretation available. Finally, we suggest that programs that structure the teaching of consecutive interpreting from a holistic integrated approach across their curricula and throughout the entire program contribute to shifting practices in our profession toward incorporating research and best practices.

7. References


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