US-China Foreign Language, April 2026, Vol. 24, No. 4, 163-168
doi:10.17265/1539-8080/2026.04.004

Note-Taking Obstacles and Their Cognitive Causes in Arabic-Chinese Consecutive Interpreting: A Case Study of Student Interpreters' Notes at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation, Shanghai International Studies University

Shimaa Abdelrahim Ali Ahmed
Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Interpreting notes constitute an essential cognitive support tool in consecutive interpreting, and their quality directly affects interpreters' information retention and target-language production. Compared with more commonly studied language pairs, such as English and Chinese, Chinese and Arabic differ significantly in syntactic structure, information organization, and modes of cultural expression, which places a heavier cognitive burden on note-taking in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting. However, existing studies have mainly focused on language pairs, such as English-Chinese, while systematic research on note-taking in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting remains limited. Based on classroom note samples and interpreting outputs produced by master's students specializing in Arabic interpreting at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation of Shanghai International Studies University, this study employs classroom observation, note-sample analysis, and comparative analysis of target-language output to identify and explain typical note-taking obstacles in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting. The findings reveal three major problems among student interpreters: disconnection between listening comprehension and note-taking, disorganized note structure, and information-organization bias caused by mother-tongue transfer. The study further demonstrates that syntactic differences between Arabic and Chinese, excessive cognitive load, and insufficient automation of note-taking skills are the major causes of note-taking failure. On this basis, the paper proposes a conceptualized note-taking training approach centered on "meaning construction" and attempts to establish a pedagogical framework for consecutive interpreting note-taking that accommodates the bilingual characteristics of Arabic and Chinese. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underlying Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting and also provides practical implications for Arabic interpreting pedagogy.

Keywords: Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting, interpreting notes, cognitive load, mother-tongue transfer, interpreting pedagogy

Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries have continued to deepen, resulting in growing demand for Arabic-Chinese interpreting. As an

Shimaa Abdelrahim Ali Ahmed, Ph.D. candidate, Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

important mode of translation in diplomacy, commerce, and international conferences, consecutive interpreting places high demands on interpreters' abilities in real-time comprehension, information processing, and cross-linguistic expression. In this process, interpreting notes function as a crucial intermediary connecting source-language comprehension and target-language production.

Traditional perspectives have generally regarded interpreting notes as a memory aid. In recent years, however, cognitive interpreting studies have increasingly emphasized that note-taking not only serves an information-recording function, but also participates in meaning processing, logical organization, and the coordination of cognitive resources. Particularly in consecutive interpreting, interpreters are required to perform multiple tasks simultaneously within a limited time frame, including listening, comprehension, analysis, note-taking, and reformulation. Under such circumstances, notes become an externalized manifestation of the interpreter's cognitive process.

Nevertheless, classroom practice in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting reveals that student interpreters frequently encounter the problem of "taking extensive notes that cannot be effectively utilized." On the one hand, students are generally aware of the importance of note-taking and therefore tend to record excessively. On the other hand, during target-language production they often experience information omission, logical disorganization, and speech hesitation. Practical observation indicates that these problems are not merely issues of handwriting or note-taking technique. Rather, they result from the combined influence of cognitive load, linguistic differences, and mother-tongue transfer.

Current studies on interpreting notes mainly focus on language pairs, such as English-Chinese and French-Chinese, whereas systematic research on Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting remains relatively limited. Existing literature often emphasizes note-taking techniques and symbol systems, while insufficient attention has been paid to the cognitive mechanisms shaped by Arabic-Chinese linguistic differences. In addition, many studies remain at the level of experiential discussion and lack comparative analyses linking authentic notes with interpreting output.

Against this background, the present study takes master's students specializing in Arabic interpreting at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation of Shanghai International Studies University as its research subjects. Through classroom observation, note-sample analysis, and comparison with target-language output, the study explores typical note-taking obstacles in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting and analyzes their cognitive causes, before proposing corresponding pedagogical implications.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Interpretive theory and meaning-oriented note-taking. Interpretive Theory holds that the essence of interpreting lies not in linguistic form conversion but in meaning transfer. During listening comprehension, interpreters must detach themselves from the surface linguistic form of the source language, conceptualize the information, and reorganize it in the target language. Accordingly, the core task of interpreting notes is not the complete recording of words, but the representation of meaning relations and logical structure.

This perspective is particularly important for Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting. Given the significant differences between Arabic and Chinese in syntactic structure and information organization, excessive reliance on word-level recording often traps students in word-for-word translation during output, resulting in structural imbalance in the target language.

Gile's effort model. According to Daniel Gile's Effort Model, listening and analysis, memory, note-taking, and coordination tasks compete for limited cognitive resources in consecutive interpreting. When task demands exceed the interpreter's cognitive capacity, information omission, logical breakdown, and production errors are likely to occur.

In Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting, Arabic long-sentence structures, numerical information, and complex modification patterns significantly increase students' cognitive pressure. If note-taking skills have not been sufficiently automated, a substantial amount of attentional resources will be consumed during note-taking itself, thereby weakening comprehension of source-language meaning.

Mother-tongue transfer theory. Mother-tongue transfer theory suggests that learners' foreign-language production is influenced by the thinking patterns of their native language. For Chinese student interpreters, the paratactic characteristics of Chinese continue to affect the organization of information during note-taking.

More specifically, students tend to record keywords while neglecting logical relations. They also tend to preserve Chinese word order without structurally processing Arabic syntactic hierarchy. Such transfer phenomena further influence target-language production.

Research Subjects and Data Sources

The participants in this study were 32 master's students specializing in Arabic interpreting at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation of Shanghai International Studies University, including 18 first-year students and 14 second-year students. All participants had received systematic training in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting and had studied Arabic for five to seven years.

A total of 128 classroom note samples were collected, from which representative cases were selected for detailed analysis. In addition, students' classroom interpreting outputs were audio-recorded and transcribed in order to compare note content with target-language performance.

Research Methods

This study mainly adopts the following three research methods:

First, classroom observation was conducted to document students' note-taking behaviors and typical problems in consecutive interpreting over an extended teaching period;

Second, note-sample analysis was employed to categorize and examine information selection, structural organization, and symbol use in authentic student notes;

Third, comparative analysis of target-language output was carried out by comparing students' notes with their interpreting performance in order to analyze how note-taking problems affect output quality.

The study primarily adopts a qualitative approach while also analyzing the frequency of different problem types to enhance objectivity.

Major Note-Taking Obstacles in Arabic-Chinese Consecutive Interpreting

Disconnection Between Listening Comprehension and Note-Taking

One of the most common problems in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting is that students "hear without truly understanding." During the listening stage, students are often able to record certain words but fail to grasp the logical and semantic structure of sentences accurately.

This problem is particularly prominent in Arabic long sentences. Arabic frequently employs layered modification and right-branching structures, within which a single sentence may contain multiple attributive,

adverbial, and connective components. During listening comprehension, students tend to focus excessively on vocabulary itself while neglecting overall semantic relations.

For example, in interpreting discourse related to foreign policy, some students recorded keywords, such as "cooperation," "development," and "region," yet failed to note causal relations and subordinate structures, resulting in logical discontinuities in target-language output. Statistical analysis indicates that approximately 72% of the 128 note samples exhibited deficiencies in logical relations, with errors in processing long sentences being particularly prominent.

This phenomenon suggests that students' note-taking remains at the lexical level rather than adopting a meaning-unit-oriented recording approach. Excessive cognitive resources are consumed by listening and note-taking themselves, leaving insufficient capacity for processing overall semantic structure.

Disorganized Note Structure and Lack of Visual Organization

In addition to listening-related problems, students' notes commonly exhibit loose structure and confused hierarchy.

Although some students record large amounts of information, their notes lack clear spatial organization and logical layering. Information of different hierarchical levels is often arranged in parallel, while causal and resultative relations are insufficiently distinguished, making it difficult for students to retrieve information rapidly during target-language production.

Furthermore, students' self-created symbol systems often lack consistency. The same symbol may represent different meanings in different contexts, or newly invented symbols may be used repeatedly before stable memory associations are established. Rather than reducing cognitive load, such practices increase decoding difficulty.

The study found that approximately 59% of the students exhibited instability in their symbol systems, while 65% showed insufficient logical hierarchy in note layout.

From a cognitive perspective, structured notes function as a "visualized logical framework." When notes lack structure, interpreters cannot rapidly reconstruct the source-language logic during output and are forced to rely on fragmented memory, thereby increasing the risk of information omission.

Information-Organization Bias Caused by Mother-Tongue Transfer

Mother-tongue transfer constitutes another prominent problem in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting. Influenced by the paratactic nature of Chinese, students tend to preserve keywords while weakening explicit logical connectors in their notes. For instance, when recording Arabic sentences, students often omit connective elements indicating causality, concession, or progression, retaining only major content words. Although this strategy may increase writing speed, it frequently results in the loss of logical relations during target-language production.

In addition, some students organize notes directly according to Chinese word order when interpreting from Chinese into Arabic, without reconstructing Arabic syntactic hierarchy. Problems are especially evident in attributive structures and prepositional collocations, where students' Arabic expressions often fail to conform to idiomatic usage.

This phenomenon indicates that interpreting notes are not neutral recording tools. Rather, they are cognitive texts profoundly shaped by native-language thinking patterns. The note-taking stage itself already reflects interpreters' tendencies in linguistic organization.

Cognitive Causes of Note-Taking Obstacles

Resource Imbalance Under High Cognitive Load

Linguistic differences in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting significantly increase students' cognitive pressure. Complex Arabic syntax, variations in speech rate, and extensive modification structures all occupy greater attentional resources.

When students simultaneously engage in listening, comprehension, and note-taking, insufficient automation of note-taking skills often results in competition for cognitive resources. Some students reduce the depth of comprehension in an attempt to "record everything," ultimately producing notes that are extensive but ineffective in supporting target-language production.

The study found that students were most likely to experience recording interruptions and comprehension breakdowns when numerical information and proper nouns appeared. This suggests that high-load information rapidly compresses working-memory capacity and disrupts overall cognitive coordination.

Insufficient Meaning Processing

Many students still regard note-taking as "language recording" rather than "meaning extraction." Consequently, they tend to record vocabulary itself instead of extracting conceptual relations.

This problem is especially evident in Chinese-to-Arabic interpreting. Because students rely excessively on Chinese expressive structures, their notes often lack the logical framework and syntactic cues required for Arabic production, making it difficult to rapidly formulate target-language sentences that conform to Arabic norms.

Essentially, students have not yet completed the transition from "recording linguistic forms" to "recording meaning structures."

Limitations of Current Note-Taking Training Models

Current Arabic interpreting pedagogy in some institutions still follows training models developed for English-Chinese interpreting, emphasizing symbols, abbreviations, and recording speed while lacking targeted training based on Arabic-Chinese linguistic differences.

Such an approach tends to mechanize note-taking training and neglects the cultivation of meaning-construction ability. In the long run, although students may acquire certain recording techniques, they often fail to develop the ability to reorganize logic and extract information effectively in complex discourse.

Pedagogical Implications for Arabic-Chinese Consecutive Interpreting Note-Taking

Strengthening Meaning-Oriented Training

Note-taking training should shift from "recording words" to "recording meaning." In instruction, teachers should reduce emphasis on the quantity of notes and instead guide students to focus on logical relations, information hierarchy, and semantic structure.

For example, during listening-comprehension training, note-free retelling exercises may first be conducted to cultivate students' ability to identify meaning units, after which conceptualized note-taking can gradually be introduced.

Developing Awareness of Structured Note-Taking

Teachers should help students establish awareness of clear spatial organization, including hierarchical arrangement, logical relations, and marking of key information.

Compared with complicated symbol systems, the establishment of a stable and rapidly recognizable structural framework is more important. In Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting, the visual representation of logical relations and syntactic hierarchy is particularly crucial.

Strengthening Arabic-Chinese Syntactic Restructuring Training

In response to linguistic differences between Arabic and Chinese, interpreting pedagogy should incorporate specialized syntactic transformation training. Through exercises, such as long-sentence segmentation, logical-chain reconstruction, and information-hierarchy analysis, students can gradually develop awareness of cross-linguistic structural transformation.

For Chinese-specific terminology and culturally loaded expressions, instruction should emphasize functional explanation rather than mechanical literal translation, so as to reduce hesitation and imbalance during target-language production.

Conclusion

Interpreting notes are not merely tools for information recording, but an essential component of the cognitive process in consecutive interpreting. Based on classroom practice in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting, this study analyzes representative note-taking obstacles among student interpreters. The findings indicate that disconnection between listening comprehension and note-taking, disorganized structural organization, and information bias caused by mother-tongue transfer constitute the major problems currently observed in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting.

These problems arise not simply from insufficient technical skills, but are closely related to high cognitive load, linguistic differences, and limitations in current training models. Consequently, note-taking pedagogy in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting should move beyond symbol-oriented techniques and instead emphasize meaning construction and cognitive coordination.

From the perspectives of cognition and bilingual differences, this study attempts to explain note-taking problems in Arabic-Chinese consecutive interpreting and proposes conceptualized, structured, and meaning-oriented pedagogical approaches. Future research may further verify the effectiveness of these instructional models through teaching experiments and quantitative analysis.

References

Danica, S. (1978). *Interpreting for international conferences*. Washington, D.C.: Pen and Booth.

Daniel, G. (1995). *Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Liu, H. P. (2001). *Interpreting skills: Cognitive science and the inferential approach to interpreter training*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation.

Wen, N. F. (2008). A cognitive study of consecutive interpreting notes. *Chinese Translators Journal, 3*.

Xiao, L. (2018). A study on the relationship between consecutive interpreting notes and cognitive load. *Shanghai Journal of Translators, 2*.

Zhong, W. H. (2007). *Interpreter training: Models and methods*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.