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Exploring Students' Views on Note-Taking during Interpreting Tasks

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Abstract: Note-taking is largely considered an important support tool for performance during consecutive interpreting. Thus, note-taking is commonly taught as an aid to memory within interpreter training programmes. In order to research students' views towards note-taking, a survey was conducted using a semi-structured group interview with a small group of Masters' students. A set of questions with follow-up probes was administered to participants, further analysed thematically. The study explores the learner's perspective, focusing on students' attitudes towards note-taking strategies, their confidence in using symbols and the main cognitive demands they experience during interpreting tasks. Findings reveal several key patterns, ranging from confidence issues to variations between taught conventions and actual practice. The insights from this study may inform future, larger-scale research on interpreting pedagogy and note-taking competence.

Keywords: note-taking, consecutive interpreting, cognitive load, interpreting pedagogy, interpreter training

1. Introduction

Note-taking has long been viewed as a central component of consecutive interpreting, functioning as a key support for memory, comprehension, and the reconstruction of meaning (Gile, 1995; Rozan, 2002; Gillies, 2005; Yenkimaleki, 2015). This is apparent in the large number of works focusing on note-taking, a trend noticed by Gile as early as 1995 (1995, 182). Subsequent pedagogical work has reinforced the essential role of note-taking, providing techniques and recommendations for the multiple cognitive processes involved in interpreting, as well as the smaller subskills

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involved in note-taking (Gillies, 2005; Albl-Mikasa, 2008; Pöchhacker, 2016; Chen, 2016, 2017; Vu & Bui, 2025).

Due to the generally high cognitive load involved in interpreting, training programmes emphasise the coordination of the underlying cognitive processes (Gile 1995, 2021; Şimon & Stoian, 2017). Gile (2021) described this act as the "tightrope hypothesis" and noticed that the cognitive difficulty of interpreting leads to heightened risk of lapses in attention when working close to "maximum capacity". He also noted the fact that students often make blatant language errors during interpreting tasks, despite their fluency outside of class (Gile, 2021).

Since note-taking, in a sense, adds yet another activity to an already strained cognitive system, it has been suggested that the act of taking notes may interfere negatively with listening, particularly in the case of beginner interpreters (Zhou & Dong, 2024). This can prove rather counterproductive, since note-taking "aims at keeping the processing effort as low as possible" (Kohn & Albl-Mikasa, 2002).

Approaches to note-taking tend to focus on the importance of capturing ideas rather than words (Kohn & Albl-Mikasa, 2002; Yenkimaleki, 2015), considered by Rozan (2002) to be one of the seven principles of note-taking. According to Kalina (2000, 10), no general convention has been established regarding note-taking in consecutive interpreting, stressing the importance of further empirical studies examining different pedagogical methods and their level of success.

As Kohn and Albl-Mikasa (2002) succinctly described it:

> The primary purpose of a notation text is to bring back to its own producer, the memory of the source text, i.e. to help her reconstruct and reactivate the textual meaning (mental model) that was constructed in the process of source text comprehension. In this sense, a notation text is an ancillary text which depends for its raison d'être on the source text. (Kohn & Albl-Mikasa, 2002, 266)

Previous research on note-taking discussed technical aspects of note-taking, such as symbol use, time durations, language choices, and interpreting quality (Chen, 2016, 2017; Hanusiak, 2021). However, limited attention has been given to the individual experience of trainees and the way they cope with the cognitive complexity of note-taking during interpreting classes.

Against this background, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to examine students' attitudes towards different note-taking strategies and their efficiency during consecutive interpreting training. It foregrounds the learner's experience through a semi-structured group interview with Masters' level students, aiming to reveal some of the cognitive and psychological factors that might affect interpreting performance and confidence. The interview was analysed around the following research objectives:

RO1. To examine students' attitudes towards note-taking conventions,

RO2. To investigate students' confidence in the use of symbols and note structures,

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RO3. To explore students' perceptions of the cognitive demands associated with note-taking during interpreting tasks.

3. Literature review

The supportive role of note-taking in consecutive interpreting has been discussed in interpreting research for decades. In earlier theoretical works (Rozan, 2002; Seleskovitch, 1975; Gile, 1995), note-taking was regarded as an aid to memory and meaning reconstruction. Gile (1995, 178-179) integrated note-taking as a key step in the first phase of consecutive interpreting. In her "deverbalisation model", Seleskovitch (1975) argued that interpreters should focus on understanding and deverbalising the source message before noting only essential information, while Rozan (2002) proposed a set of principles and strategies meant to maximise efficiency and aid recall.

In his Effort Models, Gile (1995, 2021) places particular emphasis on the limited cognitive resources that an interpreter has to work with (the "tightrope hypothesis"). In terms of consecutive interpreting, Gile (1995, 178) considers note-taking an integral part of the "listening and note-taking phase". According to Yenkimaleki (2015, 57), "note-taking plays a crucial role in interpreting since it prevents the interpreter from overloading his memory". Similarly, Prágerová (2012, 161) describes the note-taking process as overlapping with the listening one. Researchers in interpreting studies largely agree that note-taking is one component of a complex set of skills needed for successful performance (Kalina, 2000; Prágerová, 2012; Yenkimaleki, 2015; Pöchhacker, 2016).

Among the numerous aspects related to note-taking, studies have examined the linguistic aspects of notation systems (Kohn & Albl-Mikasa, 2002; Ye, 2023), the differences in notation language choice between beginner and expert interpreters (González, 2012; Hanusiak, 2021), different notation systems and symbol use (Chen, 2017; Wang & Wu, 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Zhou, 2023) and the relationship between note-taking and consecutive interpreting quality (Zhou & Dong, 2024). Chen's (2016, 19) review points out the importance of investigating note-taking among trainees, especially aspects related to cognitive load: "understanding the benefits and challenges of the note-taking technique in consecutive interpreting tasks is the first, but critical step to improving the consecutive interpreting assignments".

In training contexts, Marani & Tabrizi (2018) investigated the views of both students and teachers regarding note-taking in consecutive interpreting. More recently, Phuong et al. (2023) reported generally positive student perceptions of note-taking during consecutive interpreting assignments, as well as challenges related to skill level and cognitive load. Similar results have been observed in a study exploring interpreting difficulties among language students, alongside psychological factors such as mental exhaustion (Vu & Bui, 2025). Recent research has also advocated for the adoption of technological tools in interpreter training, such as tablet-based note-taking (Wang et al., 2023).

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Although previous studies have established the pedagogical value of note-taking, research focusing on students' views still remains rather limited. As the studies mentioned above suggest, additional research might be needed in how trainees view, use, and adapt note-taking strategies in order to gain better understanding of training needs and support the development of more efficient, updated pedagogical methods.

2. Research methodology

This study uses an exploratory qualitative research design with the purpose of identifying Masters' students' views towards note-taking during interpreter training. This approach was considered appropriate due to the study's emphasis on personal experience, cognitive difficulties, and individual adaptation.

The data was collected through a semi-structured, small-scale group interview, which allowed participants to describe their experience in detail and interact. The interview was structured as follows: three questions for each research objective, followed by probes meant to encourage participants to clarify their statements and offer examples.

The participant group consisted of seven Masters' students enrolled in the Translation, Interpreting and New Technologies programme at the Faculty of Communication Sciences within Politehnica University of Timișoara. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. Participants were informed that the discussion would be audio-video recorded for research purposes, anonymised, and used entirely within the scope of this study. Although the participants were enrolled in the same programme, they declared varying levels of familiarity and experience with interpreting practice. Two participants reported some volunteer interpreting experience outside the classroom, while the other participants reported solely academic experience.

The interview took place online, on Microsoft Teams, on April 30th, 2026, and was approximately ninety minutes long. This format facilitated participation outside formal classroom activities and enabled audio-video recording. The recording was further transcribed, allowing thematic analysis through which the main themes were identified. Furthermore, the moderator encouraged open discussion and emphasised that there were no "correct" or "incorrect" answers, as the study aims to explore personal perspectives rather than evaluate performance.

Although the interview guide was organised around predefined thematic areas and follow-up probes, the discussion evolved flexibly according to participants' responses. Therefore, the findings were organised thematically rather than according to interview questions.

4. Research results and discussion

A data-driven analysis of the interview transcript resulted in four key themes: (1) Note-taking as a highly individualised process, (2) Tension between taught conventions and actual practice, (3) Unstable confidence, and (4) Cognitive load as

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the central constraint in note-taking. Taken together, these themes account for how the interviewees navigate the demands of note-taking within consecutive interpreting tasks.

4.1 Note-taking as a highly individualised process

The participants consistently described note-taking as highly customised and evolving. The strategies introduced during training were viewed as a "useful starting point", though students repeatedly emphasised the personal nature of their note-taking process, which were shaped by their own processing styles and practical limitations. This supports previous research describing note-taking as an inherently individualised process; Kohn & Albl-Mikasa (2002, 257) have even called it an "individualised language", while Phuong's (2023, 18) study found a high percentage of students who admit to taking notes according to their own experiences.

All participants rejected the idea of a single "correct" approach to note-taking. Instead, they described it as a process of developing a personal system over time, as they gain more experience. As one participant noted, note-taking "generally depends from interpreter to interpreter". Another described it as "a bit like hieroglyphics" understandable mainly to themselves, which aligns with the observation made by Kohn & Albl-Mikasa (2002, 257), who compared consecutive interpreting excerpts with hieroglyphics. This view was reinforced by the observation that learners prioritise different types of information depending on their processing styles: "for some people it might be easier to remember numbers and names and not additional information or vice versa".

Furthermore, participants mentioned the perceived instability of their own systems. They reported that their note-taking practices were constantly evolving and changing. As one participant explained, "my vocabulary of hieroglyphics… always changes", while another stated that their system "really depends on what's easier… in that moment". This suggests that, at this level of training, note-taking is not automatised, but remains an adaptive and context-dependent process.

Interestingly, the participants that had a minimal level of professional interpreting experience reported more frequent use of symbols, while the other participants mentioned a tendency to stick to abbreviations. One participant described attempting to use symbols but ultimately "completely forgot the meaning" during delivery, leading them to rely instead on abbreviations or partial phrases. This might be due to the difference in experience and task difficulty between true interpreting situations and classroom exercise; the students who preferred symbols had faced real, high-pressure interpreting situations with time constraints that forced them to prioritise speed and had had more time to automatise their note-taking process. Conversely, students with only classroom experience agreed that teachers sometimes tried to help them by replaying sections of speech or providing shorter portions of speech during practice. This contrast seems to affirm Gile's (1995, 182) perspective on symbol usage in note-taking:

BUPT

> The basic question is how to reduce processing capacity and time requirements of note-taking while maintaining the efficiency of notes as memory reinforcers. From this angle, symbols and abbreviations are logically good solutions provided they have been fully mastered by the interpreter (otherwise, retrieving them from one's memory for writing and decoding purposes may be capacity-consuming). The much decried idea of learning a set of symbols rather than making them up on the spur of the moment may therefore have distinct advantages. (Gile, 1995, 182)

Zhou (2023, 367) agrees as well, noting that "using source language is more accessible for interpreters to understand compared with the target language based on the different levels of mastery of language".

Conversely, the findings appear to contradict the conclusions found in the Iranian context by Marani & Tabrizi (2018, 133), who noticed that professional interpreters "rarely used symbols in their notes and wrote words in letters, mostly in full forms in target language in particular". Furthermore, the authors (Marani & Tabrizi, 2018, 133) advocate for proper academic instruction among interpreters in order to prevent errors, facilitate the note-taking process, and mitigate the memory problem.

These findings suggest that note-taking instruction may benefit from more realistic interpreting scenarios and role-play activities meant to simulate the high-stakes environment of a real-life interpreting assignment.

4.2 Tension between taught conventions and actual practice

Although participants acknowledged the usefulness of note-taking conventions introduced during training, they consistently described a gap between these systems and their actual practice. Conventions were generally perceived helpful only as starting points that provide a basic framework. These findings appear to confirm the conclusions of a study conducted by Marani & Tabrizi (2017, 133-146), which found that professional Iranian interpreters who had received no formal interpreting training "took notes based on their experiences irregularly rather than the rules and principles".

As for principles, several were questioned or rejected. For example, at this stage of training, the recommendation to take notes in the target language was widely perceived as impractical, as it was seen to increase the already significant cognitive load and affect flow. As one participant noted, attempting to translate while listening "takes away attention", making it more difficult to keep up with the speaker ("you lose momentum of what is being said"). Instead, participants overwhelmingly preferred to note information in the source language and translate it during delivery of the interpretation. This preference for source language notes supports a study carried out by Hanusiak (2021), who outlined the pros and cons of both choices:

> Both these approaches have valid grounds for recommendation: the advocates of noting in the SL may claim that this is less of a cognitive burden for the interpreter to simply write down the pieces of information as they are being heard, but, at the same

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> time, it requires more effort while performing the interpretation itself, as this means transferring the SL notes into the TL oral output. (Hanusiak, 2021, 52)

A study by Zhou & Dong (2024) found that as interpreting experience increased, interpreters tended to shift from noting in the source language to noting in the target language, confirming earlier findings of González (2012) and highlighting the importance of experience and continued training. In this sense, since "note-taking aims at keeping the processing effort as low as possible" (Kohn & Albl-Mikasa, 2002) and "writing notes in the target language theoretically requires more processing capacity than writing them in the source language" (Gile, 1995, 182), source language notes could serve as a way to preserve cognitive capacity, particularly in the case of interpreting trainees.

Similarly, structural conventions such as vertical or diagonal note-taking layouts were often abandoned. Participants reported that these techniques either slowed them down or proved difficult to recall during interpretation.

Importantly, a number of divergent interpreting practices were mentioned, which the participants framed as "unconventional". For example, speech-to-text technology was called a "lifesaver" during fast speeches. Participants recalled searching for unknown terms on an internet browser when time allowed it, or taking pictures of presentation slides and consulting them during the interpreting task.

Despite these adaptations, conventions were not dismissed entirely. As mentioned earlier, participants recognised their value as an initial framework that helps structure learning. As one participant noted, conventions serve as "a basis… from which you can nurture further". For instance, participants stressed the importance of procuring relevant documentation before an interpreting assignment in order to ensure familiarity with the terms, a convention taught during training. However, note-taking in particular was ultimately framed as a result of practice and personal adaptation over time, rather than adherence to predefined systems.

4.3 Unstable confidence

Participants reported generally low and fluctuating levels of confidence in their note-taking abilities, particularly related to the use of symbols and structured notation. Confidence was described as highly dependent on situational and personal factors such as task complexity, concentration, and familiarity with the topic.

Several participants explicitly stated that they felt "not confident at all", particularly because their note-taking systems were still evolving. The lack of consistency in symbol use and structure contributed to uncertainty, as participants were not always confident that they would correctly interpret their own notes. Even those who reported some degree of confidence believed that it was limited to a few specific elements, such as a small set of familiar symbols, or using short abbreviations that may or may not be recalled during the interpretation. These findings align with Phuong's (2023, 18) study, which found that a small majority of the students within the sample found it difficult to understand their own notes.

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A recurring factor affecting confidence was the loss of focus during tasks. Participants described moments in which their attention would waver, leading to missed information and increased anxiety. As one participant noted, “the moment I lose focus, I lose a few words”, which affects confidence in both their notes and their performance. Similarly, encountering unfamiliar terminology or complex ideas could disrupt concentration, causing participants to fixate on a single item while missing subsequent information.

Overall, many of the concerns voiced by the participants seemed to revolve around a “fear of the unknown”, or rather, the unpredictable outcomes that might occur during interpreting tasks. According to the participants, these factors range from aspects under the trainee’s control, such as distraction and unfamiliar terminology, to external aspects such as rapid speech, all associated with anxiety and loss of confidence. This supports Al-Ali’s (2025, 1779) findings, who noted the fact that “the delivery phase creates self-doubt at differing intensities for most of the students, through which their performance suffers”.

These findings suggest that confidence in note-taking is closely tied to emotional factors and level of experience. This is unsurprising, since the participants were Masters’ students with overall minimal interpreting experience both inside and outside the classroom. Generally speaking, the issues pointed out by the students could be improved through further training focused on pre-interpreting preparation, flexibility, and realistic simulation of interpreting situations. Given the level of technological literacy of younger interpreting trainees, the time aspect could also be improved by introducing digital note-taking early on in the training process, as recommended by Wang et al. (2023, 17), who considered it an “inevitable trend” in the interpreting industry.

4.4 Cognitive load as the central constraint in note-taking

Across all discussions, participants consistently framed note-taking within the broader context of cognitive load, which seemed to be the most significant factor influencing both the strategies they used and their performance. Although the interview questions were centred around note-taking, participants repeatedly emphasised the difficulty of managing multiple simultaneous processes, including listening, understanding, writing, and anticipating upcoming information. Participants mentioned instances of “losing momentum”, “ears turning off” or struggling with “hand-ear coordination”. This finding supports cognitively oriented research in interpreting studies, which emphasises the difficulty of managing multiple cognitive processes at once (Gile, 1995; Pöchhacker, 2016).

Time pressure was identified as a critical constraint. Participants highlighted the difficulty of keeping up with the speakers, as well as heightened anxiety for upcoming real-world interpreting situations in which repetition or clarification would not be possible. One participant’s cynical note stands out: “no one is going to wait for you as an interpreter”. External factors such as fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and

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complex subject matter increased cognitive exertion and overwhelm, often forcing participants to resort to the less conventional methods mentioned in section 4.2.

Participants also described the challenge of coordinating auditory input with manual note-taking, referring to the need for "hand-to-ear coordination". A similar concept has been studied via pen recording (Chen, 2017). So, Chen (2017, 11) named this concept the "ear-pen span", defining it as "the time span between the moment a speech is heard (end of sound) and the moment it is written down in notes (start of pen)". In situations of self-reported better "hand-to-ear coordination", students mentioned occasionally being able to predict incoming units of speech based on previously processed units. Once again, the findings are in line with Chen's (2017, 12) study, which indicated moments of "negative ear-pen span".

In response to these constraints, participants described a range of adaptive strategies, including simplifying notes, prioritising key information (such as numbers, terms, and names), and deliberately omitting less important details. Most interviewees also reported relying on the "less conventional" means mentioned earlier, namely speech-to-text applications, digital devices instead of paper, photographs of presentation slides and impromptu internet searches.

5. Conclusion

The study employed a semi-structured group interview with Master's students to fulfil the following research objectives:

RO1. To examine students' attitudes towards note-taking conventions;

RO2. To investigate students' confidence in the use of symbols and note structures;

RO3. To explore students' perceptions of the cognitive demands associated with note-taking during interpreting tasks.

It was found that students had an ambivalent and selective attitude towards note-taking conventions, choosing those that are theoretically easier to employ by beginner interpreters. Their confidence levels were overall low, owing in part to the lack of real-world interpreting experience and dissatisfaction with their unstable notation systems. Cognitive load emerged as the most significant issue, confirming cognitively-oriented research in the field (Gile, 1995; Pöchhacker, 2016; Seleskovitch, 1975; Prágerová 2012; Yenkimaleki, 2015; Zhou & Dong, 2024).

Together, the findings suggest that note-taking instruction may benefit from a more learner-centred pedagogical approach and a stronger focus on simulations of real-life interpreting assignments. While conventions remain important as foundational frameworks, the results indicate that students ultimately construct their own, highly customised systems based on their experience, cognitive capacity, and contextual limitations. The development of more sustainable note-taking practices during interpreter training might be supported by a greater emphasis on adaptability, cognitive load management, and real-life interpreting conditions.

Finally, the exploratory nature and small scale of this pilot study limit the generalisability of the findings. However, the detailed nature of the group discussion

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provided valuable insight into the ways interpreting students utilise and adapt note-taking in practice. As there is currently insufficient empirical evidence on note-taking to draw conclusions on the most efficient training methods, future research on note-taking through further interviews and questionnaires with larger samples of students is needed.

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