An Empirical Study of the Influence of Sight Translation Skills on Consecutive Interpretation

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Abstract

Sight translation is a mixed translation form in which the source language is input in written form and the target language is output in spoken form. Sight translation has received increasing attention in recent years, and its research directions have become more systematic and diversified. These studies generally focus on theoretical qualitative research, and there are still few empirical studies on relationships between sight translation techniques and consecutive interpretation. This article utilized empirical research methods and conducted a group study to compare the interpretation performance of student translators who completed the sight translation course with students who only took the interpretation course. The research found that the application of sight translation skills is helpful for consecutive interpretation training. According to the analysis of the results of the consecutive interpretation test, it was found that proper training in sight translation does not impede the consecutive interpretation training of beginners. Instead, it has a positive impact on students’ comprehension and fluency in consecutive interpretation, particularly in terms of fluency.

Keywords

Sight translation, empirical studies, interpretation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Thesis

Sight translation has been regarded as a basic technique for simultaneous interpretation, mainly as an aid. However, whether sight translation can be introduced into undergraduate consecutive interpretation courses has always been controversial. The vast majority of scholars believe that the use of sight translation skills promotes interpretation training and is an important auxiliary training method. Sight translation is helpful for consecutive interpretation training, and has a positive impact on students’ sense acquisition and fluency in consecutive interpretation (Xu Hui, 2019). However, some scholars believe that sight translation faces a greater risk of interference than simultaneous and consecutive interpretation, because the direct presentation of source language words and sentences can easily bind the translators, which is not conducive to breaking away from the language shell and interpreting the meaning conveyed by the characters (Gile, 1995). With the rapid development of China’s economy and the increasing foreign exchange, the demand for sight translation in the workplace is gradually growing. Sight translation should become one of the future workplace qualities of undergraduates. However, most of the undergraduate interpreting courses for English majors in China’s colleges and universities only include consecutive interpretation, which fails to combine the training of sight translation with interpretation.
1.2 Value of the Experiment

By observing the undergraduate interpreting courses, the author has found that training of sight translation in the classroom has a significant effect on consecutive interpreting teaching, and more directly, on improving the students’ consecutive interpreting ability. The author observed the sight translation training experiments to find out where the student translators had improved their consecutive interpreting skills and summarize the practical methods to help more students improve their own consecutive interpreting skills through this training. To this end, this article attempts to obtain relevant data through empirical research to reveal the relationship between sight translation skills and consecutive interpretation training, providing an objective basis for further sight translation research.

2. Theoretical Basis

In this section, several main aspects of sight translation theory will be discussed. It will begin with the definition and features, then the skills of sight translation, and at last, the studies on sight translation training. This section will present a brief structure of sight translation theory, which will guide the conduction of the later experiment.

2.1 Definition and Features

Lambert (1994) used to describe sight translation as “the process of turning the word information of some specific language into another language by dictation”. Since sight translation involves reading and speaking simultaneously, he believes it can be defined as “a special form of translation and a variant of interpretation. Agrifoglio (2004) reckoned it as “a special translation form between translation and interpretation”.

The main feature of sight translation lies in the input of information. Firstly, different from interpretation, the source language of sight translation is in the form of written language, which means the materials tend to be more complex and literary. Secondly, reading, the sense of receiving information from sight translation is also different from hearing, which is used in interpretation. In this case, the pace of the information process can be controlled in sight translation for the translator can pause or even reread when confronting difficult sentences. But in interpretation, the process is unidirectional and irreversible.

2.2 Skills of Sight Translation

Due to its features and differences from translation and consecutive interpretation, strategies adopted in sight translation practice are also characteristic. This part will introduce several kinds of skills of sight translation, which focus on the challenges that occur in different aspects of the information process. These skills will also be used as references in this experiment to judge the performance of student translators.

2.2.1 Segmentation and Information Splitting

Sentence segmentation and information splitting refer to the appropriate segmentation of sentences with concentrated information, which shall be in accordance with the semantic and logical relationship of the original language. The information should be sorted out and translated then (Chen Jing, 2011). In this way, the long sentence with relatively concentrated original information can be divided into several short sentences and translated respectively to share the excessive information load and prevent missing information.

Example 1: I come before you humbled by the responsibility that the American people have placed upon me, mindful of the enormous challenges of our moment in history, and determined to act boldly and collectively on behalf of justice and prosperity at home and abroad. (Li Xin, 2016)

Version 1: 我怀着美国人民赋予我的责任站在你们面前,铭记历史上遇到的各项挑战,决定代表全国和全世界的正义和繁荣勇往直前,共同奋进。(Li Xin, 2016)

Version 2: （1）我来到大家面前,（2）肩负重任,（3）这是美国人民赋予我的责任,（4）铭记历史上遇到的各项挑战,（5）决心勇往直前,（6）上下一心,（7）将正义和繁荣带到全国甚至全世界。

In this example, both of the translations are right. The translation 1 followed the principle of translation and adjusted the structure and order of the sentence to make it more elegant. But in sight translation, interpreters are required to...
translate by the order of the sentence. So, the long and complex sentences should be divided into smaller ones to release the burden of processing. In this case, a paragraph of three sentences is divided into seven sentences in Chinese.

2.2.2 Syntactic Linearity
Syntactic linearity refers to translation in accordance with the order of the components of the original sentence, with as little or no adjustment to the sentence pattern as possible (Chen Jing, 2011). It can help reduce the memory burden of student translators and ensure smooth translation and rhythm. In practice, two skills can be adopted:

(i) Conversion of Part of Speech
When translating the original language into the translated language, the part of speech of the original word is changed. For example, nouns become verbs, adjectives become nouns, and preposition phrases become verb phrases (Chen Jing, 2011).

(ii) Sentence Conversion
On the premise of keeping the content of the sentence unchanged, the skill of active and passive conversion, conversion between positive and negative, and some special sentence patterns such as the formal subject sentence composed of “It” can help translators to translate (Chen Jing, 2011).

Example 2: Of all the burning problems to be dealt with by this assembly, one of special significance for us, and one whose solution we feel must be found first—so as to leave no doubt in the minds of anyone—is that of peaceful coexistence among states with different economic and social systems (Li Xin, 2016).

Version 1: 在这次会议所有亟待解决的问题中，有一个问题对我们来说十分关键，即虽然经济和会体制不尽相同，各国都要和平共处，必须先找到该问题的解决方案，大家心中的疑虑才能消除。

Version 2: 在这次会议所有亟待解决的问题中，有一个问题对我们来说十分关键，我们必须先找到这个问题的解决办法，才能消除大家心中的疑虑。那就是：各国之间应和平共处，尽管各国经济和社会体制不尽相同。

In this example, Version 1 processed the paragraph by translation. In Version 2, the order of the sentence should be consistent with the source language. However, since the front sentence was completed, “那就是” was used to start another sentence and link the front sentence. Therefore, consistency and integrity can be achieved in sight translation.

2.2.3 Reorganizing Information
Reorganizing information refers to breaking the structure of the original sentence while translating according to the standard of the source language. Different from the complicated or large-scale adjustments in the translation process, the reorganization information of sight translation only makes necessary adjustments (Chen Jing, 2011). When encountering a long sentence with a complex structure, the translator should quickly find the main sentence, adjust the word order, and flexibly deal with other additional structures that are unexpected by the main body. Appropriate methods such as adding and deleting words, changing parts of speech, changing voice, etc., can ensure the meaning of the sentence is smooth. If reorganizing information and syntactic linearity can be combined, the information in the source language can be guaranteed to be complete and logically coherent (Chen Jing, 2011).

Example 3: The discovery supports Yecheng’s status as a center of Buddhism and culture in the northern part of China during the late Northern Qi Dynasty.

Version 1: 该发现佐证了北齐末年的邺城是中国华北的佛教和文化中心。

Version 2: 该发现佐证了邺城作为佛教和文化中心的地位，也就是华北地区的佛教和文化中心，而那时，中国正处在北齐末年。

In version 1, the structure of the sentence was carefully adjusted to be smooth and concise. But in sight translation, such a process can’t be done quickly for there were several sense groups in the latter part. So the long sentence was divided into three sentences connected by “也就是”, “而那时”.

2.2.4 Adding and Deleting
Adding and deleting words or information refers to expressing the original language information in a way that is more
in line with the habit of the target language. Its purpose is to make the information and intentions expressed in the original text more intuitive, so that the translation can be better understood and accepted, and the proper use of these two techniques has a positive effect on the translator’s language skills and cultural accumulation.

Two aspects are included in adding. The first is the language level. Sometimes it is necessary to supplement the omitted components of the original syntax according to the habit of the source language. The second is the information level. Because the two languages are restricted by many factors such as politics, culture, professional background, and on-site situation, translators sometimes need to make appropriate explanations or supplements in the translation so that the target language audience can better understand the information (Chen Jing, 2011).

Example 4: She expresses her hope that the youth in China and the US will understand each other better.

她表达了她的希望, 希望(即)中美青年能更好地了解彼此。

The deletion of information also includes two aspects. The first is the language level. The fixed collocations and structures that exist in the original language do not need to be translated verbatim in the translated language. The second is the information level. If the explanatory information that appears in the original language is well-known. It can also be omitted appropriately (Chen Jing 2011).

Example 5: 两岸实现 “大三通” 象征着两岸关系迈入新的历史时期。(Shi Longrui, 2013)

The opening of the “Three Direct Links” across the Taiwan Strait symbolizes a new era in Cross-Strait relations.

2.3 Review of Studies on Sight-Translation Training

As a transitional and supplementary course for simultaneous interpretation courses, sight translation training must first start with sight-reading interpretation, which is grasping the three central links of ”Reading”, ”Translation” and ”Speaking” in training (Zhao Ying, 2014). In the initial stage of sight translation training, translators should first read the speech carefully, clear the language barriers, and then perform the reading and interpretation. After a period of training, translators should gradually reduce the pre-translation preparation time, and finally, they can interpret after picking up the text, preparing for simultaneous interpretation without drafts.

Reading is the main method of information input. The level of reading ability determines the quality of information input. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the training of reading skills in sight translation training. The training of reading skills can be learned from general reading skills, namely extensive reading, careful reading, and fast reading. Intensive training in reading can enable translators to grasp the essence of the article in the shortest time and master more textual information.

”Translation” is the core of the sight translation training model, which mainly starts from three levels: sentence pattern, text, and memory. Yang Chengshu (2005) believes that sight translation in the interpreting course is to expand the field of knowledge, be familiar with the types of bilingual texts and common sentences, and cultivate the skills of sentence segmentation. ”Expanding knowledge” and ”Familiarity with text types” are the basis of all forms of interpretation activities. Different from consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting, the pre-translation preparation for sight translation is relatively sufficient. Students are able to pay attention to the parallel texts between English and Chinese in-sight translation, and they are familiar with some applied sentence patterns. Discourse training in sight translation refers to cultivating students’ overall awareness of discourse analysis, that is, to analyze the text using the logical characteristics of the language to complete the prediction, summary, and information reorganization of the text. In the sight translation process, long-term memory and short-term memory work together. The vocabulary and syntactic knowledge accumulated in long-term memory are the basis of sight translation comprehension, and short-term memory plays an important role in sight translation comprehension and output. Retelling is the most effective training method. In sight translation short-term memory training, retelling exercises can adopt the training process of ”Reading-Retelling” to gradually extend the length of the reading chapter and improve the requirements for retelling details. Such exercises can effectively improve the short-term memory ability of the translator. It not only helps the short-term memory in sight translation but also improves the short-term memory in consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation.

“Speaking” in sight translation mainly reflects the expression of the target language, and it is also the ultimate embodiment of measuring the quality of sight translation. Yang Chengshu (2005) believes that the teaching content of sight
translating includes: sentence segmentation skills for converting written language into spoken language; information supplement skills for converting written language into spoken language; controlling the narrative rhythm; sentence sequence and cohesion skills for complex sentence patterns; coordination with body language; Natural and understandable oral expression skills. Among them, “Controlling the narrative rhythm”, “Cooperating with body language”, and “Natural and understandable oral expression skills” are the focus of expression skills training. The most effective way of expressing training is to simulate real sight translation scenes and use video equipment to capture the status of students during sight translation, and then review them one by one through playback. This can not only create a sense of reality on the spot but also intuitively reflect the state of the translator's expression (Zhao Ying, 2014).

It can be learnt from the above-mentioned training theories that, although many acknowledge that sight translation training is closely related to interpretation, few studies have been conducted to combine the training of sight translation with that of interpretation and make an evaluation. Some scholars hold the view that premature involvement of sight translation to consecutive interpretation may be negative because the direct presentation of source language may bar interpreters from deverbalization and conveying the message. So this paper will conduct such an experiment to verify this point of view.

3. Experiment Design

The design of this experiment includes two parts: parameters and procedures. The parameters are to introduce the key elements that are of great importance to the experiment, including the subject, test cycle, training materials, and translation form. The procedures demonstrate the whole process of the experiment, which was conducted in the real college classroom.

3.1 Experiment Parameters

3.1.1 Subject
The third-year translation major of the School of Foreign Languages, hereinafter referred to as student translator. In this experiment, student translators were divided into two groups, group A were student translators who only attended consecutive interpreting, and group B were student translators who took part in consecutive interpretation and sight translation. Before the experiment, the interpreter test was conducted, and 30 students were selected as the experiment samples based on the level of the two groups of student interpreters, accounting for about two-thirds of the total class size. The interpreting level of the two groups of student interpreters was basically the same.

3.1.2 Test Cycle
A whole semester was a cycle according to the school curriculum. The sight translation course and the consecutive interpretation course were 16 weeks long. The experiment data was collected in class. Through a complete teaching cycle, the student's learning progress could be grasped more comprehensively and their training process from unfamiliar to proficient could be recorded.

3.1.3 Training Materials
China Daily was selected by the instructor as training material. According to Liu Heping (2001), the authenticity of interpreting materials is required to be reflected in three aspects: the factual nature of the subject, the integrity of the speech content, and the pertinence of the subject. Because China Daily covers a wide range of content, basically covering all possible interpretation fields, and the content is more advanced with the times, it has become the best choice for student translators in English-Chinese interpretation training materials.

3.1.4 Training Form
The training model of Group A focused on consecutive interpretation, which included basic consecutive interpretation skills such as memorizing, prediction, sentence analysis, and transition. Given that student interpreters participated in consecutive interpretation training for the first time, sight translation was introduced to Group B two weeks later. English texts were used as materials to reduce the psychological burden of student translators in the initial training. Training in group B was more comprehensive with additional sight translation training operated after consecutive interpretation training. Its purpose is to strengthen their ability on certain aspects of consecutive interpretation (See 3.2.2). After class, student translators of the two groups were required to finish assigned interpretation materials and hand in their recordings weekly. The student translators of group B were assigned additional sight translation exercises.
3.2 Experiment Procedures

3.2.1 Initial Period
During the first class hour, the two groups conducted a unified interpretation test. They were required to use the same interpretation material as the experiment material. The length was required to be between 150-200 words. The English-Chinese interpretation test was performed and the recordings were collected and scored after the test. Through the preliminary test, the author recorded the problems that occurred in the interpretation of student interpreters and analyzed the causes. The recordings were collected in September 2020, and the total duration is about 1.2 hours. Their recordings were evaluated and graded for further contradiction.

In this part, the content of the material was relatively easy and interesting, so that the student translators could get started and enter the context quickly, so as to arouse the enthusiasm of the student interpreter to learn. What’s more, the easy material was also beneficial for them to show their interpretation level, which was good for the later evaluation.

3.2.2 Middle Period
During 2-15 weeks, the author recorded the performance of the interpretation and sight translation of the two groups and recorded the content of the lectures and the teacher’s guidance methods. Questions raised by the student interpreters were recorded, and the recording time was about 3 hours in total.

In this period, student translators in group A received concentrated consecutive interpretation training. For example, the instructor would repeat the consecutive interpretation training by switching the language or doing more exercises about memorizing and note-taking after a consecutive interpretation exercise. Student translators of group B shared the consecutive training with those of group A. However, sight translation skills were introduced to group B when they finished a consecutive interpretation exercise. They were taught to use syntactic linearity when taking notes to strengthen their connectivity of the notes, or, adopt segmentation and information splitting when memorizing sense groups to reduce the memory burden. Then, the instructor would use materials of similar topics and structure to let student translators exercise these new skills.

Through learning how to use sight translation skills in consecutive interpretation of articles of different topics, student translators of group B received more training to segment sentences, improve the accuracy of information splitting, and minimize missing information when reorganizing information.

In the later courses, the teacher answered the feedback questions of in-class interpretation training of the two groups. The teacher not only helped them to consolidate syntactic linearity and other strategies but also shifted the focus from the initial understanding of the original language to the translated language, requiring the student translators to not only maintain the quality of the translated language but also retain the characteristics of the translated language, free from the shell of the original language.

3.2.3 Later Period
During the last class hour, the student translators of groups A and B were tested again, requiring them to use the same interpreting material as the experiment material. The length was required to be between 200 and 250 words. The final test of English-Chinese consecutive interpretation was carried out and the recordings were collected. Those recordings were evaluated and graded as the initial test. Then a table of contradiction between the initial test and the final test was made to provide objective data for the analysis. The total duration was about 1.5 hours.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Data Collection of the Two Tests
There were a total of 40 student interpreters in the two groups, and the recording time was 2.7 hours. 15 people in each group were selected for evaluation in three aspects: sentence segmentation, fluency, and accuracy, and formed into tables. In addition, students’ classroom training recording time is 3 hours, as supplementary material to assist the analysis.

4.2 Analysis of Groups A and B
According to the pre-test analysis, before the student interpreters accepted the concept of sight translation skills, most of their understanding of translation stayed at the writing translation stage. Therefore, they are required to change their translation thinking habits, which cannot be completed in a short time. The improvement of this ability is also difficult to acquire. The author conducted interviews on the three stages of sight translation training. Both the instructor and the
students felt that they went through a major change in translation thinking habits.

Table 1. Average Grades of Test I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Sentence Segmentation</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>77.63</td>
<td>74.38</td>
<td>72.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>77.57</td>
<td>74.55</td>
<td>72.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Average Grades of Test II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Sentence Segmentation</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>80.23</td>
<td>76.65</td>
<td>74.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>82.86</td>
<td>79.29</td>
<td>75.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Average Improvement of the Two Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Sentence Segmentation</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The author found that compared to students of group A, the students of group B can not only basically complete the thinking transition better, but also take care of more small details in the bilingual conversion.

Table 1 shows the grade of the two groups in the pre-test is similar. To ensure the level of the two groups is basically the same, the author chose 15 students in each group for statistics. It can also make the latter contradiction more objective and rule out some invalid materials.

In test II, the average improvement of the subjects of Group A is about 2.4, and Group B is 4.42, which in general indicated that student translators of Group B had made greater progress than group A did. Table 3 shows that the progress of the student translators in Group A was more even, with sentence segmentation improved by 2.6 points, fluency by 2.27 points, and accuracy by 2.33 points. The translators of Group B improved more significantly with sentence segmentation improved by 5.29 points, fluency by 7.74 points, and accuracy by 3.23 points.

In the past 16 weeks’ courses, the 15 student translators in Group B completed combined exercises of consecutive interpretation and sight translation for about 1 to 2 hours while those of Group A did such exercises of consecutive interpretation alone. According to the experiment data during the middle period, after weeks of sight translation training, the student interpreters of Group B continue to accumulate professional terms in a more concentrated practice and understand the content of common topics. Compared with the translators of Group A who only participated in the consecutive interpretation course, the translators of Group B can apply the skills acquired in sight translation training to the practice of consecutive interpretation, so the improvement in fluency and sentence segmentation ability is more obvious.

Example 6: The United Nations advanced the idea of sustainable development // twenty-two years ago // as a way of escaping from this cycle. (Wang Yanqiang, 2012)

During consecutive interpretation, this long sentence was a heavy memory burden for the student translators, so the skill of segmentation should be used to divide this sentence into three sense groups. Both students of groups A and B could notice that. But their performance of processing it was different. In group A, seven of them chose to translate “twenty-two years ago” first but then failed to translate “as a way of escaping from this cycle” for lack of connective words or forgetting it when choosing to translate “twenty-two years ago” first. 5 of them translated all of the three sense groups but did not add the words to connect the sentences, they put “20 年以前” directly behind “联合国提出了可持续发展的概念”。The rest of them translated it properly. However, the student translators of group B showed a greater awareness of segmentation. 10 of them chose to use connective words like “这是”，“当时” to link these sense groups, which made the translated language more fluent.

Besides the choice of strategies, the total usage of time of Group A is 5 minutes longer than that of Group B, which means there were more pauses occurring in Group A. And it took Group A students longer to process information.
The improvement of accuracy is mainly reflected in the accumulation of specific vocabulary and expressions, which is involved in both interpretation courses and sight interpretation courses. So there is not much difference in the degree of progress.

However, due to the short training time for sight translation, sight translation skills that are difficult to master were still their weak points, and it was difficult to apply theory into practice. Most student interpreters put theory and practice in a state of separation. Although the strategy could be applied occasionally in the output process, it was still difficult to implement habitually.

5. Conclusions

Through the above analysis and discussion of the experiment results, we can draw the following conclusions:

In general, sight interpretation training is helpful for consecutive interpretation training. The analysis of the results of the comparison test shows that appropriate sight translation training does not hinder beginners’ consecutive interpretation training, nor does it affect their mastery of skills. On the contrary, it can promote the improvement of the level of consecutive interpretation. Therefore, the proper integration of the training content of sight translation skills into the courses of English majors in ordinary colleges and universities can not only improve the level of students’ consecutive interpretation but also provide more qualified talents to the interpretation market in the future.

Sight translation training has a positive impact on students’ sense acquisition and fluency in consecutive interpretation, with the greatest impact on fluency, followed by sentence segmentation. It shows that sight translation skills training can effectively help beginners change the conventional translation thinking mode, that is, look at translation from meaning, rather than from language, which is conducive to sense acquisition in consecutive interpretation training. The improvement of fluency is beneficial to the improvement of the target language in the consecutive interpretation.

Although the information reorganization and integration skills have not improved significantly compared to Group A, they are the skills that students think they value the most. It shows that the mastery of this skill requires time and more practice. Teachers are recommended to use sight translation skills in interpreting teaching and train students to consider how to use syntactic linearity from the perspective of meaning and logic. The syntactic linearity technique repairs and integrates broken sentences and incomplete sentences to control the pace of expression of the target language to achieve smooth interpretation (Liu Jin, 2011).

However, there are still some limitations to this experiment. First, the data of the experiment is unstable. For materials on different topics, student translators will have a large gap in their performance due to their different levels of familiarity. Due to the short period of time, it is difficult for the experiment to record their level change trends in detail. There is still room for other related research, such as the best sight translation training period, training duration, effective training methods, etc., all need further research.

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