Book review: note-taking for consecutive interpreting

Andrew Gillies
Note-Taking for Consecutive Interpreting - A Short Course.

Appearing in St. Jerome's "Translation practices explained" series, this book by fellow EU interpreter Andrew Gillies is indeed a short, practical and self-contained course in note-taking for consecutive.

It features 3 parts, each subdivided into chapters, but they could easily have been called "lessons" or "units", ready-for-use in the classroom as they are (which is among other things what makes the book attractive, at least for trainers working out of English). In the author's own words, "Part I is a step-by-step introduction to this note-taking system", each chapter introducing a "technique" or rather a principle of note-taking or a practical component of the system) such as "speech analysis" in chapter 1, "recognising and splitting ideas" in chapter 2, "links" in chapter 4, "verticality", "symbols" and so on. Part II is called "fine-tuning" and contains chapters on more detailed aspects such as "uses of the margin". Part III is a collection of resources including sample speeches and notes, and links to practice material. Each chapter in parts I and II has a brief explanation of the issue at hand, immediately followed by examples and then by practical research tasks and exercises for students.

The book is based on our colleague's extensive experience in training prospective EU interpreters from Poland on the eve of its accession to the EU in 2004. Before setting out the note-taking method itself, the book begins with information on the highly diverse settings in which consecutive is used, including a very realistic account of the importance of consecutive at professional tests in international organisations; many readers who share Andrew's professional background will recognise this function of consecutive as a "gateway" to the profession rather than a skill to be practiced daily once you are in.

Equally realistic is Gillies' approach to the issue of progression in training, especially his suggestion to have beginners practise note-taking from written transcripts before tackling the spoken word (page 11). Followers of the "real interpreting is only concerned with the spontaneously spoken
"school of thought may not like this, but spending time analyzing written texts testifies to a sensible "stop and think" attitude to interpreter training and seems - at least to this reviewer - a healthy reminder of how inextricably related the spoken and the written word are in our organisations.

The book then quite rightly avoids worn-out academic disputes as to the cognitive status of notes, i.e. whether a system for note-taking is in fact a "grammar" in generative terms, whether or not notes constitute a translational "interlanguage" between source-and target text, etc. It simply moves from the assumption that most, if not all, consecutive interpreters do take some kind of notes (despite occasional anecdotes to the contrary sometimes heard in the profession) and that student interpreters should right from the start embrace a note-taking system that saves them "time and intellectual effort" by "offering consistent solutions to frequently occurring problems" (p. 5). Readers interested in theoretical affiliations will hear in the reference to "saving effort" an echo of Gile's idea of interpreting as resource management (in fact Gile is one of the few present-day scholars cited); similarly, the author's idea of note-taking as consistent problem-solving opens the way to a very balanced discussion of automatization (at micro-level) that in fact cools down a well-known theoretical hot potato (pages 7-8).

These initial pages are typical of how Gillies deliberately chooses not to set his chapters within any explicit theoretical framework, and usually refrains from referring to scholarly work on interpreting or language sciences. Occasionally this may cause the more theoretically-minded reader and trainer - including this reviewer, admittedly - to frown, as when an operational distinction between "concepts" and "ideas" (!) is proposed (roughly corresponding, respectively, to "meaning of individual lexical units" and "units of propositional content"), or when the very relevant issue of awareness of structural and rhetorical conventions is brought home to students by referring them to popular speaking guides and toastmasters' websites. However, the frowning is most probably out of place: rhetorical conventions are exemplified convincingly, although not by reference to the obligatory literature on text-types, and using the term "idea" to identify the basic unit of what is talked about in a speech does in fact work, once accustomed to it.

Despite this apparent lack of interest in a theoretical framework, the book is far from being a collection of unrelated pieces of advice and ready-to-use symbols to be learnt by students. A sizeable portion of Part I is dedicated precisely to very "upstream" (not to say abstract) issues such as speech structure (a speech is "a group of ideas in a certain order", page 7, my emphasis) and how to identify the basic units of content in a speech. The relationship between speech structure and note-taking is quite rightly presented as two-way: macro-structure is a cue for note-taking and at the same time practising note-taking according to a well-organised system provides training in identifying structures. The identification of ideas in the speech is presented with a hands-on approach, occasionally with too much detail as when students are instructed to "download the text of a speech into [their] word-processing software, then [...] remove the paragraph marks that were in the original to give us a block of text" (p. 37, my emphasis). Apart from this "collapsing" of the text, this interesting exercise goes on with students having to hit the return key wherever they identify in the text a basic unit of meaning of the theme-rheme type (the "idea" mentioned above). This gives a nice "breakdown" of the original text and beautifully illustrates how not-so-high technology can be used to play with (written) texts and shuffle them around, arguably a key skill for future interpreters.

The rest of the book treats notes in a concise and effective if rather mainstream way, i.e. insisting on vertical layout with hierarchical indents (although the use of less structured "mind maps" is suggested as a preliminary exercise), logical links, moderate use of symbols, a technique to note tense and so on. What is certainly original and what makes the book useful is precisely Gillies' de-mystifying, intuitive approach to discourse analysis and note-taking, together with the idea that note-taking is, ultimately, about analysing speeches if not about scholarly "discourse analysis".
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For further information on the book, see this page on the St. Jerome Publishing website.

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