

IMPORTANCE OF WORKING MEMORY IN SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION

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Simultaneous interpreting presents in the target language, the exact meaning of what is said in the source language while keeping the tone of the speaker.

Simultaneous interpretation (SI), one of the most energy-intensive areas of professional activity, seems impossible at first glance. Speed signal processing and the accuracy of the output result, which professional interpreters demonstrate appear unattainable without long years of training and very strict selection.

No matter how experienced or rookie an interpreter is, all find the job challenging and burdensome. Phelan says that “when an interpreter is working, he or she cannot afford to have a bad day. One bad interpreter can ruin a conference” (2001:4).

“The interpreter needs a good short-term memory to retain what he or she has just heard and a good long-term memory to put the information into context. Ability to concentrate is a factor as is the ability to analyze and process what is heard” (2001:4-5). Many professional interpreters gain significant graduate-level training after a strict selection process which requires proficiency in three or more languages and skills in a range of other cognitive abilities. Working memory – the ability to retain the incoming information for a brief period while maintaining mental operations – has been accepted as a cognitive skill heavily called upon throughout the simultaneous interpretation process. Since the brain’s structure and function are impacted by experience, and working memory is assumed important to interpretation, it has been suggested that simultaneous translators may have better working memory skills than non-interpreters.

There are some works done in this area specifically considering the role WM in simultaneous interpreting process. In her article Barbara Moser puts emphasis on working memory in SI and considers it both structural and functional component. She also states that working memory performs several essential tasks: It stores processed pieces of text (syntactically and semantically, though it is not clear to which extent they are processed). This is the storage function proper. In Moser’s view, working memory is definitely linked to the production as well. The placement of paraphrasing and prediction functions are predicted in working memory excellently over time.

David Gerver conducted an experiment on sequential model of mental processing during interpreting. The model focuses on a system of short-term stores for the different stages of text processing. Gerver assumed that the source text is stored in an input buffer, from where it proceeds for further processing. The input buffer also stores a segment of the input text while the processor is busy with a previous segment.

According to Gerver, the actual text processing is performed in co-operation with long-term memory, which activates the appropriate linguistic units. Gerver assumed that this stage of processing is merely linguistic, and did not consider it any further (Gerver, 1976). The processed material is then ready for output – via an output buffer, where it undergoes optional monitoring.

As it is clear now that one of the tasks of translation activity is memory. As noted by R.K. Minyar – Beloruchev, “Everyone needs memory, but the translator needs it professionally [Minyar – Beloruchev, 1999:50].

Working memory allows for a certain period time to catch the sounds of speech, analyze them and reproduce them in the form of statements. This is a memory for the duration of an activity that has its goals and is determined by its features. Working memory thus retains information until the end of the action, the duration of which may vary.

Although working memory retains information for a brief period, in the end it transfers the input to the long-term memory in which an interpreter can use ready-made phrases in the process of simultaneous interpreting.

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