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## **Teaching Note-Taking to Beginners Using a Digital Pen**

### **1. General introduction**

Everyone working in the field of interpretation and translation has had people asking them how to translate a word at least once. Every single time interpreters and translators have to explain that they do not interpret/translate single words and that a translation depends on the context. The same happens to me when I teach note-taking for consecutive interpreting at Innsbruck University. Students are eager to learn as many symbols as possible. Therefore, they keep asking if there is a symbol for each word that comes up in a speech to be interpreted in class. Students tend to think that knowing and practicing the use of many symbols will automatically make a good consecutive interpreter, as indicated by Willett [1984].

As stated by Gillies [2005], symbols are not to be seen as substitutes for words. The development of a good and solid note-taking technique is quite cumbersome and time-consuming. The same applies to a note-taking lesson. Due to time constraints in class it is not possible to analyse in depth the notes of every single student in order to give feedback, to improve the technique used, to understand what caused problems during

delivery, and above all to find out if a deficient consecutive translation is due to poor notes and if so, what went wrong during the note-taking phase.

Orlando [2010] suggests that using digital pen technology in note-taking training may help concentrate on the process itself. I have tried out the digital pen,<sup>1</sup> following Orlando's approach [2010], so as to verify whether its use in class might be helpful for students as well as for teachers; in particular I concentrated on scenario A with a student (interpreter) and an assessor (student/teacher).

In this brief article I am going to present my own practical experience with the digital pen during note-taking classes for beginners and to concentrate on some aspects that are useful for teaching purposes.

## 2. Description of the digital pen and its features

First of all, the digital pen is quite intuitive; you write with it as if you were holding a traditional pen, even though it is somewhat bigger. In order to use the digital pen, you need a special dot paper notebook. After having taken your notes, you can plug the digital pen to a PC using a micro USB charging cable that comes with the pen. Firstly, however, you have to download the free software,<sup>2</sup> which is intuitive. The plugging of the pen to a PC using the USB charging cable does not take much time and within a couple of seconds you can see the notes appear on the screen of the PC. Thanks to an overhead projector connected to the PC you can project these notes onto the wall and analyse them in detail.

The pen does not only record notes but also the audio of the original speech. By simply clicking on some symbols, you can retrace the note-taking process on the screen, as notes appear at the same speed at which the user of the digital pen took them.

When I use the word *symbol* in this article, I do not refer to the concept of symbol according to Matyssek [1989], i.e. a sign unrelated to the source language SL or the target language TL, but I rather refer to a wider notion, following Gillies' approach [2005]. Gillies [2005] indicates that a symbol is to be considered any useful tool, such as an abbreviation, a picture, a couple of letters or even a single letter, that might be used

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.livescribe.com/it/smartpen/echo/>>, visited on November, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.livescribe.com/it/support/echo/setup/>>, visited on November 2017.

in note-taking for consecutive interpreting. Furthermore, as indicated by Kalina [1998] and Andres [2002], symbols are intended to make the interpreter recall what has been said, although by no means can they replace the interpreter's memory.

### **3. Structure of a note-taking class at Innsbruck University**

During a traditional note-taking class I would ask one or two students to go to the blackboard and to copy their notes from their notebook to the blackboard. This exercise would take up to five minutes. According to my experience the notes drawn by the students on the blackboard tend to be so tiny that students sitting at the back of the classroom cannot see much. In the end this is a waste of precious time. With the digital pen one gains valuable time that can be used for an in-depth analysis of the notes.

I have tried out the digital pen at note-taking classes intended for students at the beginning of the Master's programme in Conference Interpreting at the Institut für Translationswissenschaft in Innsbruck. This approach is not in line with Orlando's research [2010: 82]. The questionnaire filled out by Orlando's students led to the conclusion that 3 out of 5 students preferred to start using the digital pen after having already developed their own note-taking system for a semester and a half. My intention was to introduce the digital pen to beginners and observe if it would be helpful or not. Therefore, I used the digital pen during 3 semesters with a total of 52 students.

#### **3.1. Analysis of the notes**

Students are not always able to tell why a consecutive delivery was not up to standard. They tend to ascribe poor delivery to the difficulty of a given speech in general without distinguishing among several different aspects, including speed, density, accent, difficulty in comprehension of the SL or production in the TL. In other words, they seem to be too stressed to identify the weak link in the chain of mechanisms that work together to deliver a good consecutive interpretation. Thanks to digital pen technology it is possible to observe students' notes from different perspectives.

Firstly, you can analyse several aspects of the notes, such as conjugated verbs. If students wrote down SL verbs with inflectional endings it might mean that they did not reflect upon the meaning of what was being

said, but rather wrote down words they heard without thinking, because they learn to concentrate on subject and verb and they are aware of the fact that they do not need conjugated verbs.

Secondly, the analysis with a digital pen makes it possible to concentrate on the structure of the notes. It might occur that students replicate in the notes the grammatical structure of the SL. If the SL is German, the verb of a subordinate clause is situated in final position. If students copy this structure, it might jeopardise the delivery, since the students' eyes will encounter the verb of the subordinate clause relatively late, after they have already started interpreting the relevant unit. This might create a need of reformulations in order to guarantee that the structure of the TL, which could be completely different from the one of the SL, is respected.

Thirdly, when students finish a notebook and they do not have any space left for their notes, they tend to throw it away. A digital pen can store up to 800 hours of audio which corresponds to several notebooks. This means that students could go back to previous notes and monitor how their note-taking technique has evolved over time. What is more, students learn from other students' notes. They draw inspiration from looking at symbols developed by other students and may decide to use these new symbols. In this sense a note-taking lesson becomes even more interactive.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the language used for note-taking since it might jeopardise the entire note-taking process. Sometimes students stop, get stuck and waste precious time. When discussing notes taken by mean of a digital pen I ask the student why s/he stopped at that precise moment. The reason is often related to the student's wish to annotate the word/concept in the TL and the time needed to think about the appropriate solution in the TL. Here I could observe different approaches to cope with the situation: some decide to wait for the right word to come to their mind and lose time and content of the speech. Some decide to write a word in the TL even though they already know this is not what they were looking for. Others eventually decide to note down the word in the SL.

Rozan [1956] and Matyssek [1989] asserted in their publications that an interpreter should take notes directly in the TL, while Willett [1984] encouraged a method in which the SL is used. As observed by Kirchhoff [1979] and confirmed by Andres [2002], recent studies show that professional interpreters make use of different languages in their notes, namely

words and abbreviations in the TL, SL, as well as in a third language, which is not part of the consecutive exercise. What is more, English tends to be used frequently for being very concise.

Students should be made aware of these recent studies from the very beginning and encouraged to abandon the idea of systematically translating what they hear into the TL. This can lead to a substantial improvement of their notes.

### 3.2. *Décalage*

The analysis took into consideration another aspect that, according to my opinion, tends to be neglected in consecutive interpreting while being of paramount importance in simultaneous interpreting, namely *décalage*.

Thanks to the digital pen you can observe how notes had been taken, counting how many seconds elapsed between the utterance of a piece of information in the original and the student's elaboration of this piece of information into notes. This observation is very useful since students are not always able to tell what went wrong during the note-taking process. You can observe if students needed more time to grasp the meaning, if students wrote something and then discarded it, if they only wrote single words of the original without adapting the notes i.e. maintaining the structure of the SL. *Décalage* tends to get longer with subordinate clauses in German, because students need more time to modify the structure of their notes according to what they heard and understood. Another situation which may result in a long *décalage* is the following: if a German clause starts with an object in the accusative and the student puts it as the subject of the sentence, then s/he realizes that this is wrong, and has to go over the notes again to correct the argument structure. This causes a substantial time loss, and consequently a longer *décalage* and poor notes representing the content of the parts of the speech that follow.

By analysing the *décalage* the teacher and the students can easily find out which parts of the original speech caused more difficulty during the listening, the comprehension, and the elaboration phases of note-taking.

### 4. Conclusions

From the point of view of the above-mentioned aspects, it is worth using the digital pen in note-taking classes even at the beginning of the

term when students still do not know how to take notes and afterwards at mid-term and at the end of the term in order to show students how their technique has evolved over the past weeks.

At the beginning of the term students immediately get the opportunity to analyse their notes deeply. Thanks to video and audio recording students are able to find out in group and/or with the help of the teacher which aspects they should focus their attention on in order to improve their technique over time. Thanks to digital pen technology the teacher can devote more time to an in-depth analysis of the students' notes and students benefit from direct detailed feedback.

In conclusion, the digital pen can be a useful additional component to an innovative note-taking lesson also for beginners.

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching consecutive interpreting comprises the teaching of many different skills, inter alia note-taking. Translation scholars such as Gile [1983], Matyssek [1989], Andres [2002] and Gillies [2005] have drafted a plethora of manuals, books and articles that suggest different rules, structures, detailed symbols and abbreviations for note-taking.

Teachers of consecutive interpreting face the difficulty of analyzing the students' notes, giving direct feedback and personal advice at class, often with very limited time at their disposal. Orlando [2010; 2015] suggests using digital pen technology in note-taking training to concentrate on the process of note-taking itself in order to observe improvements and strategies needed to acquire this skill. Thanks to this technology, teachers and students can reflect upon the reasons why students noted in a certain way and used a particular structure.

This article sets out to describe how this approach has been tested at note-taking classes at Innsbruck University, with particular attention given to the analysis of different aspects of the process. The aim of the article is to demonstrate if a digital pen can be useful in training, what are the main advantages in terms of efficacy of teaching and time efficiency inter alia and if it can be used at the beginning of a note-taking course.

**Key words:** Digital pen, note-taking, teaching methodology, consecutive, décalage

### STRESZCZENIE

#### **Użycie pióra cyfrowego na początkowym etapie nauczania notowania**

Nauczanie tłumaczenia konsekutywnego obejmuje nauczanie wielu różnych umiejętności, m.in. notowania. Badacze przekładu, tacy jak: Gile [1983], Matyssek [1989], Andres [2002] i Gillies [2005], opracowali liczne podręczniki, książki i artykuły, w których proponują rozliczne zasady, struktury, szczegółowe symbole i skróty używane w notacji.

Nauczyciele tłumaczenia konsekutywnego, dysponując ograniczonym czasem, mierzą się z trudnym zadaniem analizy notatek uczniów,

udzielania im bezpośredniej informacji zwrotnej oraz porad lub wskazówek. Orlando [2010; 2015] sugeruje, aby do uczenia notacji wykorzystywać technologię pióra cyfrowego. Jego zdaniem ułatwia to obserwację postępów i strategii potrzebnych do przyswojenia umiejętności notowania. Zastosowanie pióra cyfrowego ułatwia nauczycielom i uczącym się refleksję na temat powodów, dla których studenci notują w określony sposób.

Niniejszy artykuł omawia zastosowanie pióra cyfrowego do nauki notacji w Uniwersytecie w Innsbrucku. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na analizę różnorodnych aspektów omawianego procesu. Celem artykułu jest sprawdzenie, czy pióro cyfrowe jest narzędziem przydatnym w nauczaniu, a w szczególności przedstawienie zalet jego stosowania m.in. w odniesieniu do skuteczności procesu nauczania oraz efektywnego wykorzystania czasu. Poruszono także kwestię zasadności użycia pióra cyfrowego na początkowym etapie nauczania notowania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pióro cyfrowe, notacja, metodyka nauczania, tłumaczenie konsekwentne, décalage