

An Empirical Study of Omissions in Bi-directional English-Chinese Interpretation and Their Coping Strategies*

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Based on an empirical study of Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) students' consecutive interpretation, this paper discusses the types of omissions therein, their causes, and corresponding coping strategies. Results show that time constraint and target language production failure accounted for most omissions in Chinese-English interpretation, while unconscious omissions and comprehension failure in source language constituted the majority of omissions in English-Chinese interpretation, and that omissions were also used as a coping strategy to improve effectiveness mainly in Chinese-English interpretation. It is proposed that prior preparation and some online coping strategies of omissions are emphasized for MTI interpretation teaching.

Keywords: consecutive interpreting, omission, coping strategies

Introduction

Interpreters' omissions in consecutive/simultaneous interpretation have been studied and discussed by researchers such as Barik (1971, 1975), Kopczynski (1980), Winston (1989), Livingston, Singer, and Abramson (1994), Wadensjö (1998), Napier (2004), and Pöchhacker (2004); however, views differ as to omission categories, factors triggering omission, and omission coping strategies.

According to Barik (1975), omissions are not considered as a conscious strategy on the part of the interpreter, but rather as types of failure. Barik (1975) distinguished four types of omissions: skipping, comprehension, delay, and compounding. *Skipping* refers to omission of a single lexical item, for instance, a qualifying adverb which typically will not cause much information loss and will not impact the interpretation process. *Comprehension* refers to omission due to the inability of the interpreter to grasp the sense of a larger unit of the source language (SL) message. *Delay* means that the interpreter lengthens the ear-voice span in order to receive more input and fully understand a certain segment, and thereby lags far behind the SL speaker and leaves out some part. *Compounding* occurs when the interpreter strives to summarize or reformulate a longer fragment by replacing a long segment with a more general one. Out of the four types of omission Barik distinguished in his study, only the skipping omission can possibly be considered in terms of the interpreter's deliberate action.

On the other hand, Livingston et al. (1994) held that omissions do not necessarily lead to a degraded understanding of the SL message. They explained that omissions can be used consciously as part of a strategic

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linguistic process and a strategic decision-making process, and that a conscious decision to omit certain information might be made for two reasons: First, omission of a segment based on the interpreter's estimation of being unable to find an equivalent in the target language (TL); second, omission of an item based on the interpreter's estimation that the item might not be meaningful and comprehensible to the target audience. With regard to conscious strategic omissions, Wadensjö (1998) proposed the notions of "zero renditions" and "reduced renditions" which are defined as "less explicitly expressed information than the preceding 'original' utterance" (p. 107).

Napier (2004, p. 7), through a study conducted on Australian Sign Language (Auslan)/English interpreters in a university lecture, investigates interpreting omissions from the new perspective of metalinguistic awareness. She proposed five categories of omissions: conscious strategic omissions (omissions made consciously to enhance the effectiveness of the interpretation), conscious intentional omissions (omissions due to comprehension failure or an inability to retrieve an appropriate equivalent in the TL), conscious unintentional omissions (omissions resulting from time-lag, when the interpreter decides to wait for more contextual information or depth of meaning, upon receiving the SL message), conscious receptive omission (omissions due to poor sound quality), and unconscious omissions (the interpreter is not aware of the omission and does not recall hearing the particular lexical items).

In order to be informed of omission characteristics among Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) students and to effectively deal with omissions in MTI interpreting training, the authors conducted an empirical study investigating the types of omissions amongst MTI students in terms of both conscious and unconscious omissions, the causes of such omissions, and their corresponding coping strategies.

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects in this study were six MTI postgraduate students, majoring in English Interpretation at Qingdao University. They have similar education backgrounds and had started their interpretation training program for about eight months before they were assigned with interpreting tasks for a group of US postgraduates majoring in tertiary student administration and doing their short internship course via symposiums at Qingdao University.

Task Instrument and Procedure

The tasks comprised E-C and C-E interpreting for six symposiums covering different topics, including freshmen education and management, psychological consultation and service for students, management and service of college student dormitory in China, management of campus security and students' emergency, introduction to Teachers' College and to Student Affairs and Development Center. In each symposium, a key-note speaker from a related department of Qingdao University would deliver a presentation on a certain topic, followed by a question-and-answer session, and a student interpreter was assigned to conduct interpretation for the whole procedure.

This study used observation notes to record each interpreter's performance followed by post-task discussions and retrospective interviews. The observation notes, discussions and retrospective interviews notes thus collected form the database upon which the study conducted analyses and discussions of interpretation omissions. In order to facilitate interpretation, all the six subjects were advised for prior preparation including familiarity with the themes of the conferences by highlighting specific terms, numbers and specific expressions,

consulting glossaries, reference documents and encyclopedias for specific knowledge acquisition, searching other relevant online information, and doing sight interpreting rehearsal.

After each symposium, there was a retrospective session, at which the interpreter recalled his/her performance including both strengths and challenges as well as self evaluation, followed by comments and discussions about their performance with particular reference to their omissions by the supervisor and their peers. Then the researcher interviewed the subject to identify whether they were conscious of the omissions, and the causes of omissions, the coping strategies that they had employed during their interpretation process.

Categorization of Interpreting Omission for Data Analysis

Omissions made by the subjects were determined in terms of sense groups instead of individual words, and were first sorted out by the researcher and then examined by the course supervisor. Based on the sorted data, the interpreting omissions in this study can be classified into the following categories:

(1) Omissions due to production failure: conscious omissions caused owing to the inability to find equivalent words in the TL, leading to the loss of meaning/message in the SL.

(2) Omissions due to comprehension failure: conscious omissions due to a lack of understanding of a lexical item, a concept, or a sentence, leading to a loss of meaningful information.

(3) Omissions to enhance effectiveness: conscious omissions of redundant information like synonyms or repeated information, and of SL information that does not make sense in the target language, usually making the interpretation more concise, explicit, and time-saving.

(4) Omissions due to time constraint: conscious omissions of not very important SL information, like qualifiers, modifiers, and examples, which will, to some extent, cause the loss of meaningful information, but will not affect the understanding of main SL information.

(5) Omissions due to poor note-taking skill: conscious omissions due to unrecognized notes jotted down, lagging notes or even failed notes.

(6) Unconscious Omissions: unconscious omissions due to negligence of some information caused by cognitive overload, fatigue, nervousness, and the speed of the speaker.

Results and Discussion

The total number of omissions in terms of the above categorized types by each subject was collated in Table 1.

Table 1

Total Omissions Made by All Subjects in Both E-C and C-E Interpreting

Subjects	Number of omissions in C-E interpreting	Number of omissions in E-C interpreting	Total omissions
S1	44 (36.1%)	2 (14.3%)	46
S2	26 (21.3%)	2 (14.3%)	28
S3	14 (11.5%)	3 (21.4%)	17
S4	15 (12.3%)	1 (7.1%)	16
S5	11 (9.0%)	3 (21.4%)	14
S6	12 (9.8%)	3 (21.4%)	15
Total omissions	122	14	136

It can be seen from Table 1 that a total of 136 omissions were made by all the six subjects, among which 122 were made in C-E interpreting and 14 in E-C interpreting. This striking number imbalance is mainly due to the fact that, apart from the Q & A stage at which both directions of interpretation were evident, the C-E

interpretation for speaker presentation was the main part of the symposium.

In C-E interpreting, the highest number of omissions (44) was from subject 1, the only subject that made preparation without source text. During the interpreting process he therefore made conscious omissions when he could not find the equivalent words in the TL for the large number of special expressions, like 团支委会 (*tuan zhiweihui*; Branch Committee of Youth League) and 消防逃生演练 (*xiaofang taosheng yanlian*; fire drill). By contrast, subject 5 had the fewest omissions (11), because she got her source text with a familiar topic and also earlier than the others, hence ample time for a full preparation. It is also confirmed from the discussions and interviews that omissions in C-E interpreting are in inverse proportion to familiarity with the topic at issue and time for preparation. Therefore, prior-preparation is of great significance in reducing omissions and rendering interpretation more accurate and faithful.

In E-C interpreting, the number of omissions was relatively quite small, since the postgraduate students of University of Central Arkansas (UCA) only raised about three questions after each presentation. According to subjects' feedback, omissions made in this phase were usually caused by comprehension failure, limited vocabulary, inexperienced note-taking skill, and cultural differences.

Types of omissions in both C-E interpreting and E-C interpreting are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2

Types of Omissions Made by Each Subject in C-E Interpreting

Types of omissions	Subjects						Total omissions
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	
Omissions due to production failure	23	4	1	1	1	4	34 (27.9%)
Omissions due to comprehension failure	4	1	1	0	1	0	7 (5.7%)
Omissions due to time constraint	10	10	6	3	5	5	39 (32.0%)
Omissions due to note-taking skill	4	2	2	2	1	0	11 (9.0%)
Omissions to enhance effectiveness	3	9	4	8	3	3	30 (24.6%)
Unconscious omissions	0	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.8%)
Total omissions	44	26	14	15	11	12	122

Table 3

Types of Omissions Made by Each Subject in E-C Interpreting

Types of omissions	Subjects						Total omissions
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	
Omissions due to production failure	0	0	0	0	0	1	1 (7.1%)
Omissions due to comprehension failure	0	1	3	0	1	1	6 (42.9%)
Omissions due to time constraint	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Omissions due to note-taking skill	0	0	0	1	1	1	3 (21.4%)
Omissions to enhance effectiveness	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unconscious omissions	2	1	0	0	1	0	4 (28.6%)
Total omissions	2	2	3	1	3	3	14

Among the six types of omissions, the omissions to enhance effectiveness is the desirable omission strategy and the omissions due to time-constraint is not desirable but can nevertheless be employed as an expedient coping strategy, while the other four are undesirable omissions.

With the types of omissions in C-E interpreting in Table 2, most common types of omissions amongst the subjects are omissions due to time constraint (32%), omissions due to production failure (27.9%), and omissions to enhance effectiveness (24.6%). Results show that even with prior preparation, the subjects still

could not adequately manage time constraint imposed on interpreters, hence the most common type of omissions. Interestingly, the frequent use of omissions to enhance effectiveness among subjects does demonstrate that they involve a conscious linguistic process of deciding what information is redundant and can therefore be omitted to achieve the effect of “reduced renditions” (Wadensjö, 1998). A careful look at the figures of the second most common type of omissions reveals that the skewed figure of subject 1 actually constitutes 67.6% of the type, which highlights the impact of prior preparation and familiarity of the topic on the performance of interpreters. Nonetheless, the two commonest types of omissions are consistent with those of YUAN’s (2011, p. 36) study in that concerning the impact of directionality on omissions in Chinese-to-English interpreting, the largest proportion goes to omissions caused by production failure and memory lapse (time constraint in this study).

Figures in Table 3 (albeit small) in E-C interpreting, on the other hand, show different directionality of omissions from C-E interpreting. The most noticeable difference is that the lowest percentages of omissions due to production failure, due to time constraint and to enhance effectiveness (7.1%, 0, and 0, respectively) in E-C interpreting are strikingly contrasted with the highest percentages of the same three categories (27.9%, 32%, and 24.6%, respectively), and that, similarly, the highest percentages of omissions due to comprehension failure and unconscious omissions (42.9% and 28.6% respectively) in E-C interpreting are also in sharp contrast with the lowest percentages of the same two categories in C-E interpreting (5.7% and 0.8 respectively). Such a mirror-image contrast may well be explained in terms of the subjects’ proficiency in Chinese and English that they have greater difficulty in using English as a second language in both comprehension and production as compared with their first language, Chinese, hence the contrasting omission types. This finding also supports Bartłomiejczyk’s (2006) view that interpreters are more likely to leave things out when working B language because of the gap between their A and B language in terms of proficiency. Such kinds of “leave things out” in this study are typically manifested as omissions of production failure and time constraint, and omissions to enhance effectiveness in C-E interpreting, and omissions of comprehension failure and unconscious omissions in E-C interpreting.

Gile (1995) postulated that taking notes may pose extra burden upon the interpreters, and that symbols employed by the interpreter during the note-taking process, if not mastered systematically and adeptly, run a high risk of illegibility when interpreting comes into the re-formulation phase, thereby may result in omissions of certain information. It seems that omissions due to note-taking skill in this study occur in both E-C and C-E interpreting without much difference.

Instructional Implications: Coping Strategies of Interpreting Omissions

Coping strategies of interpreting omissions are necessary and useful in the interpreting process, which

imposes a high processing load and certain cognitive constraints (time constraints, text complexity, or SL input rate) on the interpreter who, in order to cope with these constraints, must make use of certain effective interpreting strategies to carry out the task successfully. (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 132)

Based on the results of the study, MTI students are advised to master some practical and useful coping strategies to cope with omissions effectively and to improve their interpreting abilities.

Prior Preparation

Prior preparation is a must for the interpreter to perform any interpreting task, which includes both

short-term and long-term prior preparation. Upon receiving the interpreting assignment, the interpreter should endeavor to consult specialized glossaries, reference documents, and encyclopedias to be familiar with the target speakers and audiences, theme of interpretation, the thematic knowledge, technical terminologies, names, numbers and the like, which usually constitute major barriers for consecutive interpreting (CI) interpreters. Poor or no short-term preparation is often the cause of interpreting omissions or misinterpretation.

In addition, ever-going long-term preparation will empower the interpreter with long-term knowledge build-up, including both bilingual knowledge and extra-linguistic knowledge. The knowledge thus acquired over time will serve as a solid base which can facilitate the interpreter's task with confidence.

Onsite Coping Strategies Based on De-verbalization

Based on the results of retrospective interviews, discussions, and the experiment, several onsite coping strategies under the principle of deverbalization are proposed to avoid omissions and enhance effectiveness. De-verbalization means that instead of focusing on the equivalence of structure, the interpreter should strive to convey the meaning of what the SL speaker says. These strategies include visualization, paraphrasing, compression, and addition.

Visualization. Visualization is described by Seleskovitch (1978) as a "technique used in interpretation to relay a descriptive message", which is "relatively easy to apply provided the described object or a similar one is known to the interpreter" (p. 56). Such described known objects can be visualized into images and storylines which help the interpreter to comb the interpreted messages into a coherent whole. This technique is even more effective when used concurrently with note-taking of key words/symbols to remind interpreters, to relieve them from overloaded information, to keep pace with the speaker and to retrieve the details when interpreting.

Paraphrasing. Paraphrasing refers to the processing tactic that uses a longer phrase or sentence to explain rather than to interpret the SL message, because the interpreter fails to think of an equivalent word, or he/she thinks that the equivalent word is not explicit enough for TL audiences to understand. Just as Gile (1995) explained, paraphrasing takes place when, instead of using a single word which he/she is not able to retrieve at the moment, the interpreter explains the intended meaning with a longer phrase. In effect, paraphrasing under such circumstances can be employed as a makeshift strategy with a semantic focus to avoid omission in interpretation.

Compression. Bartlomiejczyk (2006, p. 160) held that compression takes place when the interpreter summarizes a long SL segment by using a shorter phrase, which is more concise and general and is supposed to convey the same meaning. It is usually used for rendering enumerations or metaphors when a more general segment or not preserving the metaphorical layer could explicitly and briefly convey the meaning of the SL message. In this way, the interpreter will be under less time-constraint to prevent from making omissions and to improve effectiveness.

Addition. Due to discrepancies between the SL and TL cultures, words with cultural or social connotations, like idioms and allusions, which abound in every language constitute a great barrier for the audiences to fully understand the SL message. Therefore, it is necessary for the interpreter to add, by way of explanation, something the speaker did not say. By using this meaning-oriented strategy, the interpreter can avoid sense missing and help the audiences better understand the connotation of the SL message. For example, apart from interpreting "“5.25’大学生心理健康节” (*daxuesheng xinli jiankang jie*) into “college students psychological health festival on May 25”, the symbolic meaning of “5.25” (I love myself) should also be added

in interpretation to render a better and deeper understanding of the festival on this day.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be seen from the study that interpreters do make omissions consciously or unconsciously as an intrinsic part of the interpreting process, due to lack of prior-preparation, production failure, comprehension failure, unskillful note-taking skill and due to time-constraint, and that interpreters do use omissions to enhance effectiveness.

The direction of interpreting does affect the occurrence and types of omissions. In Chinese-to-English interpreting, most frequent omissions derive from those caused by time constraint and production failure as well as those to enhance effectiveness, whereas English-to-Chinese interpreting witnessed the highest percentages of omissions due to comprehension failure and unconscious omissions. The mirror-image phenomenon in this study reflects a strong association between types of omission and proficiency levels of one's languages.

Some coping strategies of omissions based on the results of the study are proposed. First of all, prior-preparation is always of great importance in any interpreting assignment. As Napier (2004, p.137) stressed that factors such as the context of situation, familiarity with the discourse environment, knowledge of the topic being discussed and familiarity with the interaction participants could impact upon the rate and types of omissions, regardless of where the interpreting was taking place, and with whom. In addition, the mastery of practical and useful online coping strategies such as visualization, paraphrasing, compression, and addition also play a vital role in enhancing interpreting quality.

Due to the limited number of subjects in this study, its findings should be referred to with caution. It is therefore hoped that future study along this line will involve more subjects in a more disciplined manner so as to shed more light on the issue of interpreting omission under investigation.

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