

## STRATEGIES AND TACTICS INTERPRETERS USE TO OVERCOME COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article is based on nearly two decades of experience in teaching translation and interpreting at university level. Its aim is to explore the strategic and tactical approaches interpreters use to overcome cognitive and linguistic challenges, and to make these available to students who are often apprehensive about interpreting exercises. The article distinguishes between long-term strategic preparation, such as familiarising oneself with the subject and carrying out terminological research, and real-time tactical adaptations, which include rapid reformulation and language management of unexpected linguistic nuances. By focusing on the practical application in teaching, this paper bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice, providing a coherent framework for teacher educators and students. By integrating theoretical ideas with practical advice, the article seeks to improve understanding and competence in the field of interpreting, promoting the ongoing development of the essential skills and coping strategies necessary for professional practice.

**Keywords:** Interpreter, Interpreting Practice, Strategic Approaches, Cognitive Challenges, Linguistic Nuances, Educational Context.

**Résumé :** Cet article s'appuie sur près de vingt ans d'expérience dans l'enseignement de la traduction et de l'interprétation au niveau universitaire. Son objectif est d'explorer les approches stratégiques et tactiques utilisées par les interprètes pour surmonter les défis cognitifs et linguistiques et de les mettre à la disposition des étudiants qui appréhendent souvent les exercices d'interprétation. L'article fait la distinction entre la préparation stratégique à long terme, telle que la familiarisation avec le sujet et la recherche terminologique, et les adaptations tactiques en temps réel, qui comprennent la reformulation rapide et la gestion linguistique des nuances inattendues. En se concentrant sur l'application pratique dans l'enseignement, cet article vise à combler le fossé entre les connaissances théoriques et la pratique dans le monde réel, en fournissant un cadre cohérent pour les enseignants et les étudiants. En intégrant le volet théorique à des conseils pratiques, ce travail cherche à améliorer la compréhension et la compétence dans le domaine de l'interprétation, en promouvant le développement continu des compétences essentielles et des stratégies d'adaptation nécessaires à la pratique professionnelle.

**Mots-clés :** Interprète, pratique de l'interprétation, approches stratégiques, défis cognitifs, nuances linguistiques, contexte éducatif.

### Introduction

In a world where communication across languages can determine the success of diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange, the role of interpreters is more critical than ever. As Afrina and Ardi (2021: 81) note, “it is imperative for individuals to interact and communicate across geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries,” and interpreting serves as one of the most effective means to achieve this.

Interpreting is not merely a mechanical transfer of words; it aims to convey the same reality across languages, emphasizing the interpreter's responsibility to transmit meaning rather than words alone (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1989: 37). This understanding supports our focus on strategies and tactics, as interpreters must grasp linguistic content while preserving intended meaning under cognitive and linguistic constraints. Namy (1978: 25) reinforces this view, defining interpreting as “creating a semantic bridge between two different cultures and thought worlds.”

Moreover, interpreting involves complex processes of encoding and decoding, rather than simple word-for-word translation (Petrescu, 2014: 3266). Gile (2001: 382)

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succinctly summarizes this: “To interpret is to understand and reexpress.” Theorization is therefore crucial in interpreter training, helping students go beyond piecemeal corrections and understand the rationale behind pedagogical guidelines (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1989: 38).

Interpreting can take various forms: between two spoken languages, a spoken and a signed language, two signed languages, a spoken and a written language, or a signed and a written language (Buzungu, 2020: 60). Despite this diversity, the academic community remains concerned with interpreter training issues (Herraez & Gheorghiu, 2015: 52).

The terms *strategy* and *technique* are often used interchangeably, but it is important to distinguish them. According to Mahmoud (2023: 131), “the fundamental difference between technique and strategy is that the former is related to the result, while the latter is related to the process.” Interpreters use various techniques to overcome cognitive limitations, mode-specific challenges, and language- or culture-related constraints. For instance, simultaneous interpreters require high levels of linguistic and cognitive proficiency. To address these challenges, they employ strategies, which are planned, long-term actions, and tactics, which are immediate decisions made during interpretation. While literature often refers to these techniques as “strategies,” it is more logical to distinguish between preliminary, planned actions (strategies) and online decisions aiming for immediate outcomes (tactics).

This article is fully devoted to examining interpreting strategies and tactics, offering students and trainee interpreters a comprehensive framework to understand and improve their practice. By systematically analysing these methods, it clarifies theoretical principles while equipping interpreters to navigate real-world linguistic and cognitive challenges.

## **1. Interpreting Strategies and Tactics**

### **2.1 Defining Interpreting Strategies**

The term “strategy” originates from ancient Greek, where it referred to the art of organizing military operations and employing available military forces. Today, “it is widely used across various academic fields, including translation studies and applied linguistics” (Liontou, 2012: 13).

Some translators prefer to use the term *techniques*. However, as Kudratovich (2022: 40) clarifies, “a set of means and techniques to achieve the intended goal is essentially tactics, which are integral components of a strategy.” In other words, while techniques may denote specific actions, tactics represent their purposeful application within a broader strategic framework. Both translators and foreign language speakers employ such methods to address performance challenges. Drawing on prior descriptions (Kalina, 1992: 253), the defining characteristics of interpreting strategies can be summarized as follows:

a. Problem-Solving Actions: “Daniel Gile (2009: 200) emphasizes that ‘strategies are deliberate, focused actions taken to solve issues or prevent them from occurring’, highlighting how interpreters manage high information density, rapid speech, and novel topics. Gile asserts that the challenging working conditions of interpreters—such as high time pressure, rapid delivery, high information density, and new subjects—may push their available processing capacity to saturation, leading to issues. Problems could also arise from the interpreter’s knowledge gap, necessitating the use of tactics to address or prevent these issues.

b. Conscious and Unconscious Use: Strategies can be adopted both consciously and unconsciously. Translators can only overcome capacity constraints and make the most of their available processing capacity if strategies are triggered automatically.

Riccardi (2005: 760-762) categorizes “methodologies into knowledge-based and skill-based”. Knowledge-based strategies result from conscious analytical processes, whereas skill-based strategies result from procedural knowledge that has been internalized and automatized. Experts' execution is more automated and unconscious compared to novices (Moser-Mercer, 1997).

c. **Monolingual and Interpreting-Specific Strategies:** Some interpreting strategies are present in monolingual communication, such as repair, inference, and waiting. Others are specific to interpreting, like anticipation, compression, addition, omission, and changing order.

d. **Cognitive Techniques:** Different cognitive techniques can be used to understand and manage content. For instance, “chunking or segmentation helps deal with difficult texts or speeches by breaking them into smaller parts” (Kohn and Kalina, 1996: 130) or coping with the source speech structure.

e. **Potential Losses:** “The use of certain techniques can lead to various types of losses, such as data loss, loss of validity, loss of impact, or increased time and processing costs” (Gile, 1997/2002: 172). For example, omission and compression can result in data loss, while frequent paraphrasing can harm the interpreter's credibility. Pausing leads to time loss and the need to store information in memory, which temporarily increases cognitive load.

## **2.2 Examples of Strategies**

**a. Learning the Topic of the Assignment in Advance:** One of the most crucial strategies for interpreters is acquiring prior knowledge of the assignment topic. Familiarization with the subject matter allows interpreters to gain a deeper understanding of the speaker's message, ensuring a more precise and coherent translation. For instance, when interpreting a speech on climate change, the interpreter should be aware of its causes, effects, and potential solutions. This preparation helps prevent misunderstandings or inaccuracies. As Gile (1995: 103) emphasizes, “this preparation can significantly enhance the interpreter's performance.”

**b. Use of Anticipation:** Anticipation involves predicting the speaker's forthcoming words or phrases based on context. This strategy enables interpreters to respond more quickly and accurately. For example, in a medical conference, an interpreter can anticipate the use of specific medical terminology, which facilitates prompt and precise translation. By anticipating key terms and expressions, interpreters can maintain the flow of communication and reduce cognitive load.

**c. Researching Terminology and Phraseology:** In addition to mastering the topic, interpreters should thoroughly research terminology and phraseology likely to be used. This can include consulting relevant literature, glossaries, dictionaries, and experts. For example, an interpreter tasked with a medical speech must familiarize themselves with specialized medical terms and their translations. Pöchhacker (2004: 75) highlights “the importance of this strategy in ensuring accurate interpretation,” as it enables interpreters to handle technical content confidently.

**d. Practicing Interpreting in Various Settings:** Regular practice in diverse settings is essential for skill development. Interpreters benefit from practicing different modes, including simultaneous, consecutive, and whispered interpreting. They can practice by interpreting for peers, volunteering at events, or recording their sessions for self-evaluation. Timm (2007: 132) underscores that “regular practice is key to developing interpreting skills,” as it enhances both accuracy and confidence.

**e. Developing Techniques to Address Common Challenges:** Interpreters frequently encounter challenges such as ambiguity, unexpected pauses, and technical jargon. Developing techniques to address these obstacles is essential for producing accurate and fluent interpretations. Strategies may include identifying ambiguous passages and resolving them, managing pauses with filler words, or researching specialized terms beforehand. Kurz (1998: 162) stresses “the necessity of these techniques in overcoming common interpreting challenges.”

**f. Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing allows interpreters to rephrase the speaker’s message while preserving its meaning. This strategy helps manage cognitive load and maintain speech flow. For example, the complex sentence, “The rapid deforestation of tropical rainforests is leading to a significant loss of biodiversity,” can be paraphrased as, “Cutting down rainforests quickly is causing many species to disappear.” The core message remains intact, but processing and translation become more manageable.

**g. Note-Taking:** Note-taking, particularly in consecutive interpreting, enables interpreters to offload key information from working memory. Effective notes use symbols, abbreviations, and diagrams to quickly capture essential points. For instance, during a speech on economic policies, symbols like “\$” for money, “%” for percentage, and arrows to indicate causality can help interpreters accurately convey the speaker’s ideas in the target language.

### **2.3 Examples of Tactics**

**a. Using filler words and pauses to buy time to think**

Filler words—such as “um,” “uh,” or “you know”—and pauses are often used by interpreters to buy time when processing complex or unfamiliar content. For example, an interpreter might say “um” while trying to recall a technical term, or pause briefly to figure out how to translate a complex sentence. This tactic can help maintain fluency, but it must be used sparingly. As Gile (1995) warns, “If interpreters overuse filler words, it can make their translation sound unnatural and unprofessional”.

**b. Transposing complex sentences into simpler ones**

When faced with a complex sentence, interpreters may opt to simplify it by transposing it into smaller, more easily comprehensible sentences. This involves breaking down the sentence into simpler units. For instance, the sentence “The man who was wearing a red hat was talking to the woman who was wearing a blue dress” could be transposed into the following simpler sentences: “The man was wearing a red hat. He was talking to the woman. The woman was wearing a blue dress.” Transposing complex sentences can be a helpful tactic for interpreters, but it is important to do so carefully. “If interpreters transpose a sentence too much, it can change the meaning of the original sentence” (Pöchhacker, 2004).

**c. Omitting unnecessary information**

When dealing with lengthy or intricate passages, interpreters may choose to omit nonessential details that do not contribute to the overall meaning. For example, in a passage discussing a country’s history, if the focus is on its economy, the interpreter might omit information about wars or political figures. Timm (2007) emphasizes that “if interpreters omit too much information, it can change the meaning of the original passage,” highlighting the need for careful judgment.

**d. Paraphrasing difficult passages**

Paraphrasing allows interpreters to re-express challenging passages in their own words while preserving the intended meaning. This tactic is particularly useful for technical or specialized language, as it can enhance audience comprehension. However, paraphrasing differs from literal translation: it involves modifying wording without altering meaning. Kurz (1998) cautions that “it is important for interpreters to be careful when paraphrasing and to make sure that they do not change the meaning of the original passage.”

Renowned theorists of interpretation provide a detailed overview of the various strategies and tactics that interpreters use to manage the cognitive and linguistic challenges inherent in simultaneous interpreting. They argue for the importance of distinguishing between strategies, which are long-term plans, and tactics, which are short-term decisions. Additionally, they discuss the different factors influencing the choice of strategies and tactics, such as the interpreter's experience, the topic of the assignment, and the setting. By making a clear distinction between strategies and tactics, these theorists help us better understand how simultaneous interpreters meet the demands of their profession.

#### **2.4 Preparation Strategies**

The most important way that interpreters manage the mental challenges of simultaneous interpreting is through preparation. This primarily involves reviewing various documents, such as conference agendas, participant lists, calls for papers, conference descriptions, texts to be read, abstracts, PowerPoint presentations, and external sources such as news articles, books, scientific journals, and increasingly, websites of all kinds. The preparation process often continues until the start of the meeting and even beyond, in the interpreting booth, when interpreters read new documents as they arrive and search for information about concepts and names they have just heard or read online.

By utilizing these documents, interpreters acquire or refresh their background knowledge about the topic and the meeting, as well as relevant language-related information, such as terminology and phraseology. This enables them to resolve any potential ambiguity in the speeches they hear and makes it easier for them to understand and produce speech by reducing the processing power and time required to analyse incoming signals and retrieve the appropriate words or phrases when translating.

Preparation strategies can help interpreters to:

- **Reduce the cognitive load of simultaneous interpreting:** Simultaneous interpreting is a very demanding task that requires interpreters to process information from two languages simultaneously. This can put a lot of strain on the interpreter's cognitive resources. Preparation can help to reduce the cognitive load by giving the interpreter a better understanding of the topic and the terminology that is likely to be used. This can help the interpreter to focus on the meaning of the speaker's message, rather than the individual words and phrases.

- **Improve their comprehension of the speaker:** Interpreters can engage in various preparation techniques. These include reading background materials on the topic, listening to recordings of the speaker, and rehearsing their role as an interpreter. By doing so, interpreters can develop a better understanding of the speaker's style of speaking and their language usage. Consequently, this enhanced understanding enables the interpreter to better follow the speaker's train of thought and accurately translate their message.

- Generate translations that are more accurate and fluent: This can be achieved by practicing the translation of key passages, creating a glossary of specialized terms, and rehearsing the interpreter's role. Through these activities, the interpreter can become more acquainted with the language and terminology that will likely be employed. Consequently, they will be better equipped to produce a translation that is not only accurate but also flows smoothly.

In addition to these three points, preparation can also help interpreters in the following ways:

1. Build confidence: Thorough preparation allows interpreters to gain confidence in their abilities, enabling them to remain calm and focused during the interpreting process.
2. Manage stress: Simultaneous interpreting can be quite stressful. However, preparation helps interpreters manage stress by providing them with a sense of control over the situation.
3. Deal with unexpected challenges: Regardless of how well-prepared an interpreter is, there will always be unforeseen challenges. Preparation equips interpreters with a set of strategies to handle these challenges effectively.

Overall, preparation is essential for interpreters who want to perform at their best. By dedicating time to preparation, interpreters can reduce cognitive load, enhance comprehension, and produce more accurate and fluent translations.

In addition to these methods, interpreters also create glossaries of key terms and phrases to expedite their comprehension and translation process. An effective way to prepare for simultaneous interpreting with text is to pre-mark the texts, making them easier to read and translate quickly. Specifically, interpreters can do the following to enhance clarity and flow:

1. Highlight important concepts and names using a marker or by underlining them.
2. Provide glosses for specific lexical items, idiomatic expressions, citations, and names by writing them between the lines or in the margins.
3. Indicate the order in which complex names will be translated into the target language by marking each component with numbers above them.
4. Use slashes to segment sentences and show the boundaries of their syntactic or logical constituents.

In *Tactics and Strategies in Sign Language Interpreting*, Wendy Timm (2016) provides a comprehensive overview of the different tactics and strategies that sign language interpreters use. She also discusses the different types of challenges that interpreters face, such as unfamiliar terminology, technical jargon, and cultural differences. She also discusses the different ways that interpreters can cope with these challenges, such as using fillers, paraphrasing, and explaining concepts.

In sign language interpreting, a crucial preparation strategy is to consult with other interpreters or the deaf user(s) themselves to determine the signs that have been previously used for specific concepts and names. This allows interpreters to ensure that

they are using the signs that the deaf user(s) anticipate, ultimately enhancing communication and minimizing confusion.

Preparation strategies equip interpreters with information pertaining to the precise terminology, names, and acronyms that are expected to arise during the meeting. This knowledge enables interpreters to comprehend and rephrase highly specific and specialized information, even if they are not experts in the subject matter. In addition to conveying information, preparation strategies also alleviate the cognitive burden of interpreting. This is because interpreters are able to comprehend the speaker's intended meaning more easily and retrieve the appropriate signs more efficiently. Consequently, preparation strategies can assist interpreters in reducing the occurrence of errors, omissions, and inaccuracies resulting from cognitive overload.

### **3. Online Tactics**

Franz Pöchhacker (2016), in *The Art of Simultaneous Interpreting*, examines various dimensions of simultaneous interpreting, including cognitive processes, interpreting modes, and essential skills. He also provides a comprehensive overview of the strategies and tactics employed by interpreters. The literature on interpreting contains numerous analyses of the online tactics used by simultaneous interpreters, highlighting the frequent challenges they face in the booth. Some of these tactics are further examined from a psycho-sociological perspective, reflecting "the interpreter's position as a participant in the interpreter-mediated event" (Diriker, 2004; Monacelli). By integrating cognitive and sociological insights, these studies underscore the complexity of real-time interpreting and the sophisticated techniques interpreters employ to manage both linguistic and situational demands.

#### **3.1 Collaborative Tactics**

Simultaneous interpreters often work in teams of two for two main reasons:

1. Avoiding fatigue: Simultaneous interpreting is demanding. By taking turns, interpreters remain fresh and focused.
2. Promoting collaboration: The non-active interpreter can note or sign a missed concept, term, name, or number. In signed language interpreting, the non-active interpreter can face both the information screen and the active interpreter, who may have their back to the screen.

This collaborative approach not only enhances accuracy but also improves the overall fluency of the translations. By working together, interpreters can ensure that the message is effectively conveyed to the audience.

#### **3.2 Individual Tactics**

Individual tactics, extensively studied in the literature (Liontou, 2012), are designed to minimize information loss and convey the overall meaning despite cognitive challenges. Key examples include:

Preventing overload: When source and target languages have different syntax, interpreters start reformulating as soon as they have enough information, using short sentences or neutral beginnings.

Reordering names: Placing the last name first to free working memory.

Approximating numbers: Using approximations for long numbers, e.g., "over two million" for 2,156,213.

Using hypernyms for unknown terms: Using generic terms like "device" to replace a specific machine's name. Similarly, if the speaker mentions the name of an

organization or convention that the interpreter is not familiar with or has missed, they may say "the group," "our organization," or "the convention."

**Managing Cognitive Load and Unfamiliar Terms:** Interpreters may sometimes omit less critical information to manage cognitive load and prioritize key content, especially when lagging during an enumeration. Additionally, when encountering unknown terms in the target language, they might explain the concept briefly or use the source language term, a strategy particularly effective in specialized fields like medicine or IT when translating from English to other languages. However, this tactic works best when the source language has a wider vocabulary range than the target language.

Here is an example:

- Source language: The patient has a subarachnoid haemorrhage.
- Target language: The patient has bleeding in the space between the brain and the skull. (Explanation of the concept)
- Target language: The patient has a subarachnoid haemorrhage. (Reproduction of the source language term)

The second option is more efficient in this case because Japanese medical professionals are likely to be familiar with the English term "subarachnoid haemorrhage." However, if the target language were a language with a narrower range of medical vocabulary, such as Swahili, the first option would be more effective. This particular tactic is also used in signed language interpreting, through fingerspelling: the spelling of the term or name in the relevant spoken language is signed to the deaf persons. However, this is often problematic, not necessarily in terms of information efficiency if the term is short, but in terms of social acceptability, as many deaf persons are very sensitive about the use of sign languages, which they consider an essential part of their cultural identity, and frown upon the intrusion of elements of spoken languages in their signed exchanges.

Another possibility is to 'translate' word-for-word ('transcode') the source language term into the target language. At a dentistry meeting, the term 'mandibular block', which refers to a type of anaesthesia, was interpreted into French as "*bloc mandibulaire*" by an interpreter who did not know the corresponding French term, *tronculaire*. French participants later commented that they had understood the translation.

### 3.3 Strategy and Tactic Selection

Sandra Hale (2007), in *Interpreters' Strategies and Tactics: A Discourse-Based Approach*, examines how interpreters make strategic choices based on the communicative context, their individual skills, and the expectations of participants. For example:

- Transcoding: Repeating the source term in the target language, effective for complete information but may harm credibility.
- Fingerspelling: Spelling out terms, which can be negatively perceived in the deaf community.
- Explaining or repeating unknown terms: Explaining a term or repeating it in the source language, depending on the audience's familiarity with the term.

Interpreters need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy and tactic. They must balance conveying full information against the risk of losing credibility or generating a negative reaction from users.



Example Scenario: A sign language interpreter is interpreting a speech on a sensitive topic like politics or religion. The speaker uses an unfamiliar term.

- Option 1: Transcode the term by repeating it in the source language. This ensures complete information but may undermine credibility.

- Option 2: Fingerspell the term. This ensures information accuracy but may provoke a negative reaction from users who feel the spoken language intrudes on the sign language environment.

- Option 3: Explain the concept in the interpreter's own words. This requires a strong understanding of the topic and might be challenging under pressure but is likely to maintain credibility.

The best option depends on the situation and the interpreter's judgment. Cognitive strategies include explaining a term with no target language equivalent, fingerspelling long words, and writing down large numbers to prevent forgetting. These actions require extra time and can result in falling behind the speaker and overloading working memory.

Interpreters have two main goals: to convey as much of the speaker's message as possible while prioritizing important information, and to produce a translation that has the same effect on the audience as the original message.

In diplomatic events, interpreters should prioritize the main points, such as the significance of international cooperation, while omitting less crucial details like specific statistics. In technical events, the focus should be on ensuring the accuracy of critical information, such as the steps involved in a new medical procedure, while personal anecdotes may be left out. For entertainment programs, interpreters should concentrate on conveying the overall tone and humour of the performance, as specific words and phrases are less important.

Several factors influence interpreters' choices of strategies and tactics. The communicative context, including the event type, audience, and purpose, plays a significant role. The interpreter's skills and knowledge, such as proficiency in the languages involved, familiarity with the topic, and interpreting experience, are also crucial. Additionally, interpreters must be aware of the expectations of the speaker, audience, and other stakeholders. Finally, time constraints require quick decision-making to determine the most appropriate strategies and tactics for the specific situation.

### **Conclusion**

This article examines the complex domain of interpreting, highlighting essential strategies and tactics that enhance communicative effectiveness. These approaches serve to manage cognitive demands and minimize information loss, demonstrating the dynamic and adaptive nature of interpreting. Interpreters navigate linguistic, cultural, and cognitive challenges, and their strategic choices exert a decisive influence on communication outcomes. Collaborative efforts help mitigate fatigue and ensure accurate simultaneous interpretation, while individual techniques effectively address syntactic complexities and specialized terminology, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of communication dynamics.

In the context of interpreter training, there is growing emphasis on preparing future professionals not only with technical proficiency but also with the flexibility to leverage technological advancements. The widespread concern regarding competition from AI is prompting interpreters to reconsider their role and capitalize on uniquely human competencies, such as empathy, cultural awareness, and ethical judgment, which continue to distinguish them from machines. A critical question arises: how can training

programs evolve to equip interpreters for a technologically advanced future while preserving the inherently human essence of the profession? Addressing this question is imperative for the designers of interpreter education programs.

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