

The Problems Awaiting an Interpreter in the Process of Consecutive Interpreting from Persian into English: "A Case Study"

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Abstract

This paper is mainly intended to explore the two practices of interpreting and translating so as to spot any possible differences between them. It should be noted, however, that the focal point of the present study is interpreting and consecutive interpreting in particular which seems to create a good many problems for novice interpreters as well as interpreting trainees. To achieve the objective, 46 M.A. students of translation participated in three different tests administered in the form of TOEFL, interview, and interpreting. These tests were meant to exhibit the participants' language proficiency, their performance as interpreters, and above all the types of problems awaiting each one of them while interpreting. The results indicated that the top three main problem areas for interpreters as arranged hierarchically according to the range of frequency are the choice of lexicon, syntax and semantics respectively. It was also observed that syntactic and semantic problems arose from inappropriate choice of lexicon in seven areas of noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, preposition, and pronoun on the basis of the frequency of their occurrence.

Keywords: interpreting, consecutive interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, syntax, semantics, lexicon.

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting is an activity of enormous importance in modern world of communication. The nature of interpreting imposes certain constraints such as temporal pressure, transcoding, and the rapid selection of appropriate themes to be rendered within a short period of time.

In the activity of interpreting the two aspects of orality and interaction are especially significant. The interpreter translates oral discourse in various communicative situations, where messages are exchanged, through the interpreter, between people (Niska, 1999, p.2).

According to Pochhacker (2004), interpreting is a form of translating in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced

on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language.

Kade (1968) defines interpreting as a form of translation in which the source language text is presented, only once, thus cannot be reviewed or replayed and the target language text is produced under time pressure, with little chance for correction and revision.

The question of how successfully messages in one language can be recreated in another is the foremost concern of the translators as well as interpreters for whom there are numerous situations in which cultural, linguistic and lexical features of languages can create serious problems. Whatever the situation, a competent translator or interpreter must ensure the conveyance of true message between two or more languages.

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However, what is important in this study is that it is not merely attempted to define the two disciplines and discuss the details of interpreting nature; rather, it is aimed at clarifying them in a way to be able to identify the major problems the consecutive interpreters might be confronted with in the process of performing the task and the strategies the novice interpreters adopt to cope with the probable pitfalls in a short time while there is no room for delay.

Interpreting and translating are two closely related linguistic disciplines. Yet they are rarely performed by the same people. The difference in skills, training, aptitude, and even language knowledge are so substantial that few people can do both successfully on a professional level. However, the differences in skills are arguably greater than similarities which will be mentioned here for further clarity.

INTERPRETING VS. TRANSLATING

We should not be surprised to find that many people including translating trainees mostly misuse the two terms 'interpreting' and 'translating' and in many cases use them interchangeably. The fallacy concerning the fact that any translator can also be a good interpreter emanates from this misunderstanding. Also, the idea that interpreting and translating are kinds of activities which inevitably involve at least two languages and two cultural traditions, helps one to arrive at this misconception that the two practices are the same.

Although there are certain similarities between the two practices, it is clear to any practitioner that the two conducts are different, for they refer to different operational concepts. On the surface, the difference between interpreting and translating is only the difference in the medium: the interpreter translates orally, while a translator interprets a written text. Both interpreting and translating presuppose a certain love of language and deep knowledge of more than one tongue. Notwithstanding, the differences in the training, skills, and talents needed for each job are vast.

However, due to the time factor which is a major difference between the two disciplines (Mahmoodzadeh, 2003), a rather more serious problem arises when interpreting. As a result, some fallacies seem to unavoidably occur which cause trouble in understanding and consequently result in rather weak or in some cas

es zero communication.

Seleskovitch (1978) argues "interpreting should not be considered the oral translation of words. What the interpreter is expected to do is to uncover a meaning and to make it 'explicit' from others". She also mentions:

Interpretation is more like painting than photography.

Photography reproduces words without attempting to explain their meaning. Painting seeks to discover a meaning, to convey a message, and reflects the object as seen through the eyes of the painter (Cited in Miremadi, 2004, pp.199-200).

According to Mahmoodzadeh (1992) interpreting consists of presenting in the Target Language (TL) the closest possible meaning of what is uttered in the Source Language (SL), either simultaneously or consecutively, preserving the tone of the SL speaker.

In regard with consecutive interpreting which is the focal point of this study, Gile (2001) defines it as to be involved in rewording the full content of the source speech, not producing a report, a summary or comments on the source speech. Interpreting in this mode is mainly considered the highest form, above simultaneous, essentially because it requires the comprehension phase to be completed before the formulation phase, since most traces of linguistic form of an utterance disappear from memory after a few seconds at most, and are replaced by traces of its content.

Interpreting entails different modes or types which have evolved through time and are adopted for the purpose of communication in different settings. Apart from simultaneous and consecutive interpreting which are the two major modes of interpreting there are other types which will be briefly mentioned while avoiding further explanations, which is out of the scope and foundation of the study.

Types of Interpreting

Mahmoodzadeh (2000) believes that interpreting should be looked upon from two different angles: (1) time-based orientation, and (2) conduct-based orientation:

- a) 1. Time-based Orientation
- b) a. Simultaneous interpreting

It is defined as the oral translation of a speaker's words into another language while the speaker is speaking. The simultaneous in

interpreter, usually sits in a booth listening to the speaker via headphones, simultaneously translates what is said and relays this via a microphone to audience members in their specific language. This is possibly the most challenging area of interpreting, requiring the highest level of skills, experience and concentration.

b. Consecutive interpreting

It is the oral translating of a speaker's words into another language when the speaker has finished speaking or paused for interpreting. This is the most common type of interpreting, requiring no specialist equipment or technical support. Jones

(2002) defines three stages of a consecutive interpreter's work as: 1. Understanding the speaker's original message and concept, 2. Analysis of its content to identify the main ideas, 3. Re-expression of the same content in another language

"Consecutive interpreting is preferred at high level political talks, welcoming addresses, press conferences, speeches delivered on different occasions and court interpreting" (Bowen, 1980, as cited in Miremadi, 2004, p. 208).

c) 2. Conduct-based Orientation

d) In so far as it is related to conduct-based interpreting, we may name some modes such as ad-hoc interpreting, booth interpreting, conference interpreting, community interpreting, dialog/bilateral interpreting, escort interpreting, focus group (marketing) interpreting, intermediary/relay interpreting, interview interpreting, legal/court interpreting, liaison interpreting, medical interpreting, sign language interpreting, sight interpreting, trans-interpreting, whispered interpreting, etc., each mode is applicable for communication in different settings.

Like the two terms of translating and interpreting, an interpreter and a translator might also feature similarly at the outset but there are certainly differences between the two. The interdisciplinary nature of this study, however, necessitates a comparison between interpreters and translators.

3. Interpreters vs. Translators

According to Mahmoodzadeh (2000) the features of a qualified interpreter should be different from those of a translator to be able to deal with the task of interpreting efficiently. He defines listening and speaking as the dominant skills of an interpreter whereas their weak points

are mainly concentrated on reading and writing. As for translators, they are mostly weak at listening and speaking comparing to reading and writing.

In this vein, Mahmoodzadeh (1990) emphasizes number of other qualities for a skillful interpreter such as the powerful memory, calmness, familiarity with different accents of SL, thorough knowledge of the culture of both SL and TL, dominance in the field and comprehensive repertoire of specialized vocabulary.

However, regarding other qualifications of a good interpreter Hung (1998) enumerates a wide range of skills essential for an interpreter, that are: anticipation, listening, understanding of a message, detachment from words, split attention, memory, flexibility, quickness, sensitivity to language registers and dialects, problem solving strategies, paraphrasing and accuracy in expression.

In regard with consecutive interpreting, besides the above skills a successful interpreter should possess, it could be useful to provide him/her with detailed clarification of common problematic areas he/she usually faces when dealing with the job.

Consecutive Interpreters' Common Sources of Problems

The main problems that interpreters may sometimes complain about are usually of three types:

- a. **Note-taking:** not being able to write as fast as the speaker delivers his/her speech and not being able to read what one writes.
- b. **Memory:** not being able to remember all portions of the speech delivered.
- c. **Speed:** not being able to make pace with the speaker's speech delivery.

a. Note-taking

Consecutive interpreting notes do not cover all the information contained in the SL speech, but essentially serve as reminder to help the interpreter retrieve the information mentioned from memory. (Rozan, 1956) In fact, in consecutive interpreting, notes are used only as an aid to trigger memory of an SL speech that was heard and understood previously.

In order to note different components of a speech efficiently an interpreter

could make use of different note-taking techniques. Note-taking is very much a matter of personal taste; however, Jones (2002) identifies some techniques such as stress, arrows, suffixes, abbreviations and symbols, numbering, pictograms, etc., which are worth taking into consideration for an interpreter to be able to conduct efficiently.

b. Memory

A consecutive interpreter listens to a speech and then reproduces it in a different language. This means the interpreter must be able to recall ideas, in other words, they must call upon their memory.

It may be objected that if the interpreter takes adequate notes during the speech they should not need to rely upon memory. However, it is impossible for an interpreter to rely solely on good notes, and that even if it were possible, it would not be desirable. (Jones, 2002)

c. Speed

There is a major difference between the speaker and the interpreter. The former knows what he is about to say, whereas the latter has to wait for what is supposed to be said and exposed to him. There is a time gap between what the speaker intends to say and what the interpreter hears and what he ultimately produces. It is ideal for the interpreter to pace up with the speaker but not very often attainable because no interpreter, no matter how strong and expanded his memory capacity is, can store the exact words uttered by the speaker. To compensate for the gap some interpreters resort to shorthand writing, though it is not favored much, yet, others develop their own note-taking techniques and follow their own initiatives.

As Bowen (1984, as cited in Miremadi, 2004)

argues some interpreters invent specific graphological symbols to represent concepts or abbreviations which may seem quite similar and if the interpreter does not enjoy a good memory, ambiguities may arise. As a result, neither of these strategies can be helpful and effective unless the interpreter takes notes of the concepts and can produce concept-chunk equivalences in the target language.

However, there are some other problematic areas that might influence the interpreters' performance when dealing with interpreting. The

question is what are the main problems which might affect an interpreter's fluency and accuracy in the process of consecutive interpreting from Persian to English? Hence, this study was designed to provide answer to the said question.

Methodology Participants

Because familiarity with translation strategies was a prerequisite for achieving the objective of the study, 46 Iranian M.A. students both male and female majoring in English translation participated in the experiment. The reason for selecting M.A. students as novice consecutive interpreters was that access to professional interpreters was next to impossible. The participants were selected disregarding of gender and age which, though significant, were out of the scope of the present research.

Instrumentation

To find out the major problems the consecutive interpreters encounter, a case study was required to be conducted. In order to find out the participants' strategies to deal with the problem areas in Syntax, Choice of Lexicon and Semantics, as the thesis questions implies, three different tests were administered:

a. Test of Competency: In order for the participants to be more homogeneous, a TOEFL test was a prerequisite to administer as a criterion to assess their competency. The 43 top ones who met the competency criterion with mean score range of 50 to 80 were chosen to attend a session of consecutive interpreting practice as the main test.

b. Interview: Since fluency and uninterrupted flow of speaking is a criterion for an interpreter, those participants who were able to meet the mean score in TOEFL test were interviewed and their speech was recorded.

c. Interpreting Test: Interpreting test consisted of 3 pieces of Persian news commentary of twenty five chunks as the units of interpreting. The chunks were each as long as a sentence each was approximately made up of 10 lexical items. The news was tape recorded and the chunks were paused with an interval of 30 seconds. The tape was played for the participants in a laboratory. They had to manage note-taking and interpreting consecutively each chunk dis-

tinctively into English, within the interval before dealing with the next chunk. The texts were selected randomly without imposing experimental manipulation and intentional structural complexities as the research was meant to be a descriptive one. While each individual was interpreting, his/her voice was recorded separately. This sequence proceeded until the last sentence was interpreted.

The Procedure and Data Analysis

Each interpretation was transcribed in order to be analyzed individually in the areas of syntax, choice of lexicon, and semantic features which seemed to be more problematic.

A table was devised that contained the interpreting evaluation criteria to assess the problem areas that occurred during the interpreting test as follows:

- a. Choice of lexicon: A list of key words was extracted from the text that would determine the researcher's assessment of the subjects' choice of words.
- b. Syntax (grammar and cohesion): This means that the rendered output from the in-

terpreters would appropriately correspond to the input material from a syntactic point of view.

- c. Semantic features (relevancy): It refers to the extent of interpreting real intentions of the speaker in particular situations from SL into the TL.

Through an accurate analysis of the interpretations, in comparison to a standard text, each sentence was analyzed individually in terms of the key items included in the first column along with the number of cases they left uninterpreted. Those lexicons which did not correspond to their equivalents in the original text were listed in the next column. Then, the syntactic or semantic problems arisen as a result of inappropriate choice of lexicons were identified. Based on the recurrence of the identified problem areas, the problems were arranged hierarchically from the major to the minor significance after the results were calculated and tabulated in order to make the interpreters aware of the main pitfalls which might have remained unnoticed. For further clarity, some data analysis is provided in Table 1 to show the strategies and techniques used in the study.

Table 1
Analysis of the Problematic Areas

در این هفته در عرصه بین المللی، تحولات همچنان تحت الشعاع بحران عراق قرار داشت			
Key items	Lexicon	Syntax	Semantics
عرصه	1.issues	1	
	2.area	2	
	3. field	3	
arena	4. fields	4	
	5. domain	5	
	6. environment	6	
Uninterpreted: 25	7. scene	7	
	8. affairs	8	
	9. around the world	9	
تحولات	1. changes		1
	2. happenings	2	
	3. evolutions		3
	4. events	4	
	5. revolutions		5
developments	6. incidences	6	
	7. affairs	7	
	8. varieties	8	
	9. the change	9	
	10. new happenings	10	

Uninterpreted: 6	11. everything	11
	12. problems	12
	13. modifications	13
	14. politic news	14
	15. trends	15
	16. all the procedures	16
	17. crisis	17
تحت الشعاع قرار داشت	1. have been affected by	1
	2. has been outshined by	2
	3. are influenced by	3
	4. has been gone under	4
	5. was undershadowed	5
	6. have been under the focus of	6
	7. were under the shadow of	7
	8. centered around	8
	9. were focused on	9
	10. are under the influence of	10
	11. was at the influence of	11
	12. were according to	12
	13. were under	13
	14. are under	14
	15. were influenced from	15
	16. are influence of	16
	17. was overshadowed	17
Has been over- shadowed	18. were about	18
	19. has affected by	19
	20. was affected by	20
	21. were influenced by	21
	22. were existed on	22
	23. were related to	23
	24. was marked by	24
Uninterpreted: 2	25. were surrounded by	25
	26. are reflected by	26
	27. were attracted to	27
	28. are encompassed by	28
	29. is following	29
	30. were round to	30
	31. is overlapped	31

* The sentence left uninterpreted in 2 cases.

As it is implied from Table 1, the participants mainly faced with problems at syntactic level when dealing with the three key-terms in this sentence. Regarding the first key item "عرصه", it seems only a few participants could find proper equivalents since it was not

interpreted in 25 cases and if any, they failed to find relevant ones. For the second item "تحويلات", most of the equivalents were irrelevant and for "تحت الشعاع قرار داشت" the problem is partly due to lack of attention to the verb tense.

Table 2
Analysis of the Problematic Areas

Key items	در شرایطی که کارشناسان و تحلیل گران مسائل سیاسی و نظامی عراق معتقدند		
	Lexicon	Syntax	Semantics
طرح امنیتی Security / peace initiative	in a way that	1	
	in the situation that	2	
	in the condition that	3	
	in the case that	4	
	in the circumstances that	5	
	in a situation that	6	
	in situations that	7	
	where	8	
	yet	9	
	in conditions that	10	
	when	11	
	in the situation	12	
	in this condition	13	
	in these conditions	14	
	it is in this situation that	15	
	in condition that	16	
	on the other hand	17	
	in the situation in which	18	
	in this situation	19	
	in some conditions	20	
	under the condition that	21	
تحلیل گران analysts Uninterpreted: 9	1. politicians	1	
	2. experts	2	
	3. critics		3
	4. analysers	4	
	5. interpreters	5	
	6. negotiators	6	
	7. officials	7	
	8. authorities	8	
	9.diplomats	9	

As Table 2 shows, when dealing with the conjunction "در شرایطی که", no semantic problems occurred. This could be the result of participants' negligence to the function of the term and their decontextual choice of the equivalents such as "situation" or "condition" for the word "شرایط". However, it was left

uninterpreted in 7 cases. Regarding "تحلیل گران", among all equivalents only "critics" has relatively a close referential meaning which caused semantic problem while others have no reference in original version at all; as a result, problems have more frequently been occurred at syntactic level.

Table 3

Analysis of the Problematic Areas

طرح امنیتی نوری المالکی نخست وزیر این کشور تا حدود زیادی در کاهش خشونتها و ناامنی ها موفق بوده			
	Lexicon	Syntax	Semantics
طرح امنیتی	security project	1	
	security plan		2
	security remedies	3	
Security / peace initiative	the new action	4	
	the model	5	
	the security design	6	
	the plan	7	
	pattern	8	
Uninterpreted: 7	safety plan	9	
	act	10	
	safety planning	11	
	plans	12	
	plan	13	
تا حدود زیادی	to some extent	1	
	somehow	2	
	great	3	
	quietly	4	
	to a wide extent	5	
	relatively	6	
	so	7	
	in some respects	8	
	lots of	9	
	to the good extent	10	
To a large degree/extent	in a great range	11	
خشونتها	1. aggression	1	
	2. victims	2	
	3. harshness	3	
	4. riot	4	
	5. conflicts	5	
	6. violences	6	
	7. tension		7
	8. disputes	8	
	9. riots	9	
	10. rebels	10	
	11. chaos	11	
Violence	criminality	1	
	conflicts	2	
	disputes	3	
Uninterpreted: 21	unsafeties	4	
	anger	5	
	security	6	
نا امنی ها			
insecurities			
Uninterpreted: 28			

* The sentence left uninterpreted in 2 cases.

Regarding the 4 key-terms extracted from this sentence, “طرح امنیتی” in 7 cases, “تا” in 21 cases, “حدود زیادی” in 21 cases and “نا امنی ها” in 28 cases have not been interpreted. Among all, 2 participants

have not interpreted the whole sentence. In this chunk, as it is noticed, the major problem occurred at syntactic level. This is resulted from participants' lack of attention to selecting proper equivalents for the 4 key terms.

Table 4

Analysis of the Problematic Areas

این در حالست که درگیری ها و خشونت های پراکنده در دیگر شهرهای عراق همچنان ادامه داشت.			
Key items	Lexicon	Syntax	Semantics
درگیری ها	1.harshnesses	1	2
	2.fighting		
clashes/fights/ conflicts	3.challenges	3	
	4.disputes	4	
	5.riots	5	
	6.criminalities	6	
	7.involvement	7	
	8.Killings	8	
	9.fight	9	
	10.explosion	10	
	11.chaos	11	
Uninterpreted: 3	12. the situation	12	
	13.rebels	13	
	14. these processes	14	
پراکنده sporadic	-----		
Uninterpreted: 39			

* The sentence left uninterpreted in 1 case.

The key-word “درگیری ها” was not interpreted in 3 cases and except for 1 semantic problem, the main problem is at syntactic level. However,

as it is realized, the other key-word “پراکنده” has not been interpreted in 41 cases and only 3 participants have dealt with it properly.

Table 5

Error Frequency Table

No	Lexicon							Sem.	Syn.	Total
	N	V	Adj.	Adv.	Conj	Prep	Pron.			
1	20	6	7	1	3	3	--	4	19	63
2	21	3	7	4	2	2	2	2	9	52
3	61	4	15	6	3	2	--	--	12	103
4	52	8	16	5	2	3	2	5	16	109
5	48	4	18	5	5	7	2	10	13	112
6	55	3	20	3	2	4	--	7	16	110
7	46	9	18	5	3	5	--	13	14	113
8	45	6	15	3	3	4	--	6	10	92
9	48	8	15	7	1	6	1	5	11	102
10	25	2	9	4	1	4	--	4	9	58
11	57	4	19	4	1	6	--	8	11	110
12	31	6	10	4	1	4	1	10	20	87
13	47	11	17	4	3	7	1	12	14	116

14	52	8	21	6	1	5	--	10	7	110
15	12	1	6	1	--	--	--	4	10	34
16	58	7	11	6	1	6	4	15	8	116
17	43	7	12	3	1	4	--	18	13	101
18	41	10	11	4	1	3	--	7	5	82
19	34	4	12	5	3	--	--	11	9	78
20	42	12	16	4	3	3	--	14	6	100
21	54	8	16	5	5	5	1	6	10	110
22	61	13	23	6	3	6	--	10	12	134
23	39	3	19	5	5	3	--	11	7	92
24	53	9	19	3	3	6	--	9	6	108
25	27	8	9	6	--	5	--	5	9	69
26	23	4	9	4	--	3	--	6	7	56
27	47	5	21	4	2	8	--	11	8	106
28	46	8	18	3	4	3	--	9	6	97
29	51	6	19	6	2	5	--	3	11	103
30	49	11	16	8	4	7	--	11	8	114
31	59	10	28	8	5	5	--	8	10	133
32	58	11	22	9	5	5	--	17	9	136
33	55	10	20	5	2	6	--	9	7	114
34	48	10	22	5	3	6	--	12	10	116
35	56	12	22	3	5	6	--	13	15	132
36	44	8	12	6	3	4	--	12	11	100
37	51	7	16	7	4	2	--	14	16	117
38	43	6	20	7	4	4	--	7	7	98
39	35	11	19	3	5	3	--	10	6	92
40	60	8	20	4	4	8	--	13	23	140
41	51	8	17	5	4	6	--	10	13	114
42	62	10	19	7	5	8	--	5	15	131
43	46	9	14	7	4	5	1	5	9	99
Total	1956	318	695	210	121	197	14	381	467	4359
				3511						

Other results obtained from the quantitative analyses of the data indicate 3511 Lexical, 467 Syntactic and 381 Semantic problems in the interpretations of 43 participants. As for lexicon, the error frequency at different areas amounted to 1956 nouns, 695 adjectives, 318 verbs, 210 adverbs, 197 prepositions, 121 conjunctions and 14 pronouns.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected from the interpretation of three texts were examined, and certain conclusions were drawn with relation to subjects' tackling the problems.

Conclusion 1: The most significant deduction from the data analysis process was that the frequency of problems occurred as a result of improper choice of lexicon was considerably higher in syntactic areas than in semantics. Considering the fact that the result contributed to several factors, the most important of them seemed to be time constraint, which made a considerable impact on the interpreting conduct and distorted the quality of the process.

Conclusion 2: Another analytical process was in regard with the rate of frequency at which the problems occurred. In Table 5 of error frequency, in regard with lexicon, both uninterpreted and improperly interpreted items in seven areas of noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, preposition, and pronoun were taken into account. However, the syntactic and semantic problems arisen as a result of inappropriate lexical choice were also identified.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

It is emphasized that some acquaintance beforehand with the most frequent problem areas would be significant and of great help for the interpreters as a reliable source for better processing and understanding of the received message and more reliable rendering. Achieving a good skill in note-taking along with improving the listening and speaking skills could also play a pivotal role for the task.

However, an attempt has been made here to shed some light on a rather conclusive list of problem areas with most frequent rate of occur

rence where consecutive interpreting mode is conducted; more other related areas could still be treated in detail. Following topics could be investigated in relation to consecutive interpreting:

1. What are other problem areas an interpreter might confront?
2. Is there a direct relationship between directionality and interpreting?
3. What is the effect of 'impartiality' on the part of interpreter on quality of interpretation?
4. Which aspect of interpretation is paramount in the eyes of the conference audiences?
5. How can the interpreter train him/herself prior to multi-tasking abilities such as listening and speaking consecutively?
6. What strategies should an interpreter apply when s/he receives an unknown term which s/he can't immediately think of interpreting?

Finally, there are some qualities as inherent features of either simultaneous or consecutive interpreters, lack of each could be regarded a problem area for an interpreter and could be treated as research areas:

- Lack of mastery of the source or target languages
- Insufficient general and specialized knowledge
- Poor ability of listening and speaking
- Insufficient speed adaptability
- Inability to retain the speaker's tone and mood
- Inadequate use of linguistic dominance
- Inaccuracy

Each of the aforementioned factors could be hypothesized to act as an independent variable or in relation to the interpreting task as a dependent one and their respective effects could be scrutinized through conducting an exclusive and thorough research.

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