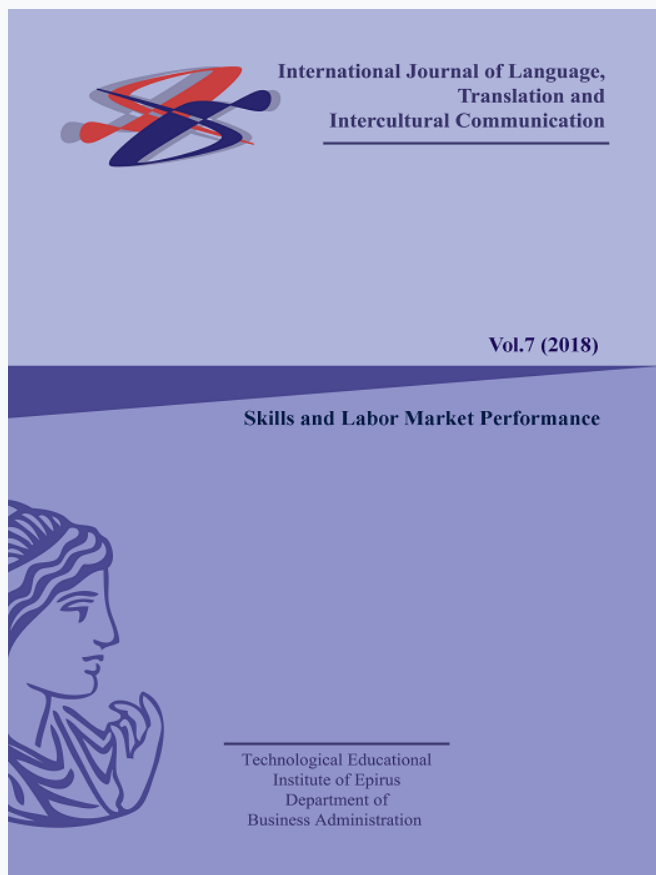


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**Identifying the language skill of consecutive interpreters. Towards the development of recommendations on language choices in interpreters' notes**

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# Identifying the language skill of consecutive interpreters. Towards the development of recommendations on language choices in interpreters' notes

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## Abstract

*This article reports on a small-scale empirical study on note-taking in consecutive interpretation. Present-day interpretation labor market has faced a number of changes, as nowadays interpreters challenge themselves to work with different language combinations. A sufficient level of an in-demand language skill is now critical for employability of young trainees in the labor market. The present research illustrates the way interpreter trainees with different language skill sets carry out similar tasks in different interpretation settings.*

*For primary research data, the study uses results of a background survey, complete with audio recordings of the performance and the notes produced by eight subjects while interpreting an English source text consecutively into Japanese. The aim of the study is to explore the differences in consecutive interpretation of interpreters in classical settings (L2 to L1) and in emerging new trends in the labor market (L2 to L3). The article argues that the language skill required for each trend in the interpretation labor market is defined by the specific interpretation settings.*

**Keywords:** *consecutive interpreting, note-taking, language combination, source language, target language, multi-language interpreting*

## 1 Introduction

Since the very existence of interpretation, language command was a major skill for any interpreter. The first interpreters were working with the L2 to L1 combination, meaning that they interpreted into their mother tongue. In the 1930s, when referring to the "language skill", most researchers (e.g. Rozan, 1956; Seleskovitch, 1975) meant the level of mastery of L2 that allows consecutive interpretation from L2 into L1. Half a century passed before interpreters finally started to work both-ways. Even now in political talks, for example, the interpreter is only allowed to work one-way from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Needless to say, the mother tongue principle was officially stated in numerous codes of conduct for interpreters and translators' associations all over the world (e.g. the Netherlands Society of Interpreters and Translators, Institute of Translation and Interpreting (U.K.), American Translators Association).

Nevertheless, there are two modern trends that have emerged in the interpretation labor market of today. One of them is interpreting both from a foreign language into the mother tongue and the other way around. The L1 to L2 interpreting trend has emerged to meet the increasing demand for such skill worldwide. Although interpreting into a non-native language is, understandably, a more challenging task, it is a more in-demand skill desired by consumers. This is shown by how "all or nearly all professional interpreters offer a service in at least two directions or language pairs, either between an L1 and L2 in both directions or from two or more L3 into L1" (Setton & Dawrant, 2016: 26). The reason for this is mostly because contemporary training programs seem to focus on the both-way interpretation, so students automatically consider it possible, as they are trained for such task.

At the same time, more and more professionals now offer interpretation services from one foreign language into another. Present-day interpreters have started to work from L3 into L2 and L2 into L3, which is another trend in the labor market that is still emerging. They mostly work on national and private markets where the demand shifts between the local language and English. Such interpreters “are [in] the vast majority of countries like China, Japan or Brazil, where international organizations have not (yet) established their headquarters” (Setton & Dawrant, 2016: 52). Professionals who perform an L3 interpretation along with L1 and L2 cover the freelance markets of Asian countries providing services in telephone, broadcast media and conference interpreting. It is also possible that the trend has emerged due to many Asian universities and colleges accepting not only domestic students but also international students for seminars where the L2 to L3 and L3 to L2 interpretation skills are taught.

As a result of such trends, the present research highlights the difference between the new type of interpretation (L2 to L3 settings) and the classic one (L2 to L1). The changes in the interpreting pattern lead to the necessity of providing a new definition for the “language skill” that reflects the present situation. This article focuses on the observation of the way different interpreters carry out similar tasks in classical settings and in emerging new trends in the labor market by studying the output produced during the consecutive interpretation and the choice of language in interpreters’ notes. The author promotes an approach, in which interpreters’ notes are studied in relation to performance assessment to obtain a complete picture of the interpretation process and trace the interrelation between language choices in the notes and the quality of interpreters’ performance. The output of interpreters in L2 to L1 settings may seem similar to the one produced in L2 to L3 settings, but the process of interpreting is supposed to differ. The combined study of interpreters’ notes and performance is expected to shed light on interpreting differences of interpreter trainees in two different settings.

The structure of the article includes the Literature review in which the author reports on the existing research on the language issues of consecutive interpretation, the Methodology, the Results and Analysis and the Discussion. The research question will be addressed through an empirical study, which will be reported below.

## **2 Literature review**

One of the most controversial topics in the interpretation research that has been discussed in different kinds of literature for many years concerns language aspects of interpretation. The discussions revolve around the issue of the choice of language in interpreters’ notes and the issue of language combinations, which are considered to be the most difficult to work with. These two topics will be briefly rendered in Section 2.1 and 2.2 below.

Another issue that will be drawn attention to is the research on notes in the context of performance assessment. It will be discussed in Section 2.3.

### **2.1 The language combination that may be considered the most difficult for interpretation**

There have been debates on which language combination is the most difficult to work with. According to some researchers, interpretation difficulties do not depend on the possible language combinations (Baker, 1992; Jakobson, 1959). Others argue that due to differences in syntactic structure, interpreting from, for example, an Asian language into a European one is more difficult than from one European language into another (Setton & Dawrant, 2016).

In this context, the issue of linguistic distance is crucial for interpretation research. The further the linguistic distance between the source and the target languages is, the more changes to the content of the original message occur during interpretation. For example, Baker (1992) reports that it is difficult to find a notional category which is expressed in all languages. Some languages have grammar categories which in many others are expressed by lexical means. The syntactic structure of a language imposes restrictions on the way messages may be organized in that language. The order in which functional elements such as subject, predicator and object may occur is more fixed in some languages than in others. Languages vary in the extent to which they rely on word order to signal the relationship between elements in the clause (Baker, 1992).

The word order in English is relatively fixed – subject-verb-object. The meaning of a sentence in English, as well as in languages with similarly fixed word orders such as Chinese and Japanese, often depends entirely on the order in which the elements are placed. But the linguistic distance between Chinese and English is comparatively closer than between English and Japanese. The syntactical structure of Japanese is different – subject-object-verb – thus, the linguistic distance in the Japanese-English language combination may cause interpretation difficulties. The difference between syntactic structures in a language combination “can make the translation of the entire conceptual information very difficult indeed”, - writes Baker (1992). A wider linguistic distance in an interpretation task suggests that translating information that is not expressed the same way in both languages is regarded as optional. The interpretation which repeatedly mitigates the line between two language syntaxes is bound to sound unnatural. Most of the time a gap between syntactic structures is covered by lexical means. As long as the information has to be expressed lexically, thus it is likely to attribute more importance to the target text. Baker (1992) writes that the lexical choices are given more weight than grammatical choices as they cover the gap between syntaxes of the source and the target language.

Thus it is perfectly clear that the farther the linguistic distance is, the more complicated it is to produce accurate interpretation. Consequently, translation from a language such as Chinese, which is closer to English, into English is less difficult than from Japanese into English and vice versa. In light of this, interpretation from Japanese to English requires a number of strategies and techniques that can be applied only within this language combination (Setton, 2011).

## 2.2 The research on language choices in interpreters’ notes

The issue of the language selected by interpreters for note-taking has been frequently discussed throughout the history of the note-taking research. Should the interpreter write notes in the language they hear (i.e., the source language) or the language they translate into (i.e., the target language) – these two categories were subject to scrutiny in the research of the 20th century. The studies conducted on the language choices in the interpreters’ notes so far (e.g. Alexieva, 1993; Chernov, 2004; Gillies, 2005; Seleskovich, 1975) have not been developed in the conditions where the source and the target languages swapped their positions during interpretation. Instead, they argued over which language – source (Gile, 1995; Ilg, 1988) or target (Herbert, 1952; Komatsu, 2005; Rozan, 1956) – would be a better choice for interpreters’ notes, meaning that interpretation would only be executed one-way. When talking about the both-way interpretation, it is important to keep in mind that the target and the source languages alternate, so the choice of the language in interpreters’ notes should be made in response to the need of cognitive assistance in a certain language.

One Danish researcher, Dam (2004), made an attempt to look beyond the status of the language in the interpreting task (it being either source or target) and instead investigate the relationship between its status in the interpreter's language combination (whether it is an L1 or L2). Her research concluded that, to minimize the effort, interpreters were likely to take notes in whichever language was easier and, therefore, faster (Dam, 2004).

In their autobiographical essays (Obst, 2010) many professionals state that when an interpreter works both-ways, the source and the target languages constantly alternate. In an instant, the source language becomes the target language, and then the status of the languages swaps places again. Although they pick, for example, the target language for notation, they may end up taking notes in both the target and the source languages. Therefore, the choice of a uniform notation language that will keep notes concise has become an issue.

Most of my interpreting was between English and German. German words can be even longer than Spanish words. Therefore, I selected English as my notation language, even though German is my mother tongue. Early in my career, I would occasionally work informal meetings from French into German. I was listening to French, taking my notes in English, and speaking in German. In those meetings, my notation language was neither the source nor the target language. It did not matter. The language that saves the most time and most wrist strokes is usually the most efficient notation language (p. 55).

This illustration shows how an experienced interpreter chooses the language for note-taking. Surprisingly, the idea of choosing a third language, one that is completely different from the language combination the interpreter works with, is reported in the research literature in a very humble manner. The choice of language in the classic one-way interpretation pattern did not require such recommendations, whereas the choice of language in the both-way interpretation pattern is a relatively new issue and needs to be studied further.

The present article will not provide an answer to whether using the source language, the target language or even a third language is preferable for high quality interpretation, but it will serve as a step towards developing recommendations for the choice of language in interpreters' notes, having considered the new patterns the interpretation is executed in.

### 2.3 The study of interpreters' notes in relation to performance assessment

The author of the article promotes an approach, in which interpreters' notes are studied in relation to performance assessment. The notes are written for several reasons: to relieve memory, to provide cognitive assistance and serve as a speaking prompt. These writings are in line with the research of R. Jones (2015), who reports that notes serve as an aid to enhance the interpreting process: understanding, analysis, and re-expression.

There is a large quantity of literature on empirical research on note-taking (Alexieva, 1993; Chernov, 2004; Dam, 2004; Gillies, 2005; Seleskovitch, 1975). However, in all of these studies, the notes and the performance data are analyzed separately from one another. The reason for this lies in the fact that appropriate assessment criteria for notes in interpretation have not been developed yet due to note-taking being considered a matter of personal choice. The author of the article believes that studying notes out of context leads to losing the cognitive connection between them and the target speech. The present article stresses that focusing on research into notes alone will not lead to the development of proper recommendations on note writing – only in the context of the performance could the

researcher analyze whether or not the notes assisted the delivery, and, in case they did not, what the reason for the failure to accomplish the task was.

All in all, three major gaps are seen in literature. One of them is the lack of research on the choice of language in the notes considering the present trends in interpreting; the other is the ambiguous manner of reporting on the language combination which can be considered the most difficult to interpret. The last one is the absence of a combined notes and performance analysis in the methodology.

The section below reports on the attempt to fill in these gaps with an experiment presented in the present article.

### 3 Methodology

As stated above, there are gaps in the methodology that the present article attempts to cover. The performance analysis and the comparative analysis of the notes' results will be shown below. The results reported in this section show the degree to which the notes assisted the interpreters' delivery.

The whole experiment was divided into two parts – a survey and an English to Japanese consecutive interpretation, that were both conducted at Waseda University in Japan. As noted above, the experiment had been tailored to observe the differences in language choices of subjects conducting L2 to L3 and L2 to L1 interpretation, so before proceeding with the description of the experiment it seems necessary to touch upon the choice of subjects.

#### 3.1 Subjects

Subjects were chosen based on the results of a background survey, which collected data on academic background, previous experience, language proficiency, nationality, mother tongue, age, sex, etc. The survey was distributed to 14 candidates over the Internet; in the end, 8 candidates were invited and 6 were rejected. The candidates invited were either Japanese or Chinese nationals. Three Chinese students had considerable experience in consecutive interpreting in their home country, and at the moment of the study were doing Masters degrees in interpretation at Waseda University in Japan. Another one had studied interpretation at a university in their home country before enrolling on a Masters course at Waseda University, which was unrelated to interpretation. The Japanese subjects were undergraduate students of Tokyo University of Foreign Languages. All subjects were taught both-way consecutive interpretation and note-writing in university; the teaching of note-taking had been based upon the principals proposed by Rozan (1956). Information on the subjects is shown in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Background data on Japanese students

Subjects	Age	English proficiency	Japanese proficiency	How long have you been studying interpretation?	How many times have you done interpretation outside class?
1	22	TOEIC 975	Native	1 year or less	No such experience

2	22	TOEIC 970	Native	2 years	1-3 times
3	22	TOEIC 945	Native	2 years	No such experience
4	22	TOEIC 950	Native	1 year or less	No such experience

Table 2: Background data on Chinese students

Subjects	Age	English proficiency	Japanese proficiency language test <sup>1</sup>	How long have you been studying interpretation?	How many times have you done interpretation outside class?
5	25	TOEIC 985	N1	1 year or less	10 times or more
6	25	TOEIC 970	N1	2 years or more	1-3 times
7	26	TOEFL.IBIT 83/120	N1	2 years or more	10 times or more
8	28	IELTS 7.7	N1	1 year or less	10 times or more

All participants were given the same English speech for consecutive interpretation. Four of the eight subjects (table 1) were native Japanese students, so they were interpreting from L2 to L1. The other four subjects (table 2) were Chinese students who had studied English as L2 and Japanese as L3, so they were interpreting from L2 to L3.

### 3.2 Procedure

The experiment, which consisted of a consecutive interpretation of an English speech into Japanese, began right after the background data was collected with a survey and the subjects were selected. The participants were invited one by one to perform interpretation. The speech chosen for the experiment was made by a native English speaker, it was chosen to exclude the need for a thorough preparation on the part of the interpreters, which would have been required in the case of a technical or scientific text.

The speech was made on a theme of how research, development and innovations support society. Before introducing the speech to the subjects, it was presented to a couple of volunteers (the bachelor students of Waseda University) who listened to it and reported that it was easy to understand the speaker and the contents. The speech was chosen with consecutive interpretation in mind, so it contained metaphors, toponyms, lists, names and numbers. The language used in the speech was formal, with a polished and elegant style. The syntactic structure was predominantly marked by short sentences. The speech lasted 6 minutes and 58 seconds and was read at a speed of approximately 120 words per minute. The

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese language proficiency test (JLPT) has been offered as a reliable means of evaluating and certifying the Japanese proficiency of non-native speakers. The test has five levels, the easiest is N5 and the most difficult level is N1. For further information on JLPT levels refer to <http://www.jlpt.jp/e/about/levelsummary.html>

speech was cut into segments (20-30 seconds each). The subjects were provided with writing tools and paper.

The audio performance was recorded to guarantee uniformity and ensure data integrity. The subjects agreed to have their notes collected after the interpretation was done; the audio recording was taken upon obtaining the permission of each subject.

#### **4 Results and Analysis**

The data used for the present study comprise the results of the background survey, audio recordings of the interpretation and eight sets of notes. The question of the choice of language in the notes had been discussed during the explanation of the experiment. The subjects had been given no specific advice on which language to choose.

In the present study, two analyses were conducted: performance analysis and notes analysis. The performance analysis was conducted upon the performance assessment, which in present research is measured by the quality and the clarity of the target speech. The data analysis methods included identifying the interpreters' errors and pauses (filled and unfilled) in the target speech (Figure 1). The notes analysis was complemented by the performance assessment to provide a view on the way notes assist in a performance. "Without the assistance of notes, many difficult interpreting tasks can not be performed properly, even by people of great intelligence and with exceptional memories" (Obst, 2010: 47). The results of the performance analysis are presented in Section 4.1; the results of the notes analysis together with the performance analysis are presented in Section 4.2.

##### **4.1 The performance assessment**

The quality assessment was executed based on the ATA explanation of interpreters' error categories; the following error categories (Abadia-Barrero et al 2003) were chosen for the present analysis: omission, addition, substitution, and editorialization.

- Omission occurs when the interpreter does not interpret a word or phrase from the original speech.
- Addition describes the situation where the interpreter adds a word or phrase to the interpretation that was not in the original speech.
- Substitution occurs when the interpreter substitutes a word or phrase from the original speech with a different word or phrase. It mostly concerns the substitution of numbers, dates, and names.
- Editorialization describes the situation where the interpreter provides their own personal views as an interpretation of a word or phrase of the original speech.

The results obtained from the performance analysis are shown in Figure 1.



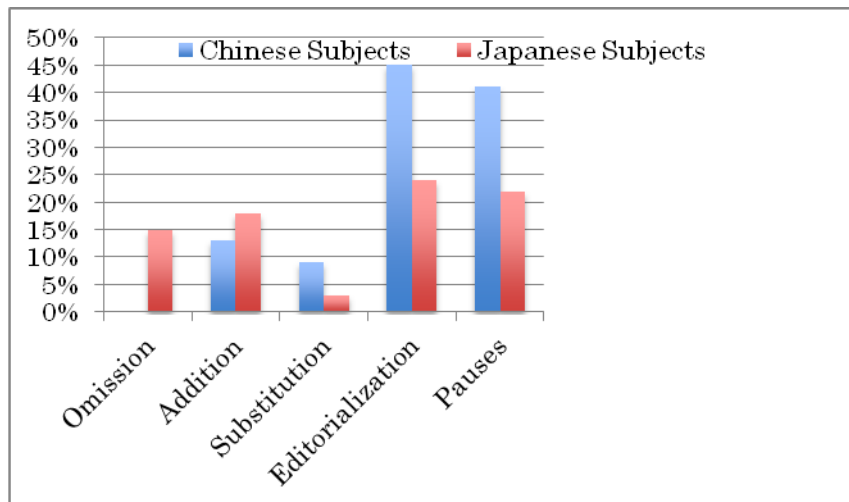


Figure 1: Performance analysis

Overall, the experiment showed a great difference between the L2 to L1 and L2 to L3 performances. The total percentage of errors, however, was pretty much the same. The errors themselves were different, though. For example, not a single Chinese interpreter omitted a phrase or a part of the phrase, in comparison with the Japanese participants who had a tendency to omit 15% of the source speech simply because they tried to perform fluently. The omitted parts were also missing from their notes, except for those of two of the subjects.

#### 4.2 Notes analysis in the context of performance assessment

During the analysis the total number of note units (words, abbreviations, shortenings, symbols) was calculated; language based units (either words or abbreviations and shortenings) were counted separately from non-language based units (symbols). During consecutive interpretation the Chinese subjects wrote a total of 462 note units, of which 355 units (77%) were language based; the Japanese subjects wrote a total of 375 note units, of which 318 units (85%) were language based. The language based units formed the basis for the analysis of the language choices below.

The notes analysis was conducted using a checklist where the language choices were sorted into the following categories: the “source language” (SL), the “target language” (TL) and the “other language” (OL), instead of the categories mentioned above (L1, L2, L3). The results obtained from the language analysis of the notes produced in the experiment are shown together with the results of the performance analysis in Figure 2.

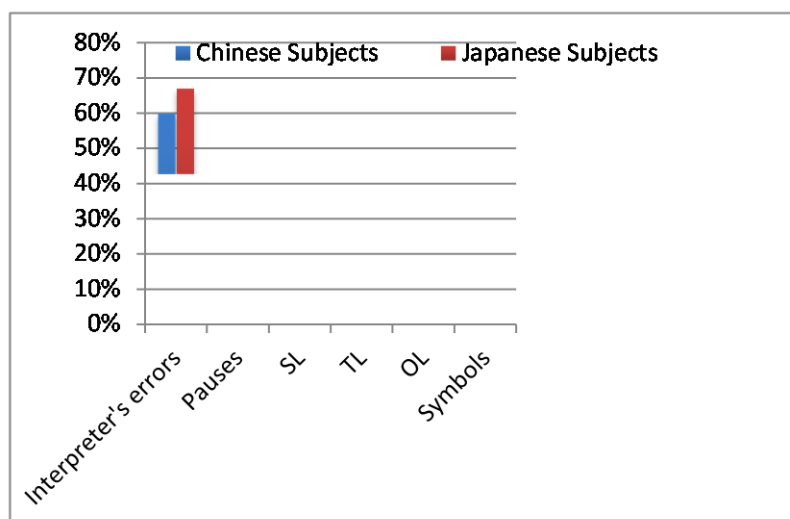


Figure 2: Notes analysis and performance analysis

As the Figure above shows, the Chinese interpreters mostly gravitated towards writing in the source language, although their notes sometimes included Chinese characters – i.e. their L1. On the contrary, the native Japanese interpreters found it easier to write in the target language (as it was, in fact, Japanese). The Japanese notes comprised 62% of their transcripts. These participants commented that they had written in English mostly because they lacked the time to translate an English word into its Japanese equivalent. To record the source speech accurately they felt they had no choice but to resort to including the source language in their notes.

Generally speaking, the choice of language in the notes in L2 to L1, as well as L2 to L3, was governed mainly by its status in the participants' language combination. The similar results were obtained in Helle Dam's research. Although her subjects were Danish students, the research resulted in the conclusion that was confirmed in the present article – “the question of language choices in the interpreters' notes is not so much whether to take notes in the source language or in the target language”, but rather whether to write in L1 or in the target language (Dam, 2004:13). These findings seem to support Dam's suggestion that TL orientation in note-taking is task-related. The conclusion that the status of the language in the interpreters' language combination itself is important for note-taking can serve as an introduction for further research on recommendations on the choice of language in interpreters' notes.

However, in the case of the Chinese subjects, traces of the source language (which is L2 for both Japanese and Chinese students) are seen in their notes together with those of the other language, which in the case of the present study was an L1. These findings are in line with the ideas of Seleskovitch, who reports a high variability between subjects regarding the choice of language: “in some notes the source language dominates, in others the target language is dominant, and in others again a balanced mixture of both languages can be observed” (Seleskovitch, 1975: 158).

The experiment resulted in both the Chinese and the Japanese group using the same strategies for notation – mixing the source and the target language. The results show that the interpreters did not employ a proper strategy for notation, which affected the quality of the performance. A tentative explanation will be given in the section below.

## **5 Discussion**

As shown in Figure 2, the Japanese subjects made notes mostly (62%) in their L1, and half (50%) of the notes of the Chinese subjects was written in their L2. The interpreters wrote their notes in two or even three languages at the same time. In note-taking studies most researchers either support or oppose the recommendation to write notes in the target language. Those who recommend using the target language do so on the grounds that it is thought to facilitate production of the target speech. Those who advise writing in the source language argue that doing so would unburden the interpreter from language conversion at the listening stage. In spite of this fundamental disagreement, there is a large quantity of literature (Dam, 2004; Ilg & Lambert, 1996; Kalina, 1998) which opposes writing notes in two or more languages. When comparing the data on notes analysis with that of the performance analysis, it becomes clear that the performance could have been executed in a better way, if it were not for a mixture of the source and the target languages in their notes.

These results are illustrated in the observation of H. Obst (2010: 53): “taking notes in two or more languages is not a good idea. Interpreters are always under pressure. ... They have to listen carefully, analyze, memorize, take notes, and find the correct formulations in the target language. They can not stare at a hastily written word on their notepad and not be sure what language they are looking at”.

Another interesting result is that the quality of the interpretation was more or less the same (within a 10% interval) with differences found only in the analysis of the interpreters' errors. The reason for such results lies in the subjects' background. While the Chinese and the Japanese students had a similar level of academic experience in interpreting (see Table 1 and 2), the Chinese participants had more professional experience as part of their jobs in their home countries and abroad. They had come to Japan to polish their skills, whereas the Japanese students had only just learnt to interpret. The results are in line with Setton & Dawrant's (2016) findings on the curriculum in interpretation training. “To preserve pedagogical progression, but still, provide sufficient hours of training and practice both-way interpretation, two adjustments are needed to the standard curriculum – extra class hours and a significantly more language enhancement support” (2016: 26).

Following up on the topic of the difference between L2 to L3 and L2 to L1 consecutive interpretation, it should be mentioned that not only the training but also the linguistic distance became an important factor in this research. As mentioned in section 2.1, Chinese is closer to English, thus it is comparatively easier to interpret in a Chinese-English language combination, whereas Japanese is relatively far from English, so interpreting in a Japanese-English language combination is considered to be more difficult.

Despite the task of the experiment being English-to-Japanese interpretation, most Chinese students had an advantage of having a mother tongue that is structurally closer to the source language. This may be one of the reasons why most of them chose to write their notes in both English and Chinese. This group of interpreters was supposed to be accustomed to the structure of English; thus understanding and processing an English speech proved to be an easier task for them.

The students from both the Chinese and the Japanese groups were observed by the researcher, and the following tendency was discovered. Most of the Japanese notes made by the Chinese interpreters were added at the note-reading stage - initially, the notes were written in English and Chinese. On the contrary, the notes of the Japanese interpreters were written mostly in the Japanese language. No English or Japanese notes were added to the existing ones at the note-reading stage. Perhaps, the linguistic distance acted as a factor which prevented the native Japanese-speaking interpreters from choosing English as their note-taking language. The Chinese interpreters, on the other hand, used all the three languages for the task.

According to Obst (2010), the language that saves the most effort is the most preferable choice for note-taking, so it is not surprising that the Chinese interpreters gravitated towards the language, the structure of which is closer to their mother tongue. Linguistic distance, as a factor, may affect the degree of difficulty of an L2 to L3 interpretation task to the extent that it may, in fact, be considered easier than L2 to L1 interpretation.

Nowadays, the labor market of interpretation services is undergoing rapid changes in providing consecutive interpretation services in Asian countries. Whether the Asian interpretation market will follow the European example and introduce the mother-tongue principle is unclear at the present moment. But the issue of the linguistic distance may play

an important part in developing and shaping the Asian interpretation labor market and its emerging trends.

## 6 Conclusion

The present article reports on how interpreter trainees with different language skill sets carry out similar tasks in different interpretation settings. It should be noted, however, that the current recommendations on note-taking either in the source or in the target language were made during the prevalence of L2 to L1 one-way interpreting. There may be a need to develop other recommendations on language choices in interpreters' notes that would be useful to interpreters performing in a both-way setting, as well as a foreign language to another foreign language setting.

The perpetrators in many cases are either the limited knowledge of language skills and emerging trends of the labor market or the lack or disregard of intercultural communication skills. Language skills are critical for employability in the interpretation labor market and the business performance, as changes that the labor market of present faced such as increased competitiveness, globalization and technological progress call for ever-higher and more labor market relevant skills for productivity growth and secure quality jobs. Having sufficient levels of language skill, consequently, is essential for interpreter trainees to smoothly access the labor market. Considering the new trends in the interpretation labor market reported in the Introduction, the definition of "language skill" (the level of mastery of L2 that allows consecutive interpretation from L2 to L1) probably does not fit the present interpretation settings. The example of native Japanese and Chinese speaking subjects shows a necessity to reconsider the definition for a language skill of consecutive interpreters. In the condition of the present-day interpretation labor market and with regards to the results of the note-taking research, the language skill required for each trend in the interpretation labor market should be defined by the specific interpretation settings.

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### About the Author

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