Theory in the interpreting classroom

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26230.22081

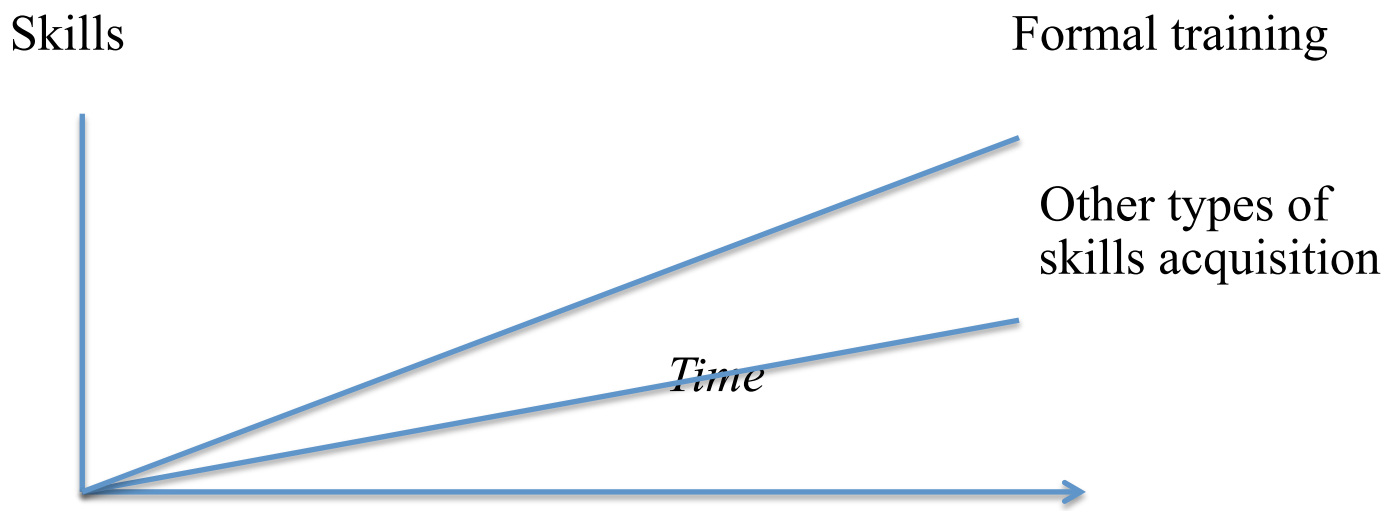
Daniel Gile

danielgile@yahoo.com

www.cirinandgile.com

Introduction: a 'philosophy' of interpreter training (1)

Formal training
(*as opposed to other forms: apprenticeship, self-training etc.*)



Aim: ***Faster & Better***
Reach operational level more rapidly
'Better' through higher skills, avoidance of uncorrected undesirable behavior patterns possibly acquired in the field if uncorrected

Introduction: a 'philosophy' of interpreter training (2)

Trainees:

- Varying degrees of talent

but

- With the potential *ability to think critically*

Trainers:

- Their role is to *guide* trainees
  With respect to technical skills
  With respect to awareness of human factors
- They seek to maintain/enhance the trainees' ***motivation***
- They ***avoid overloading*** trainees with unnecessary tasks
- Trainers ***respect the feelings*** of trainees
- But ***demand some effort*** from them

Process-oriented training

In the beginning of training
(*at least several weeks in short courses,*
up to several months in long courses)

Focus on processes as opposed to output quality
'How to do it best',
as opposed to 'what was wrong in the trainee's output'

More efficient as regards initial acquisition of processes (?)

Later ***move on to product-oriented training***
to offer practical suggestions
and fine-tune the output
(in particular *language, delivery, thematic knowledge, specific preparation strategies, coping tactics when facing difficulties*…)

Process-oriented training and theory

In order for trainers to
- Analyze the trainees' weaknesses
- Offer them convincing explanations

Some ***conceptual elaboration/'theory'*** is required

Referring to ***empirical research***
to offer the results of ***systematic fact-finding***
to support ideas and critical reflection
is also potentially useful

Hence the topic of this presentation

‘Theory’? (1)

Here
Include ***‘full’ theoretical constructs***
(e.g. *relevance theory, psychological models of cognition, linguistic theories, sociological theories…*)

But also
- Conceptual frameworks
(*not fully formalized with terminology, bibliographical references etc.*)
- Tentative explanations

In other words,
Conceptual indications,
as opposed to:
- Factual indications
- Practical prescriptions

Plus ***empirical research***

‘Theory’? (2)

In an interpreter training context
Recommend giving priority to

tentative *constructs with* ***explanatory properties***
with likely ***‘positive’ psychological effects***

(Reduce uncertainty
Reduce anxiety)

as opposed to the constructs with the best explanatory *and* predictive properties (*traditionally expected from scientific theories*)

Two *assumptions* to start with

1. Theory *can* be useful to students

Essentially

- ***To explain difficulties they experience***
- To ***explain their teachers' recommendations***
- To ***guide their action***

My assumption that it is potentially useful
is based on experience and testimonies,
(as regards the type of theory I describe here)

2. Interpreting students tend not to like theory

- They ***want*** *to acquire* ***practical skills***
- They ***do not*** *spontaneously* ***see the usefulness of theory***
- They ***do not like learning abstract concepts***

Interpreting Theory Testimonies

M. From New York, 25 years old:
Thanks to interpreting theory, I lost 15 pounds in 3 weeks

N. From Chicago, 35 years old:
Interpreting theory changed my life. I finally found a job, got married and have 5 children who will support me when I retire

O., from Hong Kong, 26 years old:
Interpreting theory gave a tremendous boost to my sex life.

More seriously

Assessment questionnaires very positive about the usefulness of theory

Plus spontaneous letters from students saying they felt encouraged and stimulated by it

Implications on what, how and when to teach theory

1. **What**?
   - As a first step, **only teach** what is likely to be **perceived** as most **relevant** and **useful.**
     Can add further 'layers' of theory later if appropriate.
   - ***Avoid prescriptive*** 'theories' – Gile's preference: descriptive, tentative
2. **How**?
   In **simple words, avoiding complexity** if possible, **avoiding abstract concepts** whenever possible, **focusing on the essential**
   albeit at the expense of completeness and accuracy.
   Corrections and complementary elements can be added later.
3. **When?**
   When students become aware of problems that can make theory attractive as a potential solution

Presenter's bias and limited competence

D. Gile: conference interpreter only, spoken languages only
No experience of community interpreting
No experience of signed language interpreting

But will attempt to think of what might be relevant/useful to you

So will rely partly on what heard and read
from competent signed language interpreters/ community interpreters

Risk of misperceptions/errors
If this occurs, please tell me so that I can correct
and
Please accept my apologies

Example 1 – Word-for-word translation or not? (1)

As a student at ESIT, Paris,
Heard repeatedly from teachers that in translation,
there was **no need to translate word-for-word**,
that **using other words, other sentence structures than those considered 'equivalent' to the ones used in the source text was fine**.

Found the idea attractive, but:

What about the author's choice of words and sentence structures?
What right do translators have to move away from them?

Other authors (ex. Peter Newmark) were of opposite opinion:
keep as close as possible to source text.

Which attitude was right?
Question bothered me, looked for theory to help

Example 1 – Word-for-word translation or not? (2)

Actually developed my own theory on the basis of an experiment (*verbalizing a simple idea, variability, 4 types of information, some of which not chosen by the producer of the statement*…)

Plus some findings from cognitive psychology

Have been using it when teaching translation with (I think) excellent results:

Translation students very rapidly accept the principle of reformulation on the basis of meaning

Accept the idea that it is legitimate to criticize a target text which reads as clumsy language and to try to improve it even if it shifts away from the author's lexical and syntactic choices (which the author might well change if s/he had a chance to do so – as shown by the in-class experiment)

Example 2 – Why is interpreting so difficult? (1)

Virtually all ***students of interpreting experience severe difficulties*** during at least the first weeks, and often during most of their training:

- 'Loss' of language proficiency (perceived)
- 'Loss' of intelligence (perceived)
- Large fluctuations in their performance level
- 'No progress' (perceived)

These generate a ***high level of stress***
Demotivation

Theory which could ***explain*** such phenomena
And perhaps ***reassure*** them (to some extent)

would be welcome

Example 2 – Why is interpreting so difficult? (2)

The Effort Models of interpreting and associated models with the help of concepts and theories from cognitive psychology were my answers to this need

A few years ago, discovered Daniel Kahneman's work

Thinking, fast and slow (2011)

System 1, System 2 governing our cognition
Useful supplement with empirical evidence

Example 3 – What should the interpreter's role be?

Conduit model, helper, mediator, coordinator of exchanges?
Explain? Draw the attention of one party to lack of understanding…?

Analysis of situations
With the help of findings of empirical research
(*Berk-Seligson, Roy, Angelelli, Miner*)
May provide better answers than prescriptive positions
Including those found in professional codes of conduct

When should theory be taught? (1)

Gile's opinion:
Preferably
when the students themselves become aware of the problems,
when the problems start bothering them

This is when they will be ***most receptive***

Before that time, they may not want to pay attention to theory
which they will perceive as added effort
which prevents them from focusing on acquiring practical skills

When do they become aware of the ***intrinsic difficulty of interpreting***?
Perhaps from the beginning,
but they ***need some time***
To ***realize the problems are real*** and will not go away soon
and to ***identify them*** with some accuracy

Perhaps 1 to 2 months after starting training is a good time
to start offering theoretical explanations of such difficulties

When should theory be taught? (2)

When do they become aware of the role issues?

Perhaps even before they start training, if they have had practical interpreting experience

But starting to ***theorize*** about their role from the start may not be a priority, as opposed to language issues and cognitive issues

The matter could be addressed partly through simulations and discussions
But theory may not be the best answer at a very early stage of training

When should theory be taught? (3)

Issues in tactics/linguistic options: iconic, fingerspelling, mouthing etc.

Students may become aware of their existence early on
Some conceptual indications, historical and sociological in nature
about the history of the Deaf,
socio-cultural issues in the Deaf community

Could be appropriate from the very beginning to guide them in their choices

How 'theoretical' would that be?

Gile's opinion:
Not highly technical theory with Bourdieusian sociology, concepts of power, social and other capital, habitus etc. Too complex, not 'cost-effective' in time and effort at this stage.
Rather, general explanations that students can relate to their daily experience
without pompous/abstract terminology

Example 1: teaching cognitive explanations (1)

In response to perceived linguistic and cognitive difficulty
of interpreting
which generates anxiety
"What is happening to me?"
"Am I 'losing' my languages?"
"Am I stupid after all?"

Wish to explain and reassure

Useful concept: limitations in processing capacity/attentional resources
which cause difficulties
combined with the hope-generating concept of automation
which will help reduce the amplitude of difficulties with practice

How to go about it?

Example 1: teaching cognitive explanations (2)

Explain the existence of so-called automatic operations and so-called controlled operations

With examples from everyday life

(Daniel Kahneman's book an entertaining and very serious reference)

BEGINNING OF EXAMPLE

from powerpoint presentation for students

Automatic and controlled operations: an introduction

Cognitive psychologists: two types of operations

1. Those which require '***attentional resources***' (or ***processing capacity***) and some ***execution time*** (*fractions of a second*): '***controlled operations***'

2. Those which are 'spontaneous', do not require attentional resources, and are extremely fast, virtually instantaneous: '***automatic operations'***

Automatic and controlled operations: a few examples

Controlled operations

- Choosing between two funding offers from a bank for the purchase of a house
- Walking on ice (a physical operation)

Automatic operations

- Looking in the direction of a sudden source of noise
- Counting from 1 to 10 (except in the case of little children)

Automatic vs. controlled operations: as binary as that?

These two categories ***oversimplify*** reality:

Some operations require substantial attentional resources,
others very little,
others very little in some circumstances and much more in other circumstances

walking in everyday life vs. walking on a slippery surface

driving on a wide, dry highway without much traffic vs. driving on a slippery, narrow mountain road when visibility is poor

Cumulating controlled operations

Available attentional resources/processing capacity are/is limited at any time

Therefore

Several automatic operation can be executed at the same time without difficulty,

but

When several controlled operations are executed at the same time,

there is a risk that they will require more processing capacity than is available

and performance will suffer

Automation of controlled operations

An important ‘law’:

When a controlled operation is repeated often, it gradually becomes *automated*:

- It is executed faster and faster
- It requires less and less processing capacity

…and thus frees attentional resources for other tasks that may require them

Why should interpreters care?

Because as will be explained later,
Interpreting is (largely) highly controlled,
with risks of cognitive saturation
when more than one operation is conducted at the same time

Some of the operations it involves
will always remain controlled

Others can be automated partly,
starting with parts of speech production and speech comprehension
(*As we will see later, neither is 'automatic' in the sense of cognitive psychology*)

Achieving such automation will be very useful

END OF EXAMPLE

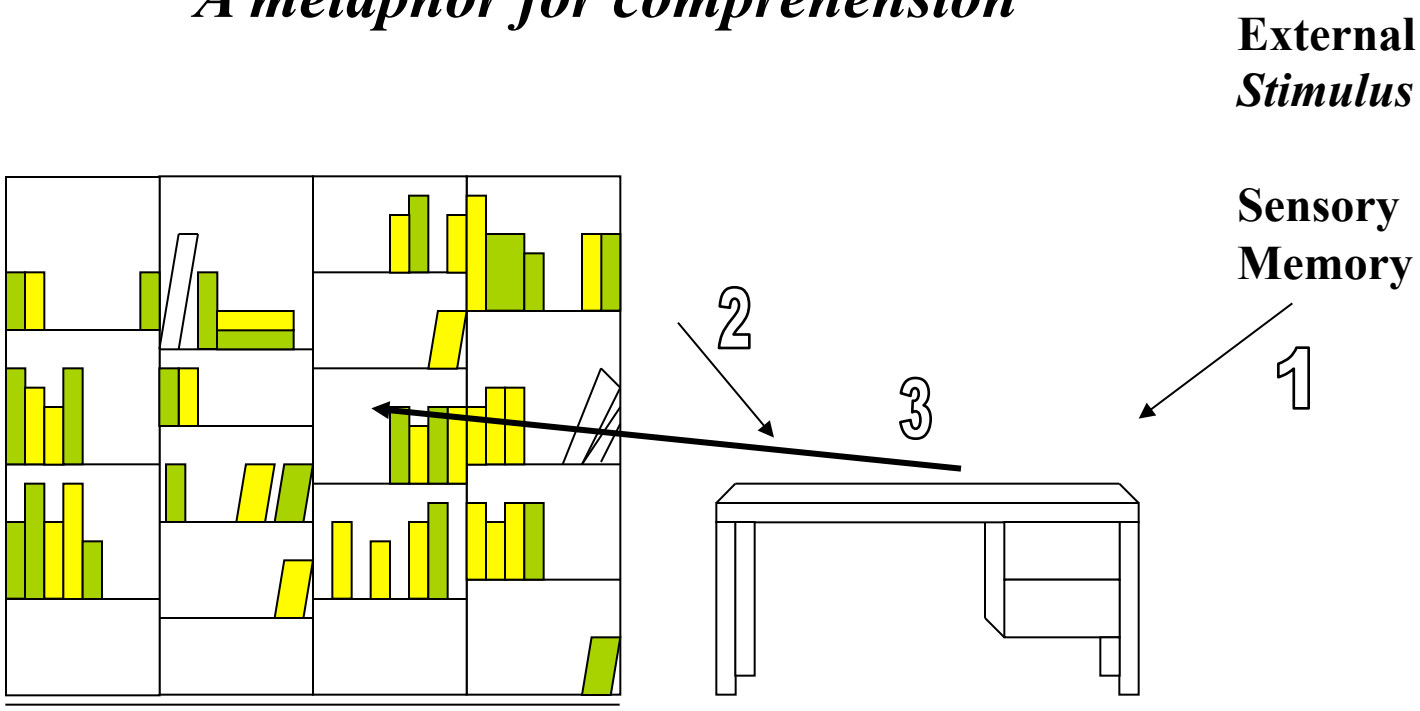
Speech production & comprehension as a cognitive challenge

The cognitive challenge is associated with limitations in attentional resources
In particular, in Working Memory limitations

Is it a good idea to tell students all
about the research and evolving theories about attentional resources and working memory?
(*Baddeley, Miyake and Shah, Cowan*…)

In view of my experience with students,
I think this would be too heavy
and prefer to offer them a much simplified view of WM
and how it functions
but draw their attention to the fact it is a simplified view
(next 4 slides)

Working Memory and Long Term Memory
A metaphor for comprehension



But WM = storage + processing. Only the storage component is represented here

Speech comprehension – the role of each memory

Sensory memory
Stores images/sounds for a very short while, until they are transferred to WM

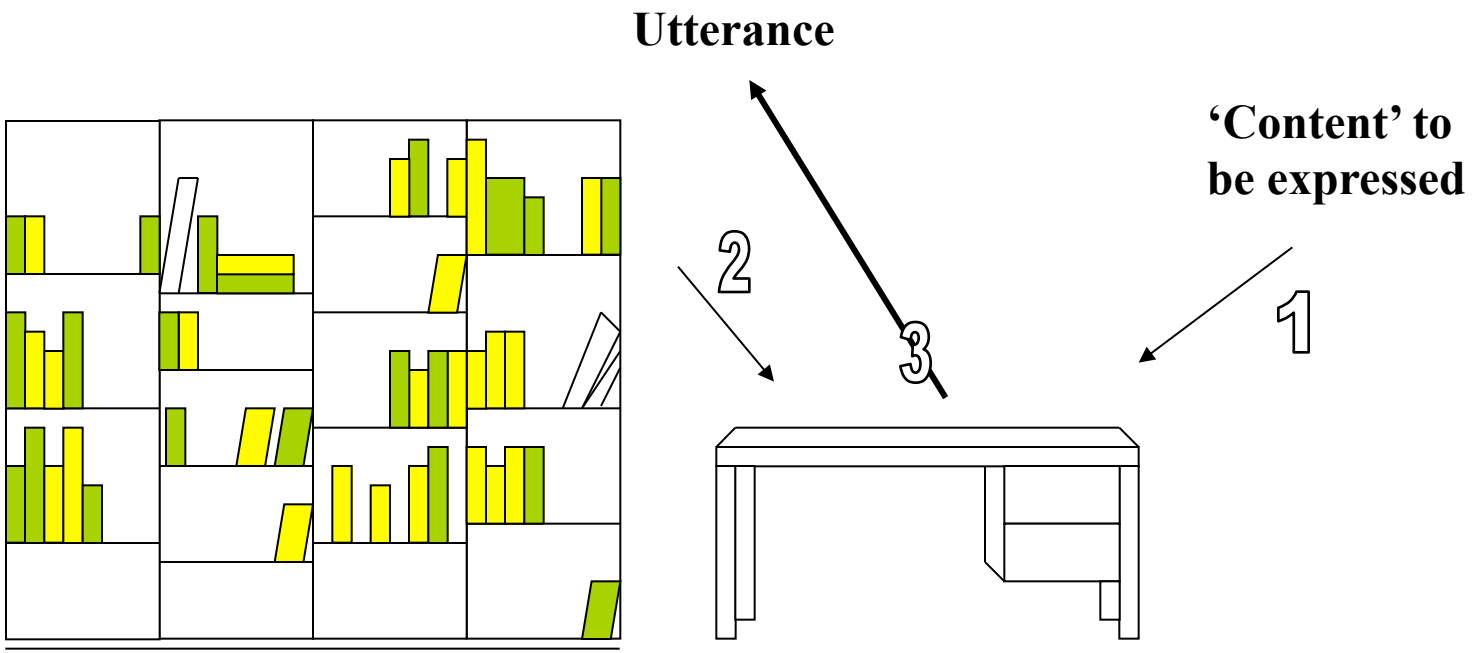
WM
Stores (for a while) ***info*** required to process the signal which comes both from sensory memory and from LTM
and
processes the information to construct meaning

- Identifying signal as language units and assemblies,
- Constructing meaning

are done ***with the help of information stored in LTM***

The process is not automatic, though parts of it may be

Working Memory and Long Term Memory
A metaphor for speech production



Long term memory **Working Memory**

But WM = storage+ processing. Only the storage component is represented here

The EM and Tightrope Hypothesis

S: R + M + P + C + *SMS + *OID****

**When working into a sign language*

In Production, ***spatial memory*** plays an important role

Why would that model be useful to students?

- Insofar as all its ***components are at least partly controlled***
- That the sum of attentional ***resources required*** at any time is ***close to the maximum available*** capacity
- That this is the reason for many EOIs
- That ***practice*** (and strategies and tactics) will ***reduce attentional requirements*** and the frequency and risks of cognitive saturation

  - *It* ***explains difficulties***
  - *It* ***explains the benefits of practice, tactics and strategies recommended by instructors***
    (*For instance, tactics in the use of signing spac****e)***
  - *It* ***gives students hope for alleviation of the pressure***

TELL STUDENTS:

Models: a reminder

All these models are by definition
a ***simplified representation*** of reality

They are offered to highlight important phenomena

They do not describe in detail or accurately the reality they represent

Other models could do this better
(*Next two slides*)

Those offered to you here were selected because they are available and simple

Setton Model

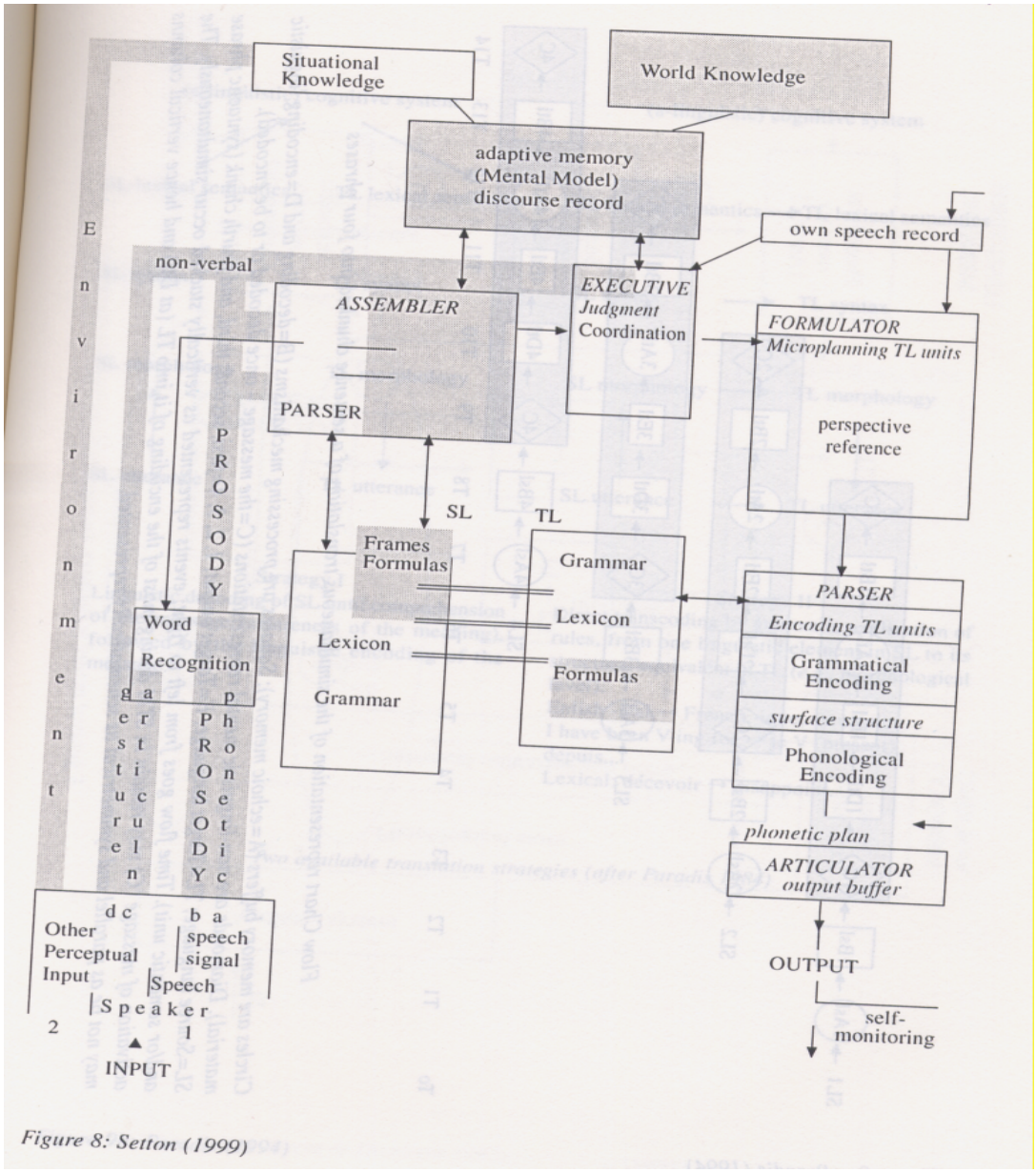


Figure 8: Setton (1999)

Moser-Mercer Model

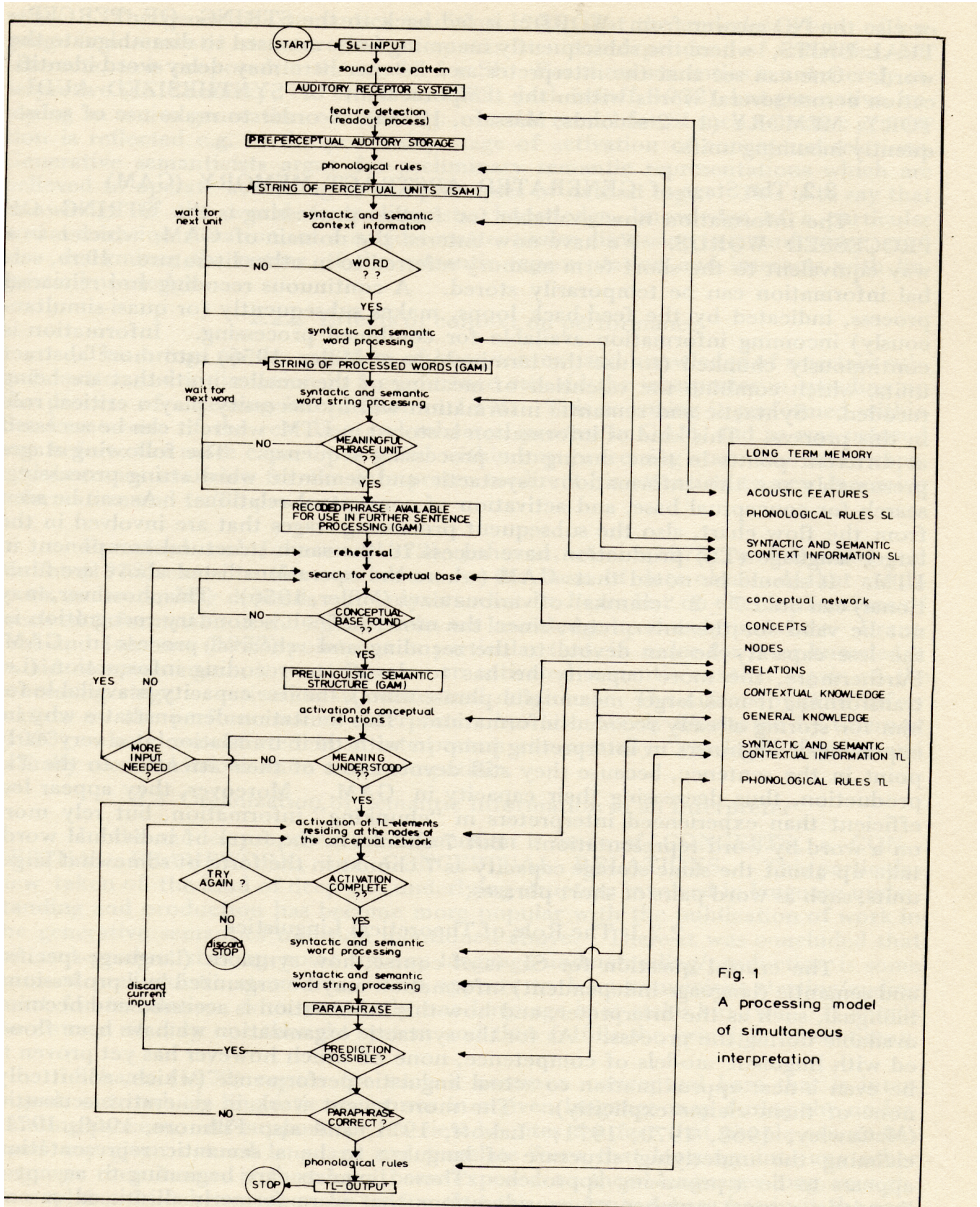


Fig. 1
A processing model of simultaneous interpretation

Figure 1

How about empirical research?

Useful to tell students that theoretical elements they are being taught have empirical backing

To boost their credibility
But also to raise the students' awareness
of the role and potential contribution of research
especially empirical research

Again, explain in simple terms
Not with all the technical details

And what about theory for trainers? (1)

Three categories of trainers

1. ***Practitioners who do not want to hear about theory***

There are many such people in spoken language interpreting and not just old-timers

Just leave them alone

Trying to convince them could be counter-productive

2. ***Trainers who know little about theory but are not hostile***

Go slowly

Start with simple theoretical components as with students

Gradually go more widely and deeper

Depending on the interest they show

Not convinced of the usefulness of abstract theories from education science

But empirical research from ed. science could be useful

And what about theory for trainers? (2)

3. ***Trainers with interest in academia and/or theory***

Basically no restriction

But would suggest caution

Theories differ greatly in their

- *Approach*
- *Nature*
- *Degree of abstractness*

Which to study in depth
And which to summarize
Will depend on the target audience

What about empirical research?

Trainees' (and trainers') personal experience
is necessarily limited

Some pre-conceived ideas
in particular about the interpreter's role
(*conduit role, expectations from principals in various situations*)

Some pre-existing ideological views
which may need to be re-examined critically

Empirical research findings can help
(Berk-Seligson, Hale, Angelelli, Roy, Miner…)

Again, use when relevant
Do not impose out of the blue

Back to the beginning: words, words, words… (1)

So much for words

But ***how efficient is theory in the classroom - in reality***?

Mentioned positive assessments and comments from students

Actually, this year at ISIT (Paris):
"One class, a second class only if you request it"
Guess what: they asked for more!

Gratifying, but not enough:

Students ***may react to teaching style rather than to theory*** per se

Reaction can be ***positive in the short term***, but no long-term effects

Need to know ***what is helpful*** and ***in what way***
what isn't
what needs to be corrected/improved

Back to the beginning: words, words, words… (2)

Empirical research required

Not interpreting performance assessment
Link between contribution of theory and performance too indirect, too much variability

but

Interviews/questionnaires about perceptions
of usefulness
Preferably with concrete details
and requests for suggestions for improvement

Preferably by investigators other than the instructors themselves

Student from University of Leipzig

Piecychna, Beata (2016)
Integrated problem and decision reporting in translation teaching – advantages and drawbacks from translation students' point of view. *Białostockie Archiwum Językowe* 2016, nr 16. 247-263.

Conclusion

In interpreter training

'Theory': ***a tool to explain, convince, generate critical thinking***

Not a provisional approximation of reality which needs to be fine-tuned for better approximation as in scientific work per se

Human attitudes of trainees are strong determinants
of when, what and how theory should be included in the curriculum

Overall
Relevance
Simplicity
Honesty about these components being constructs/models only

to preserve credibility and leave room for deeper exploration
by those potentially interested

Need to check and improve on the basis of evidence