Conference interpreting and knowledge acquisition

How professional interpreters tackle unfamiliar topics

Chia-chien Chang, Michelle Min-chia Wu and Tien-chun Gina Kuo
National Taiwan University

This paper describes knowledge acquisition of professional conference interpreters in Taiwan when dealing with unfamiliar topics: the focus is on how the required knowledge is developed before, during and after a conference. We interviewed 10 Chinese-English interpreters, to find out about their preparation for such conferences and their approach to developing domain-specific knowledge. We first collected each interpreter's five latest conference programs and used these to analyze the knowledge domains covered. We then based each interview on one conference agenda, considered representative by the interpreter, to examine the knowledge acquisition process from pre- to post-conference. The results show strategic preparation of unfamiliar topics: to facilitate comprehension and reformulation, interpreters make good use of conference documents and compile glossaries in which they organize the concepts and terminology specific to the conference. As they assimilate the language usage of the presenters and other participants during the conference, they use their analytical skills to manage any difficulties. Keeping in mind the aims of the event (e.g., commercial, scientific), as well as the profiles of the speakers and target audience, helps to optimize availability of relevant knowledge at short notice and continue updating it during the assignment.

Keywords: conference interpreting, conference preparation, knowledge acquisition
1. Introduction

When comparing the knowledge acquisition of translators and interpreters, Gile (2009:144) observed that the former are more inclined to become specialists, whereas the latter are more likely to become “general practitioners”. This is certainly true of many conference interpreters, in particular those who work as freelancers and have to deal with a variety of topics. Every time they work at a conference, they enter the domain of another profession, becoming involved in the discourse community of that profession, often as spokespersons for some of its key players. With many international conferences becoming increasingly technical and specialized nowadays, even interpreters who are experts in particular fields must be able to effectively acquire information for interpreting in other areas of expertise.

Gile (2009:129) speaks of “ad hoc knowledge acquisition” for specific interpreting assignments, as distinct from the knowledge the interpreter already possesses. He divides this process into three chronological stages (2009:144–146):

1. advance preparation: reading conference documents provided by the conference organizer, including the program, papers, related documents, speakers’ notes and/or scripts, glossaries, and bioketches; searching for related information on the Internet, and attending briefings and rehearsals;
2. last-minute preparation: reading speakers’ notes/scripts and PowerPoint presentations obtained at the conference venue, as well as communicating with speakers before their presentations;
3. in-conference knowledge acquisition: listening to speakers and to other members of the interpreting team at work; communicating with speakers.

Interpreters understand clearly the value of this ad hoc knowledge acquisition. AIIC’s Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters (AIIC 1999) emphasizes that interpreting quality depends on the interpreter’s grasp of the conference background, theme and related terminology, recommending that interpreters dedicate systematic effort to preparation of glossaries. Similarly, interpreter trainers often point out the importance of learning how to prepare for conferences. Donovan (2001) mentions three interrelated levels of preparation (terminology; subject matter; situation), to help students overcome the challenges presented by technical conferences and develop effective preparation strategies. In his outline proposal of a conference preparation course, Luccarelli (2006) identifies the need for various features to be clearly identified beforehand: type of meeting; subject; purpose and background of the event; specialized terminology; and participants. Awareness of these points helps interpreters contextualize the conference and facilitates their work.
This study addresses the issue of ad hoc knowledge acquisition from the perspective of professional interpreters dealing on a regular basis with unfamiliar topics. We asked 10 freelance Chinese-English interpreters in Taiwan to recall a recent experience of preparing for, and interpreting at, a conference on a topic new to them. By examining the variety of knowledge domains these interpreters needed to deal with when preparing, and their assessment of how successfully they had interpreted, we aim to identify strategies enabling professional interpreters to prepare such topics and hence to enter professional discourse communities of various disciplines, as communication facilitators, at short notice.

2. Previous studies

Many models have been proposed for the process of conference interpreting (Pöchhacker 2004), with prior knowledge (the interpreter’s, the speaker’s or the listener’s) often playing a key role in one form or another. Kohn and Kalina’s (1996) model of comprehension and production in interpreting relies on a diversified knowledge base that is essential to the construction of the mental discourse model, including relevant linguistic and world/subject matter knowledge, together with awareness of the communicative situation. Gile (2009) proposed that effective comprehension during interpreting depends on knowledge of the language, extralinguistic knowledge and deliberate analysis. Knowledge of the language, a prerequisite for comprehension, can be complemented by extralinguistic knowledge – covering not only particular subjects, but also contextual factors such as the speaker’s background, position and relationship with other participants. In addition, interpreters sometimes rely on deliberate and sustained analysis to grasp the speaker’s message.

Empirical studies of knowledge acquisition have largely assessed its effects on interpreting performance. Anderson (1994) examined simultaneous interpretation (SI) by 12 professional conference interpreters, under three different conditions: with a script provided just before interpreting; with a summary provided; and without prior information or material. The results showed no significant differences. Anderson explained that this might be attributed to the small sample size, individual differences, and the relative simplicity of the source texts. Lamberger-Felber (2003) compared SI by 12 professional interpreters, differentiating three experimental settings according to when the script was made available: well in advance, just beforehand, or not at all. When the script was available in good time, names and numbers were more accurately interpreted, with fewer errors and omissions. Díaz Galaz’s (2011) experimental study, assessing how well 14 trainee interpreters handled highly technical topics, simulated a conference setting to
compare SI with and without preparation. Material studied beforehand included speech outlines, speaker biographies, PowerPoint presentations, glossaries and a conference agenda. The results indicated that preparation shortened ear-voice span (EVS), enhanced accuracy and lowered the percentage of omissions. Díaz Galaz, Padilla and Bajo (2015) came to similar conclusions, in an experimental study of professional and student interpreters: in both groups, advance preparation improved accuracy and shortened EVS; it also improved professional interpreters’ handling of non-redundant elements, while students benefited not only in dealing with non-redundant information but also in managing specialized terminology and complex syntactic structures.

An important aspect of knowledge acquisition for interpreters entering an unfamiliar subject field is specialized terminology. Jiang (2013) conducted a large-scale survey of how nearly 500 interpreters build, manage and use glossaries. She found that interpreters compile glossaries mainly to learn vocabulary, to learn about issues and concepts, and to speed up their target text production. The sources considered most effective for generating glossaries are task-specific conference documents, such as texts of presentations and detailed agendas. Results also showed that glossary-building is an ongoing process, before, during and after the conference: most interpreters edit their glossaries in the booth, while listening to speakers and to other members of the interpreting team, as well as after the conference, to maintain an up-to-date resource for future assignments dealing with similar topics. Chan’s (2015) survey of seven interpreter training institutes in Taiwan showed that student interpreters used glossary-building to prepare for class assignments and to strengthen three pillars of interpreting competence: languages, general and specialized knowledge, and interpreting techniques. These findings indicate that glossary compilation plays an important role in developing trainee interpreters’ expertise.

It should be noted that, although prior knowledge can facilitate interpreting, practitioners have claimed that they do not have to be specialists in a particular discipline to do a good job. Seleskovitch (1994: 53–55) differentiated between attendees at specialist conferences, who initiate information, and the interpreters working there, who are presented with it. She stressed that the expertise of interpreters lies in the analysis and organization of information/ideas, and in the skills associated with communicating that information across languages and cultures. Gile (2005, 2009) also emphasized that the structure of specialized texts, despite the many technical terms they contain, is no different from that of general texts. If interpreters have a good grasp of the necessary terms and their etymology, as well as of the background and context, they should find most concepts accessible. Gile (2002) reported his own preparation for a cardiology conference. A comparison of the bilingual glossary compiled beforehand and the actual terms used
by speakers indicated that his preparation of technical terms was insufficient. Yet, in retrospect, the author did not feel that he had encountered difficulties: he pointed out that, though many terms were not identified during preparation, the key terms and core concepts that it did include helped with comprehension during the conference. In other words, even though interpreters cannot achieve the same level of knowledge as specialists, they can still handle technical conferences provided they have a rudimentary conceptual understanding, know key terms, and are skilled at textual analysis and comprehension.

3. Rationale and research questions

The literature reviewed so far is largely based on experimental studies or surveys to understand the role of knowledge acquisition in interpreting. Considering the relevance of this topic to professional interpreting, and the ongoing changes in the conference environment, with increasing use of English as a lingua franca and state-of-the-art technology, more detailed description of how professional interpreters acquire and update their subject-matter knowledge is needed. A good example is Albl-Mikasa’s (2012) model of interpreter competence, based on interviews with 10 professional conference interpreters working on the German market. Although knowledge acquisition was not specifically examined, related skills were identified at practically all stages in the interpreter’s workflow: (1) pre-process (low-level terminology management, informed semi-knowledge, streamlined assignment preparation); (2) in-process (below-expert scanning, identifying and matching); (3) post-process (terminology wrap-up); (4) para-process (lifelong learning).

Qualitative research such as that presented in the above study has important implications for interpreter education and for professional conference interpreting. First, interpreting training programs worldwide, including those in Taiwan, have been experimenting with different components and modules, such as conference preparation and compulsory/elective domain knowledge courses. Learning about the varieties of topics and genres for which interpreting is regularly in demand on a particular market, and about how best to prepare unfamiliar subject matter, can bring added value to interpreter training curricula.

Second, for outsiders, it is difficult to imagine how conference interpreters enter the domain of another profession via pre-conference preparation. Many conference organizers may think that interpreting in a particular field requires the inside knowledge of a practitioner, and that an interpreter’s pre-conference preparation can be no substitute for this. There is thus a tendency for organizers hiring interpreters to consider prior experience of the subject matter more important
than formal training in conference interpreting. Interpreters in Taiwan have even reported that conference organizers occasionally ask them to work in tandem with a bilingual subject matter expert, the idea being that the latter can “come to the rescue when the discussion gets technical”. Providing a comprehensive picture of how professional interpreters acquire sufficient knowledge to deal with new or unfamiliar conference topics may therefore be useful for client education as well.

Against this background, the present study adopted a qualitative approach and tapped into the experiences of professional interpreters in Taiwan dealing with new topics on a regular basis. We focused on the following questions:

1. What are the varieties of topics and genres that Chinese-English freelance conference interpreters in Taiwan need to deal with?
2. How do interpreters develop expertise on specific topics?
3. What strategies do interpreters adopt to acquire the linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge needed for interpreting at conferences that deal with unfamiliar topics?

4. The study

4.1 Participants

Ten freelance professional interpreters active on the Chinese-English conference interpreting market in Taiwan participated in this study. All had received at least two years’ postgraduate training in Chinese-English conference interpreting, with 3–17 years’ professional interpreting experience at the time of the interview. The sample recruited for this study was more or less evenly divided between language majors (this being the case for most interpreters in Taiwan) and those who had majored in other subjects. The purpose of organizing the sample in this way was to ascertain whether their degree subject affected the portfolio of topics undertaken by conference interpreters, and their ad hoc knowledge acquisition. Table 1 shows participants’ major and years of experience.

4.2 Data collection

Each participant was interviewed individually between late December 2013 and January 2014, just after the seasonal peak for conference interpreting in Taiwan. Before the interview, each participants was asked to send us the agendas of the last five conferences that they had worked on as email attachments, and to choose one of the five as the focus of the interview because of its unfamiliar topic. All conferences were held between early December 2013 and early January 2014.
Table 1. Study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>College major</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Atomic Science</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>International Business</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>1: Information Management</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The topics of the conferences chosen as the focus of the interviews (see Table 2) vary greatly and, in each case, fall outside the interpreter’s stated area of expertise.

Table 2. Topics chosen as new and unfamiliar by the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Topic of conference chosen for the interview</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Urban planning</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Corporate training workshops</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Internet and cloud computing</td>
<td>CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Healthcare and medicine</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>SI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>General legal context</td>
<td>CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Food safety</td>
<td>CI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CI = consecutive interpreting; SI = simultaneous interpreting

Forty-six conference agendas were collected from the 10 interviewees (two participants worked as a team at four of the conferences). The agendas were analyzed to identify the topics the interpreters had had to deal with recently. Participants were free to consult the agendas during the interview, to refresh their memory of the preparation process or provide examples.
The interviews, each lasting about an hour, were conducted in Mandarin by one of the authors, following guidelines for a semi-structured interview (see Appendix). Participants were first asked to fill out a questionnaire, detailing their background and experience in conference interpreting as well as the three subjects that they had worked on most often during the past year and those that they saw as their specialities. During the interview, the participants were asked to describe their knowledge acquisition before, during, and after the conference that they had chosen to focus on. They were also asked to compare this experience of preparing for a conference on a new topic with conference preparation in general. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

5. Findings

5.1 Topics and genres of interpreted events

Table 3 shows each participant’s area of expertise and the three subjects worked on most often during the past year. The table divides participants between English language majors (4 interpreters) and others (6 interpreters).

When asked how they had developed expertise in certain areas, all participants stated that they had worked at many conferences on the topic concerned. Consistent with this, all but one participant identified their area of expertise as one of the three topics they had worked on most often during the past year. Areas of expertise cover a wide range of disciplines, in most cases not directly related to the individual’s college major (with the sole exceptions of P7 and P8, among the non-English majors). Interestingly, P7 remarked that terminological knowledge she had acquired during her IT major was insufficient and out-of-date for the knowledge requirements of an interpreter specializing in that field today. The interpreters thus work at conferences dealing with topics that require them to learn new concepts and terms outside the scope of their higher education. Their ability to develop knowledge of a new discipline is such that they can come to consider it an area of expertise, for which conference organizers are happy to continue hiring them or to recommend their services.

In this sample, a conference interpreter’s college major has little effect on their choice of conference topics or field of expertise. There may be two main reasons for this. First, the dynamics of the freelance market are usually such that interpreters will accept assignments on any topic, as long as they feel confident that they can acquire enough knowledge of the subject beforehand. Second, although organizers of more technical conferences may take the interpreter’s major into consideration when hiring, their perceptions of the interpreter’s knowledge in
Table 3. Participants’ areas of expertise and subjects worked on most often in the past year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Area of expertise</th>
<th>Top three subjects during past year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>Finance and investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Psychotherapy</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-English major (subject stated in brackets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P3 (Management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 (Atomic Science)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 (International Business)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 (Information Management/English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8 (Economics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9 (Mathematics)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

relation to the conference topic may differ. For instance, P5, an atomic science major who identified technology as her subject of expertise, said that she believed she received more requests for conferences on technology because clients tend to perceive her major as evidence of scientific training and knowledge.

Table 4 classifies the 46 conference agendas collected, by topic, sub-topic, and interpreting mode. Commerce is the most frequent topic, accounting for 16 of the 46 conferences. Information Technology and Law tie in second place, each accounting for nine conferences. The environment is also popular (six conferences). Finally, there are four conferences on finance and investment, and two on medicine and healthcare. These trends are consistent with the interpreters’ indication of the three topics they had worked on most during the past year (see Table 3), which again showed commerce and technology as the two most frequent subjects.

Table 4 also classifies the conferences according to interpreting mode, indicating that demand is evenly divided between consecutive interpreting (CI) and SI. This is probably because some sub-topics feature events that lend themselves to CI – e.g., retail events, network marketing events, and depositions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Sub-topic</th>
<th>No. of conferences</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>CI</th>
<th>SI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce (16)</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sales training</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Media interview of luxury brand executives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Network marketing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Meeting with product distributors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management and Operations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Board meeting of a power company</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>International forum on entrepreneurship and innovation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology (9)</td>
<td>The Internet and cloud computing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Internet security round table</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Taipei game developers forum</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law (9)</td>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>International conference on human rights education</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patent litigation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Deposition</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Attorney – client meeting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (6)</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Launch of automatic demand response service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban planning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Golden twin cities international forum</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green issues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>International forum for business leaders of small and medium enterprises</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food safety</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Specialist meeting on olive oil testing and authentication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and Investment (4)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Investors’ seminar held by a mutual fund company</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare and Medicine (2)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conference on drug utilization effectiveness as promoted by cloud technology</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: CI = consecutive interpreting; SI = simultaneous interpreting*
Table 5 categorizes the 46 events into different genres, listed in descending order of frequency, each of which has a certain format or general purpose. For instance, the conference, symposium or forum genre usually features keynote speeches, presentations, and some form of question and answer session: usually, multiple speakers present ideas or research results on a specific topic and, during the Q&A session, the audience tends to have limited interaction with the speakers. By contrast, internal training is a genre that usually features just one or two trainers: trainee participation and feedback are encouraged – or, in most cases, required.

Table 5. Genres of interpreted events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>No. of events</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conference, symposium, or forum</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>International conference on human rights education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press conference</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Press conference on new flight routes by an airline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training workshop</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sales training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynote</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Keynote speech delivered by a renowned speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Deposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Media interview of luxury brand executives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Negotiation of a commercial contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board meeting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Board meeting of a power company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roundtable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Internet security round table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escort</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Visiting bank executives being introduced to cloud security solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video conference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Video conference with the press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award ceremony</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Celebration of World Freedom Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Celebration of World Freedom Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road show</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Road show held by a mutual fund company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment seminar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Investors’ seminar held by a mutual fund company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: The Celebration of World Freedom Day contains two genres in one event

As a genre has a predictable format and general purpose, this enables the interpreter to identify the kinds of communicative act that may take place and the type of language needed. This is not to say that every keynote speech, for example, will be the same. However, it does mean that, compared with the genre of conference, symposium or forum, in which multiple speakers each have a limited
amount of time to express their ideas, a keynote speech features one single speaker who can elaborate on the topic of the speech, and therefore a deeper knowledge of the speaker’s personal interests and background is required. Similarly, although every deposition features different attorneys and witnesses involved in litigations that will vary in their degrees of complexity, the interpreter will be aware of the need to prepare for a genre that features an adversarial format, with specific legal procedures, carefully crafted questions and cautiously considered answers. Interpreters will also know that the language of a deposition will be legalese, while that of a press conference will be based on repeated slogans and key media messages. In short, the genre of an event may offer useful guidance for pre-conference preparation and for actual interpreting practice.

5.2 Interpreters’ knowledge acquisition processes

Given the great variety of topics and genres these 10 interpreters have to deal with, how do they prepare for their assignments at short notice? Below, we present the results of the interviews, focusing on the skills relevant to knowledge acquisition before, during, and after the conference.

5.2.1 Pre-conference

5.2.1.1 Contextualization

For the ten conferences the interpreters were interviewed about, intensive preparation time ranged from one day to one week beforehand. Preparation therefore needs to be very efficient. The first step in preparing each of these conferences, mentioned by every interpreter, was getting to know about the context of the meeting. This means understanding which mode of interpreting will be used, and what genre(s) will be involved. The 46 agendas collected cover a wide variety of genres that an interpreter will often encounter, and become familiar with. This means that s/he will have a good idea of what to expect during assignments, as shown by Interpreter P8’s comment on his experience when preparing for an assignment on the unfamiliar topic of the gaming industry:

Even though I wasn’t familiar with the content, I knew how the speech would be delivered, how it would proceed. For example, it would start with a brief introduction followed by a more detailed description. This was something that I was familiar with.

(P8)

The interpreters indicated that they would go to the conference website to learn about the agenda, the background of the conference and the organizer. They would also want to know about the participants, their professional relations,
and their reasons for coming to the meeting. This contextualization is especially important for closed-door meetings, such as negotiations, and forms a reference framework guiding the conference preparation process. Interpreter P10 talked about the importance of such information when preparing a closed-door interpreting assignment for a group of chemists from Europe visiting a government lab in Taiwan to discuss olive oil import standards:

Of course there will be many technical terms involved. But the core issue is trade. Our side will insist that our product testing procedure is reliable and the border control measure adopted is appropriate. The other side will insist that our testing procedure is flawed and their manufacturers are honest and trustworthy and should not be banned from importing their products. (P10)

Understanding who will be taking part in a meeting, and why, gives interpreters a feel for the expected level of precision and detail, enabling them to identify priorities for their advance preparation. As explained by one interpreter, if the conference is open to the public, the speakers will need to tailor the language and register to a general audience, even on a technical topic: preparation should thus aim more at achieving an informed layman’s grasp of the overall concept than at mastering a wealth of technical detail. If participants are mostly specialists, the opposite will hold and more time must be spent on preparing technical terms.

5.2.1.2 Sources of preparation materials
The most important resource for preparation is the material provided by the organizers, usually in the form of PowerPoint slides or conference papers – particularly the former, which most conference speakers now use. Instead of starting to prepare intensively for the conference as soon as they know the conference topics, many interpreters wait until they receive PowerPoint files from the organizers.

When they receive this material, usually a week before the conference, the interpreters first look through it quickly to narrow down the field of preparation and judge how much time they need to allocate to it. Once they start intensive preparation, usually in the days leading up to the conference, going over the PowerPoint slides again more attentively affords a good basis on which to understand quite a lot about the content and organization of the speech. In this respect, interpreter P6 compared her first and second readings of the PowerPoint slides:

I go over the PowerPoint slides twice because the first time I look up the words and unfamiliar terms, and the reading is very narrow in scope. The second time I am able to adopt a more global perspective, and I try to figure out why this slide was included and what the speaker is trying to say, and what it all means. Why does this slide follow that slide? I am able to step back and adopt the speaker’s perspective. (P6)
The time allocated to each speaker also provides a helpful yardstick by which to gauge the expected level of detail. When PowerPoint slides include technical terms referring to difficult concepts, information about the time allotted and the target audience enables the interpreter to decide whether s/he can limit preparation to identifying a suitable translation, or even disregard information that will inevitably be left out:

You need to find out how much time the speaker has to deliver his presentation, and how many slides he has, then you will be able to assess how much he is going to say in his presentation. So if he has 50 slides covered with words and only twenty minutes, I wouldn't study the content very closely, because there is no way he is going to go into details. (P2)

Another important source of preparation material is the Internet. Most of the time, when interpreters accept assignments related to new and unfamiliar topics, they conduct exploratory research on the Internet before they receive actual conference material. Interpreter P2 talked about his preparation for the conference organized by Taipower, the state-run electricity company in Taiwan, on automated demand response, a term that he had never heard of before receiving the conference agenda:

As I had never heard of the term ‘demand response,’ I had to find out what it means on the Internet. Fortunately there was a lot of information on the Internet because Taipower had been promoting this project, and there was a lot of relevant data on government websites as well as the Taipower website. So prior to receiving the PowerPoint slides, I had already read the reports, programs, and PDF files that I accessed on the Internet. (P2)

After an exploratory search, interpreters may deem it necessary to acquire a basic grasp of key concepts before focusing on the conference material. Interpreter P4, who worked on a conference dealing with Web security, talked about how she decided to begin with basics after she had cursorily examined speakers’ PowerPoint slides to determine the required level of preparation:

I got the PPT slides of the two speakers from the conference organizers, so I scanned the slides and found out that the topic was related to web security. The speakers were going to talk about cloud computing security and firewalls. I was not familiar with firewall technology, so I started with the basics by reading a series of articles dealing with the subject on a technology blog. I learned that firewalls operate at seven layers, and that hackers used to target the third layer, but now they aim at the seventh layer. I had to find out what each layer was before I started to tackle the material provided by the client. (P4)
Among Internet resources, YouTube was cited as a particularly useful tool: videos of speakers can provide a glimpse into what they may say at an upcoming conference. Podcasts are also helpful. Compared to Internet resources, books do not seem to be a major source of information during preparation: many interpreters mentioned that they consult books only when they need to interpret for the author.

Wikipedia and the client’s, or organizer’s, official websites, often providing useful information in more than one language and keywords to prompt further research, seem nowadays to be replacing the traditional figure of the “expert friend”. Overall, most of the interpreters stated that their main research tool is the Internet and that, given enough time, they are usually happy with the results. As the knowledge required for a particular conference is often extremely specialized, only experts from the client organization are seen as reliable sources. A few interpreters did mention that they still consult expert friends from time to time; one said that he now prefers to use Facebook as a platform for crowd sourcing and consult fellow users from all works of life.

5.2.1.3 Linguistic preparation

Language is as important a part of preparation as content, since it is the very basis of a discourse community. One interpreter said that her preparation for a university professor’s presentation at a conference on human rights focused not only on the speaker’s English text, but also on Chinese articles dealing with the topic concerned:

Reading his paper in English would not be very helpful, so I decided to read related articles in Chinese. If I were to read the English version, I would try to translate the terms into Chinese based on my comprehension, but my translation might not be the accepted version. (P5)

Compiling glossaries is an essential part of language preparation. During their perusal of conference materials and their search for information on the Internet, the interpreters note down important terms and concepts, eventually building up a conference glossary. However, the line between conceptual and linguistic knowledge acquired during the glossary-making process is hard to draw: each feeds into the other, with interpreters extracting terminology as they read through conference materials and then, in turn, using these terms to search for further information on the Internet.

For the 10 conferences discussed, seven interpreters had compiled glossaries ranging from one to nine pages, either electronically or in handwritten form. Three interpreters had noted down target language equivalents directly on the PowerPoint slides. Glossaries include bilingual terms and sometimes the concepts
behind them. Most interpreters would collect terms by category (e.g., organizations), before sorting them in alphabetical order or by order of occurrence in the material as a whole. In some cases, interpreters note terms on a piece of paper for quick reference. Interestingly, putting together a glossary seems to be more a means of organizing preparation than an end in itself: whether or not the glossary is actually needed for consultation when interpreting does not seem to be a major concern.

5.2.1.4 Help from teammates and clients
Teamwork and cooperation, both with colleagues and with clients, are fundamental to interpreter competence (Albl-Mikasa 2012). Preparation time being limited, interpreters often need to work closely with their partners. Sometimes, especially for academic conferences with a large number of speakers, interpreters decide beforehand who will prepare which papers. Sometimes, one of the interpreters may have more experience of the topic and can become an important source of information during preparation.

Sharing glossaries is another way to reduce workload, as mentioned by several interpreters: one interpreter even mentioned formatting glossaries so as to make them readily accessible to a colleague.

In the interest of successful communication, conference organizers are sometimes willing to help interpreters. In this sample, some interpreters mentioned clients’ readiness to walk them through a speech, explaining difficult terms or providing bilingual PowerPoint slides. Sometimes the conference organizer offers to arrange briefing sessions between speakers and interpreters, possibly in response to a request from the latter:

I remember having received the PowerPoint before a conference, but it contained picture after picture. It was a conference related to architecture … I couldn’t prepare based on the PowerPoint because I had no idea what it was about. So I asked the organizer to set up a briefing session. Thank goodness we went to the conference rehearsal because the speaker delivered his speech from beginning to end. It was the day before the conference, and he was very detailed, even allowing us to ask questions. If it weren’t for that, we would have suffered terribly because talks on architecture can contain a lot of new things, such as new technologies and new regulations.

(P7)

5.2.1.5 Differences between CI and SI
CI and SI present different challenges and opportunities for interpreters dealing with unfamiliar subjects: this entails slight differences in preparation. Many interpreters do not print glossaries or PowerPoint slides for SI, usually for environmental reasons. The privacy of working in a booth instead of being in the spotlight
gives interpreters the luxury of consulting documents and receiving help from their boothmate. Since they cannot do so in CI, several interpreters mentioned that they spend more time memorizing terms than they would for SI; they are also more likely to print material for CI, during which they do not have time to access the computer.

Another consideration in this respect is the need for notes in CI, prompting some interpreters to favour a handwritten list of terms and names on their notepads rather than (or possibly in addition to) a glossary in electronic form. Interpreter P4’s glossary filled nine pages of her notepad for a CI assignment about cloud computing:

When I am preparing for a consecutive assignment I like to write the terms down, because the writing of the Chinese or English terms will make it easier for me to jot the terms down quickly when I take notes for consecutive. I can become familiar with the pen strokes of the characters and work on noting the terms in abbreviated forms.  

(P4)

5.2.2  During the conference

5.2.2.1  Last-minute preparation

Interpreters are obviously aware that their preparation continues even after they arrive at the conference venue. On the day of the conference, interpreters appear at the venue armed with the linguistic and conceptual knowledge accumulated beforehand. They usually check with the organizers and speakers to find out if there are any last-minute PowerPoint presentations or scripts. With CI, interpreters will naturally meet with the speakers before the conference begins. This is not necessarily the case with SI: of the six interpreters who discussed preparation for SI, four had met speakers or their assistants before the conference started, either during briefing sessions or in casual exchanges with the speaker. Several interpreters mentioned that must-do items during short meetings of this kind include asking about revisions of PowerPoint files, reminding the speaker to put on earphones during Q&A sessions, and enquiring about any videos that might require interpreting. P1 described her meeting with a speaker before SI of an urban planning conference:

I asked the speaker if he had made any revisions to his PowerPoint slides and if there was anything that I should pay special attention to. It turned out he had prepared a video clip that we did not get to see in advance. There was a Chinese version and an English version so he asked me which version he should use. I suggested that he play the Chinese version because we would not be interpreting the video.  

(P1)
5.2.2.2  In-conference linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge acquisition

As soon as interpreting actually starts, the most important thing for the interpreter is to concentrate on the task. Many concepts explained by the speaker can be readily understood in this way. To make sure they “speak the same language” as conference participants, interpreters make conscious efforts to continue polishing and updating their linguistic knowledge during the interpreting process. For example, some mentioned that they continued adding new terms to their glossary during the conference. They also tried to emulate the speakers’ usage, where this differed from that identified through Internet sources. Putting newly acquired terms and expressions to immediate use is especially effective where a session in Chinese is followed by another in English, or vice versa: this makes it easy for interpreters to learn how a concept can be expressed in both languages and to tailor their expression accordingly. In this respect, interpreter P1 described how she listens to conference proceedings even when she is not interpreting:

Sometimes you don’t know if that is how you say something, so during the conference, you listen to the language that is used. I try to listen very hard, not just to the speakers but also to my booth-mate. You will hear key concepts, modes of expression, as well as specialized jargon. (P1)

Interpreter P7 voiced similar sentiments as she talked about encountering and acquiring new terms at a medical conference:

When I heard this term uttered for the first time by the first speaker I was at a loss, but after one or two sessions, I quickly acquired the term and was able to use it. Terms and jargon are quickly learned and applied on-site. (P7)

5.2.2.3  Coping tactics for knowledge gap

However well interpreters prepare, they will almost always have difficulties with comprehension and/or expression of some items as a result of knowledge gaps not covered in preparation. All the interpreters in our sample stated that the actual content of the conference we discussed with them was in line with their pre-conference preparation/expectations, suggesting that they prepared appropriately. However, some also had occasional difficulties in understanding what the speaker was saying. This type of knowledge gap is especially prevalent during Q&A and panel discussion sessions, with exchanges between experts. Here, it is important for interpreters to stay calm and grasp the relationship between different elements so as to avoid communication breakdown. Interpreter P10 admitted to being confused by the different units of measurement in discourse on olive oil authentication, which involved many terms dealing with the chemical composition of olive oil:
I was very puzzled at that time but could only resort to literal word-for-word translation. I eventually figured out what it was all about. Sometimes we have to suppress the sense of bewilderment and concentrate on the words per se, because the audience will get it.  

Interpreter P3 shared a similar experience when interpreting for a corporate training workshop:

When they referred to a particular type of motherboard, they did not use the complete model number. They only cited the last few digits of the model number. It was clear to them but not to me. It was not until later that I realized they were talking about motherboards.  

While the strategies described above were part and parcel of the interpreters’ coping tactics, the power of Internet search engines and the phenomenon of English as a lingua franca have provided new solutions to the problem of knowledge gap. During SI, the “idle” interpreter can address unforeseen terminological problems by online searches. Social media such as Facebook even enable interpreters to crowd-source unknown terms or concepts during the conference. Of the six interpreters who discussed an experience of preparing for SI, three mentioned having searched for terms on the Internet while their teammates were interpreting alongside them. Interpreter P1 even admitted to having done so while actually interpreting, at the conference on urban planning:

I remember a panelist asking the speaker something about New York, pertaining to a particular charter, and I heard a number, 401. And I interpreted, “I think you have some kind of regulation that’s called 401 but I’m not so sure” and instinctively conducted a google search as I spoke, and discovered that he was talking about a regulation of the city council, something related to the budget.  

In CI, interpreters spoke about using the Internet during their lunch break to clarify any outstanding issues from the morning’s interpreting. Internet connection at the conference venue can thus be very important: interpreter P5 recalled specifically that a slow and unreliable Internet connection at the conference venue was “very frustrating.”

The advent of English as a lingua franca has also provided an efficient emergency and effort-saving tactic. Experts in a given field, despite their differing language backgrounds, often use the same English terminology. Interpreter P4 described how this phenomenon was useful to her during CI at a pre-conference in-house workshop for engineers, when there was no set agenda or information on content and the organizer told her “not to worry about the technical part”:
A question was raised about the latest technology developed by the company and he started drawing a picture on the board about firewall technology, starting from the very basics and getting more and more technical. There were terms I didn't understand and unfamiliar product names that were either from their company or from their rivals. When it came to things I didn't know how to say in Chinese, I just used English. Many of the engineers present probably only knew the products by their English names, instead of the Chinese translations anyway.  

Similarly, P7 described how she tackled unfamiliar English terms during SI of a conference on healthcare and medicine:

We had prepared for the topic based on the materials we received, but the speaker had over 30 or 40 years of experience. It was easy for him to make side comments not included on the PowerPoint slides. We struggled sometimes during those side comments. When he mentioned a drug which was not on the slide, I just repeated the term in English. I had no other option.

Some interpreters mentioned that, during CI of an English source text, clients often tend to accept – or even request – terminology kept in the original, rather than a Chinese equivalent. By the same token, speakers delivering source text in Chinese often code-switch to English for specific items of terminology.

In general, despite these occasional moments of puzzlement, effective deployment of logical, analytical and linguistic resources generally enables these interpreters to give the impression that they share the discourse community’s language and knowledge base, albeit imperfectly. Some interpreters mentioned that they had been asked by audience members at the end of the conference if they they had an academic background in law, chemistry or engineering – a clear sign that they had “faked it” successfully.

5.2.3 Post-conference

5.2.3.1 Disposal of conference materials and glossaries
After the conference, do interpreters hold on to their conference material? What do they do with their glossaries? Only one of the ten interpreters kept conference materials after the event. Most interpreters said that they have already run out of shelf space for bulky conference documents. Several mentioned that disposing of them gives a sense of having closed the assignment and of readiness to move on.

This does not apply to glossaries, however: all the interpreters said that they keep these, in readiness for future assignments on similar topics. They also made an effort to update the glossary when time permitted – possibly during the assignment in SI, and afterwards for CI. Interpreter P6 talked about one such experience, after a CI assignment on the retail watch trade:
This assignment is consecutive interpreting so I had taken a lot of notes. I went home and reviewed those notes to see if there were new terms not in my glossary, terms I wasn’t quite sure about, or phrases used by the speakers that I found to be useful.

In a format such as Word or Excel, filed by conference or by subject matter, glossaries are the one thing that all the interpreters hold on to afterwards: these were seen by the interpreters as embodying the very gist of the conference. Several interviewees said that they quickly forget the terminology acquired during a conference but, if they need to prepare for a similar topic subsequently, their preparation is greatly accelerated by previous glossaries.

The updated glossary also has an added value compared to the pre-conference glossary, which was prepared and collected by the interpreter alone: items in the updated document have been checked against conference participants’ usage and input.

5.2.3.2 Accumulation of knowledge

Interpreters are not entirely positive about what they have learned, and how much time they schedule for knowledge acquisition, in a given field. From conference to conference, they often have no say over what they choose to study, or even how much time to spend on each topic. Interpreter P7 commented on this as a source of regret:

Sometimes I feel like I am running a marathon without end. Every week there is a new exam, a new subject to tackle, more terms to commit to memory. Sometimes I come across subjects that really interest me, and I want to learn more, but I have a new subject to prepare for next week, and I can’t really do what I want to do. Due to the reality of work, I can’t learn what I really am interested in learning, and that can be a pity.

It seems that the expertise acquired is often short-lived, as described by Interpreter P7 after finishing a conference on a drug administration system:

Now I have a sense of familiarity with the concept and the terms, but probably only for a day or two, or a week at the most, because I will have to clear my head for new things.

This might explain why many interpreters choose to discard conference materials after each conference. The desk, and the interpreter’s head, have to be cleared for upcoming assignments. Interpreter P9 described how he intentionally clears his memory from one assignment to another:
The reality of our profession is that we have to accept new topics continuously, and even learn how to deliberately forget, in order to prepare for the next topic. I usually put everything behind after each conference, throw everything out, press delete and start with a clean slate. (P9)

In the past, interpreter trainers stressed the importance of encyclopedic knowledge, but the interpreters in our study recognized the impossibility of knowing everything. They rely more on their interpreting skills than on background knowledge of a particular topic. The importance of being able to acquire such knowledge quickly, and applying it during a specified period of time, was mentioned by Interpreter P9:

In this age of knowledge explosion, everything happens so fast. There is no need to intentionally build up your knowledge system. The important thing, in my opinion, is how you acquaint yourself with a particular subject after you accept an assignment, and how you manage to become an expert in that subject within and during a certain time frame. (P9)

The interpreters in our study stated that the key to acquiring expertise in a given field is to be work repeatedly on related topics, and can thus be more a matter of chance than of systematic intention. Two young interpreters with an English major mentioned that they had attended lectures in law and finance during their free time, but that the knowledge thus acquired was lacking in depth.

5.2.3.3 Refinement of knowledge acquisition strategies
Experience of conference preparation enables interpreters to prepare more effectively. Since they are almost always working to tight deadlines, they learn how to allocate time efficiently to the preparation of each conference. Interpreter P1 described how her conference preparation strategies have changed over time:

I remember when I was just starting out I was extremely paranoid. I tackled each assignment like an exam, everything had to be reviewed three times, all the exercises had to be done, and I had to know everything inside out. But I later discovered the law of diminishing returns. Sometimes you can spend five hours on a particular subject, and spending fifteen hours more on the same subject is not going to make much of a difference. You’re not going to be more productive. Instead, you would be wasting your time and energy. (P1)

Overall, when deciding the point at which they think they are ready for the conference, most interpreters feel that they have to be realistic and aim to achieve the best they can do under the circumstances. Interpreter P3, a veteran, even goes so far as to say:
I did not have as many assignments when I was just starting out, so I had more time to prepare. But now I have more assignments and less time to allocate to the preparation of each conference. With experience, however, you pick up the tricks of the trade, you find out what you definitely need to spend time preparing, what doesn't call for a lot of preparation, and how to bluff your way through it all when you have to. (P3)

In addition, it is often after the event that interpreters come to realize their blind spots during conference preparation. For example, several interviewees mentioned that, apart from knowledge acquisition during conference preparation, staying up-to-date with developments in the industries they work with most often is crucial. While speakers might not mention such developments, conference delegates might bring them up during Q&A sessions or panel discussions. Interpreter P1 describes how the experience of a press conference encouraged her to adjust her preparation strategies accordingly:

At this press conference for an airline, they were announcing new flights between Taipei and Dubai, using A380 aircrafts. Taoyuan Airport was not capable of accommodating large aircrafts like the A380 then, but I learned that in two years, after renovations, that would be possible. I learned about this during the press conference, and that was important information that wasn't on the press release or documents that they gave me. It is important for interpreters to do their homework, and that includes keeping up with the latest news in the industry. (P1)

Some interpreters also mentioned that their leisure reading can often prove useful. Interpreter P5 talked about how a book she had read in her spare time helped with a recent interpreting assignment on human rights education:

I read what I like to read, and the books that I read for interest often help me a lot. For example, I have been reading the book Far from the Tree, which talks about all sorts of parents and their children, including children who were products of rape, or children who are seriously handicapped. All of this proved to be very helpful during the conference that I just worked on. (P5)

The interpreting profession attracts people with curious minds. Most interpreters seem to enjoy coming into contact with, and learning about, new disciplines. A predilection for lifelong learning is thus listed as one of the overarching personal competencies of successful interpreters in Albl-Mikasa’s (2012) model, and this is indeed what we found in our study.
6. Conclusion

Seleskovitch (1994) claimed that an interpreter is “faithful to the speaker chiefly through logical analysis and only secondarily through his knowledge of the subject” – more than a specialist in any particular field, first and foremost “an expert at analysis and exegesis” (1994:54–55). However, without sufficient knowledge, an interpreter’s logical analysis will stall.

Our study shows that professional interpreters prepare strategically for conferences on unfamiliar topics. In readiness for a new discourse community that requires community-specific genres, specific lexis, and a high level of relevant content and discoursal expertise (Swales 1990), they must acquire the relevant discourse, content, and linguistic knowledge to facilitate communication.

Discourse knowledge is the easiest to grasp for experienced interpreters, as they are familiar with relevant genres such as keynote speeches, paper presentations, press conferences, negotiations and board meetings: familiarity with the great variety of such genres, as reflected in our data, helps conference preparation and interpreting.

Content knowledge is necessary not only for comprehension of discourse, but also for interpreters’ ability to anticipate and make inferences while interpreting. Since time contraints do not allow them to acquire expert-level knowledge, they need to focus on essentials so that they can understand and reproduce the knowledge presented at the meeting. As described by Seleskovitch (1994), conferences are “encounters between specialists who share a pool of common knowledge and who meet to discuss only limited aspects of their already narrow field.” Using task-specific materials and context, the interpreters can predict, usually quite accurately, the extent of knowledge required to do their job well and focus their effort on acquiring just enough. They do not think they need to know everything the presenter will say in the conference, as they will continue to acquire knowledge while there, using top-down and bottom-up processing to learn new concepts and ideas from speakers. Even when their comprehension of the content is only superficial, interpreters can manage to keep up production by using their listening and analytical skills; therefore, communication breakdown rarely occurs.

In both source and target language, interpreters must acquire domain-specific vocabulary when entering an unfamiliar discourse community. Whether they can bring their lexical competence up to par before the conference will determine whether they can comprehend the source text and ensure semantic equivalence, and will probably also shape the audience’s assessment of the interpreting. Specialized lexis includes any non-technical items specific to the discourse community. Interpreters must therefore continue listening carefully to
members of the discourse community, trying to adopt their usage and turns of phrase so as to make their language as appropriate as possible.

Finally, it should be noted that contextual features, such as participants’ biosketches and the background to the event, can prove helpful both for preparation and during the conference. Such information can afford insight as to how the speaker will aim to produce a text that is in line with audience expectations. This contextual awareness has been found to distinguish professional from novice interpreters (Moser-Merser et al. 2000), in their ability to enter an unfamiliar discourse community. Experienced interpreters can thus acquire domain-specific knowledge quickly and effectively, fulfilling their role as communication facilitators on a wide variety of topics.

**References**


Appendix. Interview questions

I. Preparing for a conference on a new topic

Pre-conference preparation

1. Please describe the pre-conference preparation for the conference of focus you have chosen:
   - When did you receive the agenda?
   - When did you receive conference materials?
   - When did you start preparing? How long did you prepare?
   - How did you use the materials you received during pre-conference preparation?
   - Where did you look up information?
   - Did you contact or raise questions to the organizer or speakers?
   - What was the process of searching and obtaining new information?
   - How did you determine that you had prepared enough and obtained enough knowledge for this interpreting job?
   - (In the case of simultaneous interpreting) Did you discuss preparation strategies with your booth-mate or distribute the preparation work between the two of you?
   - What annotations or notes did you write down on the conference materials?
   - Did you make a glossary? Why or why not?
   - Did you compile any notes or summary other than a glossary?

2. Compared to the pre-conference preparation of other conferences on new topics, was there anything different this time?
During the conference

1. Please describe how the conference went:
   - Did the actual content delivered meet your pre-conference preparation/expectations?
   - Was there a briefing session with the organizer or speakers before the conference?
     How long was the briefing and what did you cover?
2. Did you encounter any difficulties related to the knowledge aspect of the conference? How did those difficulties affect your interpreting performance? How did you solve the problems?
3. How was your knowledge of the new topic strengthened or enhanced during the conference?
4. Was any of the feedback from the audience, organizer or speakers related to the knowledge aspect of the conference? What was the feedback about?

After the conference

1. What did you do with the conference materials?
2. What did you do with other information or documents you collected or put together during the preparation stage?
3. Do you think your knowledge on this topic has grown?

II. Preparing for a conference in the general case

1. Please briefly describe your pre-conference preparation in the general case. Are there any differences in preparation for a CI, SI or escort interpreting assignment?
2. What was the difference between preparing for this conference on a new topic and one in the general case?
3. Do any of the four other conferences you have identified feature a topic in which you have expertise in terms of conference interpreting? Please briefly describe the pre-conference preparation for that conference.
4. How do you prepare for conferences that take place regularly?
5. Do you make an effort to learn about a specific field or discipline? How did you come to specialize in your topic of expertise?

Address for correspondence

Chia-chien Chang
Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures
National Taiwan University
No. 1, Sec. 4, Roosevelt Road
Taipei 10617
Taiwan
chiachienchang@ntu.edu.tw
Biographical notes

Chia-chien Chang is an Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. She received her MA in Chinese/English Translation and Interpretation from the Monterey Institute of International Studies and her PhD in Foreign Language Education from the University of Texas at Austin. Her major research interests include theoretical and pedagogical aspects of interpretation and translation, second language acquisition, and teaching English as a foreign language.

Michelle Min-chia Wu is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University. She received her MA in Translation and Interpretation Studies from Fujen Catholic University. A member of AIIC, she has been teaching conference interpreting and working as a freelance conference interpreter since 1992. Her major research interests lie in the pedagogical aspects of conference interpretation. She has also translated Chinese literature in Taiwan into English for the Chinese Pen.

Tien-chun Gina Kuo is an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University and a PhD student in the Graduate Institute of Translation and Interpretation at National Taiwan Normal University. She received her MA in Translation and Interpretation from National Taiwan Normal University in 2011, and her MPhil in Research in Second Language Education from the University of Cambridge in 2010. She has been working as a freelance conference interpreter since 2011. Her research interests include the pedagogical aspect of conference interpreting and second language listening.