

# CONFERENCE INTERPRETING

ANDREW GILLIES

A STUDENT'S PRACTICE BOOK



# Conference Interpreting

'Andrew Gillies' book offers a fount of useful, practical and fun exercises which students can do, individually or collectively, to develop specific skills. A great book for teachers and students alike to dip into.'  
Roderick Jones, author of *Conference Interpreting Explained*

*Conference Interpreting: A Student's Practice Book* brings together a comprehensive compilation of tried and tested practical exercises which hone the sub-skills that make up conference interpreting.

Unique in its exclusively practical focus, *Conference Interpreting: A Student's Practice Book* is a reference for students and teachers seeking to solve specific interpreting-related difficulties. By breaking down the necessary skills and linking these to the most relevant and effective exercises, students can target their areas of weakness and work more efficiently towards greater interpreting competence.

Split into four parts, this *Practice Book* includes a detailed introduction offering general principles for effective practice drawn from the author's own extensive experience as an interpreter and interpreter-trainer. The second, 'language', section covers language enhancement at this very high level, an area that standard language courses and textbooks are unable to deal with. The last two sections cover the key sub-skills needed to effectively handle the two components of conference interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive interpreting.

*Conference Interpreting: A Student's Practice Book* is not language-specific and as such is an essential resource for all interpreting students, regardless of their language combination.

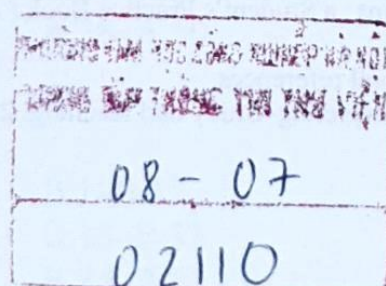
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# Conference Interpreting

A student's practice book

Andrew Gillies





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## About this book

Assuming Conference Interpreting is mainly a skill, very much like one of the more difficult sports, performed mainly by the interpreter's brain, it becomes important to realize that the most difficult exercises can only be performed by the interpreter if he can draw upon a solid reserve of automatic reflexes which allow him to free his mind for those parts of the interpretative process which need his fullest attention.

Weber 1989: 162

Interpreting, despite the fact that it is often taught at universities, is not an academic subject; it is far more akin to a craft or a sport. One cannot learn to interpret by going to a lecture (or reading a book) and understanding an explanation of how interpreting works. Interpreting is a skill or, to be more exact, a combination of skills that one can explain and understand quite quickly, but which take far longer to master in practice. In practice, and through practice!

This book offers some guidelines for effective practice and a compilation of practice exercises drawn from conference interpreting literature and teachers. As such it is meant as a resource for students and trainers looking for practice ideas. Though the book is directed primarily at students and teachers of conference interpreting, it should also have much to offer those training for other types of interpreting – court, community, sign language etc.

There are a number of simple ideas underpinning this book. First is that mentioned above, that to learn to carry out a skill we must practise, repeatedly. Repeated practice of a skill allows us to internalize it, that is to say, arrive at a place where some part of what we are doing becomes automatic and we can complete the skill without giving it our full attention. This is particularly important in interpreting, because the mental capacity freed up in this way will not go to waste. It will be put towards the other skills that go to make up interpreting.

Second, complex skills can be broken down into their component parts, which can then be practised in isolation. Interpreting is a complex skill. It involves doing a number of different things at the same time, some of them relatively simple, some less so. In this book the skills that go to make up conference interpreting



#### 4 Introduction

have been split up and exercises offered for each one. Each of these skills may well be new to the would-be interpreter and it is useful to learn, and practise, new skills one at a time, adding another only when the previous one has been mastered.

By practising each skill in isolation you can concentrate on achieving the necessary degree of internalization for it without the distraction of trying to complete the other tasks at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Let me draw an analogy with swimming. A competitive swimmer under the instruction of a qualified coach will regularly swim with a float between their legs (thus immobilizing them) in order to concentrate on the arm movements alone. Similarly, they will hold the float in outstretched arms to focus on the correct leg movements. The techniques for turning around at the end of each length and breathing correctly are also practised in isolation. Only when adjustments to these elements have been made, and practised, in isolation will those same adjustments be introduced to the full stroke.

Isolating skills like this makes it possible to practise each one in a more focused way, allowing you to arrive at a stage where you have internalized the skill, that is to say, you can complete it automatically (without too much thinking about it). You can now direct the mental capacity thus freed up to one of the other tasks, until that too becomes automatic, and so on. Of course in practice the progression is never quite so deliberate and the isolation of skills never so exact and total, particularly for simultaneous interpreting. Nevertheless the approach is still sound enough to be used as a complement to your other work.

Third, you don't have to interpret to get better at interpreting. You will interpret, of course. But you don't have to, indeed you should not, *only* interpret. This is particularly true in the early stages, when interpreting will be far too difficult for you and therefore potentially discouraging. But it is also true while interpreting, when you come across particular problems that are difficult to address.

Fourth, a change is as good as a rest. We can practise the same skills in many different ways, or always in the same way. Using different exercises to practise the same skill can help bring a new angle to an old problem and therefore help us find solutions where perhaps we had become stuck in a rut.

Last, variety is the spice of life. Having a variety of exercises at our disposal will help us avoid boredom, keep us on our toes and as a result keep us motivated in our quest to master the complex skill that is conference interpreting. A quest that is likely to take several years.

The practice exercises included in this book have been suggested by interpreter trainers, interpreters and student interpreters; adapted from ELTA<sup>2</sup> classes; taken from conference interpreting literature; or, to a much lesser extent, invented by the author. Where an exercise has been taken directly from a published text, I refer to the author, year of publication and page number, for example (Kalina 2000: 179), and further information about that publication can then be found in the bibliography. In the case of exercises that are widely known, or have been 'invented' independently by various people and appear in a published text of which I am aware, the reference appears as follows: 'also Sainz 1993: 139'. Where the works of several authors are cited in the same place, they appear in chronological



order according to the publication date. Unpublished exercises that I can attribute to individual teachers are annotated with the name of the teacher in question, for example, 'Poger'. There are no doubt also exercises that appear in conference interpreting literature that I have not read and are therefore not credited to any one author. My apologies to any author whose exercises are not properly credited to them here.

Where the original mention of an exercise was overly concise, I have elaborated, sometimes considerably, on the aims and instructions for that exercise. Where essentially the same exercise is described slightly differently by different sources, I have approximated the versions of that same exercise. And in some cases I have also suggested a number of variations on, or examples of, an exercise that the original source did not.

Not all exercises in works cited in this book have been included here. For example, where exercises were described unclearly in the original, or appear to relate to types of interpreting other than conference interpreting, they have not been included here. Also, where exercises in other works are self-contained examples (eg. 'translate the following idioms') that cannot obviously be repeated with other material, they have also not been included here.

In most cases I make no judgement on the effectiveness of any of the exercises, on some of which interpreter trainers have strong and differing views. Empirical evidence on the subject is, however, almost non-existent.<sup>3</sup> I simply suggest that you try the exercises out, and if they work for you then that is good enough. The exercises can be done by students alone or with the help of a teacher.

Some of the exercises involve more than one skill, so by changing their focus they can be used to practise different things. As such there is some repetition in the list of exercises. Each exercise is also described so as to be applicable immediately without reference to other exercises. There is therefore also some repetition between similar exercises or variations on a single exercise in any given part of the book.

The book does not address the principles of good interpreting (which are described elsewhere: Jones 1998; Seleskovich 1968 and 2002) but rather how to practise some of those principles that are generally held to be valid.

This book is loosely based on an earlier publication, *Conference Interpreting – A Students' Companion*, published in 2001 in Cracow, Poland. The fact that this work is unavailable outside Poland, and the need to thoroughly update and revise it, are behind this new publication.