

IC-002

Understanding Omissions in Thai-English Consecutive Interpreting: Insights and Pedagogical Implications for Interpreting Students

Nunthika Puthikanon^{1,*}

¹Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

*Corresponding author's email: nunthika@arts.tu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

This study investigates omissions in Thai and English consecutive interpreting among 15 beginning interpreting students at the college level. Data were collected from audio recordings of interpreting assignments in both English-to-Thai and Thai-to-English directions. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify error patterns, focusing specifically on omissions in interpreting. The analysis was based on an error analysis framework adapted from Barik (1975) and Jie (2023), categorizing omissions into three types: insufficient knowledge, unintentional omissions, and structural omissions. Descriptive statistics were performed. The findings revealed a total of 49 omission errors, with 28 occurring in English-to-Thai interpretation and 21 in Thai-to-English interpretation. Among the three identified types, unintentional omissions were the most prevalent. Insufficient knowledge ranked second, while structural omissions were the least frequent. These errors may result from a novice interpreter's limited ability to manage the high cognitive load of demanding interpreting tasks within a restricted time frame. This study suggests that interpreting training programs should focus on enhancing memory capacity and effective note-taking techniques to manage cognitive demands. It should also teach strategies to handle memory overload and reduce anxiety under stress. Additionally, training should emphasize listening comprehension and exposure to various native and non-native accents to prepare students for interpreting in diverse and challenging settings. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of omission patterns in Thai–English consecutive interpreting.

Keywords: Omission Error Analysis, Consecutive Interpreting

Introduction

Interpreting plays a crucial role in society by bridging language barriers and facilitating communication between individuals who speak different languages. It enables effective interaction in various fields, including diplomacy, healthcare, legal settings, and business, ensuring that messages are accurately conveyed across cultures.

There are two types of interpreting. Simultaneous interpreting involves real-time translation while the speaker is still talking, commonly used in conferences and international meetings. Consecutive interpreting, on the other hand, requires the interpreter to listen to a segment of speech before rendering it into the target language (Russell, 2005).

For student interpreters, interpreting remains a challenging skill, and errors frequently occur during the process. One of the most common errors in consecutive interpreting is omission, where interpreters leave out parts of the message. Barik (1975) defines omissions as instances where elements present in the source language are omitted by the interpreter. While omission is often unintentional -- resulting from memory limitations, linguistic challenges, or time constraints -- it can sometimes be used as a strategic choice (Gile, 2001). When student interpreters fail to catch what the speaker said, they may intentionally omit certain information to avoid misinterpretation, thus maintaining the flow of communication and preventing disruption. A deeper understanding of omission errors in student interpreting can offer valuable insights for improving interpreting courses and training methods. This study aims to address a research gap, as few existing studies have examined error patterns—particularly omissions—in the Thai–English language pair within the context of consecutive interpreting. Ultimately, the findings seek to help interpreting students develop more effective techniques to refine their skills and reduce omission errors in consecutive interpreting.

Purposes

Although numerous studies have examined errors in consecutive interpreting, research specifically on omission errors in Thai and English consecutive interpreting remains limited. This study aims to analyze omission errors in English-to-Thai and Thai-to-English consecutive interpreting to determine which types of omissions occur most frequently.

Literature Review

Types of interpreting

There are two types of interpreting: consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting. In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter listens to a speech segment, usually a few sentences to a few paragraphs, and then, when the speaker pauses, interprets the message into the target language (Russell, 2005). This type of interpreting is usually used in settings such as interviews, business meetings, or conferences where the speaker is not delivering a continuous speech. The interpreter has time to take notes, allowing them to focus on conveying the meaning accurately and with more precision. However, the process takes longer since both the source and target language segments are delivered in full, one after the other.

Simultaneous interpreting, on the other hand, involves the interpreter translating the message into the target language as the speaker is speaking. In order to manage the information flow, the interpreter must talk and listen simultaneously, frequently using tools like microphones and headsets (Pochhacker, 2004). Simultaneous interpreting is commonly used in large-scale events such as conferences, international meetings, or live broadcasts, where it is necessary to provide immediate translation for the audience. This type of interpreting is also challenging because the interpreter has no pause to process information and must rely heavily on their memory, cognitive skills, and quick decision-making.

Memory and note-taking in consecutive interpreting

Memory plays a crucial role in consecutive interpreting as it enables interpreters to receive, retain, process, and retrieve information from the source language and then transform it into the target language output (Seleskovitch, 1975). Short-term memory helps interpreters recall information received from the speaker, which is then mentally processed, encoded, and spoken in the target language (Gile, 2001). Long-term memory also supports interpreters by providing knowledge of phonology and grammar, allowing them to identify appropriate words and sentence structures (Gile, 1995).

However, when the message is too lengthy to remember, interpreters often rely on note-taking to aid their memory. As Russell (2005) emphasizes, note-taking is an essential tool for consecutive interpreters to manage the information load in the source text. It is particularly important during the stages of comprehension, processing, and reformulation. Pochhacker (2004) cautions that note-taking should serve as a supportive tool for interpreters, not a burden. Therefore, during the note-taking process, interpreters should focus on recording key ideas rather than attempting to write down every single word.

Omissions in interpreting

Research on omission in interpreting has explored its various types, characteristics, and effects on interpreting quality, with scholars analyzing omission from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Some studies (Barik, 1975; Barik, 1994; Zhang, 2006) examined omission from a theoretical standpoint, assessing how it influences the accuracy and coherence of interpretation. Other studies have approached omission as an interpretation strategy, emphasizing its practical application in real-world interpreting scenarios (Gile, 2001). A key finding from empirical studies is that omission should not always be viewed as a simple mistake (Gile, 2001). Instead, some scholars argue that it serves as an important interpreting strategy that helps maintain the flow of communication and prevents disruption. In certain cases, interpreters may intentionally omit words or phrases when they are unable to fully capture the speaker's message, prioritizing coherence and fluency over literal accuracy. This perspective challenges the traditional view that omission is purely an error and highlights its role as a tactical choice in professional interpreting.

Barik (1994) defines omission in interpreting as the absence of material from the original speech, excluding irrelevant repetitions and false starts. He considers only the omission of connectives, fillers, and articles acceptable, while all other omissions are mistakes. Similarly, Setton (1999) views omissions as uncorrected speech errors resulting from lapses in self-monitoring, rather than a deliberate interpreting strategy.

However, Gile (2009) views omission as a necessary technique when interpreters face external difficulties such as fast speech, dense content, strong accents, or incorrect grammar. Under certain circumstances, when faced with cognitive overload, interpreters may be forced to omit parts of the speech due to comprehension challenges. Omission can also serve as a deliberate strategy used by interpreters when they are faced with segments of speech that are difficult to understand (Gile, 2009). Instead of attempting to interpret unclear content and risking inaccuracies or misinterpretations, interpreters may intentionally omit certain portions of the message. This approach allows them to maintain the overall coherence and fluency of the interpretation, ensuring that communication remains smooth and uninterrupted. However, while omission can be a useful strategy for managing complex content, it also raises concerns about the potential loss of important information.

Rather than focusing solely on the linguistic aspects of omissions, Napier (2004) explored the reasons behind interpreters' omissions by directly questioning them. She categorized omissions in interpreting into five types. Conscious strategic omissions occur when the interpreter deliberately omits certain information, using cultural and linguistic knowledge to enhance the translation. Conscious intentional omissions happen when the interpreter omits information due to a lack of comprehension of the source text. Conscious unintentional omissions arise when the interpreter experiences a long lag time, causing some information to be lost from working memory despite having been heard. Conscious receptive omissions occur when the interpreter cannot comprehend the speech due to factors such as poor sound quality, mumbling speakers, or unfamiliar content. Finally, unconscious omissions take place when the interpreter is unaware of the omissions during interpretation and may not recall hearing the omitted information.

Cokely (1992) categorized omissions based on word types, distinguishing them into morphological omissions, lexical omissions, and cohesive omissions. Regarding morphological omissions, Cokely explains that these occur when a morpheme in the spoken language is omitted in the target language, leading to a change in meaning. Lexical omissions involve the omission of content-related information. Cohesive omissions refer to the omission of an element in the source language that has an informational or functional value, which can only be understood in relation to a preceding part of the source text.

There is another perspective that considers omission as both an error and a strategy, depending on the context. Pym (2008) classifies omissions as high or low risk based on the communicative goal of the speech. Low-risk omissions, such as false starts and hesitations, help manage time and improve rendition quality, while high-risk omissions may create significant gaps in meaning. He emphasizes the role of context in evaluating omissions, suggesting that interpreters may omit information pragmatically unless it is crucial to the communicative act.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach and uses content analysis to examine patterns of omission errors in consecutive English-to-Thai and Thai-to-English interpreting. The omission error framework used to analyze the data is adapted from the frameworks of Barik (1975) and Jie (2023). The omission errors were categorized into three types: insufficient knowledge, unintentional omissions, and structural omissions. Insufficient knowledge refers to situations where the interpreter may lack the necessary vocabulary, grammar, or contextual understanding to translate the text accurately. Unintentional omissions occur when the interpreter does not intentionally omit words, but this may happen due to memory load or processing limitations. Structural omissions involve the interpreter combining information while omitting certain elements (Barik, 1975; Jie, 2023).

The study participants were 15 students enrolled in an Introduction to Interpreting course. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, targeting students enrolled in the Introduction to Interpreting course who were willing to participate in the study. Data were collected from audio transcripts of their interpreting assignments, which were analyzed to identify omission error patterns. Each assignment required students to watch a three-minute video clip and interpret it, with content at the B2–C1 English proficiency level. The dataset included two English-to-Thai and two Thai-to-English interpreting tasks, covering a variety of topics. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide insights into the nature and frequency of omission errors among student interpreters.

Results

The results indicate a total of 49 omission errors, with 28 occurring in English-to-Thai interpretation and 21 in Thai-to-English interpretation. Among the three identified error types, unintentional omissions were the most frequent, accounting for 26 errors (14 in English-to-Thai and 12 in Thai-to-English), representing 53.06% of all omissions. Insufficient knowledge ranked second, with 14 occurrences (8 in English-to-Thai and 6 in Thai-to-English), making up 28.57% of the total. Structural omissions were the least common, with 9 instances (6 in English-to-Thai and 3 in Thai-to-English), constituting 18.37% of all omissions.

Table 1: shows omission errors in English-to-Thai and Thai-to-English interpreting by error type.

Error types	Frequency (English-to-Thai)	Percentage (English-to-Thai)	Frequency (Thai-to-English)	Percentage (Thai-to-English)	Total
1. Insufficient knowledge	8	28.57%	6	28.57%	14 (28.57%)
2. Unintentional omissions	14	50.00%	12	57.14%	26 (53.06%)
3. Structural omissions	6	21.43%	3	14.29%	9 (18.37%)
Total	28	100%	21	100%	49 (100%)

Below are examples of each type of omission error:

1. Insufficient knowledge

English to Thai

- **Source Language:** The budget of the government is in the amount of 325 billion dollars, which goes mostly to economic programs.
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** งบประมาณของรัฐบาลอยู่ที่สามพันล้านดอลลาร์ ซึ่งส่วนใหญ่จะเน้นไปที่โครงการด้านเศรษฐกิจ
- **Target Language (Correct):** งบประมาณของรัฐบาลอยู่ที่สามแสนสองหมื่นห้าพันล้านดอลลาร์ ซึ่งส่วนใหญ่จะเน้นไปที่โครงการด้านเศรษฐกิจ
- **Explanation:** The interpreter only rendered the first part of the number (3 and "billion") and omitted the rest of the number. This may be due to insufficient knowledge of how to correctly express large numbers in English, leading to an incomplete interpretation.

Thai to English

- **Source Language:** ความเครียดสามารถส่งผลกระทบต่อสุขภาพที่ทำให้เกิดโรคได้รุนแรงเท่ากับผลกระทบทางจิตใจ
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** Stress can cause diseases as seriously as mental affect
- **Target Language (Correct):** Stress can have physical effects that can lead to diseases as seriously as the psychological impacts.
- **Explanation:** The interpreter omitted the reference to "physical effects," possibly because they could not recall the word for "physical" in English, leading to an incomplete translation.

2. Unintentional omissions

English to Thai

- **Source Language:** Flying squids use jet propulsion to launch themselves out of the water and glide through the air for short distances.
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** ปลาหมึกที่บินได้สามารถบินเหนือน้ำได้เป็นระยะทางสั้นๆ
- **Target Language (Correct):** ปลาหมึกที่บินได้ใช้การขับเคลื่อนด้วยแรงดันน้ำเพื่อพุ่งจากผิวน้ำและลอยตัวในอากาศเป็นระยะทางสั้นๆ
- **Explanation:** Due to the long sentence with unfamiliar words and scientific concepts, the interpreter simplified the translation by focusing only on the main idea -- "glide through the air for short distances." This resulted in the omission of details about "jet propulsion to launch themselves out of the water."

Thai to English

- **Source Language:** คาเฟอีนทั้งในช็อกโกแลต ชา กาแฟ น้ำอัดลม รวมถึงเครื่องดื่มอีกหลายประเภทที่มีคาเฟอีนผสมอยู่ สามารถทำให้นอนไม่หลับ
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** Caffeine in chocolate, tea, coffee, and soft drinks can cause insomnia.
- **Target Language (Correct):** Caffeine in chocolate, tea, coffee, soft drinks, and many other beverages containing caffeine can cause insomnia.
- **Explanation:** The sentence was too long, and due to memory limitations, the interpreter was unable to include the phrase "รวมถึงเครื่องดื่มอีกหลายประเภทที่มีคาเฟอีนผสมอยู่," leading to the omission of other caffeinated beverages.

3. Structural omission

English to Thai

- **Source Language:** Several causes of poverty include lack of education, unemployment, inadequate access to healthcare, economic inequality, poor infrastructure, and discrimination.
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** สาเหตุหลายประการของความยากจนคือการขาดการศึกษา การว่างงาน การเข้าถึงบริการสุขภาพที่ไม่เพียงพอ ความไม่เสมอภาคและเลือกปฏิบัติ
- **Target Language (Correct):** สาเหตุหลายประการของความยากจนคือการขาดการศึกษา การว่างงาน การเข้าถึงบริการสุขภาพที่ไม่เพียงพอ ความไม่เสมอภาคทางเศรษฐกิจ โครงสร้างพื้นฐานที่ไม่ดี และการเลือกปฏิบัติ
- **Explanation:** Probably due to memory load and difficulty in finding the right word choice, the interpreter combined all the phrases together and selected only the key words.

Thai to English

- **Source Language:** การเดินทางไปต่างประเทศนั้นมีสิ่งต้องทำมากมาย ทั้งการแลกเปลี่ยนเงินตรา การจัดเก็บเงินให้ปลอดภัย การคำนวณงบประมาณ การจัดหาที่พัก และวางแผนการเดินทาง
- **Target Language (Incorrect):** Traveling abroad has many things to do, including exchanging money safely, finding accommodation, and planning the trip.

- **Target Language (Correct):** Traveling abroad involves many things to do, including currency exchange, securing money, budgeting, finding accommodation, and planning the trip.
- **Explanation:** The interpreter combined the phrases “ทั้งการแลกเปลี่ยนเงินตรา การจัดเก็บเงินให้ปลอดภัย การคำนวณงบประมาณ” together and focused only on the key words, which may have resulted in an incomplete translation of the original ideas. This simplification was likely due to memory load and difficulty in selecting the appropriate words.

Discussion

Unintentional omissions appear to be the most common type of omission, likely due to the cognitive demands and memory load involved in interpreting. Cognitive constraints, such as high time pressure, divided attention, challenging speech conditions, and unsatisfying working environment, can contribute to this (Gile, 2009). In addition, the memory factor may have had a greater impact than previously assumed (Gile, 2001). Even though students have notes, their note-taking skills may not be effective. Cox and Salaets (2019) found that nearly 90% of all omissions in consecutive interpreting were also omitted from the students’ notes. The reason for this could be that students are at an introductory stage, where they may struggle to process and translate information quickly enough to capture important words and ideas, leading to omissions.

The second most common type of omission is due to insufficient knowledge. In Jie’s (2023) study, this was the most frequent type of error, which she attributed to the translator’s foreign language proficiency not yet reaching a level of automaticity. In the present study, as this is an introductory interpreting class, students may still be unfamiliar with the language used in the assignment clips. Additionally, they may lack the necessary background knowledge to interpret all the required words accurately.

The least frequent type is structural omission, where students group some words or phrases together and produce only parts of those words. This can be attributed to memory load and the ability to cognitively process words and find translations. Structural omission can also be seen as a strategy to make interpretations smoother without interruptions. Students may prioritize capturing the core words while leaving out less critical details. This approach is similar to the findings in Cox & Salaets (2019), where interpreters focus on essential information first, omitting secondary elements like modifiers. This strategy appears to be used by students when their cognitive processing capacity is nearly full.

It is worth mentioning that the types of omissions that occur most frequently are the same in both language directions, English to Thai and Thai to English. Specifically, unintentional omissions rank first, followed by insufficient knowledge, and structural omissions coming in third. This consistency suggests that the direction of interpretation—whether from English to Thai or vice versa—does not appear to have a significant effect on the frequency of these types of omissions in this study.

This could be attributed to the fact that both directions require a similar cognitive load. Interpreting in either direction generally demands the same level of memory processing, where the interpreter must retain and process the source language information and produce the target language output in a short amount of time. The memory load, therefore, may not vary significantly enough between the two directions to cause a noticeable difference in the types of omissions that occur. Additionally, the cognitive challenges involved in managing language structure, understanding content, and retaining key information might lead to the same patterns of omissions regardless of the direction of interpretation. According to Gile (2009), the demanding working conditions of the interpreter (e.g. high time pressure, fast delivery, high information density, unfamiliar themes, etc.) may drive his or her available processing capacity to the point of saturation, thus causing problems.

The results in this study can help us modify interpreting training programs for beginner students. It appears that students may need to place greater emphasis on memory training to improve their memory capacity, which is crucial in interpreting tasks. By strengthening their ability to retain and recall information, students can better manage the cognitive demands of interpreting. In addition, students should be taught effective note-taking techniques that allow them to capture the key points of the message while filtering out non-essential details. Focusing on the gist of the information can help ensure that the most important content is conveyed accurately in both directions.

Furthermore, students should be equipped with strategies to handle situations where the memory load becomes overwhelming. For example, they could be taught to prioritize essential information and leave out minor modifying words or less critical details, which can reduce cognitive overload during the interpretation process. It is widely recognized that interpreting strategies provide the chance for the interpreters to benefit from the minimum amount of processing efforts to diminish the negative effects of cognitive constraints (Gile, 2009).

There are several types of strategies that students can learn such as achievement strategies or strategies for coping with a problem and reduction strategies which are strategies for avoiding a communicative problem (Al-Khanji et al., 2000). In addition, the compression strategy involves eliminating irrelevant elements from the source text, which can vary in nature and may include lexical, semantic, syntactic, or conceptual aspects. Compression is closely related to the strategy of implication, also referred to as condensation or abstraction, which is reflected in the reduced content of the output (Kalina, 2005).

In addition, interpreter training programs should also prioritize listening comprehension as a key skill. Students should be exposed to various non-native accents, as English is commonly used by non-native speakers in conferences, as well as to native speakers with different accents. This preparation ensures they can handle the demanding nature of interpreting, often under less-than-ideal conditions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the role of omission in consecutive interpreting among interpreting students, shedding light on the different types of omission errors—insufficient knowledge, unintentional omissions, and structural omissions. The findings show that unintentional omissions are the most common, followed by omissions due to insufficient knowledge, with structural omissions being the least frequent in both Thai-English and English-Thai interpreting.

These results suggest the need to focus on memory enhancement techniques, effective note-taking strategies, listening skills, and exposure to diverse linguistic structures and accents in interpreter training. Additionally, teaching students to recognize when omission can be a useful strategy versus when it leads to loss of essential meaning will help improve their overall interpreting accuracy and confidence. By integrating these aspects into interpreter training, students can be better prepared for the cognitive demands of real-world interpreting situations.

As interpreting continues to evolve, it is essential to refine training approaches that help students balance accuracy and fluency while maintaining the integrity of the speaker’s message. The ability to make strategic omissions without distorting meaning is a crucial skill, reinforcing the importance of cognitive flexibility in interpretation.

A limitation of this study is the small number of participants, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, due to time constraints, interviews were not conducted, limiting the depth of qualitative insights that could have been gathered. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results, as they may have influenced the overall scope and richness of the data.

Recommendations

Future studies should focus on analyzing students’ notes to identify the relationship between what was written down and the omissions made during the actual interpretation. This would provide valuable insights into the specific challenges interpreters face and how their note-taking strategies impact accuracy. Additionally, it would be useful to investigate how sentence structure affects omission errors—whether long or complex sentences lead to more omissions compared to short and simple ones. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how to design training that minimizes such errors.

References

- Al-Khanji, R., Said, E., and R, H. (2000). On the Use of Compensatory Strategies in Simultaneous Interpretation. *Meta*, 45 (3), 548-557.
- Barik, H. C. (1975). Simultaneous interpretation: Qualitative and linguistic data. *Language and speech*, 18(3), 272-297.

- Barik, H. C. (1994). A description of various types of omissions, additions and errors of translation encountered in simultaneous interpretation. *Bridging the gap: Empirical research in simultaneous interpretation*, 3, 121-137.
- Cokely, D. (1992). *Interpretation: A sociolinguistic model*. Linstok Press.
- Cox, E., & Salaets, H. (2019). Accuracy: Omissions in consecutive versus simultaneous interpreting. *International Journal of Interpreter Education*, 11(2), 7.
- Gile D. (1995). Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training.
- Gile, D. (2001). The role of consecutive in interpreter training: A cognitive view. *AIIC. Communicate*, 14.
- Gile, D. (2009). Basic concepts and models for interpreter and translator training.
- Jie, H. (2023). A Case Study on Omissions in Chinese-to-English Consecutive Interpreting. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication Studies*, 2(4), 85-94.
- Kalina, S. (2005). Quality assurance for interpreting processes. *Meta*, 50(2), 769–784.
- Napier, J. (2004). Interpreting omissions: A new perspective. *Interpreting*, 6(2), 117-142.
- Pochhacker, F. (2004). *Introducing Interpreting Studies*. Routledge.
- Pym, A. (2008). On omission in simultaneous interpreting: Risk analysis of a hidden effort. In *Efforts and models in interpreting and translation research: A tribute to Daniel Gile* (pp. 83-105). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Russell, D. (2005). Consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. In *Topics in signed language interpreting: Theory and practice* (pp. 135-164). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Seleskovitch, D. (1975). Langage, langues et mémoire: étude de la prise de notes en interprétation consécutive. (*No Title*).
- Setton, R. (1999). Simultaneous interpretation.
- Zhang, L. (2006). The impact of omission in simultaneous interpretation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 2006(4), 54–57.