Note-taking for Consecutive Interpreting: A Short Course (2nd Edition) by Andrew Gillies

A must-have book for anyone who wishes to develop a robust, efficient, and reliable note-taking system, or who aims at training interpreters to do so.

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Before looking in detail at the second edition of Andrew Gillies’ book, let’s state things clearly from the start: This comprehensive and practical course is undoubtedly one of the best resources to be recommended to any interpreting student, any interpreter trainer or any practitioner interested in improving their note-taking skills and techniques by clearly understanding the place and the role played by note-taking in consecutive interpreting.

The author is well-known to most interpreter trainers and educators, as well as to professionals trained during the last decade. The main reason is that the first edition of this book (2005) was very well received and has been used in many interpreting courses since, but also because his recent book Conference Interpreting: A Student’s Practice Book (2013, Routledge) deservedly gained its place in lists of prescribed or suggested books in many courses. Both books bear his signature style: they are easy to read and follow, they respond to a need for practical exercises, and they provide students, educators and professionals with very valuable ideas and techniques to be applied in a self-directed way. The second edition of this Short Course is no different.

The debate about the development of note-taking skills in the training of interpreters has always occupied an important place in the academic and education field. Ilg (1996) pointed out that as the technique remains highly personal and individual, some instructors and practitioners are sceptical or neutral about the necessity to teach note-taking, while others tend to promote its systematic instruction as a kind of code superimposed on language. Whether it is taught systematically or not, practitioners know that an effective note-taking technique is a necessary tool for any consecutive interpreter to perform well, and that it must be viewed as a crutch whose function goes beyond that of a simple summarized reproduction of an utterance on paper, and which really works as a memory reinforcer.

One major problem in the debate on teaching note-taking systematically or not lies in the difficulty to find a clear answer to the question about the system being a too personal one or not. As Ilg
pinpointed, “The consensus among those who have taught note-taking in a systematic manner is that any system should be highly individual but based on common-sense rules of efficiency and economy”. Gillies’ Short Course is a very good illustration of how to apply such common-sense rules and of the fact that it is possible to teach - and therefore to learn – how to take “clear, consistent and efficient” notes (p.12).

To make the point that “note-taking is a mechanical activity” and that “therefore it can be made automatic, internalized” (p.10-11), the author has designed the course in such a way that readers will develop a personal system of notes that will prepare them for most eventualities, based on Gillies’ proposed “flexible system” (p.13). As stated on page 12, “This book seeks to ‘show’ readers clear examples of the skills described and ‘involve’ readers by asking them to think for themselves and to come up with their own answers by completing a number of tasks”. This metacognitive approach, allowing readers to acquire the skills and techniques by reflecting on their own learning process, is also what the author must be praised for. Despite his broad experience, his knowledge of the subject, and his status as an authority, Gillies is never prescriptive in his recommendations.

The content of the book is developed from the author’s vast experience in the practice of consecutive interpreting but also in training future professionals and prospective EU interpreters. The course has well-explained learning outcomes; it is well-structured and well-balanced; it has a clear progression along clear pedagogical lines; and it relies on real-life examples of speeches and resources. Suggested notes are clearly displayed and properly justified, which makes it easy for the reader to better understand Gillies’ analysis and adhere to his recommendations.

As in its first iteration, the second edition of the Short Course is split into three distinct parts. In each part, all example speeches and related notes have been updated.

**Part One, The basics step-by-step**, “takes the reader through a series of stages towards a framework system of consecutive notes” (p.8), and does so by devoting a chapter to each stage (i.e. principle or practical component of note-taking): Speech analysis; Recognizing and splitting ideas; Diagonal notes; Links; Verticality and hierarchies of values; Symbols; and Noting less. Each component or stage is deconstructed, explained, and illustrated with examples, tasks and exercises. In this new edition, the chapter on analysis has been updated and includes only types of analysis that impact on note-taking.

The teaching principle underpinning this part is to learn to separate what the interpreter is doing when taking notes and “add incremental layers of difficulty” (p.14), a perfect illustration of the chosen metacognitive approach mentioned earlier whereby the trainee is given an opportunity to “learn how to learn” (Orlando, 2016) by reflecting on and tailoring their own learning curve.

What I particularly like in this part is the advice given to start taking notes from transcripts first (i.e. from the written word) to separate the note-taking task from the listening task and better measure what can overload the interpreter’s intellectual and cognitive capacity. As explained by the author: “When we start doing [note-taking] from the spoken word, the note-taking itself is less of a novelty”, is more “internalized” and more capacity can then be dedicated to listening (p.15).

One could even go as far as inviting trainees to read speeches and write their own speeches on a regular basis, paying attention to the macro-structure more than the micro-elements of the text, and thus gaining the ability to produce what any consecutive interpreter is required to produce: a logically structured speech.

**Part Two, Fine-tuning**, complements Part One and “is a collection of tips and ideas” that “have been tried and tested successfully by many interpreters” (p.8). Here, the different chapters (Clauses; Rules of abbreviation; Verbs; The recall time; Uses of margin; More on links; Comparisons; Pro-forms; Noting sooner, or later; How you write it; More on symbols; Things you didn’t catch;
The end) can be taken in any order, once again inviting the learner to somehow be involved in their own learning process. The section on comparisons and the second chapter on links are new to this edition and add to a higher clarity and logic of the course.

**Part Three, The back of the book,** is a collection of “sample speeches, notes taken from them, and commentaries on those notes”, together with versions of the recommended tasks set in the chapters of the previous parts. A new element included in this second edition is an interesting and handy compilation of note-taking recommendations and guidelines made by several other authors, useful for comparison and reference.

As was the original book, this new edition is very well written, very logically organised, user-friendly, and highly readable: it undoubtedly provides all the right exercises, examples and explanations needed by anyone interested in undertaking a self-directed short course on this topic.

My only caveat would be of a pedagogical nature. I tend to believe that any constructivist student-centred course, especially when it is designed as this one was and is underpinned by metacognitive considerations, should include some feedback mechanisms. In the case of the *Short Course*, this could have been achieved by integrating the use of digital technology in the learning process. Today’s digital pen technology, as well as note-taking apps and styluses for phones or tablets, provide the instrument trainers need to integrate feedback and remediation strategies in the scaffolding and progression of their courses. The possible access to the process of note-taking that digital technology allows with such tools today could have been recommended by the author as a means for trainees to capture their notes ‘live’ and to replay and assess them through self or peer-assessment strategies. This, in my view, would have perfectly completed the metacognitive approach developed throughout the book. The use of such technology could also have been used to present authentic handwritten examples of notes instead of typewritten ones. However, and despite this unique reservation, I consider this second edition of Andrew Gillies’ book a must-have for anyone who wishes to develop a robust, efficient, and reliable note-taking system, or who aims at training interpreters to do so.

Allow me to close this review by also saying that given the quality of the author’s previous books, I will really be looking forward to reading and using his forthcoming new publication on consecutive interpreting, announced for 2018.

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**References**


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**Recommended citation format:**