

The difference between 75% and 100%

The majority of simultaneous interpreters between English and Chinese deliver only up to 75% of what speakers say when interpreting into Chinese. It's the equivalent of missing one sentence out of every four spoken by the speaker. Let's, for the sake of this article, call them '75 percenters'.

The difference in sentence structure between the two languages does pose a challenge. The Chinese equivalent of 'The man holding an umbrella in front of the house on the street corner' for example is 'street corner house front holding umbrella man'. It's the reverse of the order in English.

Unless interpreters have been trained in how to handle the difference, they have to hear a substantial section before starting to interpret. As a result, they constantly lag behind the speakers by about half a sentence.

This puts significant pressure on their brain. They need to keep in mind about 6 English words at any given time, re-shuffle them with the words heard later and say that part of the sentence in Chinese whilst still trying to listen to the next 6 words in English.

Imagine yourself changing gear, talking on the phone and trying to check your map printed in a foreign language. Soon, something has got to give.

Most interpreters are capable of multi-tasking at that level for no more than three sentences before their brain reaches saturation. Usually, listening caves in first. A few words are not heard. Without them, the interpreter is unable to make sense of the rest of the sentence. The whole sentence has to be dropped, un-interpreted. Hence, 75%

If you find yourself listening to an interpreter who is two seconds or more behind the speaker, you will know that you are listening to a 75 percenter.

75% interpreting is particularly problematic when there is active interaction between two or more speakers. Sometimes it's the question that is missed out. Other times, it's the answers. The result? A very confused audience.

At KLI, we use the Kevin Lin method. The hallmark is that the interpreter starts interpreting almost immediately after the speaker begins. The interpreter follows the speaker continuously and very closely.

This requires a set of highly specialised skills and capabilities. It reduces brain multi-tasking and ensures delivery of close to 100% of what the speaker says. Interaction between speakers will be almost as smooth as if it were conducted in one language.