Some interpreters come to the profession by being called upon to give voice to their translations. Others spend months, even years, studying to earn certifications and degrees. Many training institutions around the world typically focus on linguistic and cerebral skills and the vast breadth of knowledge necessary to succeed in the profession, but pay little or no attention to vocal development. And yet the mastery of even a few basic vocal techniques can provide a tremendous payoff in terms of volume, euphony, and endurance. Improved vocal skills will also enhance an interpreter’s self-confidence, and it will be readily apparent to the audience that they are listening to quality work.

Those who depend on their voice for a living need to strive to enhance their vocal ability. This includes learning to maintain a pleasant voice quality in any setting. Most of us never know when the call will come in that takes us to a wholly new environment where we have never worked before. I am sure we can all remember situations where we have suffered the furrowed brows of people who could not make out what we were saying (Did I get it wrong? Should I speak even louder? Is there something wrong with my clothes? How well do they understand the language anyway?). There have also been times when we experienced insecurity, had laryngitis the next day, or lamented a missed opportunity. Overcoming these obstacles takes preparation and practice. Here are a few things to remember for your next interpreting assignment, including tips on how to keep your voice in top form.

**Understand Acoustics**

In order to succeed as an interpreter, a basic understanding of acoustics is essential. A heavily draped room full of people will absorb sound and calls for greater volume and projection on your part. This is true even if the room does not seem particularly large when you first enter it. An auditorium with uncovered structures and lots of empty space will cause sound to reverberate and requires sharper, almost staccato, delivery to keep your words distinct and easy to understand without wearing out your listeners. Were you counting on the sound equipment to do that for you? Don’t. There may not be any. Besides, you have no control over the quality of the equipment being used, and even if it is state-of-the-art, it can always break down.

**Protect Your Voice**

Skill, experience, and luck play a key part in any interpreter’s success, but your voice is crucial to professional survival. Understanding its physiology is useful and interesting. Protecting it at all times is essential and easy. Do not smoke. Refrain from shouting. Keep hydrated. Be prepared to deal with allergens and germs. Protect yourself from drafts and air conditioning by buttoning up or wearing a scarf. And always, always warm up before you begin interpreting.

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**Quick Tips to Protect Your Voice**

- Do not smoke.
- Refrain from shouting.
- Keep hydrated.
- Be prepared to deal with allergens and germs.
- Protect yourself from drafts and air conditioning by buttoning up or wearing a scarf.
- ALWAYS, ALWAYS warm up before you begin interpreting.
Work on Vocal Quality

Vocal quality is a distinct and crucial part of the interpreter’s toolkit, and where the fun really begins. The issue of quality can be approached in a number of ways, and numerous qualified specialists have compiled many fascinating manuals and treatises on the subject. Here is a simple rundown of some of the friends and enemies of good voice work.

Friends: Your best friends are practice, a voice recorder, and the sound technicians you may have the good fortune to work with.

• Devoting a few minutes each day to keeping your vocal apparatus supple and keen will stand you in good stead when called upon to use it professionally.

• Listening to recordings of your voice will tell you everything you want to know about potential areas in need of improvement. If sound technicians are present on the job, consult them. They are probably the best experts you could hope to meet and can provide the advice and make the adjustments that will allow you to sound your best. So arrive early, test the equipment with them, and value their input. They make all the difference in the world.

• If possible, consider taking acting or singing lessons and working with a voice coach. The first will provide confidence and practice in the disciplines of diction and projection, the second confidence and joy, and the third special attention to your specific needs.

Enemies: Stress and neglect are the enemies of the interpreter’s voice.

• There is no way around the fact that interpreting is a stressful occupation. Stress has a cumulative effect over time that successful interpreters have learned to manage, though few would ever claim to have eliminated it altogether. Beginning students of interpreting or linguists considering branching out into the profession must learn early on whether they are able to function optimally under pressure—the client has a right to expect it. Those who find the demands too overwhelming would be wise to consider a different field, as interpreting may well fail to bring the professional fulfillment we all want from a career.

• An inexperienced, unpracticed, mistreated voice becomes an unwelcome distraction from an otherwise strong linguistic achievement. It can hinder the audience’s ability to follow what the speaker is saying, and it will do nothing to mask any discomfort you might be feeling as a result of your performance. There is also a good chance that the client will look elsewhere for an interpreter next time. Practice and prevention can do a lot to avoid this situation.

Conclusion

Working with the voice is fun, infinitely rewarding physically and psychically, and a wonderful asset to offer your client. If you are planning to attend ATA’s 47th Annual Conference in New Orleans, consider attending this author’s session on the subject, entitled “Vocal Skills for Interpreters: Posture, Breathing, Strength, and Style for Speaking At Length.” It will be a lively workshop with plenty of movement and activity for beginners and experienced speakers alike to learn, experience, and share.

Suggested Reading


Machlin, Evangeline. Speech For the Stage (Routledge, 1980).