

Skill Building Exercises for Interpreters

INTRODUCTION

The exercises suggested below are intended to aid in the development of a range of cognitive skills required of successful interpreters. More detailed exercises are provided in the materials accompanying the online interpreter ethics class.

TO BUILD SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING SKILLS:

Shadowing: Listen to radio and television programs, such as news reports, and practice repeating everything that is said, in the same language, while lagging a short distance behind the speaker. As you build up experience, start to force yourself to lag farther and farther behind the speaker without losing any of the original content. Periodically, record yourself while you shadow and then listen to the recording afterwards to critique your performance and make sure your rendition was complete.

Divided attention: During exercises such as shadowing, you may also force yourself to write numbers from 1 to 100 on a piece of paper. As that becomes easier with practice, start writing them backwards, and then start writing by 3s from 3 to 99, for example. This trains your brain to focus on different tasks simultaneously, exactly as it has to do when interpreting.

Paraphrasing: While shadowing, change the wording of the message without altering the meaning. This works to improve your *decalage* (your ability to lag behind the speaker) as you wait to hear things before rewording them; it improves your vocabulary; it increases your mental agility and problem-solving skills and enhances your analytical skills. Remember, though, you **MUST NOT** paraphrase during an actual interpreting assignment.

Public speaking: Many people have a fear of speaking in public, or in front of groups of people. This may be natural but it is important to realize that as an interpreter all eyes and ears will be on you whenever it falls to you to interpret into English for the record. Public speaking skills are important to develop for all interpreters, not just those with a fear of speaking in public. Join an organization such as Toastmasters or enroll in a public speaking class at a community college. The skills you learn will go a long way to improving your ability to communicate your renditions in the courtroom, in accordance with your code of ethics.



TO BUILD CONSECUTIVE INTERPRETING SKILLS:

Develop your memory skills, particularly your short-term memory. In consecutive interpreting, you must be able to retain all of the information stated and render it completely and accurately, without having to constantly interrupt the speaker or asking for numerous repetitions. Research and practice memory techniques.

Develop your listening & comprehension skills. It is crucial that you be able to understand the message being communicated, even when it is disorganized or unrelated to the topic at hand. This will be easy for topics you have a personal connection or experience with but gets harder the less familiar you are with a topic or the less you agree with what is being said. Remove your personal opinions from the equation and learn to focus on the message.

Note-taking is an important skill for interpreters to develop. Notes are merely an aid to memory and there are as many techniques for them as there are interpreters. Research systems and symbols for note-taking and develop a technique that aids you in recalling the details you must interpret.

Again, public speaking is an important skill for the interpreter to develop. Knowing how to speak in public and being comfortable doing so will allow you to focus on your job of interpreting completely and accurately.

TO BUILD SKILLS FOR SIGHT TRANSLATION:



Read widely in all your working languages. Read across genres and read publications written at both high and low registers. Start with topics that interest you and read about them in all your languages. Then branch out into other areas. Read technical and non-technical publications, fiction and non-fiction. It all helps.

Work on your mental agility. As you read, practice scanning ahead and predicting what will come next. Analyze the organization of the publication. Anticipate what should come next.

Develop your memory skills, particularly your short-term memory. As you sight translate, you will need to hold on to information while you reorganize and interpret it, and while you continue reading the document. Research and practice memory techniques.

Develop your public speaking skills. As with the other modes, it is important to give a rendition that sounds good to the listener.

PRACTICE GROUPS

Working with colleagues and holding practice groups with other interpreters is an effective means of preparation and skills-building. The best practice groups are those wherein honest and objective critiques are provided as to the performance of an individual during a practice exercise. This feedback is important in identifying one's strengths and weaknesses as an interpreter and is not offered, nor should it ever be used as a judgement of the individual as a person. Nonetheless, interpreters must learn to develop a thick skin while still remaining open to evaluating their own performance.



Work in groups of three or four, if possible. If there are too many participants, not everyone is able to participate. Too few participants and you will lose out on a broader spectrum of feedback that you can use to improve your skills. Nonetheless, it is possible to practice by oneself using a tape recorder, digital voice recorder, or even your cell phone's recorder feature to listen to and critique your own performance. Try to schedule regular weekly or biweekly practice groups. As you grow more comfortable with the process, you can ask your colleagues to focus their critiques on specific areas of your performance.

Whether working alone or in a group, critiques should focus on a number of areas:

1. Accuracy and completeness: Was all the information of the source maintained? Were there any omissions or additions? Were there any shifts in meaning?
2. Style, tone and register: Were these maintained in the interpretation? Were idioms, slang, or jargon a problem or were they well preserved? Would the rendition have the same effect on the listener as the source intended?
3. Linguistic interference: Did the interpretation into the target language sound like it was spoken by a native speaker? Were the structure and grammar used within the accepted norms for the target language? Were there any new words invented? Did the rendition sound "calqued," or heavily influenced by the source language, its structure, and grammar? Were false cognates a problem?
4. Delivery: Did the rendition sound good? Was it smooth and well-paced or did it sound rushed, halting, or harried? Were there long gaps with no interpreting? Were sentences left "dangling" or incomplete? Was the interpreter's accent a problem? Would the person listening have had a difficult or easy time understanding what was said?

During all this preparation it is also important to remember to take care of your most important asset: yourself! Developing sound work, study, diet, exercise, and sleep habits will go a long way to ensuring your body and brain can do their best work in this and all other areas of your life.