Voice coaching for interpreters

Conference Interpreters are professional voice users who face enormous challenges. Like actors and television presenters they must carry someone else's story convincingly enough to achieve the intended effect.

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The pressure to deliver correctly and perform effectively under these conditions is extremely taxing both mentally and physically. The resulting physical tensions impact on the body in ways that challenge the vocal delivery, the ability to communicate confidently and the ability to sustain concentrated focus. In addition to this they need to have a pleasant, interesting voice with a strong ability to connect to their material and their audience.

Voice coaching specifically addresses these issues, developing secure techniques for tension release, breathing, voice production and effective delivery of the message.

I have voice-coached the interpreting students at Westminster University for the past 14 years and I am currently co-coaching in 'Interpreting for the Media' workshops for European Parliament Interpreters. Over the years I have moulded my exercises to suit the specific demands of interpreters; I would like to share with you my insights about how voice coaching can help support the training and practice of what is surely the most challenging of all kinds of communication.

Tension of any kind hampers good vocal delivery and impairs stamina. So first the coaching focuses on habitual tensions, which will be exacerbated under the pressure of performance. Tensions lurk in many areas but typically they are found in the jaw, tongue and neck, in the knees, abdomen and shoulders. Simple release exercises will reduce these tensions with time and practice, releasing constrictions in the breathing and the larynx. Alongside tension release work, secure technique is taught for breath support for safe, effective voice production. Postural or alignment work is integral for releasing tension and freeing the voice. Collapsed or over-held postures create enormous tensions and significantly hamper the voice. It is vital for the interpreter to sit in a balanced, grounded way that allows them to breathe, to let energy flow easily, to allow mental focus and physical expressiveness.

On top of habitual tensions most people suffer from performance tensions. They can simply exacerbate the habitual tensions or they can manifest as new issues. For example there can be locking in the neck muscles, jaw and tongue constriction in the throat, tightening in the shoulders and abdomen, tensing of the feet or holding in the upper body generally which restricts the breathing. Voice-coaching approaches these by working from a state of strong relaxation to offset the tensions, to build awareness of how and where they creep in and to offer a chance to inhibit their onset. We look at ways of releasing them in the moment. At the same time we establish a strong physical and vocal technique which will help to limit performance anxiety and tension. If poor technique and/or high levels of tension are not addressed, the interpreter could face vocal problems...
ranging from constant vocal tiredness with a thin impoverished sound to voice strain (shown by huskiness and discomfort possibly leading to voice loss). In worst cases the latter problem can lead to the formation of nodules - small callous-like growths on the vocal folds that are eliminated only through voice rest and speech therapy or in some cases through surgical intervention.

Then there is the all-important issue of breathing. Shallow breathing is a very common problem with adults and although it may serve us adequately for normal conversational use, it will create problems for the professional voice user. Extra vocal power, energy and stamina are required for the relatively athletic voice use of the interpreter, and breath is the key to building these qualities. Breathing into the shoulders and upper chest is unhealthy in a number of ways: it does not provide support for the voice, it is shallow and inadequate, it creates physical tension and significantly for the interpreter, it induces mental anxiety and diminishes focus. Good breathing for a healthy strong voice and for maintaining calm and focus should be deep, slow and steady - evidenced by the abdomen and lower rib cage extending outwards on the in-breath. To build this style of breathing as a new and reliable habit requires patient, practised work with exercises. Once the breathing is lowered, effective breath support can be discovered through the action of the muscles in the rib cage, pelvis and abdomen and from this stage in the training, resonance, safe projection and range can be developed.

There are some specific breathing issues that occur in simultaneous interpretation that I address. Given that the speaker is unaware of the length and structure of the sentence he or she embarks upon, the natural supply and demand process of breathing for speaking can break down. As a result the natural rhythm and flow of the breath is lost resulting in problems such as: stopping the breath flow altogether for seconds at a time, 'tanking' up the breath (i.e. breathing in too often), or simply running out of breath by not breathing in enough. Also a common problem is a noisy intake of breath, caused by tension, shallow breathing and throat constriction. I teach techniques to overcome these tendencies and to encourage a use of breath that is as natural as possible.

Voice quality is important for the interpreter. The tone needs to be warm and attractive to listen to - over shrill or throaty sounds, for example, would alienate and aggravate the listener. Voice coaching develops a balanced resonance and builds tonal range for expressiveness and responsiveness to the tone of the message. Other dynamic qualities in voice and speech - volume, pitch and pace, emphatic and intonation patterns - need to be varied and flexible. Also articulation needs to be precise and clear.

To convey the sense of the speech the interpreter must find appropriate intonation and emphatic patterns that highlight the key elements and convey the tone of the piece helpfully and convincingly. This can present a challenge for an interpreter working into a 'B' language when they unconsciously use intonation patterns from their mother tongue. However it can also be a problem for interpreters interpreting into an 'A' language when they become over-focused on interpreting the sense sentence by sentence or phrase by phrase in a piece-meal way - when they have disconnected from the purpose of each sentence within the context of the whole speech. Underlying this is a disconnection from the purpose of the speech and the presence and needs of the audience.

Therefore when it comes to delivering the speaker's message, interpreters need to tune in as quickly as possible to the tone, attitude and intention of the speech. And while it is not their job to emulate the exact degree of emotion or zeal the speaker conveys, it is important to carry it sufficiently for the message to be communicated effectively and convincingly. We work on 'owning the speech' - an area one may think to be more in an actor's territory - but the interpreter needs to access enough of a performer's imagination, energy and adaptability to meet this challenge.

Finally, there is the issue of the audience. Although to the students it sometimes seems like too great a challenge to interpret accurately and focus their communication actively towards the audience's needs, they soon realize what a secret weapon this ability is. We work on directing the speech to
impact the audience and they soon find that by channelling their focus and energy towards the audience the words are easier to find, the voice and breath connect and intonation difficulties are resolved. We hear them speaking to audience and purpose rather than hearing them interpret.

My approach is to address all of the above goals and issues using practical exercises - physical, communication or role-play - to build awareness and technique. We also work at a level of fine-tuning delivery to sense and purpose. All in all it goes beyond simply training the voice but addresses the complete act of communicating as an interpreter.

Interpreting training tends to focus mainly on the mental, psychological issues, neglecting how psychophysical the experience is for the interpreter. Good communication to a live audience comes from employing the whole self - the full body and mind. Voice coaching addresses the specific physical and mental challenges of an interpreter head on.

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