Letter from the Editor: freelance interpreting

Freelancers often don’t think of getting sick until they do. When one is taking those first tentative steps in the profession, health matters seem at worst a short-term inconvenience – get a cold, get over it, get back to work. But if you’re planning to make a career of freelancing, a long-term view is needed.

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Knowledge of personal and professional risk factors, health and disability insurance, and planning for the future all come into play. This article initiates an overview of interpreter health by delving into some of these issues.

The basics: voice and ears

We listen and speak to make a living, yet we seldom think of taking care of our ears and voice. Perhaps we take them for granted? “They’re part of a machine with a life expectancy of 70-80 years, so they’ll last,” one might assume. But you could also anticipate: “My voice and ears are going to get more intensive use than they were designed for.”

We should all get a hearing check early on in our careers to have a basis for future comparison. I think we should even consider recommending that university training programs provide an audiological evaluation for incoming students, thus providing them with a baseline study at the very start of their career path.

One risk you definitely want to sidestep is the sapping spiral of boosting the volume to hear “better”, then raising your voice to hear yourself, then pushing the volume up a bit more, and so on. If your boothmate can hear what is coming out of your headset, the volume is definitely too high – and she might do well to whisper it into your ear at the next coffee break.

And it could be time to pay more attention to earphones; recent studies point to increased risk with ear buds, especially when there is a sudden surge in volume (think feedback), as they sit much closer to the eardrum than traditional headsets.

We can trace a similar line regarding use of the voice. Learning to speak without straining the vocal chords is vital. Indeed, “Basic principles of posture, respiration, and expression” can all be learned, as was pointed out by Silke Gebhard in her short piece Masters of the Voice.

Others have also commented on the matter in past issues of Communicate! “Correct breathing, voice pitch and utterance are crucial for people whose business it is to speak all day,” Jean Tempini reminded us in Lift Up Your Voice. Maria Stella Vergara Bacci di Capaci produced an overview with an excellent list of symptoms to watch for and a self-evaluation checklist - Our Voice and Ears: Spreading the Word. And in an even earlier article, Annie Trottier shared her personal experience and made practical suggestions for good practice: Trouver la voix? Chercher l'oreille!
An enabling work environment

External factors beyond our direct, personal control also come into play. Booth should be built and placed to minimize external sound (including the voices of our teammates in the adjoining booths). Good equipment is essential, as is the presence of a sound technician and team to monitor the system and troubleshoot problems that arise (such as that headset spilling sound into an open mic, spawning ear-piercing feedback).

AIIC has collaborated with the International Organisation for Standardization on standards for both fixed and mobile booths that include precise requirements for sound equipment and insulation. The goal is to create a working environment that enables quality interpreting in the cause of intercultural communication and healthy habits, so that we can perform at a top level now and for many years to come.

(To be continued.)

This Issue

Lori Saint-Martin and Susan Ouriou, AIIC members in Canada, have both been honored with a Governor General’s Award for literary translation. Salma Tejpar-Dang speaks with them in Interpreter Voices.

Next Linda Fitchett, chair of the AIIC project on Interpreters in Conflict Areas, gives us her take on a seminar that examined the role of linguistic intermediaries in wartime and during peacekeeping operations: Languages at War 2010.

It has happened to us all: you’re expecting a relaxing dinner and all of a sudden you’re called upon to interpret at the table. Phil Smith jams on the theme in Food for Thought.

Critical Link is a non-profit organisation committed to the advancement of community interpreting. Every three years it convenes a conference to bring together researchers and practitioners. This year they met in England and Linda Fitchett attended. She shares her impressions in Critical Link 2010.

Many interesting items have been appearing in my inbox since the Summer 2010 issue of Communicate! This issue’s Language in the News highlights the most compelling among them - another interpreter casualty in Afghanistan, insight into how language may affect thought, a radio program on language and culture, and a growing need for foreign language education, among others.

Articles reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.

Communicate! invites submission of articles from members and non-members alike. Please contact l.luccarelli@ctvn2.aiic.net or info@w1eusenyjx.aiic.net.

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