

Assessing presentation skills in interpreter training and exams

Inge Baaring, Copenhagen Business School

Introduction

When we assess the performance of interpreters, we tend to focus on the rendering of the content, message, style and register. Presentation seems in some cases to be of secondary importance; in fact, quite often a poor presentation does not carry much weight in the final assessment.

In practice, however, inadequate presentation skills may divert the attention of the listener away from the message and direct it towards the interpreter's presentation deficiencies, resulting in irritation and even loss of information on the part of the listener.

Naturally, I don't wish to propose that a poor performance should pass because of good presentation skills. However, the question is whether an interpreter's presentation skills may be so poor that the performance as such is regarded as a fail in spite of an eminent rendering of the content.

To avoid a situation where inadequate presentation skills hamper the performance significantly, I think the assessment of presentation skills should be regarded as an important part of both entrance tests, interim testing and exams.

Based on the many examinations I have taken part in, it is my experience that not enough importance is attached to helping students cope with presentation, most notably with voice problems. I have often asked myself "how did this student get admitted to the training with such a voice quality". I have seen candidates with severe voice problems, which may result in serious problems for themselves in their daily work and which will be of great inconvenience to those who may have to listen to the interpreter for days on end. Therefore assessment of presentation does not start after students have been admitted and the training has started.

Assessment of presentation skills during entrance exams

Incidentally, I think it is difficult on the basis of the rendering of a spoken text into another language to find out whether applicants possess presentation skills – in many cases it is an exercise which they have never performed before. In my opinion, general presentation skills are better assessed on the basis of a conversation on, say, current affairs, where applicants have to relate to a specific subject of which they have some prior knowledge.

Alternatively, as has been suggested in this seminar, one could ask applicants to tell a story which is then video-recorded. This seems to be a much better basis for judging presentation skills.

However, one of the most important requirements at entrance exams is to single out students with problematic voices or real voice disorders. Asked about their possible voice problems, students will invariably say things like “I have a cold” or “No, I don’t normally have voice problems, I don’t know why my voice sounds so funny today”. Experience shows that such statements are only rarely true. Such applicants should be turned down or asked to come back later, say a week later, to show that their voices are now in order. I know that such a suggestion may be a problem in some schools where students come from far away to take the entrance exam.

So, presentation problems that are spotted during the entrance tests should be assessed according to whether assessors think that they can be cured /remedied during the training or not.

How can we then single out students who have real problems? I think we have to work on the basis of a list of factors, divided into 1) general problems and 2) specific problems, subdivided again into problems that - in my experience at least - can be cured, problems that can perhaps be cured and problems that for which there is no real remedy.

Apart from problems concerning voice quality, a detailed list of other problems could be worked out, but it would not be advisable to attach too much attention to presentation in the entrance tests. If a student's presentation gives rise to a very detailed search for reasons for presentation problems, it is a question whether that student should be considered a possible candidate for the training.

General presentation problems

Among the general problems that can be cured relatively easily belong

Bad habits

- fillers such as uh, ah, erm etc
- false starts
- hesitations
- poor intonation

The “uhs, ahs, erms”, which are so common in our daily speech, can be cured quite easily during training. The same goes for false starts and hesitations. Mostly, students are not aware of these bad habits, and when attention is drawn to them, they can gradually eradicate them. The way to stop students from saying “ah” or “uhm” is, after a couple of weeks of training, to explain to them that what they are doing is voicing their thoughts and considerations instead of just keeping silent when considering how to continue. The next step is to stop them every time they make these sounds and ask them to repeat the sentence without the specific filler. If students are systematically stopped in this manner, they will soon be able to get rid of these bad habits. This also has the advantage that students are made aware of having to pay attention to what they produce early in the training, i.e. to consciously and consistently audio-monitor their performance.

Specific problems

Voice quality

Specific problems very often have to do with voice quality and real voice disorders which may not so easily be remedied. Other problems also fall into this category, for

instance female students who have weak voices and are also in many cases have shy personalities. Such problems often require systematic and continuous efforts from the student, comprising for example private lessons with a voice therapist. We must remember that our applicants have lived with their voices for 20 to 25 years and may never have been made aware of the special problems they now have to remove in the course of 2 to 4 semesters.

To the problems that can perhaps be cured belong

- a hoarse or shrill voice
- an overcompressed or undercompressed voice
- a very weak voice or a very loud and uncontrolled voice
- a voice that fluctuates throughout the rendering.

Such problems very often have to do with breathing. Intensive breathing exercises may solve the problem.

Speech disorders

Speech disorders may pose real problems, and applicants with such problems should be tested very thoroughly to ascertain whether these can be solved. These include

- lisps
- articulation disorders
- stuttering
- defective sounds

Lisps may be very unobtrusive and may not disturb the listener; articulation disorders can also be remedied, though this is not always easy. Latent stuttering which has been cured during childhood may suddenly reappear because of the stress inherent in interpreting. In fact, we have to realise that the very prominent stress factor in our work tends to affect the voice and worsen existing voice problems or disorders.

Presentation skills during training

The next question is whether we attach enough importance to presentation skills in the course of the training, or whether we tend to see presentation as an area which is taken up only when time and money makes it possible.

Some schools teach presentation techniques on a regular basis using a speech coach whose job it is to secure that students - beyond normal presentation techniques - also learn to make proper use of their voice.

In my opinion, presentation skills should be trained in two different types of classes. Firstly, they should be addressed in the normal interpretation classes, where teachers should draw students' attention to aspects like ahs, uhms, false starts etc, which as mentioned earlier, can be cured quite easily – it usually only takes a few hours .In addition, they should be tackled in separate lessons on a weekly or fortnightly basis with a speech coach who focuses on each student's specific problems.

Gradually the speech coach might also sit in on the interpretation lessons in order to observe how the advice given in the speech lessons is implemented in the actual interpreting situation.

Assessment of presentation in interim tests and final exams

If we assume that candidates with real voice problems have not been admitted to the course, this means that in the interim tests and final exams it is necessary to focus only on the candidates' abilities to reach the audience and keep their attention and interest throughout the rendering. Voice problems may, however, as mentioned before, re-occur as a result of the stress latent in interpreting.

In interim assessment we of course have to ask ourselves “why does the student have this special problem, and how can we help him or her to solve it ?” In the final exam

it is only necessary to ascertain the problem and decide which consequences it has for the rating of the performance as a whole.

To reach the members of the audience and keep their attention, candidates must have acquired the ability to combine successfully all the factors necessary for a good presentation, so that they can render the source text in the target language in such a way that good content and a suitable register are accompanied by presentation skills, ranging from adequate to excellent.

What are these factors?

Because the presentation is an integrated part of the interpretation process, the various components that make up a good presentation can be difficult to isolate from other important skills. They might be established by firstly asking five questions related to the overall presentation.

Overall presentation

1. Does the interpreter make an authoritative and confident impression?

It is of utmost importance that the interpreter makes a confident impression on the way to the rostrum and certainly during the rendering. If not, listeners cannot concentrate on the message and are maybe distracted by other phenomena.

2. Does the interpreter establish contact with the audience?

If interpreters avoid real contact with the audience either by reading aloud from their notes or by throwing occasional and casual glances in the direction of the listeners these may again lose their attention and consequently their interest.

3. Does the interpreter's register correspond with the original?

The rendering of register is mirrored both in the choice of words and phrases and in the choice of manner of presentation. The target is a neutral presentation that may vary somewhat according to the content of the source text and the way it is presented. An entertaining speech given by a very dynamic speaker with a rich body language should of course be rendered in a lively manner with a certain amount of body language, but body language should not be exaggerated. A very sad speech delivered in a very serious tone of voice must be rendered in a neutral way. Interpreters should not try to imitate the sad facial expression since they might risk sounding as if they are making fun of the speaker.

4. Is the interpreter's performance consistent throughout the process?

In some cases students' note-taking problems result in a very inconsistent performance with a certain amount of "stops and goes". Other problems may cause the same inappropriate behaviour.

5. Does the interpreter have bad habits? (ums, ahs, awkward gestures and an inappropriate facial expression)

As mentioned several times before, bad habits divert the listeners' attention from the content of the message.

Presentation: specific points

If there are aspects of the overall presentation which are a cause for concern, we may have to go into more detail to pinpoint the problem, and in interim testing there is a need to come up with solutions to the problem. In the following I will therefore give some advice as to how the presentation should ideally be.

If we start by looking at the students' introduction to the rendering, the following question should be asked:

Has the interpreter found a suitable means of addressing the audience?

In my opinion students should be taught to look confidently at the listeners before starting the rendering, getting their attention by waiting a few seconds. Students should then look at their notes, learning the first few sentences off "by heart", look up again and present them without looking at the notes. This creates a natural contact with the audience.

Is there a suitable amount of eye contact with the audience?

Many students have very little eye contact with the listeners. By contrast, in some cases their eye contact is too intense. Students should learn not to focus on one single person but to talk to different people during the performance. However, they should avoid moving their heads from left to right and back again in a very mechanical manner.

Does the interpreter look calm and composed when he or she concludes the rendering?

If students are standing up during the rendering, there is a tendency to finish in a hurry, collect the notes and rush off looking very apologetic. In those cases where it is justified to look apologetic, listeners are confirmed that they were right to be dissatisfied. If not, listeners must ask themselves whether there is a reason for the student's wish to rush off

Does the interpreter's gestures support the rendering?

Gestures are part of rendering a message. But some students use gestures in a very mechanical way, repeating the same gesture over and over again. Others tend to

replace a verbal expression which will not come to mind by moving their hands desperately up and down, hoping that this will help!

Is the interpreter's facial expression sufficiently neutral?

We have talked about facial expression in connection with register. Apart from striking the right register expressionwise, it is also important that there is no grimacing or any other type of negative facial expression as an expression of problems. A tendency to want to show the audience "I know that wasn't very good" by grimacing should be controlled from the very beginning of the course.

Is the interpreter in control of his/her breath?

Breathing is of course the whole basis for voice control and posture. There can be no good voice or posture if the breathing is poor. In contrast to other situations, where I have recommended that a problem be controlled instantaneously, I find it very important to allow students to take their time to catch their breath. Otherwise the breath will be in control of the student. So, every time students are out of breath, they should be told to take their time, breathe properly and then start again - even if it takes more than a few seconds.

Does the interpreter use his/her voice correctly or does he/she have voice problems?

Because of the stress connected with interpreting, in tests and exams we might see voice problems that have not been apparent before. The voice might fluctuate in quality, it might be shrill or hoarse and students might have a tendency to want to clear their throat repeatedly. Students should be advised to try to control this habit as it only makes the problem worse. Drinking a little water is better than taking a lozenge. Of course nearly all voice problems of this kind are closely connected with breathing problems.

Does the interpreter use his/her notes to help the memory or is his/her memory “dependent” on her notes?

Notes should never replace the interpreter's memory and ability to render the message on the basis of an understanding of the text.

Students who at different points during the rendering cannot read their notes should be recommended to disregard them for a moment and try to recapture what they have just said and establish the logical connection to the next part of the text. Looking away from the text in some cases works wonders.

Conclusion

Good presentation skills are a significant part of a successful interpreting performance. A natural talent for such skills is an advantage, but in most cases students lacking these natural abilities can learn the techniques of presentation, if enough importance is attached to this skill and expert teachers are employed for this purpose.