

The psychological perils of conference interpreter training

Here you are, on a high-level conference interpretation course, and I would like to congratulate you on your choice! This is a path that will give you great professional, intellectual and personal satisfaction and fulfilment. However, you may not know – or at least not yet – the many difficulties and anxieties that will, all too often, be your companions throughout your training period.

I have been teaching for at least twenty years in interpretation schools in Belgium, France and the UK. Year after year, to my great sadness, I have seen that the majority of students studying for a qualification in Conference Interpretation (or taking continuous professional development courses) come up against considerable emotional and psychological stumbling blocks that they never expected to encounter, and that unfortunately are unavoidable.

My goal in this article is to forewarn – and therefore forearm – you about the personal and psychological pressures that are an integral part of the interpreting profession, and of the initial and continuing studies that give access to that profession. I hope in this way to give you the full picture, both to spare you harrowing mood-swings and personal doubts and questions, and to allow you to devote yourself fully to further learning and improving in this profession. Essentially, I would like you to be competent and fulfilled interpreters, and at the same time to be happy on your chosen path.

1. From the beginning, I am certain that you have always been (one of) the best in your school and/or university classes, since interpreting schools are always on the look-out for the most gifted and motivated students. This has perhaps carried on into your working life as an interpreter. On this Course, however, you will no longer be number one! This is of course logical, but this fact alone requires you to make the mental effort of seeing yourself with different eyes, serenely and confidently, as a “small fish in a big pond.”

You will also have to understand that you have chosen an extremely difficult challenge. This could well be the first time in your life that you are trying to acquire a range of further technical skills that you will not be able to master right off the bat. You will have to work very hard, and be patient, before these skills are acquired and things begin to fall into place. The good news is that, as long as you have the necessary linguistic and intellectual abilities, and as long as you work like a mad person, the skills and confidence will usually come. The moral of the story: be patient, work hard, listen to advice and don't be surprised or depressed if you aren't able to cope right away, or if you have both good and bad half-hours, or even days...

2. You may not know this yet, but conference interpretation is an art. The interpreter is constantly improvising, most often without a safety net, which requires access in real time to a wide-ranging set of skills and complex reflexes that do not come naturally and are initially fragile.

3. Here is a telling description of jazz, which perfectly describes the complexities and the wonders of simultaneous interpretation:
*« Controlled spontaneity. Like ink painting, like haiku, like archery, like kendo fencing – jazz isn't something you plan, it's something you do.
You practice, you play your scales, you learn your chops, then you bring all your knowledge, your conditioning to the moment.
'In jazz, every moment is a crisis', said Wynton Marsalis 'and you bring all your skill to bear on the crisis'.
Like the swordsman, the archer, the poet and the painter – it's all right there – no future, no past, just that moment and how you deal with it. Art happens..... »*
(Christopher Moore - A Dirty Job)

You must understand that we are artists and performers, walking a tightrope; our profession requires – by its very nature – that we put ourselves on the line, that we invest ourselves intensely, wholly, and very personally in our performance, that we give it our all. This is how we will become conference interpreters, worthy of this title, worthy of the message, worthy of our remuneration and worthy of our delegates!

The flip side of such an investment is that your trainers' comments and critiques may sometimes appear to become personal and/or counter-productive – or at least they may seem to be this way to you. Trainers and students must always remember that students are being evaluated and judged as conference interpreters, and not as human beings. On your side, you students must find a way of accepting and acting on the feedback you receive from your trainers, without taking it personally or calling into question your value as a human being; I assure you that students all too often tend to misinterpret trainers' comments and critiques in this way!

4. Our profession may be considered a performance art, and conference interpreters are performers or artists, getting up on stage and digging deep to move, inspire and inform a public which needs them to be able to participate in a given event. Therefore, interpretation “consumers” often feel as if the interpretation they are listening to is (as it were) a show, and therefore that they implicitly have a legitimate right to judge and comment on the interpreter's performance, just as critics and the public do at an opera, the Olympic Games, or the theatre.

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