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WORKSHOP ON ACCENT REDUCTION AND VOICE QUALITY FOR TRAINEE INTERPRETERS

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Abstract

The focus of the workshop will be learning and practicing techniques of accent improvement for interpreters in training who work in the English language. The session will start with vocal warm-ups and breathing exercises. Voice quality will be stressed through tips on vocal hygiene and non-abusive voice use. Accurate articulatory positions will be demonstrated as well as strategies for producing fluent and effortless speech in the English language. The speaker will present the computer freeware PRAAT for practicing pronunciation as well as self-monitoring vocal quality.

Introduction

Maria Balamoti has a Masters of Arts in Speech Language Pathology from the University of Massachusetts, U.S.A., and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Disorders from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, U.S.A. She is currently developing a course on accent improvement for the Department of Filología Inglesa of the University of Alicante.

Obviously, as an “outsider” to the field of Translation and Interpreting, the approach of this workshop will have a communicative angle and will attempt to demonstrate how language and speech production basics can help a trainee interpreter. Speech language pathologists (or speech therapists, or *logopedas y foniatras*) are specialists who work with accent modification, among several other issues.

Communication Basics and Accent

Oral communication is based on speech and the use of language in each communication group. Daily activities and life in general reflect the need that people have to communicate. Effective communication, among other qualities, requires speaking in a manner that your

fellow listener will understand you, identify with what you are saying and respond appropriately. Everyone's way of speaking is unique, in terms of phonology, prosody, pragmatics, rate, and language use; what we generally call an "accent" is something that everyone has. A person from Granada and a person from Las Palmas, even though they share the same language, in this case Spanish, do not have the same accent, meaning they pronounce words in a distinguishable manner. This would be called a **regional accent**. A **foreign accent** applies to a person who is speaking a second language other than his/her mother tongue. Issues in pronunciation arise when a speaker is trying to speak a second language with the rules of the mother tongue. *An accent refers to a phonetic trait from a person's original language that is carried over to a second language.* (ASHA, 2004)

Accents reflect the linguistic and cultural background of a speaker, and many people feel particularly proud about their accents. However, an accent can impede a person's communicative abilities when the accent becomes the focus in a professional or other communicative situation. Accent only calls attention and becomes a negative feature when the audience is concentrated not on WHAT the speaker is saying but on HOW s/he is saying it. Accent interferes with the overall intelligibility of the speaker and not only impacts negatively the social interactions but also decreases the confidence and the self-esteem of the speaker. ***Accent reduction or accent modification*** refers to specific techniques applied to the speech of an individual in order to increase the intelligibility of the speaker. It also applies to speakers that communicate in a language other than their native language. (Accent modification can be applied to regional accents if the speaker wants to change his/her speech production for any reason). For the purposes of this workshop, we will only refer to foreign accents.

Professionals who communicate in a language other than their first language on a constant basis for work purposes (and other) should be proficient in their speaking skills in order to be successful in what they do, for example, interpreters. According to a study titled "The Effects of Speaker Accent and Target Predictability on Perception of Mispronunciations", *listening to fairly intelligible but accented speech requires increased processing effort, possibly because of subtle differences in intelligibility and increased variability characteristic of non-native speech.* (Schmid & Yeni-Komshian, 1999). This implies that a speaker with an accented speech may not be successful in conveying the message s/he wants to because s/he is gradually losing the audience.

Interpreters, Language, and Voice

Before actually starting the accent modification process of a speaker, some essential basis need to be established. In order to modify someone's phonetic and language patterns a basic knowledge of musculature, phonological and breathing processes is necessary. Second-language learning is not automatic when it comes to adults. It is now when the person learns the relationship between the movements of the articulators (tongue, lips, jaw, teeth) and the produced sound. Warm-up exercises that involve the facial, lingual, and jaw muscles are performed. Breathing and voice exercises deal with the endurance of the breathing-voicing apparatus.

Interpreters fall under the category of "professional voice users". By this term, "professional voice users," we not only refer to singers but to all those professionals who depend on their voices in their careers. What would an interpreter be without his/her voice? For a tool that is so essential for one's living, shouldn't we know how to use it and protect it? Proper vocal hygiene and voice use can help an interpreter's voice sound as strong and clear at the end of a session as it did in the beginning.

So, when it comes to interpreters, we want to examine the speech production and overall language efficiency, including intonation and prosody – accent modification is NOT only dealing with and learning phonetics – and also examine the vocal quality and provide vocal hygiene advice and protection of the professional voice.

The Accent Modification Process

When we examine and assess a person's language skills, we look at different categories separately before combining them all together to draw a conclusion. In terms of accent modification, what we assess are the following areas: production of vowels and consonants in initial, medial or final position at the word and sentence level, consonant clusters, word and sentence stress, pausing strategies, intonation and emphasis strategies, coarticulation strategies. By coarticulation we refer to "the overlapping of adjacent articulations" (Ladefoged 1993: 55) or as two articulators "moving at the same time for different phonemes" (Borden and Harris 1984:130). For example, in order to say the word "happy",

Before you say anything, you will have moved your tongue into position for a, then, while you are saying /h/, it will sound a bit like /a/, while you are saying /a/,

you will also be closing your lips for /p/, while your lips are together for /p/ (occlusion), you will be moving your tongue to where you want it for /y/, and finally, while you are saying /y/, you will be opening your lips after /p/. The whole word will usually be uttered in less than half a second (Wood, 2000).

As you probably realize, coarticulation is a very important aspect of speech.

Consonant Sounds

Languages differ in phonemes. For example the Spanish language has 5 vowel sounds and 18 consonant sounds and the English language has 12 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds. Not only the phonetic discrepancy is an issue but also the place of production of one sound. For example a Spanish speaker does not distinguish between /b/ and /v/ but in English these are two completely different sounds, one is plosive (b) and the other labiodental (v). The variability of the place and manner of articulation makes the change of “language habits” challenging, but with practice a person can learn to differentiate and produce the accurate sound. Practicing sounds in isolation or in small words would make our job very easy if we only spoke in sounds or small words! But since that is not the case, practicing at the sentence level and spontaneous speech is eminent for generalizing the strategies we learn in isolation. Especially, because many sounds change their acoustic quality according to the other contextual sounds. A "t," for instance, changes sound depending on context. This is what we mean by acoustic variability and is often the point where people who participate in accent modification sessions find difficult to assimilate.

Vowel Sounds

Speakers of the Spanish language have major difficulties with English vowels because the vowels in English have shorter and longer duration Practice of shortening and lengthening the vowels using accurate movement of lips and jaw for mouth closeness and openness will contribute to better pronunciation, fewer mistakes, and will improve the overall rhythm of speech which greatly depends on vowels since they carry the most of acoustic energy. One of the typical exercises that deal with vowels include the discrimination between the long and the short /i/, for example /leave/ and /live/.

Word and Sentence Stress

The next step is to practice word stress and continuously sentence stress. A meaning of a word can change depending on where we stress that particular word. For example, object (noun) and object (verb) only differ in stress. Another example is, admire (verb) and admirable (adjective); even though the root of the word remains the same, the stress shifts from the second to the first syllable. Changing the stress of a word can affect tremendously the meaning and the message conveyed in a phrase. Consequently, the sentence stress needs to follow a certain pattern for the sentence to have a meaning. Sentence stress and intonation deal with the prosody of a language. Often, clear pronunciation is not enough to make a phrase intelligible if it is not combined with appropriate intonation. Focusing on suprasegmentals (a general term for stress, rhythm and intonation) is crucial for achieving a level of fluency. As Sikorski explains, "accent is largely an issue of intonation. It's the music of the language, the pitch flow, the rate of speech, the word stress, the ability to pick up hidden meanings. It's the critical pin to improving communication skills-60% of the message is conveyed by intonation." Other linguists argue that 40% of a message is conveyed by intonation. What is certain is that intonation is an important factor of one's ability to become an effective speaker of a second language.

Emphasis

Beyond the sentence level, an important concept of language at the discourse level is emphasis. This is especially important for simultaneous interpreters who interpret at conferences or presentations. If the interpreter fails to emphasize what the speaker is emphasizing, the audience could have an inaccurate impression of the key points and therefore draw false conclusions from the speech. For example, in the following sentence, "Children today watch more movies than children in the past" the meaning takes different directions if the word MORE is stressed or if the word MOVIES is stressed. In the first case we are contrasting and emphasizing the amount of movies that children today watch, and in the second we are emphasizing what it is that children watch: it is movies and not documentaries, news, sports shows or anything else.

Pausing Strategies and Breathing

Pausing strategies are important because certain groups of words stand semantically when they are pronounced together. These include noun phrases, verb phrases, subject and verb phrases, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and parenthetical remarks (Meyers & Holt, 2001). For example, “ I ate quickly and my stomach hurts”. *Ate quickly* cannot be separated, otherwise the sentence will sound awkward. Pausing can increase comprehensibility and enhance phrasal stress and phrasal intonation. For sounding fluent, it is important to avoid adding extra sounds, especially when you pause, like /e/ or /a/ or keep them to a minimum. Pausing must be combined with air intake in the breathing cycle so the voice does not lose its volume and strength and does not become fatigued.

Diaphragmatic breathing is important and can help establish a good rate of speech and a confident voice. By **diaphragmatic breathing** we refer to the following process: take a full breath feeling the lower ribs expand FIRST, thus expanding your abdomen (your stomach). Do not raise your shoulders and do not breathe only at the thoracic level. Slowly blow the air out through an open mouth. The diaphragm is the boundary between the chest and the abdomen, thus when the lungs are filled with air, the diaphragm is pushed downward causing the stomach to stick out. Repeat the process until it becomes easy. If while you try this exercise you get dizzy, discontinue and try at a later time. If you get dizzy it means that you are hyperventilating, you expel more air than you intake.

Interpreter's Voice

The following questions were taken from “Obtaining Feedback on Translators and Interpreters” by Barinas Translation Consultants Inc. (<http://www.barinatrans.com/Feedback.htm>)

Did you hear any hesitation in the interpreter's voice?

Did the interpreter use any words or phrases that sounded strange to you?

Did the interpreter mispronounce any words?

Did the interpreter have a pleasant, well-modulated voice?

Did the interpreter have a cultured accent?

Five of a total of nine questions strictly deal with the interpreter's accent and voice. Why would vocal quality be so important? A person's voice represents a number of things. It is a window to a person's emotional state; it betrays the person's physical condition (especially a fatigued voice) and hints characteristics of one's life. Every person's voice is unique; you might be familiar with the existence of voice recognition. As technology advances, one's voice is used as one's identity. Many of us are unaware of the damage we do to such a valuable and sensitive muscle tissue that rests in our larynxes. Why wait until a damage is done to appreciate it? Isn't prevention and proper vocal hygiene a better medicine?

The “balloon”

Before referring to what you can do to protect your professional voice, let us briefly explain the theory of phonation in an easy and simple way that I was taught early in my studies (Eitnier, 2001). Imagine a balloon that we fill up with air and hold it with our thumb and the fingers from its ends. If you allow some air to escape we will hear a squeaky noise. Now imagine that the air that is inside the balloon is the air that comes from the lungs and the ends of the balloon the vocal folds. Can the ends of the balloon produce sound if the balloon is empty, that is, it has no air? No. In the same way we cannot produce voice without the air that is coming from the lungs. If you have ever filled up a balloon you may have noticed that by stretching the ends of the balloon the sound changes. In the same way out vocal folds stretch when we speak in a higher pitch and consequently shorten and become thicker in lower pitches.

Vocal Hygiene

What you can do to secure the quality of your voice includes the following:

- Avoid smoking, it dries the vocal folds and is the cause of many voice disorders; drink enough water (about 1.5lt. a day), more if you drink coffee, alcohol or if you are exercising. The latest theory on water intake suggests that the weight and physical activity of each person determines the amount of water that they need daily.

- Avoid excessive throat clearing; it can cause swelling or trauma to the vocal folds. It is better to swallow, sip water or try a voiceless cough if you feel you need to clear your throat.
- Limit alcohol intake because alcohol not only dries the vocal folds but also is related to high risk of laryngeal cancer.
- Try to avoid vocal abuse, meaning don't talk loudly, don't scream, don't whisper (yes, this is actually bad for your voice)
- Don't try to speak over loud background noise
- Don't talk much when you have a cold.
- Maintain a good posture so that airflow is not impeded. Keep your shoulders back and down, do not hunch up during breathing. Keep your abdomen in and out comfortably not rigidly. Do not collapse your chest over your abdomen when you breathe.
- Be sensitive to vocal fatigue. As the rest of the body needs rest when it gets tired so does the voice.
- It is wise to warm-up the voice before prolonged speaking situations. **Warm-up exercises** include humming, gliding up and down one's pitch first saying /mmm/ and then using vowels. (Eitnier, 2001)

PRAAT

A new software used to work on phonetics with your computer written by Paul Boersma and David Weenink at the Department of Phonetics of the University of Amsterdam helps an individual keep track of the changes in his speech patterns and the quality of his/her voice. The program is called PRAAT and it can be downloaded from the World Wide Web at www.praat.org. Measurement of data becomes more accurate and the visual feedback makes the learning process of a sound pattern easier. For a first-time user, the program might appear technical but if you take the time to go through short tutorials that are also available on the website you will find it practical and fun to work with. This program not only provides you with a "picture" of your speech (spectrogram) but also notes the intonation, pitch, and loudness of the recorded sample. Working with your own speech makes the accent modification process more personal. The goal is not to eliminate an accent and mimic the speech of a native English speaker. The goal is to work with those aspects of your speech

production that interfere with intelligibility. For example if you are having difficulty with vowel duration, you can work on making the waveform of the particular vowel longer. As mentioned above, practicing phonetics exclusively will not help you become more fluent in a second language. Practice in sentences and spontaneous speech will gradually make the difference.

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