



Court Interpreter Skill Building Exercises

Judicial Council of California

Skill enhancing exercises

The exercises described below will provide both the novice and the experienced interpreter with methods to improve skills in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting and in sight translation. Do these exercises in all your working languages.

Effective listening

Observe conversations conducted outside of earshot (e.g., across a room, with the volume turned down on the television or in a crowded area, such as a shopping center or an airport). Note how facial expressions, gestures, body movements, posture, and eye contact (or lack of it), reveal what the speakers may be saying. What are they talking about? Which nonverbal cues suggest the nature of a conversation? What language are the participants speaking? How do you know? How do the cues differ among languages?

Listen closely to someone you cannot see, such as a telephone caller or radio broadcaster, and analyze the person's manner of speaking: voice pitch, tone and volume as well as other sounds, such as sighs, hesitations, stutters and tongue clicking. Compare these differences among your working languages.

Go to a store with a friend (who will run a small cassette recorder) and ask the clerk about a product. Five minutes later try to repeat exactly what the clerk said. Play back the tape recording to see how accurately you recited the original message.

Analyze words and their meanings by asking others what they mean when they use a particular word or phrase. How does their word usage differ from yours?

Analyze what went wrong if you have a conversation with someone and miss part of what was said. How did you lose your concentration? Were you daydreaming? Were you distracted by an unfamiliar word or a physical interference? Did a previous, unresolved conversation or thought intervene?

Ask someone for directions to a place you know how to get to, then ask for directions to an unfamiliar place. What happens in your mind in each situation? Do you lose your train of thought or do you jump ahead?

While listening to a speaker, try to determine the speaker's point early in the presentation. At the conclusion of the speech make another evaluation. Were your evaluations the same? Why or why not?

Evaluate how linking words including, "how," "why," "however," "but," "unless" and "therefore." Are used. How do they establish the relationships of ideas? Make a list of these words and analyze their usage. Do this in all your working languages.

Memorization techniques for consecutive interpreting

How do you remember? Are you a visual or a verbal learner, neither, or both? If you forget something you have heard, try to understand what prevented you from storing or retrieving the information.

Your short-term memory capacity is normally limited to between five and nine bits of information (units of memory), and your ability to recall depends on how well you can organize what you have heard by finding patterns.

Have someone read a series of seven unrelated numbers to you. As soon as you are able to repeat the series accurately, try to repeat it backwards. To do this, you must be able to retain the series in your short-term memory.

Increase your analytical skills by reading a newspaper or magazine.

After finishing each story, try to summarize what you read in a single sentence. Do this in all your working languages. Try this same exercise after listening to a news report or a radio or television talk show. Summarize the main idea in a single sentence.

For the exercises below, have someone read a newspaper or magazine article into a recorder, or record talk or interview programs from the radio or television. Limit yourself to non-technical material. Do not record the news, because the newscaster reads from a prepared script. Record increasingly longer texts as your skills improve. You will only repeat the information you hear in the same language and will not interpret it.

- Listen to the passage without taking notes and try to repeat as much as possible.
- Listen to the passage and write down key words to help you remember the content. Then repeat as much information as possible. Compare the results you achieved with and without notes. Which worked best for you?
- As you listen to the passage, try to condense it into a few meaningful units. Organize the information into groups. For example, if a person were to list the schools she had attended and the subjects she studied, you could group the schools by location and the subjects studied by topic. Numbers can be grouped the way people recite phone or social security numbers, in groups of two, three, or four numbers, rather than as a string of unrelated numbers. When interpreting testimony you should maintain the speaker's word sequence as spoken, except to accommodate the syntax of the target language.
- Do not allow your opinions to color your rendition of a speaker's words, even if you have strong opinions about the subject matter. Pay close attention to your reaction to the text while listening, and maintain the same level of language (register) as the speaker.



Note Improving your listening and memory skills is an ongoing and lifelong endeavor. As you gain experience and confidence, your skills will increase.

Simultaneous interpreting skills exercises

The suggested exercises listed here are based on experiences gained in the training of both conference and court interpreters. Since the various modes of interpretation involve many of the same mental tasks, the exercises recommended in the sight translation and consecutive interpreting sections will contribute to the development of simultaneous interpreting (SI) skills as well. The exercises in the sight translation section that are designed to develop analytical techniques are particularly applicable to SI, as are the memory-building exercises outlined in the consecutive interpreting section.

The following exercises should be done in all of the interpreter's working languages, beginning with the native or more dominant language. They should be practiced daily for about a half hour at a time, as SI skills must be acquired over time to allow for maximum routinization.

Dual-task exercises

Have someone record passages from magazines or newspapers on tape, or record radio or television talk shows or interview programs (news broadcasts are not suitable for these exercises because the pace is too fast and the content is too dense). The subject matter of these passages is irrelevant, but it should not be too technical or contain too many statistics and proper names. Essays and opinion columns are good sources of texts for recording. As you play back the tape, "shadow" the speaker: repeat everything the speaker says verbatim. Try to stay further and further behind the speaker, until you are lagging at least one unit of meaning behind.

Once you feel comfortable talking and listening at the same time and are not leaving out too much, begin performing other tasks while shadowing. First, write the numerals 1 to 100 on a piece of paper as you repeat what the speaker says (make sure you are writing and speaking at the same time, not just writing during pauses). When you are able to do that, write the numerals in reverse order, from 100 to 1. Then write them counting by 5s, by 3s and so on. Note what happens whenever numbers are mentioned in the text you are shadowing.

Begin writing out words while shadowing once you are able to do the above exercise with minimal errors. Begin with your name and address, written repeatedly. Then move on to a favorite poem or a passage such as the preamble to the U.S. Constitution (always choose a passage in the same language as that which you are shadowing). When writing this text, you should copy from a piece of paper placed in front of you. Do not try to write the passage from memory while shadowing the tape.

Write down the numbers and proper names you hear while shadowing the tape as in the previous exercises. Then play the tape back and check to see if you wrote them correctly.

The purpose of the above exercises is to accustom your mind to working on two "channels" at once, and to force you to lag behind the speaker. If you find yourself breezing through an exercise with no problem, move on to the next one. You should be taxing your mental capacities to the fullest at all times. On the other hand, if you are having difficulty keeping up with the speaker and are barely able to mumble a few words at a time, move back to the previous exercise until you are comfortable doing it. Repeat these exercises as many times as necessary over a long period of time.

Analysis exercises

Using the same tapes you prepared for the previous exercises (or new ones, if you have grown tired of those), rephrase what the speaker says rather than simply repeating it (see the paraphrasing exercise in the sight translation section). Stating a message in different words forces you to lag behind the speaker, waiting until he or she has said something meaningful for you to work with. To change the wording of the message without altering the meaning, you must thoroughly analyze and understand the original message. This exercise also develops your vocabulary because you are constantly searching for synonyms and alternative phrasing. It is perfectly acceptable, and even advisable, to look up words and phrases in a dictionary or thesaurus before attempting to rephrase a passage. It does not matter how many times you go over the tape. Even if you have memorized the passages, you are still deriving benefit from the exercise. Rephrasing simulates mental processes required in SI in that you must abandon the original wording and put the message into a different external form while retaining all of its meaning.

Develop your ability to predict the outcome of a message based on your knowledge of the source language syntax and style and on your common sense and experience. Complete the following exercises with written passages from a magazine or newspaper:

- Cover up the latter half of a sentence and try to predict what it says. Do certain key words in the first half provide important clues?
- Read the title of an entire article or essay and try to predict the content. Confirm or reject your conclusion as you read the article.
- Read the article, paragraph by paragraph, predicting what will come next. Again, pick out key words that contain hints about the direction in which the author is heading.
- Repeat these exercises with oral input, having someone read the passages to you.

As you increase your awareness of key words, learn to look for pitfalls that can lead you astray, such as embedded clauses and dangling participles. Develop your ability to skip over those distractions and get to the heart of a sentence or passage.

Begin interpreting from the source language to the target language using all the techniques you have developed in the preceding exercises. At first, use the tapes you have already recorded and worked on in the other exercises, then make new tapes specifically for interpreting practice. You may want to choose texts related to law and the courts for this purpose, but do not make them too technical at first. When you feel you are ready, record some actual court proceedings for practice. Court reporting schools are a good source of professionally recorded tapes of law-related texts.



Note Additional exercises and recommendations for improvement can be found in the *Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination Manual* (Gonzalez, 1986).

Sight translation exercises

The exercises outlined below will help you develop skills in sight translation. Practice them in all your working languages.

Exercises in public speaking

Reading allowed. Stand in front of a mirror and read passages aloud from any book, newspaper or magazine. A legal textbook, code book or other legal text is useful for familiarizing yourself with legal language. Record or videotape yourself and analyze the outcome critically. Pay attention to your voice, pitch, tone, hesitations, signs, projection, enunciation and posture.

Controlling emotions. Practice controlling your emotions while reading aloud texts with high emotional content, such as fear, anger or humor. Make sure you convey the author's intended emotions and not your personal reaction to the subject matter.

Public speaking. Practice speaking before a group of people at every opportunity. People you know will constitute a less threatening audience and will allow you to ease your way into public speaking and build your confidence. Court interpreting is an ongoing exercise in public speaking.

Reading ahead in text

Extensive reading. Build up your reading speed and your vocabulary by reading as much as possible in many different fields.

Analyzing. Analyze the content of each text and practice picking out the subject and verb to determine the core meaning. *Example:* Although less influential than in Argentina, migration from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected the development of Chilean political culture. Subject: migration; Verb: affected.

Identifying sentences and embedded sentences. While reading a text aloud, break up long sentences into smaller, more manageable units. *Example:* Juvenile delinquency, which is seen most often among minority youths in urban ghettos, cannot be attributed to the urban environment alone, as it plagues the suburbs as well.

Three separate sentences are embedded in this complex sentence:

- Juvenile delinquency is seen most often among minority youths in urban ghettos.
- It cannot be attributed to the urban environment alone.
- It plagues the suburbs as well.

Deciphering handwriting. Obtain texts written by hand (such as letters) and practice deciphering the handwriting on the first oral reading.

Analytical skills

Reading for content. Read a text aloud to a friend and then have the person ask you questions about its content.

Chunking. Choose a text and mark off the units of meaning in it. *Example:* I was getting ready/ to go out to lunch with/ my mother-in-law/ when/ all of a sudden/ I felt sick to my stomach./ It occurred to me that/ it might be/ something psychosomatic,/ but I later found out that/ I was simply allergic to/ the perfume she always wore.

Using transcripts. Perform chunking with transcripts of court proceedings (or any document with a question-and-answer format). Try to establish a hierarchy of importance of the units of meaning. **Example:** Now, Mr. Jones, in your earlier testimony you mentioned that you had seen the defendant in that bar prior to the date of the incident. Can you tell us or give us an approximation of how long before the incident it was that you first saw the defendant in the El Camino bar?

Hierarchy of importance:

- How long before the incident.
- You first saw the defendant.
- In the El Camino bar.
- Tell us, or give approximation.
- Had seen defendant prior to date of incident.
- Mentioned in earlier testimony.
- Mr. Jones.
- Now.

Completing phrases. Have a friend write a series of incomplete phrases. Complete the phrases and determine whether the resulting sentences convey the same idea the friend originally had in mind.

Examples:

- After being reprimanded unfairly by her boss in front of her coworker, the secretary tendered....
- The judge determined that the defendant had strong ties to the community and therefore released him....

As you do this exercise, note the errors you make and be aware of how susceptible we are to reaching false conclusions based on partial information.

Paraphrasing. Read a text aloud and rephrase it as you go along, taking care not to change the meaning.

- *Example:* Since political parties are found almost everywhere in Latin America, they would seem to be a common denominator in the region's political life. Yet this is not the case. Cultural, environmental and historical influences on party development are so varied, they challenge conventional notions. Most nations hold periodic elections, but, like parties, the implications of elections may differ profoundly from those of our own culture.
- *Rephrased:* Because political parties can be found in just about every Latin American country, one might conclude that they are a common thread in the political life of this region. This is not so, however. There is such a great variety of cultural, environmental and historical influences on the development of parties that commonly held ideas are contradicted. Elections are held periodically in the majority of countries, but the implications of these proceedings, like those of parties, are very different from the assumptions we can make in our own culture.

Expanding. Read a text aloud and expand it (i.e., say the same thought in more words) as you are going along, again taking care not to change the meaning.

- *Example:* In spite of what you may have heard, scientists are just like other people. A scientist walking down the street may look just like an insurance agent or a car salesman: no wild mane of hair, no white lab coat.
- *Expanded:* Although you may have heard assertions to the contrary, there are no differences between scientists and people who are not in that profession. In fact, if you saw a scientist out for a stroll on the sidewalk, you might mistake him for a person who sells insurance or an automobile dealer. Scientists don't all have wild manes of hair and they don't always wear white laboratory coats.

Condensing. Read a text aloud and condense it (i.e., say the same thought in fewer words) as you go along, retaining the same meaning.

- *Example:* The multiplicity of cues that are utilized in the categorizing and sorting of the environment into significant classes are reconstructed from the strategies and modes of coping with the problems presented to the subjects. In many situations, no certainty can be achieved; the varying trustworthiness and merely statistical validity of the cues frequently make inferences only probable.
- *Condensed:* Many cues are used to classify the environment. They are reconstructed from the subject's problem-solving strategies. Often, because the cues are not uniformly reliable and are valid only statistically, the results are not certain.

Manipulating the register. Read a text aloud and alter the register or language level as you go along, being careful not to stray from the original meaning.

- *Example:* As I was driving to work in the morning, I noticed that the stop sign, which used to be on the corner of Main and First, had been removed.
- *Higher level:* Upon transporting myself to my place of employment in a motor vehicle at some point in time prior to noon, I observed that the insignia to cause motorists to bring their vehicles to a stationary position, which had formerly been stationed at the intersection of the thoroughfares known as Main and First, had been displaced.
- *Lower level:* On my way to work in the morning, I saw that they took out the stop sign that used to be at Main and First.



Note These are learning exercises designed to build mental agility, linguistic flexibility, and analytical skills and to heighten awareness of language usage. In actual sight translation, the interpreter does not paraphrase, summarize or change the register of the original text.