

Overcoming Performance Anxiety during Consecutive Interpretation

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine performance anxiety among students of interpretation when doing consecutive interpretation and to determine whether being aware of their feelings of anxiety can help them overcome them. While simultaneous interpretation is used mainly for multilingual conferences, consecutive interpretation is often used in bilateral markets and interpreters must face their audience and become the speaker when giving the consecutive interpretation. The difficulties of public speaking need to be overcome and controlled in order to be able to give a competent interpretation. This study focused on first year students who had just started their interpretation studies and therefore had not had much experience in public speaking. A questionnaire focusing on performance anxiety was conducted at the beginning of the semester, followed by another one towards the end of the semester. Second year students were also used as a comparison base. Based on the questionnaire, in-depth individualized feedback was given to each student after the interpretation to determine whether such feedback helped alleviate the feelings of anxiety. For the most part, the students felt that the individualized sessions helped mentally.

Keywords: *performance anxiety, stage fright, public speaking, consecutive interpretation, individualized feedback*

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Introduction

There are numerous occasions in life when we have to speak in public. The size of the audience can vary from about a dozen people to several times that. However, regardless of the size of the audience whenever we have to give a public speech, we are bound to feel a sense of nervousness called *glossophobia*, but more commonly known as stage fright, performance anxiety or just butterflies. In fact, a quick search on the Internet results in thousands of hits in numerous disciplines, most notably psychology where the causes and solutions are discussed as well as in business where the most effective ways to overcome stage fright are presented. Successful businessmen often talk about the importance of public speaking and how overcoming their fear of it helped them advance their career. Warren Buffett proudly displays his Dale Carnegie certificate and talks about how it helped him propose to his wife (Gallo, 2017)

There is a slew of material that can be considered neuro-pop or pseudo psychological advice. But, most of the solutions or advice given to those who are afraid to speak in front of a large audience such as practicing a lot, exercising before a presentation, being well-prepared, not memorizing every word or reading the presentation are similar regardless of the discipline in which it is being discussed. (Genard, 2015; Maina, 2015; Ni, 2013; Scalco, 2017)

Musicians are probably most similar to interpreters since their work, by definition, involves performing in front of an audience and proving themselves again and again, regardless of their reputation. During the end of his career, Luciano Pavarotti would make headlines around the world whenever he missed a note or did not reach a high note. In fact, there are numerous studies targeting musicians which focus on MPA or Music Performance Anxiety to cover the emotions that a performer experiences before a musical performance. Studer et al (2011) studied musician students who complained about hyperventilation before their musical performance to determine whether there was a correlation with the actual stage fright that they experience during their performance and it was found that wind musicians, singers and women experienced higher frequency of respiratory symptoms. Thomas & Nettelbeck (2014)

studied adolescent musicians by using four different tools and they found that female musicians reported greater MPA compared to their male counterparts and that there was a negative correlation between extraversion and MPA. While most studies targeting musicians focused on classical musicians, Papageorgi, Creech & Welch (2011) wanted to see whether MPA affected other genres of music as well and they found that MPA was similar across all different genres. As such, performance anxiety in musicians has been studied from various perspectives. The same cannot be said for interpreters in consecutive interpretation even though they face similar conditions whenever they have to do a consecutive interpretation.

The phases of stage fright are often divided into four: first, anticipation or negative thoughts or imagining failing; second, avoidance or wanting to escape from the situation or task at hand; third, panic and/or anxiety or the feelings of trepidation right before the presentation; and fourth, review after the performance.

The reasons for feeling performance anxiety are numerous and they include lacking self-confidence, afraid of making a fool of oneself or even fear that the audience may not like them. But the nervousness that one feels when giving a public performance is a physiological reaction, that is, the body is presented with a stimulus – the public performance – and it reacts with excitement or fear, like the ‘fight or flight’ response stimulus.

Literature Review

Public speaking is a common fear that many people can sympathize with. MacInnis (2006, p.12) said that the fear of public speaking is real and widespread. It has been said that many people would list public speaking ahead of dying on a list of things they dread most. The bad news is that if this phobia is not managed effectively it will likely become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The good news is that the feeling is perfectly normal, it can be managed, and it can be overcome.

While some researchers compare interpreters to performers or actors who have to overcome stage fright (Gile, 1995, p.113), there are others who say that though it is not exactly the same, they still face a

lot of difficulties because, according to Bale (2016, p. 2), Interpreters do not literally perform on stage but carry out their role in front of spectators, whether there are other interlocutors, conference delegates or other interpreters. An interpreter must constantly monitor his/her performance to ensure the accuracy and adequacy of the message conveyed, and so a high degree of self-awareness and reflection plays a key role in any interpreter-mediated event.

Orlando (2010) focused on the fact that interpreters must be trained as public speakers as well and stated that as a good interpreting performance is assessed on the content accuracy, the quality of expression, and the presentation, it is invaluable for interpreters to be trained to public speaking, to acting, and to the production of impromptu structured and coherent speeches. Exercises such as role plays during domain specific dialogue interpreting situations (e.g. in healthcare, legal or education contexts), mock business meetings, mock trials or conferences, are all opportunities for students to develop their aptitude to act, to perform in public, and are also good memorization exercises as students must learn their lines – their role – before coming to class.

In order to overcome stage fright, Detz (2002, p. 135) suggested that nervousness is simply energy. If you channel that energy, you can turn it into a positive force. You can make it work for you. You can use the extra energy to your advantage. In contrast, Bryant and Wallace (1962, p. 24) recommended that public speaking be viewed as an enlarged conversation and to practice often and prepare thoroughly. Bulca & Sfaei (2013) also suggested that students practice throughout the semester giving mini-presentations in order to be better prepared which can help them overcome stage fright as well.

Zakaria, Musib & Shariff (2013) conducted a study to see how music undergraduates overcame performance anxiety. They found that everybody regardless of age, years they studied music and experience underwent performance anxiety, and the way they overcame it was through praying, breathing and relaxation, accumulation of prior experiences, adequate practices and mental readiness to perform.

In view of the fact that the overwhelming number of interpretation students are female, the study by Nunez-Pena, Suarez-Pellicioni & Bono (2016) related to gender differences in test anxiety has some interesting implications for interpretation students. Though numerous studies have shown that female subjects tend to feel higher levels of anxiety compared to their male counterparts, “this study showed that although reported levels of test anxiety were higher for female university students than for their male peers, this does not seem to affect their academic achievement, since their final grades were comparable with those of their male classmates. (p.159)

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the anxiety people feel when giving public speeches. Savitsky & Gilovich (2003) conducted a study on Cornell University students to study what is called the illusion of transparency. In the study, students were asked to give speeches and then to determine whether the degree of anxiety they felt corresponded with how the audience perceived it. In most cases, the anxiety the speakers felt was greater than how it was perceived.

In another study, an experiment was conducted in which students were divided into two groups – one group received special vocal and physical skills training, while the other was the control group. Merritt, Richards & Davis (2001) found the training that they conducted did result in a reduction of performance anxiety. They also found “that lack of oral skills acquisition highlights perceived performance anxiety.” They indicated that it is a reflection of the times where verbal communication is being replaced by electronic communication which adds to pressure when one has to give a presentation.

Cho & Roger (2010) conducted an interesting study applying theatrical techniques to the study of interpretation. Since many consider consecutive interpretation to be similar in many ways to public performance, they believed that actually using the various techniques and exercises used in the theater would help students, especially to overcome performance anxiety. In fact, most of the participants agreed that they learned important lessons from this training that could be applied to their studies; these ranged from

relaxation, memory, anticipation, logic, bodily communication, to impromptu techniques and problem-solving ability (p. 168-169).

Chang (2016) conducted a study focusing specifically on performance anxiety during sight translation. She found that students were concerned about being laughed at by their classmates in performing an ST task (p.88) for which she recommended working in smaller groups. Another finding was that students were concerned about the level of their English which is a common concern for students who have learned a foreign language at school but have not lived in a country which speaks that language as a mother tongue.

The purpose of the study conducted by Kao & Craigie (2013) was to determine the extent of the stress experienced by students and to see how they dealt with it. Though all the students experienced stress, they also found that the students perceived interpretation in class to be a challenge and perceive a certain level of control over the situation. The results also suggest that the use of problem solving strategies positively contributed to the reduction of stress.

The Study

The first part of this study consisted of conducting questionnaires at the beginning of the semester with a follow-up at the end of the semester. After each performance, students were asked to fill out questionnaires and this was followed by another one after their second performance. The students were not explicitly told that the main focus was performance anxiety. The target population of this study was first year students at the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, with the second year students used as a reference point. A total of 23 first year students took part in the study and 45 students or the entire second year of the Korean-English department answered only the questionnaire without giving a consecutive interpretation in class. The first year students had just entered the program, while the second year students had had a year of consecutive interpretation and one semester of introduction to simultaneous interpretation, and therefore could be considered a little bit more experienced.

There were three slightly different versions of the questionnaire though the main ideas were similar. For the second year students, there were four additional questions to determine whether or not they had received any feedback from their instructors regarding stage fright. And for the second round for the first year students, some additional questions about being more aware of stage fright were added.

The first year students gave their first consecutive interpretation, videotaped it, received feedback from their peers and the instructor in class and then reviewed it on their own. That consisted of one full round. This was followed by another round which was almost the same though there were a few questions which were slightly different to reflect the fact that they had already done a consecutive interpretation in class.

The questionnaire given to the first year students (n=23. 21 female and 2 male students) consisted of ten multiple choice questions and one open-ended question. The main purpose of the questions was to determine their feelings about public speaking in general as well as while during consecutive interpretation. The results of the first questionnaire revealed that the overwhelming majority had had no or very little formal training in public speaking. In addition, they had not had the opportunity to give public speeches. When giving speeches, not knowing the audience or anonymity did not help to alleviate their nervousness. However, interpreting into Korean, their mother tongue, rather than English did help somewhat for the majority of the students (60%) and it also helped when they were just talking instead of interpreting. For the respondents, there was added pressure when having to interpret compared to just talking.

Interesting to note, the majority of the respondents said that they did not enjoy speaking in front of audience but not to the extent that they considered giving up on interpretation because of that element. The results indicated that they would probably be able to overcome those negative feelings because they were not too extreme.

Regarding the symptoms that they demonstrated when speaking in front of an audience the largest number of responses were trembling

voice, blushing and hands and/or legs trembling. While a podium or desk could hide trembling legs, a trembling voice or blushing cannot be hidden from the audience. When asked what they felt was the reason for the stage fright they experienced, the majority said that they were afraid to make mistakes as well as being afraid of being humiliated. The solution to overcoming stage fright for the respondents was building confidence and extensive training.

All the students of the Korean-English department in the second year (n=45, 9 male and 36 female students) answered the same questionnaire as the first year students but with four additional questions regarding whether they had had any feedback from their instructors regarding how to overcome stage fright.

Out of the total 45 students, about half had had little or no training in public speaking. Asked whether they had spoken in front of an audience of more than 20 people, about half had had some exposure and only two students had never done so. Just like the first year students, anonymity, or not knowing the audience did not seem to help to alleviate stage fright, while speaking in Korean was better than speaking in English. But, in contrast, just speaking compared to interpreting did not make it easier to speak publicly. The biggest difference was that the second year students enjoyed speaking in front of an audience (49%). In fact, only six respondents said that they had considered quitting interpretation because they did not like to speak in front of an audience. The most prominent symptoms of stage fright were trembling voice and blushing and the reason that they gave for feeling so nervous was that they were afraid of making mistakes, followed by fear of being humiliated.

Regarding the questions that were given to only the second year students, most respondents said that they had never had an instructor comment on the nervousness that they showed during their performance. But those who had had feedback responded that the instructor had also given suggestions as to how to overcome stage fright such as not being afraid of the audience, to care less, to imagine the audience naked, not to take making mistakes too seriously, to relax and not speak so fast, to realize that the listeners are all humans and to take a 'so what' attitude.

In an open-ended question about what they felt was the best way to overcome stage fright, the students answered practice, preparation, exposure as well as having confidence, speaking slowly, and improving English skills.

For the second round, the first year students were still reluctant to volunteer to do the consecutive interpretation; however, when they did volunteer it helped a little bit with their nervousness before they began their interpretation since one would naturally assume that they felt confident that they had understood the speaker. For those who were called upon, the nervousness level was an average of 7 (with 10 being the highest), and their nervousness did not diminish even as they interpreted. Slightly more students were aware as they were interpreting that they were displaying signs of nervousness such as trembling hands, shaky voice, shaking hands and trembling voice. However, they could be comforted by the fact that they felt that they appeared less nervous in the video. In fact, most of the students felt that looking at themselves in the first video helped them to realize what they needed to work on such as increasing eye contact and taking notes more sparsely so that they can read them when they are standing.

Comments after their first performance helped for some students in much the same way as the videotaping did in that they felt that they were made aware of the communication aspect of interpretation. By far the largest number of students said that they tried to overcome stage fright was by taking a deep breath before beginning.

Neither the first year nor the second year students had had much training in public speaking. However, while more than half of the first year students had not spoken before an audience of more than 20 people, more than half of the second year students had. It can be assumed during the first year of the program, students are asked to speak in front of other students as part of their training, so even if there is no public speaking training per se, consecutive interpretation involves speaking in front of an audience. And in fact, because they become used to speaking in front of their classmates, anonymity or speaking in front of an audience they did not know did not alleviate the level of nervousness for neither the first nor second year students.

In addition to the questionnaire, students were also given individualized feedback during which time the instructor watched the video recording of the consecutive interpretation together with the student and discussed their

nervousness was manifesting itself. For the most part, the students realized that they had been a lot more nervous than they had appeared. They also mentioned that the individualized review and feedback helped them to realize the importance of the communication aspect of consecutive interpretation.

Comparing the first and second year students, there were similarities as well as differences. They both felt less nervous speaking in Korean; and they also said that they felt less nervous just speaking compared to interpreting. Probably the most notable discrepancy between the first and year students was that the first year students overwhelmingly said that they did not enjoy speaking in public, while almost half of the second year students said that they did. Since it is not the same group of students, it cannot be said definitively but one could tentatively say that having been exposed to speaking in public, the students come to enjoy that aspect of consecutive interpretation. In either case, performance anxiety, in and of itself was not enough to make them consider giving up on interpretation altogether. Regarding the symptoms that they displayed, the first and second year students both said that their voice trembled the most, followed by blushing and then hands and legs trembling. Blushing was common between the two groups. For the reasons why they experienced stage fright, both groups said that they were afraid of making mistakes – but the second year students were evenly distributed among the different answers compared to the first year students.

Conclusion

As is the case for the general public, it was no surprise that all students experience stage fright or performance anxiety during consecutive interpretation, albeit it at different degrees. Many students answered that they felt that practice and exposure was needed to overcome stage fright which should not be too difficult since during classes of interpretation, students are given ample opportunities to interpret before their peers. To add a little bit more tension or to heighten the stress level, it is also recommended that they be asked to interpret standing up behind a podium, as can sometime happen in real-life situations. Standing up and looking out at the audience can also be stressful. Being exposed to more stressful situations can help students to push themselves and ultimately they can become more accustomed to such stress which can make it manageable for them.

Repetition is important, but what is more important is that it be meaningful practice. The students should be made aware of how they are displaying signs

of performance anxiety and given some indication of how to overcome it. For example, it could be possible to teach students breathing exercises like they do in the theater.

Only a handful of students said that they had considered quitting interpretation because of performance anxiety and so one could conclude that performance anxiety is surmountable. For second year students, in particular, it appeared that they had already invested more than one year and therefore were unwilling to stop after just one year, and perhaps having practiced more did actually help them in public speaking.

In fact, after going through one round – consecutive interpretation, peer and instructor feedback, video watching, questionnaire and reflection, many students felt that they were more aware of how they expressed their stage fright and therefore felt that they could, if not overcome it completely, then at least manage it to a certain degree.

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