



How I survived my professional crisis

Preparation reinvented – instead of stressing, start SPEAKING

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Published: January 8, 2020 Last updated: January 8, 2020

Energy drain

I come from Mexico, a surreal country where things often take unexpected turns. There is a baseline level of chaos that permeates all aspects of life... including interpreting assignments.

Let me explain: during the first years of my career I spent many hours and a lot of energy trying to convince clients and agencies to provide me with conference material. The end result, more often than not, was dismal: radio silence; getting a flood of documents at the very last minute; or being blacklisted for being too demanding.

My feeling of frustration snowballed to the point that I considered changing professions. My contractors' attitudes were draining me of energy and filling me with self-pity. Finally, I decided I couldn't continue with this career. I was going to cross the Rubicon and abandon interpreting; instead I would dedicate my efforts to training interpreters. But first, I would try one last time.

Neither unique nor alone

This professional crisis led to my enrollment in the Masters of Advanced Studies for Interpreter Trainers at the University of Geneva. Being in a multinational class, I soon realized that I was not alone in my hardships – sadly, the poor supply of preparatory material for conferences appeared to be a global pandemic.

This was my moment of epiphany: I could use my studies to help reduce the frustration and despair of my peers – and my own. I decided to devote my thesis to finding a way to help interpreters prepare efficiently, using whatever information we can get from our contractors – however scarce or abundant – and optimizing the time we have available.

I came up with a method to help interpreters develop anticipatory strategies (or superpowers!) to seize the main components of the communicative situation (**S**etting, **P**articipants, **E**nds, **A**ct sequence, **K**ey, **I**nstrumentalities, **N**orms of interaction, **G**enre). This method is the foundation of the courses I teach, during which we use real-life situations to strike the best balance between contextual and terminological searches.

Thanks to this method, the interpreter can produce a relevant glossary using the technology at hand (traditional and/or CAI tools) and best practices in interpreting. In sum, the SPEAKING method equates to packing a suitcase with all the essentials you will need for your assignment, from beginning to end.

This method is inspired by Angelelli's analysis of the main differences between community and conference interpreting (2000) and Dell Hymes' theory of communication.

COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE EVENTS

S *Setting*: time and place of the interaction

S *Scene*: psychological or cultural definition

P *Participants*: speaker, sender, addressor, hearer, receiver, audience, addressee

E *Ends*: refers to the a) outcome expected by participants, b) intentions and strategies used by participants

Act sequence:

A *Message form*: how something is said

Message content: topic and how topic changes

K *Key*: provides modality, tone, manner or spirit in which a speech act is performed (serious, mock); non-verbal elements (use of emphasis)

Instrumentalities:

I Forms of speech: languages, dialects, register

Channels: choice of oral, written or other medium of transmission of speech

Norms of interaction: rules governing speech

N

Norms of interpretation: belief system of a community and framework of understanding exchanges

G *Genres*: genres of speech (poem, myth, tale, proverb, joke, etc.)

Table 1. The SPEAKING Acronym

Source: Hymes, 1986, pp. 59-65; Angelelli 2000, pp. 586-589

The potential use of the SPEAKING method in preparing interpreting assignments involves a prediction effort at the macro and micro levels. This theory is in keeping with the concept of *hypertext* developed by Pöchhacker to describe conferences as a unit and to explain the external factors that affect an interpreter's comprehension and preparation work (1992 in Ruiz-Rosendo 2006, p. 90).

The preparation strategy is customized to the requirements of the conference and the available material and time, providing a more structured and efficient preparation process.

Hypothetically SPEAKING

An all-too-real imaginary assignment

Let me illustrate by offering one imaginary example: during peak season you are hired to interpret a specialized conference on biodiversity at your local university titled: "Natural Selection & Sauropsida".

That is all you and your boothmates receive from your contractor. What can you possibly do?

On top of this, you have back-to-back jobs, and a very finite number of hours to prepare.

What do you need? Context? Terms? Both?

How can you divide the workload to optimize the time you have?

Despite your polite requests, only scant preparatory material has been supplied. You begin to hyperventilate.

Stop! Don't panic!

I'm confident that my SPEAKING toolkit will help you to prepare. By going through the aspects of SPEAKING, you can ask relevant questions, such as:

Setting: "Have I worked for this client before?" "What information is publicly available from the organizers?" "Have I worked at this venue before?" "Can I advise my contractor of my needs to avoid on-the-spot issues?" "Are electronic devices allowed?" You may be able to find some useful information online, such as the agenda of the conference, and other clues....

Participants: "Who will be there?" If you're lucky enough to find a basic agenda, it could give you some hints. If this conference is addressed to laypeople, the information will be presented in a very didactic way. But if it's a meeting of experts, then you need to acquire enough basic understanding to be the voice of those experts who have shared knowledge but different languages. And they will *not* tone it down for the sake of the interpreters. What will it take for you to acquire a basic understanding of the subject matter?

Ends: "What is the purpose of the meeting?" By finding out what the desired outcome is, you will be better prepared to anticipate how the information will be presented. Perhaps the experts will share updates on their research, or previously unheard insights....

Acts: "What is the sequence of the acts of speech?" This reflects the strategies used to communicate an idea. If experts are sharing knowledge, you can expect a series of explanations and comparisons to substantiate their theories, and possibly challenges by dissenting colleagues.

Key: "How formal will the meeting be?" This aspect can help you anticipate whether changes of register will be an issue.

Instruments: "What mechanisms will be employed to deliver the speeches?" In an academic setting, for example, some speakers

might decide to deliver their papers in various languages via remote connections. If so, this could create further challenges for the interpreters. But if you can find this out in advance, you can request that the appropriate arrangements be made to ensure a professional interpreting experience.

Norms of interaction: “What is the meeting format?” By taking stock of previous experiences, you can anticipate the prevailing culture in a university setting: a Master of Ceremonies is likely to introduce the university authorities; the opening is likely to be very formal; there will probably be a series of presentations, and very short Q&A sessions.

Genre: “What kind of meeting is it?” By identifying the kind of meeting – conference, public hearing, seminar, training – you will have a clearer idea of the task ahead.

Now that you’ve quickly analyzed the big picture, you are in a much better position to collaborate with your boothmates, deciding what to include in your glossary and which tools are needed. If you get 800 pages to read, a term extractor could be the best tool to quickly process the material. Or perhaps a simple term search will suffice – and the AIIC website has a good selection of tricks of the trade.

When you arrive at the venue on the day of the conference, despite the scant material provided, you are prepared, confident and stress-free... well, almost stress-free!



Photo:

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Avoiding stress, avoiding crisis

In the hypothetical examples above, you can see that the SPEAKING method enables interpreters to acquire a much better grasp of their assignment in advance. Over time, this method becomes second nature, building your confidence as an experienced interpreter.

In retrospect, I can see now that if I had been more proactive and strategic in terms of what I used to request from clients and conference organizers, my preparation-related stress could have been greatly reduced, and my near burn-out averted.

The SPEAKING Method saved me from leaving the profession that I love. During the three years since its genesis, I have taught this method to over 500 conference, sign-language, indigenous language, court and medical interpreters at various conferences – FITE, CITI8, NAJIT, ATA, NETA, webinars by Lexica, Lexica-Cultural Bridges trainings, AIIC Training, and other on-demand courses for staff interpreters.

I hope that it has helped at least some of them prepare their assignments in a more methodical way. . And I'm confident that if another crisis does come my way, it won't be due to preparation-related stress! Now we are SPEAKING!

About the author: Darinka Mangino holds a Master in Advanced Studies for Interpreting Trainers from FTI-UNIGE; a PGC in Forensic Linguistics from Aston University, UK; and a degree in Conference Interpreting from Instituto Superior de Interpretes y Traductores, Mexico City. She is a member of AIIC Mexico, Central American and the Caribbean Region, and the Colegio Mexicano de Interpretes de Conferencias.

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Recommended citation format:

Darinka Mangino. "How I survived my professional crisis". *aiic.net*. January 8, 2020. Accessed May 2, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/8913>>.