

Nine Exercises to Improve your Memory while Interpreting



An Introduction

Ever since the 19th century, memory has been classified as long-term or short-term. This difference was explored in more depth in 1968, by the Atkinson-Shiffrin memory model, that suggests that human memory involves a three phase sequence:

SENSORY MEMORY

the senses have limited ability to store information about the world without processing it for less than a second. For example, vision has iconic memory for visual stimuli like shapes, sizes, colours and location, but does not give these meaning.

SHORT-TERM MEMORY

our short-term memory is where most information processing takes place. It is where we try to give meaning to what we see and what we hear, converting this information into something significant, filling the blanks with elements from long-term memory. At this stage, information is held for 15 to 30 seconds, more than enough for it to be reused.

LONG-TERM MEMORY

long-term memory allows for information to be held, not just for seconds, but for a lifetime. This memory seems to have unlimited capacity to store information

SHORT-TERM MEMORY AND INTERPRETING

The role of short-term memory while interpreting has been discussed by several researchers. We have, for instance, Daniel Gile, who considers interpreting performance as a set of three efforts, each of which with their own role in the limited supply of processing capacity:

1. **Listening and Analysis Effort:** concerning all comprehension activities, such as the analysis of the acoustic characteristics of sounds, the recognition of certain sequences of sounds and the interpretation of the meaning of words and sentences.
2. **Production Effort:** the production part of interpreting, involving all operation, from the mental representation of the message to its delivery.
3. **Short-Term Memory Effort:** concerning all operations that occur continuously while interpreting. Short-term memory operations are necessary due to the delay between the moment the speech is made and the moment it is analysed. Furthermore, short-term memory also has a role between the moment the sounds of the speech are analysed and converted into ideas and the time the speech is produced. This effort may be intensified due to situational problems or specific linguistic factors (for instance, the speaker's accent may be hard to understand, the speech may not be clear or the information presented may be dense). It is also harder to retrieve information if the source language is syntactically different, with different structures than the target language, forcing the interpreter to reformulate segments of the speech earlier than normal.

CONSEQUENCES OF AN INADEQUATE SHORT-TERM MEMORY

Memory holds an important role in each phase of the interpreting process. Adequate functioning of short-term memory involves:

- Effective processing of sounds into known words and, later, into chunks of information, with the help of long-term memory to fill in blanks;
- Effective storage of these portions of information;
- The opportune retrieval of the information.

An inadequate short-term memory has negative consequences, some of which may not be obvious. However, the more obvious consequences of a poor short-term memory are related to:

- The omission of a qualifier (saying “powerful” instead of “extremely powerful”);
- The omission of a subordinate clause (saying “the thief was detained by the store’s security guard” instead of “the thief, that was caught red handed, was detained by the store’s security guard”);
- Omission of sentences.

Another obvious consequence of poor short-term memory is what we might call “approximate interpreting”, in other words, the interpreter might remember what was said, but not the intensity with which it was said. For example, the interpreter might use the term “quite powerful” when the speaker actually meant to say “extremely powerful” or a neutral (and, in a sense, meaningless) connector could be chosen when the interpreter can’t remember if the connection between ideas was additive, oppositional or consequential.

There are less obvious consequences, but still serious ones, when the memory requisites are larger than the memory capacity and saturation eventually occurs. This can happen, for example, when languages are very different from one another, forcing the interpreter to store a larger amount of information before being able to rephrase it. The denser the contents of the source language information, the harder it will be for the interpreter to remember all the bits of information.

To reduce these memory problems, interpreters might take notes during the consecutive or simultaneous interpretations. **Names, numbers** and **dates** should be written down, since they are very difficult, if not impossible, to retain, particularly when there are several of these elements grouped together. The same applies to complicated technical terms and for all information that is new to the interpreter, these should be written down in order to be analysed and understood.

However, the more notes the interpreter makes, more of his attention is focused upon making notes and less on the effort of listening and analysing, both of which essential to a good interpretation. So, it is important that interpreters improve their short term memory in all ways possible.

EXERCISES TO IMPROVE SHORT-TERM MEMORY

As mentioned, for short-term memory to work properly, an effective processing of sounds into known words and, afterwards, into portions of information, the effective storage of these portions and the retrieval, at the right time, of this information is required. The ideal would be to work on each of these aspects separately, but unfortunately this is not possible. So, the exercises we suggest here involve all of these aspects.

Memory exercises should simulate the interpretation as best as possible, since the intention of these exercises are to improve memory for interpreting purposes. However, this kind of exercises should not involve bilingual activities, since these lead to different problems that the mind tends to focus on. It is highly recommended that the exercises be done alternately in both of the interpreter's languages.

For the development of short-term memory, it is necessary to use short texts, where individual words may be analysed in context and retained as portions of information, instead of being retained simply as acoustic units.

The exercises we suggest here may be used by an interpreter, a group of interpreters that work together or by a trainer that is leading a course in interpreting.

Exercise 1: shadowing

The exercise of *shadowing* involves repeating what the speaker says, word for word, in the same language. Normally, the interpreter will be a word or two behind the speaker as one repeats what has been said. This delay may be increased as the interpreter becomes more comfortable. This exercise is often used in preparation for simultaneous interpreting, since it teaches the interpreter to listen and talk at the same time. It is also very good for memory development, since it forces the interpreter to store and recall small groups of sounds, words and chunks of information in a relatively short period of time. However, it is complicated by the fact that the speaker continues to speak while the interpreter is recalling a previous segment, forcing the interpreter to listen and speak at the same time.

For this exercise, the texts used should be relatively small, but may increase gradually in size. If you work alone, record a text or use a speech from the television or radio. If you work in a group, one may read the text while the other repeats it.

Exercise 2: shadowing with a twist

As in the first exercise, this one involves repeating exactly what the speaker says, in the same language. However, in this exercise the repetition takes place after a short pause the speaker, making this exercise similar to consecutive interpreting. This way, the difficulties related to the act of listening and speaking at the time are eliminated, allowing the interpreter to focus specifically on memory.

For this exercise, the same texts may be used, but these should be previously divided into small segments.

Exercise 3: Freer shadowing with a twist

This exercise should only be done when the previous ones are mastered and, mainly, when you can repeat long texts without problems. This is where the interpreter's acoustic and meaning memory will be tested. In this exercise, the interpreter not only repeats what was said but, whenever possible, tries to say the same thing using other words.

Usually, this paraphrasing of the original is discouraged in legal environments, as it is considered the first step into a free translation. However, as a memory exercise it does not present any problems.

Exercise 4: attentive listening for key elements

Careful listening is an important element for memory recall. If you have not listened to something carefully, it will be impossible to remember later. First, attentive listening requires identifying a speech's key points. For example, you should be capable of listening to a short narrative or a descriptive text and answer the key questions "Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?" While it might not always be possible to answer these questions in every case, the ability to answer most of them proves that you listened carefully to the key points.

In this exercise, any descriptive or narrative texts may be used and you may record the text, if you're practising alone, or you may ask a colleague to read it, if working in a group.

Exercise 5: progressively expanding the capacity to recall

Good memory must be developed gradually. This exercise was created bearing this in mind and is based on a 50 to 60-word speech that involves recalling first the main ideas and then, during the second or third pass, recalling progressively more details.

First, the interpreter should listen to the text once and identify the main ideas. Hearing the text a second time, the interpreter should be able to add more details to the main ideas. By the last pass, the interpreter should be able to recall all the details.

By knowing that it won't be necessary to recall all the details from the start, the interpreter will be more relaxed and will remember more details than if he or she were tense. As the interpreter becomes more proficient at recall, the number of times the text is heard may decrease to two and the size of the texts may increase. The ultimate goal is to be able to reproduce all the details in a speech of around 50 words, after hearing it just once.

In this exercise, any descriptive or narrative texts may be used and you may record the text, if you're practising alone, or you may ask a colleague to read it, if working in a group.

Exercise 6: visualisation

Most people are visual learners, this is, they remember things they see better than something they are told it or read on paper. Images remain in our minds much longer than abstract information. For this reason, mnemonics suggest one uses visualisation to retain different types of information by creating mental images. However, given that this kind of image is artificial, it takes a while to be created and, so, is not useful for an interpreter.

In any case, there are speeches that invoke visualisation naturally and the interpreter should be able to identify them and use visualisation to retain and recall. For example, court interpreters often have to interpret descriptions that were described by a witness (a place, a suspect, etc.). These descriptions are ideal for the use of visualisation to improve memory. Images should be visualised step by step and in sequential order, helping the interpreter recreate a whole scene.

Visualisation exercises may be completed with oral recall or, in some cases, by drawing the images in involved. In other words, recalling memories does not always have to be done through words.

In this exercise, any descriptive or narrative texts may be used and you may record the text, if you're practising alone, or you may ask a colleague to read it, if working in a group.

Exercise 7: segmentation

This exercise is based on the concept that it is easier to retain a number of limited chunks with information than just one or two larger dense chunks. Segmentation involves breaking a larger chunk of information into two or more smaller ones.

This exercise can be performed using both oral and written texts and the segmentation can also be both oral and written. You should be able to read the sentence only once and, then, segment it. The texts should contain long sentences and dense information.

Exercise 8: recognizing incoherent or ambiguous messages

Speakers are, many times, unclear. In general, incoherent and ambiguous speeches are hard to remember. This exercise aims to help you recognize incoherence or ambiguity in a speech, which is, in itself, also a way to recall the speech. After hearing a relatively incoherent and ambiguous text, you should be able to identify what aspect is incoherent or ambiguous and explain what makes it so. For example, in the sentence “João asked Miguel to sit still. Then, he got angry,” we don’t know if “he” refers to João or Miguel. Once the incoherence or ambiguity has been identified, it may be recalled and dealt with at the production stage of interpreting.

This exercise aims to merely identify the ambiguous or incoherent segment, in an attempt to recall it and not to deal with it in any particular way. Ambiguous or incoherent sentences or passages will be needed, so you should collect any examples of these you might come across.

Exercise 9: remembering messages you disagree with or find offensive

Confirmation bias describes the tendency to favour information that confirms one's personal belief or hypothesis. People display this bias when they collect or recall information selectively or when they interpret information in a biased way. Even if someone tries to interpret evidence in a neutral manner, he or she may recall that information selectively. This effect is called "selective recall", "confirmatory memory" or "access-biased memory". In short, it is harder to remember information that goes against what we believe in.

One way to deal with such information is to put yourself in the speaker's place. In other words, take yourself out of the picture and identify with the speaker because, in doing so, you'll be temporarily bypassing your personal beliefs and prejudices, and assuming those of the speaker. To practise this exercise, start by summarising a controversial text and, then, move on to the freer shadowing with a twist.

These exercises are only a few examples of what can be done to train short-term memory. However, every person is different, as are their minds, and these exercises may not all be effective for everyone. Besides, it is necessary to collect adequate material for the different exercises and to be very patient, as memory is something that is trained gradually.

Thank

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