

THE PLACE OF PHONETICS IN TRAINING CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS

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Abstract: This article explores the critical role of phonetics in conference interpreting and highlights the gap in interpreter training programs that often overlook phonetic skills. It urges to integrate phonetic awareness into interpreter education to improve accuracy, clarity, and cultural sensitivity in interpreting practices. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding speech sounds, accents, intonations, and prosody in conveying meaning faithfully, suggesting systematic phonetic drills and listening exercises as key methods to enhance interpreter competence.

Keywords: Conference interpreting; phonetic training; linguistic accuracy; language comprehension; speech sounds; intonation; prosody; interpreter education; accent awareness; communication clarity.

In today's increasingly globalized world, conference interpreting has never been more essential. International events, such as political summits, corporate meetings, scientific conferences, and the like, often bring together people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For meaningful communication to take place, interpreters play a pivotal role in ensuring that language barriers do not prevent the exchange of ideas and information. In this context, the training of interpreters has to keep up with the evolving demands of the field.

Despite the growing need for interpreters and the complex nature of the work, it is unfortunate that many interpreter-training programs still fail to give phonetics the attention it deserves. Modern interpreter-training programs tend to prioritize other aspects of language proficiency—such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar, syntax, and cognitive skills—while the phonetic aspect is often overlooked or regarded as a secondary concern. Students are frequently taught to focus on the broader meaning of a message rather than on the precise pronunciation and sound structures that may influence its meaning. This is particularly problematic because, without proper phonetic skills, an interpreter might fail to accurately capture the subtleties of speech, leading to potential misinterpretations. In many cases, phonetics and pronunciation are considered to be basic skills, already assumed to be developed at the beginning language-learning level.

Phonetics, as the study of speech sounds, plays a crucial role in the quality of interpretation. It helps interpreters understand and accurately reproduce sounds, tones, accents, and intonations. Very often, an interpreter must be able to differentiate between similar-sounding words, identify regional accents, and interpret effectively in challenging environment. These are all aspects of phonetics that are vital for successful interpreting. A good interpreter must not only have a strong grasp of vocabulary and grammar but also great sensitivity to pronunciation, stress, intonation, and rhythm. Without a deep understanding of phonetic details, even the most fluent interpreters may miss important aspects of speech, particularly when dealing with speakers who have strong accents, or unclear pronunciation. It is taken for granted that conference interpreters must have an excellent grasp of the nuances of spoken language. However, while training may include listening to different accents or variations, it does not often include systematic phonetic analysis or exercises to train interpreters to identify and reproduce sounds accurately.

Interpreters are trained for comprehension, not articulation. The main goal of an interpreter is to understand the source language and convey that message into the

target language. The focus is more on cognitive processing than on phonetic precision. While clear pronunciation is necessary for interpreters to be understood, the emphasis is typically on delivering the message. This is especially typical for interpreters working in simultaneous mode, where time constraints prevent the fine-tuning of phonetics.

What has been said above can be expressed in the following way: training materials and curriculum lack phonetic focus. Many interpreter-training programs do not integrate phonetics into their core curriculum. Interpreter training is usually structured around practical interpreting exercises, with little or no emphasis on the technical aspects of sound production, stress patterns, intonation, and rhythm. Materials used in interpreter training focus more on language comprehension, cultural nuances, and effective communication strategies rather than the detailed study of phonetic theory or articulation practice. Phonetics tends to be an afterthought in language learning, with students often first mastering grammar and vocabulary. Conference interpreters rarely receive advanced phonetics training beyond basic pronunciation drills. At the same time phonetics plays a crucial role in helping interpreters distinguish subtle differences in sounds that may change the meaning of words, particularly in languages that have similar-sounding phonemes, e.g. “bit” [bit] - a small piece vs “bet” [bet] – to wager. The difference is just a single vowel sound [ɪ] # 2 vs. [ɛ] # 3 according to Daniel Jones’s (1963) classification, but it leads to completely different meanings.

In addition to phonetic accuracy, we should bear in mind that prosody plays a crucial role in conveying the speaker's intent adding color to the words and sentences (Gimson, 1976). A failure to interpret prosody effectively can also result in misinterpretations. Prosody refers to the rhythm, pitch, stress, and intonation patterns in spoken language. For interpreters, it is not only about accurately translating words but also about conveying the meaning and emotional tone of the message in the target language. By honing their prosodic skills, interpreters can

achieve higher levels of competence and provide more precise, meaningful, and impactful interpretations.

So, as we can see, a focus on phonetic skills is essential. There is a growing need to integrating phonetic training into interpreter education programs to enhance their ability to deal with the challenges of modern conference interpreting. However, this raises several key questions: How should phonetics be taught? What standards should be chosen, given the wide range of pronunciations, dialects, and foreign accents that interpreters encounter?

There are, of course, numerous approaches to teaching phonetics. It is widely recognized that there are five major English accents, each with its own distinctive pronunciation features, in addition to a vast number of regional and foreign accents. The question of which standard should be used in interpreter training is not an easy one to take. Traditionally, Received Pronunciation (RP) has been the benchmark for Standard British English. However, there have been numerous critiques of RP in recent years, particularly as the diversity of British English pronunciations has expanded. These critiques focus on RP's status as a "prestige" accent and its limited representation of real-world English usage in the UK and abroad (Wells, 1982; Crystal, 2003).

While RP and its modern variants might still serve as a historical and prestigious reference point for British English, I propose that interpreter training programs should focus on teaching so called "classical pronunciation" of English, one that is articulate, clear, and easily understood by a wide range of audiences. This geographically unmarked pronunciation should be grounded in the phonetic clarity of a well-educated person, incorporating precise articulation without regional idiosyncrasies that could obscure communication. The goal is to provide interpreters with a standard that ensures intelligibility in a variety of contexts, from formal political speeches to the high-level business meetings.

In my view, the teaching of phonetics in interpreter training should be based on the principles of the Daniel Jones's system, particularly his vowel numbering arrangement, which offers a clear, systematic approach to understanding vowel distinctions and other key phonetic elements that should be incorporated into interpreter training: pronunciation of diphthongs, plosive consonants, glottal stops etc. Special attention should be given to training rising and falling pitch patterns of interrogative and other types of sentences.

Phonetic instruction can be integrated into interpreter training in the following way:

- **Systematic Drills:** Using the Daniel Jones vowel numbering system, interpreters can practice distinguishing and reproducing different vowel sounds, both in isolation and in context. Diphthongs, plosives, glottal stops etc. can be drilled through repetitive exercises that focus on pronunciation accuracy and speed.

- **Listening and Imitation:** Interpreters should engage in extensive listening exercises, where they listen to high-quality, clear English speech (from broadcasts, speeches, etc.) and practice mimicking the intonation patterns, stress, and rhythm of the speaker. This exercise is crucial in training the ear to recognize subtle prosodic variations and replicate them accurately.

- **Phonetic Transcription Practice:** Interpreters can be encouraged to transcribe speech phonetically using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which helps reinforce their understanding of sound distinctions and improves their listening skills.

- **Accent Awareness:** While aiming for the type of pronunciation under discussion, interpreters should also be trained to recognize and adapt to different accents by listening and analyzing speeches delivered by representatives of such manner of speaking. This involves both understanding the sounds specific to regional dialects and acquiring strategies to adjust their speech to ensure maximum clarity and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, the importance of conference interpreting in today's globalized world cannot be overstated. As the demand for interpreters grows, so too must the quality of training. Unfortunately, many training programs still overlook the importance of phonetics, which remains a fundamental aspect of language comprehension and translation. It is time for the industry to recognize that, in addition to linguistic and cognitive skills, a solid grounding in phonetics is essential for any interpreter who aims to succeed in this complex and high-pressure field. Only then can we ensure that the critical role of the interpreter continues to be performed with precision and professionalism that global communication demands.

Experience of the Training Center for Conference Interpreting at UWED which had been successfully operating for ten years has clearly shown that teaching phonetics to conference interpreters enhances the quality of their work in general and makes it more professional in particular.

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