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Presenting With An Interpreter

Can Anyone Here Speak English?

Over the past decade, I have worked with an interpreter on six different occasions. It is a very different and sometimes very humbling experience. If you are ever in the position of having to present or demo to a "foreign" audience using an interpreter - here are seven handy tips to help you out. I have also included a few bonus tips to use when presenting in your own language to a "foreign" audience who can directly understand you - for example, I commonly work with Asian or Euro audiences, but speak in English to groups who possess English as a Second Language.

For the purposes of these tips, I am assuming that you are speaking English in front of an audience with an interpreter. Which means the translation is serial (you speak, they speak) rather than a parallel United Nations type simultaneous translation. These tips should work equally well for any language pairing, I'm just used to English!

1. **Meet The Interpreter Before The Event.** Buy them a beer or a cup of tea/coffee and get to know them so you can develop some rapport. They essentially become "you", or an extension of your brand in front of the audience. It also helps to remember that they are working with you, not *for* you. This time investment will pay big dividends as you can walk through some of the more difficult concepts and ideas in your pitch. When you cannot physically meet - then Skype it! Anything is better than meeting 15 minutes before you are "on stage".

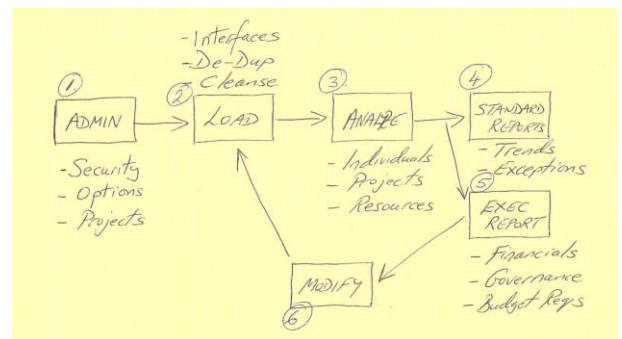
2. **Sixty Means Thirty.** Think about it - everything needs to be said twice, once in English and once again translated in the native language. So either you need to cut your material in half or else use twice the usual time for your pitch. Do NOT attempt to cram too much material into your time, otherwise both language streams fail to get attention. In particular, you should find out if there are English-speakers in the audience, as I've seen SE's present very quickly in English for the sake of time and lose that section of the audience.



3. **Metaphors, Idioms and Analogies = MIA.** (Missing In Action). Every language and culture has its phrases and imagery that you cannot hope to recreate - so remove them. If something is critical to the core of your talk, explain it to the interpreter and let them work on it. For example I like to use Mnemonics like BCRAP and MARS-BARS in my workshops; they don't work amazingly well in Japanese! If you think it is not a problem - I am a Brit; my wife is a Yankee. Even after many years of marriage, at least once a week I will say something and she will look at me with a blank expression and say "*What?*" - And we supposedly speak the same language. Sports, TV and political metaphors are the major culprits.
4. **Practice!** Practice the pitch several times with your partner to build the flow and cadence. Unless the interpreter works for your company they are clueless (in a professional way) about your product/service/solution. So make sure they at least know more about the content than the audience does. Also, prep the interpreter for emergency plans in case of problems with the technology or a demo crash. Back when I was a "real" SE I had a demo totally fail in Japan. To this day, I do not know what the interpreter said, but the audience roared with laughter and it became a non-event. We recovered and got to a successful and profitable conclusion of the meeting.
5. **Write it Out!** I strongly advise sending the interpreter a copy of your speech, demo or PowerPoint deck at least a week beforehand, You don't have to stick exactly to the script, but I'm told it's a big help for timing purposes. Early in 2011, I uploaded a video of one of my workshops for my interpreter to watch. It was a first for her and a first for me - and something I will now repeat whenever possible as it made such a positive difference in delivery.
6. **The Big Picture.** I'd also advise that you work in sentences or concepts when speaking, and not in units of time. During my first rehearsals, I'd stop after speaking for 10-15 seconds to allow the interpreter to catch up. I was often in the middle of a concept or a thought. That made the whole presentation very choppy. The interpreter is a professional - they will both remember what you said, and work with you on phrasing and timing.
7. **Watch The Visuals.** If you are using a PowerPoint deck with builds/transitions or a demo where events happen very quickly or slowly - you need to pay attention to their timing. I have learnt that if there is an 'ah-hah' moment or funny/attention capturing slide - it is better to time it for the interpreter rather than for you.

Presenting In English to English/2nd Language Audiences.

8. **The 75% Rule.** Speak slowly and/or explain what you are doing with your mouse at about $\frac{3}{4}$ of your normal speed. For English speakers work at around 120 wpm instead of 160 wpm, Most of your audience listens to you in English, translates into Swedish / German / Korean, internalizes the content, and may even retranslate back into English when they have a question. You just need to give them time to do that.
9. **Keep It Simple.** Simple refers to how plain your language is. Eliminate the MIA as noted in #3, but also any slang/figures of speech or even quotes from famous people (they may only be famous in your culture). There is the classic tale of how one of the first automated translation machines translated "out of sight, out of mind" into "invisible idiot"!
10. **Provide Guideposts.** I've written before about the benefits of having a Demo/GPS roadmap prepared when showing technology. This provides a major benefit when translated into your audience's natural language - which really applies with or without an interpreter.



Summary

Presenting in front of a "foreign audience" is never easy - it's exceptionally harder when performed through an intermediary. Yet a little practice, some relationship building and the willingness to adapt can make your pitch a big success. Just remember that the interpreter works with you and not for you - that will make all the difference.

"It's a strange world of language in which skating on thin ice can get you into hot water."

~Franklin P. Jones

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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