

Elena: Welcome to “Not Quite Magic”, a Seven Sisters podcast about interpreters. I’m Elena Langdon, and for this first season I’m talking to a variety of interpreters around the world about remote interpreting. For every interview we launch, the Seven Sisters will then host a live debriefing of the issues raised. Stay tuned to the end of this episode for details on how to join us.

For our first episode of “Not Quite Magic”, I interviewed Ernest Niño-Murcia, an English-Spanish interpreter based in Des Moines, Iowa. Most of his work has been in the courtroom and other legal settings. But with the advent of Covid19, Ernest saw a unique opportunity to branch out. Let’s listen to his story.

Elena: I'm just gonna dive into the first question that is related to our podcast name, which is, what does seem like magic to you?

Ernest: I think what seems like magic to me is language acquisition, specifically language acquisition and children. I have two young children right now. And so every day I get to watch them develop their verbal tool kits a little bit more. Not always in ways that I like, but it takes me back to my own experience learning English as a child. I couldn't articulate how it happened. I just landed in the U. S. and three months later, I was speaking English. In the meantime, I was mute. So some very interesting cognitive processes were at play there.

Elena: Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about that. We have your professional bio, but what was your experience learning English?

Ernest: I landed in the U.S. on a Saturday and I was in my first day of first grade that next Monday. I mean, this was first grade. And so it's not like I'd had a lot of academic instruction in English up until then. And so really, it was just, you know, like a pure experiment in language immersion, and I don't really have a lot of concrete memories of it just because it was so long ago. I was so young. But, I mean, I know my mother loves to tell the story about how the teacher reached out and said, “You know, I think we're gonna have to hold him back”, not because they didn't think I was keeping up, but just because I wasn't talking. So I wasn't giving any indication or evidence that I was understanding or grasping any of the concepts. And then by Thanksgiving, she says, one day I got on the phone and she was just amazed to hear me start speaking English. And so her theory is, and this sort of squares with what's happened since then, is that I was just such a perfectionist that I didn't want to learn through trial and error. I just wanted to sort of take it all in and not unleash my English on the world until I knew I was ready and I felt confident.

Elena: Ah, so you went there and this was three months after you landed.

Ernest: That's what she tells me. So I like to say that as a perfectionist acting as

an interpreter, working as an interpreter is like exposure therapy for imperfection. And so I think I would actually be really poorly suited for being a translator because, you know, as a translator, you can just sit there all day agonizing over a sentence. But, you know, interpretation is in the moment and you don't have time to hold onto a mistake or stress about something.

Elena: Yeah, that's so right. And that really meshes your experience with mine because I went to Brazil not knowing any Portuguese when I was eight and we went in September, but I went to the Southern Hemisphere so they were at the end of their school year. So I actually had just started second grade. No, I had just started third grade. Well, I would have started third grade in the United States. I think I went for two weeks and then moved to Brazil. And so I finished second grade in Portuguese, so that was kind of nice that I got that. You know, I didn't have to really be learning. And at the same time I really didn't understand anything. I think I spoke, though I had never heard that I was mute. I probably never have been. But it took about three months, and then it's just like, whoa, it's all there. And meanwhile, my mother's, you know, barely functioning in Portuguese. So it really is an incredible experience. And that full immersion is what does it.

When you do introduce yourself professionally to someone, what is the short version of what you say?

Ernest: My bread and butter is court interpreting. And that's been the bulk of my work. And over the years, I've had the opportunity to do a little bit of interpreting in the media, a little bit of conference, a little bit of medical, a little bit of translation, and the translation and medical mostly come as offshoots of legal things that I'm involved in. So right now, because court has slowed down, I was able to get this steady gig interpreting on TV, and so it's worked out very nicely because in normal circumstances it would be really hard for me every day, to set aside two hours in the morning and commit to being somewhere. You know, the freelancer's dilemma.

Elena: Right. So tell me about what you've been doing for PBS in Iowa.

Ernest: We're going on a month now that we have been live on the air with the governor for her daily press briefings. That's every day at noon, Eastern. And so folks that are tuned in here locally can turn on the SAP secondary audio on their TV and then, you know, they see the governor and they see her lips moving. And that's also then grown into a few other shows that we do. There's a local political talk show where they have different guests, different government officials and journalists. And so we do that on Fridays. And then tonight we have our first political debate. The Iowa Press is hosting a debate for the Democratic Senate candidates for the primary. That's gonna be my first time doing a political debate. I've done a little bit of political work for radio, but never the back and forth. And, you know, you've got to be ready with the applause lines and the zingers. So

that's gonna be what I'm sort of turning in the back of my head the rest of the day, is trying to get ready for that.

Elena: So how do you prepare differently for for this type of job than you did when you were working in court primarily.

Ernest: That's really good question. Court, at least what I usually do can be pretty formulaic. If you're used to working with the same judges. And if you're used to working the same types of hearings, you get used to, you know, you go in for a guilty plea and you already have the schema in your head that's going to start with getting the person's background, then explaining their rights, explaining what it means to plead guilty, and then what's gonna happen later on in the case. And so you know, after 10 years in, 11 years into that, I don't do a lot of preparation for sure. If I come across a word that I'm not familiar with, I write it down and I try to look it up. And there's just not a lot of that anymore. And so this has been wonderful because it's keeping me hungry. It's keeping me on the edge because it's totally different. And the performative aspect has been what's really pushed me. Because in court you have an audience. Mostly, you have an audience of one. If you're working simultaneously into Spanish, your audience of one is the defendant. And you know they're not giving you a thumbs up thumbs down based on your delivery and intonation. And so, you know, broadcasting out to an audience that's gonna get streamed on Facebook for thousands-- we're getting thousands of views every day. And so that's something that you know that I go back to at the end of the day and I listen to myself and if I sound breathy and I sound hurried, and I don't sound like I'm giving a good delivery. That's something that I really take to heart and try to work on. And so something that I do for this that I don't do for court is that I practice and I listen specifically, working on delivery and pacing and breathing.

You know, this is almost entirely performative, but you need to also be on top of the vocabulary. And so it's interesting. Someday, when this is all long behind me, I want to go back and listen to the first few days, which now would be really traumatic. Because the first few days it sounds like crash course for a court interpreter doing conference, you know, trying to get out of trouble by going fast, not as familiar with the terminology. But after a few days we got a feel for the terminology, and after about a week and a half, I started to figure out what matters. It's not moving the needle at all to just go fast and get everything in. It's better to sound good and be able to effectively summarize, so you're still capturing the meaning. It's just still the matter of developing that instinct and developing conditioning, getting out of those habits from court. And so what I needed to be doing or what I still need to be doing is, number one it needs to sound good. It's gotta be pleasant for the viewer so that they don't tune in and say, I'm interested in this topic, but this person sounds like they are running a marathon while they're interpreting. And number two, you've got to capture the meaning, and there's gotta be substance to it that squares with with what's being put out. That does not mean interpreting every single hedge and false start and you know, duplicated adjective. And so that's the difference from court.

Elena: Right. Yeah. And that will be interesting to see when you go back to doing a lot of court too.

Ernest: I've been back, actually. I have continued occasionally to do court stuff during the course of this past month remotely. I do notice the difference. Working on my decalage and allowing myself a longer decalage. And so it's been a pure net positive.

Elena: So, you know, when I started doing these interviews and thinking about why I had to talk about remote interpreting, it was just the very beginning of Covid19 and the pandemic. And as it evolves, some of them even seem not quite well placed. But, just remind me, had you worked at all remotely before Covid?

Ernest: I had for sure done OPI, just because by the nature of some of the court work I do, sometimes a new attorney from out of state is allowed to appear by phone, and so or they need to talk to someone at the jail. And so I'm at the jail with maybe a probation officer, and the attorney calls and so we're working off of a speakerphone there on the table. That could be one example. Or my local federal district court does a little bit of video that they're able to fuse with their audio system in the courtrooms. And so I have actually done remote simultaneous over video from the courthouse, out to a defendant, half a state away. And so I had experience with that. But the pandemic has really forced me to take that to another level. You know, when that becomes your sole source of work, that's something that you've got to really-- I don't want to say adapt or die, because this is not hopefully gonna go long enough that anybody would literally starve from not being able to work remotely--but definitely being able to adapt has allowed me to stay active.

Elena: What do you find works well in remote? Is there something that actually is better or that works particularly well because you're interpreting remotely now?

Ernest: I think it's important to have flexibility in problem solving. I'll give you a really good example. As of the middle of March, we--myself, attorneys, basically anybody was no longer allowed into the jail here. The jail here in Des Moines, Polk County has a pretty bad Covid outbreak at the moment. But even before then, preemptively, they said, that's it. We're shutting down, and so if you want to talk to your client, you're gonna have to do it by phone or you have to do it by video. And so the jail had a preexisting video video system. That's the way people speak to their families because they don't allow people to come in physically. They never did even before this. And so, in anticipation of seeing a decline in court work, I went ahead and created an account for myself. They had a really rigid position, which was the only person within the system who is granted confidential status, meaning they're not gonna have their video calls monitored for attorney client privilege purposes, would be an attorney. And so that doesn't work for me because I am on there facilitating that conversation. I'm

basically acting as the conduit for privileged communication. And so those are some pretty philosophical kind of deep points that are hard to square with a bureaucracy that says, Well, no, look at it, it's written right there: Attorneys only. And so I was anticipating actually a lot more of a fight for that, but they might have just gotten tired of getting emails from me. But after I wrote a somewhat impassioned email, they just said, Okay, give us your email. And after that, it was set. And so now I'm able to do video visits and have them not be monitored. And now I have confidential status despite the fact that I am not an attorney. So that's an interesting example of adaptation and something that you've got to be mindful of. But going back to that system, you know, that is a fixed system, that is as rigid as they come. You have no choice whether you're going to use it or not. If you want to talk to your client about video, that is what you are using. You can't mute yourself on it. You can't shut off your video on it. And so we did eventually come up with a way to do simultaneous through it. But it took a lot of thinking and experimentation. And you know, it's not essential to do simultaneous on those, but they are time limited. That's another thing that you're working with, a rigid system where you literally are on the clock. There's a countdown at the top right of the screen once you get on. And so that benefits the attorney because for their purposes, they're getting more bang for their buck out of that visit by just being able to communicate more and not have to wait for interpretation.

Elena: So am I hearing that in addition to what you know, it's good to have that adaptability and that flexibility, but also that because it was a new thing that everyone was forced to do, you were able to change something that in the past was very fixed, right? It sounds like before you would have had to do it this one way, and now you were able to do it simultaneously.

Ernest: Correct. Well, before I mean everything that we're doing over video, historically we would have been just doing in person, right? And so the big question for me and I think that everybody is wondering is how much of this sticks? Once we're able to go back into the jail, once we're able to have people back in court. And so it's good future-proofing to invest in the skill set now, in case a lot of it sticks or some of it. The skill set you build up trying to kind of "hack" a phone video system. You can apply that then to a higher level challenge, which would be something like this. An example is Zoom simultaneous. When the pandemic started, I was very intrigued by it. And so I started to get a feel for it, and I started to get a feel for some of the bugs and some of the challenges of it and then work-arounds and ways to avoid them, to the point where I was able to start using it. I've even posted screenshots with permission of some of the work that I've done with that. And attorneys are thrilled with it, but it takes a lot of work to get it up and running. And one of the issues with it is that it does have a simultaneous mode, and it will allow two interpreters on a channel, but the interpreters can't hear each other. And so that's an example of where, if you are locked into using that platform, you've got to find some sort of a work-around when communicating with your partner is an issue. Like I said, you can do it through the chat, or you can do it through some other means.

Elena: Yeah, and I think that's really the added value that you give your clients. You know, to have that technical expertise, and to enjoy doing something. You enjoy figuring it out, and to be willing to do it.

Ernest: And there's a line there between value added service within interpreting and then taking on additional responsibilities for no more money. And so I'm willing to do that in court because it serves my purpose in doing simultaneous and getting out of there faster for doing the same job. But when you're talking about RSI, or whatever you call Zoom simultaneous--and some people don't consider it to be RSI, purely speaking. When you're talking about the interpreter also basically acting as the tech and also acting as the host, then you're getting into, how do you properly quote, and ask to be compensated for this service because that really is beyond the scope of your responsibility. And so I think if you can properly articulate what the value of that is, and ask for more from your client, and whether they do it or not is another story. But it's a good conversation to have it. It's something good for us to start discussing as well. Because you know, the situation with Zoom simultaneous and the reason we're giving this webinar tomorrow for the University of Arizona is it's a great tool. And so people see it and say, Oh, hey, cool, yeah, I want to do that. But they don't understand the complexity of everything that goes in to it from setting it up and activating it and then actually running it and troubleshooting it. And so you can have issues and have technical problems if you just go into it blindly. And if the interpreter doesn't know how to run it really well and the client doesn't really know how to run it really well, you're kind of dead in the water. So that's that's what I'm really working on right now is thinking through my messaging to clients from even the first conversation where we're deciding what we're gonna use, and being proactive in addressing issues to avoid having a failed meeting. A couple of weeks ago, we did a Zoom gig where our input was Zoom. Everybody was connected to zoom, but we were interpreting over the phone. We were interpreting via a conference line that they set up for people to call in and listen. And initially there was a discussion of doing Zoom simultaneous. And I said, we can just say no because I knew that it wasn't gonna work. They were expecting to have 500 people and I had my misgivings, but I said, You know what? Let's talk about it some more and they actually proposed to have a run-through. They said, let's get on the two of you, the interpreting team and the two of us, the organizers, let's get on a Zoom call, and we'll try out the simultaneous among two people who are listening to us. We couldn't get both of them to correctly launch zoom simultaneous and get them into a language channel. And so, if that's not gonna work with two, how's it gonna work with 500? But it was that experience that really got the buy-in from the client. So they saw very clearly this is not the right tool for this, rather than us having to say no, we're not doing this.

Elena: Yeah, and ultimately it's better for your client. They'll be happier, you know, and it's just better for the whole language access process, without all that

frustration.

Ernest: And that's how I pitch it in my social media that I posted for this screenshot of the mediation. I say, ensuring safe and reliable language access while socially distancing. And that's how you can pitch it to clients as well. Because from the client side, simultaneous is great because, you know, they get out of there in half the time. And so I know some interpreters really don't care for depositions being done simultaneously. They think that's the interpreter's showcase, that it's the interpreter's opportunity to really show off their great consecutive skills. And I will say this: Consecutive is my favorite thing to do and I think it's the strongest of the three skills for me. But still in this particular instance, I'll take getting done sooner.

Elena: I think we can start wrapping up.

Ernest: I will say this, I don't know if this is relevant, but I wanted to piggyback on this. The experimentation I've been doing specifically with Zoom, and less so with the others--I call them pirate solutions, where you're doing sort of hybrid systems. It's not just something that I've been learning for myself. The way that I learned Zoom was collaboratively with other interpreters. And within two or three weeks I was on a session with Liz and Laura, walking them through it because I think Liz had a session, or a job that week in Zoom simultaneous. And so that instruction teaches me every time I do a demo for Zoom with other colleagues, I learn something different, even if it's through something that doesn't go right in that session. And so it means a lot to me to be able to take the skill set that I have with the platform and my teaching skill set to be able to share it to help other colleagues.

Elena: Yeah, that's great. Thank you. Thank you for doing that. So let's finish off with this idea of talking about what you do and why you love it. And how is that a part for you in terms of when you think about your career in general, how much is it connected to loving what you? Or do you just do it for a living?

Ernest: I was really blessed to discover interpreting. A part of me wishes I had discovered it earlier in life. If I had discovered this during undergrad, I would not be here right now. I would have gone and done the Master's in Conference Interpreting and who knows? But I doubt I would be a court interpreter here in Des Moines, Iowa. And so part of that, you know, it is something that I wonder about. But I also embrace what's been my path, and I understand that everything I did before interpreting I now bring to bear. You know, I was a teacher before being an interpreter. And so that's a skill set that I can still use in the training that I do. And so I like to say that interpreting, as a career was sort of inside of me the whole time, it just needed to come out. And so once I got into it, right away I pretty much knew this is gonna be something that I really want to run with. This is gonna be something that I really want to invest and try to see where I can get with. Because it was like, a light bulb moment where I said, Well, I've been bilingual my most of my life, and I've been using this and all of these jobs and so

take away everything else and just have it be the interpreting, the translating and right away I really took to it. And it is a constant intellectual challenge. Every day I get to learn something new by working freelance. Every day is a little bit different. And the colleagues that I've met are wonderful and inspiring, talented people who have made me better as a person and a professional.

Elena: That's great. Okay, so let's do the lightning round. Okay, is it a note pad or a digital pad?

Ernest: It's sort of digital. It's a Boogie Board, which is pretty primitive. It doesn't have a memory, you can't scroll on it. It doesn't have apps, like, literally it works like a Magna Doodle.

Elena: Right, I've heard of that. And you're my first interviewee so far to use a digital one. But I've heard of the book keyboards cause yeah, they're they're very, you know, I mean, in this kind of

Ernest: So, you know, we were talking before about the definitions of, like, what is RSI? What is OPI? Is this really digital if it doesn't have pixels, if it doesn't operate through a code of ones and zeros? So I guess this would be like a hybrid, which is perfect, right? Because I do hybrid stuff in court.

Elena: That's right. What about your beverage? Is it hybrid, too? Your caffeine--Is it coffee or tea?

Ernest: If I'm gonna have it, I generally prefer tea.

Elena: What about for language learning? Do you think you're a visual learner, or?

Ernest: It's probably against the rules, but I would say a little bit of both. I like to have auditory input, but I write it down.

Elena: Do you have a special object or a totem that you take with you when you interpret?

Ernest: Not permanently. But lately I have been carrying around a pen that I like to twirl around my finger when I'm interpreting, and it's a very particular kind of pen because I can basically twirl it back and forth between my fingers continuously. And it's just a nervous tic that I developed back in debate in high school. So it helps me focus and this is actually tangential to that, and you'll appreciate this. I know when we did VoiceBoxer, you talked about mindfulness. And there's something that I've actually started doing specifically here for the press conferences, to ground myself and to not get sort of sucked into the message. I have an application on my phone called Periodic Vibration, which every two minutes vibrates my phone. And it just forces me to kind of be in the

moment and get out of that headspace and to remember, breathe, it matters how you deliver, don't rush.

Elena: That's interesting. And so basically you decide what that vibration means to you ahead of time.

Ernest: Literally, all it does is make your phone vibrate on an interval. You can control how long the vibration is, and so you set it for half a second or a second or two seconds.

Elena: Okay, freelance or in-house?

Ernest: Freelance. That's all I know. I think, honestly, I wouldn't mind being in-house. But right now we're grounded here. And so there's no in-house positions, really for what I want to do here and so, freelance by default. So I embrace that.

Elena: And so you answered some of these already, but consecutive or simul?

Ernest: [Laughter] The ultimate interpreter-translator answer, right? It depends. I would say simul for remote, consecutive for in person, back and forth, like a witness examination.

Elena: Is there an area or a term or a category of things that never seem to stick so that, you know ahead of time, you have to kind of prepare or write on a piece of paper and pay special attention, because if not, you might get it wrong?

Ernest: I don't know about an area of give like a whole lexical category, but I know here in my work with the press conferences, I've been having trouble with public-private partnership, not because it's a tongue twister in English, but just because in Spanish it's *asociación público-privada*. And so the gender mismatch between *público* and *privada* is hard for me. I think mentally it's hard for me to get it out, and so I have it written down on a piece of paper so that I can just read it off the paper.

Elena: And, can you name a favorite podcast?

Ernest: I really like "Crime Town", and "Radio Ambulante" for practice with Spanish. It's kind of a hazard because I love to listen to it in the car, but I have to stop and pull over to write down terms, and, you know, that's not hard core technical terms. But just, you know, nice turns of phrases and nice expressions, and I'm constantly looking to continue to build my vocabulary and my repertoire.

Elena: I know what you mean. I have done that, when I'm listening or thinking about a job that's coming up or I hear a term on the radio or something and you know what I do is a voice memo on my phone, but it's safer to pull off the road.
[Laughter]

Well thank you so much Ernest for your time, thank you for this interview. I really appreciate it, especially sandwiched between all your work.

Ernest: Thank you, it was really nice.

Elena: Thank you, take care.

Ernest: Thanks, Elena.

Elena: Thank you for listening to this first episode of “Not Quite Magic”. I hope you’ve enjoyed it. If you want to join us for our live debriefing with Laura Holcomb and Liz Essary, my sisters at Seven Sisters Interpreting Training & Consulting, we’ll be doing it live on our Facebook page, on Monday June 8th.