

# On Passing the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination

In February 2014, I wrote about a subject that I had hoped I would not have to address: the experience of not passing the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (FCICE) for Spanish. Well, after retaking the exam last year, I'm happy to report that I passed. I was very open about writing about my failed first attempt, and now I can present you with some thoughts on passing the exam.

**Preparation:** There's no magic answer or magic pill, and certainly no prep course that will guarantee you'll pass. I strongly recommend staying away from any course that promises you a passing score—no one can do that. I also wouldn't recommend that anyone emulate my rather erratic preparatory phase for this exam, but I did make some good decisions in terms of prep courses.

I took a two-day court interpreting boot camp with Alfonso Villaseñor, who has taught interpreting at the Defense Language Institute and Agnese Hauray Institute. I really enjoyed his no-nonsense approach and the small group setting. I also went to the University of Arizona in Tucson for a weekend course the week before the exam, and it was beneficial, even though I was surprised that there were no interpreting booths in which to practice. I was impressed by our instructor Joshua Elliot's depth and breadth of experience and vocabulary, and even though I didn't do as well as I would have liked on the practice exams, I left the weekend inspired and ready to take the actual exam.

In terms of general practice, my plan for the year leading up to the exam was to interpret one video per day (e.g., through the practice material available from Speechpool, ACEBO, etc.), but I will be the first to admit that I didn't always stick to this plan. The exam was in July, and I didn't really kick my preparation into high gear until June, which was probably a bit late—but it was enough.



**Vocabulary:** Many think that memorizing lots of specialized vocabulary is key to passing this exam, but I would disagree. While having more knowledge of vocabulary is always good, I believe this exam tests your general skills as an interpreter rather than your knowledge of highly specialized vocabulary. I do think that I was probably a better interpreter in 2015 than in 2013, which is partially why I believe I passed the exam. Rather than spending lots of time studying vocabulary, as I had done in 2013, my test preparation in 2015 involved practicing general interpreting techniques. For example, I focused on increasing my *décalage*, which is something I took home from Alfonso Villaseñor's workshop. (*Décalage* is the length of time between the start of the speech and the beginning of your interpretation. A longer *décalage* allows for higher accuracy because you get more context before interpreting.)

While this approach worked for me, it might not work for others. My general criminal and civil law vocabulary is already quite strong, and I believe that most state-certified interpreters already have most of the vocabulary they need to feel quite prepared for the exam.

**Preparing for the fast simultaneous portion:** Many exam candidates tend to be the most intimidated by the second simultaneous portion of the FCICE, which is also the last portion of the exam, when most test-takers are quite fatigued. This was also the most challenging portion for

me, as it's quite fast at approximately 160 words per minute. However, something that helped me was to keep in mind that I routinely interpret at this speed already, and under worse audio conditions than at the exam. This helped provide me with some perspective, and it's nice to know that the audio conditions are usually ideal during the exam. (There are also no distractions, such as attorneys interrupting each other, which is fantastic.) So, sometimes it helps to look at the exam just like any other day at work.

**Logistics:** I took the exam in Tucson, Arizona, because that was one of the closest exam locations to my home in Las Vegas. I also chose to stay at the hotel where the exam was taking place. I tried to make everything as easy on myself as possible, so I flew in the afternoon before, had a leisurely dinner with colleagues, and went to bed early. I had a 10:30 a.m. exam slot, so I got up early, worked out, did my warm-up vocal exercises, and listened to some songs I like—some of which I sang at the top of my lungs (badly, I might add), in both English and Spanish. Incorporating singing as part of your vocal exercises is one of the techniques I learned from Joshua Elliot at the University of Arizona, and it got me pumped and ready.

I am absolutely delighted to be a federally certified court interpreter. I know that this is just the beginning and that I have a lot to learn, but I very much look forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead. ●



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