

“The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.”

- Malcolm X, influential African American human rights activist (1925-1965)

Ladies and gentlemen, Malcolm X said in 1962 that ‘the future belongs to those who prepare for it today’. He was of course speaking in the context of the struggle for the civil rights of millions of Black Americans such as himself, who, in making a stand *now*, would be able to bring about change in their country sooner than if they made a stand *later*. And that as instigators of change, they could be wholly proud of the future that they would create from their own actions.

But, in light of this, I’d like to pose a question: What would Malcolm X make of today’s world? Does it now truly belong to the people he was addressing in his own time? It’s true that in law, Black Americans now enjoy the freedom and equality that is rightfully theirs, but in practice, as we so regularly and tragically see in the media and hear from our BAME friends, the reality is often a different matter entirely. So in response to my own question, the answer is, arguably, ‘no’. The fight for true equality is still ongoing and the future still seems beyond the horizon, so Malcolm X may well have been disappointed that his vision has not truly come to fruition.

This, of course, raises a second obvious question. Why? Why does Malcolm X’s future that he spoke of not belong to those who prepared for it in their today? Through my own, admittedly limited experience of the world, I believe this could be answered in one single word: unpredictability. As a young person, I have seen enough to know that the route of progress is not an ever-forward-advancing, linear one: an unforeseen obstacle will always try to scupper your path and force an about-turn. I’ve seen many events which were, for the most part, unpredictable: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the rise of populism bearing the face of Brexit or of a border wall. Save for some keen observers, no-one saw these things coming. And on a personal note I speak as a member of the LGBT community who never predicted that I’d see our hard-won rights debated, and potentially thwarted, on a number of occasions. So, for all these reasons, we should take nothing for granted.

I know this all sounds very pessimistic, when what I really want to do is to put a positive spin on things. After all, there must be something in Malcolm X’s quote,

since other great historical figures, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Albert Camus, have also expressed the same idea in their own words. So, what, therefore, can I do about any of these things? How can I ensure that I own the future by preparing for it today? I'm not a politician, an activist or an economist, and I'm not even a so-called social media influencer since I only made my first tweet this year. I'm merely a young interpreter on the first step of the career ladder.

But, ladies and gentlemen, maybe this perceived weakness is actually my greatest strength? What if, as a young interpreter, I, and others like me, could actually make an impact in the world beyond our professional sphere? Let me demonstrate.

I come from the north-east of England. It's a traditionally poorer, more industrial area than the prosperous south, although most of the quintessential north-east industries such as coal mining, ship building and steel making have long since disappeared. As is typical with this sort of cultural background, educational attainment is also lower in my region, and attainment in languages at school is no exception. We all know that to be a good interpreter, one needs a great understanding not only of at least one second language, but also a great command of one's own mother tongue. Yet a 2011 survey by Skills for Life, an adult literacy initiative in the UK, found that 17% of the north-east's adult population had the English literacy levels of a 9-11 year-old. Furthermore, a 2018 parliamentary report on the state of language teaching in schools painted a bleak picture, as the number of pupils choosing to study languages was dropping year on year. I'm sure you'll agree that neither of these statistics are conducive to an environment where future young interpreters can grow and discover their passion for language and communication.

But again, let's not be too pessimistic: the north-east of England is a huge hotbed of talent – I've seen it. It just so happens to be largely untapped because of socioeconomic factors outside the control of the average citizen. But I would invite you to consider what could happen if you, as I have, visited a school language class, as a representative of the interpreting profession, and spoke to the pupils there. I have many teacher friends and I have been privileged to have been invited into their classes to act as a role model to pupils. The thrill in their faces when they learn that you, a former pupil just like them, who lived down the road, just like them, is now a multilingual young adult looking to make a career in an august body such as the EU,

is immeasurable. And it clearly shows, in my opinion, that the key to inspiring children to love language is to be a brilliant role model. I feel that too often, interpreters find contentment exclusively within the safe four walls of the booth, whereas, as educated people, we also owe it to ourselves and to our home nations to go back to our roots and show our children at schools – not just at universities - what's possible through a love of language and a love of education. All studies show that the earlier an intervention is made in the educational life of a child struggling with literacy, the better the outcome. But just imagine what could be achieved if part of that intervention was from an incredible linguistic role model, such as ourselves. I've seen the immediate impact of this and would love for other interpreters to replicate it all around the European Union starting with our youngest citizens from the most deprived backgrounds.

In conclusion, this brings me back to Malcolm X's quote: 'The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.' In taking steps *now* to improve literacy and language learning in the youngest in society, we are, I am sure, sowing the seeds of a love for languages that will yield a new generation of future interpreters from much more atypical backgrounds than before. We'd be future-proofing our profession much earlier on, which is something that we could all be personally proud of and could all take responsibility for. That way, even if we can't change the world through politics or activism, we could truly say that the future belongs to us because we have prepared for it today by doing what is within our power as professionals. Something which the late Leopoldo Costa would most certainly have approved of, given his unwavering passion for passing on his skills. And in doing so, you could say that we'd be adding just a little bit more predictability of outcome back into the world too, which, I hope you'll agree, ladies and gentlemen, in this case, is no bad thing. Thank you.

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