

Interpreter Training in the European Parliament

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Introduction

The term “interpreter training” is generally associated with the process where a student with a more or less clearly identified aptitude and/or motivation is taught the technical skills to work professionally as an interpreter. In the case of the Directorate General for Interpretation and Conferences (DG INTE) in the European Parliament, the skills we are interested in are those of conference interpreting, with a high level of competence required in both simultaneous and consecutive interpretation to ensure that we can meet the needs of our complex multilingual environment.

However, it would be a mistake to think that training stops at the point of recruitment. To fulfil our mission statement, which is to provide high quality interpretation for all the meetings of the European Parliament (EP) and the other institutions and bodies we cover,¹ and taking account of the fact that the European Parliament is perhaps the most multilingual of all international organisations, with meetings using the 23 official languages, and sometimes even more, held on a regular basis and 21 language regimes being a daily occurrence, further training for interpreters is the only way to keep pace and ensure that our standard of service is maintained at the high level our clients have come to expect and demand.

In this article, I will describe the various forms this further training takes and attempt to explain the rationale behind it. I will also argue that, though education is the responsibility of the member states of the EU according to the principle of subsidiarity, international organisations like the EP are often nonetheless obliged to support the training process upstream to ensure that multilingual communication remains possible and continues to guarantee the democratic legitimacy of the institution we serve.

¹ Meetings of the European Commission in Luxembourg, the Committee of the Regions, the Court of Auditors, the European Ombudsman, the European Data Protection Officer and the Translation Centre.

Professional Training

To begin with, professional training is recognised in the EP as a fundamental part of human resources management. Within the Directorate General for Personnel there is a professional training unit which organises the training for all EP staff, and which is also responsible for the training budget. The implementing measures for the EP's staff training policy state very clearly that training should be a permanent, regular process extending over the whole of an official's career and that it should serve to increase the fund of expertise on which the Parliament can call, as well as allowing staff to cope effectively with an ever changing working environment.

However, as a professional group within the EP secretariat, conference interpreters not only have different working conditions from most other staff, but their needs in terms of training are clearly very different and specific. It is thanks to an excellent understanding at senior management level of these needs and of the specificities of this professional group that DG INTE has been able to create a unit specifically for the training of interpreters which can liaise with the general Professional training unit, create tailor-made courses with them and ensure that, as far as possible, interpreters get the support they need to enable them to work effectively within their professional context.

Language Training

The most obvious area for training is, of course, language training. In an institution with 23 official languages, often supplemented by other non-official languages when the need arises (such as candidate country languages, like Turkish and Croatian, and also others, such as Russian and Arabic), the much-cited figure is of 506 possible official language combinations. Though relay interpreting is a daily reality, where one language will be interpreted through another (for example, Romanian will be interpreted into French and then from French into the other languages), we continue to strive for as much direct interpretation as possible. This means that we are looking for conference interpreters with a wide language combination. Our new recruits tend to have two to three passive languages from which they work into their principal language, though in some cases, notably (but not exclusively) the languages of the most recent members of the EU, we also prioritise interpreters who can work from their main language into another official language (retour interpreting). If we can help these interpreters to acquire new languages, we increase the proportion of direct interpretation, minimising time lags and the potentially increased risk of error.

The complexity of this vast matrix of language combinations also illustrates very clearly the need for the highest possible standards in interpreting, as no individual interpreter can afford to fail; teams are increasingly interdependent and the effectiveness of the whole can stand or fall on each individual performance. Language courses, therefore, are the mainstay of our training programme. As one might imagine, language training in general is a cornerstone of EP staff training policy,

but DG INTE has commissioned a set of interpreter specific courses which cater to our needs and which are accessible only for interpreters (both staff and, under certain conditions, freelance interpreters). Currently, we have twenty different language courses at different levels with some 160 participants. The focus in these courses is very much on comprehension of the spoken language, progress tends to be rapid and, supplemented with stays in the country concerned, sometimes including a final stay of up to three months, interpreters can often add a new language to their combination within five years or even less. Though management does set strategic goals for language learning to cover our greatest deficits and remedy shortfalls in language coverage due to retirements, for example, because of the long term and intense nature of learning a language to the level required for conference interpreting in the political arena, we do recognise that personal circumstances and preferences have to play a large role in choices made.

Maintaining existing working languages is also an issue we address with regular summer universities for staff. These initiatives usually take the form of a series of lectures and visits covering the economy, culture, geography, politics, history and language of the country. Summer universities are decided on the basis of needs expressed by staff and/or managers and often precede the presidency of the EU by a given country. This allows staff to refresh their knowledge of that country and its main political and social issues ahead of the increase in appearances by ministers and representatives of these governments in EP committees and meetings.

Recent extensive feedback collected from staff interpreters by the unit for interpreter training in DG INTE revealed a very clear will for language training to remain the core of our training policy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, interpreters are keen to learn new languages, despite the increase in workload this will inevitably bring in the long term. Or indeed, perhaps the increase in workload is, perversely, one of the motivating factors as staff strive to understand the meetings in which they work directly. Successful interpreters are known to be self-motivators, and this is certainly borne out by their response to new languages. Many have internalised the need to keep on working on their languages and skills, organising practice sessions in groups for newer languages, with staff volunteering to make speeches as input to these exercises and others offering their help in evaluating output. This mutual assistance not only serves the primary purpose of improving interpreting skills and language knowledge but also reinforces the sense of the team having to pull together to achieve the high level of performance many interpreters strive for.

Thematic Training

Training does not stop at the learning of new languages though. As Europe changes, so the interpreters in the EP must adapt to deal with new subjects, new terminology and ever more complex legislative debate. As the EP has moved from an assembly to a directly elected Parliament and now to a true co-legislator, both the breadth and depth of the issues discussed in working groups, committees, po-

litical groups and plenary sessions increased immeasurably. Interpreters need to be able to move swiftly and smoothly from one subject to another, and understand and render highly technical, specific discourse, often in the context of tense political debate where words and expressions need to be measured carefully, and terminological accuracy is vital. Thematic training is thus of the essence to give interpreters the solid underpinning and background they need.

Finding the right formula for this has proved to be somewhat illusive. DG INTE is currently in discussions with various in-house bodies (such as staff from specialised parliamentary committees), and also with external training providers to try to put in place appropriate seminars, lectures or workshops which will allow staff to fully comprehend the context and significance of the debates they interpret. One of the conclusions from the analysis of the feedback mentioned above is that the training most appreciated by interpreters is that given by their peers, precisely because it is, on the whole, pitched exactly at their needs and gives the right mix of terminological explanation and background information.

Interpreters are very demanding consumers, quite rightly, so training that they feel misses the point is judged very harshly, hence our concern to find the right training provider, rather than settle for unsatisfactory or ill-thought out courses. And of course, when we discover a member of staff with specific knowledge of a subject area, we do encourage sharing of that knowledge, often to the great appreciation of those on the receiving end.

Interpreters also request and receive other job-specific training, from how to assess candidates at tests, to security training to help keep them safe on missions. Personal development courses in, for example, public speaking, personal effectiveness and stress management are also routinely offered.

Interpreters as Trainers

Interpreters, though, do not only receive training but are often called upon to share their expertise. Any discussion of training in DG INTE cannot avoid the flip-side of the coin – staff interpreters acting as trainers, either for their peers, as described above, in giving feedback to others in practice situations or in the training of those not yet working in the institution. It is generally accepted by institutional employers of interpreters and by AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence)² that teachers of interpretation should themselves be practising interpreters. DG INTE's interpreters often find themselves cast in this role. Most often this will be in a scenario where an assessment and advice will be given on an interpreting performance, rather than actual training in the building of the skills comprising simultaneous and consecutive interpreting.

There are two main contexts where this occurs; final exams at different universities training interpreters and during “virtual” classes. The former is more tra-

² Conference Interpreting Training Programmes: Best Practice 2010; http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm?article_id=27.

ditional and well-known; a professional from an international organisation will join a team of internal and external examiners to assess students, thereby guaranteeing a standard which is relevant and appropriate for the market. In many cases, though certainly not in all, the EU institutions *are* the market but even in cases where there is a flourishing and viable private market, an institutional examiner brings an in-depth and up-to-date knowledge of the realities of conference interpreting. This examiner also acts as a talent scout for the institution, spotting the new interpreters who can be encouraged to sit an accreditation test to join the freelance roster, and providing the necessary encouragement and information about the process.

The second scenario, virtual classes, is becoming more frequent as a means of exporting our standards into the universities and providing support to courses in terms of expertise and language combinations. In some cases, we work with multipoint video conference and/or web-streamed classes with up to three external partners, generally speaking, universities within the EMCI network. This is a complex but thrilling feat of Eurovision proportions where a speech will be made in, for example, Lisbon University (FLUL) which will be interpreted in consecutive in Paris (ESIT) into French, and in simultaneous in Geneva (ETI) into German, with the performances assessed in Brussels by staff from DG INTE and DG SCIC from the European Commission. One of the advantages of this system is the opportunity it offers for peer review for students and trainers, as well as allowing staff in Brussels to get a glimpse of what is happening in universities across Europe.

Other virtual classes are organised with one university at a time, where students work more directly with colleagues in the EP offering advice and expert input. We have, for example, recently held a series of very successful virtual classes with Tallinn University via Skype.

Virtual coaching of this type does present certain challenges, apart from the more obvious technological ones. We have offered training to our staff in virtual assessment to try to overcome some of the obstacles, either real or perceived. Technology may seem off-putting to some, and overcoming this reticence is a particular challenge. Staff may fear that training remotely somehow legitimises remote interpreting *per se*, which is certainly not the intention. Students tend to accept this screen-based training very readily and are not at all disturbed by the sense of alienation that staff in Brussels may tend to report. Overall though, staff are tending to accept these virtual classes as a valid way of training, once they have experienced a successful class, though many are at pains to stress that it should be a complement to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face interaction.

Priorities

All our training with universities is based on a partnership with courses which regularly supply successful graduates at our accreditation tests. Resources in DG INTE are very limited and our core business, that of servicing the meetings of the

Parliament and the other bodies we serve, has to take precedence. We clearly cannot maintain intensive contacts with every university institute which expresses an interest. Our priorities are thus set based on various factors: the requirement that interpreters accredited to the EU Institutions or other international organisations teach on the course; both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting are taught, and graduates must pass exams in both modes to obtain their diploma; professional conference interpreters are full members of examination juries; there are no quotas for obtaining the diploma (i.e., students who have not managed to acquire the professional skills to a sufficient standard must be allowed to fail); there should be no minimum number of students required for a course to be organised; and graduates apply for accreditation tests and show the potential to pass.

From Theory to Practice

There is, furthermore, awareness that there is a gap between the theory and practice of the profession and that students graduating from the universities, new diploma in hand, may need extra support to bridge that gap. DG INTE has recently created two pilot programmes to provide that support.

The first is the Passerelle programme, which provides an introduction to the often complex and bewildering EP work environment and gives guidance on preparing for meetings, administrative procedures and general background to a selected group of newly accredited interpreters. Participants in this programme are currently selected by the respective heads of language unit based on the performance at the accreditation tests and the language combination being particularly useful to the institution. We are working at making some of the modules from this new programme more widely available to any freelance interpreter or new staff interpreter.

The second programme is the Seminarium, which recently ran for the first time and brought fifteen promising graduates from eight different universities to Brussels for two and a half weeks of intensive, pre-accreditation test coaching. Our objective was to see whether we could improve the current pass rate, which is 27% across all the languages but secondly, and perhaps more importantly, to ensure that these carefully selected, talented young interpreters would not be lost to the institutions and possibly the profession by failing a first test, then moving on to other work to make a living and never coming back. The participants for this programme were selected on the basis of their performance at their final examinations at universities where our staff were present as external examiners, taking account also of the usefulness of their language combination to the institution.

The programme was designed to address what had been identified as the major reasons why graduates from interpreting courses fail our test. The principal reason, reported by almost every test board, is lack of experience with simultaneous interpreting, with more supervised practice seemingly required so that detailed, expert feedback can be given, thereby enabling participants to subsequently work alone in a more focused manner with greater awareness of the standard they should

be aiming for and the skills they need to work on. Another important element was stress management, as test juries are often frustrated to see good candidates failing to hold their nerve when it counts and being unable to focus adequately on the task at hand. This first programme proved to be extremely interesting and is currently being evaluated before we assess whether to repeat the process. Our pass rate was 67%, with ten of the fifteen participants passing the test and, gratifyingly, already taking their first professional steps in the EP as fully-fledged freelance interpreters. Another benefit which may prove to be more positive in the longer term is that the trainers we recruited from various universities to help us with the coaching on the programme now have much greater awareness of the standards required to pass the EU accreditation test and more in-depth knowledge of the specific skills we are looking for. This knowledge will, we trust, be passed on in their training and multiply the effect of what is, after all, a limited programme in terms of participation.

Conclusion

The training measures and programmes described above give the outline of the ongoing opportunities that DG INTE offers to its staff and to others. Though the EU institutions rely on the member states to provide trained conference interpreters, we do recognise the need to add our support where possible to enable the institution to function effectively and efficiently. These targeted measures, amongst others, play their part in our succession planning work as we encourage and enable current staff to add to their skills, acquire new languages and constantly increase their knowledge base, whilst at the same time keeping a close eye on the future to guide those who will carry the profession forward. Some of the challenges we face may as yet be ill-defined, but DG INTE is steering its staff towards these new horizons. Training is a source of motivation, as well as a necessity and, like elite athletes, interpreters must keep on top of their game, hone their skills and adapt to new working methods and technologies. By supporting that process, DG INTE is seeking to guarantee the highest possible level of service by having the right staff with the right skills in place now and in the future.

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