Why I Train Interpreters

If we want qualified interpreters (which I argue we do), we need to continue to train interpreters.

I live in a tiny conference interpreting market. The number of Swedish members of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) is under 30, and the total number of Swedish A-language conference interpreters worldwide is probably under 100. Our biggest clients are the European institutions, so any change in meeting or language policy has an immediate and dramatic impact on the market. On top of this, the Swedish have a long and strong tradition of learning and using languages, so interpreters are often deemed unnecessary.

I would like to stress that this is not a list of complaints, only a realistic description of the market. Not surprisingly, I often get feedback from conference interpreter colleagues asking why I train new interpreters when they consider their jobs to be threatened. These colleagues argue that training should only take place when there is a need for new interpreters, and, from their perspective, there is no current need. I don't agree.

Other colleagues think that if we train interpreters, they shouldn't be trained through a university. They argue that interpreting is a practical trade, so it shouldn't be part of a formal academic program. I don't agree.

Many of my community interpreter colleagues (where the market needs are big and training scarce), on the other hand, don't think we can train large enough numbers of interpreters through university programs. They say training should be done elsewhere. I don't agree with this either.

Other community interpreter colleagues tend to have a hard time understanding why they should train at all, especially when remuneration is so low and when many practitioners don't take responsibility for providing quality interpretation or for training others as they pass through on their way to more lucrative business. Well, I agree on the low remuneration, but—you guessed it— when it comes to the analysis of the needs of training, I don't agree.

Since the debate often gets heated, I'll try to explain why I think it's important to train both conference and community interpreters on a regular basis, and why it should be part of university training.

Who decides when and how many interpreters the market needs? The interpreter, who doesn't get hired for some reason? The institution that wants interpreters with a particular profile? The agency that would like to have a variety of low-cost interpreters available at all times?

In Sweden, we don't have a state agency that is responsible for the interpreting industry. Therefore, the market and the market's needs are difficult to assess. Some claim thousands of community interpreters are needed, while others say that there is no future for interpreting and that conference interpreters are first in line to get automatized.

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The arguments for how many interpreters are needed is not, in my opinion, the same as the argument for the need for qualified interpreters. If we want qualified interpreters (which I argue we do), we need to continue to train interpreters. Interpreters, just like anybody else, take parental leave, are injured, or decide to change careers. This is why we need to have a steady trickle of qualified interpreters at the ready to take over for those who decide to leave the profession.

Does a profession lose its authenticity or credibility if it's part of an academic program? Do we get worse interpreters if we conduct research on interpreting or teach future interpreters about what research has discovered about interpreting, or teach them how to conduct research themselves? Apparently, some colleagues seem to believe that. Or, at least, believe that if you're going to be a good interpreter, then you should only study that and not the theory behind the act.

Interpreting is a highly complex activity. Believing that future interpreters are not capable of studying both the theory and the practice of interpreting is very demeaning (let alone believing that interpreting students are not capable of university studies). Of course, you cannot learn to interpret by only reading a book, but you'll probably become a better interpreter by reading a few books while you practice in a monitored environment. Furthermore, I think that it's relevant for students to not only learn the trade, but also learn to be able to evaluate and talk intelligently about what interpreters do. Otherwise, what is the difference between an interpreter and a Skype translator? (Jonathan Downie has a great post about that, by the way.[1])

WHY I TRAIN

So, to conclude, I train interpreters because I believe that by giving people an appropriate education, I empower them to get decent jobs and good pay for what they do, be it in interpreting or in any other business. Although I agree that training should be balanced against a certain level of demand, I do think training and education needs to be stable. Your call! ○

NOTES

[1] Downie, Jonathan. "Why Every Interpreter Needs a USP," *Integrity Languages* (July 27, 2016), http://bit.ly/Downie-interpreter.

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