

Engaging tomorrow's interpreters: Conference Report

Tamara Bloom, University of Leeds

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On 18 June 2010, the Pavilion at the University of Westminster was filled with an unusual mix of language professionals and educators as European Union (EU) interpreters, school teachers, university lecturers, careers advisors and more gathered for the online resources forum created by the National Network for Interpreting (NNI). Engaging tomorrow's interpreters: awareness and aspiration-raising through interactive online resources was an event showcasing the resources created so far through the NNI programme. These tools aim to raise awareness of interpreting as a profession, to highlight the variety of skills involved, and to be a fun yet informative source of reference and pedagogical material. The resources have a varied target audience (school children, teachers, language students, trainee interpreters) and multiple objectives (pupil motivation in language learning, awareness raising, basic interpreting practice materials), and this was reflected in the different sectors represented at the forum.

The NN-who?

The National Network for Interpreting is a partnership between four UK Higher Education Institutions (the Universities of Leeds, Bath, Salford and Westminster) and is part of the wider Routes into Languages initiative. The Routes programme is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the former Department for Children, Schools and Families. It was set up in 2006/7 to address the national decline in language learning, and consists of ten Regional Consortia of universities from across the UK, three research projects and the National Networks for Translation and Interpreting. The Regional Consortia work with schools and colleges to encourage young people to continue language study, while the National Networks, as well as contributing to this wider aim, seek also to raise awareness of the translation and interpreting professions.

As regards the National Network for Interpreting more specifically, our two main avenues of activity are events and the production of resources. Among our most popular events are careers days for university students highlighting the wide-ranging career opportunities open to individuals who speak other languages. These careers days give young people with a passion for languages the opportunity to find out more about the options available to them and to speak to translators, interpreters and other professional linguists from national and international organisations.

Other events are geared towards our younger users and include members of the NNI team giving interpreting taster sessions at regional consortia-run language days, attending school careers fairs or running day-long conferences where pupils sit in interpreting booths interpreting for their classmates. Whatever the format, these activities aim to get younger learners interested in the profession and to show just how many exciting job opportunities there are for linguists. These events are always hugely successful and our feedback shows them to be a very effective way to inspire young language learners. Finally, we also run activities which aim to support teachers and trainers such as evening sessions for language teachers, or informative events such as Engaging tomorrow's interpreters itself.

At Engaging tomorrow's interpreters the audience was given an overview of NNI activity; events such as those outlined above were covered briefly but the day focused above all on our interactive online resources. Our project website offers a wealth of information on the profession, different types of interpreting, getting into the field etc. as well as focusing more specifically on the skills involved in the role. Throughout the site we have made use of exciting multimedia tools to get our messages across but our Interpreting Skills Map, focusing on this last area, is our main interactive resource.

The Skills Map is an easy-to-use tool, which provides users with details of 18 different skills identified by the NNI as vital in interpreting. Examples include tact and diplomacy, teamwork, research skills, cultural awareness and good general knowledge. Contrary to what some people expect, an excellent knowledge of a foreign language is only one of those 18 skills, and again surprising to some, mastery of the mother tongue is highlighted as being just as important. Users can click on each of the skills to explore them in more detail through audio, video and interactive content, accessing both reference information and engaging exercises to try out their own command of the skill in question.

Our website aims to be of use to school pupils searching for more information (or for a fun learning game like the 'Know your Europe' drag-and-drop quiz), language teachers seeking to enthuse their classes, or undergraduates looking to find out about interpreting careers or try their hand at skills like note-taking. As discussed on 18 June, seeking to reach such a wide audience requires a careful balance of information. The site in no way claims to be exhaustive; our aim is to inform and enthuse about interpreting rather than 'train' on any level. However, given that our carefully chosen content is provided by professional interpreters and practising interpreter trainers, users can be confident that the information available is authoritative and accurate.

Going by the results of our evaluation efforts so far, we have to a large extent succeeded in catering for our different audiences, with exercises that are simple (and fun) enough to be of use to school pupils while still a relevant reference point for those at university level. The fact that the skills in question are generally transferable and applicable to other areas again makes this resource useful for anyone, not just those interested in a career in interpreting.

Fun, fresh and flashy

Following an overview of the website content and aims, attendees at the event were then talked through a Skills Map demonstration starting from the initial “map” page and then clicking on some of the different skills available to access the materials relating to each one. New users might, for example, spend a few moments in ‘Calm under pressure’ watching a humorous video on why that quality is necessary in the world of interpreting. In ‘Flexibility/adaptability,’ they could then click on each of the days in an interactive calendar to get a glimpse into a typical month or week in an interpreter’s life. Or by clicking on ‘Note-taking’ they could get an insight into what the strange lines and symbols on an interpreter’s notepad might mean. Users can try their hand at a number of skills too; for example by identifying and commenting on the use of different registers through the quizzes in ‘Good public speaking’.

The NNI team also presented the many resources available on the website apart from the Skills Map. These include video archives of speakers at Network events and informative videos from employers and users of interpreters. Interviews with users such as Manchester City Council, a local MP, or Avon and Somerset Police address different questions about the need for interpreters and where they might find themselves working. The NNI’s inside account of interpreting at the European Parliament (‘NNI@Brussels’) includes a talk by staff interpreter Alison Graves and interviews with three young interpreters who have recently started working at the Parliament. Topics include everything from how they coped on their first day to the travel opportunities open to them. Another resource mentioned at the event was the Alumni flipbook, which allows users to click through and read first-hand accounts of recent interpreting graduates’ career paths.

As evidenced on the day, these materials provide an excellent point of reference for anyone wanting to find out more about the profession. With such a wealth of content, they aim to be a bank of information that users can keep coming back to. While the NNI is delighted to have received an additional sixth months’ funding (until March 2011), the project is still finite in nature, and the team have worked hard to create a resource base that will be relevant and sustainable beyond the end of funded activity.

In the meantime though, we are continuously adding to and improving our resources. In fact, Engaging tomorrow’s interpreters coincided with the launch of our new look website. Having spent three years adding content to our previous site, it was decided that the NNI pages would benefit from a fresh layout to enhance usability. Many changes were made in response to user comments following several online evaluation sessions, organised nationally through the partner institutions. While the feedback received through these was extremely encouraging, suggesting that we are to a large extent reaching our audiences in the desired ways, it also provided some key insights into how we could make resources even more user-friendly.

Another topic addressed on the day was the motivation behind our multimedia approach. It was noted firstly that people learn in different ways, whether that be one individual responding to several teaching styles, or varying approaches being needed to

get the same material through to different people. Our second observation was that different material also suits different modes of presentation. It is for example, extremely hard to grasp the physical movements required to master a new sewing stitch with only a series of audio instructions to go on. In the same way, a skill as visual as interpreters' note-taking would be very difficult to get across through a textual approach, and we think users benefit greatly from having sample scenarios to exemplify what we mean by 'tact and diplomacy' for example.

In addition to this, you could say that our main target audiences are almost more comfortable with these multimedia formats than they are with more traditional channels of dissemination, and it is clear that they are more than ready to 'listen' to messages put across in such formats. Technology for technology's sake can be ineffective but given all these reasons in favour of its use, we strongly feel that our users benefit from the range of formats used.

International partners

Later in the day the focus of the conference shifted slightly. Having spent the morning concentrating on the NNI resources and interpreting within a context of awareness raising and language-learning and motivation, we then moved on to presentations from Katerina Dara-Lepoura from the European Commission's interpreting service, 'DG SCIC'¹, and Alison Graves from the European Parliament's interpreting service, 'DG INTE'².

Katerina spoke about the EU online interpreter training tools: iRec (a new piece of software allowing students and teachers to upload and access interpretations online) and the online speech repository, available to staff and students of postgraduate interpreting courses. She also talked about Interpreting for Europe, a group set up on the social networking site Facebook, which allows users from anywhere in the world to connect and find out about the latest interpreting news.

Alison Graves spoke about multi-point virtual classes, where different universities across Europe take part in a single training session remotely. Staff interpreters at the institutions act as trainers during these sessions. They listen to students' interpretations and provide feedback over a live connection. This initiative is still being developed, but it aims to provide students with a richer learning experience through contact with fellow students, other trainers, and professional interpreters from a range of educational and international institutions.

The NNI's close links with national and international organisations has always proved invaluable in reaching our aims, giving students the chance to hear and speak to professionals from some of the key employers in the profession, and ensuring accuracy and coherence between our materials and the 'real world' of interpreting. Representatives from various organisations take part in our regular careers events,

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/>

² <http://bit.ly/cRuA15>

giving talks on working with languages and exhibiting at our careers fairs. Examples of participating organisations include the UK Intelligence Agency, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the UK National Health Service (NHS), European Union bodies and organisations of the United Nations. We trust that this good working relationship will continue to be of benefit to all.

At the end of the day...

Positive initial feedback from this event suggests that attendees from the various sectors were excited by the resources presented, and could see practical ways in which they might use these tools in the near future. Engaging tomorrow's interpreters was successful in reaching a variety of language professionals, and we are confident that this event and other dissemination efforts will be effective in raising the profile of the NNI, so that we can continue to spread the word about interpreting and language careers.

The NNI website, www.nationalnetworkforinterpreting.ac.uk, contains an interactive report on Engaging tomorrow's interpreters as well as links to all the resources mentioned. Queries and comments can be directed to Tamara Bloom at routes.nni@leeds.ac.uk. We look forward to seeing you online!

Hot off the Press!

Since the event in June, we are delighted to announce that the quality of our resources has now also been acknowledged by the UK e-learning community. The Interpreting Skills Map has been awarded a commended prize by Jorum (a UK Further and Higher Education Service in Development for the online collection and sharing of quality learning materials) and the NNI also received an ALT-Epigeum. ALT-Epigeum is an award given by the Association for Learning and Teaching for use of video to enhance learning. Both prizes were presented to the team in September at ALT-C 2010³, the UK's largest e-learning conference.

³ <http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2010/>

