Giving voice to 1.4 billion people: Interpreter training in China

As demand for high-quality interpreters grows, China, AIIC and the profession should offer guidance and support in how best to prepare the new generation.

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Published: May 29, 2019 Last updated: June 4, 2019

China is experiencing huge growth in the demand for interpreters, including for top-end conference interpreters. Interpreter training takes place on a huge scale, with an increasing number of new interpreters entering the market with a post-grad qualification every year (8,000 in 2017). In 1979, the UN launched a cooperation programme with the Chinese government, to produce interpreters and other linguists specifically for the UN.

A rigid and simple method

The teaching method was demanding but rigid and simple: to train the best English students in the whole of China with UN meeting materials, practising with 10,000 hours of recorded material.

In the following decades, translation and interpreting courses tended to be taught by linguistics or literature specialists. There were a few exceptions, such as Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). Although it was not the first institution to set up such a programme, SISU defined its aims according to the highest international standards (such as AIIC and CIUTI), and cooperated fruitfully with the EU and UN. The previous methodology for teaching interpreting had been to set written translation exercises, based on text-books, requiring a significant amount of rote-learning.

English “A” interpreters with experience at the UN, and in SCIC in the Visiting Chinese Scholars programme, moved the focus towards a litmus test of “Can the pure customer understand and follow?”

The need for individual feedback

Even in 2019, with large class sizes, and a significant proportion of students trying to work into a “B” without extended periods of immersion, the challenges of offering high-calibre training are huge. While group feedback can be relevant for certain recurrent errors of approach, individual feedback is also vital because every interpreter is different.

EU and Chinese trainers working side-by-side have tried to find some "universal" principles, going from modelling (professors give “right” answers and students emulate professionals) to eliciting (helping students ask the right questions for them to learn for themselves, and empathise with speakers, "pure customers", and so on). Interpreters will need extra-linguistic sensitivities in their communication, too— for example, knowing how "China-savvy" an audience is, in order to make choices in "retour" interpretation for the rest of the world (using techniques such as explicitation, explanation, or equivalence).

The top-down “right answer” approach can be seductive, but there are pitfalls:

1. Perfectionism is not fluency – If you cannot find the “right” word, you are stuck.
2. By trying to say everything, you end up saying nothing – If you focus on content, then you put yourself at the mercy of a fast speaker like a bucking bronco to a greater extent than if you analyse, and prioritise primary information over secondary.
3. Noun-for-noun translation does not sound like English – Chinese tends to be abstract and impersonal, whereas English uses personalised active verbs (“Residents may only dispose of household waste at designated times and places” becomes “spot-specific timing-specific garbage-throwing”)
4. Interpreters are not superheroes – Misunderstandings occur between speakers of the same language. If we remove the language barrier, speakers can still be inelegant, contradictory, deliberately ambiguous or antagonistic, and listeners can still be unfamiliar with source language culture, and get the wrong end of the stick (e.g. a UK listener may have understood “family planning” as referring to a couple’s choice regarding reproductive rights, when the Chinese speaker was describing government policy).
Balancing literalism and cultural adaptation

The English A interpreter, rather than “correcting” the student, can share insights from lived experience in the English-speaking world, and help students ask the right questions as they seek the right balance between literalism and cultural adaptation. Students can then make use of the internet revolution to increase their understanding and cultural sensitivity, working with spoken-word sources rather than written. Self-training is also beneficial: students trained to give good source speeches and constructive, analytical feedback can then train each other.

There is a spectrum ranging from “The customer is always right” (the western listener to a “retour” or the relay interpreter from another UN booth) to “He who pays the piper calls the tune” (the source speaker and official “checkers” with their own preferences).

Chinese A interpreters may benefit from guidance on non-verbal communication through intonation, and become more creative public speakers.

Guidance and support

As the new generation enters the market, they need guidance, solidarity, international reference points, and constructive peer review rather than cut-throat competition between "lone operators". While there are significant variations between market segments, China is at the forefront of many developments in machine translation software, the use of AI, and debates about working conditions.

TAC (The Translators’ Association of China) has been working on standard-setting for accreditation exams and self-evaluation tools. While attempts to produce an objective quantification of interpreting ability may have the best of intentions, they are often based on the problematic premise that students can be mechanically benchmarked against a “standard”, correct version.

In the meantime, on the market, many interpreters and trainers feel they are going it alone, with little support.

Newcomers to the profession often aspire to join AIIC, seeing membership as a badge of quality. The market already has many segments and unfortunately not all interpreters abide by the same professional standards- due to financial pressures, the way they conceive their role, or the fact that not all interpreters active on the market have received the same standard of training.

We clearly need more two-way communication between China and Europe. AIIC can play a crucial role in this, bringing together professionals to provide a top-quality human-to-human service in a changing world- including giving externally accessible and comprehensible voices to some 1.4 billion Chinese.
Notes

[1] For more discussion of the "pure customer" – who evaluates only the interpretation, without access to the original – in interpreter training, see Matthew PERRET. "Inside a conference interpreting professional development class". Communicate! Issue 70, April 2017.

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