Training trainers for Africa

Responding to the United Nations' call to train more specialised linguists in Africa, the Instituto Camões [1], the Faculty of Arts of Lisbon University and the Universidade Pedagógica of Mozambique came together to set up the first postgraduate training course for conference interpreters in Portuguese-speaking Africa.

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Portuguese in Africa
(Garry Mullender)

Portuguese is the official language of 5 African countries: Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tome and Principe, and Guinea-Bissau, with a combined population of over 40 million. It is an official language of the Africa Union, ECOWAS and SADC, and used regularly in meetings of the African Development Bank and WHO Africa, amongst other organisations.

The capital of Mozambique, Maputo, is commonly chosen to host sub-regional or regional events, such as the African Games which will take place there later this year. Preparations are already underway to provide interpretation at the Games. Conference organisers in different parts of Africa often complain about the shortage of interpreters with active Portuguese to service their meetings. This despite the fact that there is a long history of interpreting between Portuguese and other languages on the continent dating back to the voyages of discovery. In today's Mozambique, the function of the interpreter is relatively well-known, since in this multilingual country, the President of the Republic, for example, is often accompanied by an interpreter on his trips to the various provinces so that he can communicate with local people [2] in their language.

The role of Lisbon University, member of the European Master's in Conference Interpreting consortium, in this operation is to provide its pedagogical expertise based on having run a similar training programme since 2004. One of the major challenges, though, will be to transfer know-how to local staff, so that within a relatively short space of time Universidade Pedagógica can take full responsibility for the teaching of the practical modules in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. The future trainers for this 2-year Master's course will be found amongst existing Faculty staff who have already been working as interpreters and the first batches of graduates. All of them, however, will need to undergo training of trainers programmes and be coached by more experienced colleagues.

Partnerships with other entities are absolutely vital for achieving this aim. The European Commission, through its Directorate-General for Interpretation, gave an immediate response by providing pedagogical assistance, including brief training seminars for speakers and local trainers, as did the European Master's in Conference Interpreting via pedagogical assistance.

AIIC support and training of trainers
The launch of AIIC's initiative to provide support to African colleagues who wish to attend training of trainers' seminars could not have been more generous, timely or pertinent. I was one of the first beneficiaries of the scheme.

I spent 3 years studying in Plymouth, Devon and have been teaching English at Universidade Pedagógica almost since it was founded in 1985 in the midst of Mozambique's civil war. I’ve also been working as an interpreter on the local market in recent years, having ventured into the field, like many of my compatriots, at the Africa Union Summit held in Maputo in 2003. Since then, I’ve learned to do both consecutive and simultaneous on the job, which has until now been the only training possible. Along with several other colleagues at Universidade Pedagógica in a similar situation, I volunteered to become a teaching assistant on the first Master's course, working alongside the lead trainers from the University of Lisbon.

My participation in Barbara Moser-Mercer's workshop in Rome on feedback to students in January of this year came on the back of taking part in modules on memory exercises and introduction to consecutive. The AIIC seminar, spread over a day and a half, was both intensive and rewarding. It provided us with practical guidance on how to structure and deliver feedback, following some simple do's and don'ts. Above all, we learned that feedback should not be a “laundry list” of mistakes made by the student, but should be adjusted to the specific aims of the exercise and relevant to the stage of training which the student has reached. Feedback is the main way in which a trainer can influence skills acquisition by trainees and must thus facilitate the process by providing constructive advice and setting attainable intermediate goals.

The practical part of the training seminar, which included several role-plays in which we were asked to experiment providing feedback for typical student profiles, was backed up by an overview of theoretical issues that helped us understand the cognitive processes involved in complex skills acquisition. Furthermore, participants explored other feedback possibilities, notably the all-important peer-to-peer feedback which is the main form of performance analysis in group practice sessions.

The knowledge and experience acquired in the seminar is now being rolled out to other staff at Universidade Pedagógica, so that they too can benefit from the AIIC initiative, multiplying its effect. With the opening of more postgraduate training courses in Africa in the pipeline, training of trainers on the continent must be considered a priority in order to ensure that students have access to the highest quality interpreter education. AIIC's involvement is highly desirable and effective, whilst offering the Association an opportunity to gain greater visibility in countries where its presence is still limited, but where there is a definite trend towards greater professionalisation.

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[2] At independence in 1975, only 20% of the population spoke Portuguese, rising to 39.6 % in the 1997 census.