SCICtrain makes its debut

Online video library aims to elucidate the intellectual processes that underlie interpreting and offer examples of how professionals go about their job. Does it live up to expectations?

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About SCICtrain

SCICtrain is the most recent addition to a long line of training projects from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Interpretation (often referred to as SCIC). In simple terms it’s a virtual video library offering information about conference interpreting (theoretical component) and demonstrations (practical component) that can also be used as practice exercises. Access is free and open to all.

Worth noting up front is that SCICtrain does not purport to be a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) or a self-learning platform capable of replacing formal training.

In fact the rollout presentations I’ve seen emphasize how this online library can complement training programs by offering examples of professional-level performance. This makes sense. Many students don’t have the opportunity to observe veteran conference interpreters at work, an experience that can inform their studies and illustrate what will be expected of them.

SCICtrain is designed and produced for DG Interpretation by Lourdes de Rioja. All interpreters appearing in the videos are current or former staff members.

The platform

The home page introduces six sections – or rooms, as I like to think of them: (1) About SCICtrain, (2) What is interpretation?, (3) Consecutive interpretation, (4) Simultaneous interpretation, (5) Other techniques, and (6) Other resources.

When you click on a section, you’re taken to a list of available videos. Sections 1, 2 and 6 contain talks about related subjects; 3, 4 and 5 also offer demonstrations that follow a 3-pronged format: original speech, interpretation of the speech and post-game analysis by the participants.

The library has 41 videos but the intention is to add more on a regular basis. At this time all interpreting exercises are into English, but greater variety of language combinations may come as the collection grows.

The platform itself is attractive and easy to use. The design is pleasingly simple and Ms. de Rioja’s videography is first rate.
What I looked for

A few days before the video library was available to the public I followed Ms. de Rioja’s presentation of the project at the SCIC Universities Conference via web streaming (go to 1:29:30 of the video). As I watched various questions came to mind and I noted down elements or qualities that I hoped to find once I got into the library.

- Something I can’t usually do on my own in class.
- An emphasis on process.
- Insight into how experienced interpreters approach their work, how they think, presented in a way that would be helpful to MA students.
- Stress on the vital role of general knowledge and preparation.
- Insight into factors that go beyond words, such as grasping a speaker’s intent or dealing with personal touches conveying emotion, humor, etc.

And what I found

SCICtrain gets good grades on all the above. The mix of talks about and demonstrations of interpreting are mutually reinforcing, opening up the possibility of cross-fertilization across the various rooms of the library. Forget about the order in which the sections appear; a user would be wise to shuffle between rooms. Revisiting a talk on note-taking after watching a consecutive demo, and then jumping over to “Other resources” to read about performance assessment is just one example.

The conversations among demonstration participants offer a glimpse into the way professional interpreters think. I especially enjoyed the exchange of views of speaker, interpreter and listener concerning the demo retour into English B from Italian during which process is highlighted.

In many of these conversations speakers explain their intentions - what they were trying to get across and/or how they structured the talk. Both students and trainers can gain something from this, especially when combining it with, for example, talks on speechmaking in “Other resources”.

I’ve already addressed the question of modeling, but I would add that a video library offers multiple examples, something that I certainly cannot provide on my own in the classroom. I find that early on many students have trouble accepting that there is not just one accepted way of saying (interpreting) something (and that perfection is nigh impossible, but that is another matter and also mentioned in one of the videos); viewing these demonstrations with commentary may hasten their understanding of an approach that stresses communication and highly flexible use of language.

So, I like what I see on SCICtrain, but there is one thing I hope to see more of: variety in the type of speeches used for demos. Most speeches now on the platform are descriptive narratives – and that’s not a problem. But I would welcome greater use of reasoned arguments, perhaps even presented around specific topics, as well as other types of speeches.

Summary

SCICtrain emphasizes the added value of multilingualism in both word and deed, and reinforces the idea that conference interpreting is all about effective communication. Its overall presentation, from design to video quality, mirrors the professionalism we would all like to see associated with conference interpreting. It promises to be a good resource for students and teachers alike. What's
more, it looks to be a project that could well leave an invaluable legacy for future generations, a 
raison d’être of any self-respecting library.

Recommended citation format: