Inside a conference interpreting professional development class

Participants review a Chinese and Korean into non-native English course offered by AIIC recently in Yanji (PRC).

Matthew PERRET.
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In August 2016 I had the challenge – and the pleasure – of leading an AIIC professional development course at Yanbian University, Yanji, in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Jilin Province, People’s Republic of China (20 miles from the border with North Korea; see map below). The mix of cultures proved fascinating and I decided to write about the experience and asked some of the students to do the same.

Course participants came from all over China, as well as South Korea and Germany. All had professional experience working into non-native English. None of the trainees (or the trainer) had visited the region before, but we were ably assisted by local organiser Mr. Mingri KIM, of Yanbian University, the only one among us who spoke all 3 languages (English being the language of instruction in the workshop, while Chinese and Korean were the jointly official, and virtually only, languages spoken in the city itself).

The course covered “retour” skills, English enhancement and role-playing exercises, as well as simultaneous and consecutive interpreting with native-speaker feedback, and sessions on issues specific to the ZH-EN and KO-EN combinations. We also had several opportunities to socialise during meals kindly organised by Mr. Kim. (He even managed to satisfy my unwittingly eccentric European request for a mid-morning cup of coffee, going on a 40-minute round trip).

Three course participants kindly offered to share their thoughts on various topics: Ye Siting (Stine) and Hailong Liu (Leo), both Chinese-English interpreters based in Hong Kong, and Moonsun Choi, a Korean-English interpreter from Seoul.
1. AIIC

Moonsun: Except for a few global companies, most Korean clients, be it private or public, do not know what AIIC is. However, AIIC, as an international professional association, is well placed to organize training events for interpreters from different countries to come together for their own empowerment.

Leo: AIIC is a useful platform where interpreters can exchange ideas on interpreting techniques, working conditions and professional development.

Matthew: One of the most exciting aspects of giving this seminar was the opportunity to work with talented colleagues who seemed to really appreciate a new possibility for professional and pedagogical cooperation in the region.

Stine: On my very first interpreting class, I heard about AIIC and many esteemed AIIC interpreters. So from day one, AIIC has been the monarch of the interpreting world to me. It is my dream to become an AIIC member and I will spare no efforts to get there.

2. Working with a European trainer (and English native speaker) as a “pure customer”

Stine: I have watched a lot of English programs, but still constantly find myself in awkward situations where I struggle, or say the wrong thing. Sometimes I think the more I try to say things the way natives do, the more unnatural I seem. I don’t know how to find the right balance.

In ordinary interpreting classes, we seldom looked at interpretation from the customer’s perspective. The Yanji workshop was eye-opening and refreshing to me. I learned to judge my interpretation from a listener’s point of view and adjust my output. It was very effective in improving my interpreting performance. Loved it!

Matthew: I was aware that they were the experts in the task we were examining, and I was just a facilitator. I was reminded of 19th century philosopher and political advisor Feng Guifen: "A few barbarians should be employed, and Chinese who are good using their minds should be selected so
that in turn they may teach ... We should use the instruments of the barbarians, but not adopt the ways of the barbarians."

Matthew leading class at Yanbian University

Leo: Working from Chinese into English often means dealing with ambiguity and nuances, as well as cultural references and buzzwords. Sometimes the speaker downplays his or her position, or attempts to avoid an expression of disagreement. We assess how "China-savvy" the English-speaking audience at a conference is, and alter our interpretation accordingly.

I had not realised before what a difference intonation can make when we work into English: skillful use of intonation and stress not only adds to the cadence of the language, but also enhances understanding by the English-speaking audience.

Moonsun: I found the “Socrates” method Matthew employed – asking us to come up with solutions on our own, that make sense and work for a native speaker– was quite effective, and that is something only native speakers can do.

Delegates, as well as speakers, at events in Korea come from all over the world. We have to accommodate different “Englishes” and cultural expectations. In Yanji I discovered that sometimes the Korean and Chinese trainees understood each other’s English, while Matthew, who’s from Britain, was confused! I was shocked and realized I have a long way to go …

When I first came onto the interpreting market in the early 2000s, most of my assignments were into Korean. The Koreans were in the “student” side of the room and we interpreted the foreign “teachers”. But things have changed. Korea is no longer just a listener, and people come from other countries to hear what Korea has to say. I am doing my best to cope with the changing trends. The decision to join the Yanji workshop was part of my effort in that direction.

3. Yanji city

Stine: I did not know anything about Yanji. I was reluctant to travel this far before the workshop but when I got there and tried things out, I started to like the city – it is quiet and relaxing, with nice people and great food – the best place for learning.
Leo: It was my first trip to Yanji city. It has a diverse culture and delicious cuisine, and its proximity to North Korea adds interesting features to the atmosphere.

Matthew: The city is a fascinating trading hub, famous for its ginseng, and apparently obsessed with karaoke. It’s one of the few places in the world where South and North Koreans rub shoulders. Vladivostok is also not far away, but the west definitely is.

One member of the hotel staff was keen to practise his English, saying “Hello!” before collapsing into giggles. So I heard this every morning, as I chose my breakfast from a buffet consisting of 9 types of chilli pickle!

We were all suffering culture shock for different reasons, depending on our background, and I was
relieved to find that I was not the only one who didn’t know how to eat noodle soup with scissors, or who made the outsider’s *faux pas* of putting rice in his wine bowl!

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**Lunch time**

**Moonsun:** I didn’t know there was such a huge population of Korean-speaking people outside the Korean peninsula with their own unique history and territory! Now I view the Korean language as a multinational language, like English, with variants being used in different parts of the world.

### 4. Future training?

**Stine:** Definitely open to more training! Suggestion – let’s have Matthew to do it again! LOL

**Leo:** The Yanji course was informative yet very practical, and I look forward to more training opportunities like that. As for future events, how about: negotiation skills, business management skills as freelancers, how to structure a quote, etc.? A combination of these would help constitute a complete platform for continuous professional development of interpreters.

**Moonsun:** Yanji really worked for me, firstly because retour interpreting was something I was not getting enough training for. Secondly, as an instructor myself, I wanted to learn from a European interpreting teacher how to teach retour interpreting; thirdly, Yanji was close to Seoul (very important!); and last but not least, I wanted to know more about the Chinese interpreting market and make Chinese interpreter friends. Promising topics for future workshops could include:

- Intensive mock conference sessions, with native speakers, for students: in training, we often resort to reading off a written script instead of having live, spontaneous speech as our input.
- Translation tools: we are seeing an increasing awareness of translation memories and machine translation in Korea. Training institutions are adopting translation memory as part of their curriculum here.

### 5. Anything to add?
Stine: I am a firm believer in AI and machine translation. To me, interpreters being replaced by something else, something smarter, more reliable and relentless, is inevitable. So, I would like to help push the trend whenever I can.

Moonsun: I’d like to take this opportunity to thank our host, Mr. Kim, for his meticulous arrangements for the workshop. The workshop in Yanji owes a great deal to him, and I realized how important it is to have a great host to create a memorable and pleasant experience for the participants.

Matthew: Hear, hear! Thank you, dear host, participants and contributors, and new friends.

Our thanks should also go to Ms. Hong JIANG of AIIC Trainers in Asia-Pacific for taking the initiative to plan this course.

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Farewell but not good-bye: group with Mr. Kim at bottom left

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Recommended citation format:
