AIIC thinks training : Interview with Birgit Strolz

Training is essential to the interpreting profession. Learn more about what the AIIC Training Committee does.

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As conference interpreting has evolved as a profession, training programs have had to keep pace and even anticipate change. AIIC's Training Committee (TC), composed of members who are also teachers at a number of major institutions, has long been active in helping interested students find the study opportunities they need, as well as in promoting continuing education for experienced interpreters. This month Communicate! talks with the Birgit Strolz, TC convenor.

Could you tell us what the main activities of the AIIC Training Committee are?

In a nutshell, the AIIC Training Committee (TC) focuses on programs for the training of professional conference interpreters worldwide.

Training courses on an academic and non-academic level are mushrooming. But as there is no system of certification or quality assurance for such courses, it is difficult for interested persons to find the program that would best suit their needs. Therefore, many students quite naturally look to AIIC as the representative international professional association of conference interpreters.

AIIC receives many letters from students inquiring about which schools are trustworthy, what country experienced interpreters would recommend for study and, last but not least, what language combinations are useful and likely to be in demand a few years down the road.

So the Training Committee is in charge of keeping up to date information?

Yes, we gather as much information as possible from all sources. Since all five members of the Committee are active conference interpreters and teachers at interpreting schools, they know from personal experience what skills the market requires and how schools can best prepare their students to succeed in an increasingly more competitive environment.

We try to sort through the available programs and offer interested students information that they won't necessarily get from simply reading school brochures.

So how does the committee evaluate programs?

Teaching methods and school systems are highly diversified. In order to do justice to every program, it would be necessary to visit and observe classes and exams. This is not possible for an organisation functioning on a volunteer basis. Thus the Training Committee sends out questionnaires at regular
intervals to all schools we know of or that are brought to our attention. The evaluation is based on the answers given by the schools and, as a crosscheck, independent comments received from interpreter colleagues teaching at the schools in question.

We then use a three-star evaluation system based on a number of criteria established by the committee itself and ratified by the AIIC Council. The rating reflects the degree to which a school meets these criteria. The list of rated schools is published as an annex to the AIIC brochure _Advice for students wishing to become conference interpreters_. It is meant to be a help to students and schools, many of which are in the process of reform and reorientation of their curricula and statutes.

**So what are the main criteria?**

The criteria are continuously adapted to changing market and working requirements. The most recent list was drafted in 1998 and can be found on the AIIC website.

I should clarify that the criteria are weighted, as we consider some more important than others.

One basic item is the admissions procedure. We believe that there should be an oral entrance exam conducted by a panel of professional conference interpreters capable of judging the candidate's aptitude for conference interpreting. They can also say whether the language combination in question is feasible on the market and advise the potential student of how best to focus on a career that has a reasonable chance of being successful.

Another important criterion is faculty. Teachers should be practicing conference interpreters. These are the people with insight into real-life conference interpreting who can share their know-how with future colleagues. We feel that teachers should have a say in designing and managing conference interpretation programs since they are the essential interface between training and the profession. Working interpreters can also be invaluable in helping new graduates get started in the profession. Moreover, teachers should teach classes in which the target language is their A language.

We concentrate on programs that are fully devoted to teaching interpretation, and classroom training should match actual conference conditions as closely as possible. For example, classrooms should have standard booths, students should work from actual speeches, etc. Of course, both consecutive and simultaneous interpretation should be taught. Even though consecutive interpreting is becoming rarer, it has not disappeared and helps students acquire the skills needed for simultaneous. It is especially good in helping them to concentrate on meaning rather than on form.

The final examination is an important element too. It should be taken before a panel consisting not only of the school's teachers, but also of outside professionals, people from international organisations and other potential employers. In this way new graduates can get in touch with future employers and are also assured of an objective assessment of their abilities. The exam itself should encompass simultaneous and consecutive interpretation in all of the student's working languages.

The final diploma must clearly state the active and passive languages for which the graduate is deemed to have achieved a professional standard of performance.

**Do adjustments ever need to be made for certain countries and/or languages?**

In some instances a country's educational system prevents schools from meeting some of these criteria. For example, postgraduate training may not exist, national regulations may stipulate open access without selection, or uniform examination rules may exist for all disciplines without taking the specific needs of our or another field into consideration.

The fact that a program cannot meet one or more criteria does not exclude it from our list, but it does mean that the school might not be able to obtain three stars. A three star rating means that the school
fulfills all or most of the criteria professional interpreters consider important for an efficient conference interpreters training program.

**Most programs specialising in training professional conference interpreters seem to be post-grad programs. Why is that?**

The preference for post-graduate training stems from the experience that learning the technique of conference interpreting does not take very long for people with the necessary aptitude, general knowledge and language skills. AIIC has always taken the stance - confirmed by the recent introduction of the EU Masters Programme in Conference Interpretation - that the best route is to offer relatively short post graduate training for such students.

It is much more economical to first acquire knowledge and language competence in a general course of academic studies leading to an undergraduate degree and only then set upon learning the skills of note taking for consecutive and booth competence for simultaneous interpreting.

If the student has obtained a degree in a field other than languages, he/she is more versatile if it turns out that a specific language combination is no longer in demand or if he/she desires a career change. In a world where a single, life-long profession is no longer the rule, this is an advantage that should not be underestimated.

**Do schools contact AIIC? Does AIIC invite universities to be included on this list?**

Some schools contact AIIC, but most are contacted by us. Right now we are preparing a new questionnaire and we want to reach as many schools as possible. Since most active conference interpreters have been trained in schools, the TC is aware of most programs. Of course new ones are popping up all the time and the Training Committee tries to get hold of their addresses. Many schools have Websites, links to which we intend to include on our list.

We want as comprehensive a list as possible, as that would mean more quality in interpreter training. We would like to see inclusion on the list as a label of quality.

**With programs proliferating, has the Training Committee given any thought to the training of teachers of conference interpretation?**

This is a very important topic. The Training Committee organised some very successful training of trainer's programs at a time when none were available elsewhere. Today, there is a comprehensive body of literature on the topic and regular training courses being offered or planned by established schools.

For the moment the Training Committee is giving priority to student training by preparing a new version of the list of schools. But training of trainers should certainly be on our future agenda.

Access the AIIC Interpreting Schools and Programmes Directory by clicking [here](#).

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Birgit Strolz graduated from the Institute for Translation and Interpretation of the University of Vienna in 1962. Further study at the University of Geneva (1963-64) was followed by a year in the US. In 1965 she started her career as a freelance conference interpreter in Austria. From 1970 to 1975 she worked as a staff interpreter at the Commission of the European Communities in Brussels. After returning to Austria (because of too much rain in Brussels) she resumed working as a freelancer and also started teaching at her alma mater. In 1993, she received a PhD in Translation Studies. Her doctoral thesis applied a contextual top-down approach to language comprehension and processing to simultaneous interpretation. Birgit has been a member of the AIIC Training Committee since 1993 and its convenor since 1997. She has represented Austria on AIIC Council
since 1997.

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