AIIC thinks training : Interview with Barbara Moser-Mercer

A conversation about research and conference interpreter training.

Luigi LUCCARELLI.
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Research on the interpreting process has had an impact on the classroom. Communicate! talks with Barbara Moser-Mercer, Professor at the Ecole de Traduction et Interpretation of the University of Geneva and a member of AIIC's Research Committee, about the current landscape and what it means for both students and teachers.

LL: You've been teaching interpretation for 20 years now. What changes have you seen in the classroom?

BMM: Increased awareness on the part of interpreting teachers of the importance of sound teaching methods and their willingness to continue their education in that regard. ETI's teacher training certificate is regularly oversubscribed - which confirms this trend. Programs are more intensive today and employers have rigorous standards, all of which puts enormous pressure on both students and teaching staff to "produce" outstanding interpreters with more "experience" than what many of us had when we graduated.

LL: Are students any better prepared today? What do you look for in a student coming into a program?

BMM: I don't think that students are any better prepared, unless they come to us as career changers or after having accumulated considerable work experience. Students straight out of university (translation degrees, language degrees) often lack the broad educational background and world knowledge we are looking for, and proficiency in their working languages, their mother tongue in particular, is often not at the level required for an intensive postgraduate program.

This answers to some extent the second part of the question. We look for well-educated candidates with a certain life experience who are interested in pretty much everything under the sun, are eloquent, motivated and team players. Humor is always welcome as the stresses and strains of an intensive training program can weigh heavily on the group as a whole. We pay particular attention to analytical skills and coherence in expression, resilience to stress and developmental potential.

LL: You are also active in research and a member of the AIIC research committee. Have research results changed the way consecutive and simultaneous interpretation are taught?

BMM: I hope they have. We do know considerably more about the cognitive processes involved in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting, but more importantly, we know a great deal more about how people learn, how novices become experts (in just about any field) and that a sink and swim
approach is rarely indicated. Thus, we are able to benefit not only from research in interpreting, but also from research in educational psychology, cognitive psychology and expertise research.

LL: How about curricula? Have new subject areas been added in recent years? Are background courses in subjects like economics and international law more or less common than before? Have new technologies changed the classroom?

BMM: Curricula, particularly in a select group of European schools that belong to the European Master's in Conference Interpreting project, have become more intensive and are preferably postgraduate. As a result new subjects have rarely been added, although interpreting theory is part of the European Master's curriculum. The tendency is towards short, intensive seminars let's say in medical terminology, the European Union, the UN system, etc., rather than offering a year-long course in any of these areas. New technologies have significantly changed the amount of subject/background information provided by the interpreting teacher as students have regular access to the Internet and are therefore responsible for their own subject matter research. Students learn to become familiar with these tools, develop their own electronic glossaries and subject files, and appear to be very much at ease with that approach.

LL: What do you think qualifies someone to be a teacher of conference interpretation?

BMM: In a way anyone who is extremely motivated makes a good teacher in general. For me that is the minimum requirement. I feel very strongly about teachers being practicing interpreters themselves, the stress being on practicing, as there is no point in having passed one's exams and then never having exercised the profession.

Our profession is changing and only those who continue to be involved in it are aware of those changes. Take the issue of working into a B language for example, something that was hardly tolerated 25 years ago and appears to become standard practice today - this should indeed have a significant impact on how we teach interpreting. I believe that a minimum of 3-5 years of experience is necessary to feel comfortable teaching interpreting. Some teacher training courses would also prevent novice teachers from having to reinvent the wheel or simply being bad teachers.

Barbara MOSER-MERCER is Professor of Conference Interpreting at the École de traduction et d'interprétation (ETI), University of Geneva, and Director of the Conference Interpreting Program. She studied translation and interpreting at the University of Innsbruck, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics at the University of Rochester, N.Y. and her doctoral dissertation examined the possibilities of cognitive modeling in simultaneous interpreting. She has co-authored two books on interpreting and has published papers on aptitude testing for conference interpreters and on various aspects of interpreters' working conditions. Her research interests involve the acquisition of expertise in interpreting and human factors in interpreting. She is active in the training of interpreter trainers both at ETI, as well as for the European institutions.

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