Interpreting in zones of crisis and war

New technologies and online learning can be tailored to the urgent needs of people about to begin work in these difficult situations.

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A new project has been undertaken to gain a detailed understanding of multilingual communication needs in zones of crisis and war, and to design learning materials for interpreters working in the field that can be delivered via the internet or other suitable media.

War and conflict know no linguistic boundaries. Language specialists often play an essential role in intelligence gathering before and during a conflict. Ending a conflict and delivering emergency and humanitarian aid across language barriers represents a major challenge, for which few of the organisations entrusted with operations in the field are well equipped. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is a chronic shortage of interpreters in zones of crisis and war willing to work in the line of fire or in areas of natural disaster.

Interpreters are often recruited because they "know" both the local language/dialect and English, the language of international relief operations, and not because they have been trained as translators or interpreters. It is safe to say that hardly any have undergone training in interpreting, as the results of the first phase of our project confirm. Thus, they lack both essential professional skills to perform adequately as interpreters, as well as the necessary professional ethics to support crisis management and humanitarian efforts in a stressful environment.

The consequences are dire both for the people in need of a professional service and for the interpreters themselves. Staffs deployed in the field are often unable to communicate properly with the local population, and find it difficult to assess real needs and to deliver the services they were meant to provide in a way that is commensurate with the financial and human effort that has gone into planning such relief or crisis management operations. Often the objectives of such operations cannot be fully met because of communication breakdowns. The consequences for the interpreters are no less disappointing and painful: lack of proficiency in English, misplaced loyalties, the need to assume roles that "empower" them to pass judgment during interrogations or asylum interviews, for example, without requisite deontological training, thus inadvertently participating in human rights violations. Communication scenarios that can overwhelm even a trained interpreter, such as stepping in for the delegate for whom the interpreter was supposed to be working, because the former has misjudged the cultural dimension of an exchange and the interpreter is concerned that the situation might get out of hand.

Our project entitled "Interpreting in zones of crisis and war" is managed by the École de traduction et d'interprétation (ETI). The original funding was provided by the Geneva International Academic Network, whose support we acknowledge. ETI is currently the only school worldwide to have developed a virtual learning environment for interpreters. Its interpreting department has
considerable experience in distance and blended learning, including in countries with less than optimal computer/internet infrastructure, and is thus fully cognizant of the need to develop learning modules that can be delivered at low bandwidth and with variable accessibility options.

Together with our project partner, the International Committee of the Red Cross, we undertook a survey among ICRC delegations in the field to establish how needs are perceived in terms of training of field interpreters and how virtually delivered learning modules can fill such needs in an efficient and economical way in order to build capacity rapidly. Having one of our own students work as a field interpreter in a crisis zone for an entire year and organising a training course for war zone interpreters at ETI greatly contributed to our understanding of interpreters' needs. The first objective of this project then has been to gain a detailed understanding of multilingual communication needs in zones of crisis and war and to translate these needs into the development of learning materials delivered to interpreters working in the field mainly via the internet, but also through the use of other suitable media, to allow them to upgrade their skills without taking extended leave from their jobs.

Although it was expected that needs would vary depending on the type of crisis situation with respect to communication scenarios, technical terminology and ethics requirements, we assumed that the commonalities would be greater than the differences. ETI thus focused on the common points that emerged from the needs analysis and has developed two training modules to pilot this program:

- Module 1 focuses on the specifics of communication situations with regard to professional ethics and on empowering the interpreter to better understand what is at stake in various communication situations in order to improve communication for all involved.
- Module 2 focuses on essential consecutive interpreting skills, including sample communication scenarios and essential technical terminology.

Both modules are to be delivered at distance over the internet, or blended using other suitable media such as CD-Rom. ETI's Virtualinstitute © combines the technical facilities to teach interpreting at distance (speech bank, double-track recording, feedback functionalities) with the pedagogical environment of collaborative learning. The project offers a modular approach to improving interpreting skills combined with the opportunity for interpreters in different crisis zones to learn collaboratively via the internet, thus creating a community of practice where experiences of learners can be leveraged to enhance the training effort. English has been designated as the pivot language, ensuring usefulness of training materials around the world; target languages are chosen in accordance with the most urgent needs identified by the project partners during the needs analysis phase (Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Burmese in addition to the more widely used languages such as French, German and Russian).

War and crisis zones present a particular challenge for delivering learning materials and for engaging learners. Technical constraints dictate a bite-size approach to learning; knowledge and skills must be carefully analyzed and broken down into small components; each component skill must be addressed by a specific, self-contained activity; no activity should last more than 10 minutes as internet connections are not stable and learners are usually on call around the clock. Against the backdrop of war and crises, learners' needs go beyond immediate knowledge and skill acquisition: learners are usually very isolated and unable to connect to colleagues, either because of different work schedules or simply because it is unsafe to travel any distance. The philosophy of communities of practice and the pedagogy of collaborative learning are ideally suited to address not only the educational, but also the psychological and social needs of interpreters working in war and crisis zones. Coming together in a learning environment with a common purpose in mind can forge strong social bonds which in turn help accelerate learning as interpreters are asked to work together and learn with and from each other. Tutoring support and pedagogical scenarios optimized for this environment allow us to structure collaborative learning and provide ongoing support. ETI's
extensive experience with this type of pedagogy has shown that learners appropriate their learning environment and begin to "live" and "work" in it: it becomes their life-line. This is indeed one of the needs this project is designed to fulfill.

Crises and wars know no linguistic boundaries and there is hardly ever sufficient lead time to develop electronic support devices. Our project considers human interpreters who work in the field (rather than via remote set-ups through phone and ISDN lines) as the best guarantee to ensure human communication, as language and extra-linguistic features need to be appreciated in their immediate communicative setting. In addition, we strongly believe that local capacity building should be an essential component in any development project, ultimately allowing a nation to become independent of outside support. Improved skills for interpreters in crisis and war zones thus provide an excellent spring board for these very same interpreters to function during post-war and post-crisis reconstruction, enabling nations to participate more fully in rebuilding their societies and economies.

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