



Online Resources for Conference Interpreter Training: Examples of Open E-Learning from the EU-Funded ORCIT Project

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Abstract

How does one create a single, cohesive, multilingual teaching resource that can be accessed across the globe? That is just what the ORCIT project set out to do! Starting in 2010, with EU funding and four international partners, the first steps towards a suite of training tools for students of Conference Interpreting were taken.

Five years on, ORCIT has grown to eight European partners and produced around 70 open-access interactive resources. These are used by interpreting students and trainers around the world.

Although designed with trainee conference interpreters in mind, the ORCIT resources cover a range of skills invaluable across language-teaching and in other disciplines besides. From lessons in good public speaking to tips on effective research or listening analytically, to exercises on collocations and register, much of the project output covers highly transferable skills and will be of value to teachers and learners across the board.

The presentation is an interactive session in which attendees can experience first-hand the ORCIT website and the resources on offer. We will also share some of the knowledge gained over half a decade of multilingual eLearning creation. Areas covered will include pedagogical considerations and the benefits and challenges of cross-continent collaboration. We will also discuss the technological tools and platforms used, the workflow processes employed, and share best-practices developed over the course of the project.

1. Introduction

One of the main pre-requisites to joining a Master's degree in Conference Interpreting (although far from the only one) is to have an excellent command of at least two languages [1]. It may seem surprising, therefore, that we have chosen to present ORCIT, an EU-funded project dedicated to conference interpreter training, at a conference focused on ICT for language learning.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, many of ORCIT's multilingual elearning resources are also excellent tools for second-language enhancement. Secondly, as an open web-based resource it is an ideal way for language-learners interested in interpreting to discover or familiarise themselves with topics and techniques they will come across on a postgraduate conference interpreting programme, even helping them decide whether they wish to pursue such training, or prepare for admissions tests if they do. Last but not least, we are convinced that the very creation of this eLearning tool and its methodology can be easily adapted for language-learning initiatives.

The project has been designed and developed as an open, interactive, multimedia learning resource by professional conference interpreter trainers and learning technologists at leading European HE institutions. Each set of resources includes a theoretical 'Introduction' and an interactive 'Exercises' element. This annually-funded, ongoing project has now grown to eight languages: Czech, English, French, German, Greek, Lithuanian, Slovenian and Spanish, and sees the creation of parallel resources to the same structured approach in a 'sub-site' for each language. The exercises and examples have, however, been adapted to the various language and cultural contexts.

What does this highly-structured approach consist of? The resources, each one a separate 'book' on ORCIT's virtual bookshelf [2], can be accessed in any order. However, the skillsets into which these resources have been ordered are not arbitrary. They follow a pedagogical progression, starting with the basic skills of listening and analysis and public speaking, with the latter category including a section on the importance of having a good command of your mother tongue. These six books would be of great benefit to language students, and are available in multiple languages, although each version is monolingual to allow usability regardless of language combination. Following are resources dealing with the main techniques of conference interpreting, consecutive and simultaneous, before a section on Research Skills and finally links to external resources. The materials in Speechpool [3], linked to in this final section, can also be used by language students to improve their listening comprehension and general knowledge, as they feature a range of native-speakers giving short speeches on a variety of subjects.

Apart from the opportunities ORCIT's output affords for direct language-learning use, the project itself offers an excellent model for other didactic ends. The concept can be described as follows: a dedicated, easily-available website offering pedagogical best practice and guidance in a highly-structured, interactive manner, blending theory and practice, and useful for both instructors and students. In like manner, open-access materials can be incorporated into curricula by language schools at large to supplement what is done in class; a true example of blended learning.

2. The resources

2.1 Multimedia platform

Interpreting is a very practical, 'hands-on' domain. While the discipline does, of course, include theoretical concepts effectively studied through the written medium, acquisition of practical skills does not lend itself to a largely text-based instruction. Thus the need for campus-based, tutor-led training, and the relative absence of distance or virtual courses. While ORCIT fully supports this premise, and is by no means an attempt to provide such a product, its employment of multimedia allows a complementary learning and teaching tool far more suited to the field than many textual resources. The availability of video, audio, images, animations and links to external content makes ORCIT an invaluable means for students to consolidate the skills and concepts being learnt in class (Figs. 1, 2).



Fig. 1. Early Simultaneous Introduction (Greek). Good practice and common pitfalls are exemplified in a way not possible through text-based resources.

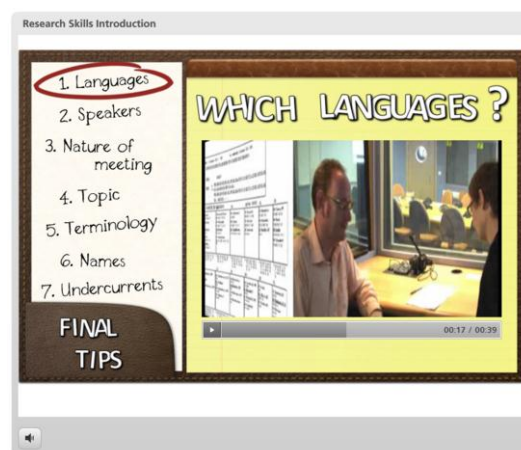


Fig. 2. Research Skills Introduction (English). The video switches between examples of common working documents to a trainer-student discussion on their use.

2.2 Didactic and practice opportunities

ORCIT was in many ways a forerunner for interpreter-training tools of its nature. When the project began, although there were some websites and speech-banks for student reference, there was little

didactic or practice material such as the project sought to provide. ORCIT offers a structured, cohesive pedagogical framework and practice opportunities through interactive exercises (Fig. 3). Upon accessing the ORCIT bookshelf the user is presented with the suite of resources, organised according to five key interpreting skills (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Public Speaking Exercises (Slovenian). Meaningful practice; users are guided in researching external sources to create a well-informed speech. Here the importance of seeking various viewpoints is highlighted, as the user reviews three articles on the same topic before mapping out a speech. Each 'UNICEF' image links to a separate article in a pop-out window.

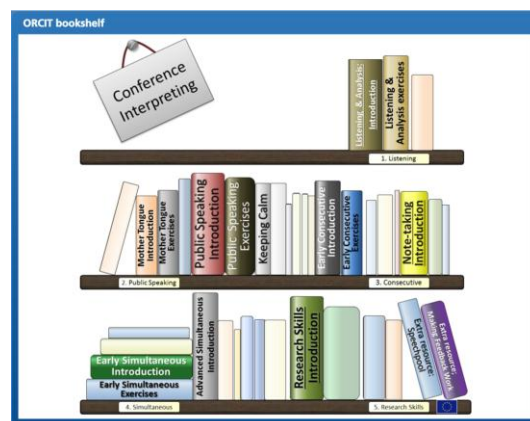


Fig. 4. ORCIT bookshelf (English). Users click on any book to access the resource. Resources are categorised into key skills, identified by interpreting pedagogy experts; (Active) Listening, Public Speaking, Consecutive, Simultaneous and Research Skills. Students thus focus on individual skills, while understanding how these fit in with their skills development as a whole.

2.3 Multilingual format

Making ORCIT available in various languages means the same didactic material is available to students on an international scale. At the same time, it allows differences between language contexts to be addressed, as partners tailor their versions to the needs of students in their setting. ORCIT allows for the fact that one size does not always fit all.

2.4 Statistics

As an indicator of the wide reach of ORCIT, since its launch the website has had over 100,000 page views from over 30,000 users, across nearly 50,000 sessions. This averages around 10,000 sessions per year.



3. Tools, platforms and processes

3.1 Technical tools

The first tool to mention is the 'backbone' of ORCIT production, Articulate Storyline. Storyline is the rapid elearning authoring software used to produce all of the materials, including the interactive bookshelf. Chosen for its ease-of use and the variety of interactive features available, this software has enabled non-technicians at partner institutions to be trained in a short space of time.

Other tools used include video, image and audio editors and file converters. In most cases free or low-cost solutions were more than sufficient; examples include free audio editing software Audacity, and Microsoft PowerPoint, which is capable of carrying out many of the needed graphics-building or image editing functions. iPad apps have also been used to create some hand-drawn graphics.

In terms of hardware needs, ORCIT resources require recording equipment such as a camera and lights; in many institutions these were already available through departmental technical teams. Audio recorders were also used, although technological advances have meant that equipment such as smartphones are increasingly able to fulfil the requirements for output of ORCIT's scale.

3.2 Platforms

Several collaboration tools make the work of the project, including the sharing of large, complex files across partners in eight countries, viable. Shared storage facilities such as those offered by Dropbox or Google Drive have allowed for a centralised space where schedules of work, instructions and template files can be systematically shared, or through which completed localisation files can be sent to technologists for processing. Online meeting programmes such as Adobe Connect have allowed partners to collaborate in an efficient way.

In terms of the site itself, this is powered through Wordpress.com, while being hosted by one of the partner institutions. It uses a dot eu domain to reflect the European nature of its partners and funding. Following setbacks caused in early years (through a reliance on third-party plugins which were not updated), a simple webpage structure was set up to support the multilingual capabilities.

3.3 Workflow processes

Over the years, and with the number of partners increasing, the workflow has developed to allow for the most efficient system possible. Resources are initially produced as English templates (an idea of what is involved at this stage can be gained from a presentation by one of the authors [4] on behalf of the National Network for Interpreting [5]). Template files are then sent to partners for localisation and recording in their languages. The UK team have had to adapt their resource-creation style to cater for localisation needs later on, for example creating transcripts where trainers might otherwise have spoken spontaneously on previously-decided points. The team have also had to determine the technical specifications needed to produce the best output, or to fit the visual design of a resource. They also specify the aspect ratio needed for videos, file formats and sizes, among other details. In order to further train technologists in best practice across the project, a recording workshop was organised in autumn 2014, led by an expert in the field. The session allowed for considerable improvements to template and media production, as well as providing invaluable opportunities for knowledge transfer within the group. Some partners have chosen to train staff members in the use of Storyline, and these will create the final resource and send the output files for upload onto the website. Other partners return completed audio, video and translated text files to be compiled into the resource in the UK. The published output is approved by institution project coordinators before being made live on the website.

Localisation does not take place simultaneously across partners; partners have been involved in the project for different lengths of time, and the resource-creation schedule factors in the time needed for different tasks by technologists and pedagogues alike. This schedule of which resources are to be localised and created by which partners, and when, is drawn up before the project year begins, and while it is flexible where the need arises, it allows for efficiency and clear progress monitoring. Partners have been able to feed back on their experience, informing such decisions as which resources are most suitable for a new, less experienced partner team to localise first.

4. Conclusions, best practices and lessons learnt

Over the years, the project has benefitted from the perspectives and contributions of professionals – interpreter trainers, technicians and elearning technologists - from eight countries sharing the same pedagogical approaches, but with different cultures which have enriched the project.

The increasing number of participants has required a streamlined organisation, outlined above and including taking into account resources available, especially technical resources. This avoids

bottlenecks due to a smaller number of technologists receiving work to be processed from several partners at once.

There are several elements worth further consideration going forward. The website could be adapted to fit differing local navigation conventions. The project could benefit from having all, or at least the more seasoned partners contribute to original resource design.

In the space of this paper there are many aspects and details that cannot be addressed; factors such as copyright or accessibility could fill an entire presentation each, and have not here been touched upon. However, we hope that we have given a glimpse of the resources already available to interpreting, and language students through ORCIT, and a taste of what is possible for those wishing to embark on similar initiatives of their own.

References

- [1] Interpreting Skills Map, National Network for Interpreting, http://www.nationalnetworkforinterpreting.ac.uk/tasks/int_skills/player.html, accessed 11/09/2015
- [2] <http://www.orcit.eu/resources-shelf-en/story.html>
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