ON-LINE INTERPRETER ACCREDITATION TESTS FOR THE BODIES AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

Multilingualism being one of the core values of the European Union, EU bodies and institutions rely heavily on the work of interpreters. To select the best candidates, the three biggest institutions organize a common accreditation test for the auxiliary conference interpreters they intend to work with. This paper aims to examine why such an accreditation test is needed by giving an overview of the necessary skills and competences of a professional conference interpreter and by explaining the sub-tasks to be completed during the examinations. Then it presents how new technologies were gradually integrated in the testing methods in an attempt to cut travel costs and to simplify the organization of the accreditation tests. Finally, the most recent, fully online testing procedure will be presented, with an analysis of the possible advantages and drawbacks of a remote exam setting, especially in the context of the lessons learnt about remote interpreting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: inter-institutional accreditation test, auxiliary conference interpreter, ACI, institutions and bodies of the European Union, remote interpreting

1. Introduction

Multilingualism being one of the core values of the European Union, translators and interpreters play a key role in European policy making. Around 1000 staff interpreters work for the European Union's bodies and institutions. But the EU's complex linguistic needs cannot be covered only by permanent staff. Depending on the number and the nationality of the participants, the linguistic regime of a meeting can be rather simple or highly complex; demands fluctuate constantly; and

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the organisation of the interpretation services must stay cost effective. Therefore, instead of giving all interpreting assignments to staff interpreters, the EU bodies and institutions rely heavily on the services of around 3000 free-lancer interpreters, the so-called "ACIs" (auxiliary conference interpreters)[1].

To become a staff interpreter and thus a *fonctionnaire* of the EU, one must pass the EPSO exam. ACIs, on the other hand, sign a new contract for each and every interpreting assignment, and need to be accredited to get into the pool of interpreters the EU institutions can choose from. To recruit free-lancer interpreters, the three biggest EU institutions: the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union have a common accreditation procedure, commonly called "the SCIC test". This denomination comes from the original name of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Interpretation: SCIC (*Service commun Interprétation-Conférences*).

This paper will explain the purpose of organising an accreditation test for ACIs, then will give a brief historical overview of the inter-institutional accreditation test. In the second part, the new, fully on-line accreditation procedure will be presented, as well as its possible advantages and drawbacks, in the context of the recent technological developments.

2. Why is an accreditation test needed?

According to a common misconception, being bilingual means that one can automatically fulfil the role of a translator or an interpreter. But it couldn't be further from the truth. Being a professional language mediator is much more than being able to communicate in more than one language.

According to Jones's definition, interpreters are professional communicators who give an immediate oral translation of what is being said in order to enable communication between people speaking different languages. They do it not only by conveying the semantic content of what their clients say, but also by bridging the cultural and conceptual gaps that may separate the participants of a conversation[2].

The main difference between an interpreter and a bilingual person is that while laymen use their language skills to fulfil their own communicational needs, professional interpreters must be able to enable communication for others, about subjects they do not necessarily know well or find interesting[3].

To be able to do so, interpreters need a highly organised mental lexicon with conscious connections between their working languages that allow a quick access to equivalents, synonyms, antonyms etc. On the other hand, the working languages

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[1]   Seresi, Márta –Láncos, Petra Lea: Az Európai Unió intézményeinek és szerveinek dolgozó szabadúszó tolmácsok akkreditációs vizsgája (Accreditation examination for freelance interpreters working for the institutions and bodies of the European Union). *Magyar Jogi Nyelv*, 2018/2. 1–7.

[2]   Roderick Jones: *Conference Interpreting Explained*. Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing, 1998. 2–3.

[3]   Szabari Krisztina: *Tolmácsolás. Bevezetés a tolmácsolás elméletébe* és *gyakorlatába* (Interpreting. An introduction to the theory and practice of interpreting). Budapest, Scholastica, 2002. 96.

must also be separated from one another, to avoid involuntary code-switching or linguistic interference[4].

Having firm linguistic skills in all of one's working languages is a *sine qua non* condition to become an interpreter, but it is not enough in itself. An interpreter must be well informed and have a vast general knowledge to be able to analyse and understand the ideas and argumentations presented by the speakers. Without a solid understanding of the basic economical, legal, and sociological concepts and processes, interpreters would always have to rely on their short-term memory, which would lead very quickly to a complete exhaustion. These pieces of background information also allow the interpreters to understand the communicational intent or the eventual hidden agenda of the speaker[5].

Interpreters must also be able to cope with the stress they are exposed to during the assignments. According to certain studies, the amount of stress a conference interpreter has to face is similar to the stress levels of an air traffic controller[6].

1. Figure: Conference interpreter sitting in an interpreting booth with a good view on the meeting room

Interpreters also need strategies to cope with difficulties that arise during an assignment[7]. These can be the results of the interpreting activity itself: interpreters work under very strict time constraints, especially in simultaneous mode. They must adapt their own speech production to the speech production of someone else, and

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[4]   Szabari op. cit. 97.

[5]   Danica Selescovitch – Marianne Lederer: *Pédagogie Raisonnée de l'Interprétation* (Reasoned Pedagogy of Interpretation) Paris, Didier Érudition, 1989. 76.

[6]   Hans Zeier: Psychophysiological stress research. *Interpreting,* vol 2., no. 1/2. 1997. 231–249.

[7]   Láng, Zsuzsa G.: *Tolmácsolás felsőfokon. A hivatásos tolmácsok képzéséről* (Advanced level interpreting. On the training of professional interpreters). Budapest, Scholastica, 2002. 83–87.

work on a text that is often being born in that very moment. The difficulties can also be linked to the interpreters' lack of skills and competences, who might be working on an unfamiliar subject or have to decode an accent they do not know well. The difficulties can also result from the speaker's badly chosen pace or from the lack of coherence in the argumentation. The physical conditions of the assignment can also hinder the interpreters' work, for example when the interpreting booth does not comply with the ISO standards, or when the interpreters cannot see the Power Point presentation well. Students enrolled in interpreter training learn to assess these difficulties in a conscious manner and acquire tactics and strategies to cope with them[8].

The purpose of the SCIC test is to evaluate whether the candidates are able to fulfil the role of a professional conference interpreter. The objective is to select the candidates who can analyse the message and present it coherently; who demonstrate strong and conscious language skills; have a good basis of general knowledge; show efficient coping strategies and good presentation skills; and who are flexible and able to cope with stressful situations.

3. How to become an ACI?

To be able to try the SCIC test, one must fulfil certain requirements. First of all, candidates must be qualified interpreters and have a BA, an MA or a postgraduate degree in interpreting. Candidates with a BA/BSc in any field can also be eligible if they have at least one year of documented experience in conference interpreting.

Candidates must submit their application on-line, via the European Union's homepage.[9] If their language combination is currently needed in the EU (and if they didn't fail the SCIC test previously three times), they will be invited to sit the test. If their language combination is not needed at that moment, they will be put on a waiting list[10].

3.1. The inter-institutional accreditation test before 2016

Before 2016, all SCIC tests were organised in a presential mode, either in Brussels or, during the enlargements, in the accession countries. There would be 2 subtests for each language pair: the consecutive interpretation of a 6-minute-long speech, and the simultaneous interpretation of a 10-minute-long speech.

When speaking about an interpreter's working languages, we can talk about three different categories. The interpreter's *A language* is the language he or she speaks the most perfectly. Very often this is the interpreter's mother tongue, or the language

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[8]   Daniel Gile: Conference interpreting as a cognitive management problem. In: Joseph K. Dansk et al. (ed.): *Cognitive processes in translation and interpreting.* (*Applied Psychology: Individual, Social, and Community Issues 3*) Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1997. 196–214.

[9]   https://europa.eu/interpretation/freelance_en.html

[10]   Seresi–Láncos (2018) op. cit.

in which the interpreter completed his or her studies. The *B language* is a foreign or learnt language that the interpreter can use as a source language but also as a target language. When the interpreter is working into a B language, we call it a *retour*. Having a *retour* is considered in this context as having two language pairs (that is from A to B and from B to A). *C languages* (or passive languages) are working languages that can only play the role of a source language for a given interpreter[11].

Candidates usually have at least 3 language pairs; therefore, they have to sit through at least 6 sub-tests. This process can easily take half a day or more. Before 2016, candidates would have to go through all the 6 exam parts, independently of their results. They had to successfully pass the consecutive as well as the simultaneous part to have a language pair accredited.

Before 2016, all the six speeches to be interpreted by the candidates were prepared and pronounced in a semi-spontaneous way (based on notes and bullet points) by a live speaker on site. The examination panel was composed of at least 6 members, all of them the EU institutions' staff interpreters[12]. It was therefore rather complicated to organise exam panels, as all panel members had to be present during at least half a day and could not be scheduled to meetings. The EU also contributed to the travel costs of the candidates, creating a financial burden that did not always pay off.

Later on, to rationalise the preparation time of the exam panel members, and to ensure fairer and more comparable conditions to candidates, the exam panels started to use for the simultaneous examinations video-recorded speeches that were screened in the examination room. That was the first time the SCIC test was reorganised in a way that benefited from the dynamic development of the new technologies.

3.2. Inter-institutional accreditation tests between 2017 and 2022

In the 2017/18 academic year, DG SCIC introduced a new element to the accreditation test: the on-line pre-screening. In order to cut costs and to avoid organising long and complex test sessions for less promising candidates, an on-line pre-screening took place before inviting candidates to sit the complete 6-part-test in Brussels.

The platform used to perform the pre-screening was managed by the European Parliament. The candidates got a link and a timeframe to complete the simultaneous interpreting of one 12-minute-long pre-recorded foreign language speech - usually from English into their A language, but German, French, Spanish and Italian speeches were also available. The language, however, was not chosen by the candidate, but by DG SCIC.

Before starting the interpretation exercise, candidates had to verify their Internet connection and their hardware (microphone and speakers). They worked on the basis of a video file and had to record an audio file of their own performance. The audio recording was then assessed individually by the interpreters of the different EU

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11 Seresi, Márta: *Távtolmácsolás* és *távoktatás a tolmácsképzésben* (Remote interpreting and distance education in interpreter training). Budapest, ELTE Eötvös, 2016. 25–29.

12 Seresi–Láncos (2018) op. cit.

institutions, who could give a maximum of 3 points in 6 categories. To pass the pre-screening, candidates had to get at least 9 out of the 18 available points. Candidates getting overall less than 9 points or getting 0 point in any of the three categories failed and were not invited to the SCIC test. Nevertheless, they got feedback explaining the possible areas for improvement. Candidates who got at least 9 out of 18 points were invited to Brussels to take the complete SCIC test[13].

3.2. The inter-institutional accreditation test after 2022

During the pandemic, all accreditation exams were suspended for a while. When life was getting back to normal, the institutions came up with a new, fully on-line testing method. In the following points I would like to present how these new accreditation tests are organized, and then analyse the possible advantages and drawbacks of a fully on-line testing regime.

3.3.1. The organisation of the on-line accreditation tests

From 2022 on, all parts of the SCIC tests are to be taken remotely[14]. The tests start with the simultaneous examinations. This part of the test is asynchronous: the speeches to be interpreted are videorecorded and uploaded to the testing platform. The candidates must perform all the simultaneous interpreting tasks on the same day and record their performance via the on-line platform. The evaluation is done later, in quiet periods when the EU institutions' staff interpreters have less work at meetings and can more freely concentrate on the evaluation process[15].

All the assessors sit in the same room and listen to the recordings together. The decisions are taken by consensus, and the assessment follows a pre-established set of marking criteria[16]. The evaluation is done in a "cascade mode": panel members listen to the recordings of the same candidate one by one. Should the candidate fail at any of the tasks, the panel will stop and will not listen to the remaining recordings.

Candidates who passed the simultaneous part of the exam will be later invited to sit for the consecutive exam. During the consecutive examination, the speech to be interpreted in consecutive mode is delivered on-line but in real time (in a synchronous mode), allowing candidates to ask questions before starting the interpretation exercise.

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[13]   Seresi–Láncos (2018) op. cit.

[14]   https://europa.eu/interpretation/freelance_en.html#3_accreditation_test

[15]   Cathy Pearson: Unpublished presentation – EMCI Training of Trainers. Budapest (2022): *The new inter-institutional accreditation tests*.

[16]   https://europa.eu/interpretation/doc/marking_criteria_en.pdf

2. Figure: Pre-recorded speech available on the Speech Repository of the European Commission for interpreter training purposes[17]

After the examination, candidates receive the results in writing with detailed feedback. Should they fail the consecutive part, they can "backpack" their simultaneous results for an eventual re-sit[18].

3.3.2. The possible advantages of the on-line organisation

When elaborating the new testing regime, the institutions had several objectives in mind. First of all, they wanted to create a system that can stay operational during an unforeseen crisis situation, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic that brought almost

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[17]　https://speech-repository.webcloud.ec.europa.eu/

[18]　PEARSON op. cit.

all human activities involving social contact to a halt. The new testing procedure will allow a greater flexibility in case of another regional or world-wild catastrophe.

Secondly, the on-line organisation makes travelling unnecessary. This is on the one hand much more cost-effective than the original testing system that obliged the candidates to travel to Brussels, often by plane. On the other hand, this solution is much more eco-friendly.

It also makes the preparation and the organisation of the tests easier. The same video-recorder speech can be used to test ten different candidates in simultaneous mode, reducing considerably the burden of the exam panel members. Staff interpreters can spend less time in exam panels and more time in the interpreting booths.

All in all, the new testing procedure is more efficient, and therefore allows the institutions to test more candidates than before[19]. It means that candidates do not have to make themselves "more attractive" to be invited to the accreditation test by offering their most complete language combination at their very first try, but can concentrate on their most reliable language pairs and add their other, maybe less accomplished language pairs later.

3.3.3. The possible drawbacks of the on-line organisation

Interpreting in an on-line or remote setting is not the same as interpreting in presential mode. Research on the subject started way before the pandemic, already in the '70s and identified a number of difficulties that are specific to remote interpreting[20].

Interpreters working remotely feel disconnected or even alienated from their audience[21], get exhausted more quickly and are less happy with their own performance[22]. These problems may be linked to the fact that in a remote setting, interpreters do not have a direct view on the meeting room but have to rely on a small screen that only transmits a fraction of the necessary visual information[23].

Before the pandemic, remote interpreting was performed in ordinary interpreting booths that were equipped with the usual consoles and headsets but were installed in a distant room or even in a distant building. Interpreters could rely on their boothmates and could create eye-contact with the eventual other members of the interpreting team.

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[19]   Pearson op. cit.

[20]   Sabine Braun: Remote Interpreting. In: Holly Mikkelson – Renée Jourdenais (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of Interpreting.* London–NewYork, Routledge, 2015. 352–367

[21]   Barbara Moser-Mercer: Remote interpreting: Issues of Multi-Sensory Integration in a Multilingual Task. *Meta,* vol. 50., no. 2., 2005. 727–738.

[22]   Ilan Roziner – Miriam Shlesinger: Much ado about something remote: stress and performance in remote interpreting. *Interpreting,* Vol. 12., No. 2., 2010. 214–248.

[23]   Panayotis Mouzourakis: Remote interpreting – A technical perspective on recent experiments. *Interpreting*, vol. 8., no. 1., 2006. 45–66.

3. Figure: Remote interpreting hub with traditional interpreting booths

But during the pandemic, the situation changed radically: interpreters were moved onto so-called remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI) platforms and had to work far away from their (virtual) boothmates. This new situation created new concerns about the cognitive load, the working conditions and the well-being of interpreters.

4. Figure: An RSI platform from the interpreter's point of view
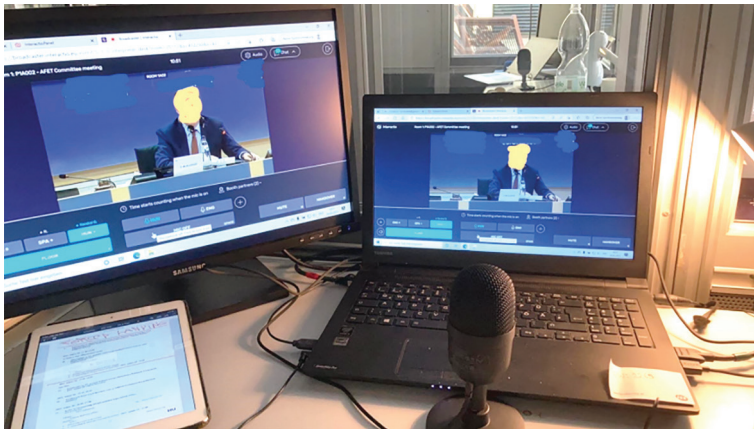

As interpreters were forced to work from their homes, using mostly the same (or slightly better) commercially available devices as their clients, sound quality has become more and more of an issue. Technology in itself became a huge stress-factor, due the tendency of the RSI platforms to collapse[24]. While traditionally conference

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[24]   Seresi, Márta – Láncos, Petra Lea: A kognitív terhelés változása online távtolmácsolási platformok használatakor (Changes in the cognitive load while using on-line remote simultaneous interpreting platforms). In: Szoták, Szilvia – Lehocki-Samardzic, Anna (ed.): *Nyelvi közvetítés a Kárpát-*

organizers had had to provide technicians and sound-proof interpreting booths for the meetings, clients started to expect interpreters to assume responsibility for the technical background of the on-line meetings, as well as for a calm working environment. The fully on-line setting made it extremely difficult or sometimes impossible for the interpreters to communicate with their boothmates. The new tasks and the loss of their colleagues' assistance meant that interpreters were exposed to a considerably higher cognitive load than before[25].

5. Figure: Interpreters working on RSI platforms must use several devices to follow the speakers, the presentations, and the fellow interpreters' performances at the same time
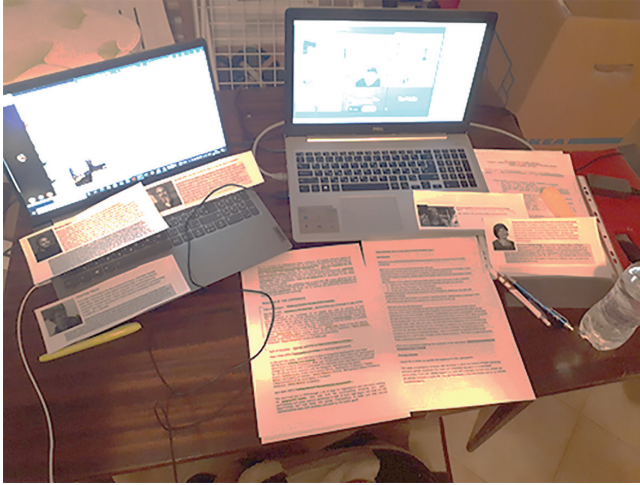
Furthermore, recent studies suggest that the human mind does not react in the same way to human faces seen on a screen as to faces seen in real life. These findings may explain why communication via ZOOM or other videoconferencing platforms demands more focus and effort from participants than a traditional in-person conversation[26]. These difficulties lead to screen-fatigue even in the case of the meeting participants and make on-line interpreting, an act of communication, particularly difficult[27].

Training institutions are very much aware of how the "new normal" affects conference interpreters. They had started to integrate virtual classes (VCs) to their

medencében a pandémia idején (Language mediation in the Carpathian basin during the pandemic). Osijek, Glotta Language Insitute, 2022. 160–168.

25   Ibid.

26   Nan Zhao – Xian Zhang – J. Adam Noah – Mark Tiede – Joy Hirsch: Separable Processes for Live "In-Person" and Live "Zoom-like" Faces. *Imaging Neuroscience,* 2023. https://doi.org/10.1162/imag_a_00027

27   Márta Seresi: Teaching consecutive interpreting online using asynchronous methods. In: Márta Seresi – Réka Eszenyi – Edina Robin (ed.): *Distance education in translator and interpreter training: methodological lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic.* Budapest, Eötvös Loránd University, Department of Translation and Interpreting, 2021. 90–119.

curriculum even before the pandemic[28], and adapted very quickly to the online setting[29]. Recent graduates today are usually equipped with some training about remote interpreting settings and in particular, online RSI platforms.

But how do all these factors affect candidates' performance during an on-line accreditation test? As candidates are very much aware of being assessed in an exam situation, we can safely say that alienation is not an important risk in this scenario. The lack of visual information or deictic knowledge about the meeting venue is not a relevant concern either, as interpretation test situations are, by their essence, only simulations of real-life interpreting assignments, and are therefore always out of context.

On the other hand, the use of a complex hardware during an exam situation can increase the stress-level of the candidates who have to make sure that their computer, microphone, eventual headset or speakers, as well as their internet connection will work smoothly at the proper time. Communication via a screen can also hinder the candidates' performance, who, as professional communicators, must understand and convey not only the semantic content of a given speech, but also the communicational intent of the speaker.

4. Conclusion

Providing consecutive or simultaneous interpretation on an on-line platform is a more demanding task than doing the same thing in a traditional in-person setting. A number of the difficulties linked to remote interpreting persist even in an exam situation. Nevertheless, on-line interpreting is here to stay, and professionals must be prepared to cope with this new reality. Training institutions are already incorporating the different types of remote interpreting in their curriculum.

Making use of the new technologies that allow remote testing can ensure the continuity of the accreditation tests and create more equal examination conditions for each and every candidate. The on-line accreditation tests have already started, and we will soon have more information about their effect on the candidates.

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[28]   SERESI (2016) op. cit.
[29]   Réka ESZENYI: Teaching simultaneous interpreting during the lockdown. In: SERESI–ESZENYI–ROBIN (ed) op. cit. 110–120.