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## Bringing interpreters on board at FAO



By Jonathan Clements

The FAO Interpretation Group is always on the lookout for freelance interpreters with FAO language combinations<sup>1</sup> capable of a high level of performance, in order to progressively incorporate them into our freelance roster and support FAO's mandate as a multilingual organization fighting hunger and malnutrition worldwide. The Organization currently imposes an age-limit of 70 for any type of recruitment, meaning we inevitably lose some seasoned interpreters from our roster from year to year and constantly need to think about the future.

The challenge is how to do this in a context of limited resources, with only two FAO staff interpreters, including myself as the officer responsible for interpretation. Although we rely very heavily on freelance interpreters, we do not have the capacity to organize accreditation tests or coach new interpreters while dealing with the day-to-day demands of the FAO's busy calendar of meetings.

As I do not add interpreters to the FAO roster solely on the basis of their CV, I will first request feedback on their performance from my network of chief interpreter colleagues in other organizations. If interpreters do not have this type of reference and their language combination is of value to the Organization, I encourage them to come to the FAO as trainees and practice in the "dummy booth" for as long as possible, in order to familiarize themselves with the FAO's work and structure and build up a critical mass of appropriate terminology. We cannot monitor them personally, but we can provide them with a booth and access to the same documentation, information and glossaries we provide to the team of interpreters recruited for that meeting. This is also a good opportunity for the trainees to listen to colleagues with lengthy FAO experience and observe how they deal with different interpreting situations. Putting time and effort into the "dummy booth" is the only way new interpreters will be capable of servicing many of our very technical and organization-specific meetings. When the trainee feels ready, my staff-interpreter

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<sup>1</sup> FAO languages are Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish. All interpreters working for FAO have one of these languages as a mother tongue and perfect comprehension of at least one other.

colleague or I will endeavor to find time to listen to them and determine if they are ready for our roster. Since we do not master all six FAO languages, we sometimes have to call on retired FAO staff interpreters or senior freelance colleagues to volunteer their time and provide feedback.

Whenever possible, the FAO Interpretation Group also offers outreach to universities with post-graduate interpreter-training programmes in FAO languages and has gained a good reputation among trainees and trainers alike. Students who have already acquired some simultaneous interpreting skills come for several days at a time for “dummy booth” practice. They thus have the opportunity to see how interpretation works *in situ* as compared to a classroom environment. It is important a trainer accompany them from their course, in order to obtain maximum benefit from the experience.

In 2017, a total of 43 trainees, including students, graduates and even some very experienced interpreters seeking professional improvement, practiced in 52 different FAO meetings. Although receiving trainees does imply extra work for the busy Interpretation Group staff, I believe it is an excellent opportunity for those who are serious about interpreting in a multilateral organization. We have therefore already agreed to host a certain number of trainees in 2018.

Thanks to nearly three years in charge of the FAO Interpretation Group, 22 years in the booth and opportunities to coach future interpreters at the Paris *École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs* (ESIT) and the Saint Petersburg School of Conference Interpreting and Translation (SCIT) over the years, I am able to listen to interpreters wishing to work for FAO and rapidly assess their skills. Some recurrent weaknesses I have identified are:

- Insufficient preparation and lack of understanding of how key this is to good interpretation: This implies reading all available documentation and background information, in order to understand the subject matter and the context, using the interpreter-specific glossaries painstakingly compiled by the FAO Interpretation and Terminology Groups jointly, as well as using the FAOTERM terminology portal, researching anything one does not understand and making lists of all meeting-specific terms and acronyms with their language equivalents.
- Lack of analysis of what one hears during the meeting: Many fall into the trap of simply repeating phrases, without constantly asking themselves why the speaker is using them, if they are logical in the context of the meeting and how they fit into the bigger picture of the Organization. The result is that the speaker's intended message does not get through.
- Poor mastery of sight translation: Like it or not, and despite our best efforts to slow speakers down, interpreting speeches read out at high speed is part of the job at FAO. The Interpretation Group works hard to convince delegations to share their texts with us. It makes all the difference to the interpreters, and the delegations then expect 100% accuracy. I have observed that many new interpreters have not practiced enough sight translation to make good use of the texts they are fortunate enough to receive.
- Insufficient use of documents in the booth: The FAO Interpretation Group goes to great lengths before and during all meetings to obtain as much documentation as possible (it is almost a full-time job in itself). All documents are printed and delivered to the booths, despite pressure from many quarters for all meetings to be paperless. These documents are not always read and prepared as they are received, or are not used while delegates are speaking, despite being an essential interpreting tool.

From an FAO point of view, I am thus inclined to conclude that some postgraduate interpreting courses are not producing booth-ready interpreters. This could possibly be because the courses are too short and the students are not taught or do not have time to focus on all of the different skills which make a good conference interpreter, or because they simply do not get enough booth-time before entering the freelance market. Based on my own experience, in addition to the prerequisites

of language mastery, broad general knowledge, preparation, rapid analysis and intense concentration, simultaneous interpreting requires many hours of practice in the booth, recording and analyzing one's own performance, before one can do it really well.

I hope that the information and thoughts above will give interpreters, both new and experienced, who are interested in working for the Organization, as well as interpreter trainers, an idea of what we expect of these highly skilled specialists and their specific contribution to the worthy causes pursued by the FAO.

**Jonathan Clements is Officer-in-Charge of the Interpretation Group at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)**

*The views expressed in this information product are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).*