

## **EMCI Past, Present and Future**

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### **Introduction**

With this series of videos we are celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> or rather the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Consortium of European Masters in Conference Interpreting (EMCI), a network of post-graduate interpreter-training programmes of higher education institutions.

These videos for the 20<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the EMCI had to be delayed owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are now happy at last to have the opportunity to celebrate the EMCI anniversary through a series of videos that highlight how the EMCI came into being, how it has evolved, what has been achieved, what changes have occurred and what is to be expected for the future of conference interpreter training. Linked to this introduction, there are videos prepared by the EMCI-member universities briefly describing the role played by the EMCI in the development of their conference interpreting programme.

### **1. Past**

The creation and establishment of the EMCI Consortium is the result of joint efforts, shared ideas and their evolution during the late 1990s, when it became clear that curricula for the training of conference interpreters needed to be harmonized at national and EU level. The initiative was taken in 1997 by SCIC, the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service of the European Commission together with the Directorate General for Education (DG XXII). This was the time when SCIC had discontinued its in-house interpreter training while, at the same time, thinking about and preparing for the 2004 enlargement and the resulting recruitment of many new interpreters. At the time, there was a shortage of highly qualified conference interpreters, particularly with language combinations with less-widely used and less-taught languages. Contacts with universities were frequent, and so a possible solution was found - a European Pilot Project for the joint development of a university programme at advanced level (Masters type) in Conference Interpreting. A working group was formed and it developed a core curriculum for a 'European Masters' in Conference Interpreting with eight universities participating. In the meantime, the Interpreting Service of the European Parliament had also become involved in the initiative.

From the very beginning of the project, there was close cooperation between the members of the working group and representatives of the SCIC, DG XXII, the European Parliament and the TNP (Thematic Network Project in the area of Languages). The existing curricula in conference interpreting were reviewed and a number of elements agreed upon as essential to a programme of this kind. Their validity was confirmed over time leading to a core curriculum for conference interpreters, balancing key issues both from the professional and the academic worlds. These components are now widely accepted and even taken for granted but at the time their implementation in the universities was no easy task. First of all, there was the realization that consecutive and simultaneous interpreting techniques are complex and that teaching and training had to be carried out at a post-graduate level. The prerequisite competencies were identified: students need an excellent command of their mother tongues (A language) over a wide range of topics and registers and an in-depth knowledge of other working languages (B and C), broad knowledge of

international affairs and they must be well informed about the economic, social and cultural background of the countries of their working languages. This inventory helped define standard procedures for entry and final exams. It was also recognized that trainers had to be experienced interpreters. These guiding principles have since then become the key building blocks of the EMCI curriculum for conference interpreting.

The core curriculum comprises elements essential to a post-graduate university programme in Conference Interpreting.

- (i) The theory of interpretation
- (ii) The practice of interpretation/professional ethics and deontology
- (iii) Consecutive interpretation
- (iv) Simultaneous interpretation
- (v) The EU and international organisations

An agreement formally to establish the EMCI Consortium was signed on May 30 2001, at a ceremony hosted by the European Parliament. Work on transforming the EMCI Consortium into an international Consortium began in 2010 and ended in 2012 with the signing of the new EMCI.

The curriculum was developed in consultation with the European Institutions and the link with the institutional interpreting environment for the training of interpreters has continued with virtual classes, study visits, pedagogical assistance and the speech repository. Cooperation with the DG SCIC for the European Commission and DG LINC for the European Parliament remains an integral part of the EMCI-activities.

The EMCI member institutions are committed to quality in interpreter training as laid down in the EMCI Quality Assurance Standards and, to this end, they regularly review changing needs and new developments, update the programme and aim to contribute to spreading good practice across and beyond Europe. The training programmes apply new technologies where appropriate and contribute to their dissemination.

The creation of the EMCI helped to bring together the individual expertise of the participating institutions and optimise their use of resources through transnational cooperation in the delivery of their interpreting programmes.

## **2. Present**

At present, the activities of the Consortium aim at maintaining and promoting the high standards that have characterized the EMCI since its inception, but, all the while, taking into account changes and developments in the profession and adapting curricula to the increased use of new technologies, which means ensuring a generally high level and comparable standards of postgraduate CI training courses; disseminating good practices and QA standards; recognising and accrediting new postgraduate training courses; promoting the use of new technologies in CI training.

To this end, the Consortium advises and assists Members in the following:

- (i) Running a European Masters in Conference Interpreting programme as a university-level post-graduate course;
- (ii) fostering the exchange of information and experience and the dissemination of best practice in interpreter training;
- (iii) engaging in continuing professional education to develop the pedagogical skills of interpreter trainers;

(iv) engaging in research relevant to interpreter training and issues that relate to the conference interpreter profession, and

(v) leveraging new technologies in interpreter training with a view to sharing pedagogical resources across the Consortium's membership and integrating new technologies in the practice of the profession.

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how important it is to keep up with the rapid developments in the field of conference interpreting. There has been something of a revolution in the profession and, hence, also in training, only made possible by the extraordinary changes imposed during the pandemic. Face-to-face meetings were impossible. Meetings were held remotely. The consequences for interpreter training and the profession were clear. Platforms became the only option to continue training and simultaneous interpreting.

While the Nuremberg trial marked the first revolution in conference interpreting with the massive adoption of simultaneous interpreting, the Covid-19 pandemic marked the second, with the massive use of platforms for virtual conference interpreting or remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI). Platforms for RSI had already been around for a while and were technically viable, but had been much less used than onsite SI until Covid-related lockdowns. In this emergency situation, the EMCI really came into its own as a platform for discussing, examining and comparing solutions among member institutions and beyond, organizing demos and webinars to learn how to manage consecutive and simultaneous classes remotely and online. A pool of resources to draw upon and to compare results and experiences was a great help.

Remote conference interpreting has become part and parcel of professional interpreting, therefore students have to be prepared for this new reality. Video and cloud conference interpreting will almost certainly make up a larger share of the interpretation market than before Covid-19. We have gained significant experience in terms of online training (entrance and finals tests, courses) since our activities had to be moved online by March 2020. During the 2021-22 academic year, conference interpretation was taught both online and onsite by the majority of the EMCI Universities. Online classes were restricted to certain periods and were sometimes hybrid to enable students recovering from COVID to follow classes remotely.

The EMCI's activities cover a range of purposes. One key set of activities is quality assessment which comprises peer reviews, since each member of the EMCI must be peer-reviewed once every 4 years to ensure compliance with the EMCI quality assessment standards.

To become a member of the EMCI Consortium, the university applying undergoes assessment, organized in two stages. An initial visit is organized during the academic year for an assessor to attend classes and meet the staff and the students. During the second stage, another assessor attends at least one day of the final exams. The activities aiming at improving and broadening training opportunities comprise:

#### ***Training of Trainers Workshops (ToT)***

Annual workshops for interpreters' trainers from EMCI-member institutions as well as from other universities on various topics of conference interpreter training to which representatives from DG SCIC and DG LINC are invited. The title of the ToT in May 2022 was: *Two years' experience of online conference interpreter training: taking stock.*

#### ***Virtual learning environment (VLE) activities***

*Bilateral virtual classes (BVC)*

They are organized during the academic year with DG SCIC and DG LINC speakers and evaluators for interpreting students from consecutive and simultaneous courses.

#### *Speech recordings*

The EMCI universities contribute to the Speech Repository 2.0 and prepare recordings of various levels of difficulty, both for consecutive and simultaneous practice

#### *E-learning modules*

The Theory of Interpreting Modules present results of ongoing empirical research in partner universities.

The EMCI has been carrying out research, mostly in the form of questionnaire surveys, on various aspects of CI as well as surveys on students' experiences of online training and on artificial intelligence and interpreting. The results and findings and the audiovisual recordings of the EMCI Theory of Interpreting e-learning modules are available on the EMCI-website <https://www.emcinterpreting.org/emci/resources>.

#### ***EMCI Student Meeting***

Every year a member university organizes the Student Meeting. The 3-day meeting is an international mock conference where students can practice consecutive and simultaneous interpreting and build contacts for their future as professionals. The meeting is aimed at sharing best practices among EMCI students coming from different European universities in the lead-up to their final exams.

### **3. Future**

The future of the EMCI entails many challenges. Interpreter training needs to be resilient and versatile. During the last ToT in May 2022, it was acknowledged that both online consecutive and simultaneous training are feasible provided classes are well-structured. However, both are considered better taught on-site. It was also recognized that consecutive and in particular simultaneous interpretations are carried out in remote mode in professional practice. Therefore, training institutions should offer specific classes to teach these remote modes of interpreting and the classes should, of course, be online.

Issues such as auditory health, fatigue and stress are central concerns. Solutions need to be discussed thoroughly with future interpreters to teach them how to protect their hearing and health. In a market undergoing rapid changes, students will also need more guidance on how to run and promote their business, how to speak to clients, negotiate fees and write a CV. The conclusions of our discussions can be found on the EMCI website (<https://www.emcinterpreting.org/emci/resources/training-trainers-workshops>).

The EMCI will be facing many challenges in the near future, but, at the same time, many solutions are becoming available, although they still require in-depth analysis, verification and a critical stance, before they can be used in classes. When various forces combine, challenges are better tackled and solutions easier to find. Hence, we sincerely hope that our consortium will continue attracting training programmes. Together, we can contribute to the collective effort to improve the quality of conference interpreter training.