European Parliament Conference for Rectors on Multilingualism

14:30, Thursday 18 October 2012

European Parliament

Speech

Vice-President of the European Parliament,

Mrs Cosmidou,

Dear rectors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to make the introductory speech at your Rectors' Conference today.

Multilingualism has been at the heart of the European Union since its very beginning in the 1950s. Language learning helps all citizens to flourish culturally, socially and professionally. It opens people's minds to the wonderful diversity that is so essential to our European identity.

Therefore, one of my priorities as Commissioner is to support not only the EU's 23 official languages but also Europe's 60 or so regional and minority languages.

I am convinced that we need to promote language learning from a young age. Ten years ago, in Barcelona, European Union leaders set out an ambitious vision of language-learning and its contribution to every child's education. The aim was clear: to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two other languages apart from the mother tongue or first language from a very early age.

Today, it is only natural that we should try to take stock. How useful was the Barcelona target? How much progress have we made so far? Where do we go next?

In spite of a profound economic crisis, the European Union's most basic objective has not changed: to work together for a better society while fully respecting our differences. We continue to believe that freedom, equality, solidarity and diversity can be reconciled in a common endeavour. And language is essential to this mission.

As Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, I attach great importance to the contribution that activities in the field of languages can bring to society as a whole. And I believe that in a more mobile and interconnected world, multilingualism has become a necessity that cannot be ignored.

Today we are talking about new technologies and education, and immediately the concept of e-learning comes to mind. E-learning is a tool that the EU Interpretation Services are using more and more to support the training of new conference interpreters in partner universities all over Europe and even beyond. New opportunities have been created by two recent innovations.

The first I would like to mention is the Speech Repository, which was launched in 2007 by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Interpretation, and which is used by students mainly for self-training at practically all universities present here today.

The Speech Repository currently contains over 2,250 video-clips – both didactical and real speeches – in all the EU's official languages as well as some other third-country languages. This material helps students to improve their languages and to practice the required professional interpreting skills.

The second important innovation is the bilateral and multilateral Virtual Classes.

These are videoconferences which link up interpreter trainers from European institutions, that is the Commission's and the Parliament's interpreting services, with over 15 partner universities in Europe and beyond. During the Virtual Classes, students are assessed from Brussels by professional interpreter trainers according to the standards required by European Institutions.

E-learning also helps DG Interpretation's own staff interpreters with both language learning and acquiring specialised knowledge on issues discussed in European meetings, thanks to a dedicated Training Portal. This of course raises the quality of interpretation provided by our interpreters.

The Training Portal is home to video recordings of thematic lectures from DG Interpretation's training programme or from the lunch-time conferences organised by interpretation units. The lectures are meant to be used as training material by colleagues.

A major challenge concerning the use of new technologies in interpretation is rather more recent, and it came to the forefront during the ash-cloud crisis in the spring of 2010.

Since air travel was seriously restricted at that time, an urgent concern was to find a suitable way to connect with distant locations via a videoconference system with interpretation. I remember how the Commission's Interpretation services managed to organise at very short notice an urgent meeting of the College of Commissioners with interpretation for everyone involved, including those in the most distant locations.

Expectations have grown since then, partly due to growing environmental considerations regarding air travel and the reduction of administrative budgets in both the European Institutions and in the Member States, but also because of the opportunities created by technological evolution.

Millions of people now see every day how their smartphones and tablets can make their daily lives easier. Obviously, this raises expectations about what similar technologies can achieve in a professional context.

Being able to fully exploit those technologies is essential if we want to have top-class multilingual communication that supports an efficient decision-making process.

A critical aspect of technological development is also the use of social media such as Facebook and YouTube. The EU institutions' interpretation services were quick to recognise the communication opportunities offered by these media, and they use them extensively to reach out to young people to attract them to the interpreting profession.

Resisting the tide of technological change is impossible. Technology has revolutionised society in many areas around the globe, including how language instruction is taught and delivered. In particular, the Internet has become a means through which people can learn, share, and collaborate in ways that were not imaginable only a few years ago.

However, lasting success comes from preparing students to interact and learn in this online environment. Therefore, integrating technology in teaching is vital if we want to see graduates with the right mix of skills on the job market.

Of course it can be good to integrate the use of technology into mainstream practice in language education, but we must be able to demonstrate that it makes learning more effective. We cannot simply pursue it for its own sake. Technology is transforming the way we live, and to suggest that education can stand apart is to ignore the potential of existing and emerging technologies.

Embracing innovation means adapting to new ways of learning, and of course to new ways of teaching. Technology will not replace language teachers, and it will not turn bad teachers into good teachers either.

Moreover, it is not a magic wand that turns uninterested or unwilling students into eager and rapid learners of languages. Technology will not transform into a good interpreter a student who is not gifted for languages and communication and who lacks curiosity and general knowledge.

But technology is already making available to skilled teachers and keen learners a range of tools and resources to extend the learning environment of a traditional classroom.

I would think that, when considering interpreter training, it would be inconceivable nowadays not to teach students how to work from a screen, or how to consult terminology databases on line. It would be inconceivable not to prepare them for a future of paperless meetings.

We need to embrace technology and innovation with an open mind, and make the most of them in every field, including, of course, the fascinating world of conference interpreting.

In this respect, I can only congratulate the EU Institutions' interpreting services on being at the forefront of technological developments in their area of competence.

When it comes to using new technologies in management, in interpreter training and in interpreters' professional life, I note with satisfaction and pride that our services are firmly positioned in the drivers' seat and that they are keen on sharing their experiences with their partner universities.

This proactive approach is essential for ensuring that the next generations of conference interpreters come to this ever more demanding market fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

I wish you a successful conference, and thank you for your attention.

* * *