

Meeting the New Normal: A Case Study of An Online Simultaneous Interpreting Course

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, interpreting educators faced the daunting prospect of adopting virtual platforms to adapt to new ways of teaching provision. Common challenges included: re-designing the original curriculum, selecting an appropriate platform with all the features required for efficient interpreting classes, tackling technical issues, and ensuring student active participation. This article presents the results of introducing a fully online simultaneous interpreting course (from February to June 2021) for second-year MA students of English Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. The research objectives of this study include assessing the usability of two online conference platforms (*Zoom* and *Microsoft Teams*) for simultaneous interpreting training, presenting the students' user experience, and the trainer's reflections on using virtual platforms in the context of socio-constructivist principles such as incorporating situated learning activities, i.e. activities simulating real-life interpreting assignments, collaborative learning, ongoing feedback, and self-reflection.

KEYWORDS: collaborative learning; interpreter training; online teaching; remote learning and teaching; socio-constructivism; virtual conference platforms

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed ways of communicating in nearly every field. As the universities opted to transfer their teaching provision online, interpreting trainers had to adapt their methods to deliver their classes efficiently in the new mode. Despite the fact that

Joanna Mirek, Meeting the New Normal: A Case Study of An Online Simultaneous Interpreting Course, 55 - 80

remote interpreting seems to have become ‘the new normal’ and that the use of virtual learning environments has the potential to enhance teaching practices, research on online interpreting training remains largely underexplored despite its potential to improve teaching practices (cf. Tymczyńska 2009; Şahin 2013; Stengers et al. 2018; Ahrens et al. 2021; Mirek 2021; Şahin & Sevkett 2021). As the popularity of virtual technology and online education is expected to grow, it seems justifiable to expect that interpreting courses should be geared to the newest technological solutions. The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that remote education has become an inherent part of interpreter training and proved that it is a crucial research area that cannot remain neglected anymore. The introduction of obligatory remote teaching in both 2020 and 2021 motivated the author to explore this unique research opportunity.

The following article aims at providing interpreting trainers with significant didactic implications by presenting the solutions to effective online interpreter training in the context of socio-constructivism as well as discussing both the pedagogical potential and limitations of remote interpreter education. The article explores the use of virtual teaching platforms (*MS Teams* and *Zoom*) as a pedagogical tool based on a socio-constructivist approach in simultaneous interpreting (SI) training involving “authentic situated action, the collaborative construction of knowledge, and personal experience” (Király 2000:3). Key premises of socio-constructivism encompass authentic materials, collaborative learning, self-reflection, ongoing feedback (cf. Fernández-Prieto and Sempere-Linares 2010), and semi-authentic learning situations that simulate the realities of the profession, which correspond to the concept of situated learning activities (cf. González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído 2016). Crucial in a constructivist learning setting, boosting social interactions and fostering students’ active participation in the collaborative construction of knowledge may be achieved by stimulating discussions and critical reflection (Stengers et al. 2018: 221).

This article is a follow-up study to the one conducted directly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Mirek 2021) and discusses whether it is possible to implement a socio-constructivist learning setting through a fully remote SI course with the use of virtual

environments. Similarly to Stengers et al.'s (2018) project, the following research questions will be central to this study:

- (1) How do students assess their learning and user experience in the context of online interpreting classes held on *MS Teams* and *Zoom*?
- (2) How does the instructor rate the teaching experience and the implementation of socio-constructivist premises in online interpreting classes on both platforms?

The following sections will describe the case study in question as well as preliminary didactic conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Case Study

2.1. Context

Similarly to the previous project (Mirek 2021), the follow-up study concerned an initial SI course between English and Polish for 30 second-year MA students of English Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. This course edition (from February to June 2021) was conducted fully online, which was in line with the author's University's official decision to hold all the courses exclusively on *MS Teams*. It is important to note that the students in question had had previous experience with *Zoom*, both in their interpreting training and other translation classes, as most Polish academic teachers opted for *Zoom* in 2020. A list of activities included in the SI course corresponding to the socio-constructivist principles (cf. Fernández-Prieto & Sempere-Linares 2010; González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído 2016) as well as work mode and the required technical functionalities are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Overview of activities, key socio-constructivist elements, work mode, and required functionalities in an online SI course.

Activity	Performer	Work mode	Socio-constructivist elements	Required functionalities
Consecutive interpreting of the news	Students	Pair work / Group work	Collaborative learning	Breakout room Group & private chat Webcams

Interpreting exercises	Students	Pair work		Breakout room Group & private chat Webcams
Preparing for SI, research, glossary, brainstorming, summary in the target language, etc.	Students	Pair work / Group work Open forum		Breakout room Group chat Screen sharing Sound sharing Main session
SI of pre-recorded real-life speeches	Students	Individual work / Pair work	(semi-)authentic learning materials, situated learning	Breakout room Screen sharing Sound sharing Voice recording
Working with the SI Portfolio ¹	Students	Individual work	Self-reflection Feedback	Breakout room Screen sharing
Self-assessment	Students	Individual work		Voice recording Screen sharing
Individual feedback & Mentoring	Trainer	Individual work		Breakout room / Call Private chat Screen sharing
Peer assessment	Students	Pair work	Self-reflection Feedback Collaborative learning	Voice recording Sharing the recording Private chat
Group feedback & instructions	Trainer	Group work Open forum		Breakout room Group chat Main session

Following the analysis of the required features, a list of functionalities and their availability in both *MS Teams* and *Zoom* is presented in Table 2.

¹ The SI Portfolio is a self-regulation tool for trainee interpreters in which they can “reflect upon and document their progress, evaluate themselves, and develop effective strategies leading to their goals” (Mirek 2020:153).

Table 2: Overview of the availability of the required functions for online SI classes (as of February 2021).

Features	<i>MS Teams</i>	<i>Zoom</i>
Time limit	X	X ²
Limit of participants	All students encoded in the system (up to 250)	100
Breakout rooms	✓ ³	✓
Alternative to breakout rooms (channels, calls)	✓	X
Voice recording (in breakout rooms)	X	X
Webcams	✓	✓
Screen sharing	✓	✓
Sound sharing	✓	✓
Private & group chat	✓	✓
Chat history	✓	X
Drive space	✓	X
Security	✓	X

As can be inferred, the key feature for efficient SI classes was the functionality of breakout rooms imitating virtual interpreting booths in which students could work comfortably in pairs without disturbing the other students working together, which is normally the case at the university.

Breakout rooms were applied for group, pair, and individual work, including a variety of interpreting exercises, SI proper, as well as providing feedback. Importantly, in the event of any technical failure, an alternative solution to breakout rooms was crucial as well (channels and calls offered by *MS Teams*). Moreover, screen sharing (for delivering presentations and providing instructions) and sound sharing (for listening to speeches and interpreting proper) proved to be useful in the previous edition of the course as well.

² The 40-minute time limit was removed once the institution was registered as “affected by the Coronavirus”.

³ *MS Teams* introduced breakout rooms as late as December 2020, hence, it was not explored in the previous study (Mirek 2021).

The use of private and group chat enabled communication (discussions, sending links, notifying about any technical issues), whereas webcams allowed for monitoring students' interpreting performance and smooth communication. The main session was used for providing general instructions, feedback, and discussions.

The added advantage of *MS Teams* over *Zoom* is chat history, which can be useful for both students and teachers for future reference, as well as the drive space that can be treated as an equivalent of e-mails and a whiteboard with all the necessary comments. Unlike *Zoom*⁴, *MS Teams* displayed no major security issues. Unfortunately, neither of the platforms offered a built-in voice recording, which required using a third-party integration⁵.

Apart from the fact that *MS Teams* was imposed as the obligatory software, the platform seemed to have had nearly all the required functionalities required for an efficient SI course.

2.2. Students' Perspective on Online SI Classes (MS Teams)

Once the summer term was over, the students were asked to complete anonymous course evaluation questionnaires and share their views on online classes. The first part of the survey comprised questions on the students' experience with *MS Teams*, whereas the second part involved the comparison between *MS Teams* and *Zoom*. The survey was conducted online on a group of 30 students and included a variety of both close- and open-ended questions.

The first question was close-ended and involved the following rating scale: 1–very low, 2–low, 3–no opinion, 4–high level, 5–very high level with respect to students' concentration, motivation, comfort of individual work, and stress level. Trainees assessed their concentration on interpreting tasks as high (53%) and very high (46%). Similarly, most students rated both their comfort of

⁴ Cf. 'Zoom-bombing' [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kateoflahertyuk/2020/03/27/beware-zoom-users-heres-how-people-can-zoom-bomb-your-chat/>] (accessed 14 September 2021).

⁵ E.g. An external device or platform (www.vocaroo.com).

individual work and motivation as high (40% and 56%, respectively) and very high (63%, 26%, respectively). For most students, the stress level when interpreting online was low (59%).

The second close-ended question included the following rating scale: 1–extremely inefficient, 2–inefficient, 3–no opinion, 4–efficient, 5–highly efficient with respect to the trainer’s feedback and mentoring, *MS Teams*’ usefulness for SI classes, collaborative learning, and self-reflection. Students assessed the teacher’s feedback and ongoing mentoring as highly efficient (96% and 100%, respectively). Trainees also believed that *MS Teams* allows for collaborative learning (76%), facilitates self-reflection (83%), and is well-adapted for SI classes (86%).

The remaining questions of the first survey were open-ended, as the author intended to learn the trainees’ exact opinion on the given subject, without suggesting any possible answers, with one multiple response question (see question 2.2.2.) that also required students to justify their choice. The second part of the survey comprised open-ended questions as well, however, certain questions required trainees to both select one answer and justify their opinion (see questions 2.3.1., 2.3.2., 2.3.5.). The answers to the open-ended questions are presented below. The students’ exemplary comments are quoted in brackets.

2.2.1. Did this form of classes impact your interpreting performance? How?

Thirteen students claimed that this form of classes had a positive impact on their performance—mainly because of reduced stress and greater comfort of individual work (“I can better concentrate on tasks with no external distractions”; “I think that the learning process is not hindered in any way, we interpret and record ourselves as we would during traditional classes, so we lose nothing”) as well as being provided with individual feedback both via individual chat and as one-to-one consultation in a breakout room (see Section 2.4.) (“Feedback facilitates my progress and improves the interpreting quality. I can see what I need to work on”; “This form of classes may be even more efficient than the traditional one, as the teacher can listen to everyone in a short space of time and provide feedback individually”), which prepares for the new

opportunities of the job market (“This form of classes is adjusted to the current situation and prepares us for a job as online interpreters”). Some students also suspected that the quality of interpreting may be even higher than at university (“The quality of interpreting can be higher, as we work efficiently and receive individual feedback”). Interestingly, one student added that the online form can be extremely advantageous for the students: “At this stage of learning SI, comfort is crucial. We are less focused on how stressful interpreting is, and more on the actual quality of our performance. We are not under pressure that someone is looking at us or listening to us”

Other students were more apprehensive and pointed to the lacking motivation (“For me, online classes are actually more stressful than face-to-face interactions, and it’s harder for me to get motivated”). Others pointed out that technical issues may have directly affected the quality of interpreting (“Technical issues sometimes lead to difficulties in getting in touch with someone or hearing someone clearly, which obviously affects interpreting”).

2.2.2. What functionalities of MS Teams did you find helpful in practicing SI?

In this multiple-response question, trainees were asked to select between breakout rooms, channels, drive space, chat, screen sharing, sound sharing, and calls. They were also invited to mention any other useful functionalities of *MS Teams* and justify their opinion.

The overwhelming majority of students pointed to breakout rooms, which allow for greater comfort, concentration, and efficiency of individual and pair work (“Students are more at ease and don’t feel judged by the group”; “We work at our own pace without external distractions, such as other people doing the same exercise. At university, we would be drowned out, so here we are less distracted—it is really intense work, we can do all the tasks required efficiently”). This includes the possibility of receiving and discussing feedback (“I can easily receive individual feedback, which helps me develop my skills”; “I feel extra motivated because the teacher listens to our individual performance and I can consult anything with the teacher without others listening to us”). One student pointed to the automatic assignment of participants: “We work with various

people assigned automatically, which is great because to some extent it accustoms us to the potential job in the future”.

The students also pointed to channels as an alternative to breakout rooms—should these fail to function properly. However, they claimed that using channels was significantly more complicated than breakout rooms (“We have to find channels by ourselves, remember to leave them and get back to the main session at a given time. We sometimes get lost and frustrated”; “In breakout rooms, everything is in the teacher’s power, we don’t have to do anything, it’s less stressful for us, which impacts our interpreting performance”).

Other students mentioned non-verbal reactions, such as emoji, and emoticons (“It makes expressing reactions easier, especially *hand-raising* is useful when I need some help—it’s faster and less stressful than verbally asking for help”), built-in drive space (“All the files are in one place, it’s easy to browse through the materials, we can easily come back to them whenever necessary”; “It’s easier to send and work with external materials, such as links”), chat history (“It’s permanently available for the entire team, e.g. linguistic aspects, things to remember”; “The teacher can provide us with the feedback seamlessly without interrupting or disturbing us when we interpret, which is great”), screen and sound sharing (“Sometimes it’s necessary to show what we have on our screen—it facilitates communication”) as well as calling each other (“Sometimes there is no other way to contact someone, and here it is possible within seconds”).

2.2.3. How did the use of a webcam impact your interpreting performance?

Four students noticed no impact whatsoever. Nine trainees found that using a webcam was definitely helpful, especially when doing interpreting exercises or interpreting consecutively in pairs as a warm-up to simultaneous interpreting proper (“When we interpret in pairs, I definitely want to see the speaker, because it helps me focus, read non-verbal signals and interpret”; “It helps because it introduces an element of normality when we see our faces”).

The rest of the students had mixed feelings—some pointed to technical issues (“It definitely hinders my performance because of *Teams*’ technical issues—the connection becomes unstable and I often get kicked out of the app when many people have their webcams on—either we can’t see or hear someone”; “If the connection is good, it helps because I can see the other person’s reaction, but when it’s poor, it definitely hinders interpreting, because the voice breaks up, we need to ask someone to repeat, which is stressful and time-consuming”). Others admit being stressed because of the distraction caused by being judged by others (“Once my webcam is off, I am not thinking about how I look, whether someone is watching me, I just keep focusing on the task proper”).

2.2.4. What do you believe is the most comfortable/uncomfortable element in these classes?

All the students commented that breakout rooms allowed them for comfortable interpreting, receiving feedback in privacy, and the possibility to discuss the performance with the teacher (“It’s good to hear the feedback when no one else is present, it certainly impacts the future progress and planning further activities”). Furthermore, the students pointed to screen sharing and pair work when discussing terminology.

Three trainees believed there was nothing stressful in the classes at all. Five students pointed to the teacher visiting breakout rooms as they interpreted (“It’s definitely stressful unless I get so engrossed in the interpreting that I even don’t notice that the teacher is in the room”).

Others pointed to technical issues related to sound quality, *Teams*’ instability (“I sometimes get kicked out, it causes failure of other apps, or it suddenly stops working—I never know why”), and having webcams on (“When we are allowed to turn them off, I am definitely more at ease”). The rest mentioned aspects directly related to interpreting proper: insufficient research, working in pairs, and being interrupted when interpreting (“No matter if verbally or non-verbally, e.g. through messages or chat, it may be distracting”).

2.2.5. Are there any new skills that you gained thanks to an online form of classes?

Seven students admitted not having acquired any new skills. Others pointed to a better organization and motivation to work individually, and more advanced IT skills (“I have learnt about new technical possibilities, how to use and manage new apps, mostly *Teams*”; “I’ve learnt quickly to juggle between my laptop, smartphone and handouts and various ways how to record my voice”; “We’ve all learnt how to manage technical issues quickly”). Justifiably, one student concluded that “it’s great that we use technology in class which can be helpful in the future (when working as an online interpreter)”. Moreover, this student admitted having to assess both others’ and her/his own interpreting performance. Four students mentioned that they learnt how to deal with stress when interpreting online (“I think learning SI is easier online, because we do it individually, without ‘a real audience’, so it’s less stressful”). Others pointed out that they have learnt to enhance their concentration on the tasks (“I was fully focused because the teacher could join the breakout room at any time”; “We had to learn to listen more carefully. We didn’t have a whiteboard, so we needed to focus on the instructions given by the teacher to know what to do”).

2.2.6. Did you encounter any technical issues? How did they affect your performance?

Only two students denied having experienced any technical issues. Most pointed to instability of *MS Teams* (“*Teams* crashes extremely frequently, and that unpredictability directly affects the student’s behaviour”; “Sometimes we have to spend extra time to address technical issues, which is frustrating and makes me feel uneasy”; “Unpredictable technical issues, such as getting kicked out of the main session, sometimes prevented my participation in classes”; “I remember once breakout rooms could not be opened, but we were divided into channels and did not affect the quality of interpreting”), complicated interface (“The interface is unintuitive, it’s difficult to make head or tail of the options available”) and connectivity issues (“It’s enough when one person has a poorer connection and needs to repeat the same thing over and over again. It slows down our work, it’s difficult to understand others”). Two students mentioned an occasional computer and/or power failure and microphone issues hindering communication and interpreting proper.

2.2.7. Was it possible to use multiple devices to participate in classes efficiently?

Only three students admitted it was impossible, and they mainly blamed the mobile application (“The app wouldn’t let me in”; “I think the mobile app is difficult and impractical to use, and smaller screens would make the whole thing really tiresome and uncomfortable. It’s optimal to use a laptop only”). Most students said they used both a laptop and a smartphone (“I sometimes use a smartphone for listening to the speech and record my interpretation using a laptop, or the other way round”; “I use my phone for sound and the webcam on my laptop, I think it’s really useful”).

2.2.8. Do you think that this form of online classes can fully replace traditional classes?

Twelve students believe that online classes can replace traditional ones due to greater comfort of work and technical possibilities of the platform (“They may be even better than traditional ones because of extra possibilities offered by breakout rooms—we can work efficiently and quickly receive feedback”; “I am less stressed, it’s easier to concentrate, I can do the tasks easily with no chaos or confusion, which would have been the case at university”).

Seven students were of the opposite opinion (“Online form will never replace the real-life environment for SI because of the lack of equipment”; “Online classes decrease the level of reality of the tasks we do—we don’t have an actual booth at our disposal and cannot face others offline. Here we can learn how to interpret e-conferences only. However online classes would be held, the effects will never be satisfactory”; “Some practical skills can never be fully learnt online the same way as in real life, the effects will not be the same”).

Ten remaining students were uncertain whether an online course can replace a traditional one and prepare them for offline assignments (“Perhaps online classes could replace offline ones in 85%, as we have no real contact with others. But at university, perhaps it would have been less

comfortable and more stressful, as no breakout rooms are available there, so we would have been exposed to noise and chaos”; “It’s good enough, but I think that interpreting offline may be a novel experience, so I can’t say whether an online course can really prepare us for the job”; “These classes are quite convenient and may replace traditional ones in terms of the content and activities. But studying online affects everything—we study, but we don’t feel it at all, it’s as if we were just *sitting* in front of the screen. No real-life interpretation makes me feel that there is no correlation between all the skills gained online and the offline reality”).

Other students pointed to the importance of stress management, which may be different offline (“What may seem unsettling is the necessity of returning to the offline world. Since it is significantly more comfortable here, the question is: will we be able to cope with stress when interpreting offline—at university or at work?”); “We are devoid of the human element. Being in front of the screens, we feel secure. But SI is not only about working in a booth but also interpersonal interactions and cooperation”; “Even though stress is significantly lower online, the experience in the real booth could allow for better stress management in a job as an interpreter in the future”).

2.2.9. Did you like this form of classes? Would you like to continue doing such an online course?

Eighteen students were enthusiastic about this form of classes and declared they would be like to continue it in the future mostly because of the convenience of individual work (“I love online classes, I feel that nothing distracts me and I can focus and use them in 100%. They are extremely efficient and far less stressful, so it’s easier to concentrate”; “Yes, nothing distracts me here, which is key at the early stages of learning how to interpret. I get explicit instructions and feedback, the teacher monitors my progress in the SI Portfolio”; “The comfort of work seems higher than at university”; “I can see the progress and am happy about it, so I see no reason to change it. I don’t feel I have lost anything”; “We practise mostly SI, so working alone is crucial here”; “These classes are not traditional classes transferred into online, but efficiently organised

and planned classes with the use of online tools. The teacher engages students in various tasks, including the SI Portfolio”).

Six students would not like to continue the online classes (“It’d be too tiring in the long run”; “At university, we can feel a more scientific atmosphere and contact others”; “Online classes are only a poor substitute for real-life classes and there is no such software that could ever change it”).

Five students had mixed feelings and would prefer at least some classes to be transferred to the university (“It’s definitely the best form we can afford now. But I do miss the university. I would like at least some classes to be held there”; “In terms of the content, the online classes are certainly comparable, but at university, we have real booths, and it’d be interesting to see how it works and how to learn in the usual setting, and how normal classes are”).

2.3. Students’ Perspective on Online SI Classes (Zoom vs. MS Teams)

In questions 2.3.1., 2.3.2., and 2.3.5. the trainees were asked to select one answer (*MS Teams/ Zoom/ No clear preference*) and justify their opinion. The remaining questions were open-ended. The answers to all the questions are presented below. The students’ exemplary comments are quoted in brackets.

2.3.1. Which platform do you prefer and why?

Sixteen students declared a preference for *MS Teams*. They believed that the biggest advantages of this platform included more built-in functionalities than in *Zoom*, the drive space (“All the materials I need are in one place; class materials are always available and I can use them any time”), attaching files, and chat efficiency (“It’s better suited for getting in touch with the teacher”; “We can easily see what we did in the previous classes”).

Students supporting *Zoom* (10) claimed that it is easier to use, more user-friendly, and more intuitive than *MS Teams*. Moreover, it causes fewer technical issues (“I have had no problems with it so far”, “It’s less likely to crash than *Teams*”).

Four students expressed no clear preference (“They have comparable functionalities”; “If it wasn’t for the fact that *MS Teams* does not cope with so many technical issues, I would choose it without hesitation, whereas *Zoom* lacks some functionalities for efficient online classes”).

2.3.2. Which platform offers an easier use of:

a) breakout rooms

Nineteen students noticed no significant difference between the two platforms. Three students expressed a preference for *MS Teams* and five for *Zoom*. The former claimed that breakout rooms work smoothly and have more options. The latter students mentioned that the interface of breakout rooms is clearer and easier to use on *Zoom*. One student mentioned significant technical issues on *MS Teams*: “Sometimes we get kicked off the session when being transferred to breakout rooms, and we have to leave the main session by ourselves, which deactivates the main session and we have to join the meeting again”.

b) chat

Thirteen students were clearly in favour of *MS Teams*—mainly because chat is saved for future reference (“We can quickly contact each other and always come back to exercises”; “Nothing is deleted, you can go back to it anytime”; “Chat remains after the meetings, whereas on *Zoom*—it disappears, so you need to copy everything quickly before the class is finished”) and there are more options available (“We can delete messages or add emoticons”).

Seven students expressed a preference for *Zoom*. They claimed that it is more user-friendly and easier to use than *Teams* (“The window looks clearer”; “It’s more comfortable, all the

functionalities in one window, whereas on *Teams* we have to use two windows and it sometimes forces the restart of the software”). Ten students were unable to say which platform they preferred.

c) sound and screen sharing

Nineteen students claimed that the quality of screen and sound sharing was better on *Zoom* (“The quality of shared clips and audio was definitely better on *Zoom*”; “I have never had any problems with it so far, which was the case on *Teams* especially when screen/sound sharing”). Also, the interface is easier to use (“Many people still don’t know how to share sound on *Teams*, plus, it’s impossible to share sound when using the browser version of *Teams*”; “The window you intend to open may be difficult to find”; “It’s easier to see that I am sharing the screen on *Zoom*”; “*Teams* sometimes does not display the page I want to share”; “When I share my screen, the icon disappears and so I can’t turn on/off my webcam or mic, I can’t see other users when sharing the screen”).

Five students preferred *MS Teams* (“On *Zoom*, I found it impossible to share my screen and had to ask my colleagues to share it for me from their laptops”). Twelve students claimed there was no apparent difference between the platforms (“I’m not sure, especially after *Teams*’ updates, it can be comparable with *Zoom*”).

2.3.3. What functionalities make MS Teams a more efficient tool for SI classes than Zoom? What functionalities can MS Teams add to make SI classes more efficient?

Six students claimed there is nothing that makes *Teams* a more efficient tool than *Zoom*. The rest of the students pointed to the full integration with *MS Office*, chat history, attaching files, calendar, notes, various ways of joining the meeting, class materials (“Everything in one place—I

don't have to open my inbox to find any materials or the link to the meeting, which was the case with *Zoom*").

Interestingly, five students claimed that what would make SI classes more efficient would be a built-in voice recorder allowing for recording their own interpreting performance in breakout rooms, generating and sharing links to the file with others for peer assessment. Similarly, one student suggested integrating external platforms directly in *MS Teams*, e.g. *YouTube* ("Everything would be in one place—now it's easy to get lost in all that when you have everything opened in one browser—*Teams*, voice recorder, *YouTube*, etc."). The students pointed to introducing a more intuitive interface and navigation, improving software stability, the screen sharing functionality, as well as eliminating sound issues, and introducing sound signals when entering and closing breakout rooms ("Sometimes someone might not notice and keep working when being transferred to the main session, which can be awkward"). One student concluded that "extra functionalities are excessive even now, but they are still too clumsy".

2.3.4. What functionalities make Zoom a more efficient tool for SI classes than MS Teams? What functionalities can Zoom add to make SI classes more efficient?

The following aspects were mentioned by the students: the grid view ("In the main session you can see the whole group, which is not the case on *Teams*"), user-friendliness, and clearer interface ("It directly impacts the quality of interpreting because I know right away where I can find the buttons I need"; "All the icons are well visible and understandable"; "It's more intuitive. On *Teams* you need to draw your own conclusions, it's not that clear"), greater efficiency ("On *Zoom* more people with webcams on can participate without quality issues"; "It's easy to use, faster and more intuitive than *Teams* and works smoothly and causes few technical issues. It does not affect the computer the way *Teams* does, e.g. by making some apps stop working"; "It copes better with poor connectivity than *Teams*"). The students believe that introducing classrooms with all class materials in the drive space, as well as saving files and chat, and introducing sound signals when

entering and closing breakout rooms could be advantageous as well. Four trainees disagreed with the statement, and some pointed to safety issues (*Zoom-bombing*).

2.3.5. Which platform is better suited for SI classes? Why?

Six students were in favour of *Zoom* because of its user-friendliness, greater stability, clearer interface, better image and sound quality, and the fact that it allows for holding “more efficient and unified classes”. Thirteen students believed that *MS Teams* is a more efficient tool because of organizational matters (“Everything you need is in one place, so it’s far easier to work this way”), and more built-in functionalities than *Zoom* (class materials, chat, calendar, calls, channels, etc.). One student summarised the comparison in the following way: “*Zoom* is better for work (conferences), and *Teams* for studying—as we have folders and files we can easily browse and use”.

Eleven students had no clear opinion, whereas one student claimed that both platforms are suitable for SI classes.

2.4. The Trainer’s Perspective on Online SI Classes

Despite the trainer’s prior experience in using virtual platforms, the transition was not without a number of hurdles. Similarly to the previous project (cf. Mirek 2021), the classes needed to be planned meticulously, including timing and planning extra activities in case some options may prove unavailable to students. Some cases of unpredictable technical issues occurred on the students’ part, (e.g. inability to join the meeting and/or breakout rooms, automatic removal from the main session and/or breakout rooms), which sometimes disrupted pedagogical tasks (e.g. pair work). Nevertheless, the students seemed to have been more accustomed to working online and managing technical issues by themselves, which was not the case in the previous case study.

Both instructions and discussions were held in the main session, which simulated a traditional class setting. Both platforms allowed the organisation of situated learning activities. Since no real

audience was involved, replicating real-life professional situations could be only partial. However, the same was the case at the university. Activities were guided by the trainer, who provided ongoing feedback, mentoring, and assistance.

Some of the most notorious difficulties were technical issues, which proved to be more frequent on *MS Teams* than on *Zoom*, both on the trainer's and students' part. Unlike *Zoom*, *MS Teams* proved to be considerably less user-friendly and less stable, which affected the way online classes were held. What is important to note is the fact that the browser version of *MS Teams* neither allowed the teacher to create breakout rooms nor share sound. Both options are available exclusively in the desktop application, which proved to be extremely sluggish and caused more technical issues than *Zoom* or the browser equivalent of *MS Teams*. On one occasion, when the trainer used the browser version and shared the screen, it turned out that after several minutes of delivering a presentation, the students could not see the trainer's screen anymore, although the trainer attempted to share the screen again and again. This points to yet another considerable drawback of *MS Teams*.

As previously mentioned, both platforms enabled the trainer to organise separate interpreting booths in the form of breakout rooms, which allowed for holding the SI course without the use of the specialist equipment. Moreover, the trainer could transfer between breakout rooms and listen to the performance of individual students, which was comparable with the traditional experience at the university. However, breakout rooms on *MS Teams* proved to work more slowly and less smoothly than on *Zoom*. Also, transferring between breakout rooms and assigning participants proved to be more time-consuming.

Furthermore, the trainer experienced an occasional failure of breakout rooms (e.g. some participants could not be assigned to breakout rooms) and opted for channels as an alternative solution. Both functionalities allow for pair and/or individual work, however, it is students who need to join and leave channels, whereas breakout rooms are fully managed by the trainer. Hence, the students needed to be explicitly instructed which channel to join, and when exactly they

needed to leave it and join the main session, which proved to be more time-consuming. In some instances, the trainer called individual students (via *Teams*) who could not join either a breakout room or a channel, which proved to be yet another alternative to breakout rooms. It should be noted that such alternative solutions are unavailable on *Zoom*.

Importantly, breakout rooms fostered peer collaboration and social interactions, and played a key role in the collaborative construction of knowledge, as students could freely exchange their ideas, problems, and solutions with each other and the trainer. It must be noted that both platforms allow for both a manual and automatic assignment of participants to breakout rooms, yet given the time factor, the students were mostly assigned automatically. This meant that they frequently worked with randomly assigned co-interpreters for both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting exercises (and not the same interpreting partners, which is usually the case in traditional classes), which encouraged collaborative learning even more than in the traditional setting, experiencing interpreting and cooperating with different speakers and interpreters, as well as managing various technical issues, which should prepare them for the job as online interpreters.

The trainer's presence in breakout rooms usually motivated students and facilitated providing detailed feedback during one-to-one consultations. Nevertheless, sometimes extremely poor sound quality on the students' part (probably due to connectivity issues) hindered providing efficient feedback. In that case, the students were asked to record their interpretation and send it as homework. Feedback was provided not only in form of one-to-one consultation (e.g. in a breakout room), but also in the main session (general comments, presenting different ideas as to how to translate a source text, how to cope with potential problematic passages, and comparing various ideas, which stimulated discussions). Furthermore, feedback was provided verbally, via chat, and through non-verbal reactions (especially positive emoji, e.g. *thumbs up* and *applause*), which did not disturb students as they interpreted. Remarks containing detailed information on the students' performance (e.g. exact quotes) were sent via chat so that they could be retrieved for

future use. Also, providing feedback on chat occurred significantly faster than during one-to-one consultation, which, taken the overall number of the students, proved to be crucial.

It should be emphasised that as students worked individually in breakout rooms, without being able to observe each other, it turned out that providing clear and easy-to-follow instructions was of utmost importance. Therefore, instructions were provided both in the main session prior to assigning students to breakout rooms and via chat (for students working in breakout rooms) to provide optimal conditions and simulate a traditional setting (e.g. instructions on a whiteboard). This proved to be significantly less time-consuming than joining each breakout room and repeating the same instruction for each participant.

Similarly to the previous edition of the course, self-reflection was encouraged through individual and pair work in breakout rooms, recording students' interpreting performance, discussions, ongoing feedback, and the implementation of the editable version of the SI Portfolio, which aimed at developing the trainees' self-regulatory skills (cf Mirek 2020).

In the trainer's estimation, the greatest strength of *MS Teams* is its structure and layout which allowed for a more transparent and efficient organisation of both the students' and trainer's ideas and documents than *Zoom*, which required mostly exchanging e-mails on a regular basis. Organising online classes on *MS Teams* resembles a more traditional setting (e.g. class materials, announcement board, saved chat history—as equivalents of e-mail exchange, notes, etc.). Moreover, as participants had already been encoded in the system, there was no question as to the identity of the students, which was often the case on *Zoom* (students had to log in prior to every meeting). Yet another unique *Teams*' functionality, the calendar, facilitated organisational matters, as it displayed classes assigned to a given day, but proved to work extremely sluggishly and occasionally caused software failure. In consequence, the trainer had to restart the computer, which took extra time and disorganised the original schedule.

Importantly, both platforms have some technical limitations, which required workarounds. Neither *Zoom* nor *MS Teams* have a built-in voice recorder, which forced students to use an external recording tool in order to analyse their performance afterwards. Furthermore, neither of them allowed for streaming source speeches or the trainer's voice to breakout rooms. The latter case meant that the students had to be provided with all the necessary instructions prior to the assignment into breakout rooms. With regard to the former case, pre-recorded speeches were used by the trainer. The links to *YouTube* speeches were sent to students via chat. The student in a breakout room opened the clip, shared their screen and audio, and then proceeded to interpreting proper. The role switch with the co-interpreter required the use of non-verbal communication, to which end webcams were indispensable. As could be expected, connectivity issues occasionally led to technical difficulties: the delay between the speaker, the interpreter, and the co-interpreter sometimes affected the simultaneousness of the process (production of the target text). However, it is important to note that similar issues arise in professional practise when interpreters work remotely, which prepares students for tackling potential difficulties in their future profession.

Nevertheless, given that both platforms allowed for the creation of situated learning activities and the organisation of classes without the specialist equipment, it seems that both platforms could be integrated into interpreter training to the benefit of trainees. However, the trainer suspects that integrating online classes as a complement to traditional (offline) classes would offer even more opportunities for budding interpreters.

3. Conclusions

Given the recent rise of technology use in both interpreter training and professional practice, the potential of popular virtual conference platforms was assessed with regard to key socio-constructivist principles in the context of SI training.

In response to the first research question, the students claimed that online SI classes allowed for collaborative learning and improved their concentration, motivation, and comfort of work.

However, technical issues, which were commonplace on *MS Teams*, often disrupted the students' active participation in class. Despite the fact that both platforms share most functionalities (e.g. breakout rooms, screen and sound sharing), the trainees noticed significant differences: *MS Teams* seems more efficient because of the organisation of work (drive space, calendar, channels, saved chat), however, *Zoom* has the advantage of being an easier-to-use and a more stable platform for SI classes. The functionality of breakout rooms proved to be crucial, as it provided students with enhanced comfort of work and facilitated collaborative learning. A considerable number of trainees argue that online classes can be equally or even more efficient than traditional ones because of greater comfort of work and efficient feedback provision, whereas others doubt whether online classes can fully replace face-to-face training. Importantly, the students believe that online SI classes can prepare them for the job as online interpreters, however, they are apprehensive whether such training could fully prepare them for offline assignments.

With regard to the second question, it is possible to implement socio-constructivist principles in SI training through the use of both platforms. Importantly, both platforms allowed for the organisation of SI classes, incorporating a wide variety of interpreting exercises without the specialist equipment. It is also possible to imitate (semi-)authentic real-life situations as well as foster collaboration and self-reflection. The functionalities which proved to be valuable features from a socio-constructivist perspective and boosted the social aspect of the online learning community included screen and audio sharing, chat history, non-verbal reactions, and breakout rooms, which imitated interpreting booths and allowed the provision of individual feedback and mentoring. Hence, online SI classes fostered social interactions, collaborative construction of knowledge, and the students' active involvement in their own learning. In short, an online SI course may facilitate (semi-)authentic, collaborative, reflective learning.

Both *Zoom* and *MS Teams* proved to be relatively efficient tools in SI training, which allowed for a wide range of learning activities. The use of both platforms enabled the trainer to design "semi-authentic, hands-on learning situations" simulating real-life interpreting assignments (Stengers et al. 2018: 222). It must be emphasised that both *Zoom* and *MS Teams* are used for professional

interpreting assignments. Hence, it seems imperative that students should be familiar with both platforms⁶. Seeing that remote interpreting has become the “new normal”, new platforms tailored for training interpreters are expected to emerge. As can be inferred from the survey analysis, a platform combining *Zoom*’s stability and user-friendliness with *MS Team*’s functionalities would make a highly efficient platform for budding interpreters.

In conclusion, it seems justifiable to suspect that an online SI course can be beneficial for trainees, especially at the early stages of the training, as it significantly reduces stress and allows for full concentration on the learning process rather than other participants. Moreover, the students learn to deal with a variety of technical issues, which prepares them for working as an interpreter in an online setting. The student’s level of motivation and active engagement in the classes as well as their overall positive opinion of the online course may suggest that online courses may have the potential to enhance “the understanding of best practices in interpreter training” (Hubscher-Davidson & Devaux 2021: 187).

However, while virtual platforms offer a multitude of attractive learning opportunities, the complete lack of both face-to-face training and first-hand experience with the real interpreting equipment are likely to affect the trainees’ level of readiness for offline assignments. This is in line with the students’ concern as to their (in)ability to cope with offline interpreting settings, stress management, and tackling technical issues (such as operating a real interpreting booth). Therefore, provided that circumstances permit, it seems reasonable to combine both online and offline classes into hybrid training. This would allow for developing versatile skills and abilities of future conference interpreters for both on- and offline settings and complement the current online provision with more traditional interactions.

⁶ It should be noted that *Zoom* has introduced *Live Language Interpretation*, a functionality that is often used in a professional real-life practice, which is yet another reason why this platform needs to be incorporated in interpreter training. It is worth mentioning that this functionality was unavailable for the trainer’s account when the first case study was conducted (cf. Mirek 2021).
[<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360034919791-Language-interpretation-in-meetings-and-webinars>]
(accessed 21 September 2021)

The psychological impact of introducing fully online interpreting classes, and students' perception of the skills acquired online versus offline, which were merely signalled in this article, remain potential areas for further research.

Due to its limited scope, the study should be enlarged by new groups of participants. Nevertheless, the preliminary conclusions presented in this article may serve as pedagogical implications for interpreting trainers.

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