Teaching Simultaneous Interpreting during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

Joanna Mirek
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, POLAND
joanna.mirek@kul.pl

ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, conventional interpreting training programmes had to be adjusted to the new reality. This paper presents the preliminary results of introducing online simultaneous interpreting (SI) classes in spring 2020 at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. One of the research objectives of this case study was to assess the usability of online conference platforms for SI online classes. The study also presents both the students' and the teacher's reflections of using a virtual platform in SI classes in the context of socio-constructivist principles.

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

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that online interpreting courses have been gaining ground in recent years, the use of virtual platforms in interpreter training has not yet been extensively researched (cf. Tymczyńska 2009; Şahin 2013; Stengers et al. 2018). The sudden onset of COVID-19 enforced interpreting programmes to replace face-to-face classes, which offered an exciting research opportunity.

This paper explores both possibilities and limitations of using an online teaching platform as a pedagogical tool based on a socio-constructivist approach in simultaneous interpreting (SI) training. Kiraly (2000:1-3) states that "in recent years, it has become a commonplace in educational psychology that knowledge is constructed by learners, rather than being simply transmitted to them by their teachers" and believes that translation training should be based on "authentic situated action, the collaborative construction of knowledge, and personal experience". Key premises of socio-constructivism encompass collaborative learning, authentic materials, self-reflection, ongoing feedback (cf. Fernández-Prieto and Sempere-Linares 2010), and semi-authentic learning situations simulating real-life assignments, which

corresponds to the concept of situated learning activities (cf. González-Davies and Enríquez-Raído 2016).

This paper discusses whether it is possible to implement a constructivist learning setting through virtual conference technology. Similar to Stengers et al.'s (2018) project, the following research questions will be addressed in this study:

(1) How do students assess online SI classes when compared to conventional classes?
(2) How does the instructor rate the teaching experience and the implementation of socio-constructivist premises in online SI classes?

The following sections will describe the case study in question as well as preliminary conclusions.

2. Case Study

2.1. Context

The study in question 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. From February to March 2020, classes were conducted at the university, whereas classes from April to June were held online (90 minutes each). Due to a sudden lockdown in Poland, academic teachers were fully autonomous to select a suitable online platform for their courses.[1] In the initial period, SI classes were held asynchronously. In the meantime, three popular platforms were tested with the use of multiple devices.[2] A list of features required for efficient SI classes and their availability in the platforms is presented in Table 1.

[1] It is worth mentioning that a free platform without time limits had to be selected due to no financial support from the University. *MS Teams* was selected as the obligatory software at the author's University as late as October 2020.
[2] *Adobe Connect* put forward by Stengers et al. (2018) was excluded from this study as the free trial period was available for only 90 days, which offered no perspectives for future use.

Table 1: Overview of the availability of the required functions for online SI classes (as of April 2020).

Key features	***Cisco WebEx***	***MS Teams***	***Zoom***
Free access	✓	✓	✓
Time limit	X	X	X[3]
Limit of participants	100	All students encoded in the system	100
Breakout rooms	X	X	✓
Webcams	✓	✓	✓
Screen sharing	✓	✓	✓
Sound sharing	✓	✓	✓
Private & group chat	✓	✓	✓

The key features for efficient SI classes included breakout rooms (imitating separate virtual booths) as well as screen sharing (for delivering presentations and giving instructions) and sound sharing (for listening and interpreting speeches proper).

Both *Cisco WebEx* and *MS Teams* proved to be better suited for consecutive interpreting classes due to the absence of the breakout room function.[4] Consequently, students would have had to mute themselves in the main session, record their performance on external devices, and send recordings to the teacher afterwards. Moreover, both applications were experienced by the trainer as sluggish and less user-friendly than *Zoom*.

As can be inferred from Table 1, *Zoom* included all the required functions and proved to be well-suited for SI owing to breakout rooms (separate booths) in which students could work comfortably without disturbing one another. Breakout rooms could be used for both group and individual work, including interpreting exercises, SI proper, as well as providing individual feedback. The use of private and group chat enabled smooth communication (discussions, sending links, notifying about any technical issues), whereas webcams allowed for monitoring students' performance and comfortable communication. The main session was meant for providing general instructions, feedback, and discussions.

Finally, it should be added that *Zoom* was also used by other academic teachers, hence, students were familiar with this platform at that point, which significantly reduced stress and saved time

[3] The 40-minute time limit was removed once the institution was registered as "affected by the Coronavirus".
[4] *MS Teams* introduced breakout rooms in December 2020.

for instructions. Last but not least, *Zoom* proved to work smoothly on smartphones, computers, and tablets. Consequently, it was decided to opt for *Zoom* as a suitable platform for SI classes.

2.2. Students' Perspective on Online SI Classes

Once the summer term was over, students were asked to complete anonymous course evaluation questionnaires and share their views on using *Zoom* as a replacement for conventional classes. The online survey was conducted on the group of 30 students and included both closed- and open-ended questions presented below. The students' exemplary comments are quoted as well.

The majority of students assessed their concentration on SI tasks as high (90%). Similarly, most students rated both their comfort of individual work and motivation as high (79% and 83%, respectively). However, 53% of the students claimed that their stress level was high. They assessed the teacher's feedback and ongoing mentoring as highly efficient (90% and 100%, respectively). Trainees also believed that *Zoom* allows for collaborative learning (83%) and is well-adapted for SI classes (73%).

2.2.1. Did this Form of Classes Impact Your Interpreting Performance? How?

Three students noticed no impact whatsoever. The remaining students pointed to collaborative activities ("You can correct and help each other. It increases your stress level when someone else is listening as you interpret", "When working in pairs, we learn from each other") and the fact that online classes largely imitate the conventional ones. Some mentioned that the tool's instability caused frustration and stress, as they were excluded from full participation in classes. Others claimed that breakout rooms enabled them to interpret at ease both individually and in pairs, as well as experience "what interpreting in a real-life booth feels like". One student pointed out that they practised intensely for 90 minutes in comfortable conditions, which significantly improved their progress. In turn, other students underlined the fact that comfortable conditions occasionally led to losing concentration on the task in question.

2.2.2. What Functionalities Did You Find Particularly Helpful in Practising SI?

The overwhelming majority of the students pointed to breakout rooms as an imitation of real-life interpreting booths in which they could comfortably work both individually and in groups

(without hearing the rest of the students' interpreting, which was the case in the face-to-face classroom), as well as discuss the teacher's feedback, which increased students' comfort of work and concentration. Some other useful options included: sound and screen sharing (group discussions on presentations and speeches), individual and group chat (sending links, proper names, discussions, etc.), as well as raising a hand for seeking help. However, students mentioned that both central sound sharing to each breakout room and the possibility to record their performance directly in *Zoom* would have definitely facilitated online SI classes.

2.2.3. How Did the Use of Webcam Impact Your Interpreting Performance?

The majority of students were against using a webcam during classes. Some students pointed out they were unable to use their webcams due to technical issues. Others indicated that using a webcam would have made them worry about what they and their surroundings looked like and how that may have been perceived by others. They also mentioned that using a webcam was distracting, stressful ("I think I feel more at ease when the cam is off"), and unnecessary, hence, they preferred working without a webcam. Some of them admitted they could not see any difference between having their webcams on or off. Others claimed that using webcams helped them "because there was a stronger motivation to work hard" and that "having a webcam on allows you to see what is going on with the rest of participants, it may also reduce stress when you see familiar faces".

2.2.4. Did You Encounter Any Technical Issues? How Did They Affect Your Performance?

Thirteen students encountered no technical issues. The rest pointed to issues with the microphone, webcam, and poor connectivity, which negatively affected joining the meeting and breakout rooms, as well as getting "kicked out" during classes. Most importantly, technical issues affected sound quality and the interpreting performance proper ("Sometimes it was difficult to hear my peers whom I was supposed to work with, I could not understand and interpret what they were talking about").

2.2.5. Did This Form of Online Classes Fully Replace Traditional Classes?

Twenty-two students were certain that an online SI course cannot fully replace traditional classes. Students claimed that classes on *Zoom* could replace conventional ones in

approximately 60-90%, but not fully, as the latter ones are "far more motivating" and "nothing replaces the teacher's physical presence and face-to-face interactions". Some pointed to "lack of access to a fully equipped classroom". It is worth quoting one more opinion: "At university, the teacher's presence enforces concentration on the task. When having online classes, the teacher cannot completely control students' concentration and has to rely on students' sense of responsibility". On the other hand, eight students thought that online classes are "more convenient and pleasant" and allowed for better concentration ("I think everyone is more focused and we actually learn more than at university"). Students emphasised that an online SI course enabled them to have a real-time interaction with both the teacher and fellow students in a setting that largely resembles traditional classes (pair, individual work in booths). Interestingly, one student mentioned that due to poor sound quality and other technical issues, it was possible for them to experience various problems that can happen in interpreters' professional life ("I have no impact on the speech quality, people speak in a more or less clear manner and *Zoom* has demonstrated that to us").

2.2.6. Did You Like This Form of Classes? Would You Like to Continue It?

Twenty-three students were enthusiastic about continuing online SI classes. Some mentioned that "it saves time for commuting", considerably reduces stress and distraction, increases the comfort of individual work, and is comparable to or even "more fun" than traditional classes. One student claimed that "you can easily do something else and immediately transfer to online classes without worrying about commuting or the way you look". However, others were more apprehensive, and added that it could be an option "only as a supplement to traditional classes" and only "for a couple of months but no longer". Seven students were definitely not willing to continue with *Zoom*. Some said they were not "tech-savvy enough" and using a new software caused additional stress and frustration apart from interpreting proper, whereas others pointed out it was rather time-consuming, lacked "real contact with people", or did not support students' development. Other students claimed they found it extremely difficult to focus on tasks because of their surroundings, which they found distracting.

2.3. The Trainer's Perspective on Online SI Classes

The pedagogical value of using *Zoom* was overwhelmingly positive. Undoubtedly, the fact that it was possible to hold synchronous SI classes without the specific equipment was hugely

advantageous. *Zoom* proved to be a relatively stable and user-friendly tool that is easy-to-use from various devices.

The teaching experience proved to be completely different from holding face-to-face classes. It was imperative to provide clear and easy-to-follow instructions, which considerably reduced the instructor's degree of spontaneity. The entire class had to be perfectly planned in minute detail, including timing and planning extra activities in case some options may be unavailable for either party (e.g., screen or sound sharing, chat, etc.). Some cases of unpredictable technical issues occurred on the students' part, e.g., participants were automatically removed from the main session or breakout rooms due to their poor connectivity, which was problematic even if it concerned only one student, as it hindered holding a class for the entire group. In the instructor's estimation, it was difficult to address various students' problems at the same time. Moreover, the organisation of such classes proved to be extremely time-consuming and required meticulous preparation for any possible technical issues, which is not the case when preparing traditional classes.

Most importantly, it was possible to organise separate interpreting booths in form of breakout rooms (for feedback sessions, interpreting exercises in pairs/groups and interpreting proper). Moreover, it was possible for the trainer to transfer smoothly between breakout rooms and listen to individual trainees. Both instructions and discussions were held in the main session, which simulated a traditional class setting. Due to its functionalities, the software allowed the organisation of situated learning activities. Obviously, the replication of real-life professional situations could be only partial, because no real audience was present, but the same was the case in the conventional classroom. Also, the software encouraged self-reflection through discussions and helped with implementation of the SI Portfolio (cf. Mirek 2020).[5] Online classes facilitated collaborative construction of knowledge: exchanging ideas, sharing perspectives, experiences, problems and solutions with other students and the instructor during discussion sessions in both breakout rooms and the main session. Activities were guided by the trainer, who provided ongoing feedback and assistance. Feedback sessions were delivered both individually (in breakout rooms) and for the entire group (in the main session). The latter solution concerned general comments applying to interpreting proper, presenting different

[5] 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).

ideas as to how to translate a source text, how to cope with potential problematic passages, and comparing various ideas, which stimulated discussions.

Nevertheless, *Zoom* has some technical limitations, which required workarounds. Peer-assessment activities were held in breakout rooms, however, self-assessment was only possible when using an external recording tool, as students could not record themselves directly in *Zoom*, which proved to be technically more challenging. Moreover, streaming source speeches to breakout rooms was unavailable. This meant that the trainer had to use pre-recorded online speeches which were sent to students via links on chat, which made the entire exercise more time-consuming.

3. Conclusions

Despite the fact that *Zoom* was originally designed with language teaching in mind, it proves to be a relatively efficient tool in teaching SI due to its stability and availability of breakout rooms, which allows remote SI classes with a wide range of learning activities. Importantly, *Zoom* works smoothly on various devices, which facilitated the students' active participation.

With regard to the first research question, students rated online SI classes as relevant. In their opinion, online SI classes allowed for collaborative learning and improved their comfort of work, concentration, and motivation. Trainees were largely enthusiastic about such functionalities as breakout rooms (individual and pair work), chat, screen and sound sharing. However, technical limitations, including poor connectivity, often caused frustration and hindered the students' active participation in class, which may be due to the students' lack of familiarity with the platform. The majority claimed that despite the fact that online classes largely imitate conventional ones, they cannot fully replace face-to-face interactions.

Addressing the second question, it is most certainly possible to implement socio-constructivist principles in SI training through the use of virtual conference platforms, such as *Zoom*. It is possible to imitate (semi-)authentic real-life situations as well as encourage collaboration and self-reflection. The most valuable functionalities that stimulated interaction between students and the trainer included screen and audio sharing, chat and breakout rooms, which imitated separate interpreting booths and allowed the provision of individual feedback and a comfortable engagement in the class. Hence, online SI classes facilitated social interactions,

students' active participation and involvement in their own learning. In short, an online SI course may facilitate collaborative, reflective, and authentic learning. Nonetheless, organising online classes certainly requires extensive preparation both with regard to content planning and technical issues, which makes it a less spontaneous experience when compared to traditional classes.

Furthermore, it should be noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, remote interpreting has become "the new normal". Hence, training programmes should be adjusted to the new reality, and it is reasonable to expect new online platforms specifically tailored for training interpreters.

Due to its limited scope, the project should be verified by a follow-up study enlarged by new groups of trainees. Nonetheless, at this stage, the preliminary conclusions presented in this article may serve as pedagogical implications for interpreting instructors.

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