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COVID-19-forced online interpreting teaching: The perspective of Polish interpreting teachers

ABSTRACT

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The perspective of Polish interpreting teachers

The purpose of this article is to present a fraction of the results of the study carried out among Polish academic teachers of interpreting who – because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – had to adapt to teaching interpreting skills online. The first part of the paper addresses the issue of how the pandemic generated new themes of interpreting research, which may be roughly subsumed into two strands of interpreting studies – the research into the professional interpreting market and the changes imposed by the pandemic restrictions, and the research into interpreter training which had to respond to the restrictions on physical face-to-face education by getting online. Then, attention is focused on the use of computer-assisted interpreting teaching, which – already for some time – has been incorporating modern technological solutions for the benefit of interpreting students. Finally, the last part of this paper offers insight into a study dedicated to the views of Polish interpreting teachers on the usefulness of modern technology and Internet-based solutions they had to use when teaching interpreting skills in the new reality of COVID-19-forced education. All in all, the paper shows that interpreting teachers appreciate technological innovations in interpreting teaching and, as might be envisaged, some of them will become an everyday part of modern interpreting training.

Keywords: interpreting teaching, COVID-19 interpreting teaching, online/remote interpreting teaching, computer-assisted interpreting tools

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic revolutionised many spheres of human activity. What was deemed impossible or unfeasible before COVID-19 was

now forced to be doable and viable. Such is the case of remote interpreting teaching, which – before 2019 – was primarily offered as practical training taking place face-to-face on the premises of tertiary education institutions. However, due to various restrictions imposed on people worldwide, universities had to adapt to the new reality, which – in the case of interpreting teaching – became the virtual reality since most educational activities were transferred online.

This article discusses a small fraction of qualitative data obtained during a questionnaire-based study that aimed to investigate the situation that Polish academic teachers of interpreting had to face for the first time on such a large scale, switching from the traditional form of contact classes at the university to a remote form, during which all teaching was performed through distance learning software.

The first part of this paper addresses the issue of how interpreting research has incorporated the themes of new interpreting practices, and new interpreter education solutions brought about by the pandemic restrictions and the consequent absence of physical face-to-face contact, and the need to teach interpreting online. Then, the discussion centres on the selected resources and solutions that modern technology offers for interpreting teachers, and the practices they have adopted in their teaching.

The second part of this contribution is devoted to presenting and discussing the qualitative data provided by Polish university teachers of interpreting on how they perceived distance interpreting teaching before and after they were forced to implement it in the new conditions under which they had to work as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Thus, what is discussed is the changing perspective of interpreting teachers concerning online interpreting classes.

The overarching goal of this paper is to shed light on how Poland-based interpreting teachers accommodated their methods of teaching interpreting to the new COVID-19-conditioned reality, how they changed their attitudes, and how these new circumstances can be used in the future for the benefit of both interpreting students and interpreting teachers.

2. COVID-19 and interpreting research

The COVID-19 pandemic stirred the interest of scholars affiliated with various scientific disciplines since the epidemic had an impact on almost all spheres of human life. Therefore, as rightly observed by Cifuentes-Faura (2022: e71), "[…] COVID-19 has caused a health crisis and affected the health of citizens, and has produced economic, psychological, educational and legal consequences", which means that the effects of the pandemic have been studied not only by researchers working in medicine, biology, public health and epidemiology, pharmaceutics or psychology; representatives of other fields like, for example, pedagogy, economics, sociology or technology, have also been tackling the issues related to

the coronavirus and its impact on humanity. No different in this respect are such seemingly COVID-19-distant branches of scholarship as communication sciences or interpreting studies. They have also offered methodological frameworks within which COVID-19-related phenomena have been investigated.

In their research endeavours related to the COVID-19 pandemic, interpreting scholars focus primarily on two broad areas: (1) remote interpreting services induced by the need for social distancing, isolation, and avoidance of face-to-face communication; (2) new reality in online interpreting teaching.

As regards the first strand – the introduction of remote interpreting services, scholars discuss a variety of issues that came to the fore when interpreters, previously working predominantly in the places where they were needed, had to adopt new technology-supported means of providing their services (i.e. CAI tools – computer-assisted interpreting tools) (e.g. Zhao 2022), being often far away from the interpreter-mediated communication participants. For instance, Lázaro Gutiérrez and Nevado Llopis (2022), based on structured interviews with Spanish interpreting industry representatives, analyse remote interpreting services in Spain (i.e. telephone interpreting and video-link interpreting), and present a map of the remote interpreting industry in Spain.

In another study, Buján and Collard (2022) report on how conference interpreters managed to go online in their profession, what challenges they had to respond to and what prospects they saw for this new form of interpreting. Similarly, Saeki et al. (2022) discuss the role, challenges, and opportunities of remote interpreting in medical contexts. The authors observe that remote interpretation becomes more widespread since, in fact, in such interpreter-mediated communication, there is no need for physical contact among the interpreter, physician and patient, thereby reducing the risk of infection.

One more interesting study concerns the cooperation of conference interpreters in a virtual booth. Seresi and Láncos (2022) discuss the results of their project, whose principal objective was to examine how working in a virtual booth located on a remote simultaneous interpreting platform affects interpreter booth partners who cannot count so readily on each other's help in the event of some difficulties (such as, for instance, the presence of the so-called problem triggers – high input data saturation, fast input delivery pace, use of dates, numbers or names (cf. Gile 1995, Gumul 2019, Korpal/Stachowiak-Szymczak 2020). What arises from the study is that virtual booth interpreters who have undergone proper training and are experienced enough can mitigate the effect of the difficulties they encounter. On the other hand, however, they feel less secure regarding the emotional dimension of having a partner in the booth.

This brief overview of some of the recent studies suffices to state that, in the near future, interpreting studies will be further enriched by new research examining the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the interpreting industry,

describing technology-supported interpreting practices, and offering new perspectives on the use of remote interpreting in the post-COVID-19 times. However, one thing can be taken for granted: although traditional (i.e. non-remote) interpreting will not disappear as people will always seek face-to-face encounters, remote interpreting and CAI services will continue to rise since they have proved to be both time- and cost-effective.

The second salient strand of interpreting research pursued in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic revolves around interpreting teaching and interpreter education in the new reality. Transferring all teaching and learning activities to Internet-based platforms was a challenge for both trainers and trainee interpreters. The former had to redesign course syllabi and curricula, construct new teaching materials or adapt the existing ones to new circumstances, devise new ways of developing trainee interpreters' skills, competences and knowledge, work out new manners of providing feedback and assessing interpreting performance, or adjust teaching methods when they could not always have eye contact with course participants (as a result of trainee interpreters' reluctance to turn on their cameras, poor Internet connection, poor hardware, making it difficult to participate actively in online interpreting classes).

Interestingly enough, trainee interpreters also, at times, found it problematic to benefit from interpreter education in the online form. Many of them were not accustomed to "talking to a computer screen"; some had trouble operating the computer and software; others shied away from showing their faces and performing interpreting through a computer. A variety of online interpreter education issues were raised by interpreting scholars. For instance, the difficulties and challenges of the transition from brick-and-mortar interpreter education to online mode, as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic, are reported by Ghanim and Mustafa Mohammed (2023). Based on their research carried out among 137 Iraq-based consecutive and simultaneous interpreting students, the scholars conclude that synchronous online training in interpreting has its benefits and can help trainee interpreters develop their skills. However, it should be blended with the traditional teaching set in a university interpreting classroom.

The COVID-19-forced virtual environment interpreting training is also discussed by Ho and Zou (2022). In their study, they justly observe that traditional in-class interpreting training is unlikely to be wholly reproduced in the online setting. This calls for new pedagogies that encompass, for example, specifically adopted training tasks or feedback forms. Exploiting the Gather platform – a tool for bringing virtual interactants closer, they tentatively conclude that trainee interpreters expressed positive opinions on working on this platform, as they felt greater proximity.

Equally valuable observations are offered by Mirek (2022). In her study carried out among thirty students, she reports on how interpreting course

participants perceived simultaneous interpretation classes taking place in the virtual environment (i.e. on MS Teams and Zoom). Although trainee interpreters appreciate quite a few aspects of such online classes, as they can provide them with suitable preparation for remote interpreting tasks, they do not think such a form of interpreter education can make them well-trained for traditional interpreting. What is also worth noting is that the trainer's perspective is discussed. As regards the trainer's view, attention is paid to the need to adapt the training to virtual reality conditions, and to overcome certain technical difficulties. However, some benefits are also highlighted, among which there is the use of breakout rooms, which serve as interpreter booths. Interestingly, the scholar claims that such 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" (Mirek 2022: 74). Thus, it may be inferred that the software used was beneficial in quite a few ways. However, the general conclusion that may be drawn is that blended learning, combining online and offline training, would be perhaps the optimal solution.

A thought-provoking aspect of testing interpreters' skills during the pandemic was raised by Diur and Ruiz Rosendo (2022), who have a look at the ways of examining future conference interpreters at the United Nations. Apart from offering an insight into the formats, conditions and procedure of testing, they also discuss the influence of the new pandemic-forced reality on administering exams for interpreters. They advocate implementing modern technology-supported solutions to verify interpreters' skills required from those interpreters who want to work for international organisations.

The above overview points to the fact that the transition from on-site university-based interpreting teaching to online interpreting training, forced by the imposition of pandemic restrictions, was – in numerous instances – successful. The initial problems that both trainers and trainee interpreters experienced were at least partially solved. This may imply that the COVID-19 pandemic helped interpreter trainers discover new ways of teaching interpreting, which may be further exploited in the future, either as a self-contained and only approach to interpreter education or as a complement to regular, offline teaching.

3. Technologically-aided education of interpreters: interpreting teaching within/with a virtual environment

While it is true, as confirmed by the above overview of the recent research trends in interpreting studies, that present-day interpreter education has started to rely extensively on modern technological solutions, it needs to be acknowledged that

before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were several attempts at incorporating computer software and Internet-based solutions into interpreting training. This can be attested by studies examining the use of CAI tools in various training settings and constellations. Some of those research projects are discussed below.

Computer-assisted interpreting tools are related to CAIT – computer-assisted interpreter training. This technology-enhanced education of interpreters grew out of the idea of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Sandrelli 2015) that pertained to the new possibilities of using technology and computers created in language learning and teaching. Sandrelli observes that the beginning of thinking about the exploitation of technology for interpreter training can be found in the 1990s. She states that "[…] in the mid-1990s a few interpreter trainers in various countries began to think that dedicated computer-based materials could be used to support students' autonomous learning and provide the necessary individual focus" (2015: 75). However, since then, training, in which, next to traditional in-class teaching means and methods, computer-assisted tools are used, has significantly expanded. Two reasons for that come to the fore. First, there has been a dramatic increase in the professional practice of remote interpreting. Second, the development and greater refinement of technological resources have contributed to the greater availability of distance interpreter training courses. Thus, computer-assisted interpreter training is no longer a thing of the future but a palpable reality happening here and now.

In its earliest days, the use of technology was limited to developing course materials, usually in the form of collections of resources available online (e.g. speech banks or repositories, an example of which is the Speech Repository offered by the European Commission[1]). However, some course developers also prepared packages with diverse interpreting tasks (or their templates to be filled in with the content by the trainers themselves), which trainee interpreters could perform while working on a computer (cf. Sandrelli 2015). Nowadays, such materials are also available on the Internet (e.g. ORCIT[2]).

What was a genuine novelty as regards computer-assisted interpreter training was the development of virtual learning environments. Not only have they now been used to train trainee interpreters and interpreter trainers (during various workshops dedicated to them) on a larger scale but they themselves have also become the object of interpreting research (cf. e.g. Braun/Slater 2014; Braun/Davitti/Slater 2020). Such virtual environments, in which both trainee interpreters and trainers can function as avatars interacting with one another in simulated settings that correspond to the professional ones (with, for instance,

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1| https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/sr/ (accessed: 27.03.2023).
2| https://orcit.eu/ (accessed: 27.03.2023).

virtual interpreter booths, virtual conference rooms, virtual courtrooms etc.), with the exception that the physical distance is no longer an issue, are unquestionably novelties likely to engage trainee interpreters even more in their interpreting learning process.

Before the pandemic, distance interpreter education witnessed rapid development with the combination of in-class and technology-enhanced methods. In this respect, Sandrelli (2015: 76) makes an interesting comment stating that

> [d]istance learning and blended learning experiences have also been taking place in various countries outside the EU, including Australia, Canada, Norway, South Africa and the US. These solutions seem especially suitable when the required language combinations or geographical distance make traditional face-to-face courses unviable, as may be the case with training for community interpreting […], business interpreting […] and also signed language interpreting.

Interestingly enough, Kalina and Ziegler (2015) point out that interpreting training has undergone a revolution because of the availability of audio-video materials, including recordings of original talks delivered at the meetings of international organisations. The YouTube platform is a good case in point, offering a wealth of authentic and semi-authentic materials that can be easily adapted for training purposes.

Numerous interpreting schools have adopted the blended approach, using technology-enhanced solutions to supplement traditional in-class education. For instance, Kajzer-Wietrzny and Tymczynska (2014) discuss a variety of computer-assisted interpreting tools, specifying both the skills that can be trained by means of them, as well as the interpreting task stages at which they can be used. What is worth stressing is that in their study, authored nearly a decade ago, they managed to forecast with great precision the present-day state of interpreting training. In other words, they observe that "CAIT tools will soon become a necessity in interpreter education […]" (ibid.). Indeed, it might be argued that nowadays, in the post-pandemic times, few interpreter trainers would envisage organising interpreter training without any technological or Internet-based resources and tools. Thus, they conclude that the research on the use of computer-assisted training tools may bring some evidence to support the arguments in favour of teaching interpreting entirely remotely. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that it is not only technically viable but also beneficial and useful for many reasons.

In another work, Sikora and Walczyński (2015) discuss the advantages of using technological and Internet-based solutions in a translation and interpreting university classroom. Their contribution, however, shows a clear link between the industry (i.e. the market of translation and interpreting services) and academia since, as they argue, the primary concern of translator and interpreter

education should be to familiarise trainees with the reality of the industry, and the translator/interpreter profession for this is deemed as one of their possible career choices. Furthermore, as regards interpreter training, they believe that computer-assisted interpreting training can foster trainee interpreters' development of psychological skills (i.e. cognitive and affective abilities), which are part of what they call "the multi-componental competence" of the interpreter (Sikora/Walczyński 2015: 121). Among the aspects of the cognitive and affective subcompetence, they mention "[…] memory, logical reasoning, attention span, comprehension gap bridging skills, anxiety and stress management, skills of working under pressure […]" (Sikora/Walczyński 2015: 123), which can be developed, refined, and furthered by such technological resources as a specially designed interpreting lab computer system that allows the trainer, among others, to monitor the trainee interpreters' delivery of outputs, intervene when necessary or provide instantaneous feedback. They also speak about a variety of online resources (i.e. authentic speeches and other didactic materials) available on popular platforms such as Speechpool, YouTube, TED or BBC and CNN websites. However, what is perhaps most interesting is that they also comment on Internet-based solutions used for expanding attention span, practising memory or logical reasoning. On the whole, the above-mentioned scholars are right in stating that the modern era is the age of technology. Therefore, the technologically oriented approach to interpreter education seems to be desired, for it can contribute to a multifaced development of interpreter competence. Hence, such training should also rely on selected computer-assisted interpreting tools, which may help trainee interpreters develop as future professional interpreters.

One more study worth referring to is the work by Prandi (2020), who – based on several university curricula – discusses implementing computer-assisted interpreting tools in interpreter education. What emerges from her survey carried out in twenty-five interpreting schools located mainly in Europe is that all surveyed institutions included – to a smaller or greater extent – technological tools in interpreting training. Among them were computer- and Internet-based solutions for interpreter trainers, and computer solutions for trainee interpreters (e.g. speech bank websites, remote interpreting tools, Internet-based search engines, terminology banks etc.). Generally speaking, Prandi observes (ibid.) that "[t]he number of responses received and the fact that half of the responding institutions already include CAI in interpreter training is certainly a sign that training is starting to take account of this technology". However, what should be taken into account is that the study was carried out in 2017 and perhaps no one at that time could expect that, in a few years, computer-assisted interpreter training tools would become an everyday reality in interpreting schools, and not an addendum whose aim was to make interpreting classes more interesting and engaging.

To sum up, it is beyond any doubt that modern technology can be a significant qualitative improvement in interpreter training. The abundance of Internet-based materials which can be used for various purposes (e.g. preparation resources for an interpreting assignment, input recordings or reference points for output quality assessment, to name but a few) makes interpreter education more real-life-like and authentic. Additionally, the exploitation of different software allowing creating virtual settings for trainee interpreters, in which they can practise not only interpreting *per se* but also booth cooperation or courtroom interactions, may yield even more engaging contexts for educating future interpreters. However, what should be accentuated here is that, in most cases discussed above, this was implemented within the blended learning approach. The abrupt COVID-19-forced need to move all teaching online fostered many (if not all) trainers' awareness that interpreter education in a completely remote manner was not only necessary but also beneficial, as will be illustrated in the next section of this paper.

4. COVID-19-forced online interpreter education – study data analysis of the interpreting teachers' perspective

It might be argued that, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, not many interpreter trainers knew how to instantly switch from brick-and-mortar education to one in a virtual environment. Moreover, few of them had any experience in teaching interpreting solely in the online format, so it comes as no surprise that many of them felt apprehensive about the new forced teaching format. In the following section, attention is directed towards the rationale for the project of which this study is a part, and the research method used. Secondly, the data obtained as responses to selected questions (i.e. not all) are presented and discussed. However, what needs to be mentioned here is that the report on the entire project and its outcomes is planned to be published elsewhere.

4.1 Rationale for the study

As mentioned above, quite a few interpreter trainers, perhaps like all other teachers, instructors and lecturers, were somewhat uneasy and anxious about the COVID-19-related restrictions and the resultant necessity to move all teaching activities onto the Internet-based platforms. This apprehension could have stemmed from the fact that computer-assisted interpreting teaching was not standard practice before the pandemic, so interpreting teachers did not know precisely how to teach interpreting courses online, how to redesign course syllabi to meet the newly arising needs, how to distribute tasks to students, how to provide constructive feedback, or how to deal with technical issues. This was an

unprecedented situation to which all teachers had to get used almost in no time. Hence, the rationale for this study was to examine how Polish academic teachers of interpreting responded to the challenge of organising interpreting teaching in the remote form, so far not pursued at any significant scale, how they approached the new Internet-based interpreting class settings, and how they are going to make use of this experience in their future educational endeavours.

4.2. Study methods

The method used in the study was surveying. It seems to be a legitimate data collection method in this particular case as it allowed reaching interpreting teachers working in different higher education institutions scattered across Poland. The survey contained twenty-two questions (eight multiple-choice questions, twelve open-ended questions and two Likert-scale questions). However, as mentioned above, in the present paper only the data provided as responses to selected questions are discussed.

The survey was distributed as a link to the MS Form questionnaire via e-mail to a network of interpreting teachers working in various Polish tertiary education institutions as well as directly to the secretariats of institutes, chairs and departments of foreign languages at Polish universities that offer interpreting courses within different study programmes (i.e. language studies, translation and interpreting studies, applied linguistics etc.). The questionnaire was available online from September to November 2021; this was the time when the pandemic was in full swing. However, the response rate was not spectacularly high as only forty-one fully completed surveys were returned. Nevertheless, overall it seems that surveying proved effective, for it allowed collecting factual, attitudinal, and behavioural data related to online interpreting training during the COVID-19 pandemic time.

4.3. Results and discussion

As has already been stated, the survey was completed by forty-one trainers (of whom twenty-nine (71%) are professional interpreters themselves) working primarily at Polish universities (thirty-five respondents). Five respondents teach interpreting at universities of applied sciences and one at a technical university. This set of data proves that it is at classic universities that most interpreting training takes place. In the Polish tertiary education landscape, this is an important distinction especially for course and syllabi designers, because studies run by universities of applied sciences must obligatorily differ in the so-called "profile". It means that such studies have to be more practical (i.e. they have to offer more practical classes and more vocational practice in the professional market) than academic and theoretical, and thus students are expected to be provided with more practice than theory.

As many as twenty-eight (60%) teachers teach interpreting as part of language studies, nine (19%) teach interpreting to students of applied linguistics, two (4%) to students enrolled in the studies of business language/linguistics for business, and seven (15%) train trainee interpreters within postgraduate studies in translation and interpreting. One (2%) person did not specify the field of study.

When asked about the types of interpreting taught, the respondents provided the following answers: consecutive interpreting (twenty-two trainers; 34%), simultaneous interpreting (eleven; 17%), sight translation/interpreting (eight; 12%), a variety of types (twenty-three; 35%), others (one; 2%). Such a distribution of interpreting types taught by the respondents may suggest that all major types of interpreting provided as services in the interpreting market are taught. What is also interesting is that as many as 35% (twenty-three) of the trainers declare that during their courses, they teach students a variety of types of interpreting. Given the circumstances of the Polish translation and interpreting service provision industry, it comes as no surprise since, depending on the client's needs, Polish interpreters must be quite versatile as they are often commissioned to perform consecutive interpreting, whispering, sight translation or even simultaneous interpretation. This view can be additionally corroborated by the profession of Polish sworn interpreters who – in the lengthy and onerous testing procedure – have to successfully take the tests in both sight translation/interpreting and consecutive interpreting. Thus, at the certification stage, sworn interpreter candidates must demonstrate a broad range of interpreting skills. The graphic representation of the distribution of the interpreting types taught by the respondents is presented in Chart 1.

a variety of interpreting types
35%

consecutive interpreting
34%

others
2%

sight translation/interpreting
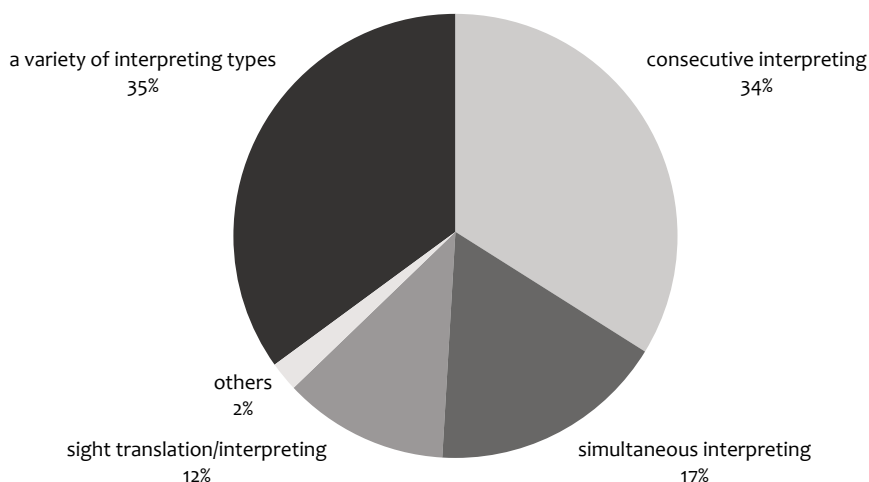12%

simultaneous interpreting
17%

Chart 1: Distribution of the interpreting types taught by the respondents

Let us now focus on the data provided to the questions related to the exploitation of computer-assisted interpreting tools and computer-assisted interpreting training. When asked about the adoption of computer-assisted interpreting training prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, only four respondents (10%) stated that they had used computer tools in their teaching endeavours. This seems to be in line with the initial reactions of the interpreting teachers, who were somewhat apprehensive of the obligation to transfer all teaching activities to virtual environments due to the pandemic restrictions. For this purpose, those four respondents used, among others, conference room software, local infrastructure allowing Internet access, and Skype. They do not mention other solutions classified as computer-assisted interpreting (training) tools. This may point to the fact that few Polish academic teachers of interpreting included modern technological solutions in their interpreting courses before the pandemic. Given the fact that before the studied period, various computer-assisted interpreting training tools were already available (as discussed earlier), it indicates that pre-COVID-19 interpreting teachers did not necessarily follow the technological innovations in the interpreting industry and interpreter education.

As regards the question concerning the use of Internet-based and computer tools during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most commonly used platform (thirty mentions) was Microsoft Teams, which – thanks to its functions – offers some practical solutions which can be easily adapted to interpreter education (e.g. breakout rooms or channels). Less popular was Zoom (eleven mentions) and then others (eight mentions), Google Meet (four mentions), Skype/Skype for business (four mentions), Google Classroom (two mentions) and Discord (one mention). Since the number of mentions exceeds the number of the respondents, it points to the use of several platforms within one course. Interestingly, the great majority of the respondents (thirty-five; 85%) were satisfied with the solutions mentioned above. Among the reasons for such a high percentage of satisfaction expressed by the teachers were the functions of such distance learning software (e.g. the already mentioned breakout rooms and channels in MS Teams, which were used as virtual booths and the ease of monitoring trainee interpreters' performance; the possibility of using on a broader scale authentic audio and video materials, easy sharing options, the easy organisation of home/additional assignments with deadlines, the clear visibility of those wanting to take the virtual floor by employing the function of raising a hand, the possibility to maintain eye contact through cameras etc.). What emerges from the respondents' responses is that they appreciated a variety of functions that facilitated teaching interpreting courses online. This, however, does not mean that the teachers did not notice any problems, deficiencies or inadequacies in the software used. Such issues can be grouped into three categories.

The first category relates to technical problems (e.g. problems with playing input materials, problems with ejecting trainee interpreters from the meetings, poor sound quality, poor Internet connection quality, poor quality of trainee interpreters' headphones which do not meet the requirements of headsets used in real-life simultaneous interpreting).

The second category would include interpreting proper difficulties (e.g. no/limited possibility of practising interpreting in a standing position, which sometimes has to be taken by the interpreter during, for example, court interpreting, no/limited possibility of listening to the input and producing the output simultaneously – no/limited possibility of recreating simultaneous interpreter booths, no/limited eye contact in booth teamwork, no options for relay simultaneous interpreting). However, what needs to be highlighted is that the respondents used their creativity and ingenuity to overcome the above-mentioned problems by, for instance, making use of two platforms at the same time (one for input comprehension, another one for output production) or recording students' performances on external devices (e.g. mobile phone recording device) and only then making them available in the software used for online classes.

The third category of problems includes the "human factor" difficulties. Being highly conscious of real-life interpreting challenges, the teachers wrote about no/limited (eye) contact with some students resulting from no top-down obligation to switch on cameras, no possibility to observe and monitor students at work, and the related inaccessibility to their emotional reactions to tasks and task content and to the ways of dealing with them, uncertainty about interpreting course participants' independent work while performing, for instance, sight translation/interpreting, no possibility of putting trainee interpreters in situations with emotional pressure so often encountered in real-life interpreting practice, difficulties in evaluating students' body language and posture, observations of trainee interpreters' greater focus on searching activities on the Internet rather than on performing high quality interpreting in terms of both semantic accuracy and language correctness. What was highly conspicuous in the respondents' answers was the great stress they placed on the frequent impossibility of maintaining direct contact both with the trainers as well as with other group members. Several teachers explicitly stated that direct contact is simply indispensable in such training and, although Internet-based platforms and technological devices can significantly enhance interpreting teaching, nothing can replace genuine, direct contact. It clearly shows that the trainers are well aware that, in interpreting at large, not only linguistic means but also other paralinguistic and extralinguistic ways may convey meaning. On the whole, it transpires that the respondents were very well cognizant of both the strengths and weaknesses of online interpreter education. This was even more perceptible

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among the trainers who are themselves practising interpreters and who can relate their teaching activities to real-life interpreting practice[3].

The final theme discussed here is post-COVID-19 pandemic interpreter education. The respondents were asked to state what type of education they would be willing to be engaged in as trainers in the future. As many as twenty-eight (68%) opted for the blended approach. In other words, they would be interested in teaching interpreting in a hybrid form, combining traditional in-class training with the online one. Among the most common reasons are the more extensive use of remote interpreting services and the need to familiarise trainee interpreters with these new forms of interpreting. In addition, many respondents believe that ours is the age of technology, and remote interpreting will unquestionably be on the rise as the form that is cost- and time-effective for both interpreting service users and providers. On the other hand, they also highlight that traditional university-based classes can help trainee interpreters get accustomed to the public and overcome the stress and anxiety that accompany public speaking, of which interpreting is a prime example.

Another argument justifying the need for the blended form, for instance, in the ratio of 80% (traditional) to 20% (remote), is the possibilities that modern technology offers. Students' oral productions can be recorded, analysed and evaluated using the software. It is easy to stop the recording at some point to accentuate a given aspect of the recorded performance whereas the unrecorded output fades away the moment it is uttered. Students can additionally record the same interpretation several times, paying attention to different details of their delivery, thus observing the increase in its quality. The abundance of teaching materials (i.e. audio-video recordings of authentic conferences) available online is another asset that can be used for both forms of interpreting teaching.

Interestingly, one person who was also in favour of the blended learning approach explained his/her stance by the fact that, at that time, the old-fashioned interpreter booths located at that person's institution were being replaced with new systems and online education allowed offering trainee interpreters opportunities for practising interpreting despite the non-functional interpreting lab.

Another cause for implementing the hybrid form was that, although some Polish institutions have started to use online interpreting services, there are still many contexts in which interpreting takes place in person. Examples of such settings can be found in widely understood community interpreting, in which the interpreter rarely provides online services while interpreting, for instance, patient-doctor exchanges or police officer-the accused encounters. Thus, combining the two forms seems justified.

3| Due to the space limitation of this paper, this issue, although addressed in the survey, is left uncommented here.

Furthermore, there is one issue unaddressed so far – administering interpreting tests, which is easier and faster thanks to modern technology. All trainee interpreters can take the test simultaneously by recording their performances and uploading them for the trainer's review on the platform used (e.g. into MS Teams). This significantly saves the time devoted to the organisation of the testing procedure.

As can be seen, there are many well-justified arguments for implementing the hybrid form of interpreting classes, which could foster a more comprehensive development of trainee interpreters' skills.

Let us now direct our attention to the second group of ten respondents (25%), who selected the "traditional classes only" option. Some of them think that, in a big group of students, dividing them into pairs and assigning them to breakout rooms may take more time and thus limit the interpreting practice time. Some respondents also wrote about the poor Internet access available on the university premises so a traditional learning environment seems to be a justified option.

One teacher argued his/her choice by referring to online simultaneous interpretation training as highly ineffective, with no possibility of recreating the booth environment. However, this argument can be easily invalidated by using the virtual environments mentioned in the previous parts of this paper. Among other arguments for this form of interpreter education, raised mainly by those teachers who combine their academic work with professional interpreting, were, for instance, the need to put trainee interpreters in a real-life interpreter booth to learn how to interact and cooperate with booth mates and co-solve ongoing problems; this would hardly be viable in online settings. Furthermore, another argument for brick-and-mortar education of interpreters, also mentioned mostly by academic teachers with professional interpreting experience, is that in the post-pandemic times, many interpreters will return to their booths in international organisations and, therefore, training for them should take place in an authentic booth, not a virtual one.

A thought-provoking and well-justified argument concerns the teaching of note-taking. During online classes, teachers usually do not have direct access to students' notes. For this reason, they cannot glance at the notes taken, comment on the note-taking style nor provide advice on how to do it more effectively. Thus, this aspect of interpreter education is perhaps better practised through face-to-face classes in a university classroom.

Quite a few respondents also referred to better contact and interaction with interpreting students in a traditional interpreting lab since they have nothing to hide behind (i.e. the computer) and no excuse for not working (i.e. malfunctioning equipment). Indeed, these arguments may be justified, considering that the teacher is sometimes unable to control students' activities in a virtual

environment. Moreover, in traditional settings, interpreting students' bodily reactions and body language can be observed and commented on, especially given that people under various stressful conditions, of which interpreting is an example, tend to exhibit specific uncontrolled body movements or use gestures. This way, they can be made aware of what they must work on if they plan their career as professional interpreters.

Only three interpreting teachers (7%) were in favour of online training only. To support their selection, they state that they anticipate that interpreting services will be increasingly rendered in the online-only form, which reduces the costs and time for the client and the interpreter, respectively. One respondent observed that trainee interpreters are not interested in participating in traditional classes for pragmatic reasons. However, this answer was not further developed, so it might only be hypothesised that the trainer meant trainee interpreters' pure convenience of not having to commute to the university. One more argument mentioned by those trainers was that organising distance classes is much easier as there are no problems with booth-equipped interpreting labs, which are usually few and thus often occupied by other trainee interpreter groups/trainers.

The percentage distribution of the respondents' preferences concerning post-COVID-19 interpreter training forms is presented in Chart 2.
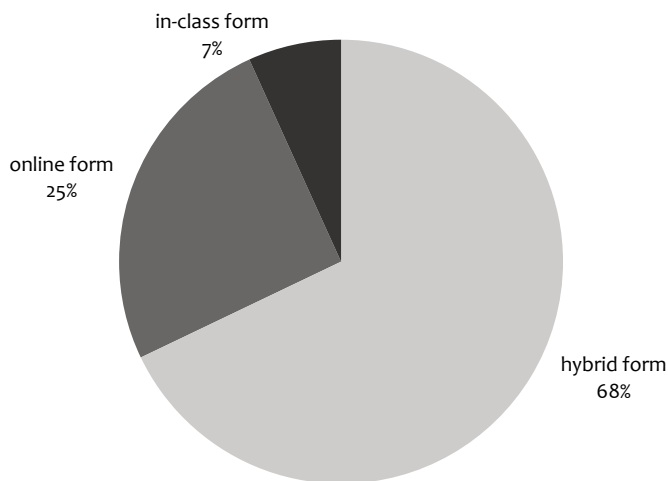

Chart 2: Distribution of the respondents' preferences concerning post-COVID-19 interpreter training form

To sum up, from the above discussion emerges that there are many arguments in favour of the combination of distance and traditional forms of interpreter education. Nonetheless, some opinions pinpointing the reasons for

traditional classes are equally valid and well-grounded. Considering all the data discussed above, it may be suggested that what seems to be an optimal solution is the hybrid form, which would use the potential of technology in interpreting, not disregarding the fact that much interpreting still takes place in real life. Therefore, it might be anticipated that computer-assisted interpreting training and tools will stay with interpreting teachers. Hence, there are grounds to believe that in the years to come, i.e. in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, hybrid interpreting teaching will be more widespread as it has proved beneficial in at least several ways.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper aimed to show how Polish teachers of interpreting perceived the strengths and weaknesses of remote interpreting classes, which they had to adapt to due to the COVID-19 pandemic-forced changes.

In the first part of this paper, attention was paid to COVID-19-influenced interpreting studies. Interpreting scholars have observed that the interpreting market and interpreter education have undergone significant changes resulting from the pandemic. Therefore, in their research activities, they have been trying to capture the essence of those modifications, thereby contributing to expanding the research themes taken up in interpreting studies.

The second part addressed the Internet- and technology-based innovations implemented in interpreter training. It transpires that computer-assisted interpreting training tools can facilitate the development of a variety of skills that are part of the generally understood interpreter competence.

The final section of this study focused on discussing a fraction of the data obtained from forty-one Polish interpreter trainers who participated in the survey on COVID-19-forced online interpreter education. All respondents, perhaps like the entire higher education system employees, had to respond to the challenge of moving interpreting teaching online by reorganising their teaching formats, redesigning the course syllabi and curricula, or modifying assessment forms and feedback provision channels. In other words, many of those teaching interpreting had to re-formulate their thinking about distance education. In fact, what emerges from the analysis of just a handful of the data obtained is that, although some of the teachers see drawbacks and deficiencies in this form of providing interpreting teaching, quite many appreciate newly used technological innovations and Internet-based solutions to such an extent that they would be willing to use them in their future teaching endeavours. Such conclusions may be drawn from the study since most respondents opted for either hybrid interpreter training, combining traditional, university-based classes with online forms, or online-only interpreter courses. There were relatively few

Polish teachers of interpreting who were unsatisfied with the obligatory online teaching and would, therefore, still insist on the traditional manner of educating future interpreters.

On the whole, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the inclusion of modern technological and Internet-based solutions into interpreting training curricula and made them more prevalent. Before that time, there were some attention-grabbing initiatives of training interpreters in virtual environments but, as odd as it sounds, it is thanks to the pandemic that a heavier reliance on distance education tools in interpreter education can be observed. Hence, it may be hoped that these solutions will aid interpreting students in developing their skills more comprehensively to make them better prepared to meet real-life market needs, which often involve remote interpreting in various settings.

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