Teaching Translation and Interpreting in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

Interest in online teaching and learning has grown rapidly since the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As universities across the world decided to transfer their teaching provision online, translation and interpreting (T&I) educators faced the daunting task of delivering their courses effectively in this new mode. Common challenges included: designing and administering suitable assessments, ensuring student engagement, and fostering peer collaboration and interaction. Research in the field of online and distance learning provides a rich source of information to address these challenges, and yet, it remains underexplored despite its potential to inform and enhance T&I teaching practices. We introduce this special issue by presenting some fruitful research areas that could provide new directions for T&I pedagogy and improve our students' remote learning experiences in the future. It is against this backdrop that the special issue was conceived. Contributions cover teaching translation and interpreting at a distance, and contextual issues and trends resulting from the act of teaching T&I online.

KEYWORDS

Online learning, COVID-19, translator education, interpreter education, remote learning and teaching.

Unsurprisingly, interest in online teaching and learning has accelerated rapidly since the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The impetus has come from universities needing to transfer their teaching provision online and has led to educators across the world looking for new ways to deliver their courses and learning objectives using virtual learning environments and other distance-learning methods. The widespread and increasing interest in the topic of online teaching in Translation and Interpreting (T&I) more specifically is documented by a recent set of workshops organised in 2020 by the UK Association of Programmes in Translation and Interpreting Studies (APTIS), which covered topics ranging from distanced supervision of postgraduate students to facilitating remote interpreter training. This initiative provided valuable support to T&I educators in search of immediate and effective solutions to online teaching and learning. The rapid transition, however, has not been without ongoing challenges including, but not limited to, designing and administering suitable assessments, ensuring student engagement, and fostering peer collaboration and interaction. While a few T&I programmes were already fully delivered online and well-equipped to meet these challenges—ensuing a number of months or even years of planning, development, and testing—the vast majority faced an unprecedented shift in terms of their instructional delivery.

Shifts are not new in the interdisciplinary field of Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS). As TIS has become increasingly established over the last few decades, its teaching methods and content have adapted to the realities of the profession but also to evolving epistemologies, such as the shift in focus from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching practices

(e.g. Klimkowski and Klimkowska 2012). Scholarly work in TIS can also be said to have influenced translation and interpreting pedagogies, for instance by highlighting the importance of the mediation process alongside source and target content and emphasising the need to focus on students' critical self-awareness (Colina and Venuti 2017). Technological developments have also revolutionised the T&I industry and, as such, a number of new practices—ranging from software localisation to remote interpreting—have gradually carved themselves a space in our curriculums. In many ways, educational theory has been the underlying force that drove forward the most substantial shifts and deeply impacted T&I teaching, as can be seen for example in the widespread application of Kiraly's ([2000]/2014, 2001) constructivist teaching methods and the implementation in many classrooms of the collaborative task-based approach proposed by González-Davies (2004).

However, while T&I pedagogy has drawn heavily from a number of educational theories and methods, it seems fair to say that much of the research in the field of online and distance learning remains underexplored and underused despite its potential to inform T&I teaching practices. As Colina and Angelelli (2016: 114) observe, the following areas in distance learning need further study due to their relevance for T&I pedagogy: motivation, community of learners, teacher/student and student/student interaction, and discourse in the virtual classroom. A foray into the field of online learning, however, must be accompanied by a solid grasp of what we understand by this term. Researchers in online and distance learning have, over a number of years, carefully defined and distinguished between the vastly different modes of delivery that have been developed and implemented: online learning, distance learning, mobile learning, distributed learning, blended learning, and others. Each mode has distinguishing features, though the term 'online learning' is often misused or overused as an umbrella term (Singh and Thurman 2019: 301).

In a recent systematic review of definitions of online learning, Singh and Thurman (2019: 302) conclude that a clear definition of online learning should include the following elements: (1) clear domain delineation of the concept to avoid overlapping and confusing terms, (2) explication of use of technology, (3) clear articulation of whether the teaching is in a synchronous environment or an asynchronous environment, (4) interactivity/learning examples, and (5) an acknowledgement of the role of physical distance, if any. These components of the definition serve to highlight the various elements that online learning encompasses and to provide an indication of the many associated and fruitful research areas that this field covers. For instance, substantial work has been carried out in online learning design (Beetham and Sharpe (eds) 2013; Chipere 2017; Donald *et al.* 2009), learner-content interaction (Tagoe and Cole 2020; Ettazarini 2017; Xiao 2017), technology enhanced assessment and feedback (Kirkwood and Price 2008, 2014; Rogerson-Revell 2015; Uribe and Vaughan 2017), the development of digital learners (Dray *et al*. 2011;

Selwyn 2011; Wei and Chou 2020), and issues of ethics, inclusivity, accessibility and inclusion (Croft and Brown 2020; Kelly and Mills 2007; Kotera *et al*. 2019) to name a few. When discussing new directions for T&I pedagogies, Colina and Angelelli (2016: 114) anticipated that the focus would turn to "learning how to teach translation/interpreting to students with various levels of linguistic proficiency and how to create reasonable outcomes and evaluation methods for a variety of student profiles." Clearly, the extensive literature in online and distance learning has the potential to guide T&I educators along this path and present new solutions for effective online learning experiences in the future.

Perhaps one of the most prominent concerns of educators delivering emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has been student motivation and engagement. Many have found that their expertise in building a sense of community in face-to-face classrooms did not adequately prepare them for the challenges of engaging students in an online teaching context. As Hodges *et al.* (2020: 6) highlight, research on different types of interaction (including student–content, student–student, and student–learner) is one of the more robust bodies of research in online learning. Integrating these types of interaction in a way that increases learning outcomes and supports the learning process is something that needs to be carefully planned and thought-through. Similarly to in-person teaching, which requires "an overall ecosystem specifically designed to support learners with formal, informal, and social resources" (Hodges et al. 2020: 6), building a learning community online also necessitates investment in a multi-componential system of learner support which, as Hodges *et al.* note, takes time to identify and build. In their study of the perceived effectiveness of an online 20-week Business Interpreting and Translation (BIT) Certificate Program designed for the South Korean context, Lee and Huh (2018) come to a similar conclusion, noting that the instructional design of online classes is key in encouraging peer interactions and that substantial management and organisation efforts are required across the entire programme to boost the social aspect of the online learning community.

In spite of these challenges, there is substantial evidence to suggest that a relationship exists between interaction, reflection, and learning in online and distance education (Herring *et al.* (eds) 2016; Roberts 2002; Williams-Shakespeare 2019). In TIS, this link was clearly highlighted by Kenny (2008) who explored the impact of task structure on student interaction in an online translation exercise module, and concluded that online interactions are conducive to high levels of cognitive activity when the task structure is appropriate. In the same vein, when presenting ways to integrate online learning activities in a healthcare interpreting course in Poland, Tymczyńska (2009) also notes that productive learning and reflection takes place when active participation is embedded in well-designed (both face-to-face and virtual) interpreting tasks. Although research in this area is still in its infancy in TIS, it shows promise and

portends that the study of online and distance learning in T&I settings has the potential to add to our understanding of best practices in translator and interpreter training. It may move the field forward and enable the kind of curricular and pedagogical innovation and improvement that Venuti argued for, in a field where consolidation and stability could otherwise have led to a potential resistance to change (2017: 2).

Clearly, there is a meaningful difference between well-planned online learning experiences and courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster (Hodges *et al.* 2020). While emergency remote teaching in T&I may not be able to take full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format, it nonetheless presents an opportunity to rethink and enhance our teaching practices. It is against this backdrop that the present Special Issue on Teaching Translation and Interpreting in Virtual Environments attracted over 50 abstracts from scholars across the world. These article proposals spanned a wide range of issues, but they also served to document how much we still need to learn about teaching T&I in virtual spaces. Of the 53 proposals submitted for this Special Issue, 7 were selected by the editors for submissions as full manuscripts, and subject to double-blind peer review. We acknowledge with grateful thanks the efforts of 15 reviewers who assisted in the selection process.

We now turn our attention to discussion of the seven papers that survived the review process to be included in this Special Issue. These papers might be loosely categorised as to whether they concentrate on teaching translation, teaching interpreting, or contextual issues and trends resulting from the act of teaching T&I online.

Lyu Wang and Xiangling Wang investigate the building of virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) during a post-editing course, and how this process can facilitate the kind of social interaction that constitutes a fundamental part of learning but—as previously noted—can be challenging to implement in distance learning contexts. The study compared virtual and face-to-face student experiences and performance in a post-editing course, and found a number of interesting findings in relation to translator performance, self-reflection, and engagement. In addition to the many benefits that students in the VCoP experienced, one of the findings from the research that ought to be of interest to all translation educators was that collaborative engagement in virtual learning environments seems to enable students to develop into more responsible and independent learners.

In their article, **Egan Valentine and Janice Wong** also address the challenge of fostering a sense of community and explore the effects that collaboration, interaction, and deeper learning have had in the context of their online translation courses in Canada. One of the unique aspects of their article is that it reports on three case studies that took place over the course of a 10-year period. The data they present were collected via forums and synchronous discussions between students and staff. Interestingly, the

authors found that a/synchronous discussions during translation problem-solving have the potential to decrease the transactional distance between students and staff, and to be a catalyst for student engagement and higher-order thinking.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Barbara Ahrens, Morven Beaton-Thome and Anja Rütten** report on their experience of teaching conference interpreting remotely. In order to investigate the effect of a sudden move to online teaching, they conducted a longitudinal study amongst MA students and staff, and administered a weekly questionnaire to track the effects of this change in relation to several indicators: strain and fatigue, time invested in the online provision, efficiency, and quality of interactions. Their results revealed that interaction suffered the most, especially in the form of peer-to-peer observation. The authors also identified various factors that could influence the success of online teaching, from group size to the type of feedback provided, and the provision of tailored technical solutions.

Still on the topic of interpreting, **Leah Gerber, Jim Hlavac, Irwyn Shepherd, Paul McIntosh, Alex Avella Archila, and Hyein Cho** take a relatively uncommon approach to training and investigate some ways in which students' experiences can be enhanced using innovative technologies. They describe a project on the use of Virtual Reality (VR) to train students to interpret within the field of family violence. More specifically, in this article, they provide details on the pedagogical underpinnings of the project and, by sharing their experience, they offer a possible blueprint to explore alternative and realistic teaching methodologies. A wider adoption of VR could help to minimise future sudden disruptions to students' learning, but it also offers new perspectives and areas to explore that could complement current face-to-face provision.

In their article, **Mehmet Şahin and Sevket Benhur Oral** look at the transition to online teaching through the lens of platform capitalism, focusing on student/teacher relationships and the impact on these of working in digital ecosystems. Their study of TIS students and instructors in Turkey revealed, amongst other aspects, that many students feel a lack of agency and control in relation to their life and work, sometimes exacerbated by the online teaching model. An important point made in the article is that the benefits of working online must not come at the expense of educational purpose, which the authors—adopting Biesta's view—define as students' capacity to remain independent from the existing orders of society by challenging their uncontested insertion into these orders.

Di Wu and Lan Wei tackle the move to online teaching from a different perspective and focus on translator educators' beliefs about their own abilities to cope with various aspects of the sudden transition. With many universities focusing on—and often prioritising—the student experience, it is refreshing to read about the experiences of teachers during the pandemic

in the Australasian context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the research revealed some gaps in terms of prior experience and training in online teaching which impacted teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, but the study also found that important skills and confidence were also gained in a number of areas. This research provides valuable information which could usefully feed into the future training and development of translator educators.

In **Segun Afolabi** and **Oludamilola Oyetoyan**'s article, we learn about the impact of the pandemic on T&I education in a number of African countries. The authors compare the transition to online teaching in the Global North with what has taken place in some universities in the Global South and identify some unique challenges that seem to have hindered the smooth transition to online learning for many T&I programmes in Africa. Drawing on findings from a survey of T&I students and educators in Benin, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo, the authors analyse a number of benefits and drawbacks of lockdown teaching identified by participants. This contribution provides important insights into some of what has taken place in African contexts during the global COVID-19 pandemic, enabling us to access perspectives located outside what Mona Baker called "the typical centres of scholarly dominance in Europe and the Anglophone world." (2021: xvii)

This special issue covers a wide range of questions linked to teaching T&I in virtual spaces. We hope that it marks the start of more research in this exciting field, as there is clearly scope for a great deal of further studies. Finally, we wish that we could have included more of the research that we read in the initial proposals submitted for this issue of *JoSTrans*. Fortunately, there are many different outlets for these important contributions as it has become clear that teaching T&I in virtual environments is a valid and important area of research which has been neglected for far too long.

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