**A Few Notes on Teaching Translation and Interpreting Online**

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**Abstract**

The paper focuses on the author’s experience with teaching the translation and interpreting seminars online during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explains how the lessons were optimised on the go and how the technological support provided by the university evolved to address the teachers’ and students’ needs. Last but not least, it focuses on the students’ opinions on the quality of the online seminars and compares the data with the findings of other researchers dealing with this subject matter.

**Keywords:** translation, interpreting, remote teaching, Covid-19 pandemic

# Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic started in spring of 2020, none of us were prepared for its major impact on our lives. This situation forced many teachers to invest their personal resources into upgrading their home offices as the situation was unprecedented and all schools in Slovakia were scrambling to provide the employees with the necessary equipment. In summer, the situation improved, but in September, it took a nose dive. But this time, we were prepared. This paper presents the methods and strategies used by the author to teach translation and interpreting remotely throughout the pandemic.

# 1 An overview of the existing research

In the context of the pandemic, Pérez-Villalobos et al. (p. 2, 2021) have defined Emergency Remote Teaching (RT) as “presenting a fast and transitory solution to the impossibility to keep up face-to-face work due to a passing problem, and hoping to return to the prior mode after that.” However, it seems that this problem is not passing (Kissler et al. 2020) and RT may become an integral part of education. Across different countries, the students’ attitude to remote teaching varies based on a number of factors, e.g. whether they study theoretical disciplines or need practical training (Pérez-Villalobos et al., 2021). Watermeyer, R., Crick, T., Knight, C. et al. (2020) performed a survey among higher education teachers in the UK and found out that it was perceived as an “unusual, disorienting and even an unwelcome experience”. Major increase in workload, pressure, stress, and problems balancing personal and work life was reported.

Emergency RT affected children at all stages of education, which means that teacher-parents had to both teach online and ensure their own children were learning. The situation was critical mainly for women (Minello, 2020) who are still expected to perform the caretaker roles in emergency situations and at the same time, work full-time.

Several researchers across Slovakia have investigated the impact of the pandemic on teaching translation and interpreting, but no results have been published so far. Hopefully, in the course of 2021, the findings will be consolidated and an overall picture of the situation will be available for comparison.

# 2 Ad hoc solutions

## 2.1 Simultaneous interpreting (SI)

The hi-tech interpreting laboratories at the faculty were inaccessible during the closure. As Djovčoš and Šveda (p. 118, 2021) have pointed out, “it is impossible to teach SI via the standard remote learning software of MS Teams or Zoom and Discord platforms used at Slovak universities”. The laboratory offers a full conference system, which is no luxury – it is the essential equipment. The pandemic made us take a major leap forward when Comenius University in Bratislava and Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica teamed up and commissioned a specialised software.

During the first online semester, SI was taught the “old way” because the common platforms do not provide the necessary combination of channels with respective directions. This brief model explains the problem in a simplified way:

Input 1 (speaker) → interpreter (input 2)

Input 2 (interpreter) → audience

In common platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams, Input 1 and Input 2 cancel each other out.

This problem can be (at least partly) tackled as follows:

1. Recording:
2. all students mute their microphone and set up the recording software (e.g. Audacity)
3. teacher streams the speaker
4. students record their interpreting performance
5. the performance is analysed.

This approach is inconvenient and time-consuming. The recording can be streamed to other students and the group can analyse it together, or the students are asked to transcribe it and fill in the Machová’s (2016) self-assessment form. Alternatively, the students can switch their transcripts and recordings to perform peer review. However, the first semester of online teaching showed that his approach was overloading the students and slowing down the progress as analysis was performed at the expense of training.

1. Dummy interpreting – The teacher streams the speech through a common platform and the students interpret without being heard by anyone. It saves time, but the disadvantage is obvious: the students get no feedback whatsoever. However, they were always reminded to record themselves if they wanted to analyse their performance outside the lessons.
2. Combining devices – This method is quite desperate, but nevertheless, it works. The students can listen to the input streamed through a common platform and record themselves or send their output through an application on their smartphone.

Most frequently we used dummy interpreting, less frequently recording, and if the situation was dire, devices were combined.

At the beginning of 2021, we finally received the first version of the VirtualLab online interpreting laboratory designed by Contest. As for advantages, we were finally possible to train SI real-time without having to resort to improvisation and the application has quite good UX as well. As for disadvantages, the application has extreme requirements for the teacher’s computer, e.g. the teacher cannot share streaming (everything needs to be downloaded), bugs were removed on the go (it felt like a beta version at the beginning), and the Relay function was added only after the summer semester has ended, therefore we skipped training relay interpreting and chuchotage in practice.

## 2.2 Consecutive interpreting (CI)

Booths are not helpful in teaching CI. In practice, the interpreter has to face their clients and even perform in front of large audiences. Therefore, it is necessary to force the students out of their comfort zone and make them train CI in front of the whole class or even better, on a stage in an auditorium. Obviously, this was not possible during RT.

For teaching structuring, notation, and oral expression, common platforms were sufficient. CI requires body control and this part was impossible to train real-time, but students can be filmed during their performance and apply self- or peer-evaluation.

## 2.3 Translation

Translation was taught using MS Teams, which was quite convenient, even slightly faster when the students simply shared their screens instead of taking turns at the main computer in the lab. The typical issues related to slow connection and hardware requirements (MS Teams needs a 2-core processor with 4GB RAM to run properly[[1]](#footnote-1)) occurred.

It needs to be pointed out that the Kilgray company was very helpful and immediately provided the students with home licences for the memoQ CAT upon request. In this case, the transition was quite smooth and students were not deprived of anything. Troubleshooting took some time, but after we adapted and learned the multiple-step procedures by heart, MS Teams became quite comfortable.

The experience with remote teaching of translation led to a convenient little discovery applicable in the presence teaching as well: logging to MS Teams in the lab and sharing screens instead of physically moving across the classroom will considerably speed up the lessons.

# 3 Survey results

The author performed a survey among the MBU Master students of translation and interpreting (n=30) to collect their opinions on remote teaching (RT) in June 2021 (after the semester has been completed). The findings can be summarised as follows. 24.1% of the respondents were in the final year and 75.9% have just completed the first year of their Master studies. 46.7% of the respondents felt their study load did not increase during the period of RT while 33.3% felt it. This finding suggests that perception was highly individual. 70% of respondents felt less stressed. Interestingly, as many as 50% would like to combine remote and presence teaching in the future if possible, 30% would like to continue online, and only 20% explicitly wish to return to school. 80% were satisfied with the way translation was taught while only 60% liked the way interpreting was taught. 7 students provided comments: one demanded more individual attention during translation seminars, while another student demanded higher tempo, which is in direct contradiction with the teacher’s ability to pay individual, high-school type attention to each student. It also depends on the tempo of the students in the given class which is highly diverse – some students are quick thinkers while others take their time. As for interpreting, students complained specifically about the software.

Another set of questions allowed students to choose what they liked and disliked about RT. 80% liked that travelling was eliminated, 63.3% liked that many teachers let students contact them real-time regardless of the consulting hours, therefore issues were resolved right away. 3 students honestly confessed they liked the fact that no one could physically stop them from turning off their camera although the teachers pleaded them not to. The personal experience of the author suggests that openly explaining the students how “teaching into the void” feels may help. Students sometimes seem to forget that teachers are just humans too, but the whole situation was exhausting for everyone involved. 60% were annoyed about the constant technical issues. 12% believed that interpreting seminars did not cover the same exercises as it would in person. 66.7% students felt exhausted sitting in front of the computer all the time. 63.3% missed social life, which is less than expected.

It needs to be pointed out that the results of the final exams were perfectly comparable with the previous years, which suggests that neither the quality of teaching, nor students’ performance was affected in reality.

# Conclusion

The paper presented selected problems related to teaching translation and interpreting online during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 and explained how the author tackled them in practice. As Pérez-Villalobos et al. (2021) have correctly pointed out, it was emergency RT.

In simultaneous interpreting, recording, dummy interpreting, and device combining was used before the VirtualLab application was supplied. In consecutive interpreting, common platforms were sufficient. However, not all forms of interpreting could be trained during the lessons due to objective reasons (e.g. chuchotage requires physical proximity and the Relay function was not available at the very beginning). RT of translation can be summarised as convenient, some experience can even be transferred to presence teaching.

The survey, which collected opinions of Master students of translation and interpreting (n=30) at Matej Bel University in June 2021, resulted in highly diverse findings. As Perez and Hodáková (in print) have pointed out, “handling and experiencing different types of load, the ability to maintain sufficient focus and attention in class, and the need for social contact are all strongly dependent on aspects such as personality and character traits and cognitive abilities.”

80% of the students were satisfied with remote translation seminars; the complaints included technical issues, slow tempo, and lack of individual attention (the last two are contradictory). 60% of the students were satisfied with remote interpreting seminars; respondents complained specifically about software imperfection, not the teaching style or methods. As many as 50% of the respondents would like to combine the remote and presence forms of study despite the complaints.

To sum up, RT provided flexibility and to some extent, even compensated social deprivation during the winter isolation. The whole situation required resourcefulness, which improved our technical and problem-solving skills. For example, we created a podcast[[2]](#footnote-2) to compensate for the missing lectures with experts from the external environment. As Pérez-Villalobos et al. (p. 14, 2021) have pointed out, “disaster planning must be incorporated to the strategic plans of university organizations”.

**Resumé**

Príspevok sa zaoberá vyučovaním prekladu a tlmočenia počas koronavírusovej pandémie v rokoch 2020 – 2021. Predstavujeme v ňom stručné informácie o výsledkoch najnovších výskumov týkajúcich sa hodnotenia učenia na diaľku z pohľadu študentov aj učiteľov. Autorka počas pandémie vyučovala na diaľku predmety konzekutívne/simultánne tlmočenie a odborný preklad, v príspevku preto sumarizuje, aké problémy pri tom vznikali, a akými stratégiami ich riešila. Poslednú časť príspevku tvorí prieskum u študentov, v ktorom nielen hodnotili jednotlivé aspekty učenia sa týchto predmetov na diaľku, ale dostali aj možnosť konkrétne formulovať svoje výhrady.

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1. Source: https://docs.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/hardware-requirements-for-the-teams-app [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Playlist: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKhL6nj\_mpXRFcxzXJlOUVEZpzgbouTf\_ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)