

Exploring New Ways in Translator and Interpreter Training: A Student Adaptation Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some preliminary results of the pandemic-driven emergency shift to online teaching undertaken at the Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies of Moscow City University, Russia in the spring semester of the academic year 2019/2020. The study focuses on transition-to-online strategies used by instructors and adaptation levels demonstrated by undergraduate and graduate students taking intermediate and proficiency courses in translation and interpreting. It is argued that two major factors contribute to successful student adaptation under stressful circumstances of coronavirus-instigated disruptions: motivation and community involvement.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; translator training; online mode; student adaptation

1. Introduction

Across the globe, the spring semester of the year 2019/2020 turned out to be a nightmare for nearly everyone in academia due to numerous problems caused by the coronavirus crisis. While students worried about lacking technical equipment, closed campuses, and expiring visas, and administrators faced financial and management issues, it was instructors who found themselves ultimately responsible for the smooth transition to the new learning environment. Apart from the technical issues and emotional instability most likely experienced by both students and educators across all disciplines and subject areas, some parties to the education process in certain professional areas turned out to be in a less advantageous situation due to field specifics making the shift to online learning much more complicated. In this respect, translator and interpreter training was one of the worst hit fields in Russian universities, as national Higher Education programs in Linguistics and Translation Studies are very much dependent on face-to-face interaction between students and trainers.

Online translation and interpreting courses are not inventions of the COVID-19 crisis. All kinds of web-powered courses for translators-in-training are available across the globe in various formats and for audiences of different learning levels. They may focus on general translation skills or be topic-/competence-specific, and may have some professional prerequisites or work on the open-entrance basis. Additionally, degree courses in translation and interpreting developed by professional educators are also available online, either on mass education platforms or on universities' websites. There is a large volume of research on methods and techniques of improving teaching approaches used in virtual translator training and boosting student performance in online translator classes, not to mention reports on integrating web-based translation tools into conventional instruction (see, for instance Kajzer-Wietrzny and Tymczynska 2014; Bilic 2020). Regardless of teaching paradigms and specific didactic solutions, the status and delivery style of web-based translation courses, their relevance for the professional community, and high demand on the part of trainees prove the efficacy and practical merit of the online format.

Against the solid training background described above and extensive discussions of distant-mode options for translator training in professional literature (Ko 2008; Morris, Rothman and Owens 2020), the issue of the unplanned transitioning of university courses to the virtual learning space seems to be exaggerated, as existing practices of teaching translation and interpreting skills online could be used as a methodological basis for the emergency shift. However, when it comes to the implementation stage, it turns out that there are no ready-made solutions that could be used as groundwork for the coronavirus-triggered change. Much of the related up-to-date research focuses on the potential of technology in e-training (Kajzer-Wietrzny and Tymczynska 2014; Spinolo and Amato 2020), development of course tools and materials (Prandi 2020), and the use of blended-learning models (Kościałkowska-Okońska 2019), which, undoubtedly, holds high value for instructors, but, unfortunately, is not of much assistance in urgent planning of an unexpected shift to online mode. The conceptual framework of available Internet-based translation courses could not be seen as a model due to the fact that online courses were originally intended and designed as such, which could not but affect their structure, curriculum, content configuration, working tools, and performance evaluation.

The present research, therefore, reports on some aspects of a mid-term transition to the online format of teaching translation and interpreting skills. Specifically, it examines student adaptation mechanisms under new virus-imposed circumstances attempting to investigate the

differences between students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs as well as the role of the course orientation factor.

2. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

As stated above, the present research focuses on students majoring in Translation and Interpreting Studies and aims at exploring their adaptation potential and strategies under the conditions of an emergency mid-term shift to a virtual learning environment. The study offers some insights on the specifics of students' adaptation in different levels of training (second-year bachelor's degree students and first-year master's degree students) and seeks to examine adaptation patterns in transferring theoretical vs. practical, and translation vs. interpreting courses.

3. Study Design and Data

3.1. Courses and Participants

Moscow City University (MCU) offers two professional training programs aimed at developing translation and interpreting skills – a four-year program for undergraduate students majoring in linguistics and a two-year program for graduate students working towards their master's degree in Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication. Both programs provide practical and theoretical training in English-to-Russian and Russian-to-English translation and interpreting, the undergraduate one including both introductory and specialized courses in spoken and written English, intercultural communication, language theory, and linguistic research, and the graduate one focusing on more subject-oriented and task-specific courses. Students are exposed to specialized translation courses in their first year of study, the education process relying on the active learning approach (Tareva and Kasantseva 2011; Tareva 2011; Tareva 2015; Suleimanova, Fomina and Vodyanitskaya 2020) extensively promoted by the Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies and successfully implemented in original course books on translation theory (Suleimanova et al. 2012) and linguistic research fundamentals (Suleimanova, Fomina and Tivyaeva 2020).

By March 2020, when a national lockdown was declared in Russia, the spring semester at MCU had been progressing for four weeks, so all professional training courses were about a quarter

of the way through. This research letter takes the form of a case study and examines four courses affected by the unplanned mid-term transition.

Two courses – ‘General Translation Theory’ and ‘Translation of Political Texts’ – were delivered to second-year bachelor’s degree students (n=38). ‘General Translation Theory’ is a theoretical course designed to familiarize students, regardless of Language 1 and Language 2, with central concepts of translation theory and prominent scholars, researchers, and translators working to expand our understanding of how translation works. It also covers the historical and cultural context of translation studies in Russia and abroad, focusing on key strategies and the concept of equivalence and appropriateness in translation.

‘Translation of Political Texts’ is a practical course in the translation of thematically oriented English texts, which is intended to introduce second-year bachelor’s degree students to fundamentals of their future profession by training them in written, consecutive, and sight translation of authentic materials covering burning issues of contemporary global politics. Would-be translators are also trained to develop note-taking skills and enhance short-term memory performance.

First-year graduate students (n=13) were also enrolled into theory- and practice-oriented classes: ‘Theoretical Aspects of Translation’ and ‘Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting’ respectively. ‘Theoretical Aspects of Translation’ provides a comprehensive overview of structural differences between English and Russian that are relevant in terms of translation, focusing in particular on word order, functional sentence perspective, sentence semantics, and pragmatics.

‘Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting’ seeks to develop basic English-to-Russian interpreting skills and introduces students to various techniques used by professional interpreters to prepare for interpreting sessions, control the actual process, be proficient in note-taking, handle stress, and so on. The course originally relied on numerous group and face-to-face activities.

The student body totaled 51 trainees of which 13 were working towards their master’s degree and 38 were undergraduate students. Graduate participants had both prior training in language-related occupations and relevant work experience. All of them held bachelor’s degrees in

Linguistics, Foreign Languages, or Philology, so their training expectations were quite realistic and their motivation levels were high. Undergraduate students were majoring in Linguistics and had no prior professional training. They either had no work experience or held part-time jobs not related to translation or other language services.

3.2. Procedures and Instruments

The research was conducted in qualitative mode and relied on data obtained via three major methods: class observations, student self-assessment, and performance evaluation. Both undergraduate and graduate students were informed that the shift process was being monitored in search of better solutions, and their feedback was of high value to supervisors and trainers struggling to reshape courses for a smoother transition and more satisfying learning experience. Students were encouraged to participate in surveys and discussions to have their voices heard and issues addressed, however, it was made clear to them that their answers were not evaluated and requirements towards getting course credit and the final grade were not in any way affected by either their choice or any information disclosed. Students also knew that no pressure or bias was exercised as regards their participation in surveys and questionnaire submission deadlines.

To assess student adaptation levels, a four-grade scale was developed presupposing the following shift outcomes: Successful, Acceptable, Requiring Assistance, Adaptation Failure. The grade was calculated as a sum of points assigned to each student on the basis of his or her performance which was evaluated in accordance with the criteria below: 1) technological advances (tackling technical issues), 2) psychological and emotional well-being, 3) class activity involvement, 4) class performance and learning outcome.

Each of the criteria was assigned values within the range of [0 – 3], in which 3 indicates successful adaptation to the new course format, 2 stands for the acceptable level of adaptation with minor issues in two or three spheres selected as key indicators, 1 marks a borderline case and 0 points at an adaptation failure. For instance, when a student's class activity involvement was assessed (Criterion 3), the class observation method was applied and the following indicators were taken into consideration: 1) a student regularly misses online training sessions, providing inadequate excuses, or joins class meetings and remains online while the session is on without actually responding either in writing or in voice – 0 points; 2) a student attends online sessions but refrains from contributing to class activities – 1 point; 3) a student

participates in class activities when asked to do so, volunteering on occasions – 2 points; 4) a student is willing to be involved in class activities, showing enthusiasm for leadership roles – 3 points. Thus, the total score a student could obtain was calculated as a sum of points gained for each criterion, the maximum reaching 12 points and the minimum lining up at 0. Score-to-grade correlations are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Correlations between students' total scores and adaptation levels

	Successful	Acceptable	Requiring assistance	Failed
Score Range	10-12	7-9	3-6	0-2

Students in each class were ranked on the basis of the total score and distributed among the four graded categories accordingly. For example, two undergraduate students in 'General Translation Theory' and 'Translation of Political Texts' were assigned 1 point for Criterion 1 (technological advances), 1 point for Criterion 4 (class performance and learning outcome) and 0 points for Criteria 2 and 3 (psychological well-being and class activity involvement), the total score amounting to 2 and placing them in the lowest position in the ranking. Their adaptation was therefore assessed as Failed, which is represented as percentage in Table 2 below. Failed adaptation did not, however, entail any negative consequences for students in terms of class credit, but was instead interpreted as indicative of situations requiring more attention on the part of the tutor.

As stated above, my conclusions are based on data obtained in the course of class observations, student self-assessment, and performance evaluation. Class observations were held on a weekly basis after the shift to online learning was completed. Each online session was recorded, all records being stored in the corporate MCU 'cloud'. Students were observed for their class participation, enthusiasm, and involvement level as well as psychological and emotional state. Systemic observations were also used for assessing trainees' technical competence. Students were informed that online training sessions were being recorded, a red indicator remaining active on the Microsoft Teams menu panel while the recording was on. The idea of organizing a video archive of online classes was originally put forward by graduate students who were unable to join one of our first meetings due to some technical issues and asked for a recording to make up for the class they were unable to attend. Recordings were also later used in 'Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting' as a retrospective analysis tool. As all students at

MCU's Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies still have two or three days of online training in the spring semester of the academic year 2020/2021, session recording has become a common practice supported by all parties to the learning process and is now expected by default.

Student self-assessment relied on questionnaires, self-assessment reports, and retrospective protocols. Questionnaires were provided via the Google Forms service and included questions dealing with the technical aspects of the online format, students' psychological and emotional health, their interest in class activities, course contentment, and general concerns. Surveys were held every week until the end of the semester. Most questions on the list were open-ended as this format seemed to be more effective in helping to expose hidden bottlenecks and understand students' experiences. A sample survey fragment is demonstrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Sample survey questions

Questions	
1.	What shift-induced challenges related to academic activities are you facing?
2.	How can we help you address these challenges?
3.	What is crucial to change in class to improve your learning experience?
4.	What new activities would you suggest trying in class?

Self-assessment reports were collected twice – on week 5 and week 10 after the transition. Students were to evaluate their own progress as Excellent, Good, or Unsatisfactory. Retrospective protocols were offered after the courses were completed, that is, after students passed the exam or were given credit for their work during the semester. Participants were encouraged to share their course impressions, evaluate the courses' efficacy, and suggest ways to improve it. As the new training environment triggered transformations in regular student-mentor communication, making it more person- rather than class-oriented, a few students from each class preferred to share their concerns privately, contacting me via institutional email or Microsoft Teams chat rather than filling in questionnaires. Class discussions also contributed to empirical data as many trainees were eager to share their impressions and expectations.

The performance evaluation procedure required analytical processing of test results and the general course outcome. It was heavily dependent on test grades, individual and class work, and the final exam. High academic performance was interpreted as suggestive of successful

adaptation while lower grades (as compared to class average) signaled a potential borderline case.

4. Results and Discussion

To make the transition to the new learning environment smooth and convenient, it was agreed with students that as much as possible of the original course format would be preserved. Specifically, the following items remained unchanged: class schedule, synchronous work, interactive approach integrating both group and individual work, and progress tests (written translations and recorded audio). A number of regular class activities were successfully implemented in online mode after some minor modifications. For instance, research reports in ‘General Translation Theory’ were presented via the screen sharing option. Working in pairs in ‘Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting’ required creating individual channels in the class conference, but the instructor was still in control of students’ work by switching over channels. Using conference equipment became impossible for obvious reasons, but workarounds were found that relied on web-based resources, such as online voice recorders.

The general strategy underlying the shift was based on the following principles: 1) preserve as much as possible; 2) if something is impossible to use in the original format, look for a digital solution; 3) be open to new tools and techniques working for students’ benefit. The new course direction was discussed with students and gained their approval, so it was expected that adaptation to training in distant mode would be quick and flexible.

As stated above, the student adaptation level was assessed on the basis of four parameters, each one being assigned values within the range of [0 – 3]. The technical parameter received the highest values in both groups of students enrolled in the courses under discussion, which, in my opinion, is mostly due to the efforts of the MCU distant-mode support unit organized right after the shift decision was made in accordance with federal and municipal regulations. All courses delivered at MCU were moved to the Microsoft Teams platform, and classes were held online in accordance with the pre-pandemic schedule. Both students and tutors were provided with comprehensive instructions (including video manuals, remote Q&A sessions, etc.) and 24/7 support on the university website and via corporate email. Minor issues faced by trainers and trainees were related to connection failures, software settings, and working on mobile devices.

Psychological and emotional well-being as a factor contributing to the general adaptation level under the coronavirus-imposed conditions was assessed on the basis of questionnaires and self-evaluation forms. Students rated their general emotional and psychological state, compared it against their pre-pandemic “norms”, and listed all negative or positive factors affecting how they feel about the new training format. Some students also chose to contact me directly via text message to share their concerns or discuss their situation. In this case, the results obtained on the basis of the questionnaires were modified in order to reflect the actual state of affairs. Surprisingly, graduate students assigned lower scores to this criterion than their undergraduate counterparts, indicating anxiety as a key factor causing the out-of-balance condition. Would-be translators working towards their Master’s degree specified that anxiety was caused by the upcoming final qualification exam and an apparent lack of job opportunities in the COVID-19 crisis.

Class involvement indicators increased as the transition to the new format was announced. Students both in undergraduate and graduate programs demonstrated interest in online classes and showed higher activity levels than prior to the shift, which was revealed in their willingness to participate in new learning formats and online competitions; their initiative in finding and sharing web-based training tools and resources; and the availability of, and students’ openness to, extracurricular activities in cyberspace launched by the Russian Translation Teachers Association, Russia’s Union of Translators (UTR), and other university departments keen on sharing their lockdown translator training experience.

Of all the parameters taken into consideration in the course of the study, the most representative one is probably general performance, as its specific indicators also depend on external factors, such as equipment and technology, psychological and emotional well-being, and tutor guidance. Grade average was about 82% among undergraduate students and amounted to nearly 87% among graduate students, which is, among other factors, due to high motivation featured in survey results.

Preliminary results of the study showed a number of patterns that emerged in relation to target groups and the nature of taught disciplines. The following conclusions could be made on the basis of the available data: 1. Undergraduate students showed lower adaptation levels compared to graduate students (see Tables 3 and 4 respectively). 2. Theoretical disciplines turned out to be easier in terms of effective adaptation (refer to Table 5). 3. ‘Consecutive and Simultaneous

Interpreting' required more efforts and flexibility on the part of both students and trainers than courses focused on developing translation skills.

The first finding runs against initial expectations, as graduate students over their studies had greater volumes of classroom training, so it would be logical to assume that shifting to a different style would cause a certain amount of stress. However, the reality demonstrates that high motivation and community involvement have significant positive effects on adaptation.

The second finding is consistent with the digitalization approach currently applied to teaching theoretical courses at MCU's Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies. The concept promotes extensive use of digital tools and techniques in both delivering course material and conducting research by students. It was first systemically implemented in the Fall semester of 2019/2020, so by the time the shift was in progress, students already had some academic experience with Internet-based linguistic analysis tools, online translation corpora, professional software, databases, etc.

As for concerns around the interpreting course, its complexity in terms of format shifting is understandable as it required greater attention and transformation due to equipment issues. This was the only course under analysis for which numerous participants reported technical issues, the latter being related to using online tools designed to assist would-be interpreters rather than to working on the Microsoft Teams platform. Equipment-related stress caused anxiety in the first weeks of the new format, so students were assigned lower grades for Criteria 1 and 2 respectively. Lost points affected the overall outcome, 'Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting' demonstrating the lowest adaptation level indicator values.

At the same time, this course turned out to be the most rewarding resultwise, stimulating students to seek new tools, solutions, and professional connections. As the conventional on-site training format was no longer available, the initial feeling of perplexity was ousted by the desire to find new adequate ways to make up for the lost options, which resulted in students extensively exploring online opportunities for training and working. This activity boost did not significantly affect the final adaptation grade, since it could be measured only as a Criterion 3 indicator limited to the maximum of 3 points, however, in terms of qualitative appraisal, it was a very satisfying outcome. An unexpected transition to the online format inspired graduate students to seek new tools and ways for professional development online, and some of their

findings are being implemented at the Department of Linguistics and Translation Studies in the Spring semester of 2020/2021 as well. Newly applied practices include participation in Internet-based interpreting competitions, observing professional interpreters at work, collecting data (video recordings and transcripts) for the Department’s Russian-English interpreting corpus, and taking up new avenues for corpus-based student research in Russian-English interpreting studies.

Table 3: Adaptation of students enrolled in the undergraduate translation program

	Successful	Acceptable	Requiring assistance	Failed
General Translation Theory	71%	18.4%	5.3%	5.3%
Translation of Political Texts	57.9%	28.9%	7.9%	5.3%

Table 4: Adaptation of students enrolled in the graduate translation program

	Successful	Acceptable	Requiring assistance	Failed
Theoretical Aspects of Translation	76.9%	15.4%	7.7%	0%
Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting	53.9%	30.8%	15.3%	0%

Table 5: Average course adaptation

Course	Adaptation level
General Translation Theory (undergraduate)	85,3%
Translation of Political Texts (undergraduate)	82,2%
Theoretical Aspects of Translation (graduate)	87,8
Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting (graduate)	79,1%

The findings demonstrate that despite fears on the part of all parties to the education process, students managed to adapt to the new format of studies in a relatively short period of time, which suggests that no or very short ‘transitional periods’ are actually required. Issues of any nature were mostly related to unprecedented conditions and the suddenness of the move. Course-specific circumstances were of particular relevance only in ‘Consecutive and Simultaneous Interpreting’; however, the challenge turned out to be of high value to both tutors

and trainees in terms of discovering and implementing new tools, practices, and procedures. Students also showed appreciation for greater academic freedom in selecting and preparing appropriate materials, which also became possible due to their willingness to cope with the situation.

Moreover, due to previously unpracticed extracurricular events which were of great advantage in connecting students to industry best practice, some graduate students saw unprecedented career opportunities for future employment as online translators and interpreters, which also served as a motivating factor and affected their overall performance. Thus, one important observation accompanying the results of this study is that remote translation and interpreting training provides students with new industry connections, career prospects, and, which is of utmost significance, relevant digital skills and professional competences. Unexpected in the time of a global pandemic-driven crisis causing termination of employment contracts and decreasing demand for freelance services all over the world, the transition to online work space actually expands employment opportunities for many translators and interpreters, as there arises a need for language specialists competent to handle remote-mode communication.

5. Conclusion

While there is evidence suggesting that the emergency mid-term transition to distance learning and teaching in universities across the globe brought about negative consequences in many disciplines and subject areas, especially those that require on-site training and face-to-face interaction with peer students and instructors for successful acquisition, my findings indicate that the resulting effect was neutral, at the least, if described in terms of student adaptation and performance. However, the limited timeframe of this study does not allow for any longitudinal analysis of adaptation levels and their relation to other factors, such as the duration of the distant-mode instruction, student personality types, or individual circumstances. As the coronavirus crisis still dominates the regional and global agenda, the online format of translator and interpreter training in universities may be the dominant type of instruction for years to come. Thus the current research will be expanded to cover more professional courses and participants, as well as introduce new relevant parameters related to both the general Higher Education context and specific field-oriented factors, such as the digitalization of the education process, student support, course content quality and delivery style, and industry exposure.

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