

Teaching Consecutive Interpreting Remotely Online: Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, interpreter training, just like almost all forms of training and education, was carried out online, using remote teaching methods. The aim of this paper is to summarize students' perceptions of learning consecutive interpreting remotely during the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 semesters at the University of Szeged's MA Program in Translation and Interpreting.

Data was collected using an online questionnaire from students of interpreting attending interpreting techniques and consecutive interpreting classes. The questionnaire was answered by 23 students of interpreting. It included questions concerning the positive and negative aspects of remote online teaching and learning of consecutive interpreting, together with its perceived effect on the development of students' interpreting skills, and the amount of stress students faced in online classes. Results indicate that there were both positive and negative aspects of these classes, and that students found the classes equally or less effective as on-site lessons. Online classes were found equally or less stressful than on-site classes.

1. Introduction

The aim of this investigation is to survey the perceptions of Masters' students of interpreting to remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting (CI). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, at the University of Szeged three semesters have been partly or completely taught remotely online. Online teaching started in the Spring 2020 semester in March 2020, the Fall 2020 semester started with hybrid teaching, and online only teaching commenced in November 2020. The Spring 2021 semester was taught completely online. After the emergency switch to online teaching in Spring 2020, online teaching during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters proceeded smoothly.

The Master's Program in Translation and Interpreting is a four-semester study program at the University of Szeged's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Students have Hungarian as their A language, and choose a B and a C language from the following list: English, German, Russian, French, Spanish or Italian. Generally, there are 25-30 students per year, and some of the interpreting classes are taught by part-time trainers who are practitioners of interpreting. In the first year of training, students have three Interpreting Techniques courses: A to B, B to A, and C to A. Following the second semester, students choose from two specializations:

translation or interpreting. Usually fewer students choose the interpreting than the translation stream. In the second year, students have three Consecutive Interpreting classes: A to B, B to A, and C to A. In addition, they have a practice seminar with three mock conferences per semester. The MA program does not include training in simultaneous interpreting, in order to master that working mode, students in Hungary have to attend a post graduate course in conference interpreting.

At the Master's Program in Translation and Interpreting, there was no compulsory platform to be used for remote online teaching; trainers and students agreed on what would be the most suitable solution for the class. Options included the University of Szeged intranet's Big Blue Button platform, which was the University's recommendation, but other options were also accepted, and some classes were held using Skype, Zoom, Jitsi, Teams, GMeets, and Messenger. Except for the transition period in March 2020, remote online classes were held synchronously. In this paper the results of a questionnaire survey are presented about the attitudes and perceptions of MA students of interpreting to the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting.

Remote online teaching has become everyday reality in all walks of life, including education, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several surveys have investigated university students' and trainers' experiences and perceptions of online teaching and learning (BFUG-ESU 2020, Watermeyer et al. 2021). The studies have revealed some general and some training-specific characteristics of remote online teaching and learning.

Researchers and trainers in the field of interpreter and translator training have also shared their experiences and research results related to the online teaching of interpreting (Ahrens et al. 2021, Eszenyi 2020, Seresi 2020). The remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting was less problematic than that of simultaneous interpreting, as the teaching of active analysis, note taking and presentation can be achieved using online platforms synchronously or asynchronously (Bachledová 2021), however, non-verbal aspects of consecutive interpreting are impossible to train, practice or discuss in an online lesson (Bachledová 2021).

In a longitudinal study, Ahrens and her colleagues investigated fatigue, time investment, efficiency and the quality of interaction aspects of remote online teaching and learning of conference interpreting (Ahrens et al. 2021). Their results indicate that online lessons were found to be more exhausting than on-site lessons. As concerns the efficiency of online classes, they found that students and trainers perceived the efficiency of online lessons as equal or worse than that of on-site lessons. Quality of interaction was also surveyed, and the results show that it was perceived as equal or worse than the quality of interaction in on-site classes.

Perez and Hodáková (2021) surveyed remote online translator and interpreter training during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia. Their comprehensive study combines qualitative and quantitative methods to survey students' attitudes to remote online teaching and learning of

translation and interpreting. Challenges identified by students fall into three broad categories: procedural factors, technical factors, and psychosocial factors. Perez and Hodáková (2021) found that students experienced less stress in interpreting seminars held remotely online, largely because of the anonymity of the learning situation. The authors add that stress is a necessary part of interpreter training, however, this topic, that is stress in interpreter training has received limited research attention to date. Students surveyed also mentioned that class dynamics was significantly altered in remote online learning of interpreting, as students had to keep their cameras and microphones switched off during online classes because of technical limitations. Thus, communication was characterized by a lack of spontaneity and non-verbal feedback.

As for technical factors, Perez and Hodáková (2021) found that the overall technical expertise of the students was appropriate to be able to cope with the technical challenges posed by remote online learning. Problems related to technical factors included internet connection problems and a lack of technical equipment in the case of some students. Overall, students were satisfied by the selected online platforms (zoom or discord).

The third group of factors identified by Perez and Hodáková (2021) is psychosocial factors, which can further be divided into predominantly intrapersonal and predominantly interpersonal factors; a third category being the combination of the two. This is the most subjective category, as these factors depend on personality, character traits and cognitive abilities (Perez and Hodáková 2021). Students surveyed identified the following challenges: difficulty to concentrate during online classes, less interaction in an online setting, and the handling of stress. Some students found the remote online learning of translation and interpreting less stressful because of the anonymity of the situation, and because of a larger social distance. In contrast, other students found the remote online learning of translation and interpreting more stressful than traditional classes, because of time management issues and technical problems.

The results of Szabó and Besznyák (2021) confirm the findings of Ahrens et al. (2021) and Perez and Hodáková (2021). They report that students of interpreting at the Technical University of Budapest found remote online teaching of interpreting convenient, flexible, less stressful than on-site classes, and students also stated that remote online learning of interpreting contributed to the development of their digital competences (Szabó and Besznyák 2021). However, in contrast to the findings of Perez and Hodáková (2021), students surveyed by Szabó and Besznyák stated that an advantage of remote online classes was that they had seen the face of the speaker in interpreting classes, and that there had been visible reactions from the participants. As concerns the disadvantages of remote online teaching of interpreting, students mentioned, among other factors, the difficulty to focus in a home environment, a lack of personal contact with fellow students, and technical problems. In addition, they stated that remote online classes come with a different type of stress, mostly connected to technical problems (Szabó and Besznyák 2021).

Students also reported their perceptions on the teaching methodology used in remote online teaching of interpreting. Bachledová's survey (2021) among translator and interpreter trainees at the Matej Bel University in Slovakia revealed that 60% of students were satisfied with remote online interpreting seminars, complaints mostly concerned technical issues and not the teaching style or teaching methods of teachers. 12% of the students stated that the interpreting seminars didn't include the same tasks as traditional on-site classes. She points out that the final exam results of the students were comparable to results from the pre-COVID19 years. Perez and Hodáková (2021) mention that students felt that they lacked more detailed feedback during online teaching. Students surveyed by Szabó and Besznyák (2021) perceived that they had more chance to practice during classes in (zoom) breakout rooms (Szabó and Besznyák 2021).

All authors mention that remote online classes come with less stress than traditional on-site classes, for example Bachledová found that 70% of the trainees felt less stressed during the remote online learning of translation and interpreting (Bachledová 2021), which implicitly suggest that on-site classes come with a considerable amount of stress. Stress can be defined as a psychological reaction in the cases when there is a mismatch between the requirements of the task and the resources at the disposal of the interpreter for coping with them (Lazarus 1966, quoted in Riccardi 2015). Professional interpreting is likely to contribute to stress because it is a complex activity with high cognitive load, and it is also a social activity, where a lot of responsibility for successful communication falls on the interpreter. There is a wealth of data on job-related stress in interpreting (Riccardi 2015), however, few studies deal with stress in interpreter training. Kurz (2003) compared the stress level (pulse rate and skin conductance level) of experts and novices; students of interpreting had a significantly higher pulse rate during a simultaneous interpreting task in class than expert interpreters working at a medical conference. Besznyák (2019) enumerates internal and external factors influencing the quality of interpreters' performance at final exams in interpreter training, and their relation to stress.

In this paper the results of a questionnaire survey are presented about the attitudes and perceptions of MA students of interpreting to the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting. The aim is to answer the following questions:

How do students of interpreting perceive remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting in general?

How effective do they perceive the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting as compared to on-site teaching?

How stressful do they find remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting as compared to on-site teaching?

The presuppositions were that students generally see the positive sides of remote online learning of consecutive interpreting. Based on the results of Ahrens et al (2021), Bachledová (2021), Perez and Hodáková

(2021), and Szabó and Besznyák (2021), it can be expected that they would find remote online teaching less effective, and less stressful than on-site classes.

2. Method

In the course of this cross-sectional investigation, 23 students of a Masters' Program in Translation and Interpreting filled in a questionnaire (Google form) about the positive and negative aspects of learning consecutive interpreting remotely online (see Appendix for the questionnaire). The questionnaire included open-ended questions on the positive and negative aspects of learning consecutive interpreting remotely online, together with questions on the effectiveness of and stress related to this type of training.

The answers to open-ended questions were analysed using keyword analysis.

Out of the 23 students answering the questions, 16 attended Consecutive Interpreting classes in the Spring 2020 semester, 18 in the Fall 2020 semester, and 18 in the Spring 2021 semester, in other words, most students attended Consecutive Interpreting classes during two or three semesters of remote online teaching. All of the students attended three Consecutive Interpreting classes per semester; Consecutive Interpreting from B to A, Consecutive Interpreting from C to A, and Consecutive Interpreting from A to B. Different language combinations mean different teachers and different platforms used in the remote online teaching of Consecutive Interpreting.

Taking into account some of the results of the questionnaire survey, a second, small-scale survey was also carried with eight first-year students attending the course Interpreting Techniques A to B (A: Hungarian, B: English) on the positive and negative aspects of the course that was taught remotely online. The results are also reported and discussed in this paper.

3. Results

In this section the results of the questionnaire survey are presented.

The Consecutive Interpreting classes the surveyed students attended were mostly held synchronously (69.6% of the classes), while about one third of the classes (30.4%) were held synchronously, and complemented with extra asynchronous tasks.

The classes were held using a variety of platforms (see table 1).

Platform	Number of students reporting using it
Zoom	23
BBB	16
Skype	13
MS Teams	3

FB Messenger	3
Google Meets	2
Jitsi	1

Table 1. Platforms used in the remote online teaching of Consecutive Interpreting

The most frequently used platform during the three semesters of remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting was Zoom, followed by BBB, which part of the University's intranet platform. Skype ranked third, while MS Teams, FB Messenger, Google Meets and Jitsi were mentioned infrequently. No explicit correlation can be revealed between the platforms used and the results, as more than one platform was mentioned by each student in the survey, because even within one semester, students used different platforms for different CI classes.

3.1 Positive and negative aspects of remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting

There were 33 answers regarding the positive aspects of online teaching of CI. The answers fell into seven broad categories. The advantages related to the methodological aspects of using online platforms ranked first (interaction, group work in breakout rooms, taking notes on the computer), followed by the chance to try out remote interpreting, which might be useful in students' future careers. The lack of live audiences ranked third. Students also mentioned convenience, less stress, and a clam home environment as additional advantages (see table 2.)

Advantage	% of answers
Methodological advantages	27.3
Trying out remote interpreting	21.2
No live audience present	15.1
Less stressful	12.1
Convenient	9.1
Calm home environment	9.1
Using online materials	6.1

Table 2. Positive aspects of remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting

As concerns the negative aspects of the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting, students provided 38 answers, which fell into seven categories (see table 3.). Students mentioned the impersonality of the classes first, followed by problems related to equipment (poor voice quality, microphones, cameras) and the uncomfortable atmosphere of the classes (long pauses, students tend to be more passive). This, of course, is teacher-dependent. Students also mentioned that the classes were not

effective, there were fewer opportunities to practice interpreting, in other words, there was less student interpreting time, and they also noted that there were some problems related to internet connection. In addition, some students also stated that they had found it difficult to focus or concentrate during the remote online classes.

Disadvantage	% of answers
Impersonal	21
Uncomfortable atmosphere	18.4
Equipment	18.4
Less effective skills development	15.8
Internet connection problems	13.2
Less student interpreting time	7.9
Difficult to concentrate / focus	5.3

Table 3. Negative aspects of remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting

3.2 Skills development

The next section of the questionnaire concerned skills development. 60.9% of the students surveyed stated that their interpreting skills developed less than during training on-site, while 39.1 % of the students stated that their interpreting skills developed as much as in on-site classes. It has to be noted that this was the students' objective perception, and there are not compared to actual test results or grades here that would confirm students' perception.

In an open-ended question students had the opportunity to share their reasons for their choice.

13 responses were given by those students who perceived that their interpreting skills had developed the same way as during on-site classes. The responses fell into four broad categories (see table 4.). Most of the answers stated that "we do the same tasks as in normal classes". This was followed by stating that this form of training has both advantages and disadvantages. Some students also mentioned that the trainers tried their best, and that students saw this situation as a new challenge.

Reason	% of answers
Same tasks	53.8
Advantages and disadvantages add up	30.8
Challenge	7.7
Trainers' efforts	7.7

Table 4. Reasons for equal interpreting skills development as in on-site classes

Those students who perceived that their interpreting skills developed less, in other words who think that remote online training was less effective than on-site training, gave 19 answers to explain their choice. The answers fell into two broad categories. Problems related to the channel of instruction ranked first (73,7%); answers included isolation, problems with concentration, and difficulties in understanding the source language text via headphones. In addition, students didn't have the feeling that there was much at stake, or that they had to perform well. Students also mentioned that they didn't not have the necessary expertise to be able to perform well in an online interpreting situation. The second group of answers (26.3%) concerned some of the methodological characteristics of remote online classes, including a slower pace of the classes and a more restricted selection of tasks, as compared to traditional on-site classes.

3.3 Stress

Students were also asked about stress related to remote online consecutive interpreting classes, as compared to traditional consecutive interpreting classes.

Overall, students found remote online consecutive interpreting classes less stressful than traditional on-site consecutive interpreting classes (56.5%), only 8.7% of the students think that remote online classes are more stressful than on-site consecutive interpreting classes. 34.8% of students think that remote online consecutive classes are as stressful as traditional consecutive interpreting classes.

The answers of those students who perceive remote online consecutive interpreting classes as less stressful fell into four categories. Most of the students mentioned that they didn't feel as intimidated by the online audience as by live audiences. Someone even mentioned: "I don't have to stand in front of the audience". Students added that being at home meant less stress, while others noted that they could use online resources during interpreting. Some students also added that they were called upon to interpret on fewer occasions.

Students who perceive remote online consecutive interpreting classes as stressful as traditional on-site classes gave 10 responses to explain the reasons. 40% stated that the tasks and the amount of preparation is the same in online and offline classes, and 30% added that the extra stress of the internet connection problems is compensated for by the fact that they can join classes from home.

Students who perceived remote online interpreting classes as more stressful cited internet- and technology-related issues, and things that cannot be controlled (eg. the deliveryman ringing the bell during the class) as reasons. See table 5. for details.

Less stress		Same stress		More stress	
reason	% of answers	reason	% of answers	Reason	% of answers
No visible audience	61.1	same tasks	40	technology / equipment	50
joining the class from home	16.7	advantages and disadvantages add up	30	internet	25
online searches	11.1	stress is the same, but other factors cause it	30	things out of our control	25
methodology	11.1				

Table 5. Factors related to the perceived stress level of remote online consecutive interpreting classes

3.4 Students' suggestions

The results presented above related to the positive and negative aspects of remote online teaching and learning of consecutive interpreting and the perceived development of interpreting skills of the students involved reveal several factors related to methodology.

In order to better understand students' views on the methodology used during the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting, a follow-up, small-scale survey was carried out in the Spring 2021 semester. Students attending the Interpreting Techniques A to B class were surveyed on their suggestions. This was part of the midterm class evaluation; students had individual evaluations sessions with the trainer to get feedback on their progress, and students also had the opportunity to share their views on positive aspects of the class that had contributed to the development of students' interpreting skills, together with their suggestions for the improvement of the class.

Students got a variety of asynchronous tasks as well; for example, to write English language summaries of short Hungarian videos, or to prepare an English language speech and record themselves presenting it in order to compensate or some of the negative aspects of remote online teaching of CI, and also to make the best use of technology and internet resources. The class also focused on interpreting term related to Hungarian culture from Hungarian into English.

16 answers were received concerning the positive aspects of the (completely remote online) class, and these answers fall into eight categories. Most of the answers concerned the vocabulary development section of the classes, while others mentioned feedback in class, and interpreting tasks in class. Students also mentioned when they had to

interpret speeches delivered by fellow students, as these helped them to get used to a greater variety of speakers, and the awareness of Hungarian culture-specific terms and phrases was also mentioned. Table 6. shows the proportion of answers.

Category	% of answers
Vocabulary development	25
Homework assignments (video recordings and video summaries)	18.75
Feedback	12.5
Interpreting tasks in class	12.5
Materials provided for preparation	12.5
Students as speakers	6.25
Awareness of Hungarian culture and culture-specific terms and phrases	6.25
Interpreting situations like in real life	6.25

Table 6. Benefits of the Interpreting Techniques A to B course, midterm evaluation from students

Students also had the chance to word some suggestions. There were altogether 10 suggestions. Most of the suggestions (60%) concerned more groups work, which would mean more chance for practice during the online classes. The class was scheduled to start at 4 p.m, and students were usually very tired, and thought that group work and more student interpreting time per class would help them to remain active during the cases. Others suggested more feedback in class (20%), and more diverse source texts (20%).

4. Summary

This paper presented the results of a survey on the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting in a masters' program of translation and interpreting. The results of the survey suggest that students have found both positive and negative aspects of remote online learning of consecutive interpreting. They consider the new methodological tools as an advantage, together with the opportunity to try out remote interpreting, which might be useful in their future careers. The negative aspects concerned the impersonality and the uncomfortable atmosphere of the classes, together with problems related to the equipment and internet connection. This is in line with the findings of Ahrens et al. 2021, Perez and Hodáková 2021, and Szabó and Besznyák 2021.

As concerns the perceived development of consecutive interpreting skills during remote online teaching, 60 % of the students think that their skills develop less in remote online classes than in on-site classes. This is also in line with the findings of Ahrens et al. 2021 and Bachledová 2021.

Those who perceive they develop equally during online classes stated that the reason is that the same tasks are done in online and on-site classes. This implies that not all trainers adapted their methodology to the online environment.

More than half of the students stated that remote online consecutive interpreting classes were less stressful than on-site classes. This confirms the findings of Szabó and Besznyák 2021 and Bachledová 2021. This implies that on-site consecutive interpreting classes pose considerable stress for the students, and their answers also suggest that this is because in on-site classes they have to perform in front of live audiences.

The second, small scale survey revealed that students would prefer the inclusion of more group work in remote online consecutive interpreting classes, in order to provide more student interpreting time and also to help them to stay focused during the late afternoon online classes.

Limitations of the research reported in this paper include the relative small sample size, together with the lack of comparison of the students' perceived interpreting skills development with that of actual test results or seminar grades.

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Appendix

Dear Students,

Please fill out this questionnaire about the remote online learning of consecutive interpreting. This is an anonymous questionnaire for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. In which semesters did you take part in remote online learning of consecutive interpreting?
 - Spring 2020
 - Fall 2020
 - Spring 2021
2. Were the classes held synchronously or asynchronously?
3. Which platforms were used for teaching?
 - BBB
 - Zoom
 - Skype
 - Teams
 - other: _____
4. What were the things that you liked about the online classes?
5. What were the things you didn't like about the online classes?
6. During the remote online teaching of consecutive interpreting my interpreting skills developed
 - more
 - less
 - equallyas during on-site classes.
7. Why?
8. Remote online classes of consecutive interpreting were
 - more
 - less
 - equallystressful as on-site classes.
9. Why?