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Virtual Classes as an Innovative Tool for Conference Interpreter Training

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Virtual Classes (VCs) make up a pedagogical tool taking advantage of videoconferencing for simulations of interpreting. Up to the present, the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, has been the only interpreter training center in Poland to offer this type of a blended learning model. VCs were originally designed to meet the requirements of the training within the EMCI (European Masters in Conference Interpreting) program implemented by the Institute as the Polish member of the EMCI Consortium. The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a longitudinal study based on observations of the trainers and trainees involved in preparing, carrying out, and reflecting on VCs.

Video-Mediated Interpreting and the Classroom

Virtual Classes (VCs) make use of the idea deployed in videoconference interpreting (VCI) and remote interpreting (RI) (Moser-Mercer, 2003, 2005), where interpreters and their clients, situated in different places, communicate with one another via special devices and infrastructure. VCI and RI are successfully deployed in healthcare, legal, and other institutional settings (Braun, 2013; Napier, 2012; Locatis et al., 2010, 2011), even though both modes may impose certain constraints on communication (Mouzourakis, 2006; Braun, 2015b).

The first VCI dates back to 1976 when the debate took place at the conference in Nairobi, Kenya, while the interpreters provided their services from the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (Braun, 2015a). Further tests (Tryuk, 2007) proved that RI was feasible, but problematic, mainly due to low sound quality. The scholarly research has confirmed that despite of facilitating the organization of events (Mouzourakis, 2006; Tryuk, 2007), RI indeed imposes limitations concerning sound quality, and revealed other hindrances. Table 1 shows possible problems, which can appear during RI and VCI:

In spite of these handicaps, distance education training for interpreters has been incorporated in curricula, although at the moment of the birth of this idea, it was labeled as an *insurmountable oxymoron* (Carr and Steyn, 2000, p. 83). Nonetheless, nowadays, it seems that in the 21st century *the triumph of technology* (Tryuk, 2007) does not leave the interpreters behind; instead, it is pointed out that *video-mediated conference interpreting is increasingly commonplace and even routine*

Table 1. Possible problems related to RI and VCI:

Problem	Authors
poor visibility	Mouzourakis (2006)
a feeling of alienation and decreased motivation of the parties to the remote communicative act	Mouzourakis (1996); Braun (2007)
the parties being 'left out'	Moser-Mercer (2005); Mouzourakis (2006); Roziner and Shlesinger (2010)
remoteness (*loss of co-presence*)	Setton and Dawrant (2016, p. 36)
decreased concentration, lack of handouts	Seleskovitch and Lederer (2002)
background noise, scarce eye contact, social interaction problems in consecutive interpreting via videoconferencing, a need to adapt to new means of communication	Braun (2007)

Source: author's compilation.

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(Setton and Dawrant, 2016, p. 34), and *blended learning is already a reality* (Rodríguez Melchor, 2018, p. 91).

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a 5-year pioneer – at the national level – project carried out by the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, consisting in offering a blended learning module in conference interpreter training, and in particular, to focus on the trainers' and trainees' perspective as regards preparing, carrying out, and reflecting on VCs.

Method

The ethnographic study, the results of which are discussed in this paper, has been conducted as an *emergent design* (Creswell, 2014, p. 186), which allows an observation-based analysis of pedagogical opportunities, tasks, and attitudes of the trainers and trainees of the Institute of Applied Linguistics involved in preparation, realization, and follow-up activities related to VCs. This empirically grounded analysis preconditions a *bottom-up approach* (Silverman, 2000, p. 139) where naturally occurring behavior observed in a *natural setting* (Creswell, 2014, p. 14) is a point of departure for *exploring new, uncharted areas* (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 39) of VCs as an innovative pedagogical tool for the interpreter training in Poland.

The data was collected in the period between 2013 and 2018, that is, during the whole time-span of the VCs offered on a regular basis (at least three times a semester, which translates into 6 hours of virtual training) at the Institute of Applied Linguistics. At that time, 31 VCs – which amounted to 62 hours – were organized (exceptionally, in the initial 2013/2014, two VCs took place, while in the academic year 2014/2015 the record of 11 VCs was set up). A total number of *purposefully selected* (Creswell, 2014, p. 189) trainees who actively participated in VCs (interpreting and receiving feedback), and trainers, involved in either preparing, assisting in, or carrying out reflections following VCs, or all of these activities, amounted to 120 and 16, respectively. All of them[1] constitute a *small sample size* (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38) for the qualitative analysis, probably conducive to further research in the field. As regards the trainees, the criteria for selecting them included: training level and language combination, while the trainers were indicated according to the language combination and their availability for a particular class.

Furthermore, as regards the discussed study, the author has been both a researcher (*key instrument*, Creswell, 2014, p. 185) and a trainer involved in VCs. It seems that in spite of disadvantages of assuming this dual role such as *insider meaning* (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38) affecting a degree of criticism towards VCs or *naturalistic generalizations* (Stake, 1995, p. 86), which influence the way of reporting the findings, the ad-

vantages include, first, that it has not been necessary to ask for permissions to gain access to the site and to carry out the observation, and secondly, that the author has been perceived as a regular element of the setting thus, at least in a certain sense, possible artificial behavior on the part of participants resulting from the presence of third parties has been eliminated.

The material for the study consists of the researcher's field notes (including the opinions of the trainers and trainees) and written documents in the form of draft scripts prepared for all VCs. As to other evidence, pursuant to the constraints imposed by the provisions of Intellectual Property Rights, speeches prepared and provided for the purposes of VCs cannot be recorded (or even used for the purposes of other classes). The right to take photos is also limited and possible only upon an express consent granted by all the attendants.

The qualitative design of the study has been developed in order to provide a *complex picture* or a *holistic account* (Creswell, 2014, p. 186) of the phenomenon of VCs as an innovative tool for conference interpreter training. To this end, after the general information of VCs as a component of program design is provided, the following issues as observed during the study have been presented:

–   the Institute's partner institutions and languages covered by VCs,
–   technical requirements and constraints,
–   draft scripts as main documents guiding the attendants,
–   content of the VCs,
–   the trainers' and trainees' perspectives (*participants' engagement in activities*, Creswell, 2014, p. 19).

VCs as a component of program design

Originally, VCs were designed to meet the requirements of the training within the EMCI program, which is classified in Poland as postgraduate studies; nonetheless, with time, VCs appeared to be a useful tool for interpreter training also at MA (second degree) level.

As regards both EMCI and MA programs, the trainees acquire interpreting skills in both directions: from B into A, from A into B, from C into A, and from A into C, the latter being related to the requirements of the Polish national market where the interpreters with a certified interpreting skill within A, B and C languages are expected to satisfy the needs of their clients. In general, the training objectives of the MA program assume preparing highly skilled specialists in interpreting and cross-cultural communication (A-B-C combination), while as regards the EMCI program – training professional conference interpreters in the A-C-C or A-B-C combinations, with a particular

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[1] With the exception of the trainers and trainees of partner institutions who are not included in the sample as not being objects of the observation.

consideration of the demand for conference interpreters from the EU institutions (accreditation tests).

In order to satisfy the above objectives, set for both the EMCI and MA level, the trainees are offered 360 hours of face-to-face training[2], composed of both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. To this number at least 12 hours dedicated to VCs are added.

Results of the study

The longitudinal (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 40) observation-based study has shown a variable nature of all the components of VCs, that is: partner institutions and the languages covered by VCs, technical requirements, draft script, content, as well as the trainers' and trainees' awareness and expectations.

Partner institutions and languages covered

Among the institutions with whom the Institute of Applied Linguistics has been cooperating as regards VC there are pedagogical assistance units (e-learning units) of the EU institutions: DG LINC of the European Parliament and DG INTERPRETATION/SCIC of the European Commission, as well as partner universities, which are, along with the Institute, members of the EMCI Consortium. So far, VCs have been available at Universidad de La Laguna, Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid (Spain), Univerza v Ljubljani (Slovenia), ISIT and ESIT Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, Paris (France), Faculté de Traduction et d'Interprétation, Geneva (Switzerland), Univerzita Karlova, Prague (Czech Republic), and SCIT – Herzen University, St. Petersburg (Russia). VCs have also been organized with external partner universities, mainly with London Metropolitan University (UK), preconditioned by the fact of offering Polish as one of the languages of conference interpreter training.

The languages covered by VCs are: Polish (being overwhelmingly A language for the trainees), English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian, the latter being offered only within the MA program, while all the former ones are provided for both the MA and EMCI trainees.

The frequency of VCs depends on the need to practice interpreting within a particular language combination, and on availability of native speakers (it is recommended that the speeches be delivered in the speaker's A language) of the languages scheduled for a VC both in Warsaw and at the partner institution. The variability of the languages, consisting in adding new language pairs to the already established schemes, commonly depends on the interest of partner institutions in holding a particular VC as a step towards establishing new relations; such is the case of starting to co-organize VCs with Herzen University, St. Petersburg, as a new member of the EMCI Consortium.

Technical aspects

First VCs offered at the Institute were provided via Skype connection. Since 2014, it has been a local videoconference infrastructure – Brand Polycom HDX7000 HD, which ensures a desirable *reliability of connection* (Setton and Dawrant, 2016, p. 37) and has been successfully used.

Despite the fact that, as mentioned above, the Institute offers both consecutive and simultaneous interpreter training within face-to-face hours, this scheme cannot be easily transferred to VCs. This is mainly due to technical constraints, including, but not limited to, low sound quality in booths. Therefore, at present VCs in consecutive interpreting are provided, although in the past there were attempts to offer VCs in simultaneous interpreting.

Another technical issue is that VCs are organized by the Institute overwhelmingly bilaterally (BVCs), i.e. between two partner institutions, and (sporadically) multilaterally (MVCs), with three partner institutions. As regards the latter, their number is limited not only because of the partner institutions' low demand of Polish as the trainees' B or C language, but also because of huge technical (and organizational) effort they imply.

Draft scripts as written evidence

At the pre-VC stage, which takes a few weeks, the partner institutions negotiate the date and hour, as well as the length of a particular VC (usually 120 minutes), a number (3) and a level of speeches (intermediate, advanced or test level), as well as the topic, which is the same for all speeches during a particular VC. It has been noticed that general topics are recommended; historically, they included e.g., *Europe's aging population*, *Euroscepticism*, *Air pollution in cities*, and *Renewable energies*. All the above-mentioned data, along with the names of trainers and trainees attending the VC, is inserted in the draft script. Typically, the draft script is made available via email or Google in order to give an easy access to the continuously updated details. Moreover, special closed Facebook groups are created to serve the trainees to exchange glossaries and other information they deem helpful.

A note to speakers and trainees concerning the features of the speeches is an important element of a draft script. Apart from the information stated above, this includes such data as:

– a recommended length of each speech (5–6 minutes);
– an indication that the interpreters will be interpreting consecutively with notes;
– a need to deliver a well-structured speech;
– a requirement to present a given problem enriched with some facts being a personal experience of the speaker, a reasonable amount of numbers or statistics, as well as idiomatic expressions.

[2] Overall information concerning the curriculum is available at www.ils.uw.edu.pl.

Draft scripts differ, depending on a partner institution and language combinations covered during a particular VC. For instance, as regards VCs offered within a pedagogical assistance provided by e-learning units of the EU institutions, these are not trainers but the accredited EU interpreters. They provide both the speeches (usually 3 during a particular VC, each touching upon a different topic announced to the trainees in advance) and feedback. Furthermore, some VCs are organized as mock conferences where these are only the trainees representing the Institute and the partner institution who actively participate as both speakers and interpreters, while the trainers assume the roles of observers during, and assessors after such a VC. In 2016/2017 a new model as regards language pairs was also introduced, which had been preconditioned by the fact that Polish, as stated above, was not commonly offered by partner institutions. The new model assumes that speeches in Polish are provided by the Institute's trainers and interpreted by the Institute's trainees into their B language, and only these renditions are then interpreted by the partner institution's trainees into their A language. This idea has appeared to be an effective solution; first, it is possible to co-organize VCs with any partner institution, no matter whether they offer training with Polish as B or C language. Secondly, it seems to be a value added to VCs due to an increased motivation shown by the trainees who become aware of the need to interpret not only in order to be assessed, but also to produce a rendition from which a relay will be taken by their colleagues at the partner institution.

Content of a VC

As to the content, it has been observed that VCs and regular face-to-face classes are similar. During a VC usually three speeches are delivered. Each speech is interpreted twice, by two trainees who cannot hear their renditions; thus, when the first trainee provides interpreting, the other is obligatorily outside the classroom. The trainees' performances are assessed immediately after the rendition; feedback is given by the trainers from the partner institution, which means that the trainees' deliveries are not assessed by their regular trainers. The assessment is composed of the same elements as the one provided during face-to-face training. First, a pure customer (i.e. the client, who does not speak the source language) comments on comprehensibility and grammatical correctness of the target text without referring to the source text unknown to that customer. Then, the trainers assess such aspects as the message (transfer of the main idea of the original speech), accuracy (reproduction of all the details of the original speech), target language (possible errors), style, and delivery (e.g. voice, pace, and possible vocalic fillers).

Such a content of a VC allows the trainees to practice the interpreter's hard and soft skills. The former includes: A, B, and C (listening and speaking) language skills as a prerequisite, active listening for interpreting purposes, concentration, empathy, and note-taking for consecutive interpreting purposes. The latter cover: public speaking, stress management, and self-assessment. In other words, the range of skills is the same during VCs and face-to-face training. What distinguishes the two modes is a distance between various attendants of the class, as well as a changing environment, which means a departure from a well-known context (trainers, peers) of in-house classes to a new setting of a VC.

Trainers' perspective

The observation-based study has shown that trainers involved in VCs assume technical, organizational, and pedagogical tasks. First, in the preparation stage, as regards technical aspects, they are obliged to have a connection test and sound tests with a partner institution. As organizers, trainers work on a draft script, i.e. they indicate trainees' levels, assign trainees to particular interpreting tasks, and ensure a corresponding timetable of the VC. As teachers, they need to explain to the trainees what a VC is, how important a preparation stage is, as well as why and what for a VC is organized (not to test but to assist the trainees in improving their interpreting skills). All attendants are also given detailed information regarding their roles and tasks in a VC. In particular, as no previously recorded speeches are used, special tips are provided to speakers.

According to DG SCIC general guidelines, the speakers are recommended to:
- speak naturally at a reasonable pace;
- speak their mother tongue;
- speak instead of reading;
- speak into the microphone;
- put figures, names and acronyms clearly;
- stick to the time limit[3];
- stick to the level of speeches determined for a particular VC.

Moreover, trainers and trainees are advised to be prepared (as regards content and logistics) and punctual. Secondly, during a VC, trainers:
- instruct the speakers and trainees of a position of a camera, which is immovable, and no zooming is possible on a particular speaker/ trainer/ trainee;
- watch out the way the microphones operate;
- keep up to the timetable;
- greet the partner institution's trainers and trainees;
- introduce the attendants to the partner institution's representatives;
- make all those present stick to the order agreed upon and indicated in the draft script.

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[3] scic.ec.europa.eu/scic-tulkit/tips_for_speakers/tips2009_EN.pdf

The trainers also give speeches, provide feedback, as well as they support and assist the trainees. As regards feedback, the observation confirms that it is *less immediate than in the case of face-to-face interpreted communication* (Horváth, 2012, p. 52), and that it is of the *evanescent quality* (Rodríguez Melchor, 2018, p. 96). This is for these reasons the discussion concerning the just completed VC is necessary. Therefore, after the connection stops, the trainers discuss the outcomes with the trainees, provide a general and individual feedback to make the trainees aware of their possible deficiencies, but also to make them feel involved and motivated, as well as answer the trainees' questions.

Irrespective of the load of work, trainers point out considerable advantages of VCs:
– observing the trainees interpreting outside regular classes;
– listening to feedback from the interpreters accredited with the EU institutions and from interpreter trainers at partner universities;
– networking and feeling a part of a large interpreting community;
– comparing the trainees' skills with those of their colleagues at partner universities;
– comparing the trainees' skills with those of their colleagues representing other language sections at the Institute.

VCs as viewed by the trainees

In general, the trainees appreciate that the VCs start at an early stage of the course (week 7 of an intensive course at the EMCI level, and week 12 at the MA level) but report that for them a VC is related to both psychological and professional effort. As regards psychological effort, the trainees indicate stress management resulting from working *within certain parameters* (Carr and Steyn, 2000, p. 86). Although they are instructed that a VC is an extra opportunity to practice interpreting and not to test their interpreting skills, still they explain that they feel exposed to certain inconveniences. Among them they mention: a need to get accustomed to interacting with different people and being ready to face new situations, an obligation to be present in the classroom during the whole VC as they are held in real time of 120 minutes), and self-assessment (critical thinking of performances contributing to the trainees' ability to – gradually and with each new task – improve their interpreting skills). As regards professional effort, according to the trainees it is connected with sensitizing them to the importance of a preparation stage (trainees as team members and as individuals, working on glossaries, and extending vocabulary resources), as well as of time management during a VC.

The observation confirms that a VC may be considered as a *forum for live discussion*, which *motivates the learners, and serves to bond the class* (Carr and Steyn, 2000, p. 86). The trainees perceive VCs in terms of special learning opportunities. First, each VC is an extra occasion to practice interpreting through a direct contact with the professional world. Secondly, the trainees get feedback from the interpreters accredited with the EU institutions and from the interpreter trainers at partner universities can practice stress management skills. Thirdly, they students can compare their own skills with those of their colleagues at partner universities, as well as compare their own skills with those of their colleagues representing other language sections at the Institute of Applied Linguistics. Finally, they network and meet new colleagues who are candidates for the profession.

Conclusions

The longitudinal observation-based study has shown that VCs make up an effective component of a blended learning model; they cannot replace face-to-face training but provide additional, both professional and pedagogical, opportunities for trainers and trainees. Although VCs are characterized by the same features as regular classes, such novelties as: sharing a virtual classroom with up to the moment unknown trainers and/or trainees, facing perhaps different evaluation criteria, and a necessity to cope with videoconference infrastructure make them a tool enhancing the trainees' preparation for the profession. Furthermore, VCs are associated with extra organizational, technical, and pedagogical efforts on the part of the trainers. Nonetheless, it has been reported by the trainers and the trainees that broadly understood technical progress implies that VCs should be permanently incorporated in the curriculum. In recognition of all the presented characteristics of VCs as deployed in the conference interpreter training process, in view of their *sporadic nature* (Rodríguez Melchor, 2018, p. 96), an overwhelming need for development of this component should be underlined, accompanied by further research in the field.

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Abstract

Virtual Classes (VCs) make up a pedagogical tool taking advantage of the idea of remote interpreting and videoconferencing for simulations of interpreting. At present, the Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, is the only interpreter training center in Poland to offer such a blended learning model. The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a longitudinal study based on observations of various stages of VCs in which both the trainers and trainees have been involved. The material for the study consists of the author's field notes from observations, including the trainers' and trainees' opinions, as well as written documents in the form of draft scripts prepared for each VC. The results of the study show that VCs make up an effective component of a blended learning model. Although they cannot replace face-to-face training, they provide both professional and pedagogical opportunities for the trainees. Furthermore, VCs are associated with organizational, technical, and pedagogical effort on the part of the trainers. In general, an overwhelming need for development of this component as contributing to innovative interpreter training should be underlined, as well as for further research in the field.

Keywords: virtual classes; innovative interpreter training; videoconferencing; remote interpreting

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