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## **Integrating virtual conference tools in interpreter and translator training**

### *Abstract*

In this paper, we will present the preliminary results of an educational innovation project in which we assess the use of virtual meeting technologies in higher education programmes of interpreting and translation, more specifically the master programmes of interpreting and translation at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). One of the research objectives of the current project is to test the possibilities of virtual conference tools supporting situated learning activities, i. e. learning activities simulating the conditions of the professional reality in a learner-, situation- and experience-based environment. Our second research objective is to assess the usability of virtual conference tools as pedagogical tools to support translation and interpreting classes that are based on the premises of socio-constructivist teaching. The research is carried out in the context of two different courses which were supported by a virtual conference tool: in particular an interpreting workshop and a group feedback session in a translation workshop.

### **1 Introduction**

In this paper, we will present the preliminary results of an educational innovation project in which we assess the use of virtual conference tools in the master programmes of interpreting and translation at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Our motivation for introducing student interpreters and translators to virtual conference tools is first and foremost driven by the unmistakable impact of virtual communication and conference technologies on professional translation and interpreting. For instance, the use of Remote Interpreting Technologies (RITs) – i. e. telephone or video interpreting technologies – is gaining ground in different professional interpreting settings (e. g. immigration proceedings, multilingual conferences or healthcare contexts) with interpreters more often working in virtual spaces (Braun 2015). Likewise, translators can work wherever and with whomever they see fit in a shared virtual environment (Olvera-Lobo et al. 2009) as a result of the ongoing technologisation and globalisation. As it stands to reason that the popularity of virtual spaces and virtual communication technology in contexts of interpreting and translation is expected to grow, it is our belief that training programmes should be geared to this new reality by introducing students in translation and interpreting to some of the available virtual technological solutions. Moreover, designing learning activities using

virtual communication technology possibly allows the implementation of principles of socio-constructivism, which have become paramount in translation (Kiraly 2000) and interpreting didactics (Class/Moser-Mercer 2013), as they often offer online meeting experiences for collaboration.

One of the research objectives of the current project is to assess to what extent virtual conference tools support the organisation of situated learning activities, i. e. learning activities simulating the conditions of the professional reality in a learner-, situation- and experience-based environment. In recent years, this learning-by-doing approach has gained quite some interest in interpreter and translator education (González-Davies/Enríquez-Raído 2016).

While the importance of integrating information and communication technologies in translator and interpreter training programmes has been widely recognised in the literature (Sandrelli/Jerez 2007; Bowker/McBride/Marshman 2008; Alcina 2008; Olvera-Lobo et al. 2009; Şahin 2013), a review of previous studies dealing with the use of virtual communication platforms in interpreter and translator training reveals only few studies on the use of virtual communication platforms in the context of interpreter skill training (Tymczyńska 2009; Şahin 2013). The same applies to studies on the use of virtual communication or conference platforms in the context of translator skill training (Olvera-Lobo et al. 2009). This finding is in contrast with the recent technological breakthroughs in terms of interpreting and translation services delivery.

On the other hand, several interpreter schools have already adopted virtual learning when it comes to organising distance interpreting programmes. In many cases, these distance programmes largely replace face-to-face training. To our knowledge, however, the pedagogical impact in terms of learner attitudes and motivation of offering distance classes compared to traditional in-class skill training has not yet been researched.

Our second research objective is to assess the usability of virtual conference tools as pedagogical tools to be used in translation and interpreting classes that are based on the premises of socio-constructivist teaching. Key socio-constructivist premises include authentic materials and training, collaborative learning, a student-centred, collaborative, process-oriented, problem-based approach, reflection and an integrated assessment (Fernández-Prieto/Sempere-Linares 2010). The success of a learning approach that adopts principles of socio-constructivism is determined by the extent to which social interactions are realised and stimulated within a group. Constructivist teachers therefore need to create a context or learning environment in which social interactions, participation and involvement of learners are strengthened and encouraged as much as possible. In practice, this means among other things that constructivist teachers will welcome as many questions and ideas of students as possible, that they will encourage students to seek out information themselves, that teachers are willing to expand their own knowledge on the basis of input from the students, that they will encourage students to critically reflect on ideas provided by other students, and so on.

Needless to say, the use of technology can play an important role in the successful implementation of such a constructivist learning setting (Allsop 2016). The presence of a computer, tablet or smartphone during class, for instance, allows students to easily compare and reflect on ideas coming from the group or to find solutions for specific problems or questions. If used wisely, technology can thus reinforce an important tenet of constructivist teaching, i. e. the fact that a lot of emphasis is placed on the process of knowledge construction. The second research aim in this project is to assess the possibilities (and limitations) of virtual conference tools as pedagogical instruments in (socio-constructivist based) translation and interpreting classes.

The scope of the present educational innovation project is limited, as it ran in the course of one semester only and focuses on the use of virtual conference tools in two specific cases included in the master programmes' practical interpreting and translation workshops, i. e. the classes during which students make language-specific practical exercises and receive feedback in order to develop their practical skills. We chose to implement the use of a virtual conference tool in an 'integrated' manner instead of testing them in the context of separate technological courses in order to be able to assess its pedagogical value in the practical skill training courses, both from trainers' and trainees' perspectives.

In the context of the interpreting workshop, the use of a virtual conference tool allows the design of semi-authentic, hands-on learning situations reproducing a professional real-life practice. This way, it is possible to organise a learning situation which simulates a (video) remote interpreting ((V)RI) or videoconference interpreting (VCI) setting. The scenario we have looked at so far in this context is a distance interpreting class including simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting exercises.

In the case of the translation workshop, the tested scenario was a distance class comprising a feedback session of a previously submitted translation assignment. In this case, the virtual conference tool does not simulate a professional setting but allows for the creation of an experiential learning activity in a virtual environment which entails a different learning environment than face-to-face instruction.

In this paper, we will probe the trainers' and the trainees' perceptions of using a virtual conference tool in a practical course. More specifically, we address the following research questions:

- (1) How do trainee participants rate the virtual translation or interpreting class as learning experience?
- (2) To what extent do trainers feel a virtual meeting platform allows for the implementation of socio-constructivist key principles and that such a platform can be used as a medium to integrate student-centered, authentic, collaborative and reflective learning activities in the context of interpreter and translator skill training?

- (3) Compared with traditional interpreting and translation classes, what do trainers believe are the other advantages or disadvantages of using a virtual meeting platform for practical exercises?

In the next sections, we will describe the two different case studies in which we used and assessed virtual meeting technology. The first case study describes the virtual interpreting class (Section 2). The second case study focuses on group feedback during a virtual translation class (Section 3). At this exploratory stage, we assess the pedagogical value of the tools as perceived by both trainers and trainees after only one implementation session. In Section 4, we will provide a general conclusion and reflect on possible directions for future research.

## 2 Case study 1: A virtual interpreting class

In this section, we describe how a virtual conference tool was used to simulate a remote interpreting activity during an interpreting workshop (Spanish–Dutch) in which four students participated. In Section 2.1, we first describe the context in which the study was carried out. After that, we will focus on the findings of the study (see Section 2.2).

### 2.1 Context

As we set out to organise a virtual class in which the trainer could organise practical exercises in both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting, we considered remote conferencing tools such as *Adobe Connect*, *Skype for Business*, *GoToMeeting*, *BigBlueButton* and *WebEx*, which offer many opportunities in terms of virtual communication and collaboration.

Before we effectively tested one of these tools in the context of the interpreting workshop, the trainer made up a list of features which any virtual conference tool should ideally have in order to organise the interpreting exercises efficiently, e. g. the possibility to send files, to share a screen, to stream audio or video, to make recordings, etc. The complete feature list is given below:

- Trainer + all participants in 1 group
- Use of webcams possible
- The trainer can listen to the interpreting performance of one participant only (breakout of smaller groups of participants possible)
- The trainer can speak to one participant only (breakout of smaller groups of participants possible)
- The trainer can send (sound) files to the participants
- The trainee can send (sound) files to the trainer
- Sent files can be collected in a folder accessible to all participants
- The trainer can send a screen to all participants

- The trainer can send an audio stream to all participants
- The trainer can send a video stream to all participants
- Each participant can make a recording of his/her interpreting performance (if possible without the voice of the trainer reading the text)

We conducted a first trial session with four students using *Skype for Business (SfB)*, as our university had recently subscribed to Microsoft Office 365, which includes *SfB* as an online meeting tool. As we had free access to this tool, we decided to put it to the test as a first virtual conference tool to organise virtual interpreting exercises.

The tested functionalities for the interpreting exercises included listening to a participant while reading out a text, sharing a screen in order to stream an audio or a video, which students could then interpret consecutively or simultaneously, and sharing a screen to show the used speech text in order to discuss some parts of it after the interpreting activity. During the interpreting activity, the trainer would listen to trainees individually.

The trial session led us to conclude that *SfB* has some significant limitations which make the tool unsuitable for interpreting exercises. The main hurdle relates to the absence of a breakout room function, as a result of which no separate audio tracks can be created for each student. In other words, whenever the trainer un-muted the microphone of a trainee in order to listen to his/her interpreting performance, all students would also come to hear the interpretation of that student, which required students to take off their headset when carrying out a consecutive interpreting exercise, and which hindered the rendition of the source language text in the case of simultaneous interpreting. The possibility to have students carrying out an interpreting exercise on a separate audio track would imply the availability of a breakout room function allowing each student to perform an interpreting task in a separate breakout room or 'virtual booth', which was not present in *SfB*. The tool also reacted quite unreliably when it came to audio and video streaming, as the audio sound was often not correctly transferred to the participants and these functions led the tool to be experienced as slow.

In addition to the absence of a breakout room function, some functionalities turned out to be unavailable for Mac users, e. g. screen sharing. After the trial session of *SfB*, we looked for a more powerful and stable tool including more of the proposed functions. After considering and testing other possible tools, we selected *Adobe Connect* as a suitable tool for a second implementation exercise session. The participants were the same four students following the Spanish–Dutch interpreting workshop. They were requested to participate in the implementation session using a headset or earplugs. The use of an external microphone was not compulsory. As it is crucial for interpreters to actually see the speaker, and for the trainer to see the trainees in order to monitor how they perform during the pedagogical activities, the webcams had to be on.

*Adobe Connect* is an online meeting tool allowing participants to be split in separate breakout rooms or virtual booths with separate audio tracks. The trainer can then move from one virtual booth to another and thus listen to an individual participant without

disturbing the other trainees. After completion of the exercise, the trainees can be instantly called back to the ‘central meeting room’ which runs on one central audio track. The only restriction which applies to the use of breakout rooms is that a trainer cannot read aloud a text in the ‘central meeting room’ if meanwhile he or she wants to listen to a trainee in a separate virtual booth. In other words, a trainer cannot read a speech and listen to a student at the same time. This means that in the case of simultaneous interpreting exercises, a trainer will have to use a prerecorded audio or video stream in order to be able to listen to the students’ simultaneous interpreting performance. In the case of a consecutive interpreting exercise, however, a trainer does have the possibility to read a text in the central meeting room and then have the trainees perform the interpretation in the virtual booths.

Tested functionalities included sharing the trainer’s screen to stream audio or video speeches, which can be consecutively interpreted in the virtual booths. For simultaneous interpreting exercises, we sent trainees an MP3 file and the link to an online speech via the chat function which each trainee could open and listen to in order to interpret the speech simultaneously in the individual virtual booths. After completion of an exercise, the trainer sometimes showed or sent a pdf file of the source texts in order to discuss some of the text’s most challenging parts in the central meeting room.

*Adobe Connect* proved to be a very stable online meeting tool with powerful functions which allow the creation of different kinds of interpreting exercises. It includes most of the required functions, as is clear from Table 1 below. It also worked smoothly on both Windows and Mac platforms.

Trainer + all participants in 1 group.	V
Use of webcams possible.	V
The trainer can listen to the interpreting performance of one participant only (breakout of smaller groups of participants possible).	V
The trainer can speak to one participant only (breakout of smaller groups of participants possible).	V
The trainer can send (sound) files to the participants.	V
The trainee can send (sound) files to the trainer.	V
Sent files can be collected in a folder accessible to all participants.	V
The trainer can send a screen to all participants.	V
The trainer can share or send an audio stream to all participants.	V
The trainer can share or send a video stream to all participants.	V
Each participant can make a recording of his/her interpreting performance (if possible without the voice of the trainer reading the text).	X only possible using audio recording software

Table 1: Overview of the availability of the required functions for interpreting exercises in Adobe Connect

As with *Skype for Business*, recording a students' interpreting performance is not possible within the online meeting tool, as it only has one recording option which allows a video recording of the activities taking place in the central meeting room. Consequently, students will have to use separate audio recording software to record the audio of their interpreting performance in order for them to listen to it again for self-assessment.

## 2.2 Findings

### *Students' perception of the learning activity*

Given the limited number of trainees involved in the implementation session, we approached the students after the session to probe their experience of the learning activities. All four students stated that, given the use of virtual interpreting services delivery in the professional field, they could see the added value of organising exercises using the platform and that they would find it relevant to have more exercise sessions using a virtual conference tool. However, when asked whether they thought a virtual class could replace face-to-face instruction, all of them claimed that face-to-face instruction with the "real" interpreting equipment was fundamental in their training and that virtual learning activities could only be a useful complement to face-to-face training. Two students mentioned that virtual conference technology could also be used to perform extra out-of-class exercises among themselves. Two of them said they believed that virtual interpreting was more difficult than in a real booth, as it is more difficult to focus and retain one's concentration when only sitting in front of the computer with a headset on. One student said she experienced less stress performing the interpreting exercises, but she felt that this affected her performance negatively. Another student said the use of the webcam distracted her. Obviously, these perceptions could be linked to students' lack of familiarity with the tool. Two students mentioned the risk of frustration due to the unpredictability of using an online tool, as they had both experienced a failing headset and microphone at some point during the session. The students stressed the fact that performing an interpreting assignment virtually was a totally different experience than in an interpreting booth, and although they could see the benefit of these kinds of exercises, they were not sure they enjoyed performing them.

When it came to the tool's functionalities, the students mentioned that they appreciate the fact that it enabled them to conduct the interpreting activity in separate virtual interpreting booths and that the trainer's feedback was given in the central meeting room with the other participants, as is the case in a traditional class context. They were also impressed by the fact that the trainer was able to listen to each of them without them being aware of it (this requires the trainer to turn off her microphone and her webcam when joining the trainee's breakout booth). They were also enthusiastic about the screen sharing option, which allows easy and clear teacher-guided text analysis and discussion after the exercise. The file sharing option was an efficient way to provide students with the texts of the speeches after the exercise and the chat option was a useful tool to share

the link to videos which were not streamed through the file sharing option. In general, the trainees were positive about the stability and the user-friendly interface of the tool.

#### *The trainer's perception of a virtual conference tool's pedagogical value*

The trainer, the first author of this paper, was also quite positive about the tool's stability and usability. In her opinion, virtual conference platforms can most certainly be used as media for socio-constructivist and situated learning activities in the context of interpreting. As illustrated above (see Table 1), they can have most of the functions required to organise distance interpreting exercises.

The tool provides possibilities for student-centered activities which are guided by the trainer, who provides feedback, coaching and assistance as regards students' understanding of the original text. Meanwhile, the students are actively participating in the different learning activities. In the context of simultaneous and consecutive interpreting exercises, the tool provides semi-authentic situations that draw on knowledge and the skills that will be applied in real-life professional contexts. However, it only provides a partial replication of a real-life situation, since no real audience or clients are involved in the learning activity.

Although no teamwork was involved in the implementation session, the trainer believes the tool is collaborative in nature as it allows for the exchange of ideas and thus a collaborative construction of knowledge. Students learn from each other as they are invited to share their experiences, perspectives, problems and solutions, etc. with the other trainees.

The technology can also promote reflective learning activities such as trainer-led discussions encouraging self-reflection on perceived strengths and weaknesses. However, as students cannot record themselves readily in the virtual conference platform, the trainer suspects the design of self-assessment activities in a distance class could possibly be technically more challenging as students would have to rely on the use of an external tool. The same applies to the design of peer assessment activities, which are also essential to a socio-constructivist approach (Fernández-Prieto/Sempere-Linares 2010).

While the trainer fully acknowledged the benefit of designing interpreting exercises using a virtual conference platform – especially since it has the potential for situated activities – she was not convinced of its added value as a medium for designing socio-constructivist activities in comparison with a traditional face-to-face interpreting class. The trainer also stated that she believed organising a distance class successfully was quite complex and time-consuming, as it involves extensive preparation in order to limit potential technical hiccups. As we have seen in the trial session using *SfB*, too many obstacles can quickly lead to frustration on the part of the trainer and the trainees. Not only do the materials need to be prepared and adapted to the formats which are supported by the tool (e. g. pdf for screen sharing and MP3 for audio), but managing a distance interpreting class requires technical mastery of the virtual tool's features. Even in the case of an adequate preparation, however, unpredictable problems such as

connectivity issues can arise. This is problematic even if only one participant experiences technological problems, as he or she cannot participate in the learning activity anymore. The teaching experience is different from face-to-face teaching as well, as it is very important to provide clear and comprehensive instructions to the trainees in order for them to know exactly what they are expected to do. This somewhat reduces the trainer's degree of spontaneity.

On the other hand, a virtual conference platform makes it possible to organise interpreting classes without the use of specific interpreting equipment. And given the fact that it allows for the creation of situated activities, it is certainly worth integrating its use in the practical courses as a complement to face-to-face instruction. Finally, the trainer was convinced that more advantages and the full pedagogical potential of the tool could only be unlocked after organising several distance classes and gaining more experience using the tool.

### **3 Case study 2: Group feedback during a virtual translation class**

In this section, we describe how a virtual conference tool was used during a group feedback session within the context of a technical-scientific translation workshop (English–Dutch) in which twenty students participated. In Section 3.1, we first describe the context in which the study was carried out. After that, we will focus on the findings of the study (see Section 3.2).

#### **3.1 Context**

The purpose of a translation feedback session is to compare and discuss the translations made by students based on the same source text. Unlike an individual feedback session in which a student receives direct feedback from a trainer on a translation that he/she has made himself/herself, a group feedback session has the advantage that students develop different views on how a source text can be translated by comparing their translations with one another during class. This approach to providing feedback in a translation classroom is student-centered. Central to this approach is, after all, the idea that students learn first and foremost from each other, while creating at the same time an increased metacognitive awareness of their own actions. This vision fits within a social constructivist learning paradigm (Vygotsky 1930/1978) in which knowledge and insights within a group are developed in a social context (through social interactions).

In order to facilitate comparisons of student translations during the feedback session, and to create an environment for active participation and cooperation, students in the technical-scientific translation workshop are requested to make their translations in a designated CAT tool and submit these in the standardised XML Localisation Interchange File Format (XLIFF). In order for the translations to be easily merged into one translation memory, the trainer needs to make sure that the source text is segmented in exactly the same way for all students. This means that the trainer creates the translation project in

the CAT tool in advance and that students just need to open the translation project and start translating the source text.

In preparation of the feedback session, the translation memory comprising the different student translations is then examined in more detail by the trainer. Interesting translations (both good suggestions and errors) that the trainer wishes to discuss during the feedback session are copied in a handout which serves as a basis for the classroom discussion. An example of this is shown in Figure 1 below in order to illustrate the format of this handout. The left-hand column shows the number of the specific source language segment. In the middle column of the table we find the original source language segment. This example shows the English title “Call for papers”. The right-hand column shows a list of student translations (in Dutch) selected from the translation memory. During the feedback session, various types of questions are then asked to the students about these translations with the intention of stimulating as much discussion as possible, raising awareness and acquiring insights with regard to translation errors, translation preferences, etc.

Nr.	Source segment	A selection of student translations
1	Call for papers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Call for papers</li><li>2. Oproep tot het indienen van papers</li><li>3. Oproep tot papers</li><li>4. Oproep voor papers</li><li>5. Vraag naar papers</li><li>6. “Call for papers”</li></ol>

Fig. 1: Sample of a hand-out used during a group feedback session in the translation workshop

When selecting a virtual conference tool in the context of the translation workshop, we took into account the features which any such tool should ideally have in order for the trainer to organise the translation feedback session efficiently, e. g. one central presenter, the possibility to send files, to share a screen, to create polls, to record the entire session, etc. The complete feature list is given below:

- Trainer + all students in one virtual class
- The trainer plays a central role as “speaker/presenter”
- The trainer can speak with and listen to the different students
- The trainer can send files to the students (e. g. ppt or hand-out) and vice versa
- The trainer can create polls in order to collect (from the students) quick answers to specific questions (e. g. “What is the correct translation of this term: A, B or C?”)
- Sent files can be collected in a folder accessible to all participants
- The trainer can share his/her computer screen with all students (e. g. in order to show a web page, to demonstrate the functionalities of a CAT tool, etc.)
- The participants can send chat messages to one another
- The trainer can record the entire session and send it to the students afterwards

## 3.2 Findings

For reasons mentioned earlier in this article, *Skype for Business (SfB)* was chosen for the first trial session in the translation course. So far, only one virtual feedback session has taken place. This first session involved a two-hour discussion of a translation assignment that students had prepared in the week before the feedback session took place. The assignment involved translating an English text fragment of approximately 500 words into Dutch. The text sample was taken from a call for papers for a conference about machine translation. Prior to the virtual feedback session, students were told what they needed to do in order to join the session. They were also given tips on how to reduce the risk of encountering technical problems during the live session.

### *Students' perception of the learning activity*

Immediately after the feedback session, students were asked to complete an online survey. In the first part of this questionnaire, questions were asked about the way in which the students had participated in the session. Of the 18 students who had completed the survey, 16 indicated that they had never participated in a virtual training session before. Two students indicated that they had already attended webinars. Most of the students followed the virtual feedback session using a Windows computer. Two of the students followed the session using a Mac and two students used a tablet. During the feedback session, the students hardly encountered any connectivity problems. Occasionally there were some issues with the audio but overall this had no negative impact on the session. A major disadvantage for Mac users was that they did not have access to the materials that were shared within the group during the session. Furthermore, they were also unable to participate in the polls that were held during the session.

The students generally responded positively to the question whether they liked the format of a virtual feedback session. Only two students indicated that they didn't like it at all. The general motivation within the group was also high. Furthermore, the students answered positively to the question whether they thought an online feedback session was just as effective as a face-to-face feedback session. But the students' opinions were divided as to whether they preferred a face-to-face feedback session instead of a virtual one. Six students clearly agreed with this, while nine disagreed and three students did not have a specific preference.

Students indicated that the chat function was the most relevant and useful functionality tested during the session. This function was frequently used by the students during the session to interact with each other or to respond to a question or comment from the trainer. Another important aspect was the sharing of a document. Sharing the screen was also seen as an important functionality but was not essential in this case because the handout for the feedback session was delivered to the students in advance. Launching a survey was considered a positive way to stimulate interaction. Being able to see each other was not considered important. The same applies to the use of a shared whiteboard on which all participants could write their ideas.

Regarding the degree of attention and participation within the group, the students indicated that they did not necessarily notice a difference with a traditional feedback session. They also clearly indicated that they did not feel inhibited by the tool to respond to questions or comments from the trainer. In response to the question whether they found *SfB* a good, attractive and user-friendly tool for a virtual feedback session, the majority reacted positively. For obvious reasons, the two Mac users indicated that they would no longer want to use the tool in the future.

Overall, we can conclude that the experience for most of the students was positive. Despite some technical issues for Mac users, *SfB* proved to be a suitable tool for a virtual translation feedback session, because it supports most of the required actions, which are shown in Table 2 below.

Trainer + all students in 1 group.	V
The trainer plays a central role as “speaker/presenter”.	V
The trainer can speak with and listen to the different students.	V
The trainer can send files to the students and vice versa.	V
The trainer can create polls.	V
Sent files can be collected in a folder accessible to all participants.	V
The trainer can share his/her computer screen with all participants.	V
	Although this functionality should be possible, there were some technical problems to do this.
The participants can send chat messages to one another.	V
The trainer can record the entire session to send it to the students afterwards.	V

Table 2: Overview of the availability of the required functions for a translation feedback session in *SfB*

*The trainer’s perception of a virtual conference tool’s pedagogical value*

The trainer’s experience in giving a virtual feedback session was generally positive. This was largely due, of course, to the fact that there were hardly any technical problems during the virtual feedback session, which took about two hours in total. Only at the beginning of the session it appeared that some students could not see the powerpoint slides that were partly used as a preparation during the session. The trainer therefore decided to immediately switch to the handout he had created in preparation of the virtual session (cf. Section 3.1).

Unlike the first case study in which a semi-authentic context was created for interpreting students on the basis of a virtual meeting tool, in the case of the virtual feedback session for translation students, the focus was on whether this technology could easily be used to support other aspects of socio-constructivist teaching. The trainer, who is the second author of this article, tested various functionalities of *SfB* during the virtual feedback session and concluded that the tool can stimulate interaction in different ways, which is an important condition for constructive and collaborative learning. Besides the fact that students can share relevant content with each other and with the trainer, that they can see and discuss each other's translations and that they can actively participate in polls, the chat function was also experienced as an additional valuable feature that was frequently used during the session. Students often responded to fellow students' answers via chat, often spontaneously sought additional information from external sources and copied their findings in the chat window. In this way, the chat discussion was considered an added value to the discussion that took place via the audio channel. This form of interaction also promotes trainees' reflection on their own performance. The fact that the recording of the session was subsequently made available to the students is also seen as valuable from the point of view of the trainer.

With regard to the preparation of the virtual feedback session, the trainer noted that the possible technical problems that may occur during a virtual session need to be carefully considered beforehand. This makes the preparation somewhat more complex compared to a traditional (face-to-face) feedback session. In addition, the lecturer experienced his teaching method as less spontaneous compared to a face-to-face teaching method, which is largely due to the fact that it was more difficult to respond quickly to various simultaneous reactions from the students. An important conclusion was that, from a trainer's perspective, the use of a virtual meeting tool can never be seen as a replacement for the face-to-face class setting. Nevertheless, this first trial showed that it is possible with virtual meeting tools to maintain a socio-constructivist teaching method. More attention needs to be paid to learning activities that stimulate the collaborative learning process in a virtual environment.

## **4 Conclusion**

In creating learning contexts for student translators and interpreters, technology has become an important factor to take into consideration, given the unmistakable impact that it has on professional translation and interpreting practices. Given the rise of technologies which alter the way in which interpreting and translation services are delivered, we assessed the virtual conference tools' potential to simulate semi-authentic situated learning environments and to design socio-constructivist learning activities which could complement traditional face-to-face instruction.

The following questions were central to this study:

- (1) How do trainee participants rate the virtual translation or interpreting class as learning experience?
- (2) To what extent do trainers feel a virtual meeting platform allows for the implementation of socio-constructivist key principles and that such a platform can be used as a medium to integrate student-centered, authentic, collaborative and reflective learning activities in the context of interpreter and translator skill training?
- (3) Compared with traditional interpreting and translation classes, what do trainers believe are the other advantages or disadvantages of using a virtual meeting platform for practical exercises?

First of all, it should be stated that in our quest to find a suitable virtual conference platform to conduct a distance interpreting class, we found that *Skype for Business* was not adequate for virtual practical interpreting exercises as it lacks stability and a function allowing to create breakout rooms or separate virtual booths. Moreover, we also detected signs of the tool's instability, as some participants got kicked out of the exercise session. Moreover, certain tool functionalities in the Windows version were not available in the version for Mac users. This said, the tool could still prove useful and adequate if the aim is to simulate a triad/role play in the context of community interpreting training as a form of situated learning activity. Our search for an alternative tool led us to *Adobe Connect*, which turned out to be a stable platform with breakout rooms making it possible to organise a distance interpreting class with different types of interpreting exercises.

In response to the first question (cf. *supra*), we can conclude that both translation and interpreter trainees rated the learning experience as relevant and useful. The interpreting students felt that virtual interpreting classes were not as important as their face-to-face instruction using "real" interpreting equipment. Some of them found it more difficult to stay focused in the virtual setting as opposed to a traditional class setting and said this affected their interpreting performance. Another potential threat was the risk of frustration in the case of a technological failure. Although the trainees were enthusiastic about the virtual platform's functions, especially the screen and file sharing options and the breakout rooms, they did not seem to have found their learning experience as very enjoyable.

The translation students, on the other hand, believed the virtual feedback session to be as effective as the face-to-face feedback session and found it, overall, an enjoyable and relevant learning experience. They did not feel intimidated by the technology and were eager to participate during the live interactions. The difference in the results of student perceptions between the two case studies is partly due to the differences in size between the two groups of students. In the case of the interpreter course, only four students participated while twenty translation students took part in the virtual translation feedback session. Another important difference between the two case studies accounting for the differences in students' perceptions lies in the fact that the interpreter students

had to play a much more active role during the interpreting session, as practicing interpreting skills was central to the virtual interpreting session. For the translators, the session was about giving feedback on a translation they had submitted earlier. Furthermore, hardly any technical problems were encountered during the virtual workshop for translation students, whereas the participants in the interpreting workshops were faced with quite a few technical problems, which led to some frustrations and ultimately had a negative impact on the overall perception of the technology.

In response to the second question (cf. *supra*), we can conclude that the virtual trial sessions in the context of the interpreting and translation classes show that it is possible to organise learning activities in accordance with key socio-constructivist principles – such as student-centeredness, authenticity, collaboration and reflection – through virtual conference technology. Virtual meeting tools contain a set of interesting features that stimulate interaction between the students and the trainer. The possibility to create instant polls, share files and screens, participate in the live chat session as well as the availability of break-out rooms are some examples of this and are rated as valuable features from an educational point of view.

In response to the third question (cf. *supra*), both trainers stated that although organising a distance virtual class requires extensive preparation and entails a somewhat less spontaneous teaching experience, it is certainly worth integrating virtual technology in translator and interpreter training. The biggest challenge of organising such classes, in their opinion, is the management of unpredictable technical problems and connectivity problems which can arise and disrupt the pedagogical task.

We are aware that our study has some limitations. As the number of participants was very limited, the representativeness of this pilot study for a larger research population should be verified by means of a follow-up study. It must also be acknowledged that our findings are based on a first experience with learning activities using a virtual conference platform. Therefore, we cannot make general claims as to the impact of virtual learning activities on students' learning experiences. It would be worth investigating how more practice with the virtual conference technology affects interpreting and translation trainees' motivation and inclination to use the technology. Further research could also shed light on which additional skills are acquired through a virtual conference platform compared with traditional face-to-face classes.

As a next step in our educational innovation project in the context of interpreting, we will aim to introduce students to alternative interpreting modes such as whispered interpreting and boothless simultaneous interpreting. These modes of interpreting are often treated as marginal or unorthodox, but are actually gaining ground in the professional field (Baxter 2016). The use of these tools is especially relevant in the context of the interpreting internship assignments, which require students to perform interpreting assignments about a panoply of possible subjects in different sectors (mainly non-profit) of the professional field at the demand of organisers of a conference or event who want to facilitate communication in other languages. Contrary to the pedagogical situation of an interpreting workshop, in which the trainer reads or plays the recording of

an oral text while listening to the student interpreters, an interpreting internship offers an authentic (situated learning) situation with a speaker and a listener who are independent of each other and who do not understand each other's language. As these assignments at "real" events in front of a "real" audience is often at the demand of organisers who do not have interpreting equipment or interpreting booths at their disposal, we have to look at alternative ways that students can deliver their interpreting service. Bring-your-own device (BYOD) solutions make it possible to stream the interpreter's translation to the attendees' phones or tablets via an app. *BeONAIR* is such an interpreting solution which we will put to the test. As the tool only runs on local networks, it is conceivable that we will have to look for ways to circumvent this limitation. *Google Hangouts* could also be used for these purposes, although the tool only allows a maximum of 10 participants. Streaming a Google Hangout session through YouTube is another option to get around a maximum number of participants, but in this case the delay in audio between the interpreter and the listeners can run up to 60 seconds, which is problematic as the interpreting act itself entails a delay already. We will also look at the potential of *Adobe Connect* to be used in such cases.

In the context of translation training, further thought will be given to meaningful learning activities that can stimulate interaction during virtual feedback sessions and thus contribute to building up shared knowledge. In addition, we will also look at other learning situations in translation education in which the use of virtual meeting tools can be justified. Recently, for example, we organised an interactive webinar on technology-driven terminology research in which students learned to compile a bilingual glossary using technology and on the basis of a corpus of bilingual texts. As virtual conference technology is increasingly being used in professional translation contexts, we also want to embed the technology more strongly into a translation office simulation course in which students gain insights into translation workflows through authentic translation projects. Our aim is to further examine how virtual conference technology can play a role in socio-constructivist translation teaching methods. The impact of this technology on students' learning motivations and attitudes and on their acquisition of technological skills should also be further explored in the context of translation education.

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