Teaching dialogue interpreting by distance mode in the COVID-19 era: a challenge for the present, an opportunity for the future

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Abstract

The sudden shift from a traditional to a virtual classroom in the COVID-19 era has resulted in a radical re-organisation of courses not conceived initially as online learning. The Internet availability of materials and tools has been an excellent resource for the so-called "emergency remote teaching" (ERT); however, the passage was somewhat problematic. This paper presents our experience of teaching dialogue interpreting (DI) by distance mode in two beginner interpreter classrooms during the COVID-19 era. We present three different kinds of data: a questionnaire concerning our first ERT experience (2020), observation sheets, and two excerpts of transcriptions (made after recording the students' role-play performances in 2021). Our aim is to analyse how ERT can affect course delivery and design and to evaluate whether the pedagogical measures we took to mitigate the drawbacks of ERT were effective. In essence, we were faced with the paradox of using distance learning methods for training students to work as dialogue interpreters in face-to-face interactions. Needless to say, some problematic aspects emerged during our lessons. Therefore, the present study is also intended to highlight strengths and weaknesses in teaching dialogic interpreting by remote.

Keywords

Dialogue interpreting, dialogue interpreting teaching, emergency remote teaching (ERT), COVID-19 pandemic, distance education, gaze direction, distance learning.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 epidemic broke out at the beginning of March 2020, Italy was faced with taking measures to contain the spread of contagion, including the closure of schools and universities. In response to the President of the Council of Ministers' Decree of 9 March 2020, new solutions were adopted to manage the suspension of classroom-based instruction, and distance learning quickly replaced face-to-face interaction. This transition was challenging for both educators and students, whose lives were being disrupted by the ensuing pandemic at the same time (Hodges *et al.* 2020). Timelines for reshaping courses were very short, and not every student had the necessary technologies to access online learning. Moreover, before the shutdown was extended to the end of the academic year, instructors were uncertain about the duration of this alternative teaching modality. This lack of a long-term view inevitably led to delays in taking action.

Indeed, it should be underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic did not exactly result in "distance learning" but led to "emergency remote teaching" (ERT), as Hodges *et al.* (2020) explain in their article *The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning*. The term was created by these researchers to designate an instruction which is provided "in a hurry with bare minimum resources and scant time", and which strongly differs from "what many of us know as high-quality online education":

> emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses, and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. (Hodges *et al.* 2020: NA)

Despite being conceived as a temporary solution, ERT finally turned out to be the "world's biggest educational technology (edtech) experiment in history" (*Ibid.*). With "1.5 billion students" involved, and along with the creation of networks aiming at supporting countries in providing online education like the Global Education Coalition launched by Unesco, this unprecedented event marked a new era in teaching paradigms; however, it will have a significant impact on what learning will "look like in the 21st century" (*Ibid.*). According to Hodges *et al.*, "emergency education models are being treated as prototypes for education systems to emulate far beyond the pandemic". Nevertheless, one year after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, ERT continues to be the solution to the extension of the state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (*Ibid.*).

This paper mainly aims to discuss how ERT can affect course delivery and design in the context of a DI module. We will seek to evaluate whether the didactic and pedagogical measures we took to mitigate the most problematic aspects of ERT were effective. We also intend to highlight strengths and weaknesses in the teaching of DI by remote. To this end, we will first offer a short insight into the

studies concerning the use of new technologies for teaching DI by distance mode (section 1). In section 2, we will present our course design and data. Section 3 will first concentrate on the challenges posed by ERT and on our response to these. Next, we will evoke some basic principles and models of distance learning that were a source of inspiration for defining our pedagogical approach and the objectives of our "learning community" (Swan *et al.* 2009). Data discussion (section 4) will finally be an occasion to comment on our solutions to transform our lessons into an ERT mode. Paradoxically, we were faced with the contradiction of using the distance mode for training students to work as dialogue interpreters in face-to-face interaction.

The results of a questionnaire we submitted to our students at the end of our first ERT experience (March-May 2020) will raise the fundamental issues of the "teaching presence" (Anderson *et al.* 2001: 5) and of the students' participation. Furthermore, our observation sheets and the two excerpts we took from the audio-recordings we made in January-March 2021, will allow us to illustrate some peculiarities which emerged during our students' role-play performances, namely, how the concept of "face-to-face interaction" (Wadensjö 1998) changes when DI is taught by distance but is not intended to train remote interpreters. We will try to ascertain which errors and difficulties in interpreting performance seem most directly connected with our mode of delivering the course. Finally, we hope to offer some food for thought on effective approaches to distance education in times of crisis, especially since this topic is vital for both children and young adults.

1.   Dialogue interpreting and distance learning: an overview

The link between Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) and DI has become increasingly closer in the last few years. As evidenced by Tripepi Winteringham's (2010) investigation, the use of "terminology aids, such as laptops, notebooks, small handheld PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) or similar instruments with Internet accessibility has facilitated interpreters' work" (2010: 91). At the same time, the helpfulness of ICTS and CAIT (Computer Assisted Interpreting Technologies) has been fully recognised not only for practice but also for training dialogue interpreters: "dedicated authoring programs", "intelligent CAIT" applications and "computer-mediated communication tools" all seem to have "a positive effect on students' performance" (Sandrelli/de Manuel Jerez 2007: 269). As stressed by Sandrelli (2011), trainers can devise

> [...] new ways of using technology to provide a solution to a specific problem, such as an increase in the number of students, which makes it impossible to provide individual feedback in class; a reduction in the number of contact hours, with courses becoming more and more reliant on students' autonomous practice; the need to cater to different learning styles and paces; an attempt to reduce the stress levels that are often associated with interpreter training; and, finally, the desire to encourage self-reflection and the acquisition of critical skills in order to improve performance (Sandrelli 2011: 226)

Besides providing tools for implementing interpreting practice and preparing interpreters to work in a face-to-face situation, technology has also involved the birth of remote interpreting. Telephone and videoconference interpreting are "gaining ground in a variety of settings" such as "healthcare, legal, business and administrative", and there is a "rapid growth of web-based interpreting platforms allowing interpreters to work from a remote site" (Amato/Spinolo 2018: 7). As prophesised by one of the most prominent essays on the subject, "whereas the interpreter's presence at the site of communicative interaction was a defining characteristic of interpreting throughout most of its millennial history", new options for delivering the service have gained ground in response to the relentless technological acceleration which characterises our times (Koller/Pöchhacker 2018: 89). Social distancing and the closing of borders are now accelerating the process. It must nevertheless be noted that these studies also deal with some drawbacks. For instance, Koller and Pöchhacker (2018: 89) highlight the repercussions of remote interpreting on the "service quality and interpreters' health", such as "discomfort (e.g. eye strain) and fatigue" and the "interpreters' perceived lack of presence", of "being there", which is associated with "reduced motivation and higher levels of burnout". For her part, Tripepi Winteringham (2010: 91) warns against the risk of losing concentration, a distraction which in "liaison settings" may "even irritate the interlocutors and may cause the interpreter to miss out on essential non-verbal language and lose the human closeness that is the much-praised characteristic and facilitator of LI".

However, these drawbacks do not seem to overcome the advantages, and research into the application of ICTS to DI teaching went one further step at the end of the 20th century. In fact, this period saw the first attempts to use ICTS for offering DI courses by distance mode: of note are the courses organised by Carr and Steyn, researchers at Vancouver Community College in Canada, or those offered by the Language Line Services of AT&T in the United States, to mention but two (Ko 2006: 67). Ko's pioneering papers (2006; 2008) marked a turning point in this respect. In raising the fundamental issue of opting "pedagogies to best fit the new technologies so as to achieve results comparable to those of on-campus teaching" (Ko 2006: 67), this scholar sets up a training programme which used sound-only teleconferencing and telephone as the "main medium" to set up interactive activities (such as "multiple group practice") for an off-campus group of students. Ko's experiment demonstrated that "students trained by distance mode can achieve a level similar or comparable to those trained in a face-to-face manner in terms of interpreting ability and skills" (Ko 2008: 814). Thus, the author prophetically concluded that remote interpreting might "become a necessity (…) in the field of future training programs for interpreters" (Ko 2008: 838).

Though these studies are still relatively rare, other research followed Ko's experiment. For instance, Tymczyńska's (2009) blended model for a healthcare interpreting module demonstrated the effectiveness of online course management systems in supporting "both students and instructors in creating collaborative learning communities" (*Ibid.*: 158). As for fully online modules, Perramon and Ugarte's (2020) paper reports the details of a distance teaching programme which involves fourth-year interpreting specialisation subjects: the project is

aimed at providing "telephone and videoconference interpreting, especially in liaison interpreting" to "groups with a high number of students" (2020: 95). We must also add to this list the EU-funded project *Interpreting in Virtual Reality* (IVY), which was born "to develop an avatar-based 3D virtual environment that simulates professional interpreting practice" in the settings of "business and community interpreting" (http://virtual-interpreting.net/). Nevertheless, Ko's experiment remains the most similar to our ERT experience. First, it involved no face-to-face contact with distance students. Secondly, it addressed students who had no previous experience in DI teaching or practice; last but not least, its objective was to prepare students by distance to work as dialogue interpreters in face-to-face interpreting situations.

2.   Course design and data

Our study, which adopts a descriptive approach and combines different teaching methods, deals with our two experiences of ERT (March-May 2020 and January-March 2021). These both concerned our course in Interpreting for International Companies, a 30-hour module of general preparatory training in DI (language combination Italian-French) for people who approach this discipline for the first time. The course is part of the third and final year exam in French Language and Translation and is intended for students who have chosen French as their first language in the degree programme in Disciplines of Linguistic Mediation at the University of Macerata. In addition to a theoretical part aimed at supplying some basic notions and a framework for critically engaging with the profession, the course includes a series of exercises, namely structured role-plays, the importance of which has been widely ascertained in the literature (see Niemants/Cirillo 2016), based on scripted dialogues. These are conducted by the teacher and a French mother-tongue assistant, who act respectively as the Italian-speaker and the French-speaker in a simulated dialogic situation where interpreter services are required. Since the course has a strong connection with the entrepreneurial world, topics and scenarios mainly deal with business negotiations, company visits and trade fairs; furthermore, two lessons are reserved for medical settings. Role-plays are proposed in the co-presence of the two teachers, generally once a week. At the same time, the other lessons are dedicated to theory, sight-translation, and exercises to improve short-term memory, like shadowing with a twist; that is, a word-for-word repetition done after a short pause.

With the COVID-19 outbreak, we were faced with the inevitability of adapting our course design to the new situation. In fact, moving to ERT required a preliminary step of analysis in which we had to consider some objective factors, first of all, the main goal of our course. Though reproducing a real-life communication context in a fully online learning context mode may seem absurd (if not impossible), the assumption that "interpreting students or practitioners engaging in remote interpreting training" should "have already acquired the interpreting skills necessary to handle basic communication in a dialogic setting" (Braun/Davitti 2018a: 151) led us to re-organise the lessons keeping in mind our original pur-

pose – that is to say, training students to work as dialogue interpreters in face-to-face interaction, and not as remote interpreters. This decision involved some adjustments in the scripts of our role-plays. We tried to convey the impression of being in a face-to-face interpreting situation by inserting as many references as possible to actions performed in real life (e.g. standing up, having a look around, tripping on a step while visiting a cheese factory). We must also consider that in such a short time our course planning could not be fully revolutionised for both administrative and practical reasons. Indeed, the concept of "course design" becomes paradoxical when applied to ERT: as Hodges *et al.* (2020: NA) point out, "typical planning, preparation, and development time for a fully online university course are six to nine months before the course is delivered", while "educational planning in crises" requires "creative problem-solving". As we will see in detail in the following sections, we tried to "generate various possible solutions" to "help meet the new needs for our learners" (*Ibid.*), namely by combining asynchronous and synchronous teaching. These were provided via two means: OpenOlat, a free learning management system offering content managing as well as several features for learners and teachers; Microsoft Teams, a platform that was initially designed for business meetings.

Our first ERT experience (March-May 2020) did not allow us to collect data, except for an online questionnaire submitted some time after lessons had ended (September 2020), to the students who attended the course. Conversely, in 2021 we were able to audio-record our synchronous lessons, which were almost entirely dedicated to role-plays. In order to protect students' privacy and avoid the automatic upload of our recordings on Microsoft Stream, we used a voice recorder app. Audio data were collected over two months, from mid-January to mid-March 2021. The recordings (five lessons for a total of almost 15 hours) were transcribed using conversation analytical conventions (see Jefferson 2004), and include 28 role-play performances in total. In what follows, we will discuss two extracts that can offer a sample of difficulties and errors in interpreting, which can be more directly attributed to our mode of delivering the course (that is to say, ERT) rather than to the students' linguistic and pragmatic competences or their lack of previous experience. Two auxiliary instruments of investigation were employed. Firstly, an observation sheet, which we filled in during the role-plays and which is a very simplified and adapted version of Merlini and Favaron's model (2003: 216-217). Secondly, we stimulated discussion through retrospective think-aloud techniques, asking the students to comment on their performances and guiding them back to the more critical points so that they could find a better way to interpret the talk. In particular, the students were stimulated to reflect not only on some interpreting errors or on the omissions altering the message but also on their ability "to coordinate" their "listening and speaking with others' listening and speaking" (Wadensjö 1995: 129). Finally, even if we recognise the importance of non-participant observation and peer evaluation, the peculiarity of the context did not allow for broad use of this resource since most of our students kept their cameras off during the lessons. Therefore, even if we shared an online assessment sheet, it was challenging to build a dialogue with the non-participants. We preferred not to force them to intervene, to avoid that the participants be "judged" by voices with no face.

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3. Teaching dialogue interpreting via ERT: our experience

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic severely hit Italy. Urgent measures were taken to limit the spread of the virus: the Italian government first ordered the closure of all schools and universities on 4 March 2020, just a few days before starting our course in DI at the University of Macerata. Therefore, our transition to ERT was sudden and unexpected, and we had very limited time to plan new didactic strategies. As witnessed by people working in the field, the move from face-to-face to distance teaching and learning was accompanied by a profusion of advice and instructions from experts, which often turned out to be "tips and tricks" rather than reliable guidance to facilitate this passage (Rapanta *et al.* 2020: NA). Organisational and pedagogical issues immediately required special attention. We had to familiarise ourselves very rapidly with the tools the University put at our disposal; the aforementioned Microsoft Teams and OpenOlat, which both had some prominent drawbacks, as we will see. We also had to re-set our programme considering the "role of online assessments" (Means *et al.* 2014: 12) because, as a matter of fact, ERT did not entail any revision of exam format, but exams simply had to be taken online in the teachers' virtual classroom. Furthermore, the "student-instructor ratio", on which a fundamental element of our course depends, i.e. the "level of online student-instructor interaction" (Means *et al.* 2014: 10), could not be easily foreseen. We did not know how many students would be able to face "the technology barriers and challenges in using ICTs" posed by ERT, such as "internet connectivity, technology costs, and lack of technology skills" (Rahiem 2020: 6124). However, the crux of the matter was the urgent necessity to re-conceive what Anderson *et al.* (2001: 5) define as the "teaching presence", that is to say, "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes".

Moving to ERT meant both reflecting on some basic principles of distance learning and defining the role of the teacher in an online environment. The "importance of interaction" in distance education has been fully emphasised by researchers (Wilson/Stacey 2004: 33), especially since this element is the basis of one of the most famous models for online teaching, the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison *et al.* 2000). The COI is a "dynamic model" for "both the development of community and the pursuit of inquiry in any educational environment", and it is founded on "three core elements: cognitive, social and teaching presence" (Swan *et al.* 2009: 44-45). According to the COI model, creating an "effective online education community" (or "learning community") not only involves "cognitive presence", that is to say studying a particular content, but teachers should also do their best to establish a "supportive environment" and "develop a sense of trust and safety within the electronic community" (Anderson 2008: 350). Anderson (2004, 2008) illustrated the advantages of both community-of-inquiry models and independent study models: both may allow the building of "learning-, knowledge-, assessment- and community-centred education experiences", and these will be further enhanced by "integration of the new tools and affordances of the educational Semantic Web" (Anderson 2008: 68). In

a more recent study, Picciano (2017) took up Anderson's and Bosch's (2016) models to propose a Multimodal Model for Online Education, which could reconcile "community/collaborative models" with "self-paced instructional models". Picciano's multimodal model provides for the following design components: content (via learning management systems); reflection (blog/journal); collaboration/student-generated content/peer review; evaluation/assessment; dialectics/questioning (discussion board); self-paced/independent software; and, finally, the social/emotional component, which is conveyed through face-to-face learning and tutoring (Picciano 2017: 182). The components may be mixed to create different types of "learning communities": self-paced or fully online teacher-led courses, blended courses with instruction provided primarily by a teacher, and so on (Picciano 2017: 183-186).

Picciano's model may be a source of inspiration for pedagogical proposals during ERT, mainly if we accept that video conferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams can partially compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. Our "learning community" involved all the components listed by Picciano, except for the "reflection" one (merely due to lack of time for creating it and keeping it updated). Considering both these suggestions and the status of our recipients (i.e. young adults who are primarily non-resident students and who would have probably returned to their region of residence in case of extension of the state of emergency), we opted for a blend of synchronous and asynchronous lessons, with a prevalence of synchronous teaching.

Exercises involving shadowing, glossaries, instructions functioning as a kind of briefing, and a selection of materials (videos, websites, articles) introducing the subject to be treated in the following role-plays were uploaded once a week on the platform (OpenOlat in 2020, Microsoft Teams in 2021). The purpose was to facilitate a linear progression in the acquisition of specific knowledge and operational skills. In addition, audio-recorded lectures accompanied by slideshows concerning the theoretical aspects of interpreting were also offered in an asynchronous mode. This way, synchronous classrooms could be entirely dedicated to practising sight translation and role-play interpreting exercises. On the other hand, synchronous lessons permitted us to establish a direct relationship with the students and create a form of sociality in a period of social distancing, somehow integrating the "emotional" component. Thus, classes were not only an occasion for DI practice but also a chance for the members of the same learning community to meet virtually. This was also a way to counteract the inevitable "impact of stress" caused by the forced transition to online education (Hodges *et al.* 2020: NA) and to compensate for one of the main drawbacks of remote DI, the "feeling of reduced presence" (Braun/Davitti 2017: 166).

Finally, even though our guiding principle was the social constructivist pedagogy of being "a guide" who "assumes the critical role of shaping the learning activities" (Anderson/Dron 2011: 85), we also adopted some practices typical of Siemens' (2004) connectivist approach. This "theory for the digital age" guided us into planning some activities intended to implement the students' capacity to build their "personal knowledge" and to strengthen their "decision-making" processes, that is to say, the capacity to choose "what to learn" and to shape "the

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meaning of incoming information processes" (*Ibid.*: NA). For instance, students were asked to expand the asynchronous materials we had provided (namely, the glossaries) and complete the preparatory work for the role-plays by researching additional materials on the Internet. It was also suggested to students to autonomously organise "multiple practice" activities with each other: this was a way to stimulate "collaboration/student-generated content/peer review".

4. Data discussion

4.1. Results of the questionnaire (March-May 2020)

Some months after the lessons of our first ERT course ended, students were asked to fill out an online questionnaire concerning their experience with our DI course and their general impressions about this new form of learning. The aim was to evaluate the students' satisfaction with our course and identify the strengths and weaknesses of our pedagogical proposals. The questionnaire was generated with Sosci, a professional tool that can be used free of charge for scholarly survey projects. It consisted of 11 items (multiple choice questions), and was completely anonymous. We arranged three different sections, whose aims were: data concerning the students' attendance and their degree of active participation in classes (section 1); the students' opinions on the organisation of the course and the platforms used (section 2); their global appreciation of the course and their potential interest in including some references to CAI tools (section 3). 64 questionnaires were completed, which is a highly representative sample, since the average number of the students who attended our synchronous classrooms was 75.

As evidenced by answers to section 1, the students' attendance was globally continuous. 50 students stated that they had attended "all" or "most of the synchronous lessons", whereas the option "I have attended one or none of the lessons" was selected only by 4 students. It should also be noted that almost half of the participants admitted that the transition to online learning had a "strong" or "some" impact on their actual presence during the lessons; this seems to confirm that online learning can "give access to educational experience that is, at least more flexible in time and in space as campus-based education" (Anderson/ Dron 2011: 53). As for the degree of participation, only 24 students participated in a "very active" way in the course, while 20 students declared that their participation was "absolutely passive". It is worth noticing that both "reasons of privacy" and personality traits ("shyness, fear of being judged by the fellow students and by the teacher") were indicated as the main factors conditioning active participation. However, 35 students also believed that the virtual learning environment was more "distracting", a drawback largely assessed by research in distance learning (Anderson/Elloumi 2004: 51). These data seem even too optimistic if we consider that not all the students initially turned their cameras on nor answered when they were asked to participate in a discussion. On the other hand, we should remember that the shift to ERT was a significant trauma for the students, who were "forced to continue their courses online" and experienced

"caused chaos, confusion, and frustration" (Hodges *et al.* 2020: NA). Given the critical situation, our choice was to encourage their attendance to our course by allowing them to remain "invisible" – even though this decision did not help to build a collaborative learning community, as we will see.

The questions in section 2 revealed a general satisfaction with the organisation of the course. The balance between synchronous and asynchronous lessons was appreciated. However, most students expressed the desire to eliminate some asynchronous materials (namely, pre-recorded shadowing exercises) to practise more sigh translation. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that nobody chose the option "I would prefer taking only synchronous lessons even if this means less time for practising". Probably the students knew that the asynchronous lessons provided more material than real-time lessons. However, the results also seem to confirm Hodges *et al.*'s (2020) opinion concerning the advantages of asynchronous activities in "times of disruption" such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which studying "will likely not be the priority of all those involved". Dissatisfaction with OpenOlat was expressed by 28 students, who found the system "too difficult to use and chaotic". Instead, Microsoft Teams was considered a "practical and comfortable" environment for distance learning (respectively 37 and 14 students expressed a global or high satisfaction with the tool). 13 students objected that the platform was far from being able to "recreate the climate of a face-to-face classroom and permit an effective interaction".

It must be specified that OpenOlat offers groupware functionalities such as forums, wikis, and blogs. Nevertheless, users were granted minimal storage space, so we could not use these tools. As for Microsoft Teams, having worked with this platform before it was implemented with functions like pinning or spotlighting videos, apps, and expansions for its gallery view, we experienced difficulties in showing the three protagonists of the role-plays on the screen all at once (i.e. the teacher, the mother-tongue assistant and the student acting as the interpreter). The impossibility of allowing all the participants to see each other was another downside that influenced the climate of the classroom: only a few people could be seen on the screen during the meetings (initially four, then nine participants, to be exact), the others were displayed as small black icons at the bottom even if the students' cameras were turned on. Furthermore, since the platform did not permit students to work in small "breakout rooms" at the time, group activities such as "multiple dialogue interpreting practice" were impossible within the context of the lessons.

These limits were a significant obstacle to enhancing the "social/emotional" and the "collaboration" components in our learning community, and this downside affected the overall judgment on the course. On the one hand, the majority (52 students out of 64) was "globally satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the course. 34 students thought that it succeeded in "re-creating, as far as possible, the climate of the classroom, even if it did not provide any space for group work", and according to 18 students, it "allowed a personalised way of learning, even if at the expense of the creation of group dynamics". However, 11 students believed that the course should be more focused on "group dynamics" and were consequently not satisfied enough with it. Finally, the questionnaire outlined a general inter-

est in CAI tools such as automatic speech recognition, online glossary tools (40 students), and virtual learning environments (36 students).

Realising that our "teaching presence" was not sufficient was a point to meditate on for our pedagogical team, especially since we soon discovered that students rely on alternative "groups" which are similar to those evoked by Dron (2007). The author focused on social software used in an education context, such as MySpace, arguing that these may become a place for exchanging information and interacting in a less reliable way than in a learning community context (*Ibid.*: 234). On the other hand, even though our students undoubtedly suffered from the "loss of closeness among participants" (Hodges *et al.* 2020: NA), our survey seems to confirm Braun and Davitti's observation on the novice interpreters' "capacity of adaptation" to distance modalities (Braun/Davitti 2018b: 41). We were pleased to learn that our students were satisfied with the choice of alternating asynchronous and synchronous lessons, especially since we thought that the latter might help students continue their learning path despite the difficulties of the moment.

As for the students' interest in CAI, despite the questionnaire results, we agree with Tripepi Winteringham's (2010: 91) worries about the potential for distraction implicit in consulting online terminological resources while interpreting speeches in a triadic context. Our course is intended as a first approach to DI and should consequently aim to provide the basis of the profession and develop the fundamental capacity of assuming the role of "coordinator and gatekeeper of the interaction" (Wadensjö 2002: 93). However, we believe that virtual learning environments may offer many advantages to future dialogue interpreters, especially since both online and face-to-face courses do not allow for much time for student practice, notably in large classrooms. As Kohn outlined in a 2014 interview on some 3D virtual worlds developed by the IVY and EVIVA project partners, these environments offer "locations for business and community interpreting, including a reception area, meeting and conference rooms, a hospital ward, and a courtroom". Thus, they can provide "controlled practice with prepared material and role play including live encounters with interpreting clients" (Kohn 2014). We look forward to the addition of the French-Italian combination, which is currently missing.

We will finally add that the questionnaire results led us to confirm our "learning community" model for our second ERT experience (January-March 2021). Nevertheless, we introduced some adjustments: given the students' dissatisfaction with OpenOlat, all the asynchronous materials were uploaded on Microsoft Teams. Most importantly, students were asked to turn their cameras on when they participated in the role-plays. This decision was primarily a strategy for implementing the "social" component by overcoming the "complications of anonymity" (Anderson/Elloumi 2004: 51) and by promoting constructive discussion in our group; besides, it also allowed us to strengthen our "teaching presence" by giving the students effective feedback on their interpretations, as we will see in the following Section.

4.2. Observation sheets and transcriptions of role-play performances (January-March 2021)

In January-March 2021, role-play performances were audio-recorded and transcribed with the aim of identifying features and problems which seemed directly connected to the distance mode of teaching DI. Renditions were classified according to Wadensjö's (1998: 108-110) taxonomy. Furthermore, the observation sheets we filled in during the performances permitted us to make an initial distinction between three main categories (see Appendix): "additions", "substitutions" and "omissions" (Merlini/Favaron 2003: 216-217), the latter being referred, in our case, to both "deliberate strategies" and "translation errors" (*Ibid.*: 219). A special attention was paid to kinesics. As the observation sheets show, excessive gesticulation or inappropriate posture were observed only four times, which is rather unusual for a beginner class. It is reasonable to think that being in front of a camera made the students behave less naturally and that they tended to control their movements more than they would in a face-to-face situation. This seems to suggest that distance teaching may help the students manage the kinesic aspects of their interpretation and acquire an adequate posture from the early stages of their training; nevertheless, some of them declared that they felt inhibited and that lack of closeness was a factor of stress for them.

Apart from kinesics, other peculiarities in the students' interpretations could be ascribed to the fact that our course was being delivered online. In fact, two types of difficulties caught our attention. Firstly, problems of Internet connection often affected the performances. Requests for clarification and for repetitions that were attributed to "bad connection" appear in 20 out of the 28 performances transcribed, and amount to 17 out of the 56 "non-renditions" with "coordinating functions" we could detect. On the other hand, only 8 out of the 42 inappropriate omissions and zero renditions we identified were attributed to poor network quality, the other 34 being due to insufficient capacity to memorise and to reformulate the speakers' utterances or to poor linguistic knowledge, as recognised by the students during the retrospective thinking-aloud moments. In such cases, the only suggestions we could give them were either trying to guess the missing parts by considering the overall message, as indicated by Gile (1995: 45), or asking to stop interpreting and try later, since the repetition of utterances such as "I can't hear" or "Internet is not working" can be very annoying.

However, the most interesting phenomenon which could be observed was the confusion caused by the loss of gaze direction. As Mason points out, "gaze direction is an important device for showing attention and for the distribution of turns", since it "regulates patterns of participation" by allowing "all participants" to "position themselves and others within the exchange" (Mason 2012: 177-178). The following excerpts are representative of this situation and of the disorientation it engenders in the student. In the first excerpt, an Italian television personality (TP) is interviewing a female French virologist about the COVID-19 pandemic: the interpreter (I) mistakes the name of the virus for the

name of the disease, thus generating an embarrassing misunderstanding. The television personality asks the interpreter if she is sure of her translation, thus eliciting a non-rendition in order to clarify the misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the interpreter does not seize the meaning of the television personality's question and, instead of giving her an answer, translates the question to the virologist, who is offended:

Turn number	Speaker	Speaking turn
1	TP	a proposito, il nome ufficiale del virus è SARS-CoV-2 e: quello della malattia è COVID-19 (.) giusto? - *by the way, the official name of the virus is SARS-CoV-2 and the name of the disease is COVID-19, right?*
2	I	le nom officiel de la maladie est SARS-CoV-2 (.) et le nom du virus est COVID-19 (.) c'est ça?
3	V	non (.) c'est justement le contraire
4	I	no (.) è il contrario - *no, it's the opposite*
5	TP	veramente (.) io sapevo così (.) è sicura di quello che sta dicendo? - *actually, that was what I knew, are you sure of what you are saying?*
6	I	mais: je sais que c'est comme ça (.) vous êtes sûre?
7	V	écoutez. si vous m'avez invitée (.) pour me contredire!
8	I	beh: se mi ha invitata per contraddirmi! - *well, if you invited me to contradict me!*
9	TP	io contraddico il dottore? scusi ma prima stavo parlando con lei (.) mica con il dottore - *me? contradicting the doctor? excuse me, but I was talking to you before, not to the doctor*

Excerpt n. 1

The misunderstanding was fundamentally due to the student's poor knowledge of the subject and her inexperience in managing the turns. Nevertheless, the loss of eye contact was at the origin of the *quid pro quo*, which ended in an embarrassing "face-threatening act": the interpreter had no elements indicating that the television personality was looking at her. So, she missed an important clue to clarify the reply, which she recognised only during the retrospective think-aloud moment.

Excerpt n. 2 provides another example of this kind of situation. Here, an elderly Italian woman (W) has taken her niece Alessia to a medical doctor (D). The woman has recently moved to France with her family, and she is asking for information about mandatory vaccination for school. However, she is not aware of the procedure concerning vaccines, and she supposes that the doctor can give her Alessia's vaccination records:

Turn number	Speaker	Speaking turn
1	W	mi scusi: ma non ho capito (.) me lo da' (.) il libretto vaccinale? *- sorry but I don't understand. are you giving me the vaccination record?*
2	I	pouvez-vous me donner le carnet de vaccination?
3	D	pas du tout (.) il faut que vous demandiez au pédiatre qui a suivi Alessia (.) ou au centre de santé
4	I	deve chiedere al pediatra di Alessia (.) o andare in un apposito centro - *you must ask Alessia's pediatrician or go to a specific center*
5	W	io mica lo capisco (.) come funziona qui in Francia (.) e lei? - *I don't understand how it works here in France (.) do you?*
6	I	moi je n'ai pas compris comment ça marche en France (.) et vous?
7	D	oui: bien sûr (.) je suis Français

Excerpt n. 2

Here, the woman thinks the doctor is offering to prepare the child's vaccine booklet, whereas he is merely saying that he needs this document. As the following utterances show, the interpreter's attitude remains merely passive, and he uses no strategies to coordinate or check the dialogue. As a result, the conversation becomes more and more confused: the interpreter's rendition of "au centre de santé" as "a un apposito centro" (turn 4, "to a specific centre") increases the woman's disorientation, thus provoking her exclamation in turn 5. The woman is simply expressing her perplexity to the interpreter and seeking support in him, as her question "e lei" ("do you?") indicates. Nevertheless, the impossibility of meeting the speaker's gaze becomes a complicating factor for the student, who misses an important clue to correctly decipher the question and translate it to the doctor.

These examples show both the need for the students to be highly attentive to the situation in which they were fictitiously projected and the necessity for us to help them develop a meta-cognitive competence. To this end, we proposed some exercises that made them reflect on those linguistic elements which can generate more ambiguity in interpreting from Italian. In excerpt 1, the source of the error is the form "è sicura?" ("are you sure?"), which in Italian can either refer to the person directly addressed by the speaker (i.e. the interpreter, who is addressed in a courtesy form) or to a third female person (in fact, female gender in Italian is generally designated through the ending in "–a" of a noun or an adjective). We also proposed a brainstorming exercise for developing the students' ability to decode some hints that their interlocutors could give them: their suggestions, which included discourse markers like "dunque?", "giusto?", "è così?" ("right?", "is it true"?), were collected in a specific glossary which was added to the glossaries we had offered during the lessons. Finally, we asked them to think of some alternative translations for "è sicura?", which sounds rather aggressive in the context of an interview, and to make some comments on the reasons which originated the *quid pro quo*. Their answers included some good solutions like "je ne sais pas si j'ai bien compris" and some expedients

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to "avoid the trap", like "je ne sais pas si vous êtes en train de vous adresser à moi". Furthermore, the students all recognised that the absence or the reduced effectiveness of non-verbal elements had a negative repercussion on the interpreter's ability to decode the original message, and a general need to learn strategies to compensate this loss was expressed.

5.   Conclusions

In recognising the advantages of remote interpreting and videoconferencing communication, Braun and Davitti (2018c: 107) stressed that they inevitably lead to an intense "cognitive effort to recreate a sense of togetherness" in the "fractured ecology" typical of remote forms of interpreting. The authors' analysis seems to summarise the central issue of our ERT experiences. As evidenced by both our questionnaire and our first ERT course, if our pedagogical proposal (and, in particular, our choice of alternating synchronous and asynchronous mode) substantially met the need for flexible learning in such "a time of disruption" (Hodges *et al.* 2020: NA), implementing the students' participation was a challenge which we initially lost. The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden passage to ERT, the lack of experience with Microsoft Teams and OpenOlat had a traumatic impact on our students, and we realised that our "teaching presence" was not sufficiently effective in creating a collaborative learning environment. Initiatives such as providing the students with spaces in Microsoft Teams for meeting in autonomous forms could possibly offer them a space for sharing documents and assessing "their own learning in virtual groups" (Anderson/Elloumi 2004: 50). Furthermore, the use of chat logs during our synchronous lessons could promote both discussion and effective interaction: as demonstrated by Skaaden (2017: 323), this tool may allow students to "discuss dilemmas of practice, while the facilitators reflect on the students' ability to articulate knowledge through action in role-played exercises". All these actions could also develop the "social" component, which is vital in a community-centred environment. As for the content of our course, the recordings of the lessons highlighted the need to pay special attention to some factors that inevitably affect DI when this is done by distance mode: students should be guided to develop strategies to compensate for the loss of eye contact and avoid annoying repetitions when the connection is bad.

It should be finally remembered that the COVID-19 pandemic has involved a dramatic growth in the demand for video remote interpreting services, as evidenced by the Italian Association of Interpreters and Translator (AITI). After publishing a set of recommendations for organizations needing to operate as DI hubs with their staff and accredited freelance interpreters in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), this association organised a "Taskforce on Distance Interpreting", which was followed by a conference called "Interpreting and translating skills/competencies: recognizing and enhanc-

ing them in a changing market" (30 January 2021)[1]. Thus, after being a lifeline in the COVID-19 crisis, the shift to videoconferencing seems to be the new future for dialogue interpreters. In the light of these events, we think there would have been some undeniable advantages in transforming our course into a course for videoconference DI. The online delivery modality would have been perfect for this purpose, and our students would have benefited from training aligned with the market's demands. On the other hand, we also believe that a module intended for beginners should aim to develop this profession's fundamental skills before dealing with "one of the most difficult forms of interpreting", as Tripepi Winteringham says (2010: 90). Strategies to compensate for this big drawback should be found, especially if we think that there are many reasons why remote training could be a great resource not only for practitioners who have already started their careers as interpreters, but also for beginners.

Appendix: observation sheet (adapted from Merlini/Favaron 2003)

OBSERVATION SHEET			
INTERPRETER:		GENDER:	
Situation:			
OBSERVATIONS ON THE VERBAL INTERACTION			
Phonology - tone of voice marked unmarked - speech rate low medium high			
Syntax			
Lexis			
Grammar and pronunciation			
Divergent Renditions: - Additions - Substitutions - Omissions			
OBSERVATIONS ON THE NON-VERBAL INTERACTION Gestures Facial expressions Posture			

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1 "Le competenze dell'interprete e della/del traduttrice/tore: riconoscerle e valorizzarle in un mercato che cambia", <https://aiti.org/it/news-formazione-eventi/corsi-eventi/le-competenze-dellinterprete-e-delladel-traduttricetore>.

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