

Limits and Opportunities for Training Conference Interpreters in Pandemic Times

The experience of the postgraduate course in conference interpreting at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

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ABSTRACT: The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic not only impacted the circulation of people and goods on a global scale but also affected the events sector, the conference interpreting market, and the training of future interpreters. The present text aims to share the experience of the all in all successful transition from face-to-face teaching to remote teaching during the pandemic and thus contribute to the already existing academic accounts on the effects of the pandemic on conference interpreting teaching and learning (Ahrens et al., 2021; Krouglov, 2021). We identify three major aspects that led to a rather smooth teaching mode transition: (1) the efforts that had been undertaken in the years prior to the pandemic to incorporate autonomous learning practices into the curriculum leading to the use of online tools,

shifting classroom activities to the home/virtual environment; (2) the training of some members of our staff in blended learning techniques and the active use of learning platforms in training; and (3) the software offered by the university for online sessions. This article is divided into three parts: First, we present the main features of PUC-Rio's original training course, then we redraw the steps taken to gradually adapt the course to the challenge of remote online teaching during the pandemic, and finally we draw an initial reflection on the program's adaptation to the online teaching and learning format. We understand that, while the pandemic has posed a major challenge to our conventional teaching and learning mode, the program was able to overcome initial difficulties. Furthermore, the transition to a fully remote teaching mode led to unforeseen opportunities as far as, for instance, the recruitment of new candidates nationwide is concerned. We understand that PUC-Rio's adoption of a fully remote teaching and learning mode from 2020 onwards opens up new perspectives for conference interpreting training in the post-pandemic landscape in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: interpreter training, conference interpreting, COVID-19 pandemic, remote online teaching, remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI)

RESUMO: O início da pandemia da COVID-19 não apenas afetou a circulação de pessoas e bens em escala global, mas também afetou o setor de eventos, o mercado de interpretação de conferência e a formação de futuros intérpretes. O presente texto visa compartilhar a experiência de transição em larga medida bem sucedida do ensino presencial para o ensino remoto durante a pandemia e assim contribuir para os relatos acadêmicos já existentes sobre os efeitos da pandemia no ensino e aprendizado da interpretação de conferência (Ahrens et al., 2021; Krouglov, 2021). Identificamos três aspectos principais que levaram a uma transição bastante suave do modo de ensino: (1) os esforços que haviam sido empreendidos nos anos anteriores à pandemia incorporando práticas de aprendizado autônomo no currículo, levando ao uso de ferramentas on-line, deslocando as atividades em sala de aula para o ambiente doméstico/virtual; (2) a familiaridade de alguns dos membros do corpo docente com blended learning e o uso ativo de plataformas de aprendizado em treinamento; e (3) o software oferecido pela universidade para sessões on-line. Este artigo está dividido em três partes: primeiro, apresentamos as principais características do curso de formação original da PUC-Rio, depois redesenhamos os passos

tomados para adaptar gradualmente o curso ao desafio do ensino on-line remoto durante a pandemia e, finalmente, fazemos uma primeira reflexão sobre a adaptação do programa ao formato de ensino e aprendizagem on-line. Entendemos que, embora a pandemia tenha colocado um grande desafio ao nosso modo convencional de ensino e aprendizagem, o programa foi capaz de superar as dificuldades iniciais. Além disso, a transição para um modo de ensino totalmente remoto levou a oportunidades inéditas no que diz respeito, por exemplo, ao recrutamento de novos candidatos em todo o país. Entendemos que a adoção pela PUC-Rio de um modo de ensino e aprendizagem totalmente remoto a partir de 2020 abre novas perspectivas para o treinamento em interpretação de conferência no cenário pós-pandêmico no Brasil.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: formação de intérpretes, interpretação de conferência, pandemia da COVID-19, ensino on-line remoto, interpretação simultânea remota (RSI)

1. Introduction

It was certainly not possible to imagine that the week of March 15, 2020 would mark a major change in how people, goods, capital, and knowledge circulate around the world. The Conference Interpreters Training course at PUC-Rio¹ had just started its work for the 2020 academic year with a group of students about to start their second year/third semester of training and a second group of newly approved students to start training studies. The World Health Organization (WHO) had elevated the COVID-19 epidemic to the status of a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and, over the following 10 days, the Brazilian government, and several sectors of society—schools, universities, industry, companies, and commerce—gradually but decidedly adapted to the emergency need of lockdowns and social distancing. The challenge imposed on all training courses, including the PUC-Rio interpreter training course,

1 The Conference Interpreting Postgraduate course at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro is a two-year vocational type of postgraduate certificate course ('pós-graduação lato sensu' in Portuguese) comprising 360 hours. The degree earned is that of a 'specialist in the field' ('especialista'). Students are required to hand in a final research paper.

was therefore launched: How were we to proceed with training activities despite the pandemic?

This article seeks to outline the initial conditions of the work of training interpreters at PUC-Rio, especially those that facilitated the transition to remote teaching. Then it will present positive consequences related to the shift to online teaching and, finally, it will provide a reflection on training paths in a post-pandemic world.

The text begins with a brief account of the training course at PUC-Rio, which was founded in Brazil in 1969, approximately 20 years after the institutionalization of the profession at what came to be known as the Nuremberg Trials (Pagura, 2010, p. 83; Quental, 2018, p. 10)². The next section, dedicated to the brief history of the training of interpreters at PUC-Rio, will help to understand the contours of the training scenario at the beginning of the pandemic.

Next, we will present some features that facilitated the transition from the on-site to the online model, which were: (1) the slow and gradual incorporation of practices based on autonomous learning into the curriculum years before, shifting classroom activities to the home/virtual environment; (2) training of trainers in blended learning and the use of learning platforms in training; and (3) the infrastructure for online classes offered by the university.

After presenting this overview of training in Brazil and the catalyzing vectors of the transition to the remote teaching mode, we will present and analyze the challenging factors that this mode of teaching entails. By way of conclusion, we will discuss some of the elements that demand reflection in the projected post-pandemic scenario: What are the limits and opportunities to the training of interpreters at PUC-Rio after the experience of transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching?

2 In the last two decades, there has been an expansion in the offer of commercial courses and university courses in cities such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Curitiba. With this, it is possible to state that, although heterogeneous in terms of training hours, the number of classes, and their content, as well as the make-up of the teaching staff, interpreter training in Brazil can be considered consistent and in line with market demands at least in the Portuguese-English language combination.

2. The PUC-Rio Interpreter Training Course: A brief history and pre-pandemic overview

The early stages of interpreter training in Brazil date back to the late 1960s (Quental, 2018, pp. 2-3), which was consistent with the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, in which Brazil hosted international events. Interpretation services in Brazil at the time were provided by a generation of interpreters from two different backgrounds. Some of them had been trained abroad, especially in Europe and the United States, and other interpreters had established themselves in the profession through practice, on the job. At the time, the absence of training of any kind was common and acceptable. A person who spoke several languages could be seen as someone with a gift for interpreting. If they attempted to interpret and succeeded, they were seen as someone who was born to interpret (Araujo, 2017, p. 41).

The existence of events in large cities in Brazil, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, provided fertile soil for the creation of training courses—both commercial courses (such as the Alumni course, in São Paulo) and university courses (as in the case of PUC-Rio and PUC-SP). It is possible to say that today the training of interpreters in Brazil is consolidated for the Portuguese-English language pair, which means that the market already has many interpreters with some formal training, either in commercial or university-based courses (undergraduate, extension, or postgraduate courses).

Regarding the training offered by PUC-Rio, which was a pioneer in the training of conference interpreters in Brazil, the course format today bears little resemblance to its original design, implemented in the late 1960s. There were literature, written translation, and interpretation classes, with specific courses for the simultaneous and consecutive modes, but still in one direction (English to Portuguese). Over time, disciplines focused on interpreting in both directions (English to Portuguese and Portuguese to English) were incorporated based on the perception of the need for training in bidirectionality by the course's graduates. New subjects with focus on voice coaching, attention and concentration, theoretical aspects, and terminological management were also gradually added to the curriculum. Due to various circumstances, the course was no longer part of the undergraduate program in the Languages Department, and it became an extension course. Later the course achieved the

status of a postgraduate certification course, and it has remained so since 2008 (Quental, 2018, p. 3), always in a face-to-face format. One of the developments that we would like to highlight here (Quental, 2018) is the implementation of the SANAKO system to monitor students at their workstations³. The use of the SANAKO system can be considered a laboratory for understanding which technological mechanisms would be necessary for each discipline that made up the training—this system, for example, allowed, in addition to dual-track listening/replay, integration with other digital media.

Another important feature provided through the system was the possibility for students to listen to the recording of their performance in the classroom, paving the way for self-assessment in the classroom. The technological evolution of the course, for the benefit of face-to-face classes, was accompanied by some changes: a gradual transfer of individual work in class to out-of-class homework, thus reorienting activities aimed at training sub-skills, and the concomitant perception of the teaching staff that new winds would bring the possibility of incorporating blended learning activities in the course. Therefore, the course format as of 2016 already provided for a workload of individual study that would place part of the responsibility of training in students' hands, fostering their autonomy⁴.

It is interesting to note that even before the pandemic, the latest curricular reforms were already aligning some pedagogical assumptions guided by the concept of developing 'expertise' (Sawyer, 2004, p. 64) through autonomous learning.

The 2018 curriculum reform would consolidate two pedagogical pillars of the course: (1) the importance of developing the capacity for autonomous learning, through structured exercises aiming at improving specific skills related to interpretation (deliberate practice) and (2) self-assessment, as well as peer and trainer feedback, as a guiding tool for practice⁵.

3 Quental's (2018) article provides further knowledge on the relationship between pedagogical choices, advances in didactics of interpretation, and the needs of the local market.

4 In the 2016 curriculum reform, we included an individual workload of 80 hours, covering preparation for monthly mock conferences (30h), internships in real conference situations, self-managed independent study/preparation for internship assignments (20h), and a peer feedback program (30h).

5 In the classes started in 2016 and 2017, mock conferences were already part of the curriculum, but they were called 'Booth Practice'. As of 2019, mock conferences were incorporated into the day-to-day course, organized by trainers and students and making use of the physical booth of one of the university's language laboratories.

The course structure and the distribution of workload by subject would largely remain the same in the following years with minor changes. When the pandemic started, working 100% offsite represented a steep learning curve which resulted in a training mode entirely mediated by technology, just a few weeks after the lockdown of institutions and establishments.

3. Implementation of the Online Curriculum

In line with other experiences of transposing face-to-face to emergency remote interpreter training (Ahrens et al., 2021), Zoom was chosen as the virtual platform for classes. It should be noted that the platform was already known by one of the faculty members, who used it in her pedagogical activities. However, the decision to use Zoom was made by the university, which implemented it for all undergraduate and graduate classes.

Another element that served as a platform for the transition to remote teaching was the implementation of some initiatives in line with blended learning, such as the use of the virtual educational platform Edmodo from 2016 to 2020. Edmodo was used to document what had been done in each class and to organize tasks and activities proposed every week.

In a way, when the pandemic began, both the organization of study materials and the very rationality of pedagogical progression of the preparation to be carried out autonomously by the students were already part of the course's workflow, which, in a way, would mark a continuity in the work of the teaching staff.

Edmodo at the time was adopted only by the interpretation course teaching staff. In 2020 it was succeeded by Google Classroom, an educational platform offered by the university to all undergraduate and graduate courses (including master and doctoral Programs) as an option to Moodle. As a video conferencing platform for distance learning, the university's choice of Zoom to tackle the need to resume classroom activities at the beginning of the pandemic could not have been more beneficial to our course. The faculty would not only easily adapt to the platform's features, but since the beginning of its use, the platform already had the language interpretation feature. The faculty even carried out initial research to test other RSI platforms that

were interested in establishing a partnership with the course but the cost to the institution was not feasible. However, the university's bet on the Zoom platform was indeed successful, as it made practice sessions possible with all students forming teams simultaneously, since the number of languages offered allowed multiple booths to work at the same time. Relay training was carried out with the use of a second device by the students entering the same meeting as listeners and as interpreters, which, by the way, was also widely practiced by professional interpreters working on Zoom until the software's recent update, which allows interpreters to listen to other languages in addition to the main audio on the platform. It is important to say that the 'fortunate coincidence' in the university's choice to use Zoom was not only due to the practicality of its use in the classroom while practicing one of the core businesses of interpreter training—teaching simultaneous interpreting—but also as a bridge to the job market, as Zoom has become one of the most used conference platforms in Brazil since the beginning of the pandemic. Not only classroom training but mock conferences therefore largely resembled the scenario of demands for RSI in the current world context.

Some pedagogical adaptations took place, therefore, at the level of the setup for classes. For example, some content has been turned into asynchronous content to avoid the so-called 'zoom fatigue'. The full transition to remote teaching affected each class in a different way.

Class 2019, which was in the second year of training in 2020, had already attended a full year of face-to-face classes and had to undergo necessary adjustments for the rapid implementation of the remote teaching mode on an emergency basis. Many did not have a stable internet connection, powerful computers, and noise-canceling headphones appropriate for long hours of use, for instance. Some students did not have places at home where they could attend classes properly, and there were situations in which they attended classes without starting their cameras. Having registered for an on-site course that had started on February 15, 2020, the 2020 class met only three times on campus. Unfortunately, the students had not yet had, during those three introductory sessions, the opportunity to see the equipment for training in simultaneous interpreting. The transition to the remote emergency teaching mode was carried out in light of its potential temporariness—the idea was to return to campus as soon as possible, which did not happen. There were

some dropouts linked to the pandemic situation, but not exactly related to the migration from the face-to-face to an online environment. Fifteen students enrolled and 9 of them finished the course.

At this point, the faculty, mainly composed of interpreters working in the Brazilian market, already knew the technical needs for both online teaching and the demands of the RSI market. Therefore, when selecting candidates for the class of 2021, technical requirements for participation in virtual classes were sent to students beforehand.

4. Positive Consequences of Online Teaching

At the end of the first year of implementation of the remote teaching mode—which was no longer an emergency, since the pandemic showed no signs of coming to an end—a consensus was established among the teaching staff that the transition had enabled students to successfully master the necessary skills needed to become interpreters. In this context, we considered offering the subsequent edition of the course in a hybrid format, with synchronous classes, asynchronous activities, and also with one face-to-face meeting per month for each subject, to provide students and trainers with an in-person contact⁶. In this hybrid model 60 hours of the 360 hours of the course would be face-to-face and the other 300 hours would be online⁷.

However, the idea of offering a hybrid course was abandoned because of the need to continue remote teaching in 2021—university campuses were still closed, making it impossible to return to in-person classes. Thus, for the year 2021, registration was opened for the first online training class. The existence

6 It is interesting to mention that the success in offering online courses motivated some faculty members to offer a refresher course in note-taking for consecutive interpretation, in addition to a course on voice coaching, offered by a professor who is a speech therapist and an interpreter. This initiative, in line with several others around the world to offer CPD in an online format in pandemic times, attested to the capacity and confidence the faculty had to offer content originally conceived for the face-to-face format in a virtual classroom.

7 See an excerpt from the project presented to the Department of Languages: “In 2020, in the face of the coronavirus pandemic that devastated the world and forced us to migrate all classes to the online environment, the proposal arises to offer the course in the hybrid format. This mode, which allows covering the entire national territory, also aims to meet a repressed demand, given that, in addition to its recognized excellence, the PUC-Rio course is the only graduate-level interpreter training course in Brazil.”

of a Postgraduate course in Conference Interpreting—entirely online and held only on Saturdays—attracted an (even) more heterogeneous group of students.

For the class of 2021, asynchronous class hours were included (65h out of 360h), to reduce time spent online, as we chose to keep classes only on Saturdays. The 15 students in this class are spread across 10 cities across the country and 1 student lives in Portugal.

Class 2021, with course completion scheduled for the end of 2022, includes a few interpreters who are already active in the market, and some of them are even members of the Portuguese Association of Conference Interpreters (APIC). In some cases, the students graduated from commercial courses and joined the class of 2021 in search of a solid, comprehensive (and non-modular) education and also in search of a more attractive degree in the market (postgraduate level, which is only offered at PUC-Rio).

The enrollment of professional interpreters in the 2021 edition was considered, in general, positive. We interpreted this as a sign of the course's relevance at a national level. It bears also witness to the importance of training as an influential component in the interpreting market. The online offer of the postgraduate course contributes to making training more accessible and present, raising the academic level of interpreters.

Although there has been no increase in the number of students who complete the course—the group of graduates has been, on average, 12 students in recent years—it is possible to see that the course is able to cover training needs beyond its geographical location. However, this has immediate effects on one of the fundamental aspects that characterize the course: the internships in real conferences.

5. Challenges to Maintaining the Online Course

Although the transition to the online mode was very successful, especially in the face of so many setbacks faced by Brazilian higher education in the context of the pandemic, several challenges remain. We list below three peculiar aspects that deserve attention in the near future.

First, there is a generation of trainees who are unaware of the practice

of physically exchanging and sharing ideas/information with booth mates (Chmiel, 2008). The very idea of being one's 'booth mate' (Chmiel, 2008, p. 262) can be something completely unknown to students who graduated only sharing a backchannel with classmates and without ever having shared a physical booth with another colleague.

The second interesting aspect to consider in having a fully online training course is the students' lack of acquaintance with a physical booth: organizing and sharing a common space is something new to these novice interpreters. While discussing preparation as one of the key strategies used by interpreters (Gile, 2009), it became clear that online trained students cannot fully grasp the importance of some visual clues within the space of physical booths. For instance, the use of Post-it sticky notes for a fast recall of very specific or very important words only makes sense for those who have a place to put them. Having said that, one of the course's initiatives will be to soon promote an opportunity for students to become acquainted with a physical booth.

With the gradual return to on-site events in the university, the third issue currently resides in the allocation of students to on-site internships. One of the course's special features is that it offers internship opportunities to second-year students in situations analogous to real conferences.

PUC-Rio had canceled all its events at the onset of the pandemic but was eventually able to resume a schedule of shorter online conferences. Having succeeded in promoting online events, the university organized more of them throughout 2021. And our students, thanks to having their interpretation classes on Zoom, were perfectly equipped to meet this demand. We were thus able to maintain the benefit of these internships carried out in events organized by the university, without resources to hire professional interpreters, which offer an opportunity to train our students in real working conditions.

With the return of hybrid and/or face-to-face events, the difficulty that arises is to bring together pairs of students with real availability to be in Rio de Janeiro, the course's headquarters, to participate in these activities that are considered such an important learning experience. A question to be considered is whether it will be possible to maintain the offer of in-person internships if the online classes are increasingly composed of students from outside Rio de Janeiro.

6. Final Considerations

The present text aimed to briefly present the transition of the oldest university-based interpreter training school in Brazil to the online teaching mode, given the extraordinary global conditions imposed on the community of interpreter trainers and the interpreting market as a whole in the last two years. Based on a brief overview of the training course at PUC-Rio, we offer in this text a short account of the initial conditions that led to the transition from in-person to remote teaching, pointing out what, in our evaluation, resulted in benefits for the course and the challenges—both those overcome and those remaining—that resulted from this transition.

If the Nuremberg Trials, almost 70 years ago, presented a technological leap that defined the profession—promoting the institutionalization of the craft and the creation of the ‘simultaneous’ mode, this new technological leap catalyzed by the pandemic still has important unmapped consequences for the profession. One of the consequences already seen and made popular is ‘RSI as a craft’. Another no less relevant consequence is related to the forced adjustments that face-to-face training courses had to face in having to cope with social distancing.

In line with Krouglov (2021), we believe that the previous experience with technological elements, such as learning platforms, interpretation systems, and prior contact with the software itself to be used later as a teaching tool contributed to a more harmonious transition between teaching modes.

It is important to point out that we are currently considering keeping the course online—we believe that the contribution of the postgraduate course in conference interpreting can expand beyond the region where we are physically located: the city of Rio de Janeiro. Although face-to-face training is ‘what we all dreamed of during the pandemic’, our assessment, for now, is that PUC-Rio’s contribution to the training of interpreters in Brazil, which is a country of continental dimensions, can be more relevant if it continues to be offered online.

This conclusion was only possible after two years of online activities: we received positive feedback regarding student performance in internships, and we have students who have already entered the profession in this new format, in which RSI has become a concrete possibility for entry in the market.

However, by way of reflection, we know that the interpreting profession is historically anchored in face-to-face settings for at least three reasons. Firstly, at the beginning of the training, students are introduced to consecutive interpreting, of a face-to-face nature par excellence since, originally, it was never mediated by technology. Second, the construction of identity in the craft likewise involves learning from the example of others. Third, the exercise of the profession itself was traditionally carried out in pairs, sharing the same physical space, and operating the same interpreter's unit. Given these three important inter-human aspects, how can training be structured so that, on the one hand, these aspects are not lost and, on the other hand, other skills in line with the present time are also taught?

Despite the success in the transition of the teaching mode at PUC-Rio, the reflection on the maintenance of the course format goes hand in hand with a reflection on the direction the profession is headed, on the dimension that the RSI mode will have in the global events market in constant transformation and, of course, on the consequences of this for the interpreting market in Brazil. One thing is certain: Remote training is as demanding in terms of hours invested in teaching, learning, and autonomous practice as face-to-face training—and our training foundation, in the PUC-Rio course, remained the same.

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Professional Profiles

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