

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and Interpreting

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The theme of this special issue is COVID-19 and the teaching and practice of interpreting. The on-going COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the development and adoption of distance interpreting (DI) and remote teaching, two trends that were emerging pre-COVID. The United Nations (UN) has been a champion of multilingualism, recognized by its General Assembly as a core value. Simultaneous interpreting (SI) of six UN official languages is normally available at UN's Security Council open meetings (Ma & Cheung, 2020; Song & Cheung, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). It was essential for the Security Council to continue its daily meetings, especially during the period when the pandemic was rampaging globally. However, during the COVID-19 induced lockdowns in New York, where the UN headquarters is located, daily meetings of the Security Council continued virtually in English without SI because of technical constraints (Cheung, 2022). Simultaneous interpreting of all six official languages resumed gradually following the implementation of remote simultaneous interpreting, a form of distance interpreting. Diplomats posted to the United Nations from non-English speaking countries may be proficient in English and may not rely on simultaneous interpreting services when English is used (Cheung, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). The fact that the Security Council could continue its daily meetings without the involvement of interpreters is a wakeup call to both interpreting trainees and trainers to reflect on the roles of interpreters and the purposes of interpreting services.

Virtual conferences and DI are likely to stay post-COVID. However, many questions related to DI are unanswered, probably because DI, especially remote simultaneous interpreting (RSI), was adopted as an emergency measure to meet the needs of virtual conferences. Virtual conferences may have democratized conference attendance by reducing related costs.

Attendees at virtual conferences no longer have to spend time and money to travel to a conference venue. Studies that compare the behaviors of SI listeners between online and onsite conferences are needed for interpreters and trainers to understand the end-users of their services. Findings of Cheung (2022) suggest that there is a difference in quality perception between SI listeners attending online events and SI listeners attending onsite events. To have a comprehensive understanding of SI listeners, more studies are needed. Similarly important is to investigate if there is a difference between onsite and online SI performance. Because SI is cognitively demanding (Cheung, 2001), do interpreters handle problem triggers such as numbers (Cheung, 2009, 2008) and word order (Cheung, 2012) differently between onsite and online settings? When conducting RSI, should interpreters work from home or a hub (Chaves, 2020)? What is the acceptable level of sound quality for remote speakers?

In the context of practice and training of interpreting, technology seems to be the elephant in the room. Studies such as Desmet et al. (2018) and Defrancq and Fantinuoli (2021) suggest that Automatic Speech Recognition technologies (ASR) could aid the interpreting process. More studies are needed to understand how best to utilize these technologies. Studies that investigate how to build trust, an essential part in training (Cheung, 2011), are needed, especially when online training may become more common as the technological landscape shifts. Researchers may fathom the possibility of machine interpreting enabled by a suite of technologies, including but not limited to ASR, machine translation and speech synthesis. What would an interpreting syllabus be like when that suite of technologies becomes a reality?

The special issue touches on some of the above mentioned issues briefly. Most contributors to this special issue have multiple professional roles: academic, practitioner and researcher. These multiple roles provide them with unique positions to recall, review, reflect and research on the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching and practice of interpreting. The seven contributions could be divided thematically into two groups: teaching and practice. Carbonell Agüero describes the experience of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey following COVID-19 outbreaks in the US.

It analyzes results of a survey conducted among students who were exposed to the remote, the hybrid and the in-person models.

Gondar, Quental, and Araujo document the transition from face-to-face teaching to remote teaching during the pandemic, allowing the PUC-Rio interpreter training course in Brazil to continue despite the pandemic. They conclude with perspectives for training in the post-pandemic landscape.

Donovan turns her attention to remote entrance selection of conference interpreter training programs that participate in the European Masters in Conference Interpreting. She presents some of the new considerations and principles that should be integrated into test guidelines when remote entrance selection becomes a normal practice.

Woo and Lim adopt the social presence perspective in their analysis of online interpretation classes. Their survey results suggest that both students and instructors experienced a low level of social presence because of the online nature of their interpretation classes. They suggest that online classes should be accompanied by offline interaction for better learning efficiency.

Chew and Cheung present the public perceptions through the lens of personal accounts and retrospective interviews with Malaysian Sign Language interpreters to examine the challenges and demands they encountered when working in the context of live broadcast of daily media briefings. Their study also debunks some misconceptions of the public regarding the Deaf community and sign language interpreters.

Frittella and Rodríguez provide an evaluation of an RSI platform SmarTerp. They also discuss interpreters' needs and requirements for an RSI system.

Matsushita reports the results of an online survey participated in by more than 200 interpreters with Japanese as one of their working languages. Recognizing that language combinations, adoption of technologies and forms of employment vary from one interpreter to another, she suggests that there is a need for continuous observation of the interpreting industry as it

transforms itself.

The two themes represented by this special issue's contributions, teaching and practice of interpreting, are some of the areas where the impact of COVID-19 on interpreting is particularly pronounced. Some of the changes described may gradually disappear but some may remain post COVID-19. The only constant is the incessant barrage of change that the teaching and practice of interpreting face as technology develops and people's insatiable desire to understand and be understood grows.

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