

Expertise and resources for interpreter training online

A student survey on pedagogical and technical dimensions of virtual learning environments

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The impact of ICTs on interpreter training is undeniable, and it opens a new set of opportunities and challenges for both trainers and learners. Indeed, the development of online interactive resources for interpreter training has been at the centre of the agenda in terms of pedagogical assistance and cooperation both for the European Institutions and for their partner universities. Modern videoconferencing systems and online learning technologies provide an excellent alternative to face-to-face classes, offering solutions to the problem of trainers' availability and engaging learners in synchronous and asynchronous task-oriented activities.

In this context, the European Parliament-funded ERITON project was launched in 2014 with the aim of facilitating the dissemination of best practices and enhancing collaboration between EU and non-EU partner universities in the field of conference interpreter training. Forming the strategic core of this project was the use of innovative training methodologies, such as virtual classes and virtual mock-conferences. In the framework of ERITON, the Universities of Astrakhan, Boğaziçi, Geneva, Ljubljana and Comillas also developed an OpenCourseWare (OCW) database of interpreting resources, an online script creator for Virtual Classes (VCs) and a dual-track recording tool allowing students to practise online with materials from the OCW and other technically compatible sources.

This paper presents the pedagogical framework of the VCs and discusses the results of an online survey conducted from 2015 to 2017 among students who actively participated in the virtual classes held within the ERITON project. The aim of the survey was to obtain anonymous feedback on the technical set-up of the VCs and on the helpfulness of this format in terms of

skill acquisition and progress. The results show that the new medium was well-received and appreciated by respondents, especially since it gave them the possibility to interact in ways and with people that would otherwise be impossible.

Keywords: virtual classes, best practices, conference interpreter training, online resources

1. Introduction: Project background

Trade and political relations between the EU and countries around the Caspian region are a key driver of cross-border cooperation and stability, as acknowledged by the European External Action Service in the “European Neighbourhood Instrument Regional East Strategy Paper” (2014). To foster these relations, contact between speakers of the languages of the region is paramount, making interpretation at an adequate professional level an obvious need, as evidenced by the statistics of the European Commission Directorate-General for Interpretation, which point to the demand for interpretation from Russian, Turkish, Arabic, etc.¹ Nevertheless, the need for interpretation in less widespread language combinations such as these cannot be sufficiently covered by conference interpreters trained in accordance with the European Masters in Conference Interpreting criteria (EMCI 2018). In this context, the ERITON² project, funded by the European Parliament DG-INTE, was launched in 2014 with the aim of facilitating the dissemination of best practice in conference interpreter training between EU and non-EU languages, using online technologies as a means to overcome the challenges represented by the costs of mobility and the wish to reach a larger audience.

In 2014, the ERITON project set up the core of a regional network structured in a way that the partners could bring in their own skills and benefit from the others’ competences across a larger set of languages. The network consisted of representatives from five institutions: University of Ljubljana, Comillas Pontifical University, University of Geneva, Boğaziçi University and Astrakhan State

1. However, according to the presentation at the 2018 SCIC-Universities Conference by Filip Majen, Director of Interpretation Services Management & Professional Support at DG-SCIC, there was a slight decrease of i-Slots for Russian, Arabic and Turkish in 2017. These data are consistent with those presented in the same conference by Juan Carlos Jiménez Marín, Director of Interpreter Planning and Support of the European Parliament and could be a reflection of the current political situation and EU language priorities.

2. EP financed project Expertise and Resources for Interpreter Training ONLINE (ERITON) Accessed 8 October 2019. <http://virtualinstitute.fti.unige.ch/eriton/>

University. The variety of language combinations offered and the number of languages spoken in each university's interpreting courses allowed each partner to access materials and feedback for languages that were not available (or were limited) at their home institution. For instance, Astrakhan State University was able to have access to more Turkish speeches from Boğaziçi University, while Boğaziçi University was able to benefit from more exposure to Azeri through Astrakhan State University. Geneva University had significant experience in training in non-EU languages such as Russian and Arabic and, for their part, the University of Ljubljana and Comillas Pontifical University offered experience in regional cooperation, e-learning and an anchorage in the EU.

During the course of three years, the partner universities organised Virtual Classes (VCs), i.e. classes where some of the interpreters, speakers and/or audience are not present onsite but connected using videoconferencing technology (see the DG Interpretation guidelines;³ cf. also Biernacka 2018), and cooperated in the creation of a joint OpenCourseWare (OCW) database of interpreting materials, namely videos of speeches and expert advice, prepared by professional conference interpreters on a specific pedagogical difficulty agreed upon for a given level of expertise (for instance, making use of links for beginners in consecutive interpreting; and handling high delivery speed for intermediate-level students (Gile 2009: 92). In order to avoid traditional Word documents that would usually be exchanged an inordinate amount of times among participants when planning the VCs, an online script creator for the VCs was developed, as well as a dual-track recording tool allowing students to practice online with materials from the OCW and other technically compatible sources. The development of these tools enabled the partners to enhance their technological competences. Discussions took place on the pedagogical aims of the VCs, to define levels of progression and difficulties that students encounter at specific moments in their learning progression, and to decide on the kinds of speeches and topics that would be suitable for the preparation of the pedagogical content of the VCs. This cooperation offered the opportunity to reach out to other interpreter training institutions in the Caspian region by means of webinars to disseminate the results of the project.

This paper focuses on the students' perspective and presents the results of two electronic surveys conducted during the course of the ERITON project on the students' perceptions regarding their experience with the Virtual Class. In the pages that follow, we will address the grounds and conceptual framework, objectives and methodology of our research, and will comment on the students'

3. See https://ec.europa.eu/education/knowledge-centre-interpretation/conference-interpreting/training-tools-and-support/virtual-classes-explained_en.

perception of the technical and pedagogical aspect of the VCs organised by the ERITON project partners.

1.1 Research objectives

The purpose of the study presented in this paper is twofold. Firstly, we aim to evaluate the technical set-up of the VCs organised by the ERITON partner institutions during a three-year period (2015–2017) and to see whether this virtual environment allowed students to feel as if they were interpreting in a face-to-face classroom environment. Secondly, we wanted to assess the extent to which the students perceived the VCs as useful in terms of skill acquisition. The term Virtual Class refers here to the virtual connection (institutions linked via videoconferencing system) enabling classes to be held at a distance, with trainers and students taking part in the class online. Alongside the VCs that replicated a traditional classroom setting, the ERITON project also looked at another setting for interpreter training: mock conferences. Within the project virtual mock conferences were organised by students (after the topic and level of progression had been agreed upon by trainers) who acted as speakers and interpreters, and who provided feedback to each other, with trainers observing and stepping in only at the end of the online event. Two separate surveys were up for students to assess the VCs and mock conferences, and the present paper presents the results of these surveys.

The use of videoconferencing technology for pedagogical purposes is not new in interpreter training. Over the last decade both DG-SCIC and DG-LINC (formerly DG-INTE) have been prime movers and sponsors of innovation in this area, gradually shifting from their traditional on-site training assistance schemes to virtual classes and e-learning tools.⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that “about 35 universities around the world have already joined the virtual classroom” (DG-SCIC 2018), there is a notable paucity of evidence-based literature on the matter (cf. Graves 2012) and, so far, there has been no systematic analysis of the technical dimension and pedagogical effectiveness of videoconference settings for interpreter training. A common assessment framework would improve our understanding of technology-mediated interpreter training and facilitate the comparison with traditional courses.

4. Such as Speech Repository 2.0 and SCICtrain. https://ec.europa.eu/info/education/skills-and-qualifications/develop-your-skills/language-skills/interpretation-training-toolbox_en.

2. Theoretical framework

Our intention is not to study distance interpreting, although there is a growing interest in the matter (e.g. Niska 1999; Moser-Mercer 2003, 2005; Braun 2011; Amato et al. 2018). Rather, this study falls under the framework of distance education. At this point it is therefore important to differentiate between distance interpreting (be it videoconference interpreting or video remote interpreting) and distance learning (virtual classes, virtual learning environments (VLEs), repositories, etc.). The first is defined as “information and communications technology (ICT)-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s)/signer(s) at a given event” (AIIC 2018) and is a controversial issue that has recently been at the core of the professional standards discussion and the object of a clear AIIC position (2018): “AIIC, through its Task Force on Distance Interpreting, is committed to sparing no effort in developing and adopting evidence-based working conditions that provide for both quality of interpretation and interpreter wellbeing, through the systematic and methodical testing of Distance Interpreting modalities in real work environments.” The second is a well-studied topic in the discipline of Education, albeit not in interpreter training, and deserves a closer look in light of the aims of our study. While there are several definitions of distance education available (cf. Moore and Anderson 2003; Jung 2019), Ko (2006) states they all involve some form of “physical separateness between the teacher and students” and the acquisition of knowledge and skills without the traditional in-class presence of both students and teachers at the same time. In interpreter training studies, distance education has developed alongside remote interpreting. Several projects, such as AVIDICUS⁵ or SHIFT⁶ have already explored the educational implications of this new mode of interpreting, and some authors have extensively studied and compared it with traditional interpreting (Connell 2006; Mouzourakis 2006; Braun and Taylor 2012). The present study focuses on the use of videoconferencing technologies to provide virtual interpreter training and, as such, draws on two areas of research: (1) research on the impact of new technologies in interpreter training; (2) research on videoconferencing as a means for interpreter training.

The development of technology has had a significant impact on interpreter training, although it is only in the last decade or so that studies have directly addressed the use of blended and distance learning in interpreter. While several studies emphasize the advantages of such modes of training (Motta 2006; Blasco Mayor and Jiménez Ivars 2007; Güven 2014; Biernacka 2018), a number of

5. <http://wp.videoconference-interpreting.net/>.

6. <https://www.shiftinorality.eu/en>.

potential problems that can occur in videoconference interpreting (and remote interpreting in general) have been identified, which may also therefore be problematic for distance learning in interpreter training, such as poor visibility, alienation and decreased motivation, loss of co-presence, decreased concentration, scarce eye contact, etc. (e.g. Mouzourakis 2006; Moser-Mercer 2005; Roziner and Shlesinger 2010; Setton and Dawrant 2016). One area related to distance learning for interpreter training that has received considerable attention is the development of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), that is, virtual platforms offering students access to various kinds of repositories and communication and evaluation tools (Gran, Carabelli and Merlini 2002; Sandrelli and de Manuel Jerez 2007; Sandrelli 2015). In fact, one of the advantages of new technologies has been to make resources easily available for students to practice outside the classroom. Specifically, Computer Assisted Interpreter Training offers a wide array of possibilities, from online materials and exercises⁷ to libraries (Chan 2014) or speech banks, of which the best known and most comprehensive is the Speech Repository 2.0, by the European Commission Directorate General for Interpretation (DG-SCIC). The Speech Repository 2.0 includes speeches in all of the languages (EU and non-EU) involved in our study, and also provides a recording tool, the SCICRec.

Unsurprisingly, given their recent introduction to the field, videoconferencing technologies as a means for interpreter training have so far been the object of very few studies (e.g., Mouzourakis 1996, 2006; Ko 2006; Sandrelli and de Manuel Jerez 2007; Braun 2007; Braun and Davitti 2017). Since the core skills involved in interpreting, as well as the training of such skills require a high degree of verbal and visual interaction (cf. aforementioned studies), some of the typical drawbacks of distance learning also apply here, as Ko (2006) argues. It has to be noted here that the more recent advances in technology have positively influenced at least some issues mentioned in this study (for instance, the bandwidth problem Ko mentions has been largely absent in our project activities, which commenced in 2015, as shown in Sections 4.1 and 4.2). Even though other issues encountered in these studies have not yet been resolved by developments in technologies, there is a growing demand for the introduction of distance interpreting in training programs. This is related to four fundamental factors identified by Ko (*ibid.*: 70): educational needs, development of telecommunication technologies, financial considerations and new market demands. Moreover, given that we were dealing with languages of lesser diffusion or those not traditionally present in certain interpreting programmes across Europe and beyond, it seemed only

7. Such as provided by ORCIT or Speechpool.

reasonable to implement training methods involving the use of videoconferencing connections, particularly in light of their cost-effectiveness.

A recurring concern in the literature about blended and distance learning in interpreter training is whether the results of such an educational process are comparable to those of traditional face-to-face settings. Although some researchers argue that the effectiveness of remote training of interpreters has not yet been validated (e.g. Setton and Dawrant 2016), several others have reported successful cases, especially in blended mode (e.g. Rodríguez Melchor 2011, 2016; Güven 2014; Ko 2008; Biernacka 2018).

Despite its possible drawbacks, it is certain that distance learning will experience interesting developments in higher education in general, and that interpreter training will be no exception, because, in spite of the disadvantages that remote settings might entail, “one clear advantage [...] is the broadening of the educational community to include instructors and students whose participation would otherwise be unlikely, if not impossible, due to geographical constraints” (Sawyer and Roy 2015: 130), as we experienced with the ERITON project.

3. Methodology

As previously stated, this paper reports on the results of two online surveys carried out during the three-year ERITON project (2015–2017). One survey was devoted to the 11 virtual thematic classes and another to the two mock conferences mediated via videoconference organised by the project partners. Virtual classes (VCs) simulated a face-to-face class held with two or three partner universities. Trainers decided on and coordinated the topic (e.g. the Olympic Games, or climate change and immigration), specific learning difficulty⁸ that students were expected to encounter at their level of progression (e.g. intermediate consecutive). Students received the topic and difficulty in advance and a script was generated containing the structure of the event, the names of the participants and the titles and keywords of the speeches.

The structure of VCs was similar to that of a traditional face-to-face interpreting consecutive course: several native speakers delivered short talks on a given subject; the students took notes and interpreted into their A or B languages and received feedback from trainers at all participating universities. This had the added benefit of allowing students to receive feedback from trainers who were not familiar with their usual performance, and who they do not see on a regular basis.

8. Difficulties proposed were, in no specific order: links, structure, figures, list/enumerations, asides/digressions, humour.

The added value of the VC was that all speakers would construct their speech to include the learning difficulty chosen for the event, unlike the vast majority of VCs in which the ERITON project partners had participated up to that point, in which there was no coordination among speakers on the topic or specific aspect of difficulty of the speech, and in which speakers did not always take it upon them to learn the level of progression of the students. Another added value of the way in which VCs were organised, which is also one of the innovative aspects of the project, is that at the end of each VC one trainer from each participating institution would share with students their “expert advice”, that is general advice from a professional interpreter on how they usually deal with the specific difficulty that was the object of the VC. This advice is applicable independent of the source or target language, and offers all students (and sometimes fellow trainers) a take-home message on how to deal with a specific difficulty faced in interpreting.

In the case of the virtual mock conferences, trainers would still decide on the topic and level of progression, but students from several partner universities were then in charge of organising the class and distributing the roles of speaker, interpreter and listener (and feedback provider) using the digital canvas Padlet, where a “wall” (i.e. an online space allowing for collaborative note and document sharing) had been set up and access provided (with a single password for all students) to enable students to cooperate among themselves. On the day of the mock conference, students thus had to perform not only their own role as trainees, but also provide speeches and/or feedback on the interpreting performance.

In both cases, an onsite briefing preceded the event and an online (common) and onsite (per institution) debriefing took place. Moreover, as already mentioned, surveys were used to gather students’ opinions on both the technical and pedagogical aspects of the VCs and mock conferences. Questions asked in both surveys provide quantitative (on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=bad to 5=good), and qualitative results (open comments). Questions concerning the technical aspects of the setting asked about the quality of the image and sound, the timeliness of turn taking (appearance on screen of the speaker, which was important especially when the camera moves upon turning on the microphone in the room) and the set-up not being an obstacle (or students feeling that they were able to interpret as if they were in a classroom). Questions concerning the pedagogical aspects of the setting asked about the student’s perception of how the topic and learning difficulty proposed fitted into their own learning program, the clarity of the description of the topic and how speeches related to the announced topic (or dealt with something completely unexpected for the student), the coherence of the pedagogical objective with their level of progression, and the quality of their own preparation for the classes as well as their assessment of the feedback

received and of the interaction with the assessor of their performance. Each question received a closed answer on the Likert scale and space for open comments was provided at the end of each group of questions.

The surveys were administered online after each videoconference. The participants in VCs (following the traditional speech- rendition-feedback model) and in virtual mock conferences (all roles played by the students themselves) were provided with a link to the surveys and asked to reply to the online questionnaires immediately after the videoconference took place. Once all the data were gathered, they were transferred to a common matrix and statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software version 24.

4. Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics were elaborated on the basis of the answers to the surveys. Overall, the two surveys totalled 71 answers from different students taking part either in VCs or in mock conferences: 30 answers from students who took part in two mock conferences and 40 answers from students who participated in VCs.⁹

As shown in Table 1, students from the 5 universities involved in the project replied with different levels of participation and completion: participation from Geneva and Astrakhan amount for the majority of the sample (63.4%). These figures are consistent with the actual number of students enrolled in the programs and with the number of virtual classes in which those two universities took part.

Table 1. University affiliation

University where the subject was an interpreting student	Students	%
Geneva	26	36.6
Comillas	13	18.3
Ljubljana	10	14.1
Astrakhan	19	26.8
Boğaziçi	3	4.2
Total	71	100

9. There was a subject who did not declare the event in which (s)he was involved (lost value in tables), but according to the form (s)he filled in, it was a virtual class.

Since the online surveys for participants in VCs and in mock conferences asked questions about different pedagogical scenarios we will first present the data related to the VCs, and then move on to that related to the mock conferences.

4.1 Outcomes of the survey on Virtual Classes (VCs)

To begin with, we will focus on analysing the responses to technical questions (Table 2). When asked about the VCs' quality of image, on a scale from 1 (bad) to 5 (good), subjects valued this variable with an average 4.41 out of 5, 5 being both the median and the mode. As for sound quality, 58.5% of participants gave it the highest score (5 out of 5), with an average score of 4.51. Dispersion among responses was low in both cases: 0.741 standard deviation for image quality and 0.637 for sound quality. Since the quality of sound and image is an important determinant of the success or failure of a consecutive interpretation mediated by a videoconference connection, these statistics illustrate the fact that the technology that is currently used for VCs is reliable and provides a virtual space that is stable enough to enable students and trainers to interact as smoothly as if they were in a face-to-face pedagogical setting. Indeed, most of the participants agreed (31.7%) or completely agreed (51%) that the virtual environment allowed them to feel as if they were in a regular classroom.

The last question on technical aspects concerned the timeliness of turn taking, which we defined as the time it took for the speaker to appear on screen during the VCs. This is an important factor, related to the synchronization of sound and image coming from one site and also to the switch between different sites, which was dependent on the fact that some partners relied on a technician to handle the camera, while others worked with automatic devices. On the whole, this variable was considered satisfactory: not a single participant considered it to be "bad", only two respondents (4.9%) said that it was "not very good", with the vast majority of answers ranging from "ok" to "good" (with 85.4% of the sample agreeing on the appropriateness of turn taking).

Let us turn now to the questions that were directly related to the pedagogical design of the VCs. Questions were asked on the (1) pertinence of the general topic; (2) adequacy of the learning difficulty with respect to the level of progression; (3) description of such difficulty; (4) pertinence of the speeches with regard to the topic; (5) coherence between difficulty and level of progression; (6) structure of speeches; (7) argumentation of the speeches; (8) unanticipated difficulties. Participants in the survey answered the questions in the above order, but, for ease of presentation, these items have been grouped in two categories: difficulties and speeches. Table 3 presents the results linked to difficulties: the relevance of the difficulty according to the level of progression (2) was granted a mean 4.44 on a

Table 2. VCs: Questions on technical aspects

<i>Answers provided on 1–5 Likert scale</i>	The quality of the image during the VC was...	The quality of the sound during the VC was...	The timeliness of the turn-taking (appearance on the screen of the person who is speaking) was...	The set-up allowed me to interpret as if I were in a classroom
N Valid	41	41	41	41
Lost	30	30	30	30
Mean	4.41	4.51	4.29	4.32
Median	5	5	4	5
Mode	5	5	5	5
Standard deviation	0.741	0.637	0.844	0.82
Variance	0.549	0.406	0.712	0.672

5-point scale, and most participants (61%) gave it the highest score; when asked whether the description of such difficulty (3) was good or bad on a 5-point scale, 92.7% respondents provided a positive response (4 or 5 on the scale); there is also consensus (87.8%) concerning the coherence between the difficulty and the level of progression (5); most participants (82.9%) found no unanticipated difficulties (8), although certain unexpected challenges, such as speed (4.9%), digressions (2.4%), speech density (2.4%) or literalness (2.4%), note-taking problems (2.4%) or the impression that the speakers were not familiar with interpreting (2.4%) were mentioned.

As indicated in Table 4, assessment of the speeches and of the feedback received was also positive: 82.9% of participants considered the choice of topic (1) good; when asked about the pertinence of speeches in relation to the general topic (4), 95.1% of participants gave a positive response, ranging from “ok” (14.6%) to “good” (80.5%); 92.7% of participants considered the speeches to be clearly structured (6) and 87.8% to have a clear argumentation (7). As for the clarity of the feedback received, on a scale from 1 to 5, clarity scored an average 4.45 out of 5, with a high degree of consensus on feedback being very clear (65% of participants). Students were also asked about pertinence of feedback, and the average score here was also very high: 4.43 out of 5, with, once again, 65% of participants granting it the highest score.

To conclude this section, we will report on the remaining six questions that were related to the students’ perception of the strategies recommended by the trainers (expert advice, different from the feedback on their own performance as

Table 3. VCs: Questions on the pedagogical difficulty

<i>Answers provided on 1-5 Likert scale</i>	I would qualify the choice of topic for the VC in terms of how it fits in my training programme, as...	With respect to my level of progression, I would qualify the relevance of the difficulty chosen for the VC as...	The description of the difficulty chosen for the VC was...	I would qualify the pertinence of the speeches in relation to the general topics announced as...	I think that the difficulty was coherent with my level of progression ...
N Valid	41	41	41	41	41
Lost	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	4.78	4.44	4.56	4.76	4.39
Median	5	5	5	5	5
Mode	5	5	5	5	5
Standard deviation	0.525	0.838	0.776	0.538	0.972
Variance	0.276	0.702	0.602	0.289	0.944

Table 4. VCs: Questions on the speeches and feedback received

	The structure of the speeches was clear	The argumentation of the speeches was clear	There was a difficulty I had not anticipated, and that was...	The feedback I received was clear	The feedback I received was pertinent
N Valid	41	41	41	40	40
Lost	30	30	30	31	31
Mean	4.51	4.51	0.56	4.45	4.43
Median	5	5	0	5	5
Mode	5	5	0	5	5
Standard deviation	0.711	0.711	1.517	0.932	0.958
Variance	0.506	0.506	2.302	0.869	0.917

previously explained), their own preparation for the class and their own performance.¹⁰

When asked whether the recommended strategies (expert advice) for overcoming difficulties were applicable (Table 5), most students agreed that they were (57.5% of respondents for VC and + 25% for mock conference). Similarly, 75% of participants either agree (15%) or completely agree (60%) that they had the possibility to reply to the assessors' comments, but in this case, it is worth noting that another 15% of respondents disagree or totally disagree on this point. As for preparation, 90% asserted that they were prepared (52.5%) or very prepared (37.5%) for the videoconference. Finally, students rated their own performance with an average score of 3.48 out of 5, tending, in this case, to more central scores (3–4 being the most common) compared to the technical-/quality-related questions.

Table 5. VCs: Questions on general feedback received and self-assessment

<i>Answers provided on 1–5 Likert scale</i>	The strategies that were recommended for overcoming the difficulties are applicable	I felt I had the possibility to reply to the assessor	My preparation for the VC was adequate	I think my performance was...
N Valid	40	40	40	40
Lost	31	31	31	31
Mean	4.3	4.15	4.28	3.48
Median	5	5	4	4
Mode	5	5	4	4
Standard deviation	0.018	1.252	0.64	0.816
Variance	1.036	1.567	0.41	0.666

4.2 Outcomes of the survey on mock conferences

Out of the 30 participants in mock conferences, most were either part of the audience (53.5%) or interpreters (36.7%). The remaining three subjects took part as chair, speaker and feedback-provider respectively. Some inconsistencies are to be flagged: some respondents seem to have filled in a set of boxes that were not related to their declared role in the mock conference thus invalidating some data, and some played more than one role at a time. Most of the questions asked on the mock conferences were formulated as both closed and open questions, because

10. Only 40 out of 41 participants answered those six questions.

we wanted to take this opportunity to learn more about students' perceptions in a setting that was, for most of them, different from their other experiences of distance interaction and, in many cases, also different from their usual face-to-face classes.

As shown in Table 6, participants who intervened as coordinators on behalf of their institution estimated that it took them an average 14 hours to prepare for the event; those who had to prepare speeches declared having invested on average 10.8 hours in the task. In the case of both mock conferences, all of the respondents declared that they would repeat the experience and, when asked whether they would do things differently, only one declared that (s)he would introduce minor changes (for instance, the number of speeches). As for the adequacy of the materials (Table 7), 8 of the participants that took part as interpreters (11 participants declared to have interpreted, so this would account for 72.7% of the interpreters) highlight the fact that speeches were well structured and easy to follow, and when asked for the main difficulties encountered 54.5% of the interpreters signalled speed and density.

Table 6. Mock conferences: General impressions and preparation time

<i>Open questions with request to explain answer provided.</i>	What did you like about the mock conference?	Role during the mock conference	Was there anything you did you not like about the mock conference?	If you were in charge of the coordination for your university, can you estimate how much time you invested?	If you were in charge of preparing a speech for the mock conference, can you estimate how much time you invested?
N Valid	30	30	30	4	5
Lost	41	41	41	67	66
Mean	3.5	4	1.83	14	10.800
Median	4	5	2	2.75	3
Mode	4	5	0	2.5	1.5
Standard deviation	1.383	1.174	1.642	22.6679	12.0654
Variance	1.914	1.379	2.695	513.833	145.575

Let us turn now to the opinions gathered through several open-ended questions regarding the students' perceptions and preferences (Table 8).

When asked what they liked the most about the experience, one-third of respondents mentioned aspects related to the international interaction that was

Table 7. Mock conferences: Appreciation of event, speech and feedback

<i>Yes/No or Open question with request to explain</i>	Would you be happy to do this again?	Would you do anything differently?	If you interpreted a speech during the mock conference, how did you find the speech?	If you interpreted a speech during the mock conference, what difficulties did you encounter?	If you provided feedback, what difficulties did you encounter?
N Valid	5	5	8	7	4
Lost	66	66	63	64	67
Mean	1.00	0.20	1	1.86	2
Median	1.00	0	1	2	2
Mode	1	0	1	2	2
Standard deviation	0	0.447	0	0.378	0.816
Variance	0	0.200	0	0.143	0.667

made possible through this experience. Another significant percentage (26.7%) pointed out that they liked the content or topic of the speeches. Other answers highlighted feedback (16.7%), organizational aspects (13.3%) or the possibility of practising their interpreting technique (6.7%). Concerning aspects that participants disliked, respondents complained about technical issues (20%), time management (16.7%), language combination of the mock conferences (13.3%), insufficient feedback (13.3%) and scarce interaction among students (6.7%). Ten participants commented on their feelings when receiving feedback: 50% stated that it was useful, and 30% considered it clear and constructive, while 10% deemed it not sufficiently detailed, and the remaining 10% asserted that what they received was not so useful. Out of the seven participants that worked with the Padlet, 42.9% share the opinion that it was useful and easy to manage. 28.6% state that it was messy and unclear and the remaining 28.6% say that usability could be improved. Concerning the topic of the mock conference, 43.4% of participants thought it was enjoyable and/or interesting, 20% considered it pertinent and/or suitable, 16.7% said it was boring and/or clichéd. 6.7% of participants stressed that the topic was too narrow, which made the speeches repetitive.

With regard to the technical (audio and video) aspects of the mock conference the participants' opinions were varied: 6.7% considered them excellent and 26.7% appropriate; 16.7% thought they could be better; 20% noted that there were small technical issues; 6.7% stated that the video was poor but sound was acceptable;

3.3% declared that the sound was poor but video was acceptable and 3.3% noted that there were technical problems.

Overall students had a positive impression despite some technical problems that were flagged, and very few considered mock conferences to be less useful than traditional face-to-face classes.

Table 8. Mock conferences: Feedback technical aspects and adequacy in own context

	If you received feedback, how did you feel about it?	If you worked with the Padlet, did you find it user-friendly? Did you encounter any issues?	What did you think of the audio and video aspects of this mock conference?	How did you feel about the topic of the mock conference?	How did you feel about this virtual mock conference in comparison to your usual interpreting classes?
N Valid	10	7	30	30	30
Lost	61	64	41	41	41
Mean	2	1.86	2.97	2.13	2.47
Median	2	2	2.5	2.5	2.5
Mode	2	1	2	3	0
Standard deviation	0.943	0.9	2.173	1.196	2.193
Variance	0.889	0.81	4.723	1.43	4.809

Finally, respondents were asked to reflect on the experience and provide their own opinion by the answering the question “How did you feel about this virtual mock conference in comparison to your usual interpreting classes? Do you think there are any benefits to such a virtual setting? Any drawbacks? Please explain your answer and give examples.” Results are as follows: 30% of the respondents to the survey found the virtual mock conferences to be useful and highly beneficial and 16.7% described them as an interesting experience, whereas 13.3% thought they were unproductive in terms of feedback and time-management, 3.3% similar to a regular class and 3.3% less useful than a regular class. The question was purposefully very broad: some of the students had never been exposed to virtual mock conferences at all and some had no experience of face-to-face mock conferences; some institutions organized mock conferences in a range of different formats, while others held none. Some of the answers might therefore have been motivated by the enthusiasm of the novelty of the setting, some by a perceived inefficiency of such a set-up vis-à-vis the regular and orderly mock conference

organised in their home institution, some by the opportunity to interact with students that are geographically remote and thus generally inaccessible.

Some of the explanations provided by students for their answers are interesting and deserve a mention in that they confirm the underlying objectives of mock conferences: the set-up trains students to address a larger and unknown audience, outside the comfort zone of their usual classes (public speaking and stress management); the technical component can be distracting but as such technology could be used more often in the future, it is beneficial for students to gain experience of videoconference settings. One respondent spoke of a "brand new experience" that was very useful because of the challenges it presented, and another of the experience being interesting because it put the students in a professional situation, more realistic than regular classes, with people coming from different backgrounds.

On the downside, it was noted that some of the students who were to provide feedback seemed to shy or afraid of doing so in front of their trainers and that at times it was difficult to maintain concentration due to looking at a screen for extended periods because the languages spoken were not necessarily understood by all.

4.3 Research limitations and implications

One of the limitations of this study is that despite the fact that we gathered a rather high number of replies, the results of the two surveys cannot be compared because of the different range of questions asked and the fact that a 5-point Likert scale was used for most of the questions related to the VCs while the mock conference online survey was designed mostly to prompt open-ended answers. In the context of a study that uses technology as a means to build on pedagogical scenarios, collecting qualitative data was considered necessary in order to gain greater insight into the subject and especially to gain information about the students' perceptions. The richness and depth that this approach provided was worth the complexity of analysis it required.

Surprisingly, one unanticipated result of our study is that the students often blur the boundaries between pedagogical difficulty and level of the speeches despite these being discussed and defined with students by trainers in the participating institutions: some of them understood the question in terms of "difficulty level" (providing answers such as "intermediate" or "consecutive beginner"), others identified the specific objectives targeted by trainers (digressions, links, irony or numbers). It might be argued that a drop down menu should have been provided, but this can also be viewed as a useful reality check, in that aspects that

trainers believe have been clearly explained and understood, is not always crystal clear to students.

That said, the 5-point Likert scale answers to the questions regarding pedagogical difficulty (survey on VCs) were illustrative of the advantages of ascribing quantitative values to qualitative variables. Even though the question “Pedagogical difficulty identified in the VC/Mock” was non-conclusive, when asked whether the description of such difficulty was good or bad in the case of videoconferences (on a scale from 1=bad to 5=good), results were positive, with an overall 92.7% of positive responses (4 or 5 on the scale). There also seems to be consensus concerning the coherence of the VC’s difficulty level with students’ levels of progression at the time of the event: 87.8% agree (26.8%) or totally agree (61%).

In conclusion, our experience with the open-ended question approach is ambivalent. Although we managed to gather a large amount of data, the limitations we have described in the previous paragraphs mean that our study findings should be interpreted with caution.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for future work

Cooperation in the field of interpreter training, embodied in the sharing of best practices and capacity building in non-EU partner countries, is one of the key features of the European Institutions multilingualism strategy. The ERITON project has been instrumental in laying the foundations of a solid collaboration in our field among a number of EMCI member universities and partners in the Caspian region, and has served as a testing ground for innovation in our pedagogical practices.

One of the main features and pedagogical strengths of the project has been to focus on students’ needs and adapt the different tools developed and classes organised (VCs and mock conferences) to cater for the students in all partner institutions despite the different local contexts. The choice of specific difficulties, together with the adequacy of the speeches and feedback adapted to the students’ level of acquisition of interpreting skills, has enabled the trainers involved in this study to test the feasibility of classes facilitated by a videoconferencing connection among very different partners. Indeed, in spite of the disparity in language profiles and level of progression of the students and of the geographical distance separating the partners, when there is an affinity of purpose and a clear set of objectives, these classes can work smoothly and thus multiply the chances for students to practice and receive feedback. In our further work, we should endeavour to set even clearer objectives for each VC, in terms of difficulty to be faced and competences to be developed by the students, and establish guidelines that will allow

us to match with yet more accuracy both variables with the interpreting students' level of progression.

In our future work, a second study would be undertaken to ascertain the usability of the OCW dual track recording tool developed in the context of the ERITON project. Careful reconsideration will be required about the methodology and design, but we think that the results of our present study, in spite of its limitations, have been useful to gain deeper understanding of VCs in the field of interpreter training and have helped us identify methodological strengths and shortcomings.

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Résumé

L'impact des TIC sur la formation des interprètes est indéniable et ouvre un nouvel ensemble de possibilités et de défis tant pour les formateurs que pour les apprenants. En effet, le développement des ressources interactives en ligne, destinées à la formation des interprètes, a été au cœur du programme d'assistance et de collaboration pédagogiques, tant pour les institutions européennes que pour leurs universités partenaires. Les systèmes modernes de vidéoconférence et les technologies d'apprentissage en ligne fournissent une excellente alternative aux cours en face à face, en apportant des solutions au problème de la disponibilité des formateurs et en mobilisant les apprenants dans des activités synchrones et asynchrones, axées sur les tâches.

Dans ce contexte, le projet ERITON, financé par le Parlement européen, a été lancé en 2014, dans le but de faciliter la diffusion de bonnes pratiques et d'améliorer la collaboration entre les universités partenaires de l'UE ou de pays tiers, dans le domaine de la formation des interprètes de conférence. Le noyau stratégique de ce projet a été l'utilisation de méthodes de formation innovantes, telles que les classes virtuelles et les simulations de conférences virtuelles. Dans le cadre d'ERITON, les universités d'Astrakhan, de Boğaziçi, de Genève, de Ljubljana et de Comillas ont également mis au point une base de données OpenCourseWare (OCW) de ressources en matière d'interprétation, un créateur de script en ligne pour les classes virtuelles (CV) et un outil d'enregistrement à double piste permettant aux étudiants de s'exercer en ligne avec le matériel de la base OCW et d'autres sources techniquement compatibles.

Cet article présente le cadre pédagogique des CV et examine les résultats d'une enquête en ligne menée entre 2015 et 2017 auprès d'étudiants ayant participé activement aux classes virtuelles, organisées dans le cadre du projet ERITON. L'objectif de l'enquête était d'obtenir un retour d'information anonyme sur la mise en place technique des CV et sur l'utilité de ce format en ce qui concerne l'acquisition et la progression des compétences. Les résultats montrent que le nouveau média a été bien accueilli et apprécié par les répondants, en particulier parce qu'il leur a donné la possibilité d'interagir d'une manière et avec des personnes qui, autrement, leur auraient été inaccessibles.

Mots-clés: classes virtuelles, bonnes pratiques, formation des interprètes de conférence, ressources en ligne

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