22 Remote online teaching in modern languages in Germany: responses according to audiences and teaching objectives

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Abstract

This chapter reports on the 'Corona teaching' in a department of English studies at a German university of technology. It discusses the general frame in the German university system and in this specific department, faculty and university. It focuses on the responses depending on participants and learning objectives. One larger lecture for 1st year Bachelor of Arts (BA) students used Moodle to teach a traditional knowledge transfer course, the 'History of English language and culture'. One smaller seminar used Big Blue Button (BBB) to teach a more interactive Master of Arts (MA) course on 'Translation theory and technology'. The overall experience was positive for the good students who managed the challenge well, but it was negative for others who were less privileged in their technical equipment or their resilience. Some losses included more social class activities; opportunities included additional learning in the media and digital contexts – possibly invaluable advantages for further developments for modern foreign language specialists in future.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, modern languages, translation, Moodle lecture, interaction, Germany.

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1.   The federal and institutional framework

This chapter[2] discusses the experience from the forced online teaching in a modern department of philology at a German university in spring 2020. Although Chemnitz is called a university of technology, like three of the four universities in Saxony, Germany, it has a faculty of humanities with traditional departments like German studies, English studies, media studies, European studies, etc. The teaching in English studies (Anglistik/Amerikanistik in German) is not focused on teacher training for public schools, although many graduates choose this option later (also in the context of teaching refugees and international students that developed in Germany in the last five years). But it offers a wide range of skills useful for today's language service providers in the widest sense. Former students run their own private companies and provide up-to-date response to the departmental teaching from a practical perspective (cf. 3.3 below). Thus, since the introduction of the Bologna system[3] at Chemnitz 15 years ago, the teaching has developed strongly towards digitalisation and intercultural cooperation. This can be seen in 'modern philological' MA seminars like 'project management', where international students are taught German culture in the preparation of a 'Christmas Evening' in December, and German and European students learn about 'Chinese New Year' in February, or 'Translation theory and technology' (which is discussed below). The English Department at Chemnitz had developed such 'modern philological' classes over the years and they were approved and supported by the faculty and university. This 'technological' emphasis was welcome because of the (traditional) name of the university, although the interpretation of the term 'technological' was different in some cases: the university leadership and Saxon Ministry of Education liked to think that it links well with the great German engineering tradition – the department liked the good computer equipment and support by the computer centre. Both sides came together recently in a million-Euro 'collaborative research centre'[4] on 'Hybrid

Societies: Humans Interacting with Embodied Technologies', which includes a project on lingua franca English interaction of humans and a non-native 'agent'.

From the examples above, it should be absolutely clear that classes in the English studies programme do not aim at learning a language (like in a language centre), but at using the language at an advanced level in modern academic interaction and preparing learners for professional language services afterwards, from creative mediation (translation) and intercultural discourse to media-, discipline-, and reader-/listener-specific writing/presentation, and editing.

This summary shows the background of the classes discussed below: a digital component had been introduced already and seen at least as interesting by the department, faculty, and university as a whole. In this context, the university was hit by 'Corona' in spring 2020. From April onward, all classes had to be held remotely – and this will be done again from October, except on special application. In fact, all university buildings were locked for months and staff were only allowed to meet in small groups (after applying to the Corona task force). All official departmental and faculty meetings were held online via BBB and students and staff were informed regularly about the situation by (usually rector's) circulars[5]. These circulars included links suggesting tools, instruction videos, and online courses for teachers and students. Some recommendations were based on discussions of external and internal task forces; in the end, however, it was colleagues who helped with advice and experience on all levels, departmental and international. Additionally, the federal system in Germany allowed the keen newspaper reader to compare different responses in different universities and disciplines through the collection of relevant newspaper cuttings by the German rectors' conference. Thus, this report is based on the experiences in my own lectures and seminars and is put in a wider context of discussions with international colleagues and colleagues in similar situations. They illustrate concrete experience in different types of classes and may be useful for comparison.

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5. The first circular, still published on the university webpages in German and English, came on February 6th, the fifth circular introduced the Video Conferencing System BBB on April 1st.

2.   BA introductory lecture 'History of English language and culture' in Moodle

The first example of 'teaching adaptation' to the Corona situation is from a 1st year/2nd semester BA class, which usually has 60 to 100 listeners, including many international students, not only from the BA English programme, but also from other related areas. Since this is a popular topic combining basic history (from secondary school) and only a few challenging linguistics components (from an introduction in the 1st semester), it attracted a wide range of students, as can be seen from the course description below:

> "[t]his survey lecture shows language in its socio-cultural contexts: its relationship to power and technology, to historical personalities and social groups. It ranges from the Romans to William the Conqueror, from Caxton to Dr Johnson or Noah Webster, from Matthew Arnold to Bill Gates and from the medieval scriptorium to the internet. It provides the background necessary to understand the world-wide forms and functions of English today and tries to draw general conclusions about the socio-cultural factors affecting language (change) in the past and today".

This description shows that in this lecture the learning outcomes and competences (cf. Brendel, Hanke, & Macke, 2019 or Kennedy, Hyland, & Ryan, 2007) were relatively traditional, i.e. a wide spectrum of cultural background knowledge, typical of intercultural language classrooms at advanced level at German universities (cf. Barrett et al., 2014). In the current Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) illustrative descriptors, they can be described in terms of professional users' 'Exploiting pluricultural repertoires' (German – English, but also British – American – global):

> "[a]t the C levels, this develops into an ability to explain sensitively the background to cultural beliefs, values and practices, interpret and discuss aspects of them, cope with sociolinguistic and pragmatic ambiguity and express reactions constructively with cultural appropriateness" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 124).

2.1. The flipped classroom phase

This learning perspective made it possible immediately before the semester to start with an ad hoc experiment. Students were asked in departmental circulars and online course descriptions to prepare for the class by watching different types of YouTube videos: a professional television film on Old English, a short self-recorded lecture by a German colleague on Old English, a long TV documentary on *The forbidden book – history of the Bible*, and a very short self-made short video on *Why did English become an international language*. Students were warned that each video would require much more time than the weekly lecture and asked to send eight questions and suggested answers in phrases for each film (>500 words). This flipped, or inverted, classroom approach has been discussed for a long time (e.g. Estes, Ingram, & Liu, 2014; Handke & Sperl, 2012) and is discussed again in the current blended learning context, where the discussion after the individual learning phase is online and not in the classroom. Unfortunately, the results of this part were only 'interesting' for the following short online discussion via BBB and not really as 'inspiring' as teacher and tutors had hoped – still, the points given by the tutors were used as extra points in the final assessment.

2.2. The Moodle lecture

Although universities in Saxony developed their own 'online education system' several years ago, the lectures for this introduction were put into the same Moodle system as the weekly quizzes and tutorial materials because it allows us to exchange materials with our Italian and Czech colleagues, who use basically the same system. Since teachers at our university tried to adhere to the new European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on data protection and online privacy, which do not allow us to use foreign servers for our data, teachers in Germany were happy when they noticed that many open-source tools were integrated in spring 2020 to their Moodle systems. So, BBB and Etherpad were added for smaller groups in seminars first and Zoom for large lectures later. Most colleagues, it seems, opted for the easiest version of adding sound to their usual power-point presentations and made sure that the audio file was short enough

for students limited attention span and small enough for students' to download even with unstable internet connections outside the university campus. This was followed up by regular video office hours and chats or forums – which were hardly used.

2.3.   The tutorial

In the German university system, some departments and teachers spend a considerable part of their funds on student assistants and tutors. For lectures, teaching materials (such as the YouTube videos mentioned above) are usually checked or even selected by (paid) older students who did well in the class one or two years before. These tutorials are also used to create a less formal atmosphere without the professor where students can speak out and admit when they still have not understood the concepts discussed. Theoretically, this 'understanding' is immediately checked by tutors in weekly quizzes of transfer questions (cf. 2.4), which are the basis of the continuous assessment in the end, as a welcome alternative to the traditional big final test at the end of term.

Unfortunately, the tutorials even lost more students than the lectures because students just attempted the quizzes without using the additional learning opportunities in the tutorials – and tutors were frustrated not only because students did not attend their tutorials but also because they failed even tests that the tutors considered as simple. Many tutors were also not happy that German politicians and university leaders told students that it did not matter if they did not attend online classes and even failed exams – they were guaranteed to have another chance next semester, as their teaching or their exams were not as expected and promised in course descriptions.

2.4.   The final exam

When it became obvious in June that the university would not go back to the classrooms, online final exams were discussed. It is interesting that in the end, all Safe Exam Browsers (SEB) were considered too easy to cheat in online group

exams (e.g. with one system locked by a SEB and another one open used to consult lecture notes or the internet). Thus, teachers had the choice to persuade students to take exams in a special classroom that was equipped according to Corona hygiene regulations or to try online – reassured that they would be given the chance to repeat everything later. The result was – predictably – that almost all students who took the exam online did really well, and those who did not take online teaching seriously failed badly or did not take the exam at all. One positive outcome of the online tests was that Bloom's (1975) taxonomy of higher cognitive skills (application, analysis, evaluation, synthesis) was taken seriously in this open book format (Oxford University, 2020), where the students were expected, or even instructed, to take the relevant passages in the teaching materials as a starting point and transfer and apply this information to new materials (cf. Koksal & Ulum, 2018).

2.5. Lessons for future BA lectures

We conclude that this *Introduction to the history of English* is not ideal for online learning if the interactive parts with library visits, small group tutorials, and individual group discussions cannot complement the delivery to hundreds of students online or in a large lecture theatre. Generally, online teaching and exams are an opportunity for the good students to make them even better and a threat for the weaker students who need more personal guidance with time management, note taking, regular revision, and (self-)critical questions. This will have to be achieved in small groups with friendly and trustworthy student tutors if we do not want to lose too many weak students in future.

3. MA interactive seminar 'Translation theory and technology' in BBB

The second example of online teaching is from a seminar for MA students on 'Translation theory and technology', which was described as follows (unchanged from the original course catalogue):

"[t]his seminar intends to show that translation today includes important business and technology components. As a business, it is part of a wider range of language services (from language teaching to editing), technologies range from small web-based tools (such as EU databases or Linguee) to the neural networks of DeepL and complex translation memory systems (such as TRADOS). The linguistic focus in this class is on various levels of equivalence (lexical, semantic, pragmatic and textual). Finding this equivalence or making linguistically informed choices between different options is a significant task for translators. We will also consider cultural aspects of translation and explore models and solutions, esp. by discussing whether our Library's English webpages are suitable for international students using English as an international lingua franca and not as a mother tongue".

The seminar also included traditionally a flipped element (cf. 2.1. above) with group work, discussing YouTube lectures by renowned international specialists like Mona Baker (Manchester) or Antony Pym (Tarragona). This element was, of course, maintained this year, except that students were only able to meet in digital break-out rooms and not on campus.

In this class, the learning objectives were more clearly defined than in the lecture above and the interactive component was much more prominent. Despite the traditional name in the German system, the skills taught were based more on the CEFR illustrative descriptors for mediation at C2 level:

"[c]an mediate effectively and naturally, taking on different roles according to the needs of the people and situation involved, identifying nuances and undercurrents and guiding a sensitive or delicate discussion. Can explain in clear, fluent, well-structured language the way facts and arguments are presented, conveying evaluative aspects and most nuances precisely, and pointing out sociocultural implications" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 91).

3.1. Regular meetings via BBB

As this seminar was relatively small (only about 20 students), it was taught using the new online tool, BBB, recommended and supported by links to tuition by the university. Most students used a laptop, but it also worked on modern smartphones. Since this is an international course, students logged in from different parts of Germany (after it became clear that there would be no more classroom teaching, many students did not stay on campus), but also from places as far away as Lebanon, which was not only difficult, but also expensive and showed the commitment of international students. Other international students stayed on campus – and still did not hand in their 'papers' after the class finished in early July or needed an extension until the end of August.

During the weekly meetings, we were joined online by a specialist from the library as a 'customer' (see 3.4. below) and as a resource person because all students were asked to choose texts from the university library web pages and present evidence-based arguments for as many alternative translations as possible. In the first part of the semester, we discussed online how to use free online resources (like DeepL, online dictionaries, online mega corpora, such as the Brigham Young University (BYU) examples below, and parallel texts from library web pages of other universities). They had to be as broad as possible to generate as many as possible alternative versions according to principles of equivalence (Baker, 2018). Finally, students were able to present their preferred options in the shared notes and even take an online vote according to stylistic criteria, especially from a non-native/lingua franca perspective of an international 1st year MA student advanced level (C1 in the CEFR)[6]. This general part was done by individual presentations in BBB and follow-up individual student work with a few online discussions orally (with disciplined use of the microphone) or in writing in the chat. Figure 1 shows an example of a www page presented to encourage students to check possible solutions to critical translation issues. Here we see the entry in the BYU

6. Thus the 'translation course' was in fact a user-focused 'stylistics course', since the source text did not have to be a German text from our library, but could also be a text from their 'home' university library in their mother tongue or any other. The only clearly defined variable was the target text user and students were asked to focus on information they considered useful for them, even if it had not been noticed by the institutional customer, i.e. the university librarian.

databases (Davies, 2010) for *reserve*, which was important in the context of *reserve collection*, i.e. books that are kept in the library only for reference and not given out on loan – an important point for international students, who have to plan their time to work in the library accordingly. Different parts of the BYU entry in Figure 1 support the choice *reserve collection*: the second definition fits well, the academic nature is clear, and the sample sentence on *literature review* is related, but the noun *collection* is not in the collocations list, and the other nouns there are not from the same field either. These parts offer a much wider basis for the discussion of alternatives than traditional bilingual dictionaries and even modern www based tools like Linguee. The discussions on such online resources are basically the same as in the classroom, except that experienced teachers find it easier to read their students' faces in the classroom than online, where technology may (still) require more teacher attention than student reactions.

Figure 1.   Screen showing usage features of 'reserve' in the BYU corpora

3.2.   The shared notes

The second part of the BBB meetings consisted mainly of student presentations, where students often (as in normal face-to-face classes) provided far too few choices for crucial passages in the library texts they had chosen to work on and collective brainstorming made available more text alternatives copied into the shared notes.

Figure 2. BBB screen with participants, shared notes, and www work plan
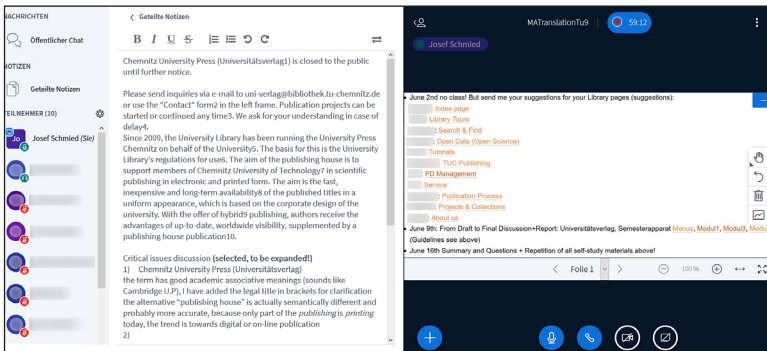
As Figure 2 shows, BBB has the advantage that it provides on one screen the participants list (here anonymised on the left), the shared notes in flexible width in the centre, and, on the right, the work plan from the www course pages or the original www page either in German or the original DeepL translation as a starting point, since some students spoke German only at a B1 level. Such a set up may even be seen as an advantage because it may be more difficult to set up the three parallel perspectives in a traditional classroom (or in Zoom). The notes allow some basic formatting, and everything can be exported and made available in the course cloud or on the course www page later – the same as the recorded version, which is shown by the red button at the top. Figure 2 also shows the disadvantages of BBB shared notes, since much of the original formatting is lost (footnotes, bold for emphasis has to be added just as italics for lexemes/phrases discussed, all important points in student papers later). Unfortunately, all student contributions are 'anonymous', in contrast to the options in Etherpad for instance,

where all participants can choose their colour to mark individual contributions, but we also know now from experience that some students prefer it this way.

3.3.   The social interactive extras

This seminar usually included an (optional) 'excursion' by train (university students enjoy free rides on all public transport in Saxony with their student ID) to a neighbouring town and a translation agency run by a former PhD student, where students learnt three main points in a remarkable demonstration:

- as a professional business, we manage your project and time and submit the final product when it is required;

- as sociable human beings, we can work in a social atmosphere (even in a nice 'villa'), as long as we deliver; and

- as creative artists, we do not translate – we create – and this takes more time and effort than most customers imagine.

This social event (with drinks and snacks provided) had always been considered the highlight of the class, a central contribution to the working atmosphere in the group and a model for student applications for internships/traineeships and even job interviews in their later lives. Unfortunately, these important elements of the seminar could not be replaced; the discussions on professional aspects of translation and language services did not get very far. Interestingly, the agency was not affected by the 'Corona crisis' and worked and delivered as a business throughout the lockdown, which was not as strict in Germany as in other countries. For this class, the interaction with real life business in an important workplace experience was not possible.

3.4.   The final paper

Although students were given scaffolded, interactive collaboration opportunities in the last few class meetings and the following individual consultations via

BBB, they found it difficult to understand that the 'final translation' was not the main part of this class requirement and only added as an appendix; the main part was the detailed discussion of 'alternative solutions' and the student's well-documented and well-argued final choice for only five to eight different language problems. This involved not only lexemes but also collocations, associations, etc., since this was not an exercise in German-English translation, but rather in advanced English stylistics focusing on media-, institution-, and user-adapted language. The final paper thus was also seen as a formal report to the 'customer', the university library for further reference – and maybe to make library access easier for the translation target group, the next generation of international MA students.

3.5.   Lessons for future MA seminars

This 'translation' class is a good example for a fruitful blended approach in future: after the first social gathering, where students also divided up into work-groups of different backgrounds and specialisations, most of the presentation discussion could be done online, the real professional touch during the excursion to the translation agency could give the creative thinking a new boost before the final online discussions of alternative solutions and the individual completion of the paper.

4.   Opportunities and dangers for modern languages

The conclusions drawn from the limited experience presented in this study are based on the current German university system, where the modernisation of the curriculum depends on the department, the technical affordances on the university, and the finances on the state (more southern *Länder* in Germany can usually invest more in higher education). In such relatively stable institutional contexts, professors and students have to remain flexible in times of crisis and make the most of the opportunities while being aware of the dangers they might present.

4.1.   Towards international exchange and cooperation?

The greatest opportunity of online teaching using world-wide systems (like Moodle, Zoom, or BBB) is the new digital exchange and cooperation. Although international exchange students (at Chemnitz, usually from China, Turkey, Italy, and the Czech Republic) were able and will be able to take part in lectures and seminars, the students' usual interaction with foreign students suffered during the 'Corona restrictions'. The new slogan 'Internationalisation@home' can be expanded in hybrid form: of course, the personal intercultural encounter and cooperation cannot be replaced, yet it can be expanded in digital form. Colleagues who usually send their exchange students can be integrated in digital teaching even before exchange students meet them in person. Students who hesitate to go abroad can at least get a glimpse into 'foreign worlds' by interacting with international students at home and in digital seminars.

4.2.   Towards commercialisation?

On the 'dangerous' side, the 'Corona experience' demonstrated that online teaching materials for some standard introductory classes (like 'history of English') are easily available on the www today. This may be interpreted by educational economists as an option 'to save' in cases of general survey lectures, which serve wide groups of students in modern English philology according to similar CEFR standards in many similar departments in native and non-native university contexts (cf. Bordet, 2021).

However, the extent to which advanced language learning in a philological department can be moved to remote online mode obviously depends on the specific learning contexts and objectives of the specific course. The limitations of online 'interaction' compared to classroom interaction and even extra-mural activities support the argumentation that blended forms of teaching will be most useful in post-Corona times.

The concrete description of the specific online experience in this contribution can also be seen as a warning against 'easy' commercialisation – 'even in

Germany', where international education and exchange is still highly valued, as this contribution also tried to illustrate.

5.   General conclusion from Germany

It is clear that the response to the Corona threat does not only depend on technical affordances and the previous training in e-learning for students but also on the psychologies of language teachers and students. For modern philology students who are trained to adapt to new digital developments in a technological world, the experience may not have been as difficult as for others, yet there is no way to avoid crises – we have to learn to cope with them, in language teaching and learning as in other branches of life.

The consensus after the first online semester in Germany seems to be in contrast to many schools: universities were able to cope with the challenges depending on learning objectives and technical affordances. Students learnt to live with uncertainty and risk, which increased their personal resilience. They had to rely on their personal competence in developing digital and learning strategies and in complexity in general. In a small online Deutsche Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung (DZHW) survey (Marczuk, Multrus, & Lörz, 2021), 24,600 students were asked about their experience in *studying in times of the Corona pandemic* and 86% disagreed that 'digital forms were not useable or accessible', whereas 77% agreed that they "missed the personal exchange" – unfortunately, this situation will continue for some time, and students and teachers just have to make the best out of it.

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