

14 Teaching online in translation studies: a teacher-researcher's feedback from France

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on language classes in a Paris university in 2020. The first case studied is a Master of Arts (MA) class in translation studies. The forced and sudden switch to online learning was well accepted by students who cooperated with the academic staff to choose an online platform, in the absence of any available institutional resource. Although online teaching proved efficient in terms of learning output, it implied a lot of extra work to ensure interaction between teacher and students. Besides, important discrepancies appeared between students as regards equipment and connection. The second case is taken from language classes with Bachelor of Arts (BA) students. Communication was compromised by students' reluctance to activate their webcams, seen as a threat for their privacy. Material problems such as poor connection were thus compounded by the digital divide among them. This situation reveals disparities between students while opening opportunities for change. The priority should be given to an assessment of students' needs in a context of pandemics, at an international level.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote language teaching, digital divide; needs' assessment; interaction, France.

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1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the consequences of language studies' sudden switch to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown in the context of a French university. The process was made even more difficult considering that the new 'Université de Paris' was born in January 2020 from the merging of Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7 and Université Paris Descartes-Paris 5. This is part of the current restructuration of French universities, with a view to creating larger entities, so as to make them more visible in the competitive academic world while at the same time cutting costs (Nature, 2020). In March 2020, the restructuring process was just starting, which made adaptation to an emergency situation even more difficult. The programme discussed in this chapter deals with translation studies as part of the Paris Diderot Applied Languages Department. In this multidisciplinary university, mastering of languages is a shared issue. Beside the applied languages and the English studies departments, students from other disciplines take part in courses addressing the specific linguistic needs of various disciplines. They all have access to a language resource centre. Besides, a recently created Linguistic Resources Development Service (PERL)² aims at providing teachers and students resources based on new technologies, including blended and online programmes. The Applied Languages Department offers four MA, three of which are based on apprenticeships in the industry. They focus respectively on Languages for Specific Purposes and Translation (LSPT), technical writing, intercultural communication, and digital culture management. Another MA aims at training future researchers in translation and corpus studies of English for specific purposes. One shared objective of these MA's is training future language service providers in various professional contexts. Another shared feature is the importance given to a functional approach to languages, based on translation studies, corpus studies, and terminology (Baker, 1996; Bordet, 2017). Thus, the LSPT MA includes part-time training in vocational settings as well as an individual applied research project. This project implies the choice of a highly specialised field in which the translation and terminology project is set. The field

2. Pôle d'Élaboration de Ressources Linguistiques: <https://perl2018.wixsite.com/perl-uspc>

chosen may be as diverse as agroecology or digital marketing, etc. The students explore a hitherto unknown field, interrogating a bilingual corpus which they compile themselves in the source and target language and carry out a contrastive study of its terminology and phraseology (Aston, 1999; Kübler, 2011; Zanettin, 1998), with the support of one or several experts from the field (Bordet, 2013; Froeliger, 2013). The resources collected provide the student with the required contextual knowledge for a satisfactory translation from a functional (Nida, 2001; Nord, 1997) and a pragmatic point of view (Newmark, 1988). The project is supervised by academic staff and translation professionals. While this project was traditionally completed during the second year of an MA, a modification of the curriculum made it possible recently to introduce a preparatory step during the second term of the MA first year. The objective of this first step was an initiation to both the use of information technology for information retrieval and processing as well as to the fundamentals of terminology. One expected positive impact is to reinforce coherence between the first and the second year of the programme, while making the workload lighter for the second year students. This paper focuses on the impact the lockdown had on this specific class.

2. Context

For the LSPT second year translation studies students, the two first weeks of March are traditionally dedicated to individual presentations in which the students give a 20-minute talk justifying their work in grasping the fundamental issues in the area chosen and in tackling questions of terminology and translation. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this procedure as on the 14th March the French government announced the beginning of a lockdown (in French ‘confinement’) initially for two weeks. To ensure that there was no gap in the learning process, the decision to take the class online was immediately taken, with the agreement of the academic staff and professionals involved. Moodle platform is the only technological support that was made available by the university. This platform, however, turned out to be excessively restricting since it only catered for transferring written and visual teaching contents so that it could not be used to organise online classes.

The second limitation was that the platform was only available for permanent university staff, thus excluding the many non-university professionals involved in the programme. In the absence of official alternatives, the MA's students and the teaching staff explored what free-access platforms were available. Our exploration was widely based on email exchanges between teachers and also with students, who proved most cooperative and strongly motivated in these exceptional circumstances, despite the economic and housing difficulties some of them had to face. This point will be taken up again later as well as its impact on learning conditions, in the second part.

The aim of this brief introduction has been to describe the context in which we had to proceed to a sudden change so as to adapt to a new situation. This involved a complete reappraisal of our teaching approach. As mentioned above, this paper deals with the impact of this change on the introductory course to the second year MA research project during the second term of the 2019-2020 academic year. However, it will also include new prospects based on our teaching experience during the first term of the 2020-2021 year, with undergraduate classes dedicated to language learning.

2.1. A new programme in a context of 'forced' innovation

As mentioned above, the case discussed here is a specialised translation studies MA class. Introducing the students to information retrieval and terminology since the MA's first year was an innovation following a 2016 modification of the Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate (BMD) system³. While up to 2016, students coming from other MA's could apply to register for the second year of translation studies MA, admission from the first year became compulsory. This implied a reinforced continuity between the two years of the MA. The LSPT MA is in fact a highly selective programme considering that there are many more applications for admission than places available. It is also very intensive. In the second year, students have to adapt to a new professional environment in the industry one week out of two and attend workshops and classes at the university during

3. BMD: a European educational system defined by the Bologna process with a view to standardising education at a European level: <https://www.eua.eu/issues/10:bologna-process.html>

the other week. At the same time, they have to deal with short term deadlines for assignments and long term time management for the research project. The modification to the BMD cycle offered the opportunity to launch the research project with an information retrieval and a terminology class during the second term of the first year, so as to lighten the workload in the second year.

The MA's capacity is 40 students. The students are divided into two groups according to their second foreign language, a high-level command of English and French being a condition required to integrate the programme. The students are selected based on language tests exclusively. Consequently, while a majority of the students come from language studies departments, others may come from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and law fields for instance, as long as they give evidence of an outstanding proficiency in those languages. The age range is usually very wide, since this MA is frequently selected by older students as an opportunity for professional reorientation.

In 2019, the course received, through the French government organisation 'Campus France'⁴, an unusually high number of applications from various countries, in Africa and South America, but also from Italy, Russia, China, and Taiwan. For this reason, a third of the 2019-2020 class came from these countries and this year that was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic was the first year in France for these non-French students.

2.2. The MA first year information retrieval class before COVID-19

During the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, each of the two groups of MA first year students was scheduled to attend six sessions, one week out of two, for two hours, with the same teacher. The objective was to provide the students with the techniques and tools required for the choice of a specialised domain and the collection of a comparable corpus, representative of its discursive production, as a basis for their research project. This implied developing the students' awareness of the diversity and the complexity of

4. <https://www.campusfrance.org/fr>

Languages for Specific Purposes (LSPs) (Swales, 2000), while providing support to each student's research process. Therefore the class was designed to combine theoretical and pragmatic input from the teacher and exchanges between the students as to their ideas and findings. The final result was to be a written report presenting a research proposal and including a description of the domain, a commented sample of the future corpus, and a selection of texts submitted for translation. These written reports were to be presented during an individual oral exam. The final objective was not only to provide the students with the required techniques but also to make sure that each of them was able to persuade the supervisors of their final reports of the relevance of their research proposal at the end of the first year. Therefore the first year report was intended as both a feasibility study and a communication document.

2.3. Working out online teaching strategy

When the lockdown was announced by the French government on 14th March 2020, each of the two LSPT groups had attended only two face-to-face sessions, one every two weeks. The class had started with students' pair work about their ideas for their research project. This led to a whole group brainstorming on possible ideas of specialised domains and topics. The second session focused on a presentation of the resources offered by the online platform of the university library and their application to research on various topics. It was also an opportunity to develop students' awareness of the variety of available discursive genres (Dressen-Hammouda, 2003) for each topic. The instant switch to online classes was made easier by the fact that the students and some teachers had already had to use online learning platforms in December 2019 and January 2020, due to massive public transport strikes in Paris, which made physical access to university very difficult.

Three platforms were successively tested. After the first online session, two of these, namely Blackboard⁵ and Renater⁶, decided to impose restrictions on

5. <https://www.blackboard.com/teaching-learning>

6. National network for research and education: <https://rendez-vous.renater.fr/home/>

the group size, which caused a third switch to Zoom⁷. With Zoom, there was no problem with group size and the access procedure was very easy. However, we could only use it through private connection, which implied that we had to disconnect and reconnect every 45 minutes, which of course resulted in a loss of teaching time. It should be mentioned that this problem was solved for the year 2020-2021, since the university decided on an institutional subscription.

A new teaching strategy was adopted. Online classes were dedicated to input on research methodology, presentation of Information Technology (IT) resources, and techniques for corpus collection: use of the university library catalogue online, Open Archives, Google Scholar, Boolean search in databases, etc. In the homework following the online sessions, each student applied the resources and research techniques presented in class to his/her own project and domain of choice. The teacher then sent individual feedback to each student, sometimes requiring follow up from the student.

Each online session started with feedback to the group, based on examples taken from the students' work. To do so, the screen-sharing function was used alternatively by the teacher and one of the students for group discussion. Students could either take part orally or using the 'conversation' space. The same space could be used to share useful links and resources.

The switch to online teaching did not imply major modifications to the way in which students' work was evaluated. The students' reports were sent by email as well as downloaded on the Moodle platform. They were then presented orally by the student to the teacher in charge of the class and a colleague specialised in corpus studies, thanks to individual Zoom sessions. They were commented on by the teachers, who sent the students a written feedback. Track-change was used for syntax errors, and comments to highlight specifically interesting points to be developed in the project or to require more information. Once the required revisions had been made, the reports were marked and finally sent on by email to potential supervisors, according to the chosen combination of languages, which

7. <https://zoom.us/>

included mostly English to French, but also Italian to French, Chinese to French, and Chinese to English.

2.4. Impact of the switch to exclusive online teaching

Since the course under discussion was new, it is not possible to compare the quality of work delivered by the students with previous realisations. However, considering the aims of the team who initiated this class, it may be said that it totally fulfilled the expectations. It was clear, from the students' reports and the oral exchanges that followed, that students had fully integrated the functional approach of LSP and translation studies (Kübler & Volanschi, 2012), based on corpus observation and contextualisation of translation choices.

Although, as expected, there was still much exploration necessary to master the field they had chosen, the students knew enough about it to be able to select the variety of genres and disciplinary discourses which were representative of this field. For instance, one student chose to deal with ecotechnologies as applied to sustainable building. Using a Venn diagram, she showed that this very specific topic involved a wide range of fields such as urbanism, sustainable development and circular economies, and documents such as patents, regulations, research papers, and product sheets. So students knew where to find adequate resources and were able to justify their relevance for their project. In other words, they were now in a position to start a fruitful cooperation with their supervisors at the beginning of the second year. They were also able to ask field experts the relevant questions.

The online class sessions and the teacher's regular individual feedback combined with informal online meetings strengthened the mutual relationship, especially since informal online meetings gave time for discussions about students' motivations and professional plans. They also made it possible for the students, aged between 22 and 40, to express their stress and worries about the public health emergency and its multiple implications.

Indeed, while the learning outcome was very obviously positive, the students' and teachers' quality of life were strongly impacted by this change of situation.

This was partly due to individual socio-economic factors, such as housing conditions and social environment. Some students found themselves totally isolated and motivation was hard to sustain. It is most likely that the Facebook group traditionally created by the students for informal exchanges was very useful in this case. The students who had just arrived from abroad, mostly Northern Africa, found themselves in a very difficult position since their housing conditions were most precarious, sometimes staying with more or less close family relatives, often sharing a room with the children, with infrequent access to a computer.

One main difficulty was the closing of public and university libraries, which had up to then provided the required conditions for concentration. While a large part of documentary resources was available online, and commented on in class, this did not offset the impossibility to have access to reference books.

More generally, the social and cultural phenomenon commonly referred to as the digital divide was made more visible than ever, mostly in terms of equipment and connection. Some individual oral interviews were moved from Zoom to WhatsApp due to lack of appropriate connection. In the absence of an institutional response, solidarity between students and teachers turned out to be the most effective answer, in the form of individual loans of computers. In one extreme case, a final oral exam was conducted with a student seated in a car, which appeared to have been lent to him for the duration of the exam since he had been sleeping in the streets for several days. Obviously, these difficulties were strongly aggravated by the housing shortage in Paris.

Another negative side-effect was the obvious increase in the teacher's workload due to individual interviews and informal meetings, added to individual weekly feedback.

To sum up, while the quality of teaching and learning does not seem to have been impaired, this comes with the price of students' stress and teachers' workload increased.

3. Additional feedback from current language teaching situations with undergraduate students

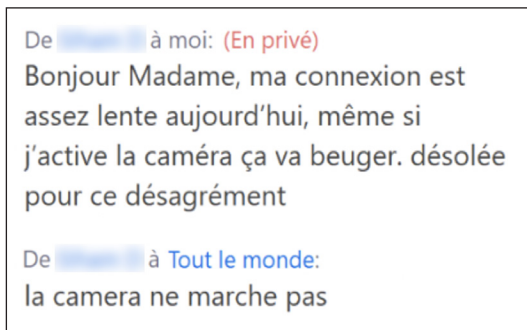
The experience described above was totally improvised and lasted only two months considering the fact that the lockdown was imposed mid-March while university face-to-face classes had to end by the beginning of May. By contrast, the 2020-2021 academic year started in the context of a six month old public health emergency due to COVID-19. Although we were only six weeks into the first semester at the time of writing this chapter, this second experience has brought further insight into the changes due to the COVID-19 crisis; this time with undergraduate language first and second year BA students. Language classes at this level imply a different stance for the teacher. While I was both transmitting information and coaching my MA's students in a new approach of language, language classes with new students set the focus on interactions, with the teacher among students. Another important difference is that first year students not only had no experience of university but also, in this specific case, had not attended high school classes for the last four months of the previous school year. The Baccalauréat examination (equivalent of A-Level in the UK) was based on the first six months of the year. The resulting social isolation of these new students made bonding with these students as a teacher a challenge. The first obstacle was convincing them to switch on their cameras so that I could identify them. Despite my repeated requests and explanations about the importance of visual interactions, the students remained extremely reluctant. In a recent assignment where they were required to take a stance for or against distance learning, several students explained that this reluctance was not due to the refusal to have an interaction with the teacher, but to privacy concerns and other students being able to watch their environment (see [Figure 1](#) below). This reaction seemed to lessen with years and was much easier to overcome with third year students. However, creating interactions in distance learning remained a core issue. In the same assignment, students expressed their frustration of not being able to talk to the teacher and to ask questions after class. The technological substitutes, such as a frequently asked questions space on the Moodle platform or simply email questions to the teacher did not seem to fully meet their needs. However, other informal techniques seemed

to provide a lead in that direction. One striking example is that of a second year student who waited for others to switch off their connection and to end the programme, to lunge forward to say “if you still have time, I do have a question”. As a result, I now wait a few seconds before clicking on the button to end the class. Beyond the anecdote, this little story sheds light on the importance of managing time instead of space, switching to new signals.

It should also be mentioned that the digital divide which was made visible among MA students was even more visible among BA students, not only in terms of equipment and connection, but also due to lack of skills in handling digital communication.

Screen capture below provides an illustration of students’ reactions when required to switch on their camera.

Figure 1. Digital divide: students’ apologies for not switching on their camera



4. Conclusion

The conditions of an emergency and resulting improvisation encountered have led to rapid changes but also to an increased obligation to assess students’ needs in this new context. Distance teaching and learning does not only impact the way content is presented but the whole relational context. It highlights the role of

group socialisation in the learning process and gives evidence of the importance of informal exchanges before and after class.

4.1. Opportunities

Learning platforms also open up new teaching possibilities, thanks to the array of technological functions they offer. One example is the possibility of sharing the screen with the students. From a practical point of view, this function solves the irritating problem of teaching in large classrooms where the students sitting in the back rows can hardly see the screen. It also makes it much easier for the teacher to improvise and to decide to share resources according to students' emerging difficulties or demands. More importantly, it allows the students themselves to show their own screen, comment their work, and share criticisms and suggestions with the group. The chat function makes it possible to share references and online links or to contact the teacher without having to speak up. The Zoom 'poll launching' function is used by some teachers to get anonymous feedback from students as to the points they have not understood or even their decreasing or increasing level of motivation! New tools create new opportunities and new modes of communication, even though many problems remain to be explored, one of the main issues being the organisation of exams and more generally techniques of knowledge validation of learning outcome.

Beyond these practical issues, this situation of 'forced' innovation paves the way for a collective reflection on the objectives of university education and its various forms. Teaching and learning needs must be assessed, making clear the distinction, and complementarity between knowledge transfer, academic socialisation, and acquisition of individual skills. For instance, this recent experience shows that MA students are more likely to benefit from online knowledge transfer, while BA students obviously need to integrate the academic community through interactions with peers and teachers so as to develop new communication skills. Therefore, this unprecedented situation imposed on the academic community offers an exceptional opportunity for a critical use of technologies, where needs' assessment comes first.

4.2. Risks and limitations

Of course, these positive outcomes also imply risks. In a context of cost saving and ever-increasing economic liberalisation, there is a strong temptation to turn course content into prepacked products which can be marketed for various audiences (cf. [Schmied, 2021](#)). We might even see the emergence of a distinction between ‘designers’ and ‘disseminators’, the teachers finding themselves in charge of sharing knowledge that has been imposed on them. This type of information broking is already familiar to the academic world, where researchers have lost control of their own publications, to the benefit of powerful electronic publishers ([Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015](#)). In countries like France, imposed distance learning might also provide a tempting opportunity to make up for the current lack of investment in student housing, university libraries, and other such facilities. Finally, these risks and these opportunities both contribute to providing evidence for the urgent need for the international academic community to share these new experiences and confront them with the diversity of the students’ educational needs.

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