

Does Distance Interpreting Training Work?—A Survey to examine students' preference for face-to-face versus distance interpreting classes in Beijing International Studies University

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Abstract: This study examined students' satisfaction with distance interpreting classes, which was the sole class format among university students in Beijing during the outbreak of COVID-19. A questionnaire was used to examine students' preference between face-to-face (F2F) and distance interpreting classes among interpreting students in Beijing International Studies University, and the correlating factors contributing to their preference. The results showed that the majority of students favored F2F classes as a more effective format for interpreting training. Several variables, including the online delivery system, learning environment, and in-class exercises could affect learning effects of distance classes. This study suggested that with a professional delivery system, soundproof learning environment, and more in-class exercises, better learning effects could be achieved. Results derived from this study provided the guidelines for the further improvement in the practice of distance interpreting training.

Keywords: interpreting training, face-to-face classes, distance classes, students' preference, correlating factors

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of technology, online instruction has become an inevitable trend to supplement face-to-face (F2F) courses, and is well embraced by both lecturers and students in university. Hybrid or blended classes have been the most commonly adopted mode of teaching, for which online instruments are used as an assistance to facilitate F2F classes. In this study, F2F classes refer to both F2F classes per se and hybrid classes. Distance classes are those delivered wholly online, where training is delivered synchronously for both lecturers and students without any form of F2F contact. With the prevalence of distance learning in universities worldwide, a lot of research has been done to compare the effectiveness of F2F and distance teaching modes, and to examine the strengths and drawbacks inherited in each mode. However, due to the different natures and features within different disciplines, those studies have contradictory results.

Recent reviews of literature on distance training have come to two general conclusions. First, students in distance classes are found to achieve similar class quality and learning effects as they are in F2F classes. Driscoll and Jicha (2012) evaluated student performance and satisfaction across distance and F2F settings. They found that when distance courses are considered to be pedagogically reasonable, there is no significant difference in student satisfaction and performance. Another study compared traditional and online courses in introductory special education. The findings indicated that there was no significant difference in student performance and knowledge acquisition (Steinweg, Davis, & Thomson, 2005). The other category of literature argues that though there's no significant difference in the two learning formats, F2F classes are more favored among students due to more student participation. One study suggested that online classes helped to improve student satisfaction and participation in class, but had no positive effect on learning in composition class (Finley, Desmet, & Evans, 2004). In the field of psychology, although students' learning effects did not much vary, F2F class format was still more preferred by students because of the longer attention time paid in a F2F classroom (Scott and Jensen, 2011). On sociology courses, Bergstrand and Savage (2013) found that students acquired less knowledge from online courses, and F2F classroom were treated with more respect and attention.

The above studies suggest that distance learning could achieve similar learning effects with F2F mode for certain courses, but failed to meet students' expectations in terms of attention time, exercise amount, and effective interaction with other courses. In the field of interpreting studies, a large number of studies have been carried out examining the learning effects of web-based training classes or blended classes on students.

A large amount of research have been conducted into computer-assisted interpreting training, in particular, into blended classes, where F2F contact still plays a primary role in teaching. Few studies were designed to find out the effectiveness of distance classes with no F2F communication included in any form. Leong Ko (2006) from the University of Queensland compared the cost and performance of three telecommunication modes, namely teleconferencing, local network and internet video conferencing. The findings were that each mode of distance classes has its advantages and disadvantages; and more effort has to be made to render distance teaching comparable to the F2F format. The difficulties hindering the practice of distance interpreting training lie in its interactive nature. Therefore, whether the interaction of on-campus interpreting classes and student satisfaction can be realized in distance classes are of great research significance in the internet era.

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, which not only hindered the basic function of society, but also fundamentally changed the format of university teaching. Due to the compulsory social distance requirements, students and lecturers were not allowed to operate on-campus F2F classes. Thus, distance classes have become the one and only option for university education. For students and lecturers of Interpretation and Translation School in Beijing International Studies University (BISU), the practice of distance learning was unprecedented. The total transformation of training format provides the author with a valuable opportunity to study students' preference of learning formats and the related determining factors. So far, BISU interpreting classes have normally been of small size, with the number of students ranging from single digits to two dozen. If distance interpreting training can be proved to be practical in operation and effectiveness, then distance interpreting classes can be widely promoted to meet a large group of learners' expectations. If not, what aspects of distance interpreting classes can be improved is also worthy of discussion. This paper will study whether students prefer distance or F2F interpreting classes, and the factors correlating to their preference.

2. Research Background

In BISU, F2F interpreting classes are normally conducted in language laboratories or professional interpreting classrooms, where the lecturer and each student is equipped with an interpreter console, including a headphone, a microphone and a computer to ensure good audio and visual quality. Additionally, with the assistance of the New Class system, the lecturers are able to monitor, record and replay the whole class interpreting output. Therefore, further analysis can be conducted and feedback can be provided to specific students in good time. Unlike other courses, interpreting modules are highly interactive, and communicative, requiring clear and synchronous sound effects. Due to the unique nature of interpreting training, video and audio display, students' exercises, exercise monitoring, and providing feedback are all indispensable components in a class.

This study examined the distance classes conducted among postgraduates in the second semester of 2019-2020 academic year. During the examined period of 17 weeks, lecturers and students organized distance classes from their homes through various network devices, including computers, laptops, tablets, or mobile phones. Students were required to install different online learning platforms due to the lecturers' preferences. These included: Dingding, Tencent, CC Talk, and Rain Classroom. In this study, interpreting classes were limited to consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting offered to postgraduate students.

3. Method

The first 17 weeks of interpreting studies for postgraduates, in the first semester of 2019-2020, had been in the F2F learning format, i.e. up until the COVID-19 pandemic. The same group of students then had a further 17 weeks of distance interpreting classes in the second semester of 2019-2020. During the two examined periods, the courses and the correspondent lecturers remained consistent. In the last week of the examined semester, a questionnaire was disseminated to the postgraduate students in three classes. To stimulate the response, multiple reminder messages from the author were sent to

students to stress the importance of the study, and the survey was left open for 14 days. The number of examined subjects totaled 75, among which 71 students completed the questionnaire effectively, making the response rate 94.6%.

The questionnaire, consisting of 20 questions regarding the comparison between distance and F2F interpreting classes, required approximately ten minutes to complete. The questionnaire surveyed students' preferences for class formats and the correlating factors of their preferences. The 20 questions were mostly in the form of Likert scale (16), 3 were single choice and 3 were multiple choice. Questions in the questionnaire were designed based on the features and constraints of distance learning. A few distance conferences were held during the examined semester to better understand the issues most concerning students about distance learning. Therefore, more accurate correlating factors could be incorporated in the questionnaire. Questions concerning learning environment, learning systems, Internet connection, training for the learning platform, exercise length and forms were proposed to investigate the student preference correlations (see the appendix of the survey).

4. Results and Analysis

Firstly, the author examined students' satisfaction level with distance learning for interpreting training. The data showed that 57.3% students were satisfied with the learning effects achieved online, indicating however, that almost half of students held doubts about the format of distance learning. In terms of the differences between F2F and distance classes, 56.3% students believed that the differences were significant. When asked which learning format they would prefer, if both formats were available, 83.8% students favored F2F over distance classes. Based on the author's teaching experience and the feedback received from distance learning, the author inferred several predictable variables to investigate the relationship between students' preferences and their correlating factors. The results suggested that the online delivery system, learning environment, as well as in-class exercises, are the three most significant factors influencing students' preferences.

4.1 Online delivery system

Students were asked which delivery systems were used for the distance classes that they had attended; and selected the one they felt to be the most suitable. Opinion was divided among the respondents between the four online delivery systems: Dingding, Tencent, CC Talk, and Rain Classroom. 77% of students believed that a professional delivery system should be designed exclusively for interpreting training. Additionally, the majority of students (87%) were unable to operate the online delivery system well. However, the same percentage still insisted that necessary training of delivery system is indispensable prior to classes taking place.

4.2 Learning environment

Although 94% of students were confident that their local network could support the smooth running of distance classes, 12% of students were dissatisfied with the audio quality of exercise materials. 23% of students pointed out that noises could occasionally be heard from the lecturer's online classroom. Also, 30% of students admitted that learning at home failed to guarantee a noise-free learning environment, which distracted students' concentration from time to time. The goal of achieving good vocal quality, a stable local network, enabling transmission of quality exercise materials, and a noise-free learning environment are equally important - for both lecturers and students.

4.3 In-class exercise

Students were asked how in-class distance interpreting exercises were organized and their effectiveness compared with F2F classes. Almost half of students (45%) believed that the same amount of interpreting exercise could be conducted online. However, when discussing exercise forms, individual interpreting exercise accounted for 70% of exercise in total. Only 28% of students received group exercise practice during distance classes, and 62% of students insisted that distance exercise was less effective than F2F exercise.

At the end of the questionnaire, students were asked about the drawbacks and merits inherited in distance classes and its feasibility in practice. 45% students pointed out that learning online failed to provide an opportunity for them to exercise with a partner. Additionally, 68% students believed that

staring at a screen made it more difficult to concentrate (52%), and the sense of communication was compromised in this process (68%). Furthermore, 65% of students felt that the learning environment at home failed to give students a sense of interpreting atmosphere. While noting the above, distance learning was favored by students in certain aspects. The results showed that 73% students were less easily distracted by other students. Also, 67% students felt less nervous and anxious in distance classes. Thus, distance learning does exert positive influences on students' stress management. Last but not least, students were asked about the difficulty in putting distance interpreting training into practice. Only 7% of students believed that distance interpreting was a more convenient format for training when compared with F2F classes. Among the reasons for this may be the rapid and stable network, and a relatively quiet environment required for distance interpreting classes.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to examine students' preference of interpreting class format, and factors that correlate with their preference. The data showed that 57.7% students were satisfied with distance learning mode when it was the one and only option. However, when distance and F2F interpreting classes are both available, 81.7% students insisted that more learning effects could be achieved through F2F classes. Overall, the majority of students were able to adapt to distance learning during the quarantine period. However, F2F training is still regarded as the more effective format for interpreting courses.

Regarding the disadvantages in distance learning, the inconvenience of online delivery system, noisy learning environment, and inadequate in-class exercise are positively correlated. The existing online delivery systems (mostly online conference systems) failed to provide suitable functions for interpreting classes. Thus, a professional delivery system, tailored exclusively for interpreting training is urgently needed. Further reasons lie behind the screen. It is believed that online classes failed to provide the sense of communication, concentration, and exercise partners to facilitate effective interpreting exercises.

The results also exposed the constraints and limitations in distance interpreting training. To improve the practice and performance of distance interpreting three suggestions are proposed. Primarily, full training for use of the online delivery system should be provided for faculty members and students. Unlike other distance courses, interpreting training requires more complicated and timely operations of the delivery system. Students and lecturers need to be well familiarized with the system so that the lecturers' online instructions can be executed in good time in order that fewer technical problems occur during classes. Moreover, a professional delivery system for interpreting training is urgently needed. Currently, existing online systems are primarily designed for online business conferences. These systems fail to meet the demands for interpreting training, especially simultaneous interpreting. More functions need to be installed in the system, which can enable various exercise forms, interpreting monitoring and replay. What's more, lecturers organizing distance classes need to innovate and deliver various forms of interpreting exercise that provide a full sense of communication through the screen.

This research was subjected to several limitations. Firstly, the findings represent only a single researched case during the COVID-19 quarantine period. Thus, student psychological stress affected by COVID and quarantine was not considered, which may well have had a significant impact on the survey results. The study was further limited by the indiscriminate survey of interpreting modules. Consecutive and simultaneous interpreting modules were not separately studied, which might lead to too general results of the survey.

Despite the limitations of this study, the results suggest some interesting areas for further research. In this survey, students were asked about the most favorable system for interpreting training, which varied among students. This result illustrated the advantages and disadvantages within each delivery system. In the future, research concerning the comparison among different delivery systems for a certain course is worth research. Secondly, the in-class exercise was discussed in this study. Without F2F contact, the forms of in-class activities and exercises are quite limited by the screen. Consequently, the class design in distance format is a practical area to research.

Overall, the study showed that distance interpreting training was less favored by students. To meet student expectation, many aspects of distance interpreting classes will need to be improved, including the modification of the online delivery systems, training of online operations, and better interaction and communication in class. Distance interpreting training, though not the latest trend, is still rarely put into practice in universities. Due to the interactive nature of interpreting, the constraints of distance classes

are not easy to overcome technically and pedagogically. However, in the face of the pandemic, distance interpreting training still proved to be feasible in practice and served as an alternative for F2F training. In the Internet era, the trend of distance learning is inevitable, as are efforts to narrow the gap between F2F and distance formats. To achieve this goal, much more efforts is needed by software designers, school of interpreting studies, and interpreting lecturers.

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Appendix

Beijing International Studies University Course Evaluation Survey on Distance Interpreting Class

Students surveyed: The second year postgraduate students from the school of translation and interpretation

The number of surveyed students: 71

Questions (%)	Strongly agree 5	Agree 4	True some of the time 3	Disagree 2	Strongly disagree 1
Students' General Attitude towards Distance Interpreting Classes					
1. The learning effects of distance interpreting course were satisfactory.	17 (23.94%)	24 (33.8%)	24 (33.8%)	4 (5.63%)	2 (2.86%)
2. The differences between distance interpreting classes and F2F classes were significant.	40 (56.34%)	24 (33.8%)	7 (9.86%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3. If both distance and F2F classes were available, which format would you choose? (Single answer)	Distance 8 (11.27%)	F2F 58 (81.69%)		Either is ok. 5 (7.04%)	
The Operation of Distance Delivery System					
4. The operation of delivery system could affect the class quality.	26 (36.62%)	28 (39.44%)	13 (18.31%)	4 (5.63%)	0 (0%)
5. The lecturers were familiar with the delivery system, and could operate it very well.	9 (12.68%)	40 (56.34%)	17 (23.94%)	2 (2.82%)	3 (4.23%)
6. All students could operate the delivery system well when interacting with the classes.	20 (28.17%)	42 (59.15%)	7 (9.86%)	2 (2.82%)	0 (0%)
7. Your school had provided effective training session of delivery system prior to the class. (Single choice)	Yes. 12 (16.9%)		No. 59 (83.1%)		
8. It was necessary for school and lecturers to provide a training session on delivery system operation provided by your school.	34 (47.89%)	19 (26.76%)	15 (21.13%)	3 (4.23%)	0 (0%)
9. It was necessary to design a professional delivery system for distance interpreting training.	50 (70.42)	5 (7.04%)	2 (2.82%)	14 (19.72%)	0 (0%)
10. Which delivery system was the most convenient one for interpreting classes? (Single choice)	Tencent 29 (40.85%)	Dingding 15 (21.13%)	CC Talk 1 (1.4%)	Rain Classroom 2 (2.82%)	Any system 24 (33.8%)
Interpreting Exercise in Distance Classes					
11. The audio and video quality of exercise material was vital for your interpreting performance.	14 (56.34%)	24 (33.8%)	5 (7.04%)	2 (2.82%)	0 (0%)
12. Compared with F2F classes, distance classes could offer the same amount or even more exercise opportunities for students.	7 (9.86%)	30 (42.25%)	2 (2.82%)	20 (28.17%)	12 (16.9%)
13. The interpreting exercise in distance classes failed to reach similar effectiveness in F2F classes.	24 (33.8%)	20 (28.17%)	22 (30.99%)	4 (5.63%)	1 (1.41%)
14. In which form was your interpreting exercise conducted in distance classes? (Multiple choice)	Individual exercise 43 (60.56%)	Group exercise 20 (28.17%)	After-class exercise 26 (36.62%)	Single student demonstration 54 (76.06%)	
Learning Environment of Distance Interpreting Classes					
15. The learning environment of both lecturers and students could affect your learning effects significantly.	33 (46.48%)	34 (47.89%)	4 (5.63%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
16. The network at your home could meet the demands for interpreting classes.	50 (70.42%)	17 (23.94%)	2 (2.82%)	2 (2.82%)	0 (0%)
17. The lecturers' teaching environment was quiet enough, and no noise could be heard through classes.	34 (47.88%)	20 (28.1%)	2 (2.81%)	15 (21.13%)	0 (0%)
The Overall Evaluation of Distance Interpreting Classes					
18. What are the major drawbacks within distance interpreting classes? (Multiple choice)	Lacking interpreting atmosphere 46 (64.79%)	Noisy Learning environment 22 (30.99%)	Lacking sense of communication 48 (67.61%)	Lacking exercise partner 32 (45.07%)	Difficult to concentrate 37 (52.11%)
19. What are the advantages within distance interpreting classes? (Multiple choice)	Easy to concentrate 9 (12.68%)	Less anxious 25 (67.61%)	Less nervous 48 (35.21%)	Less distraction 52 (73.24%)	Saving time 2 (2.82%)
20. Compared with F2F interpreting classes, distance classes were difficult to organize in practice.	9 (12.68%)	31 (43.66%)	26 (36.62%)	3 (4.23%)	2 (2.82%)