

## 92. Distance learning in interpreter training: A survey on student perspective

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the student perspective in interpreter training by distance learning mode at a state university in Turkey during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey consisting of three sections was conducted. Participants were junior and senior students enrolled in Translation and Interpreting undergraduate program and who had taken online interpreting classes. The results show that while some advantages are favored by students such as watching recorded classes later, most students do not like attending online interpreting classes because they find these classes 'boring', harder to focus on and do not think these classes help their overall interpreting classes. Although technical problems are mostly eliminated with the help of advancements in communication and information technologies, some inherent problems surrounding distance learning such as attention deficiency remain intact. Following a brief literature review, the present paper provides the student perspective on distance learning in interpreter training and based on the findings, puts forth ways for further research.

**Keywords:** Interpreter training, distance learning, online survey

### Sözlü çeviri eğitiminde uzaktan öğrenme: Bir öğrenci anketi

### Öz

Bu çalışma, COVID-19 salgını sırasında Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde uzaktan eğitim modıyla tercüman eğitiminde öğrenci bakış açısını keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla üç bölümden oluşan çevrimiçi bir anket yapılmıştır. Katılımcılar Mütercim-Tercümanlık lisans programına kayıtlı ve çevrimiçi sözlü çeviri dersleri almış üçüncü ve son sınıf öğrencileridir. Sonuçlar, öğrenciler kayıtlı dersleri daha sonra izlemek gibi avantajları sevdigini belirtse bile, çoğu öğrencinin bu dersleri 'sıkıcı' bulduklarını ve bu derslere odaklanmakta zorlandıklarını göstermiştir. Bu sebeple, bu derslerin genel anlamda sözlü çeviriye yardımcı olmadığını düşünen öğrenciler çevrimiçi sözlü çeviri derslerine katılmaktan hoşlanmadıklarını belirttiler. Teknik sorunlar, iletişim ve bilgi teknolojilerindeki gelişmelerin yardımıyla büyük ölçüde ortadan kaldırılsa da, dikkat eksikliği gibi uzaktan öğrenmede bulunan bazı genel sorunlar bu derslerde de mevcuttur. Kısa bir literatür taramasının ardından, bu makale, öğrencilerin sözlü çeviri eğitiminde uzaktan öğrenmeye ilişkin bakış açısını sunmaktadır. Buna ek olarak ortaya çıkan veriler dahilinde yeni araştırma imkanlarını ortaya koymaktadır.

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** sözlü çeviri eğitimi, uzaktan öğrenme, çevrimiçi anket

## 1. Introduction

This paper is an initial attempt to explore distance learning in interpreter training. This study, designed as a descriptive/ exploratory study with a survey-based approach, intends to provide - as the title suggests - the student perspective with respect to issues going from the general, such as the effects of Covid-19, to the specific, like the current methods in interpreter training under the new circumstances. The aim is to present and discuss the preliminary findings of the survey applied to the junior and senior students at the Department of Translation and Interpreting in a state university in Turkey.

By the 30th of January, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, which is WHO's highest alarm. This declaration was followed by a series of measures at the national and international level such as limitations in cross-border travels, lockdowns, and various bans to social life. When it comes to education, each country developed their own ways of coping with the pandemic. As face-to-face education at university level requires a high level of mobility between cities and unavoidable interaction among the students, the academic and administrative personnel, Turkey was among the first to start distance learning in university education.

## 2. Interpreter training and distance learning

Although there are several discussions on the meaning of distance learning and what it applies to, this paper takes as a basis the following description put forward by Leong Ko in 2006 (69):

"Distance education is a form of non-conventional education that provides educational programs for students without requiring them to be present at educational institutions (or their branches) for any purpose. A distance education program might involve the physical presence of a teacher for tutoring or consultation, but this must not constitute an indispensable part of the program, nor must students' attendance at tutoring or consulting sessions be a prerequisite for program completion."

In the same article, Ko lays some theoretical foundations for interpreter training in a distance learning environment. Accordingly, there are four 'fundamental reasons' for distance learning, which are: 1) Educational needs. 2) Development of telecommunication technologies. 3) Financial considerations. 4) New market demands such as telephone interpreting. These categories point to the situation when the initial forms of distance learning within an interpreter training program started emerging. Ko suggests that the educational needs derive from a number of factors including students who have full-time jobs (hence no time for an on-campus program) and having graduates in concentrated areas where interpreting departments are located. While such concerns might still be relevant in 2021, the main drive for the shift to distance learning in interpreter training was the fact that undergraduate students have to continue their education in a safe way healthwise. As to the emergence of telecommunication technologies, interpreting is undoubtedly a profession not only born out of sheer human will but with the telecommunication technologies which the profession depends on to this day. While Ko argues that in financial terms, distance learning can remove the burden of high costs for higher education, in our example, there are no tuition fees for students enrolled in public universities in Turkey. Another point Ko makes is the adaptation of new trends in interpreting into the interpreting departments, for which he gives telephone interpreting as an example.

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Ko concludes that even though there are many options for interpreter training by distance mode, every one of them comes with ‘advantages and disadvantages’ (2006, 91). Most options that the paper brings up as means for distance learning, such as telephones, local area networks (LANs) and the like are not relevant today as current communication technologies and resources are far better than they were in the 2000s. However, the challenging side effects of communication technologies on human psychology, in this case, on students, are far from being eliminated, for which the mere existence of this paper could be counted as evidence. A striking example is the ‘attention span’ while using the telephone as Ko notes. Even though, as Ko predicted (2006, 92), technologies developed ‘rapidly’ since then, the attention span of a distance learner still remains a problem especially when there is little interaction between the lecturer and the student. For example, a paper published in 2017 argues that interactivity in an online class might increase the attention span of students (Geri et al., 224) One of the important takeaways from Ko’s 2006 paper that lies on the part of the lecturer is worth mentioning -even though this paper deals with the student perspective-, the lecturer has to go through all recording homework assignments creating a burden on their behalf.

In another paper from 2008, Ko discusses the results of an empirical study in which he compares two groups of students, one receiving on-campus training and the other getting off-campus training via telephone by distance mode. To compare the results, Ko applies an ‘Interpreter test’ from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (2008, 818). The training course for both groups is the same and includes ‘dialogue interpreting, consecutive interpreting and sight translation’. The paper concludes that there is no comparable difference between the two groups, clearing the way for the feasibility of teaching interpreting by distance mode. One of the core constraints of this experiment was that the course was conducted via telephone, and the lecturer had to call every student separately.

As Ko predicts that training by distance mode will become more available as technology advances (2008, 838), there are several points that have not become as advanced as the means that empower today’s online interpreting training platforms. One of these problems is the connection. Even though connection speeds are higher than ever, connection problems are still part of the picture in 2021. One of the main problems is the change of the physical setting, from that of a classroom to a home environment. As Ko explains in the following excerpt, the outside noises are a natural companion to distance learning environments even today (2008, 826):

“Noise from the former source includes children crying, and people talking, watching TV, washing dishes, or moving furniture.”

Another point Ko investigates is the ‘concentration span’. He concludes that the more time a student spends time in a distance learning environment, the more their concentration span will be. While this conclusion is decisive, there are other factors that play out with the distance learning program after the onset of the pandemic such as extra stress due to a family member catching the disease.

While Ko’s papers deal with a very specific topic, another paper from Turkey discusses the use of distance learning in order to teach interpreting. Published in 2014, Mine Güven’s paper refers to the lack of medical interpreters in Turkey despite there being a demand for their services. In solving this problem, Güven suggests a hybrid training program consisting of face-to-face training and distance learning, which is much more relevant under the present conditions that make distance learning a necessity rather than a choice.

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It should be noted that these papers mention both the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning in interpreter training. Although they provide insights into the topic, it is necessary to delve into specific contexts and settings in order to understand what goes on in real-life situations.

### **3. Distance Learning at The Department of Translation and Interpreting**

At this point, it might be useful to briefly give information on distance learning at the department of translation and interpreting. With the decision of the university rectorate, distance learning started throughout the university as of March 2020. The following points would summarize the nature of interpreting classes that are taught online:

- The essential means of communication is carried out through Sakai, an open source distance learning software, of which the University has its own version.
- Every student has their own log-in credentials for the service, which are provided by the university.
- Every student has to provide their own computer and internet connection as the campus is closed due to the pandemic.
- Students are assigned to different classes of which they have a weekly schedule. Students log into their accounts and go to the live class section for a certain class scheduled for that day and time.
- All classes are recorded and can be accessed any time.
- Examinations are conducted either live on Sakai or - mostly - as assignments given in advance.

Distance learning has been conducted for two academic terms at the university and department; 2019-2020 spring term and 2020-2021 fall term. Based on the experience of teaching simultaneous interpreting for a term, it might be said that finding new solutions has been a necessity in practice. Simultaneous interpreting is offered for two terms to senior students who passed the interpreting aptitude test - this year 7 students. Normally, the course was conducted through practicing interpreting in sound-proof booths. This term the course was conducted over Sakai like all other courses. The majority of the course - ten weeks out of fourteen weeks - was based on listening to and assessing the simultaneous interpreting performance of students who recorded their interpretations in advance, making preparations for the videos assigned to them each week. At the first half of the term, the students were allowed to listen to the speech for once before interpreting and to work on the terminology, whereas afterwards they were asked to interpret it the first time they listened to it. During the remaining four weeks, the students interpreted the instructor's speech simultaneously, recording their performance and sharing it afterwards. Live interpreting and receiving feedback right after performing was not a possibility since the instructor could not listen to student performances synchronously as it would interfere with other students' performances. Although this can be mentioned as a drawback, still the simultaneous interpreting classes conducted as described have been quite efficient as discussed further below.

Although the perspective of instructors is not within the scope of the present paper, a few comments based on the author's experience as an instructor might be useful to provide an insight complementary to the student perspective. The flexibility of distance learning is obviously valid for both parties, for instance, changing the time and content of courses is more convenient than in face-to-face education. However, in the same line as Ko's paper (2006), the lecturer has to listen to and assess all recordings of students every week. This creates an extra burden for the instructor. Also, the fact that interpreting

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exams cannot be made live online results in more recordings of interpretation to go through. It is true that the instructors can assess them according to their own schedule, however this does not change the fact that all recorded material - classwork, homework, and exams - needs to be checked and graded. It is important to note that, however, these observations reflect only the situation as to simultaneous and dialogue interpreting classes offered by the author in 2020-2021 Fall Term, and input is required for classes like consecutive interpreting, which might have totally different implications as synchronicity is not a must in consecutive; i.e., practice could well be made live online and assessed right after the actual interpreting performance.

All in all, awareness regarding the upsides and downsides of distance learning is to be gained only through practice, and interpreting is no exception in that sense. It is true that the merits of distance learning deserve consideration for an improved interpreting curriculum not limited to but likely to contain elements of distance learning. Thus, the survey analyzed below is hoped to contribute to the existing knowledge on distance learning in interpreting from the students' perspective.

#### **4. The Survey**

##### **4.1. Method**

An online survey was conducted over a period of two weeks. The survey consists of four sections containing linear, multiple choice, yes-no and write-in questions. The first section titled "General Information" has questions on the participant's gender, grade and the classes they have taken. The second section embodies linear questions regarding the effects of the pandemic on the participant and immediate family. This section also asks the participant whether they have basic equipment and resources needed for distance learning, e.g. a quiet place, a reliable internet connection, etc. The third section titled "Interpreting classes in a distance learning environment" features multiple choice and linear questions on the students' general attitude towards distance learning with respect to interpreting. The last section has two write-in questions regarding the students' expectations from the future.

No personal data such as e-mail addresses and names were collected considering that the students can be more comfortable and candid with their answers when anonymity is ensured. The results from the last section were by and large satisfying for the authors as a result of this approach.

##### **4.2. Participants**

A total number of 36 undergraduates at the Department of Translation and Interpreting took part in this survey. 11 of students who completed the survey were male while 25 were females. 7 junior year respondents were the minority as 29 participants were in their senior year. As more senior students took part in the survey, it would go without saying that the study has a broader representation of this group of students.

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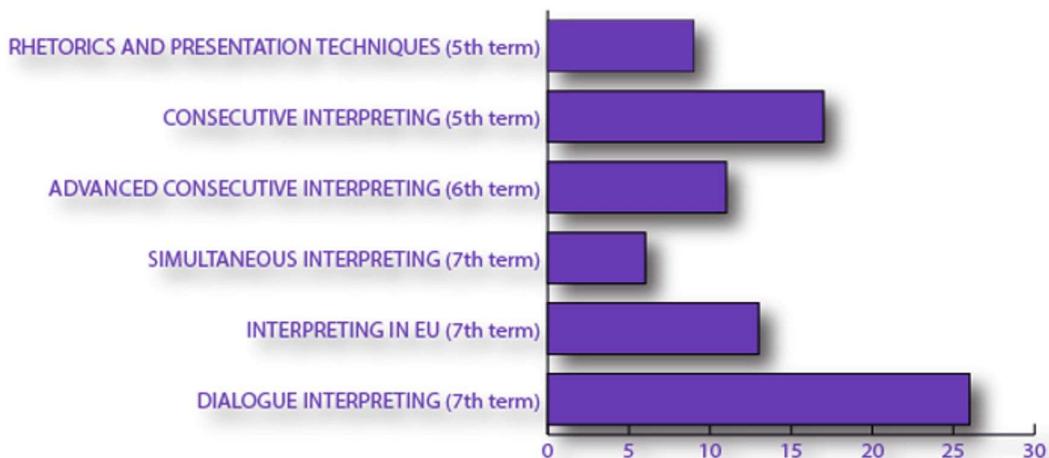
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## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. General information

The data from the first section were given largely in the previous paragraph above, the gender of participants and their grade. This section also includes which classes participants have taken. As can be seen from the graph, a majority of students, 27, have taken Dialogue Interpreting. The second most common class is Consecutive Interpreting with 17 enrollments. It should be highlighted that survey participants have chosen all the classes that they have taken regardless of whether these classes were conducted online. To put it in perspective, Consecutive Interpreting in the fifth term was conducted only once as an online class and current junior students could have taken the online class and as a result, the 17 enrollments account for both online classes in the 2019-2020 spring term and face-to-face classes in the 2019-2020 Fall term.



The students were more concerned about their family members' health than about their own health. 11 students chose "very much" or "quite" to the question "How concerned are you about your own health?" whereas 32 students were concerned about their family members' health. 21 students reported that they have family members who are at risk of catching Covid-19. And 17 students said that their family members got Covid-19. These numbers show us that students are largely concerned about those close to them and this might distress students affecting their class performance apart from their views on distance learning.

It seems the students are not very fond of distance learning as 19 of them reported that they find participating in online classes 'tiring and boring' and 18 students said that distance learning is not for them. When it comes to physical conditions, only nine students said that they have difficulty in providing the necessary physical conditions for distance learning, such as a quiet place where they connect to online classes. Likewise, only eight students reported that they do not have the necessary equipment (a headset, a reliable computer) for distance learning, which might be interpreted as physical equipment is not a problem for the majority of students. 23 students stated that they find it difficult to concentrate during a live class. Based on these findings, one could come to the conclusion that problems with distance learning on the part of the students are mostly psychological or motivation driven. Most

students have the necessary equipment and conditions for live classes, however they are not willing to participate or even if they do, they find the online classes tiring and boring. This might imply that online classes need to be more interesting and perhaps more interactive in order to encourage distance learning by involving the students.

### **5.2. Effects of the pandemic and physical conditions**

In the first section, a general picture of the pandemic's effect on the students was intended to be drawn. Deducing from this picture, this section builds on the views students hold about online interpreting classes. The section begins with two multiple choice questions in order to probe the make-up of classes that the students take, i.e. the manner the classes are conducted and what interpreting resources are employed. Some of the most commonly used resources are EU Speech Repository, TED Talks, podcasts, and Boğaziçi University Interpreter Training Resources with 24, 16, nine and eight votes respectively. The leading resource for the classes appears to be from the same source of this survey, students: Peer presentations predominate other online resources by 27 votes.

The means of conduct for classes can be categorized in two groups: peer-driven and lecturer-driven. While no class is carried out with one of them in a clear cut fashion, the ratios in which the two means are used might differ for every class. This data might be useful if one is to look at the relationship between interaction in a class and attention span of students or a lecturer's burden in an online class among other possible topics for research purposes. The most common manner in which online interpreting classes are run is by means of 'interpreting and receiving feedback during class' with 23 votes. Role playing comes second with 20 votes. "Interpreting and recording [students'] performance before class, and receiving feedback during class", peer assessments, and interpreting peer presentations come in third, fourth and fifth places with 15, 14, and 10 votes respectively. While online classes seem to be conducted more or less the same way face-to-face classes are run, recording interpreting sessions beforehand seem to be an addition to online classes.

The remaining ten questions in this section are several statements on distance learning with a linear likert scale. The most obvious conclusion is that students simply do not think that distance learning is good for them. 22 students tell us outright that they would prefer face-to-face classes over online classes while only seven oppose it in some form (Another seven students are neutral on the topic). 21 students think face-to-face classes would have improved their interpreting skills far better than online classes while seven of them do not agree, and eight students are neutral. Only 12 students think that distance learning improves their interpreting skills while 21 of them say they oppose this view. 18 students report that distance learning is an obstacle to practice interpreting in their view while only 12 students say that they can 'easily benefit and learn from online interpreting classes'. A majority of students, 22 of them, say that they can use SAKAI, the distance learning platform that Dokuz Eylül uses, with no difficulty with seven students saying that they have difficulty in doing so and another seven being neutral on the topic. Not everything is considered negatively, though. Only two students responded negatively to the statement "The fact that the classes are recorded provides flexibility in attending." while 30 students agreed with the statement and four students stayed neutral. But again, students are divided on the issue of whether recorded classes are as good as watching the live class. 16 students think watching recorded classes is no different than participating in live classes while 13 students do not think so with seven staying neutral.

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### 5.3. Interpreting classes in a distance learning environment

The last section was designed to include two write-in questions to let students share their thoughts on what they expect from the future in terms of their training and what suggestions they might have for distance learning. The answers vary from one word negations - that is no- to several percipient sentences. The students were given full anonymity to encourage candid answers.

Regarding the open-ended questions, many students stated that they hoped to go back to face-to-face education. Some students said they were not happy with too much homework and that too much is expected from them although/because training is online. One comment was on the fact that many students do not attend online classes and that attendance could be encouraged through grading. Some answers were concerning specific classes, e.g. that simultaneous interpreting could be held through interpreting simultaneously, which is closer to a real-life experience. A few comments suggested diversifying the topics dealt with in classes, e.g. in consecutive interpreting. Although most comments revolved around a few central points, some were more specific in content. For example, a student stated that they had Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder and that this disorder made online education very difficult throughout the term. Two other students mentioned anxiety management and improving confidence in students. Issues such as attention, anxiety, and confidence are crucial in interpreter training as interpreting is usually based on a one-time performance. Thus, student comments have been mind opening in the sense that such issues also need to be taken into account when courses are planned.

### 5.4. Discussion and Conclusions

When technical issues are put aside, issues around interpreting by distance mode are still multi-layered. One could inevitably hold these problems to be innate to the interpreting profession and they are only reflected in teaching thereof. When the medium of instruction changes, these problems only become more defined. One such issue recognized by the researchers is interpreting being a stress-inducing profession as shown by previous research (Mackintosh, 2001; Mertens-Hoffman, 2002). Another point that requires our attention is that interpreters-to-be are more stressed out during interpreting (Kurz, 2003). Distance learning, in and of itself, makes the teaching environment more stressful and nerve-wracking adding up to the mentioned factors. The findings that the study at hand has gathered seem to be in line with these yet unpolished trends.

This study reveals that a majority of the students do not want to learn interpreting by distance learning as they find it ‘tiring’ and ‘stressful’, that they do not think it is simply ‘for them’. In other words, the students have reported what concurs with the trends as described above. These are the preliminary findings without any reference to advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. When asked about how they weigh in on interpreting-specific issues by distance learning, again, most students did not favor distance learning for interpreting classes. While technical challenges are still part of the picture despite numerous advancements in information and communication technologies, difficulties that students face today are only more intensified in the new environment. These problems are not immune to solutions that instructors might find. While no detailed solutions can be made without a full-scale analysis of the distance learning environment for interpreter training, the findings from this study may be used for giving recommendations. In finding solutions, all recommendations are best put forward taking the distinct make-up of an interactive and participant-engaged class, in this case, any interpreting class where a continuous interaction between the instructor and students are essential. For more detailed answers to questions such as “How can one make online interpreting classes more accessible?”, “How

can interpreting classes be more interactive?", "How can the students be more motivated to participate in online interpreting classes?", further research for a specific class where both students and instructor perspectives are taken into account might be needed as this study puts forth the student perspective and lacks the instructor perspective. All in all, the present paper describes the current situation regarding distance learning in interpreter training based on case-specific data derived from junior and senior interpreting students and points to the deficiencies in online education in quest for a more efficient learning model in distance mode in interpreting.

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