ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

EDUCATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL STUDIES

DEVELOPING CHINESE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH SYNCHRONOUS DISTANCE INTERPRETING COURSE

E.A. Vasina

Future of higher education is closely connected with degree programs in distance mode as it guarantees security and convenience for overseas students. With Chinese-Russian relations becoming closer, more Chinese students are majoring in translation and interpreting studies at Russian universities while staying in China, so universities should provide well-organized online interpreting classes to build professional interpreting competences.

Purpose. This paper aims to assess possibility of developing basic communication competence of future interpreters from China through all-digital synchronous interpreting course in Russian educational environment.

Methodology. The research was carried out among Master's degree Chinese students and their trainers at Lomonosov Moscow State University, overall number of participants was 58. The set of tools included role playing performance evaluation, open discussion, assessment scales, questionnaires and interviews.

Results. The study showed that communication skills of future Chinese interpreters can be sufficiently developed in synchronous all-digital interpreting course if good educational environment is provided. The results of

the cross-semester examination as well as the questionnaire data confirm that interpreting classes in distance synchronous mode at Moscow State University promote developing of communication competence of Chinese major degree students. For this purpose, pedagogical technologies of the course should include online interactive tasks, role play activities, small-size group rooms, chats via video platforms as well as use of various digital translation technologies. The results of the survey also showed that open online discussions with Russian students have a positive impact on the development of Chinese students' communication skills. The study also reveals that synchronous distance learning is preferable for Chinese students in turbulent periods of world history (epidemics, wars) as it guarantees sustainability and continuality of educational process.

Practical implications. *The results of the study can be applied in optimizing the organization process in professional higher education both in Russia and abroad. Under certain circumstances synchronous distance training can be the only choice for international higher education programs.*

Keywords: *digital interpreting course; Master's degree students from China; communication skills development; turbulent era; continuous educational process*

РАЗВИТИЕ КОММУНИКАТИВНЫХ НАВЫКОВ СТУДЕНТОВ ИЗ КНР НА ЗАНЯТИЯХ ПО УСТНОМУ ПЕРЕВОДУ В СИНХРОННОМ ДИСТАНЦИОННОМ ФОРМАТЕ

Е.А. Васина

Будущее высшего образования тесно связано с дистанционным обучением, поскольку оно гарантирует непрерывность образовательного процесса в турбулентные периоды истории, а также

является удобной формой обучения для иностранных студентов. По мере развития российско-китайских отношений все больше китайских студентов изучают письменный и устный перевод в российских университетах, оставаясь при этом в Китае, поэтому университеты должны обеспечить хорошо организованные онлайн-занятия по устному переводу для формирования профессиональных переводческих компетенций.

Цель данного исследования – оценить возможность формирования базовых коммуникативных компетенций будущих китайских переводчиков на занятиях по устному переводу в синхронном дистанционном формате в российском образовательном пространстве.

Метод или методология проведения работы. В исследовании приняло участие 58 китайских магистрантов и их преподавателей Московского государственного университета имени М.В. Ломоносова. Были использованы такие методы, как наблюдение, анализ, опрос. Эксперимент проводился посредством проведения ролевых игр, открытых дискуссий и аттестаций, а также с помощью анкетирования и интервьюирования.

Результаты. Исследование показало, что при обеспечении благоприятных организационно-педагогических условий коммуникативные навыки будущих китайских переводчиков могут успешно формироваться в синхронном дистанционном формате на занятиях по устному переводу. Результаты промежуточной аттестации, а также данные проведенного анкетирования подтверждают, что занятия по устному переводу в синхронном дистанционном формате могут способствовать развитию коммуникативной компетенции китайских студентов при условии использования в образовательном процессе таких педагогических технологий, как интерактивные онлайн-задания, ролевые игры, работа в мини-группах, общение через платформы для видео конференций; применение различных цифровых переводческих технологий также способствует оптимизации учебного процесса. Результаты опроса показали, что открытые онлайн-дискуссии с участием российских студентов положительно влияют на развитие коммуникативных навыков

китайских студентов. Опрос китайских студентов также продемонстрировал, что занятия в синхронном дистанционном режиме для них предпочтительнее в периоды неопределенности (эпидемии, войны), поскольку данный формат гарантирует как безопасность, так и непрерывность образовательного процесса.

Область применения результатов. Результаты могут быть применены при выстраивании наиболее оптимальных организационно-педагогических условий в российских и зарубежных вузах. При определенных общественно-политических обстоятельствах синхронное дистанционное обучение может также быть единственным выбором для международных программ высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: занятия по устному переводу в дистанционном формате; магистры из КНР; развитие коммуникативных навыков; эпоха турбулентности; непрерывность образовательного процесса

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Introduction

According to UN Resolution 73/25, education plays a very important role in building societies as it develops professional skills of individuals, therefore guaranteeing sustainable development and economic growth to the countries [1].

In recent years the world map of education has been transformed as BRICS and SCO member countries extensively participate in realizing bold initiatives on bringing millions into schools, establishing centers of world-class learning and driving innovation [2]. With rapid development of economy and international contacts in Asia Pacific region, more attention in educational policy of these countries is paid to educating professional interpreters that can provide linguistic services at a very high level.

Interpreting training demands good conditions such as face-to-face learning, resource and tools availability, small-size groups, special equip-

ment. In well-organized educational environment future interpreters successfully develop professional competences and various soft skills, but distance learning can be at the same time either a great opportunity or a big challenge for them.

As old and new social restrictions cause immobility, higher journey costs and other restrains, many foreign students continue overseas university studies in all-digital mode. The post coronavirus era has become a good start for many universities in reconsidering their curricula in accordance with new challenges, significantly accelerating their transition to distance learning [3]. China was the first country to face the new disease and in a very short time it successfully switched higher education programs to online mode.

Leading universities of Russia and China started to launch online educational platforms before pandemic and continued after: Chinese e-learning platforms such as "XuetangX" in 2013 and "iCourse International" in 2020 [4]; the national Open Education platform – a joint project of several Russian universities, etc.

It should also be noted that China excels other countries at university training of future translators and interpreters – since 2010 Chinese universities have launched more than 200 undergraduate programs in translation and interpreting [5]. At the beginning of the pandemic, most of the interpreting training programs in China were adapted to a new format [6] and first researches on the issue were published [7].

Translators Association of China (TAC), China International Communications Group (CICG) since 2019 pandemic year have also launched online educational programs for professional interpreters and interpreters' trainers, successfully ensuring continual professional development on specialized online education platforms for almost four years [8].

Yet undergraduate Chinese students, when they enter Master's degree program at Russian universities, frequently demonstrate poor communication skills due to their traditional modest behavior in the presence of teacher [9] as well as teaching methods designed for large classes (80 students and above) and therefore limited opportunities for conversational practice, which can become a stumbling block in developing interpreting

competences. However, one of the key competences for a professional interpreter is communication competence. E. Voevoda claims that perfect communication skills promote successful language behavior in various oral activities [10]. S. Kalina underlines that communication competence helps an interpreter to process texts in various bilingual and multilingual communication environment [11].

With growing interest of researchers to digitalization of higher education after Covid-19 pandemic in general [12] and developing key competences of interpreters via Internet in particular [13] still one can see a lack of studies on building basic communication competence of Chinese future interpreters in all-digital environment. That is why further research is needed to examine what conditions should be provided in e-learning degree programs to help Chinese students build sufficient communication skills.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to assess possibility of developing communication skills of future interpreters from China in all-digital intercultural educational environment.

To achieve the main goal, we need to meet the following objectives:
– to show advantages and disadvantages of online higher education programs;
– to reveal the results of scientific research into online degree programs for future translators and interpreters;
– to carry out an experimental study among groups of Chinese students concerning the influence of distance interpreting classes on development of interaction and communication skills;
– to evaluate students' results and summarize the findings.

Literature review

Different digital tools and educational platforms such as world-famous MOOCs or China-based Bilibili, Wanmenhaoke, Wanyu, etc. are becoming more popular nowadays as they make educational programs of leading universities accessible to broad public audience [14]. Most of

them, however, offer asynchronous or hybrid format of courses which means self-directed learning of trainees with regular feedbacks from trainers [15].

Pandemic of COVID-19 not only increased the amount of online educational courses and intensified educational export [16], but also promoted the introduction and widespread use of synchronous distance university programs [17].

However, transforming degree programs to all-digital environment has faced new challenges. Z. Khan finds low-quality internet access, increase in workload, low social contacts and feeling of isolation to be the main obstacles for successful e-learning [18]. E. Karadag mentions low student satisfaction rate as one of the main challenges of digital transformation of degree programs in a number of countries and regions [19]. V. Krasnoshchekov and L. Wang research examined the educational online process of Chinese students at overseas universities. They concluded that Chinese students, if they stay in China, meet local governmental restrictions on access to digital platforms and products (such as Youtube, Google products, etc.), and more often find reasons to miss online classes what they rarely allowed themselves offline [20].

At the same time, many researchers agree on advantages of digital transformation in higher education. G. Yokus showed that pandemic led to higher digitalization of campus facilities and also enhanced universities' competitiveness [21]. Zelenova connects improved student performance with optimization of resource base during pandemic period [22]. J. Bayer claims that distance learning is more convenient as it allows choosing place for training, reducing extra financial costs for campus and journey, and makes a wide range of additional resources available at any time [1]. Z. Khan's research examines redesigned assessment strategies and tools such as word clouds, Padlets, gamifying assessments that can make evaluation process more efficient and precise [19].

Language learning in distance mode also introduced new interesting formats and effective methods. S. Altam studied the influence of use of social media during online language lessons and showed that it increased the enthusiasm of students, therefore improving their language skills

[23]. E. Alekseeva described new approaches to e-textbook design and demonstrated efficiency of flipped classroom technique and gamification of e-learning [24]. E. Penalver and J. Laborda examined the tools used for developing oral communication skills in online English language classroom and concluded that group video and audio calls as well as social media and gamified online content can be considered as the best tools to enhance communication skills of students in distance class [25].

Rapid digital turn in higher education programs also provides new individual-level opportunities [26] that make learning process more flexible and individualized. It is of prime importance for Chinese universities, where person-oriented approach is becoming the main trend in higher education system modernization [27].

Interpreting training in distance mode can face the same challenges as other digital university courses – slow internet, low digital experience etc., but there are also some specific technical issues. I. Tivyaeva marks limitation on access to conference interpreting equipment such as Bosch interpretation system as one of the serious obstacles to simultaneous interpreting training in distance mode [28].

At the same time there are many more new opportunities rather than challenges in online transformation of interpreting training for students. Face-to-face video conference communication requires synchronous format with dynamic interaction of students and tutors via digital meeting platforms, that means all participants see each other and interact on a real-time basis. J. Mirek registered increasing students' involvement in class activities, higher rate of participating in webinars, new formats of online interpreting tasks and contests [29]. Various digital tools such as Zoom conference meeting platform, Dingtalk (famous Chinese meeting platform), etc., allow to practice conference interpreting in a new mode such as separate conference rooms.

X. Lu's research carried out at Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2020 shows that interaction and communication among students or between students and tutors in distance learning interpreting course was quite poor, while personalized-oriented learning became stronger [30]. Major's degree Chinese students and their tutors were asked to estimate

the results of simultaneous interpreting online training via interviews and questionnaires covering such points as content, methods, rules, environment of training etc. Only 25 percent of students agreed with such statements as "There is an increase in tutor-to-student interaction", "I understand my classmate better", "My teacher understands me better". On the contrary, 85 percent of tutors strongly agreed that digital tools and distance mode promote more personalized teaching and learning, more flexible methods of communication and can awake keen interest in the subject [30].

Despite the fact that China now witnesses gradual transformation of offline educational programs into online mode, still traditional pedagogical methods and conditions of e-learning in China can't provide enough interactive activities. In this regard, online interpreting courses at Russian universities for Major's degree students from China can become a better choice as one of the advantages they offer is a small class and teacher-to-student, peer-to-peer interaction model of studying which can offer more communication practice.

Materials and methods

The research was carried out at the Higher School of Translation of Lomonosov Moscow State University in 2022 during spring and autumn semesters (including exams in June and December).

The total number of Chinese students in 2022/2023 academic year was 149, all of them approximately of the same age (24-25 y.o.). 89 percent got bachelor's degree in China and 11 percent did bachelor's program at Russian universities. Most of the students before entering the major program in translation studies at MSU studied the Russian language and literature as the main higher education program and only few of them got bachelor's degree in translation and interpreting.

During one semester all of the students had 90-minute lessons twice a week, each lesson was organized via one of the platforms for video conferences (Zoom, DingTalk or Tencent) in synchronous mode. Teaching materials such as internet links, articles, course books, video and audio files, as well as students home tasks, were shared via Chinese chat-based

communication app Wechat. The assessment tasks such as regular class performance evaluation, mid-term assessment and final exam at the end of the second semester were also accomplished in distance mode with the help of digital tools.

As combined qualitative and quantitative methods lead to more comprehensive and objective results [31], both methods were chosen to obtain and analyze the data. Observation method was also one of the basic methods used during two stages of the research. The first stage consisted of regular class observations, role playing activities with following discussions, student home task reports and assessment results; students' performance was evaluated either by teachers in the format of assessment scale or by students themselves during Q&A Session. The second stage included students' and teachers' questionnaires, which were collected and thoroughly analyzed by experts. Likert scale was used to build questionnaires framework.

Research results

In accordance with the curriculum of the Higher School of Translation at MSU, Chinese students at Master's degree program start Chinese-to-Russian/ Russian-to-Chinese interpreting course in the second semester of their two-year educational program after accumulating general knowledge in translation studies. In 2022, we supervised the performance of three groups of Chinese students (n = 52) for eight months using the above methods. The results of our observation, which is divided in two stages, are described below.

– *Stage 1*

Participants (n = 52) attended synchronous interpreting online classes for 32 weeks since February to December 2022 with passing a mid-term exam in June.

Before the course started, we measured students' level of communication skills via oral test activities and tutor-to-student online conversation. The initial findings showed that Chinese students had obtained good knowledge in foreign language (Russian) but still were not ready to use it properly in expressing themselves as orator/ interpreter, or in

keeping up the conversation, as they had poor skills needed for inter-cultural communication.

Every three weeks we organized role playing activities to check the performance of participants either as public speakers or their interpreters.

Students were asked to join in mini-groups (of 3 or 4) and choose the role of:
- Russian side representative (speaking Russian);
- Chinese side representative (speaking Chinese);
- An interpreter (one or two participants for Chinese-Russian and Russian-Chinese consecutive interpreting).

The main topics of discussion included various aspects of bilateral business relations between Russia and China:
- B2B meetings
- Workplace visit or plant trip
- Participation in the exhibition
- Contract negotiation
- Delivery and packaging
- Customs processing
- Potential investors meeting
- New technologies implementation

So-called negotiations (role playing) between two counterparts and their interpreter were held via Zoom and Tencent video conference meetings. Students were put in the situation of online communication process which simulated the real process of building business relationship between companies with the help of online interpreting and translation services. Therefore, so-called representatives were asked to prepare their companies' oral and slide presentations to make it clearer to understand, while so-called interpreters were allowed to use digital translation technologies to facilitate and speed up the interpreting process. The teachers' observation of students' negotiation sessions showed that regular training and active participation in such intercommunication activities led to visible progress in developing communication competence.

Besides that, every five weeks we organized an open online discussion and invited so-called expert group to listen to the negotiation pro-

cess and to evaluate the participants. Expert group included Chinese students from other groups and Russian students studying Chinese as the first foreign language. Experts' task was to evaluate the performance of each member of the group checking: 1) voice (strong voice, trembling voice), 2) response rate, 3) willingness to communicate, 4) ability to use interpreting skills or to be a good public speaker.

All answers were discussed among experts within the criteria mentioned above, then the data was summarized to find out whether the mini-group members possessed basic skills needed for successful communication. The last round of negotiations held in December demonstrated solid performance of the most part of the participants.

The findings are listed below in Table 1:

Table 1.

Evaluated item	*Students* (n = 52)
Student has a strong voice	39
Student shows quick response while interpreting or answering questions as a public speaker	42
Student wants to interact with others	45
Student is able to make a public speech / to interpret	49

We also have noticed that the format of online discussion sessions, when we invited Russian students as expert-group or counterparts, made cross-cultural communication more effective as Chinese students tried to keep in touch with native Russian-speakers and showed more willingness to participate in discussions. However more attention should be paid to create better digital environment for Chinese and Russian students to communicate with each other.

Mid-semester oral examination in June, that was also held in online format, demonstrated solid achievements in building communication skills. Students were asked to make different interpreting tasks, and one of the estimation criteria was the level of interpersonal communication skills. Most of the participants (83%) showed high and middle levels of building communication skills through online interpreting course.

    – *Stage 2*

The second stage of the experimental research took place in December 2022 during the 14th and the 15th weeks of the second semester of interpreting online course, and was held in the format of questionnaire survey. The total number of participants was 58, including 3 groups of Chinese students (n=52) and 6 teachers.

Two questionnaires (7 questions each) were sent to students' and trainers' group respondents via Google forms within one week, afterwards the questionnaires were collected and analyzed. To sum up the results, we used a typical five-level Likert scale, which contains the following options:

-   Strongly disagree
-   Disagree
-   Neither agree nor disagree
-   Agree
-   Strongly agree

Trainers were asked to make observation of students' social behavior during all-digital interpreting course and compare it with the behavior of those students who were trained before in offline format.

Students were asked to compare the communication achievements they had obtained after seven months of training with those they had at the very beginning of the online interpreting course.

Tables 2 and 3 reveal the findings:

The results of the questionnaire-based survey showed that communication skills of future Chinese interpreters can be sufficiently developed in digital mode. Chinese students due to their ancient cultural traditions of social behavior still couldn't easily join a dialogue and preferred to wait for the tutor's approval, but their interaction became more active.

In addition to the main survey, we interviewed Chinese students, who stayed in China up to that time, whether they planned to restart offline format of educational program in Russia, or online mode was more preferable to them, and if so, than why. Most of them (95%) were not ready to arrive due to the old and new social challenges such as COVID-19, expensive flights and unstable worldwide political situation. Taking this in consideration, distance synchronous mode under certain circumstanc-

es can become the better choice for organizing educational process for foreign students at overseas universities.

Table 2.
"Trainers" (n = 6)

Questionnaire items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Students are more likely to ask questions or to answer them (orally or writing them in online chat)	0	0	1	5	0
Students are less afraid to express their point of view (for example, in open discussions)	0	0	2	4	0
Students are less afraid to speak orally (make public speech or interpreting task)	0	1	2	2	1
Students use communication apps (such as WeChat) to contact the teacher after class if they have additional questions	0	0	0	1	5
Students are less likely to be late or miss classes in digital mode	0	1	0	5	0
Communication with students has become more interesting and comfortable	0	0	2	3	1

Table 3.
"Students" (n = 52)

Questionnaire items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Material delivery via digital technologies is very convenient (I can record, download and demonstrate files)	0	0	0	2	50
I am less afraid to enter into a dialogue with the teacher or classmates (ask and answer questions)	0	7	22	19	4
I experience less stress while interpreting	1	4	17	24	6
I enjoy working in mini-groups as a conference interpreter or a speaker	1	2	10	31	8
I am willing to keep in touch with the professor after class to clarify bottleneck questions	0	0	9	29	14
I have got more opportunities to communicate with Russian students	5	7	19	16	5

During the course we tried to break through communication barrier which was at the beginning of the study. We compared the results of the

assessment tasks at the beginning of the course with mid-semester exam performance and answers to questionnaires. It was found that students' level of communication skills became much higher than their initial level.

Discussion

Today digitalization of higher education is a vital need as it can guarantee continuous training and facilitate learning during pandemic [32].

In response to worldwide changes many universities redesigned their degree programs and launched more courses in online synchronous mode, therefore giving a good opportunity for foreign students to continue their studies staying home.

We fully agree with I. Tyaviaeva that lack of face-to-face interaction, technical issues, curriculum modifications in distance learning have a negative effect on the training process [28]. We also agree with S. Diaz-Galaz that teachers and students can face such challenges as equipment inaccessibility, lack of mutual understanding and feeling of isolation [33]. However, when we speak about translation and interpreting training, we can see clearly that interpreting e-training marks new opportunities such as resource availability and convenient use of new digital tools of translation which can make the translation process more comfortable.

K. Hartshorn and B. McMurry suggested that oral communication skills couldn't be developed properly in online language teaching classes as more attention in such format is paid for writing than for speaking [34]. However, our investigation of organizing interpreting classes in synchronous distance mode showed that it depends on the purpose of the course and the choice of digital platforms and pedagogical technologies.

The results of our study correspond with the data collected by E. Penalver and J. Laborda, which showed that synchronous interaction via video platforms and with the help of gamifying format such as role playing can positively influence on developing oral communication skills of students [25].

X. Lu states that interaction between Chinese students in online interpreting course was quite poor and therefore had a negative effect on development of communication skills [30]. On one hand, we should admit that Chinese students prefer to speak less in front of the teacher as such

behavior corresponds with their ancient traditions. On the other hand, our study revealed that intercultural environment of Russian universities as well as foreign teachers' new methods and pedagogical technologies can positively influence on Chinese students and stimulate them to interact more with their teachers, Russian peers and with each other.

This study fulfills current investigation of interpreting distance training, as it covers the issue of developing soft communication skills of future Chinese interpreters via synchronous online format and shows some new ideas in pedagogical approach to organizing digital classes for Chinese students taking into account their cultural background and traditional methods of training.

Our findings also revealed that online synchronous format of courses is a good opportunity for foreign students to receive training at Russian universities when they have to stay home as the world situation nowadays faces new challenges which bring uncertainty and insecurity for many students and their parents. That is why universities should pay more attention to build well-organized and thoroughly considered digital educational environment, especially for international educational programs.

Conclusion

Degree programs in translation and interpreting studies when they are launched in the distance mode should be designed in such a way as to help future interpreters to develop professional competences and soft skills. Participation in online conferences as public speakers, remote interpreting tasks, mini-group activities, cross-cultural communication with native speakers and Q&A sessions can reinforce social, intercultural and communication skills of Chinese future interpreters.

In distance synchronous course of interpreting, it can be easier to provide more individual training even in large groups via one-on-one mini-sessions, voice or text personal messages. Students are less afraid to interact and are more confident in giving their answers as they can use digital translation technologies to help them in doing tasks and keep distance with others (for many of them physical distance helps to overcome mental stress).

The results of the study show that communication skills of future interpreters from China can be sufficiently developed in all-digital intercultural educational environment.

However, further research on the issue of distance training for foreign students seems to be required to adapt more Russian degree programs to synchronous and asynchronous distance mode. It is also necessary to study how all-digital intercultural educational environment effects on building other professional competences of future interpreters.

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DATA ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ekaterina A. Vasina, Senior lecturer, Department of Translation Theory and Methodology *of* Higher School of Translation and Interpreting; Senior lecturer of Chinese Language Department
Lomonosov Moscow State University; MGIMO University
1, Leninskiye Gory Str., Moscow, 119991, Russian Federation; 76, Prospect Vernadoskogo Str., Moscow, 119454, Russian Federation
katya.vasiliy@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4430-5327

ДАННЫЕ ОБ АВТОРЕ

Васина Екатерина Алексеевна, старший преподаватель кафедры теории и методологии перевода Высшей школы перевода МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова; старший преподаватель кафедры китайского, вьетнамского, лаосского и тайского языков МГИМО МИД России

Московский государственный университет (МГУ) имени М.В. Ломоносова; Московский государственный институт международных отношений (МГИМО) МИД России
ул. Ленинские горы, 1, г. Москва, 119991, Российская Федерация; ул. Проспект Вернадского, 76, г. Москва, 119454, Российская Федерация
katya.vasiliy@gmail.com