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EMOTIONAL UPS AND DOWNS IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM. THE CASE OF TRANSLATOR TRAINING

EVA SEIDL

Abstract

This contribution focuses on Translation and Interpreting oriented Language Learning and Teaching (TILLT) for future translators and interpreters. It discusses the main characteristics of the TILLT-classroom in higher education by placing particular emphasis on the role of emotions. After addressing emotions in second and foreign language learning and teaching in general, the spotlight is on their importance in translator and interpreter training. The purpose of the contribution is to value the student voice regarding emotions in the virtual TILLT-classroom during emotionally challenging times caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, based on students' reflective essays on perceived successes and failures at the end of an online-semester (winter term 2020/21) recommendations will be given on helping students achieve greater well-being in online university settings and become more effective online language learners.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has sharply shown its effects on learning and teaching conditions. Negative stress and unhappiness can create a negative spiral since both students' and teachers' emotions interact in dynamic ways (Dewaele, 2021). Due to the fact that emotional contagion works in both directions, emotion regulation behavior is of utmost importance, for teachers and students alike. Thus, in emotionally challenging times like these, characterized by health concerns for loved ones and for oneself, both parties need to deploy a range of strategies to control their emotions in order to effectively and successfully teach and learn (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Kumar, 2021). In what follows, I will focus on the university language classroom in translator and interpreter education by discussing strategies, which allow students to achieve greater well-being and become more effective online language learners. With regard to the value of positive relationships between teachers and students and between peers, special emphasis will be placed on the complex and interdependent nature of the teaching and learning environment and student engagement (Sulis & Philp, 2021). As the title suggests, the virtual language classroom in the context of TILLT, i.e. Translation and Interpreting oriented Language Learning and Teaching, forms the centerpiece of this paper. I will present an in-depth analysis of essays in which 20 Bachelor's degree students reflected on their achievements, failures, happiness and frustrations during an online German as a foreign language class (CEFR-level C1) in the winter term of 2020/2021 at the Department of Translation Studies at an Austrian University. The discussion of these insights into students' perceptions will reveal whether the attempt to create a positive emotional environment in the virtual classroom was successful or not.

Language education and trans lation studies

A critical analysis of the last 25 years of research in language education for prospective interpreters and translators has shown that language learning and teaching for this specific target group of students has yet to be positioned as a vital part of translator and interpreter (T&I) training (Cerezo Herreo & Schmidhofer, 2021). Researchers in the emerging field of TILLT advocate a tailor-suited pedagogical approach that is firmly grounded in T&I principles in order to help students with the transition from the language classroom to the actual T&I classroom (Seidl & Janisch, 2019; Yeghoyan, 2020). This transition should reflect a change in mindset on the part of the students, in the sense that they develop a translator and/or interpreter identity. This means that it must be made clear from the beginning of their studies that students' very own communicative goals are not at the heart of their academic and professional endeavors. Rather, T&I students learn how to act communicatively on behalf of others, either with spoken, written or signed language. In order to raise awareness of the characteristics of TILLT, to both T&I students and the language teaching and research community, TILLT has, so far, been tackled from different angles. Cerezo Herreo and Schmidhofer (2021) address this particular field of language education from the

perspective of Translation Studies, Koletnik (2021) conceives of TILLT as a Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), and Seidl (2021) examines it in the context of enculturation in higher education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In what follows, I will discuss the relationship between TILLT, the role of emotions and emergency remote teaching and learning.

The role of emotions

The critical role that emotions play in language learning and teaching has been widely recognised (Gkonou et al., 2020; Simons & Smits, 2021). MacIntyre and his colleagues (2019) describe language teaching as a special case within teaching more generally because of its characteristics such as "high emotionality, personally meaningful content, shifting identities, and issues surrounding motivation" (p. 34). When it comes to language teaching for T&I students, a growing body of research suggests that not only time and stress management play a crucial role for both students and T&I professionals but also emotion management in terms of emotion perception, regulation and expression (Hubscher-Davidson, 2018, 2020; Alhawamdeh & Zhang, 2021). Hubscher-Davidson (2020) compares translators and interpreters to health professionals who can be subject to stressful situations either during their training or when practicing in real-life contexts.

With respect to mental well-being, Alhawamdeh and Zhang (2021), thus, argue for helping future T&I professionals, who often work as part-time freelancers, be aware of the job's emotional demand. During their training, students should learn to deal with negative emotions and stress and develop various ways to provide self-care. In addition, as Haro-Soler (2021) in her rejection of a transmissionist approach suggests, teachers in T&I programs should deliberately adopt a caring teaching approach that is based on respect, proximity, and mutual trust that fosters students' self-efficacy beliefs. In a similar vein, and also arguing against a transmissionist approach, Klimkowski and Klimkowska (2013) call for an empowering approach in translator training that depends on the teacher's competences and attitudes. More precisely, they underline the relevance of teacher attitudes towards themselves as professionals, as people, towards students, education, translation as a profession and towards the university. Because of the pandemic, however, as of the beginning of summer term 2020 (starting in Austria in March), the university could no longer be considered 'spatial' in the sense that those who work and who study there meet in a physical location. According to Kumar (2021) the success of lesson delivery and online learning was dependent on how familiar teachers and students became with different online platforms and she points out the affective meaning of togetherness. She asserts that "the affective presence of spontaneous bonding that comes with physical teacher presence was missing" (p. 267) which is why the following sections will address what this gap meant for students' emotional ups and downs during the online university experience.

Compassion and vulnerability during quaranteaching

Interestingly, what bell hooks (2003, p. 132) observes with respect to students, equally applies to their teachers in the pandemic situation, namely that when they are "encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn they can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence". But how does this apply to translator education? In their analysis of T&I training during the pandemic, Seresi and her colleagues (2021) address the widespread reluctance to technology-based distance education in pre-Covid times. Almost overnight, in spring 2020 however, working, teaching and learning habits had to be changed and initial reluctance had to be overcome – reluctance that stemmed from the fear of the unknown and the new and of leaving the protection of one's comfort zone. In my view, the pandemic brought teachers and students closer together in three ways. Firstly, if teachers were willing to embrace a sense of uncertainty, risk and flexibility they could share some responsibility for modes of teaching and learning with their students and even learn a lot from them. Secondly, serious health concerns that affected teachers and students alike during quaranteaching made both parties sharply realize that we are all equally vulnerable and what happens to others might also happen to oneself. In this sense, the pandemic helped see "the other person as an individual who is basically like ourself with the same kinds of hopes and the same desire for personal success and happiness"

(White, 2017, p. 29). That is to say that the pandemic brought the notion of compassion in education to the fore and with it the admonition not to view compassion as a weakness rather than as a strength. What White (2017) states in respect to compassion perfectly fits the pandemic situation, as compassion allows us "to see the world as it really is – as a field of interdependence and impermanence – where nothing is completely separate or self-contained" (p. 26).

Thirdly, another aspect of how the pandemic could strengthen the relationship between teachers and students, which is also related to compassion, is the notion of vulnerability. If teachers remember what it was like to be a struggling student, burdened by the uncertainty of the future, they can more easily enter in a relationship of equality with students. In Brantmeier's (2013) concept of a pedagogy of vulnerability teachers are encouraged to take risks – risks of self-disclosure, of change, of not knowing or even failing. He invites teachers to "open yourself […], co-learn, admit you do not know, and be human" (p. 96). Vulnerability can, thus, be an act of courage in that it involves "openness to personal distress and everything difficult that we usually turn away from" (White, 2017, p. 21). By embracing vulnerability in times of pandemic-induced online education, I believe that teachers could help students learn how to appreciate difficulty. Bell hooks (1994) argues for embracing difficulty as a stage of intellectual development that comes with the satisfaction of having grappled with difficult material. In my view, in pandemic times, being able to cope with difficulties and even fears in various aspects of our private and academic lives can enhance personal and professional growth that can lead to a sense of agency in both domains. To sum up, the pandemic-induced online teaching and learning setting highlighted the relevance and the added value of embracing shared responsibility, compassion and vulnerability. If the teacher-student relationship is underpinned by these three principles, students are recognized in their valuable role as co-constructors of knowledge and co-creators of teaching and learning in higher education (Bovill, 2017).

Valuing the student voice

So far, the discussion has tried to underscore the benefit of nurturing power-sharing student-teacher relationships in higher education, undergirded by a spirit of reciprocity that values students as partners. In such an approach, teachers want to learn from students' analyses of their experiences and affirm students' knowledge of and insights into higher education pedagogy (Bovill, 2017). In relation to TILLT, Cerezo Herrero and Schmidhofer (2021) call for more research that combines both the disciplines of Translation Studies and Foreign Language Teaching while focusing on the language learning process of prospective translators and interpreters. As a language teacher in the TILLT context, a practitioner-researcher and a teacher educator, I, therefore, followed Barkhuizen's (2019) advice for qualitative research topics in language teacher education in the following way: (1) "ground topic in context you know and care about" and (2) "pursue questions you really don't have answers to and are really curious about" (pp. 4-5). This meant for me that I wanted to better understand students' emotional ups and downs during an online-semester in the TILLT context which I really care about. I also wanted to follow the advice that Palmer and Zajonc (2010, pp. 101-102) give to university teachers: „We need, therefore, to become more attentive to our students' intellectual, emotional, and character development and learn to see them as richly endowed, malleable beings open to cognitive and affective changes through pedagogical interventions and social formation."

Pedagogical intervention

I implemented the following pedagogical intervention in the second year of the three-year study program Transcultural Communication at the Department of Translation Studies at an Austrian University. This Bachelor degree's program prepares students for a two-year Master's degree in Translation and/or Interpreting. In the winter term of 2020/21 (October to January), I taught the 15-week-long advanced-level course called German Language and Culture (CEFR-level C1) with three 90-minute online lectures per week, using the web conferencing system BigBlueButton and the learning platform Moodle. The group consisted of 20 undergraduates, i.e. 13 female and 7 male students, from 8 different nationalities and with 11 actively spoken languages within the cohort. At the end of the online semester students were asked to write a reflective, critical, and narrative

self-evaluation in the form of an essay (of 300-400 words) on perceived successes and failures during the semester.

In order to help students with this reflection they were asked to read and listen again to four comprehensive assignments (word documents and audio files) which they had delivered over the course of the semester on the topics of media, law, health and science. In their essays they were asked to comment on their performance, on teacher feedback and grades. In addition to the four quite demanding assignments, students also had to reflect on seven smaller tasks during the semester and to structure the essay along the following guiding questions: How happy are you with your achievements? What about improvements, things still to improve and how to? What are you proud of and what bothers you? What about success, failure, disappointments, encouragement, happiness and motivation? Moreover, to link these reflections with distance education, two additional questions were asked: How does online learning and teaching affect all that? What, if any, relationship do you see between success and failure in language learning with respect to mental well-being, emotional support, classroom connectivity and interaction? When reading the essays I greatly appreciated students' openness, honesty and trust as well as their willingness to use the texts in anonymised form for research purposes.

Learning from students' insights

This section provides some insights into how students reflected on their perceived successes and failures in an online semester and which reasons they gave to explain each respectively. Since this was not a study that I conducted but, rather, an attempt to compare the student perspective with my own experience with the sudden, quite unprepared conversion from face-to-face teaching to the online mode, I can only highlight what stood out in the data. With regard to self-assessment, the 20 reflective essays confirm what previous research on this kind of assessment in the TILLT classroom demonstrated, namely that a guided reflection on the personal history of the language learning experience helps savour achievements and focus on strengths while, at the same time, setting goals to overcome weaknesses (Janisch-Hrnkaš & Seidl, 2021).

Within this cohort of 20 undergraduate students, some approached the task as a way of written personal communication with their teacher, some even in form of a personally addressed letter. Therefore, it was all the more important that each student was given a written comment from the teacher so that the communication was not one-sided. What stands out in the data is that many more reasons for success than failure emerged. I structured the explanations for success into internal and external ones, and will first report on which reasons were given for perceived failure.

Reasons for Failure. Students emphasized that when they felt stressed and overwhelmed by the pandemic situation it usually led to demotivation and the loss of the ability to concentrate and to study. One student, in retrospect, blamed herself for not asking for help with an assignment, neither the teacher nor her peers, and concluded that guilt, self-blame and shame are detrimental to higher education. Generally speaking, the students regretted a lot of things that they did not do but that could have been done easily. These can be divided into two categories, i.e. in the online classroom and beyond. As regards the first category, they often mentioned no active participation in the online class and, as a consequence, no social connection to their teacher and peers. For what concerns their behavior beyond the actual classroom, students mentioned self-defeating behavior such as not taking enough screen breaks or even not engaging in any leisure activities in pandemic times.

Reasons for Success. Interestingly, students listed much more external reasons for perceived success than internal ones, which could be hinting at the importance in higher education to help students attribute both their successes and failures to their own behavior, which they can control. In doing so, they might know more easily what to do to maintain or increase their success and reverse any failures (McGuire, 2018). At any rate, in this data, students mentioned smaller and larger teacher efforts to keep socially connected in spite of online teaching. For example, students appreciated the online classroom atmosphere of reciprocal sharing, openness and trust, which reduced their fear of failure. They valued the teacher's effort to involve everyone while, despite the adverse circumstances, striving for a positive focus and encouraging mutual support and motivation. Due to a large number of pair and group work in

breakout-rooms throughout the semester, they could make friends with peers and described the virtual classroom as feeling real and causing happiness boosts in difficult times.

It is important to mention at this point that a positive, nurturing classroom atmosphere did not imply that students were not intellectually challenged. As one reason for their academic achievements in this semester they pointed out the variety of interesting, up-to-date topics and challenging tasks in written and audio form together with a mandatory revision of assignments. Systematic, rigorous assessment, especially a formative one, was frequently referred to in the data as helpful if given quickly and encouragingly, based on transparent assessment criteria.

To conclude this section on the student voice I will report on their explanations for success that depended on themselves. In contrast to the above-mentioned regrets in terms of behavior in and out of the classroom, some students attributed their feelings of success and academic achievement to their active participation, to deliberately setting screen breaks and to taking part in leisure activities. One student stated that in the online semester it is even more important to set oneself goals and to pursue self-defined targets with optimism, determination and tolerance of frustration while recognizing even small improvements in the language learning process.

Another student expressed her feelings of joy and pride regarding a particularly difficult assignment in which she had invested a lot of time and energy but which she had also enjoyed accomplishing. Maybe the next statement is typical for T&I students who are expected to strive for very high standards of linguistic proficiency and accuracy, and to critically approach source texts and their own linguistic performance, either in written, spoken or signed language. In this regard, one student posited that he was perfectly aware of his linguistic shortcomings and knew that one day he would have to confront them. However, he considered as the required prerequisites for achieving this his ability to deal with pressure to perform and with very high expectations.

Concluding thoughts

This contribution examined emotional ups and downs in the virtual classroom in the context of TILLT by focusing on the student perspective on online higher education in pandemic times. In general, university students are expected to stretch their boundaries and push themselves past their limits. This is why the ability to deal with emotional highs and lows is part and parcel of university studies and especially relevant for second and foreign language learning. According to Simons and Smits (2021) the limitations that one might experience because of a still imperfectly mastered foreign language can pose a threat to one's self-image which is particularly pertinent for future translators and interpreters. The extremely high expectations on their linguistic competence are due to the fact that any linguistic shortcomings or deficiencies could lead to mistranslations or misinterpretations and, at worst, to dramatic consequences for their clients. In my view, language teachers of T&I students should strive to build rapport to their students through a caring teaching approach and help them not be intimidated by high standards and requirements in T&I programs.

As the previous sections have shown, a pedagogy of compassion and vulnerability lends itself particularly well for quaranteaching, because the pandemic has demonstrated how it equally affected students and teachers as vulnerable, fundamentally interrelated human beings. In terms of emotional ups and downs it underscored the fact that, obviously, also teachers' lives "are filled with joys, sorrows, stresses, successes, and failures, just like anybody else's" (McGuire, 2018, p. 79). The pandemic not only widened the distance between teachers and students and between peers, but, as the analysis of student narrative reflections showed, it was also a way of demonstrating to both parties how much they influence each other's perception of failure and success.

The narrative data, collected in the winter term of 2020/21, support the findings of a study on distance learning at Austrian higher education institutions during the summer term of 2020 and the winter term of 2020/21 (Pausits et al., 2021). Two of the points made in the government-funded study by Pausits and his colleagues (2021) deserve to be particularly emphasised, namely that teachers had to invest enormous efforts and that students predominantly lamented limited communication with teachers and their fellow students. With regard to recommendations on how teachers can help students achieve greater well-being in online settings and become more effective online language learners,

what Mercer (2015, n. p.) posits in terms of learner agency and engagement is perfectly suited for the virtual classroom.

> Ideally, we want learners to have a positive but realistic self-concept […] [by] ensuring credible, authentic experiences of success through well-scaffolded tasks […], [helping learn] to focus on one's strengths in a range of areas […], on one's own sense of progress […] having a growth mind-set and believing in the potential of improvement.

If the quality of the teacher's presence is vital in the face-to-face classroom – especially for students' active participation and emotional well-being – this is all the more the case in the virtual classroom. In an educative environment in which communication and interaction are based on webcams, microphones, chatboxes, emails and learning platforms such as Moodle, students are even more dependend on teachers „giving feedback, monitoring students' understanding, ensuring equal involvement in the classroom activities and creating a positive, safe and supportive classroom atmosphere where learners feel free to take the initiative and interact without being afraid of making mistakes." (Sulis & Philp, 2021, p. 117)

In the case of online language education in translator training, where teachers prepare students linguistically for the actual translation classroom, they act responsible towards students if they serve as role models as to how one can handle emotional ups and downs, caused by failures and successes that we all experience in online or face-to-face language learning and in life in general.

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