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#### **BLENDED LEARNING: STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN INTERPRETING TRAINING**

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The interpreting profession, as well as interpreter training, has been changed by technology, and in higher education blended learning has become a part of modern study programmes. We present the results of a short survey of former and current MA students of interpreting at the University of Ljubljana and Astrakhan State University on the role of blended learning in interpreting study programmes, and students' attitudes towards different blended learning activities, from the use of

language resources, podcasts, video and audio materials, and social media, to participation in videoconferences and mock conferences.

**Keywords:** blended learning, interpreting technologies, higher education, interpreting profession, interpreter training, attitudes

**1. Introduction.** Blended learning, a combination of face-to-face classroom exchange and computer-mediated activities with the use of the Internet, interactive boards, virtual learning environments, blogs, wikis, etc., has become popular in education, especially higher education, and is now a common part of contemporary study programmes.

Blended learning in interpreting training is used mainly to facilitate pedagogical assistance, to provide easier access to resources, and for students to become familiar with the technology they will likely use in the course of their career. However, in some regions, for instance Astrakhan, it is also used for overcoming geographical distances. It enables students to take exams, to be enrolled and access resources, as well as to practice together with students from other schools, etc. [3; 5, p. 18].

Our main motivation was a general one, based on the fact that technology has changed the interpreting profession as well as interpreter training, and we wanted to gain an insight into students' attitudes towards the use of technology in interpreting study programmes in Astrakhan and Ljubljana. Specifically, the study was a part of a bilateral project between Slovenia and Russia on virtual environments for interpreters, funded by the Slovenian Research Agency. The results will also be useful for the DG INTE project *Dissemination of best practices in conference interpreter training between EU and non-EU languages*, coordinated by the University of Ljubljana with Astrakhan State University being a partner in the project.

The results of the survey at both universities will be used to explore how technology is embedded in the interpreting training at both institutions and what students' general attitudes are towards the use of this technology. We conclude with a discussion on the differences in preparedness for the integration of blended learning in study programmes between the respective institutions and future work activities.

**2. Blended learning.** During the last decade, the concept of blended learning has become more and more popular in different areas, from business to academic spheres. We are mostly interested in the latter.

Barbara Allan [1] believes that in the past few years the term *blended learning* has become increasingly popular and is used in different ways. It is mainly a mixture of face-to-face (F2F) learning and e-learning or online learning, which includes chat rooms, discussion groups, podcasts and self-assessment tools, to support traditional classes. This type of learning and teaching in language learning is defined as a combination of face-to-face learning and the appropriate use of technology which includes the Internet, CDs and interactive boards, computers (chat rooms and e-mails), and various environments, such as virtual learning environments, blogs and wikis [14, p. 7].

Littlejohn and Pegler [7] use the term *blended e-learning*, which in their opinion includes: access to a wide variety of alternative resources on personal computers; online learning with tutors that facilitate the learning process and emphasize co-creating a class rich in online cooperation; the use of virtual learning environments to access learning materials and ask questions; uploading notes to a weblog during classes; staying in contact with other students via instant messaging applications; and the integration of physical and virtual learning spaces that include technology but focus on the learning process itself.

Sharma et al. [14] offer a more precise and detailed description of the term. During their research, they found that the definitions of the term *blended learning* are quite vague. However, they believe this is also an asset because of the possibility to adjust the meaning of the term to accommodate different needs.

Barbara Allan [1] sums up different dimensions of blended learning as follows: time (synchronous and asynchronous learning activities); place (in school, in work-

place, at home); various information and communication technologies (ICT), such as social networks, Web 2.0, development technologies; learning context (academic sphere, workplace); teaching models (teacher- or student-based learning, behaviourist or constructivist learning theories); goals (teacher's learning process goals, or goals set by individuals, groups or communities); learning style (learners with different roles or multidisciplinary groups of students and teachers); and the attitude towards others within the learning process (independent learning, group learning or learning community development). In this way, blended learning can be approached from different perspectives. We are mainly interested in the use of ICT in the academic learning context.

**3. Pilot study: Aims and goals.** In interpreting training, technology has always been present due to the nature of the profession, as interpreting involves the use of technology, especially during simultaneous interpretation. Therefore, the notion of including technology in the learning process had been present even before the term *blended learning* emerged.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technological advances have contributed to the emergence of new forms of interpreting and broadened the range of applications of interpreters' skills, while the influence of telecommunications and digital data processing has had a major impact on professional practice, especially on multilingual videoconferences, whereas this type of conferences was introduced by the United Nations as early as the late 1970s [12, p. 168].

In the light of technological advancement that is crucial in interpreters' professional practice, it is essential that students learn to use technology and receive adequate information on the potential possibilities of its use [4]. Also, the use of new technologies as well as audio- and videotapes is essential for enabling access to a wide range of resources from different disciplines and various speech styles and accents [6, p. 71]. With the development of remote interpreting and more easily accessible equipment for its use, videoconferences have become a standard part of interpreting study programmes [10, p. 75; 11]. They enable students to experience remote interpreting and to have easier access to native speakers of different languages and feedback from a wider range of teachers and representatives of employers, such as the institutions of the European Union [9, p. 28].

Since technology is intentionally included in interpreter education both at the University of Astrakhan and at the University of Ljubljana, we wanted to establish how it is used by students in their practice and what their attitudes are towards the use of technology and towards blended learning in general.

For the purpose of conducting this study, we used a questionnaire with 15 questions (from multiple-choice to open format questions) that was completed by former and current students enrolled in the interpreting programmes at both faculties. We first carried out our research in Ljubljana as it is a niche programme with a small number of students (from 3 to 6 per academic year), and therefore the number of respondents depended on this. The questionnaire was completed by 20 respondents and we therefore decided to get the same number in Astrakhan in order to obtain a balanced sample. All together, 40 respondents were included in our research (N = 40, 20 in Astrakhan + 20 in Ljubljana).

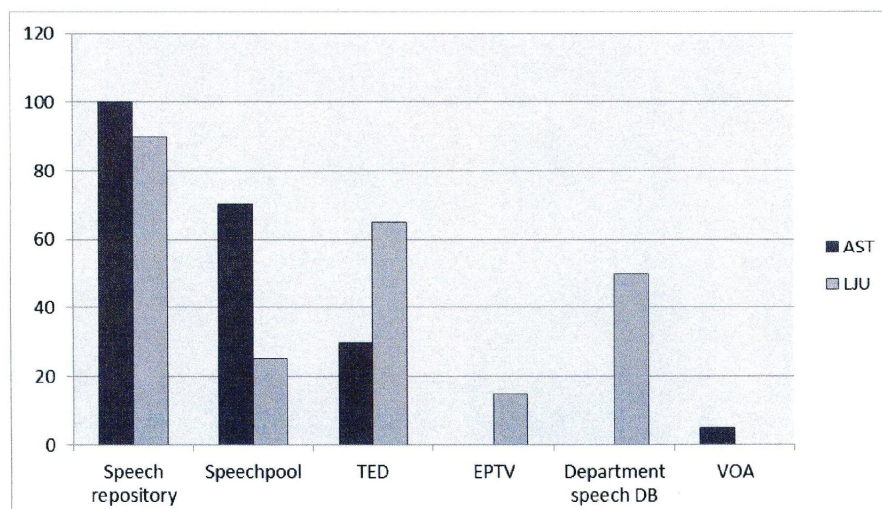
Our main goal was to get feedback from our former students and also to determine whether the use of technology in interpreting training differs between the two institutions. And if it does, what are the reasons?

**4. Results and discussion.** In the presentation of results, we decided to point out only those that shed light on the most significant similarities and differences between the two interpreting programmes in Astrakhan and Ljubljana. In the last part of our discussion, we analysed all open format answers based on the respondents' attitude towards the use of technology in interpreting studies.

In interpreting study programmes, speech databases are one of the key resources since they enable access to a wide range of speeches in different languages and topics. Speech databases are important for group work in class as well

as for autonomous exercises, which is why we wanted to find out which speech databases students use in interpreting practice.

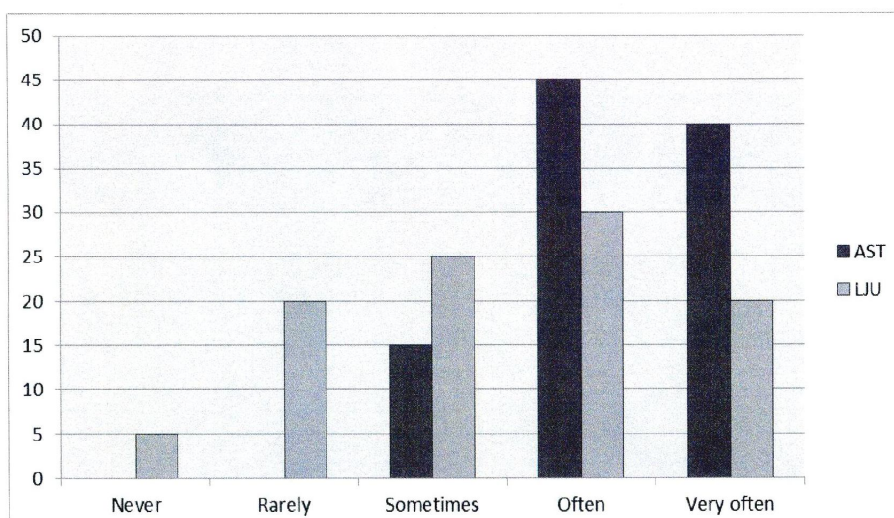
### Speech databases used



The most commonly used speech database at both universities is *Speech repository*, whereas the use of other databases significantly differs between the two institutions. Frequent use of *Speech repository* is not surprising, since it is the biggest database project comprising different speeches [13, p. 215], and in addition to this, both institutions closely cooperate with the EU institutions and train interpreters to work for the aforementioned bodies, which gives this speech collection additional value. In Astrakhan, students also use *Speechpool* and in some cases other databases, such as TED or Voice of America (VOA), whereas students in Ljubljana very often use TED as well as their internal speech database, and recordings from the European Parliament (EPTV).

One of the crucial parts of interpreting is also recording the output as this is of great importance for self-evaluation and feedback independent of real time. We thus wanted to establish how frequently and which types of recording devices students use.

### Use of audio and video recording devices



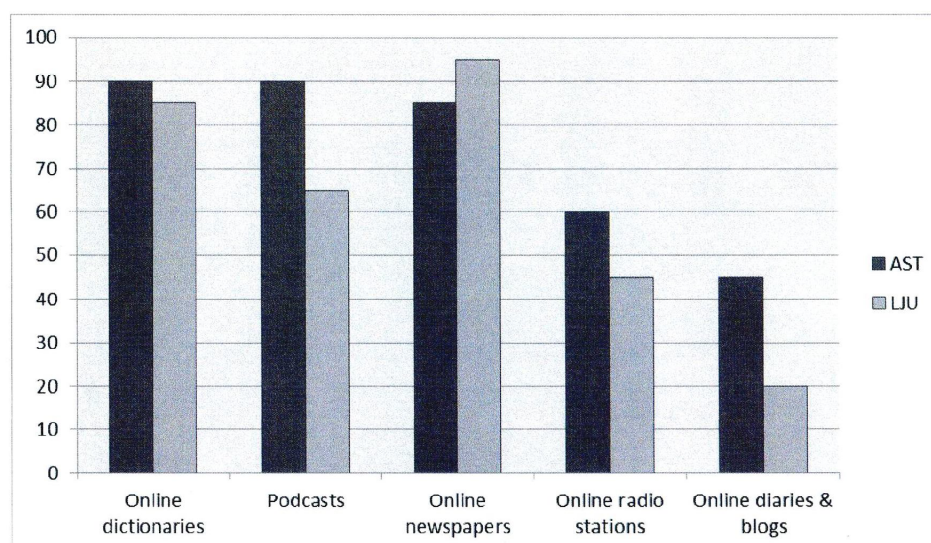
The results are unexpected in the case of students in Ljubljana since some of them have never used this technology during their studies. This is also surprising because (at least in the simultaneous mode) the output is automatically recorded in interpreting booths, which means that despite being aware of this possibility, students in Ljubljana opted not to use it in practice. On the other hand, all students in Astrakhan often or very often use their recorded outputs for practicing, unlike students in Ljubljana where very frequent use seems to be an exception rather than the rule.

There are no major differences in the type of devices used. Students use a wide range of devices, from recording devices in interpreting laboratories, smart phones, tablets, video cameras, voice recorders to iRec. The use of the latter is surprisingly rare, given the fact this is a tool incorporated into Speech repository, the most often used speech database. This discrepancy has also been noticed by SCIC, and consequently they are now planning more promotional activities to raise awareness among its users [7].

Students have to prepare for their practices in interpreting labs, videoconferences and mock conferences, so we wanted to find out which resources they use and whether they are already building a community as fellow colleagues through social media.

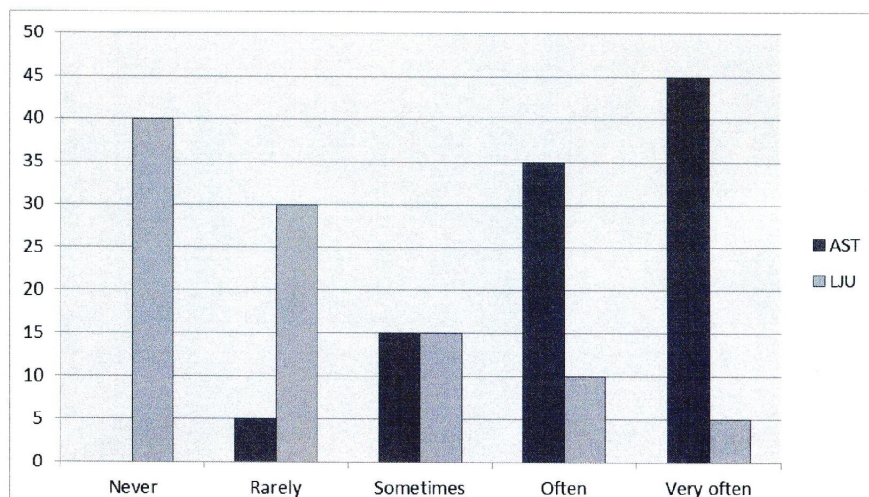
Even though there are no significant differences between students' answers from both universities, we can clearly state from the below graph that students in Ljubljana are more inclined to use traditional sources of information, such as newspapers, whereas students in Astrakhan more often use modern media sources such as podcasts, online diaries and blogs. In addition, we have established a difference between oral and written resources, with students in Astrakhan being more likely to utilize audio resources, i.e. podcasts and online radio stations.

Resources used during preparation



Nowadays, social media is omnipresent, even in professional communities that use them in order to build a community and to take part in a community of practice [2, p. 159]. We tried to find out how social media is used by students when it comes to building a student community in interpreter training.

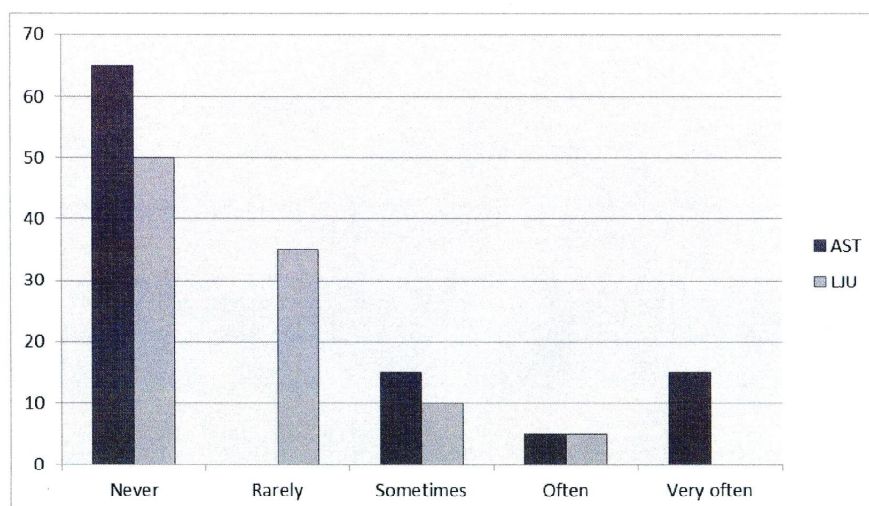
Use of social networks



The questionnaire showed vast differences in the use of social media between students in Astrakhan and Ljubljana. For students in Astrakhan, social media is of great importance in building their community – all of them participate in this type of communication. On the other hand, students in Ljubljana are more conservative. This different attitude towards the use of social media can perhaps be linked to very small groups that in real space and time form relatively intimate student communities.

The E-learning platform Moodle has been widely integrated into university study programmes, due to the fact that Moodle is a user-friendly platform with high performance. Used mainly as a repository for learning materials, it now transformed into an environment that enables much more interactive work with students by including blogs, various types of assignments, questionnaires, cooperative learning, etc. Although this tool seems less appealing at first glance for use in interpreter training, “it was soon adopted by many interpreter training institutions, initially to support students and teachers in the delivery of traditional face-to-face courses and then to explore the idea of delivering interpreter training courses in a blended learning format” [13, p. 118]. We therefore wished to determine the frequency of its use among students.

Use of Moodle



The use of Moodle at both institutions is (discouragingly) similar. Even though it offers a myriad of possibilities, especially for additional practices that are not related to the work in interpreting labs, such as more carefully planned work with students during their preparations for interpreting, data storage of interpreting outputs after practicing and the preparation of a structured feedback from various teachers, or peer feedback from other students, etc., this platform remains virtually unused.

In the open format questions part, we obtained a lot of valuable ideas on how to improve technology-assisted interpreter training. Students in Ljubljana are inclined to use various resources and tools in their education and they highlighted the need for a more systematic use of Moodle, especially in order to obtain structural performance feedback from various teachers, and not just the feedback received during their classes. They suggested even more videoconferences which, in their opinion, offer a positive experience by establishing contact with a wide range of universities, institutions, speakers, and teachers, and also because of their different approaches to giving feedback. They believe there is room for improvement mainly in the field of audio- and video-recording analyses and evaluation, be it by professors outside school hours or during the lectures and practices where self-evaluation or critical assessment by peers or professors takes place [15].

Similarly, students in Astrakhan also believe that technology-assisted education has many advantages. Their suggestions include an ever greater integration of ICT and various resources, such as coursera.org, into the study programme, whereas some believe it would be useful for students to become familiar with various resources and tools; however, they state that during the courses the focus should be on the two or three most useful resources. They also propose a more systematic approach to learning about terminological resources and databases. Students in Astrakhan also place a high value on videoconferences by suggesting that this approach could be used for autonomous work so the students themselves could organise virtual classes.

In interpreter education in Ljubljana, technology is a vital part of the whole educational process, and students believe that a more systematic approach would be preferable. Due to a smaller number of students, the work is mainly personalised, and it seems that technology is not equally integrated into various segments of the educational process. Although students are in favour of technology-assisted training, they are also aware that in spite of this fact, interpreting is a profession where in crucial moments the interpreter can rely only on himself or herself, and that general knowledge and pre-preparation for work is crucial, since "it's what's inside the head of the interpreter that counts" [15].

From the students' answers, we can conclude that technology is more integrated in the Astrakhan study programme. This could partly be explained by the fact that potential students become familiar with technology even before the beginning of the study due to geographical reasons (central Asian and Caspian languages at the school) as a part of their enrolment procedures. In their case, technology is a necessity due to geographical distances between potential students and university and institutional environments, such as the EU, with which the faculty closely cooperates. In addition to this, it is also used to facilitate the pedagogical assistance, give easier access to resources, etc.; however, as it is necessary, technology is systematically incorporated in all phases of the programme, from enrolment to the final exams. Perhaps this is why the attitude towards it is extremely positive in all respondents and could be summed up in a single quote from one of the survey respondents: "The use of online tools and resources makes the program more efficient and much more entertaining".

**5. Future work.** We are planning a survey and interviews with teachers at both universities. It will be used to explore trainers' attitudes towards the use of technology in interpreting training. The results will then be compared to the results from the student survey. We will start with the hypothesis that trainers' attitudes directly influence those of students.

Due to the insufficient use of the e-learning platform Moodle at both institutions, the use of different functions of Moodle used at both institutions will be ana-

lysed. Our hypothesis is that e-learning is largely unused in interpreting training due to the unused/unknown functions and possibilities of the platform.

**6. Conclusion.** Even though the pilot study was presented on a small number of former and current students of interpreting in Astrakhan and Ljubljana, it was nevertheless possible to form a general impression on the use of technology in two different environments. It seems that along with the element of necessity, the general attitude towards the use of technology is the decisive factor in determining how technology will be integrated with the study process. Future studies to obtain more inside information are planned for a deeper understanding of blended learning, its function in academic environments, and the attitudes of both students and teachers towards it.

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