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Charting a new course for translator and interpreter training in Africa: Lessons from the COVID-19 experience in selected countries

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ABSTRACT

Translator and interpreter (T&I) training, using virtual learning environments, was largely uninterrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the Global North. This might not have been the case in the Global South, especially in African countries. Building on earlier studies which focused on a comparative analysis of a number of T&I programmes in Africa, the objective of this paper is to further investigate the T&I training situation in a number of African countries between the pre-COVID-19 (before March 2020) and the initial lockdown (March - September 2020) period. Online questionnaires were administered to T&I students and trainers in five countries: Benin, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. The data collected were analysed qualitatively. Our preliminary findings, although not surprisingly, reveal that T&I training was interrupted by the lockdown and the attempted transition to online teaching and learning has not been smooth, due to economic challenges, insufficient technological infrastructure and skilled human resources. We find that the provision of reliable technological facilities and the implementation of blended learning are essential for strategic development in African T&I training. Trainers also require continuous professional development to enable them to acquire technological and pedagogical skills necessary to provide training that meets current T&I market demands.

KEYWORDS

Translation and interpreting training, online teaching and learning, virtual learning environments, African, COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Being a linguistically heterogeneous entity, Africa is arguably a continent in dire need of translation and interpreting services. Although not necessarily as advanced as in the Global North, the field of translation and interpreting studies is fast gaining ground on the African continent, and there seems to be a growing interest (see Oyetoyan 2016; Okagbue 2017; Afolabi 2018; Mombe 2020) in translator and interpreter (T&I) training, a branch of the larger discipline known as Translation Studies (Holmes 2004[1985]). Evidence of this growing interest is an African project, initiated in 1999 with the support of the European Commission's Directorate General for Translation and Interpreting, which gave birth to the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpreting and Translation (PAMCIT). This consortium is currently being run by five African universities, namely, the University of Buea in Cameroon, the University of Ghana, the University of Nairobi in Kenya, the Université Gaston Berger in Senegal, and the Universidade Pedagógica de Moçambique in Mozambique.

In line with this flagship project, the aim of which was to train a sufficient number of students to work as highly qualified translators and interpreters in Africa, a number of universities across the continent now offer graduate

programmes in T&I. In recent years, studies have also been conducted on the training of translators and interpreters in some African countries. Amongst other findings, these studies revealed important concerns regarding the sustainability of T&I curricula and the increasing need to align training with market requirements (see Dongho 2014; Oyetoyan 2016; Afolabi 2018).

In this article, we aim to explore the state of T&I training programmes in Africa prior to and during the lockdown necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic. We strongly believe that understanding past and present practices in terms of translator education will enable us to evaluate more precisely what direction the future of T&I training should take in Africa. Considering the vastness of the African continent, it would be overly ambitious to attempt to cover and represent the entire continent within the scope of one journal article. Our study will, therefore, focus more specifically on a few African countries. As these cannot be taken to be representative of the wider continent, it is our hope that the present case study will pave the way for further research on this topic in other African countries.

In the first section of this article, we will present some key features of T&I training in a few non-African tertiary institutions, focusing in particular on their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This will serve to contextualise the case study, and we will then provide an overview of how T&I teaching is carried out on the African continent more specifically. Subsequently, the methodological approach that was adopted in collecting the data for our analysis will be presented, and results will be discussed. Finally, we will make a comparison regarding various aspects of the pre- and post-COVID situations. To conclude, implications and measures will be discussed in a bid to potentially enhance or improve current standards of T&I training in the countries under study, taking both local and global needs into account.

The overall aim of this case study is to contribute to knowledge and identify areas where T&I training programmes in Africa could usefully be aligned with contemporary educational standards, in order to respond more effectively to 21st century industry needs. To achieve this aim, we posed the following research questions:

1. What tools are being used in non-African contexts to train translators and interpreters? How prevalent are virtual environments in T&I training?
2. How prevalent was virtual learning in T&I in the African countries in this study prior to COVID-19?
3. Did/How did T&I training programmes in African countries in this study transfer from a physical to a virtual environment during the COVID-19 lockdown?
4. What were the challenges faced by African universities following emergency lockdowns and campus closures?

5. What lessons can be learned from the COVID-19 experience and what innovative solutions could be implemented for the benefit of T&I training in the countries represented in this study?

2. T&I training trends in non-African contexts

In North America, Europe and Australia, one of the bigger trends of the last few decades is arguably the development of virtual teaching methods, i.e. learning “carried out, assessed, or stored by means of a computer, especially over a network” (Lexico 2020), in a synchronous or asynchronous form, or a combination of both (Schwier and Balbar 2002). In contrast to many African countries which are still said to suffer from a technology gap (You *et al.* 2020), many countries and universities around the world have quickly adopted so-called EdTech, or educational technologies.

In industrialised countries (sometimes referred to as the Global North), teaching and learning by virtual means have thus been relatively well incorporated into—and blended with—traditional learning approaches and environments, due to their potential to enhance learning, thus complementing face-to-face classroom teaching. This pedagogical approach can increase “[...] the interaction between students and students, as well as students and instructors” (Hew and Cheung 2014: 3).

Synchronous online learning, on one hand, allows real time participation in online classes in spite of the differences in the physical locations of course participants. For instance, this includes videoconferencing and tools such as Adobe Connect, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout and Zoom, all of which provide real time chats during live classes (Lowenthal *et al.* 2017; Mahoney and Hall 2020; Dale 2020). Synchronous classes often mirror their face-to-face counterparts in terms of structure and content. On the other hand, asynchronous online learning allows the storage of learning materials in electronic forms, on a computer or online on a portal/platform. These are then made accessible for students’ use at different times, rather than in real time (Kung-Ming and Khoon-Seng 2009: 122). In other words, learning is self-paced, with no time-zone constraints. Examples of asynchronous learning can include stepped activities using video recordings uploaded on websites for educational purposes, platforms that enable and make use of automated reflection and feedback loops or learning analytics, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), Wikis, learning blogs, etc. (Mahoney and Hall 2020; Delello and McWhorter 2020). Moreover, in their article entitled “Thinking Beyond Zoom: Using Asynchronous Video to Maintain Connection and Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Lowenthal *et al.* (2020) argue that asynchronous video discussions, for example, can increase student engagement, offer more time for reflection, and enhance equitability, while allowing for fewer technological issues.

Additionally, catering to issues of accessibility and improving flexible learning have been important drivers in education contexts outside Africa.

Asynchronous teaching can involve a wide range of learning activities that can be carefully designed and scaffolded to support experiential learning (James *et al.* 2020). This is arguably beneficial for students, especially if they have learning difficulties such as dyslexia. For many students facing accessibility challenges in higher education, and for differently abled students, the flexibility offered by asynchronous learning can provide unique opportunities (Mutanga 2017; Betts *et al.* 2013).

One of the most prominent trends to come out of e-learning is the advent of Learning Management Systems (LMS) software applications which make it possible to provide both synchronous and asynchronous learning. This kind of system can even allow for a teaching session to take place in a classroom, while one or a few participants, who are absent physically, participate online via Zoom, a videoconferencing tool that has been integrated as part of the LMS. Some examples of LMS are Canvas, BigblueButton, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Moodle (Piña 2010; Piotrowski 2010; Dias *et al.* 2014a, 2014b).

It is well known in published literature on distance-learning that creating suitable online materials and classes can be very time-consuming, but that careful design pays off (Rapanta *et al.* 2020). Although these virtual platforms are relatively common in many parts of the world, and their use has resulted in developments and innovations suited to these specific contexts, the pandemic seems to have contributed to this realisation to a greater extent in 2020. It is however fair to say that these online tools did not feature prominently in African Higher Education pre-pandemic. For instance, when reporting on a survey into the usage of learning management systems with 358 respondents across 25 African countries, Unwin *et al.* (2010: 5) observed that “while there are some enthusiastic advocates of such systems, the reality is that most African educators as yet have little knowledge about, or interest in, their usage” (see sections 3-5 for further discussion on T&I education and virtual platforms in Africa). Similarly, in their review of the World Bank’s education policies in Africa and their impact on the African Virtual University, Nafukho and Machuma (2013: 646) note, for instance, that while the increased digitisation of universities in Africa has been a catalyst for major learning technology, suspicions remained regarding expensive hardware, software, and e-learning packages. It will be interesting to see whether, in the long-run, the increased awareness about the complexity and benefits of online learning will be taken into account in future in Africa (and elsewhere) as a result of COVID-19.

The use of computers and digital facilities has also long been considered a requirement for T&I education in many non-African countries. Access to a high-tech environment is in fact considered necessary in order to provide a forum where students can develop different types of skills, which come under the umbrella term known as ‘translation and interpreting competence’ in different academic publications (Kalina 2000; EMT Expert

Group 2009). This includes—amongst other aspects—using technological tools for translation and interpreting, thereby developing technological competence, as well as competencies for information mining, and translation and interpreting service provision in general (Oyetoyan 2016: 59, see also EMT Expert Group 2009: 4; PACTE 2003: 58-60; Göpferich 2009: 21; Rothwell and Svoboda 2019).

Although technological competence is also developed to some extent in a number of T&I programmes on the African continent, some still question whether there remains a disjuncture between theoretical knowledge acquired in class and practical knowledge used in the field (e.g., Mombe 2020: 188). Marais and Luchner (2020: 3) also highlight that, in Africa, “technology is predominantly taught as a skill to enhance interlingual translation with little thinking about digital humanities and the multimodality implications of recent developments in communication technology.” Translation and technological competence in African universities is therefore likely to be interpreted and applied quite differently compared to the rest of the world.

In addition to the rapid developments in virtual teaching methods, online platforms, and required translator competences, the digital age and the influx of new technology in non-African contexts created the need for a continuous expansion of knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the modern T&I industry (Nitzke *et al.* 2019; Marczak 2018). This has inevitably influenced the educational sector, as job market requirements are constantly changing, thus enforcing a continuous assessment of market demands for T&I skills, and regular adjustments being made to the T&I curriculum. Oyetoyan (2016), for instance, reports on lessons from translation teaching and practice in Germany to inform the development of vocational translation in Nigeria. The author argues for a closer integration of professional skills in T&I training in both contexts, thus demonstrating that the challenge of continuous skills updating is a key concern for translator trainers.

In the Global North, the COVID-19 pandemic engendered a number of rapid developments, one of which was the shift to emergency remote teaching. Many institutions transitioned relatively quickly and smoothly from traditional classroom teaching to teaching completely online or, eventually, to some kind of blended learning approach. A few examples of the transition that took place in non-African T&I training is provided below to illustrate the responses of several educational institutions to the pandemic. These institutions are based in three continents/four countries, namely: Canada, Germany, Indonesia and Norway. Although they are not necessarily representative of changes that took place across the globe, they provide an indication of how the process unfolded. It should be noted that those examples were selected due to the ease of access to necessary information.

First, at Laval University in Canada, a number of courses were already being taught virtually, either partly or completely, long before the first lockdown was declared. Therefore, transitioning to full virtual teaching and learning during the lockdown did not pose many technical or other problems for content delivery (e.g., Université Laval 2020). Similarly, online searches revealed that a German university and some universities in Norway with T&I programmes had discontinued in-person teaching and swiftly moved classes online in response to the pandemic. Where students have had to attend class sessions physically, the number of participants was significantly reduced in order to allow for social distancing in line with infection prevention rules (e.g., University of Leipzig 2020/2021).

The Global North was clearly able to exploit and leverage its technological resources and thus quickly adapted T&I training to prevailing societal realities. The practical courses for introducing CAT tools to students during the pandemic are of particular interest, providing an example that African universities with T&I programmes may consider and adapt for their learning and teaching environments, should the resources become available. At the University of Leipzig, for instance, according to the e-mail response from an anonymous informant-educator, student licences were acquired for each registered student, so that they could practise the use of the tools from home and meet course requirements. For each of the CAT tools being introduced to the students, the lecturer recorded a video teaching session, showing practical steps, and uploaded this on the LMS authorised by the university, BigBlueButton. Although clearly a time-consuming task for the teachers, and probably not entirely without some setbacks along the way, it is useful to illustrate that both the technology and the means were available to transfer the learning opportunities from one setting to another almost seamlessly.

A report by Akmaliah *et al.* (2020) on translation classes that were held online at the Indonesian university UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung reveals another interesting way that translator training was adapted to meet the challenge of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Using a combination of (1) the mobile application 'WhatsApp', (2) the LMS provided by the university, and (3) Zoom web conferencing, the university was able to continue delivering their translator training despite problems associated with data quota and internet signal problems. Lecturers and students used the mobile application for classroom and group discussions; translation assignments and documents were sent through chats; and explanations and presentations were made using voice notes (Akmaliah *et al.* 2020: 17). It is interesting to discover that the mobile application 'WhatsApp' may be used as a learning social medium. As Carr and Hayes (2015: 50) note, social media allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present in a way that also enables them to derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. Hence, should the need arise, social media could be adapted for educational purposes more widely, including in T&I training.

Having presented some key features of the pre- and post-pandemic T&I training in non-African contexts, we will now provide a brief account of some relevant aspects of T&I training in Africa before the pandemic.

3. Pre-COVID-19 T&I training in Africa: a short overview

T&I training in Africa dates as far back as the post-independence era. According to Bandia (2005: 958), during the first two decades post-independence, most African translators and interpreters were being sponsored by their countries' governments to be trained abroad, particularly in Europe and North America. However, the turn of the century marked a change in this trend, especially with the establishment, in 1985, of the first professional translator and interpreter training school in Cameroon — the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) of the University of Buea.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, one major watershed moment in relation to the training of translators and interpreters in Africa was the creation, in 2011, of the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpreting and Translation (PAMCIT), an initiative of the Directorates of Translation and Interpretation of the European Union, in collaboration with the African Union (AU) (see section 1). The training curricula used by the five universities are similar and, most importantly, embrace the four official languages of the African Union (see Afolabi 2018).

According to Okagbue (2017: 21-23), PAMCIT had 120 new students in master's programmes, and one student in a PhD programme, across the five universities as of July 2017. There were 59 students on internships with various bodies such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), African Development Bank (AfDB), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Pan-African Parliament, International Criminal Court (ICC), and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Okagbue (2017: 27) also reports that there are about 60 graduates of the programme who are gainfully employed as translators and/or interpreters in various organisations. These figures attest to the growing demand for professionally trained translators and interpreters across the continent.

Beyond the PAMCIT network, it is important to note that while many universities across Africa offer translation courses as part of their foreign languages curricula, some, such as the University of Port Harcourt, the Pan-African University, etc., offer specialised MA and/or PhD programmes. Our focus in this article is on these specialised Translation/Interpreting programmes.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a few published reports and articles which revealed the different modes of delivery prevalent in different

parts of Africa: traditional, virtual, and blended. In Nigeria, for instance, reports revealed a lack of digital infrastructure, the result being that university learning mainly took place physically in the classroom (Olayiwola and Kudirat 2015: 27). In his discussion of the restructuring of translator education at the University of the Free State in South Africa, Marais (2008) refers—amongst other aspects—to students undertaking virtual practice on a computer screen requiring them to work within a simulated professional setup. From this, one might assume that the use of tools and virtual means in South Africa did not pose the same issues in terms of ICT facilities that tertiary institutions in Nigeria and elsewhere faced. In a more recent study, Luchner (2019) examined the context of interpreter training in Africa using two case studies from Kenya. The study revealed that there were limitations attached to the programmes investigated which “illustrate the need for a nuanced, contextualised and diversified approach to interpreter training in Africa, and the risks of a one-size-fits-all understanding of interpreting” (Luchner 2019: 4). These observations seem to corroborate what Marais and Luchner (2020: 3) noted in relation to the underexploitation of technology in many African translation classrooms. The picture that emerges from pre-pandemic research and publications on T&I training in Africa is therefore a patchy one, something which will be further explored in section 5.

4. Research methodology

In order to analyse and understand the situation regarding T&I training in the countries covered by this study, we administered two separate online Google questionnaires to translator trainees and trainers, respectively. With these questionnaires, we aimed to collect information on available T&I programmes and how they were being taught before and during the COVID-19 lockdown, in order to gain insight into the impact of the pandemic in Africa and the transition to remote teaching. See Appendix 1 for the links to the two questionnaires.

The questionnaires were administered over a period of one month, precisely from September 4 to October 4, 2020. To ensure as wide a circulation of the questionnaires as possible, we employed various communication media, which included available personal email addresses, professional and general social media platforms (such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn and relevant Facebook groups). The number of respondents reached via these various means was approximately 50 educators and 100 students. Overall, despite a number of reminders, a total of 14 students and 6 educators completed and submitted the questionnaires. Although the low response rate was disappointing, it was not entirely unexpected due to the limited timeframe within which the study was carried out. As a case study, however, the findings can still be considered revealing and somewhat indicative of aspects of the developing situation in the specific countries under study. While we recognize the exploratory nature of the study, it could be a useful starting point for further research.

In view of the limited number of responses, we adopted a narrative approach (Riessman 1993) in reporting and analysing the collated data with a focus on the areas of interest to the present study. The results gathered from the responses of the two categories of participants are presented below. It should be noted that, for confidentiality purposes as required by research ethical standards and regulations, information regarding the identity of respondents is not disclosed.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Biodata of respondents: Students and educators

Respondents were asked to provide information about their countries of residence.

Respondents' countries of residence

As shown in Table 1 below, the 14 student-respondents are spread over 5 countries, as follows: Benin - 4, Cameroon – 6, Nigeria – 2, Senegal – 1, Togo 1. From the collected data, we note that Cameroon seems to have a higher concentration of T&I students, perhaps due to its long history of, and interest in, translator and interpreter training (Bandia 2005). Table 1 also shows that the majority of the respondents in the educator category are from Nigeria (4) while we have one respondent each from Cameroon and Senegal. It is however important to note that responses are too few and, therefore, cannot be representative or generalised but are more of a snapshot of the situation.

Respondents' countries	Students	Educators
	No. of respondents	No. of respondents
Republic of Benin	4	0
Cameroon	6	1
Nigeria	2	4
Senegal	1	1
Togo	1	0
Total	14	6

Table 1. Respondents' countries of residence

Programme of study/teaching

Students and educators were asked to specify their programmes of study or area of teaching respectively. The given options were 'Translation', 'Interpreting', or 'Both'. Responses showed that there are no students studying interpreting only, and that more students were registered in translation only programmes than in programmes that included both T&I. The majority (6) of the educators who responded taught translation, and one answered that they were teaching both translation and interpreting. This was somewhat surprising and indicated the possibility that there might be more translation teachers in the countries listed in Table 1 than interpreting teachers.

Appendices 2 and 3 provide a complete list of respondents' institutions.

Level of study

Student-respondents were mainly MA students (11), though a few BA students (3) also took part in the study. This could be an indication that MA students were more likely to engage in a questionnaire on T&I training, or it could be an indication that most T&I programmes in the geographical contexts covered provide full MA degrees. In fact, this is in line with the wider literature which highlights that a majority of T&I professional training on the African continent takes place at the postgraduate level (Afolabi 2018; Mombe 2020). As previously noted, undergraduate foreign languages studies in university departments may have some elements of translation in their programmes, but specialised professional T&I training is offered mostly at the postgraduate level.

5.2 Pre-COVID-19 T&I training situation

The responses gathered through the survey confirmed that, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many T&I training programmes involved mainly in-person or face-to-face teaching, and that virtual classes and online learning methods were not commonly used.

Among the 14 student-respondents, 8 stated that the traditional classroom method of teaching was the general practice before the lockdowns, 3 respondents mentioned that they were making use of virtual learning platforms only, while 3 students answered that they were learning through a combination of both in-person and virtual methods. As for the educators, 5 respondents mentioned using the traditional classroom (in person) before the outbreak of the pandemic, while 1 respondent was using a combination of both in-person and online teaching. None of the educators had been teaching mainly/only online.

Students and educators were asked to state the materials and tools they were using to learn or teach prior to the pandemic. The question was open-

ended to enable respondents to answer in their own words and unconstrained by a specific set of options. Their responses are listed in Table 2 as follows:

Tools and materials used for learning and teaching prior to the pandemic		
Individual respondent	Students	Educators
1	Textbooks and reference materials	Vinay et Darbelnet's <i>Stylistique comparée de l'anglais et du français</i> .
2	YouTube	Online CAT
3	No	Not applicable
4	Google classroom	Textbooks, whiteboard
5	Phone and laptop	Books and white board
6	None	Classes, WhatsApp, computer
7	None	
8	Classical classrooms	
9	Zoom, WhatsApp	
10	Competency Based Approach (CBA)	
11	Traditional	
12	Computer	
13	Courses, assignments and final examination	
14	Social media (WhatsApp, Zoom)	

Table 2: Tools and materials used by respondents prior to the pandemic

Since it would be difficult to learn or teach T&I without any teaching material, the responses of three students and one educator were difficult to interpret. A student-respondent mentioned the "Competency-based approach. Apart from that, it is noteworthy that, out of the 20 respondents, 2 educators and 6 students referred to using some form of online tools/materials while the 12 others did not.

5.3 Situation during the pandemic

Moving on from what the situation was like before the lockdown, it now seems useful to explore the situation participants faced during the lockdown. To find out, educators were asked whether or not they taught T&I during the lockdown. Only 2 of the 6 respondents said they continued teaching T&I during the lockdown, while the rest did not. In view of the above-mentioned relatively smooth transition from traditional classroom teaching to teaching online noted in section 2, this finding indicates a marked contrast. Indeed, T&I teaching in a number of African countries seems to have been hindered as a result of the lockdown. Although the reasons why the majority of respondents did not teach during this period were not provided, one might assume that there was some level of disruption and perhaps a different impact of the pandemic in African countries compared to elsewhere.

The students' answers to the question of whether or not they continued learning virtually during the lockdown was also quite revealing. Seven students indicated that they did not take any T&I courses during the lockdown period, while seven others stated that they still had lectures. This mixed picture can be understood in light of the confusion that surrounded the start of the pandemic. In some countries such as Cameroon, the lockdown caused hesitation and paralysis in the education sector and emergent challenges generated by the crisis simply added to existing ones of educational inequalities (Béché 2020). In some countries such as Benin, despite the lack of government directive to suspend activities in schools, some suspended them on their own (Reimers and Schleicher 2020). In light of the case study data showing that half of the students did not attend any classes, it is interesting to reflect on the potential consequences of the lockdowns for T&I education. Although lockdown periods in the countries in the present study varied in length, if a significant number of students were not trained for weeks or months, this could affect the supply of qualified graduates into the respective T&I labour markets. Also, as Tinsoba succinctly puts it: "This pandemic has exposed the weakness in our T&I training which is the non-inclusion of modules on remote interpreting and its allied applications, which should expose trainee translators and interpreters to remote interpreting technologies" (2020: 6, our translation).

We also sought to find out which tools were used for learning during the lockdown (for the student-respondents who continued to receive lectures).

The list below shows the media mentioned:

- YouTube
- Microsoft Teams
- Google classroom
- Zoom
- WhatsApp.

The two teachers who reported that they continued teaching during the lockdown also mentioned Zoom and Microsoft Teams as the main tools or media they used for teaching. This echoes trends in terms of translation teaching in other countries across the world (e.g. Shuttleworth 2020), although initial concerns over security with the Zoom platform have meant that a number of institutions opted for alternative software, or provided additional security guidance for Zoom users. While it is unclear whether the teachers in the present study were provided with such guidance, it is perhaps unlikely since cyber-security is not necessarily a priority in many African countries (Sawahel 2020). As Sawahel notes, the pandemic and subsequent rapid switch to online education forced African universities to adopt unfamiliar technology with limited time to assess risks and no legislation or protection regarding cyber-security. In this vein, raising awareness of information security issues amongst educators (in Africa and elsewhere) would probably be a useful post-pandemic lesson for universities.

In the survey, teachers were also asked to share their positive and negative experiences while teaching online during the lockdown. The following points were mentioned:

Positive experience

- Certain practical aspects of the course are better explained and illustrated online, especially when using specialised resources.

Negative experiences or challenges

- Lack of closer control and monitoring of students' practical work and feedback.
- Poor internet network.
- Poor mastery of the ICT tools.

Although we find the positive experience mentioned quite encouraging, the challenges encountered deserve greater attention. The comments revealed some of the gaps which this study seeks to identify, so that practical solutions might be sought. We shall therefore address the three challenges mentioned in turn:

1. Lack of closer control and monitoring of students' practical work and feedback: This concern mirrors those of lecturers in other countries who also struggled to moderate students' learning activities in a virtual classroom environment (see Shuttleworth 2020). However, bearing in mind the fact that online learning pre-COVID-19 was not prevalent in many African countries, the sudden change brought about unexpectedly by the lockdown is likely to have increased the sense of a lack of control. The additional work that the transition to online teaching entailed for teachers around the world is already well-documented (Mishra *et al.* 2020). The fact that the transition was

abrupt, without prior adequate preparations either on the part of the teachers or that of the students, placed higher demands on both parties in terms of the amount of time required to make the transition successful. The issue of monitoring students may have been felt more intensely because using virtual media for teaching was a new or relatively alien experience for many, and something for which the teachers were not fully prepared.

2. Poor internet network: As previously noted, there was a lack of digital infrastructure pre-pandemic in many tertiary institutions in Africa (Olayiwola and Kudirat 2015). In many African countries, including some of the ones covered in this study, stable electricity and internet connection is still a major challenge (Béché 2020). The lack of digital infrastructure goes some way towards explaining why some T&I programmes could not transition smoothly from in-person to virtual learning as soon as the lockdowns commenced.
3. Poor mastery of the ICT tools: The teacher's comment regarding ICT tool mastery could relate either to their own (low) competence in this area, or to their students'. On one hand, it could be that students partway through completing a face-to-face T&I programme found it difficult to use or be taught to use ICT tools at a distance; however, students are often called "digital natives" and their ICT skills are generally thought to be quite developed (Verhoeven *et al.* 2020). On the other hand, if educators are not well versed or knowledgeable in the use of ICT tools themselves, they would probably also find it difficult to cope with teaching these in a virtual environment (Tinsoba 2020: 6). Training African educators in ICT has been a long-standing issue, and ICT adoption and integration in teaching is still relatively basic. For instance, in a study of educators' ability to integrate technology in South African classrooms, Mashile (2017) found that educators were generally ill-prepared to impart digital skills to learners. Going forward, it would be interesting to further explore whether the pandemic might influence African universities to invest in ICT training, and whether there might have been a transformation of sorts in terms of attitudes towards the technology.

Student-respondents who had the opportunity to experience some form of virtual learning during the lockdown were also asked to share their positive experiences. These are their responses:

- More capacity to deliver.
- It was great to have been able to continue our class during the lockdown, but we succeeded doing it (sic).
- I was able to work via online platforms I was not friendly to (sic).
- I learned new terms.
- I've come to know the existence of Google Classroom and learn more in using Zoom.

- Using the computer to learn and to do documentary research.
- Nothing to say.
- Independent and more focused because I was left on my own, so I had to choose the right way for me.
- It enhanced my level and soar widely my knowledge (sic).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the student-respondents generally appreciated the experience. The transition online allowed the students to discover new tools and resources that they were previously unaware of, some of which translation professionals would probably employ quite regularly, such as online platforms. As Béch  (2020) highlights, the development of techno-pedagogical skills is essential for ensuring quality education, both in crises and in "normal" times. As such, it will be interesting to see whether distance education and its associated digital skills will receive more institutional attention in terms of teaching T&I students in Africa, or if the end of the pandemic will signal a return to traditional teaching methods which may be less well-suited to professional requirements.

Finally, students were asked to comment on the challenges they encountered as part of their virtual learning experience during the lockdown. Some common aspects mentioned are reported verbatim as follows:

- Inability to practice
- Weak connection
- Difficulty to master them (the tools or platforms)
- Unavailability of teachers most of the time
- Difficulties to always attend classes due to electricity problems (low batteries)
- Spending more money for data, and the mobile network was not always good
- Lack or absence of internet network.

The unavailability of teachers (or other students) which may lead students to feel isolated and disconnected in the virtual learning environment is an issue that can be experienced by students in online learning environments worldwide. Social isolation can lead to attrition, and the development of ways to mitigate this has been a long-standing area of research in distance education. For instance, Stone and Springer (2019) found that student retention is greatly improved when there is an online 'teacher presence', combined with a supportive and engaging online teaching and learning environment which is also inclusive and interactive, providing students with lots of opportunities to engage. The other challenges raised by students in the present study relate more specifically to the previously mentioned ICT and network issues.

6. Post-COVID-19: Towards innovation in T&I training in Africa

In some ways, the COVID-19 experience has offered opportunities for the future since it exposed aspects relating to T&I training that probably were not so sustainable. For instance, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, many programmes were delivered in traditional classrooms. Although some online programmes already existed, this study, in section 5.2, revealed that training sessions were largely carried out in traditional classrooms. The pandemic clearly brought to light the fact that online learning is something to invest in for education to continue in the face of an unpredictable future.

Although there are differences in the virtual learning facilities that each country or continent offers, all have had to adapt their T&I training to the pandemic challenges that came in 2020 and most have introduced working alternatives to traditional classroom learning. The different choices made in the different countries also revealed the varied economic capacities of each. For instance, while there seems to be no issue with access to larger bandwidths for stable internet connection in countries like Canada, Germany and Norway, the report by Akmalayah *et al.* (2020) on Indonesian universities and the responses in the present case study in different African countries, show that there have been real issues resulting from unstable internet connections in some parts of the world. In spite of this problem, learning has often been taking place online through the use of more accessible and creative means, such as mobile messaging applications which were not initially designed as learning platforms. However, in many ways, the lack of resources in many African universities and in other parts of the world has laid bare the existing digital divide.

In view of the above, we are of the opinion that there is a need to reflect on the context of T&I training in the African countries from this study, and identify areas for strategic development. In order to do this, we offer the following recommendations, derived from our review of extant literature, and our analysis of the data gathered in this preliminary study by means of the afore-mentioned survey.

1. Increasing the development and implementation of a hybrid approach (or blended learning) by combining both online and in person modes of teaching: The COVID-19 experience demonstrated that we need to be better prepared for an unpredictable future. Had hybrid methods been in practice more widely, transitioning to online teaching/learning would not have posed as many issues as we have discovered in the contexts under study. It seems that many educational institutions in Africa were caught unprepared, hence it was difficult to continue the teaching and learning process during lockdown. Going forward, a proactive step for the education sector in African nations will be to invest in and begin combining both in-person and online modes of teaching. While we acknowledge that there are potential systemic issues to be addressed, we are strongly convinced that these could

be overcome with determination and political/institutional willpower. As Wehrmeyer and Inggs (2021) observe, translation is still a fledgling field in many parts of Africa, but the discipline is growing, particularly in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, and Senegal. With this growth, there could be additional innovation combined with investment in digital infrastructures.

2. Incorporating additional technology-based course contents: Rothwell and Svoboda (2019: 27) consider the mastery of more than two translation software as a competitive advantage for translators. We, therefore, suggest the inclusion of more courses or course content focusing on the use and management of translation and interpreting technology in the training curriculum, Computer-aided Translation (CAT) tools, specifically. The suggestion of one of the research respondents also corroborates this point of view: "T&I Schools in Africa should consider the growing environment and adapt [...] to the new technologies of information and communication." We would also like to advocate for a general review or overhaul of the curricula for T&I training in the countries in this study, with a view to making them reflect the realities of 21st century T&I needs and, in essence, increase the global competitiveness and employability of the graduates of T&I programmes in Africa.
3. Training and retraining of T&I trainers: It is important that those who educate future translators and interpreters in the use of technology must have themselves been trained in the first place. Training the trainers is therefore an essential requirement to increase their familiarity with technology and its inherent risks, especially in light of the fact that trainers in the present study experienced a number of difficulties which were compounded by their lack of understanding of the capabilities of technology. Both students and their teachers would benefit from learning the techno-pedagogical skills that Béché (2020) promotes.
4. Providing access to reliable internet connection: One common and major challenge in the reactions and observations of all the study respondents was that of poor internet connection and unstable electricity supply, which made online teaching and learning very difficult, if not impossible in the countries under study. It is difficult to see how the African continent can achieve the kind of technological catch-up that You *et al.* (2020) discuss without resolving this basic issue. Improving this one element would help to pave the way for more accessible education. As Olayiwola and Kudirat (2015: 31) highlight, there is a need for government at both state/provincial and federal levels to invest in adequate infrastructure, possibly with private-public partnerships (PPP). Decision makers in these contexts need to prioritise making good and reliable internet connection available and affordable for the entire population, most especially for

students and teachers, not only within school environments but also in their homes.

5. Prioritising the use of asynchronous learning and teaching option: As mentioned in section 2, amongst other things, this form of online learning allows flexible access to learning materials with no time-zone constraints and no requirement to be present online at a particular time or place. We suggest that this option may currently be more suited to T&I training in Africa, while efforts are being made to provide reliable internet facilities for learning. Our preliminary results also show that the mobile application WhatsApp can provide both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning opportunities. This option can help alleviate some of the other issues raised in this study (workload, isolation) due to the flexibility, active learning, and strong sense of connection that well-designed asynchronous learning can enable.

7. Conclusion

T&I training in African countries is still in its developing stages as the results of our preliminary study revealed. For a long period of time, teaching and learning have only been associated with traditional classroom settings. While the educational sector in the developed world 'effortlessly' combines both face-to-face teaching and learning in virtual environments, several African nations still struggle to find practical solutions that will enable online learning to take place unimpeded. As shown in our study, in many places, teaching and learning have become even more challenging in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this preliminary study and our review of extant literature, we have provided some initial observations in relation to virtual learning in a number of African countries. The results from this study represent the groundwork for obtaining important insights into delivery issues and opportunities in T&I training before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in five countries. While we acknowledge that the findings of this study are not representative enough to make any generalisations, they provide interesting insights and can be used to formulate hypotheses and guide future work in these under-researched areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have paved the way for a reorientation of learning and teaching within T&I in African settings. Although both online and blended learning modes have recently become the norm in T&I training in the Global North, the pandemic currently conditions T&I stakeholders in Africa to chart a new course, one that can enable continued access to learning in synchronous and asynchronous virtual environments outside the traditional classroom. This contribution aimed to add a much-needed African perspective on the impact of Covid-19 on T&I education and training. We hope that it will inspire further research on this topic in the African context in years to come.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaires

[RESEARCH SURVEY FOR TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING STUDENTS](#)

[RESEARCH SURVEY FOR TRANSLATOR/INTERPRETER TRAINERS](#)

Appendix 2: Institutions of Respondents to Students' Questionnaire

1. Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria
2. Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) Buea, Cameroon
3. Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) Buea, Cameroon
4. Higher Institute of Translation, Interpretation and Communication (ISTIC), Cameroon
5. Institut supérieur de traduction, d'interprétation et communication (ISTIC), Cameroon
6. ISTIC, Cameroon
7. Linguaspirit International School, Togo
8. UAC Abomey-Calavi, Benin
9. UAC/FLLAC/ANGLAIS/MASTER II, Benin
10. University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin
11. University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin
12. University of Lagos, Nigeria
13. Université Gaston Berger, Senegal
14. University of Yaoundé, Cameroon

Appendix 3: Institutions of Respondents to Educators' Questionnaire

1. Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria
2. CleverTrans, Cameroon
3. Ekiti State University, Nigeria
4. Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria
5. University of Benin, Nigeria
6. Université Gaston Berger, Senegal

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