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## Polyphony as a Transformative Factor in Solopreneurship Education of Language Specialists

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to demonstrate that the notion of multiple voices (polyphony) is a powerful educational idea that can bring value to translator education programmes. Based on a class dedicated to the entrepreneurial functioning of MA students in translation, the article strives to show how polyphony can be entrenched in class content and classroom dynamics. It is argued that polyphony can empower students' informed approach to career choices. The empirical part discusses the responses from the class participants in 2023 concerning their perception of the modes of work they find most attractive. Conclusions outline areas for enhancements in class content and classroom dynamics.

### KEYWORDS

multiple voices; polyphony; transformative learning; entrepreneurial attitudes; modes of work

### 1. Introduction

This article aims to demonstrate that the notion of polyphony, that is an alignment of multiple voices in the translation classroom – as proposed by González Davies (2004) – represents a powerful educational metaphor, helping to construe translator education in terms of shared spaces (Klimkowski, 2015), necessary to empowering transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003). The case in point is a class dedicated to entrepreneurial (solopreneurial) functioning of MA students in translation (as a professional education profile in the 2-year MA course in applied linguistics) held at the Department of Applied Linguistics, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. In its initial part, the article outlines the notions of multiple voices and polyphony. Then, polyphony is characterised as conducive to transformative learning. What follows is the analysis of the class elements and classroom interaction in search for the polyphonic elements. Transformative aspects of class polyphony are identified. With these categories in mind, the article discusses how the participants of the first edition of the class in 2023 perceive pros and cons of three modes of work as language specialists: in-housing, hybrid

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and freelancing/solopreneurship. Research results bring insight into the degree of polyphony students can experience in-class (input polyphony). Of equal significance is to see how much polyphony can be found in the students' reflection on career functioning. The latter is of particular value for enhancing the quality of the participants' educational (developmental) experience.

## 2. Polyphony in Translator Education

The notion of polyphony as we adopt in this article draws upon the concept of multiple voices, introduced to translator education by González Davies (2004). In her characterisation of the concept, González Davies states as follows:

Multiple voices should be heard in the classroom: those of the teachers and the students, as well as those of different theorists and researchers, and those of the practitioners and initiators. New paths should be explored instead of keeping to one approach to translation or to its teaching. At this point, it is not only a question of encouraging the translators' visibility, but also of giving support to these other voices. (pp. 4–5)

González Davies outlines a translator pedagogy based on *hearing the multiple voices*, which can be interpreted in terms of *giving support to the voices* – the power to decide to stakeholders, whose presence is necessary for a *re-construction* of the translation classroom: from the enclosed space for a unidirectional flow of knowledge and power distribution towards a space *shared* (cf. Klimkowski, 2015) by *voices* (agents with power to decide). Neither the knowledge, nor its sources are taken for granted on the sole premise of teachers' expertise, but are a subject to reiterative negotiations between the stakeholders (Király, 2019). Polyphony critically relies on sources of knowledge, its legitimacy and credibility reaching beyond the classical classroom. The polyphonic classroom is governed by the efforts to align voices of all the stakeholders, with their right to pursue distinctive, autonomous learning trajectories.

Under the interpretation adopted in this article, the following basic types of *voice alignment* can be – based on González Davies (2004) – distinguished:

1. *Voices of teachers and (facilitators, negotiators, moderators of classroom dynamics) and students (explorers, negotiators, peer learners/teachers etc.)*

This appears to be a core type of polyphony that conditions the others. For González Davies (2004), the teacher's role is that of a “guide, counsellor, informer and evaluator” (p. 17). Their role is to scaffold the classroom environment to inspire “learning through negotiation and experimentally” (p. 17), which necessitates that the classroom becomes “a discussion forum and a hands-on workshop” (p. 18). For the sake of simplicity, in what follows we refer to this type of voice alignment in terms of *level 1 polyphony*.

2. *Voices resultant from different learning styles and ways of functioning*

The relations between the teachers and students in level 1 polyphony need to take into account the diversity of learning needs, allowing all sorts of individual

learning trajectories. This type of polyphony covers respect to diverse “learner styles, teacher styles and translator styles,” allowing them to develop learner autonomy, and mobilising students’ potential (pp. 17–18). This type of voice alignment is *level 2 polyphony*. It can be a challenge in learning contexts suffering from excessive formalization of the learning process, often accompanied with a bureaucratic and positivist belief that competences (learning outcomes) should mean the same to everyone in the classroom.

3. *Voices of the other participants of the learning ecosystem: education and translation theorists, industry practitioners*

Successful construction of polyphony at the two prior levels allows inviting voices from outside the academia, “[e]stablishing contact with the outside world by means of projects which involve professional translators” to learn through meaningful engagement in real life tasks enabling authentic professional experience (p. 18).

Polyphony as outlined here – and derived directly from González Davies (2004)’s idea of multiple voices in translation classroom – is not a static phenomenon. Voices come, continue or go. One polyphony needs to empower other polyphonies. For the purposes of this study, we are going to distinguish between *input polyphonies* and *output polyphonies*. Input polyphonies are those planned by the teacher in the class content and foreseen in the classroom dynamics. Output polyphonies are derivative from the stakeholders’ interaction with input polyphonies.

### 3. Polyphony as a Transformative Factor

In the simplest terms, progress from input to output polyphonies is a form of learning. Taking into account the complex voice alignment processes and meaning negotiations that are part of polyphonic classroom dynamics, one can claim that learning through polyphony is highly likely to be transformative.

In fact, the transformative powers of multiple voices approach are highlighted by (González Davies, 2004, pp. 15–16), where she makes an overt reference to the conception of transformative learning, as introduced to translator education by Kiraly (2000). In his seminal work, Kiraly builds the main argument on a dichotomy between transmissionist and social constructivist views of how people learn. Advocating for the latter, Kiraly quotes Miller & Seller (1985), who explore a dichotomy between transmissionist and transformation perspectives in educational thought.

The dichotomies listed above illustrate a stark contrast between the transmissionist and the transformational epistemologies, irrespective of the fact that some statements in the table can be problematic even if approached from a radical (social-)constructivist angle (for discussion on radical constructivism and the transformative views held by Kiraly, 2000 and Miller & Seller, 1985, see

Table 1. The transmission vs. transformation perspective in education – based on Miller and Seller (1985), quoted after (Kiraly, 2000, p. 22)

<b>Transmission Perspective</b>	<b>Transformation Perspective</b>
Knowledge is transferred	Knowledge is constructed
Learner is a student and client	Learner is a whole person
Teacher should be in control	Student should be in control
Knowledge is public	Knowledge is private
Motivation is extrinsic	Motivation is intrinsic
Learning is molecular	Learning is holistic
Learning characteristics are shared	Every learner is unique
Learning is individual	Learning is social
Knowledge is content	Knowledge is process

e.g. Klimkowski, 2015). In the optics adopted in this article, the transformative power of polyphony can perhaps be even better illustrated by reference to Mezirow (2003) – the author of the concept of transformative learning. In one of his later works, he explains that learning has the potential to transform “problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). When transformed, “such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (pp. 58–59). According to Mezirow (2003), the mechanism to inspire transformative learning is dialogue:

Discourse here refers to dialogue involving the assessment of beliefs, feelings and values. Discourse involves topics referred to from the point of view of a particular frame of reference. Justification of a proposition must be assessed in relation to the particular frames of reference applied. To take the perspective of another involves and intrapersonal process, drawing on the information one has about the speaker to form a mode of the other. Perspective taking also involves an interpersonal dimension, using feedback to adapt messages to the other’s perspective. (pp. 59–60)

It stands to reason to assume that aligning multiple voices in (translator) education critically depends on this type of dialogical interaction. Dialogue is crucial to Mezirow’s concept as it underlies his view of communicative learning:

Communicative learning refers to understanding what someone means when they communicate with you. This understanding includes becoming aware of the assumptions, intentions and qualifications of the person communicating [...]. (p. 59)

In his understanding of communicative learning, Mezirow (2003) depends on Habermas (1984) and his claim that communicative learning is in a dialectical relation to instrumental learning:

The distinction between instrumental and communicative learning is fundamental. In instrumental learning, the developmental logic is hypothetical-deductive, and empirical methods are more often appropriate for research. For communicative learning, the developmental logic involves analogic-abductive inference. Abductive reasoning is reasoning from concrete instances to an abstract conceptualization. To understand communicative learning, qualitative research methods are often more appropriate. (p. 59)

In what follows, we attempt to show how the concept of voice alignment or polyphony can benefit all the stakeholders in the educational process. Our case in point is education of MA students of translation as regards entrepreneurship and language service provision.

#### **4. Solopreneur Academy: Class Outline**

Subject to this study is a class dedicated to Translation Service Provision Competence (EMT, 2009, 2022; Klimkowska & Klimkowski, 2015; Kujamäki, 2020, 2021). Other concepts addressing this broad thematic area include entrepreneurship training (Galán-Mañas et al., 2020; Klimkowska, 2014; Klimkowska & Klimkowski, 2020); entrepreneurial competence (Lackéus, 2015); professional competence(s) (Eskelinen & Pakkala-Weckström, 2016; Koskinen, 2020) or business and people skills (Koskinen, 2020). Though they can classify under diverse umbrella terms, skills and competences of this kind are a regular part of academic translator education. The class offered at the Department of Applied Linguistics at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin covers four main thematic components, which relate best to the language service provision (LSP) market in Poland. The components pursue the following educational objective•

learning to construct one's own service portfolio as based on one's service strategy;

- adopting an optimal business model to pursue one's strategy;
- launching and managing one's business; assessing and reviewing its objectives;
- attracting and retaining clients, developing a branding and a communication strategy.

The class consists of 10 regular workshops devoted to a wide selection of issues within the above content areas. The remaining 5 meetings are workshops held by class partners: industry experts, solopreneurs or representatives of organisations functioning on the LSP market.

Apart from these two main lines of activity, students can (optionally) accept two kinds of teamwork tasks:

- social media tasks: students provide LinkedIn coverage of class activities (research, post preparation, review, post publication). The class is branded as *Solopreneur Academy* and has its dedicated group on *LinkedIn* ([linkedin.com/groups/9316130](https://www.linkedin.com/groups/9316130));
- study tasks: students prepare and deliver in-class presentations devoted to a topic they pick from the list. The list contains topics that delve deeper into issues discussed at the regular classroom workshops, though often in a rudimentary way. For example, the diversification of tax schemes in Poland is only briefly sketched in the classroom, and a dedicated study task allows students to seek more information about diverse criteria for tax reduction or exemption in the case of individually run businesses.

The class ends with an examination featuring two main components:

- the theoretical part, where knowledge is evaluated through an oral presentation of three topics that students pick at random. The list of topics is made available to students at the beginning of the semester. In fact, the list covers issues that are similar to the ones used for the study tasks and presentations. Students are exempt from the theoretical exam if they engage in either of the tasks specified above;
- the practical part is an individual portfolio, in which students complete 5 tasks corresponding to the four content components. The tasks are available to students at the beginning of the semester, and are explained at the concluding meetings for each content component. This allows students to choose whether to complete the portfolio systematically, step by step, or treat it as one task. The tasks are open-ended – there are no key words, hints or close-ended items included. In other words, students get empty tables to fill in information completely on their own. The only specification is the mode of work for each table. Each table has two main columns: for advantages and disadvantages of a given mode. Below the tables, there is an instruction for students to mark their most favourable mode of work.

## 5. Solopreneur Academy: Transformative Polyphonies

In the author's opinion, the framework of the class discussed in the previous section features at least four markers of transformative polyphony:

1. Task diversification: as can be inferred from the class outline above, the class design allows for task diversification as concerns main class components and the examination procedure. This caters for different student learning styles, allowing individualisation and autonomy. The latter qualities are of particular import for a course aspiring to empower transformative learning to facilitate students' emergence as professionals.
2. Task reality: although *Solopreneurship Academy* is a curricular, academic subject, the tasks it poses to stakeholders are out of the ivory tower. Firstly,

the portfolio task is intended to be a preliminary business plan. Secondly, the study tasks are to give students valid know-how to browse through the legal and economic environment of LSP provision in Poland. Thirdly, the *LinkedIn* task gives students a first-hand experience of how social media marketing works. Students are encouraged to repost or otherwise leverage the *Solopreneur Academy* material to start building their own brands.

3. Evaluation as dialogue: as discussed briefly above, the adopted exam evaluation procedure relies on a constructive interaction of instrumental learning (in that students complete the particular tasks) with communicative learning (when the students and the teacher enter into dialogic investigation, evaluation and operationalisation of the portfolios).
4. Guest input: the final polyphonic element are the voices of the Academy Partners. Their role is to expand the classroom polyphonic spectrum to cover industry narratives. The role of the students is to decide which of the voices, and to what extent, need to be aligned with their frames of reference, which of the voices are to be rejected, and which are an impulse for a learning transformation.

## **6. Modes of Work in Language Industry: Students' Perceptions**

In its 2023 edition, the class gathered 33 participants. As mentioned above, one of the examination tasks was to submit and discuss personal portfolios. They contained tasks correlated with the main thematic components of the class. One of the tasks (Task 3) asked students to explore their individual perceptions of advantages and drawbacks of each working mode discussed in-class: in-housing, hybrid and freelancing (solopreneurial) mode:

Task 3: Assess your favourite modes of work: in-housing, hybrid and freelancing/solopreneurship

The students were to explore all three options, but they were also told to indicate the mode they found most attractive. Out of 33 respondents, 21 expressed their preference for the hybrid mode, 10 for in-housing and 2 for freelancing/solopreneurship. Below, we present an analysis of how the respondents perceive the pros and cons of their preferred mode of work – as recorded in the portfolios they submitted. Since the hybrid mode was the most often reported choice, it begins data presentation. The data are anonymised, published on written consent from each student, issued prior to portfolio submission. The data are organised in three tables: each for one mode of work.

Table 2. Results for the hybrid mode as favourite

<b>HYBRID</b>		<b>TOTAL RESPONSES</b>	21
PROS		CONS	
income/work stability and flexibility	21	work load issues	19
project diversity	10	management issues	15
part-time related employee benefits and growth opportunities (promotion, pay rise)	10	conflict of interest between part-time job and service provision	15
greater autonomy	7	coordination, cooperation and communication issues	8
greater client network (relations)	7	work-life balance issues	7
reduced social security and tax burden	7	risk of burnout	5
skill development in both part-time and LSP	6	limited social interaction	3
options for client/ domain specialization	5	technology issues	3
limited risk of unemployment (discontinuity of work)	4	competition issues	2
reduced business risks (in contrast to freelancing / solopreneurship)	3	limited options for income increase or career change	1
more options for distant/hybrid work	3	sense of uncertainty	1
greater work-life balance	2	limited options for tasks and clients (in contrast to freelancing / solopreneurship)	1
full pension rights	2	lack of legal regulation	1
time management flexibility	2	limited flexibility (in contrast to freelancing / solopreneurship)	1
reduced operational and fixed costs (in contrast to freelancing / solopreneurship)	2	limited autonomy (in contrast to freelancing / solopreneurship)	1
better informed budget management	1	stress	1
higher bank credibility	1		
good test for the freelancing option	1		
diversified income	1		
more interest driven than in-housing	1		
professional recognition	1		
productivity increase	1		

21 respondents out of 33 pinpoint the hybrid mode of work as their first choice, and all of them signal that the main advantage is *income and work stability mixed with flexibility*. 10 students point out the advantage of *project diversity*, and an equal number is likely to enjoy *part-time employee benefits and growth*



*opportunities*. The list of all advantages mentioned by at least one student reaches 22, but the above mentioned 4 categories outnumber the others significantly.

The list of disadvantages, or weaknesses, acknowledged by the students in the hybrid mode covers 16 items. *Workload issues* are indicated as the strongest disadvantage (risk factor). It is chosen by 19 out of 21 students. 15 respondents indicate that *management issues* can be an operational problem for them, and an equal number of responses is recorded for *conflict of interest between part-time job and service provision*. The remaining 13 categories attract a smaller portion of voices than these main 3 ones.

Table 3. Results for the in-housing mode as favourite

IN-HOUSING		TOTAL RESPONSES	10
PROS		CONS	
financial stability	10	working environment issues (supervisors, co-workers)	8
employee benefits	9	limited autonomy, creativity	8
employment stability	6	boring tasks, monotony	6
weekends and holidays	6	risk of underpayment	4
promotion opportunities / pay rises	6	inflexible working hours	4
formalities managed by employer	5	flat income ceiling	3
social security covered	4	obligatory office work	2
social interaction, social skills, teamwork, collaboration	3	risk of being used	1
no need to seek clients	2	task preference is limited	1
flexible working hours	2	limited or no contact with clients	1
no business risks	2	need to identify with the company	1
access to jobs	2	limited time management options	1
labour law protection	2	growth/promotion opportunities depend on employer policies	1
development and training opportunities	2		
reduced costs	1		
no need to seek alternative sources of income	1		
predictable workload	1		
fewer duties and lower responsibility (in contrast to the other forms)	1		
predictable working hours	1		

Out of 33 respondents, 10 indicate that their preferred mode of work is in-housing. They list 19 advantages. *Financial stability* is perceived the superior advantage: it is highlighted by all 10 respondents. *Employee benefits* occurs 9

times. *Employment stability, weekends and holidays* as well as *promotion and pay rise opportunities* were noted by 6 students.

The list of perceived disadvantages of in-housing contains 13 items. The most problematic item for the respondents is *working environment issues*, with some students explicitly mentioning working under supervision, while others also addressing other workplace relations. *Limited autonomy* and *limited creativity* are listed in the category of disadvantages by 8 students. Other perceived problems were *boring tasks and monotony*, *risk of underpayment* or *inflexible working hours* (4 responses each).

Table 4. Results for the freelancing/solopreneurship mode as favourite

FREELANCING/SOLOPRENEURSHIP		TOTAL RESPONSES	
PROS		CONS	
professional autonomy	2	income uncertainty/irregularity	2
flexibility (place, time, workload)	2	management issues	2
project/client diversification	2	self-motivation issues	1
unconstrained income progression	2	no employee benefits	1
building entrepreneurial expertise	2	limited social interaction	1
building a brand	2	client management	1
skill diversification	1	workload issues	1
		stress	1
		pressure to develop	1

Only 2 responses opt for freelancing as their favourite. In both cases, the advantages include autonomy, flexibility, diversification, income progression, entrepreneurial expertise and branding. The disadvantages concern income instability and management issues. One student mentioned self-motivation as a potential disadvantage of freelancing.

## 7. Discussion

The analysis of the data outlined above focuses on tracing the output polyphonies in the responses collected from Task 3 in the student portfolios in 2023. The main marker of polyphony is the students' ability to opt for one out of three modes of work, accompanied with their ability to pinpoint advantages and disadvantages of their choice. Completing the task required an alignment of the narratives about the options recognized in the market environment with the voices respecting and empowering students' personal preferences and views.

Although each category of advantages and disadvantages has its typical, most frequent representatives, the list of all options that the students are able to acknowledge is fairly comprehensive. There was no option signalled in the

students' responses that was off to the topic. This can imply that the students were able to approach the topic from multiple angles and with numerous narratives (polyphony) that coincided in their thinking about the task. This latter observation is further supported by the fact that some students found it difficult to decide on one mode of work only. One student admitted finding hybrid and in-housing modes equally attractive. Two students were contemplating both hybrid and freelancing. One student chose in-housing as a step in their way towards the hybrid mode, while yet another chose the exactly opposite trajectory.

## 8. Conclusions

In face of the results presented and discussed above, a claim is put forward that the class devoted to solopreneurial education of language specialists empowers multiplicity of voices both as input and output polyphonies. The input polyphonies result from the content and classroom dynamics factors planned by the teacher (thematic workshops, discussions and tasks; learning trajectory personalisation; expert guest voices). The output polyphonies record how the class is able to empower a transformed view of options, relations, conditions and limitations in thinking, talking about and planning language service careers.

The portfolio proves an optimal tool for inspiring polyphony. First, it provides a space for individual work for each student and for aligning narratives necessary to complete the tasks (level 2). The narratives come from the classroom activities, but also from the guest input (level 3). Second, thanks to the dialogical formula of the examination, the portfolio empowers student - teacher polyphony (level 1), giving each stakeholder a chance to transform their viewpoints.

Another advantage of the portfolio method is that it provides quality material for research and reflexive teaching. Getting to know students' responses helps the teacher determine if the main assumptions of the class are met. More importantly, the research offers suggestions for improvements. For example, the following improvements are introduced in the 2024 edition of the class:

- more comprehensive in-class coverage of the portfolio tasks to make its completion more meaningful to students;
- the social media tasks are structured in a more detailed way. Student teams work in turns. The social media tasks will become obligatory from the 2025 edition onwards, with the task array reaching beyond LinkedIn posting;
- portfolio examination dialogue requires a more efficient structuration to improve its communicative effectiveness: Lackéus (2015)'s list of entrepreneurial competences will be used as *key performance indicators* and narrative anchors at the examination.

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