

Doctoral dissertation pre-defense in an online setting: lessons and challenges

Olívia Seidl-Péché, Dániel Mány¹

seidl-pech.olivia@gtk.bme.hu;

manydaniel91@gmail.com

Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME)

Centre for Modern Languages

Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE)

Department of Translation and Interpreting;

Abstract: PhD students of Translation Studies at ELTE University carry out a pre-defense before being awarded their doctorate degree at the final defense. The dissertation shall at this point conform to the rules regarding the format and content requirements of the final defense. Based on the opinions of the three pre-opponents and other members of the committee, the PhD candidate at this point can still modify the dissertation in consultation with the supervisor. As certain measures had to be implemented due to the pandemic crisis, pre-defense was remarkably different from the normal procedure in having no oral examination after sharing the committee's written comments in advance. Therefore, all members of the committee, the supervisor and the PhD candidate had to face new challenges. As a result, organizing the pre-defense in a written form required flexibility, empathy, and openness to online communication, while the stress associated with public performance has decreased significantly, in addition to the rather smooth organization of the event. The present study details the process, characteristics and lessons learned from the pre-defense organized in a distance-learning setting.

Keywords: pre-defense, pandemic crisis, comments, flexibility, decreased level of stress

1. Introduction

The changeover from a higher education to a distance learning system affected not only the bachelor's and master's education level, but also had an impact on the functioning of doctoral schools. The organization of lectures, seminars, consultations and participation in scientific life (conference participation, writing publica-

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tions) did not pose a particular challenge for students of doctoral schools, either. Only outstanding events linked to the PhD graduation process, the organization of pre-defense and defense represented a completely new experience compared to the usual ones. While the online management of the defense posed technical challenges for organizers, the structure of the pre-defense was quite different from the usual methods. In our study, firstly, we present the process of the pre-defense, then we discuss the differences and difficulties arising from distance learning, as well as the lessons learned during the pre-defense process.

2. Specific features of the workshop

As we all know, the defense of a doctoral dissertation is required to obtain a PhD degree. However, this step is preceded by a no less important event: the pre-defense process of the dissertation. According to the doctoral regulations, PhD candidates who started their studies after 2016 are to submit the final form of the thesis within three years from the day of the complex exam (students can only enter the second part of the doctoral study programme upon the successful completion of the complex exam). Before that, it is necessary to organize a pre-defense, also called home defense, which may take place either before or after the end of the 8th semester. The dissertation submitted for the pre-defense must comply with the formal and substantive requirements for the dissertation to be submitted for the final defense: the PhD candidate submits a paper that is considered to be completely ready for the defense, even if the possibility exists that the student will have to make major changes to the dissertation based on the insights and suggestions of the pre-opponents and the reviewers.

A significant difference between these two defenses is that, unlike the final defense, the pre-defense committee has not two, but three pre-opponents judging the submitted dissertation. In addition to the pre-opponents, all lecturers of the doctoral programme, the chairperson of the committee, its members and secretary may all evaluate the thesis. One of the pre-opponents is an “internal” lecturer (one of ELTE’s professors in the case of the Doctoral Program of Translation Studies), while the other pre-opponent is a researcher who is not contracted to this university. In contrast to the public defense, a PhD student of the program submits a third evaluation of the dissertation.

The opponents of the thesis are invited by the head of the doctoral programme, who proposes a method of compiling the evaluation. When assessing the content, it is appropriate to mention the purpose of the research, the theoretical background, as well as the research questions and hypotheses. The reviewers reflect on the corpus of the research and then discuss whether the research methods are appropriate and correct. When evaluating the dissertation, special attention will be given to new results, new terms and their definitions. Another specific aspect is the usefulness of results, their applicability in the practice of translation and in the educa-

tion. When assessing formal aspects, the pre-opponents carefully examine, among other elements, the regularity of the bibliography, the appropriate numbering and address of tables and diagrams, the presentation of examples in different languages, the presentation of sources, finally orthography and typography.

The traditional pre-defense is attended by pre-opponents, but also all interested teachers and PhD students. In this case, the opponents themselves hear each other's opinions, to which the candidate responds one by one. The primary task of pre-opponents is to use their comments and suggestions to help raise the standard of the thesis and to draw the candidate's attention to content and conceptual inconsistencies. Following the professional proposals of the reviewers and the answers of the candidate, the result of the debate is the vision of the final structure of the dissertation, which sometimes differs considerably from the work submitted for pre-defense, and which is the task of the PhD candidate in the time frame at their disposal.

3. Pre-defense in distance learning

In the Doctoral Programme of Translation Studies, pre-defenses usually take place with the personal participation of the PhD candidate, the supervisor and the committee, but due to the emergency situation that arose in spring 2020, it was not possible in this semester. The head of the PhD programme and the Doctoral Office provided the opportunity to organize the pre-defense with distance learning, so unlike the usual case, the process was carried out only in a written form. The dissertation was submitted online. The reviewers had two months to write the review, to which the candidate responded within two weeks, in consultation with the head of the programme and the supervisor. The pre-defense process ended when the head of the programme sent the minutes of the defense to the Doctoral Office. The minutes contain the summary opinion of the head of the programme, the review of the three pre-opponents, the statement by the secretary of the committee and the candidate's reply.

As well as the three pre-opponents, the secretary of the committee also commented on the dissertation. In addition to the substantive observations (the order of presentation of the theoretical background, the reflection on research questions at the end of the thesis, more explicit explanation of the results), all four reviewers also made valuable comments on the formal errors of the dissertation. Formal errors involving language or stylistic incorrect wordings, formatting deficiencies were sent to the candidate. In the context of the doctoral dissertation, all four critics commented on whether they would recommend that the dissertation be put to a final defense.

From the perspective of the PhD candidate, it is essential to have a pre-defense process because it is still possible to discuss and modify all substantive and formal elements. The proposals made during the pre-defense can be incorporated into the

final form of the dissertation. During the written conduct of the pre-defense, a significant part of the process does not deviate from the usual schedule, as all pre-opponents have assessed the dissertations in detail and in writing. It is also not new that the candidate has to answer written opinions in a written form. However, a significant difference was that after the forwarding of written opinions, there was no oral discussion or scientific discussion. The latter factor has caused difficulties for all participants in the process, since the lack of oral debate has become particularly important for all comments to be formulated with extremely precise, comprehensible and constructive criticism. The pre-opponents also offered a telephone consultation option, which the candidate should use if a point of criticism is difficult to understand, or it is needed in any case to draw the judges' attention to an aspect or circumstance that may modify the comments made in the evaluation.

4. Adaptation to changed circumstances

Due to the lack of oral discussion, the members of the committee, the head of programme, the supervisor and the PhD candidate all needed more time and energy for the successful completion of the pre-defense. It required flexibility and patience from all participants to consult on the phone and in online form. It is also important to mention the self-evident stress associated with the pre-defense, which may be reduced by the absence of public participation. At the same time, as a result of distance learning, the responsibility and engagement of the doctoral candidate is increased. The successful completion of the pre-defense requires greater attention from the PhD candidate, who helps facilitate interactions with the Doctoral Office, the head of programme, the supervisor and the pre-opponents, and who thus coordinates the successive implementation of each of the elements of the event. This task falls primarily to the doctoral candidate because they are the most interested person to have a successful pre-defense as soon as possible, and they see best where the process is, which party should be contacted next in order to make progress.

The increase in the responsibility of the PhD candidate requires a kind of autonomy, which characterises both the preparation and realization of the pre-defense. It is evident that the doctoral candidate will not be left alone with the increased responsibility incumbent on them, they can initiate consultations with the supervisor, the Doctoral Office or the head of programme at any time, if they feel that their own expertise alone is not sufficient to further the process. This increased autonomy undoubtedly has a positive impact on the awareness of processes and consequences of the doctoral candidate.

5. The role of the supervisor

If we approach the pre-defense from the relationship between the supervisor and the PhD candidate, we can conclude that increased awareness will also play an important role in these relations, and empathy will also be brought to the fore. Receiving written reviews by email, the lack of oral reflections are difficult psychological situations for the doctoral candidate. Since pre-opponents are responsible for formulating opinions that can further increase the professional value of the dissertation, the candidate can easily become unsure about the value of their own work while reading them. It is therefore important during the consultations to make the author aware that critical remarks do not necessarily refer to a poor quality thesis, especially if the opinions of the pre-opponents also detail the undisputed merits of the work at length.

In the absence of an oral defense, the doctoral candidate must decide, on the basis of written versions of the opinions, which proposals will be included in the final paper. Dweck's research on the causes of success and failure quotes the idea of Benjamin Barber, who said: "I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don't. I divide the world into learners and non-learners."² In the case of these pre-defenses, learning should not be narrowed down to concrete preparation, but rather to take a constructive account of the insights and suggestions of pre-opponents. The task of the consultations is therefore to organise critical observations, to identify contradictory observations, and to find all the elements that may be relevant to the candidate's scientific career. At the same time, the supervisor may also perceive the hindrance of the candidate, who may have problems with the cooperative processing of pre-opponent opinions, as, in the absence of a real debate, the possibility of presenting the benefits of their own concept is very limited. In such cases, the supervisor may try to make the student aware of the positive effects that can be palpable by integrating certain elements of pre-opponent opinions. A change of perspective may also be necessary to remove the doctoral candidate from being stuck. For example, the retrospection of the imaginary completion of the programme enables the doctoral candidate to become aware of all the positives they can face after restructuring the paper. These include, for example, the possibility to apply for a final defense, the possibility of professional cooperation following the consultations with the pre-opponents, and the increase in the relevance of the dissertation as a result of integrating new aspects.

In the case of consultations, more precise planning of the timetable in the online space will be strengthened so that the fulfilment of the tasks can be checked both during the self-review process of the doctoral candidate and for the supervisor. Planning should also take into account progress and timeframes for administrative

² Source: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/164408-i-don-t-divide-the-world-into-the-weak-and-the>

tasks. In mapping tasks, the candidate should be assisted in the assessment of their own capacity, in which they must calculate by fulfilling other responsibilities (study and work tasks). The doctoral candidate will therefore have the basic task to prepare the timetable, to which the supervisor can contribute only by taking stock of the succession of tasks and by helping to meet the necessary deadlines. The advantage of determining the possible scheduling is that the doctoral candidate may feel fully empowered, since the appointment of each phase is not conducted by the supervisor on the basis of the obligations, but rather by the doctoral candidate in the light of the deadlines and their own possibilities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the pre-defense debate can also be conducted within the framework of the distance learning system, the organisation takes less time and stress sources decrease. At the same time, it requires more flexibility and patience from all members of the committee and from the PhD candidate who spends a significant part of the semester in the online space. The real conduct of pre-defense without oral debate requires increased awareness of the candidate and more empathy by the supervisor. However, in the case of future pre-defenses, consideration should be given to allowing the candidate the opportunity to express their opinion in an online debate and to reflect on the pre-opponent's opinions. A useful result of that may arise during the scientific discourse on the subject of the dissertation, which the candidate may be able to put into the dissertation in the remaining time frame. On the other hand, the online pre-defense would also be a good opportunity to prepare the candidate for the final defense process itself.

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