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How to educate students without coming face to face with them or Information technologies in the teaching of translation on a distance-learning basis

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Abstract

The author offers a synoptic vision of the possibilities presented by the use of information and communication technologies in the teaching of translation on a distance-learning basis, with a view to improving contact between lecturers and students, suggesting practical translation classes and guaranteeing individualised online education.

Key words

Translation didactics, distance learning, online education.

Introduction

A period of reflection is necessarily required in order to reap the benefits provided by the invention of a new medium for the transmission of knowledge, as well as to avoid the risk of making mistakes due to a lack of experience. The esteemed lecturer Frank Borchardt of Duke University usually draws a comparison that, in my opinion, clarifies the problem. Gutenberg's invention of the press entailed the 'copying' of the form of manuscripts (initials, calligraphy, etc.), which constituted the medium used prior to that point, and it was thought that the press merely represented the speeding-up of the process of book production. It was only 40 years later that other benefits of the new medium began to be identified. It was possible, for example, to use a particular type of lettering for the purpose of emphasis, to refer to another page, to produce tables of content, to facilitate searches, and to exchange ideas and engage in scientific debates from a remote location (through missives), simply by alluding to a specific page in a book, as the parties involved would both have 'identical' books at their disposal. Something similar occurred when computers began to be used as a pedagogical instrument. At that stage, 'programs' were no more than books or exercise books copied onto a computer, and computers themselves failed to provide any benefit whatsoever, as they were extremely expensive and difficult to transport. However, with the passage of time (we) scientists realised that it was not a matter of replacing books or exercise books, but of using computers in the areas in which they could offer great advantages compared to the paper format; for example, by organising information in hypertext and presenting it on the screen, or by predicting feedback to the various replies of students and making it immediately available. We are now witnessing another 'invention', the possibility of using the web to establish distance learning, i.e. to give online classes (translation classes in this case). However, there is a tendency to 'copy' the concept and system used in more traditional education to the new medium (e.g. in one of his statements at the beginning of the first session of the virtual translation workshop of the Instituto Cervantes, the lecturer Antonio Roales says "Ah, OK. Well, now we're going to proceed as we would with a normal translation class, except we'll be writing instead of speaking").

Given the importance of contact and pedagogical dialogue between lecturers and students in our field, we lecturers must be prepared to tackle this new educational challenge, which involves dispensing with personal, face-to-face interaction with our students, prior to setting up 'virtual universities'. In an article in *El País* (22-1-2001) entitled "La Red entra en la educación" (The web becomes part of education), Jesús Beltrán, a professor of psychology, states that "all technology, and the internet in particular, has tremendous power. However, it is simply an instrument, and the key issue consists of what lecturers or students know how to do with it". He also emphasises the importance of serious pedagogical research into "the role of lecturers and students, their relationship and the type of class that can be given" (translation classes, in this case).

Applications

It is theoretically possible to identify different ways of using information and communication technologies to teach translation on a distance-learning basis:

- a) to improve contact between lecturers and students;
- b) to offer magisterial classes or videoconferences;
- c) to broaden the range of independent-learning syllabuses on offer;
- d) in the shape of "practical translation classes" or "virtual translation workshops";
- e) to offer individualised education.

Lecturer / student contact

It is possible to use an intranet or the internet to improve contact between a lecturer and the students of the different subjects taught by the former (procedures that normally take place directly). Email can be used to receive work from students and to relay comments thereon to them; syllabuses, dossiers and grades can be posted on the web; and it is even possible to conduct written and oral exams via the internet, something which would be well received by students who are unable to attend for reasons such as being abroad as part of an Erasmus or Socrates exchange, etc. In conceptual terms, these applications are no different from the activities in which lecturers commonly engage while teaching their students and do not entail fundamental educational advantages (from a pedagogical point of view), with the exception, of course, of the convenience that this medium involves for students.

The Spanish – Catalan "teoría i pràctica de la traducció" (translation theory and practice) module, coordinated by Marisa Presas with the collaboration of Mònica Fernández and offered by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) as part of the second stage of its degree in Catalan philology, is an example of how to systematically use the aforementioned option afforded by the internet. The module features a theoretical section in the form of a 'tutorial', which, like a book, contains textual and graphical information on the topic in question. It also takes advantage of the possibility of highlighting words or segments, thus enabling students to activate hypertextual information in the form of definitions or brief conceptual explanations.



Of much greater interest, where the teaching of translation on a distance-learning basis is concerned, are the *exercicis* (exercises) and *activitats* (activities) suggested in each of the module's sections. The *exercicis d'autoevaluació* (self-assessment exercises) consist of a number of open questions that students answer themselves, and they then compare their answers with those contained in the *solucionari* (solutions) section; in other words, they are offered a model of a correct answer. Among the *activitats* proposed are practical translation exercises involving the use of

information and communication technologies (ICT). For example, in order to practise using the translation memory program *Déjà Vu*, students have to translate a paragraph from the manual of a Lancia car, followed by a paragraph corresponding to a Vauxhall, drawing from the memory created during the first translation, and so on thereafter with Smart, VW and Fiat documentation. After each translation, they email their work to the lecturer, who corrects it in the 'traditional' manner (i.e. correcting linguistic errors and indicating the type of mistake or commenting on the translation) and returns it to them.

Magisterial classes

It seems that it may be beneficial to use the web for the purpose of broadcasting magisterial classes or lectures given by learned speakers on a large scale, without it being necessary for them to relocate; it would simply be a case of filming them while they gave voice to their reflections and transmitting the images and sound via the internet. It would even be possible to record such offerings and implement them on the web for all interested users, as classes of this type are based on pure presentation with no interactive element, meaning that only passive learning is involved. In theory, there is no difference in comparison with magisterial classes given in a university classroom, but the great advantage of this approach is that it enables a wide-ranging audience from all over the planet to access information, a concept that is a crucial part of the internet philosophy.

In the case of magisterial classes (for example, those entailed by certain theoretical subjects, such as translation theory, linguistics, documentation, etc.), the same kind of videoconferencing technology could be applied in order to simply replace the presence of lecturers in the classroom, thus enabling them to teach more students than would normally attend presence-based classes.

Independent-learning programs

The web provides the option of implementing independent-learning language and translation programs supplied on CD-ROM and, thus, of increasing the offer of any media resources centre, regardless of how complete this may appear to be. In all cases, the preparation of modules to support the independent learning of the various competencies present within our field requires pedagogical adaptation to the new medium (it is not a matter of implementing traditional textbooks or exercise books on a computer). It is therefore still necessary to carry out pedagogical research with a view to optimising our ICT-adapted didactics, and this is particularly true in the case of content related to the training of translators and interpreters, although it also applies to pedagogical science in general. Semi-attendance-based and distance-learning university studies that function via an intranet or the internet will take on an extremely important role in the immediate future, and we should thus be prepared, from a conceptual point of view, to use computers as virtual exercise books, virtual textbooks, virtual tutors, virtual teachers, virtual professors or virtual lecturers in virtual seminars, virtual laboratories, virtual departments or even virtual universities. We must also be ready to study the pedagogical situations in which multimedia learning provides benefits and those in which it will be necessary to continue using the presence-based system, supported by other, more 'classic' pedagogical tools (books, exercise books, group work, moderated discussions, etc.), possibly in conjunction with computers.

The program *Translt-Tiger* constitutes an example of computer-assisted teaching. It is a piece of software that enables lecturers to design their own support exercises for translation classes, in addition to containing a kit consisting of specialised-translation exercises developed by the Universities of Hull and Coventry. These exercises are geared to the independent learning of translation, and their objective, which I feel is overly pretentious, is "to give both an insight into, and some training in, translation as a practical skill with which, after further training and practise, you might earn a living". There are versions in various language combinations where direct translation is concerned (French-English, German-English, Spanish-English, Italian-English, etc.), as well as a version for inverse translation (English-French). *Translt-Tiger* shows a text to be translated (source text) and offers the option of consulting a specialised dictionary (glossary) and various explanations (hints) regarding problems in the original language, sometimes taking the form of bilingual dictionaries 'disguised' as explanations. In some cases, it is also possible to establish links to documentation (context) from marked segments (hot words) in the text. All the above is

programmed by the author in order to facilitate translation. Additionally, students are able to refer to two 'model' translations (version A: the most literal translation possible; version B: free translation), either separately or together (version A + B), and to compare their own translations thereto (see graphic).

Some programs (such as Wincalis, developed by Duke University) include a parser, i.e. a system that analyses the work being produced by students. They make it possible to program corresponding responses, which appear in a window and provide students with information, hints, criticism, etc. The aim of this is for students to come up with an acceptable solution, thus simulating the role played by a lecturer in a classroom, the difference being that the feedback provided for a specific offering from a student is always identical. In a study undertaken by the author of this piece of work and based on an independent-learning exercise ("El sitio de México", Neunzig, 1997, 1998, see graphic), the possibility of simulating different didactic concepts in the highly complex area constituted by translation was demonstrated, and the usefulness of computers as an auxiliary medium in teaching and independent-learning work was fully endorsed, as students reacted (positively or otherwise, depending on the educational method applied) to the didactic offer.



Virtual translation workshops or classrooms

The use of the term "virtual translation workshops or classrooms" in this section refers to the recreation of a physical classroom with students and lecturers or speakers in attendance, whether in the form of work performed by students, magisterial classes or practical translation classes, or of 'round table' discussions or colloquia.

Forums for debate among students from different translator-training centres correspond to a concept of self-monitoring and represent a means of mutual support between students, enabling them to benefit from the best sources of documentation and the possibility of linguistic correction. Online work helps to overcome problems in terms of comprehension and terminology, thus simulating the debate forums used by professional translators. From an educational point of view, however, it would be a good idea for students' forums to be supervised by lecturers who specialise in didactics of this kind, and who would take responsibility for moderating, orienting, commenting on and qualifying discussions, which are open to all interested parties, wherever they may be.

Supervised forums that could be classified as being of the 'practical translation class' or 'virtual translation workshop' variety use the internet to organise a type of chat facility geared to didactic exchange with the potential to be highly effective. Any student or interested party can take part from any location and reap the benefits of the knowledge of a good teacher, without it being necessary to attend a presence-based class or to have signed up for a course. Provided that they are moderated and run by experienced lecturers, such forums represent a simulation of a translation class in real time, except that "when giving a class, lecturers will enter the VTW (virtual translation workshop) and discuss the students' translations, just as they would at universities, but in a written form and from a remote location", as the introductory page of the virtual translation workshop of the Instituto Cervantes states.

Another apparent point of interest lies in the possibility of using videoconferencing to organise 'normal' real-time classes (e.g. language or translation classes), involving the capture of pedagogical interaction and the contributions of lecturers and students, and the transmission

thereof via the web. Here, however, the benefits are outweighed by the disadvantages (except in very specific cases, such as the possibility of handicapped students being able to 'attend' classes), as the number of students per class (e.g. a practical translation or language class) should be restricted for pedagogical reasons, regardless of how open access may be, meaning that this new technology does not seem to provide any benefits. However, there is a field of application in which I believe it can offer advantages, based on the following concept: the world of translation is extremely wide-ranging, due, on one hand, to the huge quantity of possible specialities and areas of specialisation, and, on the other, to the almost unlimited number of languages from and to which translations are performed. Irrespective of the scope of the linguistic offer (for example) of a presence-based centre, there are many languages that will not be encompassed by presence-based education for reasons of cost, despite being socially relevant. The incorporation of a language to a translation degree in a given faculty gives rise to costs that cannot be justified by social needs or the level of interest among students. For example, incorporating Hungarian or Danish to a translation faculty is not feasible in economic terms, despite the fact that Spanish society requires a certain, limited number of professionals in these fields. If a network offering virtual studies or courses in these languages were to be created among the State's translation faculties, it would then be possible to bring together a sufficient number of students to justify the outlay and to cover social demand, in the long run. Furthermore, this concept does not require competent lecturers to travel to Spain; it would be perfectly feasible for them to give their classes from their places of origin. The same can be said of virtual courses on specialised translation or areas of specialisation within translation. For example, distance-learning courses on software localisation, copywriting (i.e. the translation of slogans and advertising texts) or audiovisual translation could be offered, and would certainly be of interest to a small group of students. Another field of application would be all training courses aimed at interested parties who work on a full-time basis (e.g. legal translation for lawyers) and for whom attending presence-based classes is therefore extremely problematic. It is not necessary to underline that, for all the above reasons, we must develop a pedagogy geared to the medium, and that under no circumstances is this a matter of simply copying activities undertaken in presence-based classes and transmitting them to unprepared users via the web.

Individualised education

New technology has resulted in the availability of an IT tool that could open up a new avenue of pedagogy (and research) in the field of translator training. This tool consists of programs that make it possible to provide individualised education from a remote location; in other words, which allow for the monitoring of the activities of translators (or students) during the process of translation production and make a record of all the modifications and computerised searches performed, and all the times involved (including pauses). In a manner that is invisible to students, these programs thus record all the steps taken,



such as corrections, references to documentation, modifications, etc., in a separate file that I have called a Translation Protocol (TP), which assures that the progress of the process is monitored. Additionally, and similarly to as occurs in language laboratories or interpreter-training suites, there are programs that enable lecturers to 'spy' (from their own computer) on students while they translate, and to remotely correct errors on students' screens (e.g. Gateway's Proxy program). When Proxy is combined with Winpopup, it is possible, if necessary, for lecturers to contact students, to send them messages containing assistance, criticism, corrections, information, suggestions, etc., or to intervene in a preventative manner before an error is committed, i.e. offering them pedagogical feedback, making it a new and potentially significant tool where the training process is concerned. Lecturers can use this 'online' feedback for the purposes of individualised or

interactive education, whether in a classroom equipped to such an end, as it provides separate access to each computer and makes it possible to comment upon, correct and qualify a specific student's proposals, similarly to as would happen in an interpreting suite or a language laboratory; or whether in the context of online distance learning, with one or more students working in their natural environment whilst being 'observed' and guided by a lecturer. The great theoretical advantage that this new tool holds is the option of direct access as soon as mistakes begin to be made and, ipso-facto, of rectifying them, which would make lecturers' involvement more telling. In a study geared to testing the effectiveness of the concept (see Neunzig, 2001), the program Traducere Navem was developed at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and students' acceptance of this type of distance learning and the suitability of the pedagogical premise, within certain limits, were successfully demonstrated.

Conclusions

Here, I want to put forward an initial proposal (to be confirmed in future studies) regarding the form that the online, interactive teaching of translation could take, although it should be borne in mind that the introduction of information and communication technologies to distance learning can, at the time of writing, represent nothing more than another pedagogical medium and a means of support for the 'traditional technologies' used in presence-based training.

On the basis of the results I have obtained, I want to appeal to information technology applied to translation to elaborate a kit of programs which enables us to envisage the development of a module that guarantees immediate, individualised pedagogical intervention, something which is essential where the non-presence-based training of translators is concerned. I would venture as far as proposing a program that makes it possible to combine the advantages provided by authoring systems ('prefabricated' responses) with those of programs geared to direct, online intervention, such as that outlined above.

With a view to lecturers having time to intervene directly in the translation work being undertaken by one or more groups of students, similarly to as lecturers of interpreting do, it is my belief that such a program kit would have to simultaneously offer the following applications:

1. In keeping with the concept of resident independent-learning programs, it would be necessary to envisage the possibility of automatically consulting a glossary and hints (hidden behind hot words) without lecturers having to send the required assistance personally. In order to prevent the incorrect use (or even abuse) witnessed in the experiment, such hints would be limited to consisting of a transcript of an entry from a bilingual dictionary (it is not a matter of merely selecting the appropriate equivalent on the basis of the context of the translation, as is the case with Transit-Tiger) or an explanation of the equivalents of toponyms or anthroponyms, all with a view to speeding up the process of translation production and saving time spent on consulting bilingual dictionaries.
2. An application such as Winpopup would supply preventative or explanatory feedback, this being the major benefit of the procedure proposed and tested. Corrective feedback should be limited to the rectification of serious lexical or terminological errors, in order to avoid constant interruptions to the process of translation production. In small groups of 2 to 3 students, didactics can be given a boost by prepared feedback of this nature, as it could be used as a basis for the development of discussions between the parties involved; the hints would serve to orient and restrict debates.
3. An application that allows for 'chat' conversations would enable lecturers to engage in more flexible dialogue with their students, in the event of the pedagogical feedback envisaged not giving the desired results.
4. It is my opinion that errors where linguistic rules are concerned should be commented upon or corrected once a translation has been completed, whether in the traditional way or, preferably, and session time permitting, by means of an application that, like the Proxy program, makes it possible to intervene directly on students' screens, conveying a message stating that "we are going to review your translation together and correct the mistakes that you have made, for which reason your cursor will be temporarily deactivated".

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5. An application that enables translations to be recorded with the corresponding 'pedagogical dialogue', as well as with the records of the work performed by professional translators (which I have named 'Translation Protocols'), could also be used for didactic purposes. Students could subsequently refer to these records and learn from their own and others' mistakes, or imitate procedures that have produced good solutions.

This piece of work can only be interpreted as a contribution to the discussion concerning the best way to guarantee efficient distance learning, and aims to stimulate a search for new, specific avenues where education of this kind is concerned.

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