



E-LEARNING AND TRANSLATION: PATTERNS AND CURRICULUM

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RESUMEN

Este estudio presenta una metodología completa de la enseñanza de la traducción, a través de un sistema de enseñanza virtual, donde prácticamente el trabajo se realiza desde casa y se completa con una serie de tutorías presenciales. La traducción es una materia que se adecua muy bien a este tipo de enseñanza a distintos niveles, sea como una materia añadida o como parte de un currículo. Partiendo de nuestra propia experiencia, nos proponemos ofrecer los principios metodológicos que hemos seguido durante tres años para desarrollar dicha enseñanza virtual de la traducción, que, además, se adapta perfectamente al espíritu de los nuevos créditos europeos.

Palabras Clave: currículo, créditos europeos, enseñanza a distancia, enseñanza de la traducción, metodología.

ABSTRACT

This study introduces a new approach on translation methodology through a virtual teaching system, where almost the whole work is implemented at home and is complemented with a few face-to-face tutoring sessions. Translation is a subject that can be easily and suitably adapted to this kind of teaching at different levels, either as an autonomous subject or as a whole curriculum. According to our experience, we will show the principles we have followed to develop a virtual methodology of translation that is perfectly adapted to the spirit of the new ECTs.

Key Words: curriculum, ECTs, virtual teaching, translation teaching, methodology.

1. JUSTIFICATION

Along the last years, *e-learning* has become a serious alternative to conventional learning, given that a large number of students cannot attend ordinary face-to-face lessons.

In this paper we intend to set the patterns to develop a course in translation studies based on e-learning methodology, either applied to a postgraduate or to a specific introduction or advanced course. In any case, we will always deal with translation, never with interpretation, since interpreters cannot be trained, for obvious reasons, by means of virtual courses. Our experience in this kind of training is based on our task to train translators during several years at three colleges: ISEIT Cluny (Catholic University of Paris in Madrid), CES Don Bosco (UCM)² and University of West Bohemia (Pilsen, Czech Republic). In all cases a basic methodological principle has always guided our teaching task: theory cannot be offered to students as a set of principles to be learned by heart, but it emerges from practice; therefore, our syllabuses and methodology are focused on their personal daily work with texts, where trainees learn to translate by translating.

We do not properly intend to define what e-learning is, but a few ideas should be said, given that our methodology to teach translations follows a distance teaching system.

- a. First of all, our lessons are not properly 100% virtual ones, since students should have tutoring seasons periodically. Only in certain cases, when tutoring cannot be carried out in face-to-face seasons, an online guidance lesson can be established (we will refer to that later on). It is absolutely necessary to maintain a constant contact between the trainees and their tutor; apart from the tutoring meetings, students may have permanent access to their tutor by email, because in this way students may ask questions, solve doubts or even discuss.

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- b. At the same time, students may receive last hour pieces of information and certainly their assignments (though the way to send assignments can also be another one, just a document previously uploaded in a certain site).
- c. The role of tutors is crucial, being one of their most important tasks to motivate students and preventing them from getting lost, since students following this kind of studies might undergo certain difficulties to organise their schedules (attending lessons is a good way to organise oneself).
- d. Students must send their tutor a series of pre-established tasks or assignments with a given periodicity (it may vary from one week into a month).
- e. Tutoring is constant, because it serves to correct, motivate, evaluate and make feedback of the whole process. Besides it is probably the only moment in which students may meet. However, the online contact among the students can be promoted. A blog or forum may be created for the students to share doubts, experiences or solutions. Even Microsoft Messenger and similar programmes can fulfil this task.

2. PRECONDITIONS FOR A TRANSLATION E-LEARNING COURSE

There are certain conditions that must be observed in order to use e-learning. Not all the subjects of all specialties can be taught according to an online learning system. Some features must be respected:

Contents that require manipulation cannot be taught online, so theoretical contents can be studied in this way. It is crucial to establish the subjects or content blocks that can be learned following an e-learning system.

Students are expected to have a minimal equipment to follow the courses, i.e., a computer, an internet connection and a certain amount of software, such as dictionaries, browser, word processors, etc.

Motivation happens to be more important here than in conventional studies. Besides students must have a huge willpower, given that they don't attend conventional lessons. Therefore, following this kind of courses requires these two elements in a larger range than in conventional studies, since a possible paternalist role of the lecturer or teacher is absent. On the other hand, following online courses allows student to alternate them with conventional ones or a job.

In our case, there is no doubt that Translatology can be taught by means of e-learning. We can introduce it through a double table of reasons and conditions.

Reasons	Conditions
1. Translatology contents can be perfectly adapted to an online methodology.	1. An accurate linguistic level is absolutely necessary in order to work as a translator with both the target and the source language.
2. The theoretical framework is minimal; in the event of need of auxiliary materials, extra readings can be provided through paper stuff or e-documents to be downloaded or e-mailed.	2. It is recommended that students have a previous knowledge of the cultural background of both languages.
3. Students' tasks can easily be sent by e-mail or to the tutor.	
4. Students must possess strong and solid work habits, because most of the tasks will be implemented at home.	
5. E-learning requires a great deal of personal research, which is mainly carried out on the net.	

Table 1. Table of reasons and conditions.

3. PREPARING A SYLLABUS

Despite being online, e-learning requires very specific syllabuses. The fact of working at home does not permit a complete improvisation; instead, contents, aims and all the rest of the teaching items must be very clearly established.

We cannot forget that we are presenting the methodology and syllabus of introduction course. All the other possibilities could be discussed somewhere else, but due to the lack of space; we will limit ourselves to this kind of course.

First of all, concerning the duration, this kind of courses must last between one and two academic years. The best option is two years, which is equivalent to some 300 hours (30 credits according to the current European educational systems). When dealing with only one year, the number of hours should not be under 200, being the work much more concentrated. We honestly believe that fewer than 200 hours are not enough to train a translator.

The second matter about settling down a syllabus is the number of languages with which we are working. An A-language can be combined with either one or two foreign languages. The A-language is usually the mother tongue; however it could happen that a foreign language should be established like this. In fact, English is quite probable to be used as the A-language because of its international language status³.

The second languages should be tagged as B and C. The choice of these languages will depend on the circumstances in which the course is developed. Anyway, the setting of the target and source language is variable. We don't just offer an A > B direct translation system, where A is the source language and B the target one, but also a B > A (in parallel with A > C and C > A). If the students are ready, an eventual B > C and C > B combination could be also included. In this case, it is highly recommended that the A-language be the students' mother tongue. Such as it has been showed above, in theory students could work with direct and reverse translation, though this is a point to be decided according to the starting point of the students.

Finally, the syllabus should be established with a certain number of subjects and a practicum (see it later).

4. METHODOLOGY

Our belief is that translators should be trained following an essentially practical methodology, such as we have already explained. This is why the core of our programme is made up of a collection of texts in the different source languages that will be periodically assigned for translation. Nevertheless, students will receive the necessary theoretical background to their translation activity.

As we shall explain shortly, the exchange between tutors and students takes place mainly, but not exclusively, on-line. The following are the main modes of interaction:

- **Face-to-face Lessons.** The class meets at the students' college for several hours at the beginning of the school year. (Possibly, on a Saturday morning). The goal of this session is to introduce the students to the main theoretical concepts useful to the translator's activity, as well as providing some guidelines of the necessary steps to tackle successfully a professional translation assignment. A meeting at the end of the year is also necessary for evaluation purposes. This lesson is not a seminar. We will refer to them later on.
- **On-line Interaction** according to the following dynamic:

³ As a matter of fact, our teaching experience with Czech students (University of West Bohemia, Pilsen) is like this. These students have all Czech as their mother tongue, but the linguistic combinations of the course do not include their first language. Instead, these students are trained in Romance > English translations, where Romance include all major Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese), working as their B-languages, and English as their A-language.

- The instructor sends the translation assignment by e-mail.
 - Students work on the assignment in their own time.
 - Students submit their work by e-mail within a deadline of two weeks, though this term may vary according to the nature of the translation.
 - The instructor corrects the assignments and sends it back to the students a) collectively, a comment on the main problems and features worthy of note of the assignment, and b) individually, corrections to each student's work.
- **Office Hours:** Instructors are permanently available through e-mail. However, they also offer office hours every week at college (typically, two hours on a given evening or longer seasons on Saturday morning if necessary).

5. COURSES

As we have already shown, course will be established according to the previous plan that will be established. The course titles (regardless of the language chosen) are as follows:

1 term	direct translation	reverse translation
2 term	direct translation	reverse translation
3 term	practicum	

Table 2. The course titles.

During the Practicum the general will courses will be interrupted.

6. A MODULAR STRUCTURE

The contents of the course are structured in modules. The course includes a total of six modules, equally divided between the two years of work. Each module is worth 50 hours of coursework, thus making a total of 150 hours for the whole programme. The detailed structure is the following:

MODULE	DURATION	WHEN	CONTENT
I	One term	October - December	Direct and reverse translation: general texts
II	One term	January – March	Direct and reverse translation: general texts
III Practicum	One term	April-May	Individualised work.

Table 3. The structure of course.

Students are required to take the different modules in the order presented above. There is some flexibility however, in the conditions of the Practicum, which can be discussed with the instructors on an individual basis.

There should be a minimum of ten students registered in a module for it to take place. The fact of working according to an e-learning makes things difficult, so tutors must attend their students in a quite personalized way.

7. MATERIALS

The programme home-page contains the collection of texts that will be assigned in every module. Theoretical materials and links to useful resources on the Web are also constantly posted; this is normally done with reference to specific units and assignments. Instructors will periodically ask students to download the texts and resources required for each assignment.

Certain theoretical materials, such as handbooks or articles, could be linked from the site where the translation course is hosted. In this way, students must read those questions concerning their would-be job as translators by themselves. Some of them can also be downloaded if they are available. For this purpose, we have prepared a collection of easy-to-read collection of texts around very usual topics such as false friends, international standards (ISO) and varieties of the English language. Besides, a large amount of interesting links for translators were added, so that the students may have a direct access to online dictionaries, translators- forums, terminology websites, etc.

Nevertheless, there is one item that can also be used, especially with beginners, which is a commented translation handbook. This is a very specific auxiliary material consisting on a whole set of original texts (always offered in the source language) graded according to their range of difficulty. These texts include footnotes with explanations related to meaning, grammar, use or suggested translations, so that the students can translate into the target language. In any case, these texts may be the same ones used as independent documents that the students download for translation.

8. SEMINARS

Students must periodically attend seminars in order to complete their training. These seminars refer to a certain set of knowledge that all translator should possess, which is not only related to his/her techniques or linguistic competence, but also to the way in which translators interact with their colleagues, look for a job, solve doubts and even make research. Along our courses, we have offered these seminars, whose contents may vary each year depending on the students needs:

- The use of search engines, which includes little tips and the way in which translators may find the information they are looking for.
- The use of certain programmes, such as Trados or Wordfast, as well as the so-called CAT tools.
- A presentation of the main websites existing on the net where translators can register in order to enter the labour market, including some strategies to be able to gain a good position as translators.
- The use of some other tools, such as specific subtitling translation software

9. THE PRACTICUM

A large part of our course is based on the practicum. Students need a good placement in order to become actual translators; otherwise they will not be able to compete against an increasingly competitive market which requires well-trained and very fast professionals who can work under pressure and in a very short time.

A part of our philosophy of teaching is that teachers assume the role of customers who offer a job to a given translators. Although the conditions will never be the same ones, teachers may demand not only quality but also speed in delivering the work.

The practicum requires quite a long period, during which students will have to face a long translation by themselves or prepare a report on lexicology, since these are the two possibilities to work with.

As for the first one, a long translation, it will be assigned to each student individually. It could fit the student's specialty field or interest, since it is good for the students to discover which they specialty fields as translators will be.

The second option, which can be alternated with the first one, is a lexicology report. In this case, students must collect a bilingual or trilingual vocabulary on a specific field. As a matter of fact is a project that requires the use of internet and some specific programmes, such as Microsoft Access or Excel allowing to create lists of vocabulary and additional explanations, as well as a multiple entry system and an easy organization of the terms in multiple alphabetical orders. This report is aimed at the creation of the translator's own databases.

10. THE EVALUATION

Any teaching and learning process that claims to be serious must end up with an evaluation, though the evaluation is not the final part of any teaching process, but a continuous experience where not only the students assess his/her own advances, but also the teacher, who offers an outer approach (often acting as an outsourcer, remember) based on his own skills, even frequently a translator him or herself. Therefore, it is the teacher who can judge whether students actually can or cannot translate, what they need improve or which are their weakest points, as well as the students- skills to choose a specific specialty field in order to become a professional translator.

In our course, evaluation is basically performed by means of the translations that students carry out and send to their tutor. Therefore, there is a continuous evaluation of the work done all over the course, comprising the direct and reverse translations, as well as the practicum.

In the event that more assessment items should be necessary, a final exam consisting on a short text to translate could also be made.

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