12 Real-world translating: learning through engagement

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Abstract

In an effort to motivate language students and to promote real engagement, a long-running project has taken root at Newcastle University. For over 12 years, the Real Translation Project (RTP), an extracurricular initiative in the School of Modern Languages, has been offering opportunities to language students to use their linguistic skills to support community and charity organisations. Through participating in the project, the students develop professional as well as translation skills. This paper examines how the project facilitates the transition of students to post-graduation life – equipping them with work skills and increasing their awareness of the specific skills required in translation whilst linking them with external organisations and giving them opportunities to contribute to society. Drawing on empirical data from participants, this paper analyses the immediate and long-term outcomes derived from working on meaningful, authentic projects, using problem-based learning and a collaborative approach.

Keywords: real-world translation, collaborative approach, social impact, employability.

1.   Introduction

The RTP is an initiative which provides opportunities to language students in the School of Modern Languages (SML) at Newcastle University to engage with the community via the translation of real documents for a variety of organisations.

This initiative came into being in an effort to increase motivation among final-year language students and promote a sense of ownership of their work, through working on real and purposeful translations for charity and community organisations. In the process, the project has become a vehicle for preparing students for the world of work, by adopting a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, where students are confronted with real clients, a real readership, and real deadlines. Over time, the RTP has established close links with external organisations by supporting their work for several years running. It has also provided an opportunity for teaching staff in SML to engage in the projects, encouraging integration of the various language departments.

2.   Aims and theory

The RTP started out of a need for translation services from charitable organisations with limited resources. Whilst teaching a translation module for an undergraduate Spanish course, I found several local community organisations dealing with international families. This situation presented potential in two ways: we could support these organisations by translating documents to ease communication with their clients and also motivate and inspire our students via their participation in these real-world translation projects.

The main aims of the RTP are to increase *student motivation* using purposeful tasks, support charitable organisations, and inspire and raise the *social awareness* of the students. The project's objectives are to link Newcastle University language students with the wider community and enable them to support the work of community and charitable organisations through their language skills. The rationale is to use texts which these organisations need translating as

project work for the students and via this process to impact on their learning experience and motivation, enhance their employability and forge links between the university and the community (Uribe de Kellett, 2020).

According to research into pedagogy and psychology, motivation is the most important factor to improve learning (Olson, 1997, as cited in Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 2). It is also argued that increased motivation and participation among students leads to enhanced student performance and competence (González Davies, 2004, p. 2). From a social-constructivist view, which conceives learning as being co-constructed by individuals interacting in authentic situations, Kiraly (2000) has argued for an 'empowerment' approach using 'authentic project-work'. He explains this approach as "the collaborative undertaking of complete translation projects for real clients" (Kiraly, 2005, p. 1102). The goal is "'to empower' students by making them proactive agents of their own learning through authentic, collaborative work leading to autonomy and expertise" (Kiraly, 2005, p. 1104).

Within a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, collaboration is understood as the exchange of differing views which are then evaluated and developed into new perspectives (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992, as cited in Kiraly, 2000, p. 35). In collaborative work, the participants are "simultaneously creating meanings among themselves and are also internalising meanings individually" and each group member acquires "cultural and professional knowledge" (Kiraly, 2000, p. 36).

Working on authentic translation tasks is believed to develop translator competence and its benefits are wide ranging: "along with autonomy, responsibility and emotional involvement, motivation increases as well as the willingness to initiate action oneself instead of simply completing assignments" (Risku, 1998, as cited in Kiraly, 2005, p. 1104). Furthermore, as part of a holistic and an empowering approach to education, students should be encouraged to reflect on the learning process, which is understood as "the ability to reflect upon, understand and control one's learning" (Schraw & Dennison, 1994, as cited in Pietrzak, 2019, n.p.). By (self) reflecting, students' learning is maximised, and

its practice leads to the development of lifelong learning skills which will serve them in the world of work (Kiraly, 2000; Pietrzak, 2019).

Therefore, by undertaking real translation assignments, the RTP set out to encourage student participation and engagement. The project adopted specific practices in line with the social-constructivist model advocated by Kiraly: use of authentic tasks, a collaborative approach, student-centred and problem-based learning, a process-oriented approach, and reflection (Fernández Prieto & Sempere Linares, 2010; Uribe de Kellett, 2010). However, the guiding principle underpinning all the projects is cooperative learning which González Davies (2004) defines as: "positive teamwork… It is about creating a working atmosphere where each student feels actively involved in, and responsible for, the process and the end product" (p. 13).

3.   The RTP

The initial projects were carried out as in-class project work within a Spanish translation module for final-year students. However, working with large cohorts made them difficult to implement and after some trials, it was found that running them as extracurricular activities was more appropriate. The RTP has now been taken up in most of the school's language departments – Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese.

Although all projects vary, they share the following principles: the students work in teams, including Erasmus students where possible, as this is an important element in terms of peer teaching and learning, social integration, and cultural exchange. The teams manage themselves – when to meet, deciding on different roles, how to tackle the work, etc. The lecturer acts as a guide and facilitator.

For each project, a representative of the 'client' organisation is invited to speak to the students about their work, why the translations are needed, and to answer queries. Where relevant, there is a site visit as in the case of heritage sites.

Regular meetings with the lecturer take place to discuss progress, difficulties encountered, etc. For some projects, additional workshops enable students to gain or hone the necessary skills – e.g. learning to use subtitling software for audio-translation; or to provide context – for example, a talk on the recent political history of Peru when preparing to subtitle a video on Peruvian youth movements. The student teams carry out peer reviews and receive feedback from the lecturer. The translations are finally edited by the lecturer for quality assurance. Students then submit a report, reflecting on their learning, strategies, and processes. At the end, the organisations are invited again, and the students hand over their final translations personally, thereby reinforcing the relevance of their work. At the end of each project, individual students complete a questionnaire.

During the course of the RTP, the projects have varied in scope and nature just as the type of organisations involved. For example, the RTP has collaborated with a local primary school with a high proportion of children from migrant or refugee families. The language students translated letters and forms into four languages to help ease communication between parents and the school. In another project, the RTP worked with an organisation monitoring the situation of human rights' defenders in Colombia. The students translated a comprehensive dossier on the Colombian legal system and human rights law, and then a small group of students travelled to Colombia with the lecturer to interpret for a delegation of international lawyers. Other projects have included websites for non-governmental organisations , guides for heritage sites, bilingual booklets for vocational students and a book on alternative community projects. The work has branched out to interpreting, audio-visual translation, and recording audio-guides. So far, well over 500 language students have participated.

4. Analysis and discussion

The feedback questionnaires and individual reports of 98 students from three different years (2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2018-2019) have been analysed and key issues identified.

Responding to the following question from the questionnaire – *What impact did the fact that the text was a 'real text' have on your motivation?* – 93% of the students indicated that it had a great impact. In response to another question – *What impact did the fact that the text was for a charity organisation have on your motivation?* – 77% replied that it was a high motivating factor. Therefore, the value of real-life projects and translating for charity and community organisations was recognised by the students as key motivators. In fact, according to the students, these two elements – 'real tasks' and supporting 'good causes', had the effect of motivating them to perform to the highest standard possible. This in turn increased their engagement with the work and raised their level of performance, all of which would corroborate research findings by González Davies (2004) on how greater student performance and competence results from an increase in motivation and participation.

In addition, when asked to name five things gained through the project, two items topped the students' lists: gaining understanding, experience, and skills in translation (67%), and teamwork skills (48%). When asked to further specify the professional skills developed, collaborating (82%), communication (78%), and independent learning skills (76%) were singled out most frequently. These results validate one of the main goals of collaborative work as the assimilation of 'cultural and professional knowledge' by individual members of the teams (Kiraly, 2000, p. 36). They also point to the development of lifelong learning skills (Kiraly, 2000; Pietrzak, 2019).

Other gains reported by students, along with improved linguistic ability, experience, and acquisition of technical skills, were friendships, and engagement with the local community. This indicates that participation in the projects led to forming and strengthening friendships, which derives from positive teamwork in cooperative learning (González Davies, 2004). This also shows that students valued their engagement with the community, which is one of the main aims of the RTP.

Some students self-reported that having the opportunity to try out their translation skills in a collaborative way changed their career path towards translation and

interpreting. It led a number to follow MA courses in these fields and/or to get jobs as translators and interpreters after finishing their studies. Some individual reports described their experience with the RTP as their first professional assignment, and one participant even set up her own translation company.

These findings confirm the hypothesised benefits deriving from working with authentic translation projects of motivation, responsibility, emotional involvement, and initiative as well as autonomy (Risku, 1998, as cited in Kiraly, 2005). They also confirm the achievement of all the aims and goals set out for the RTP. From the above findings as well as from observation the positive effects from the RTP can be summarised as follows: linking students with community organisations enhances the student experience and their sense of personal fulfilment. Moreover, it enables them to see themselves as capable of making a difference within society. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to practise their linguistic and translation skills purposefully and enabling them to gain professional skills and strengthen their CVs, the RTP contributes to facilitating their transition to post-degree life (Uribe de Kellett, 2020).

Tangible societal benefits can be identified at different levels: collaborating with local organisations and schools working in deprived areas and providing support to migrant families and refugees; cooperating with international humanitarian and indigenous organisations; and working with heritage organisations as well as the academic community.

5.   Conclusion

Although various 'authentic translation projects' can be found in the literature, here are some distinctive features of this RTP: firstly, the engagement with local communities beyond the university is a dimension which broadens students' education – it raises their social awareness, provides the means to have a social impact and contributes to the broader recognition of the civic role of universities and students within society. Secondly, despite its limitations, the extracurricular format of the RTP gives greater flexibility in terms of timing and input

requirements. Projects can run over semesters or even partly into the summer and do not have to comply with modular prescriptions (number of content hours, etc). Thirdly, besides facilitating the integration of exchange students, the RTP allows a real cultural exchange to take place by giving students the opportunity to interact and work together in multicultural groups. Fourthly, the voluntary nature of the projects promotes positive values apart from avoiding any potential competition with local translators as the work done is for organisations who do not have the means to pay professional fees.

It must be added that even after over 12 years there continues to be a high take-up from students because they can recognise the benefits. The RTP has also proved there is a need for such collaborations with the community.

However, there are challenges as well as opportunities. Although the project has run as an extracurricular activity for most of its existence, some thought has been given to turn it into a credit-bearing module, but both approaches have their drawbacks. In our experience, real-world translation projects with large cohorts of students are difficult to manage, whereas the extracurricular context affords greater flexibility. Yet, the greatest difficulty inherent in this type of real-life project work in the long-term is the continuous uncertainty of the availability of projects each year.

In summary, there are significant benefits of real-life, collaborative projects in that they empower students, enabling them to take control of their learning and equipping them for life post-graduation. These projects also add extra dimensions to their educational experience. Despite the constraints and limitations, there is great value in taking the students out of the classroom and enabling them to learn through experience. But how can this potential be harnessed in a viable way? One possibility is through a 'Project-module' which would give much greater flexibility than standard modules as well as ensuring that the students' work and staff time are formally recognised.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that there is great value in collaborative and socially engaged real-world translation projects which allow

students to contribute to society whilst empowering and preparing them in their transition to life beyond the university. Such projects are worth pursuing as an integral part of courses that can motivate both students and staff and add real value to the university experience.

6.   Acknowledgements

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