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ONLINE COLLABORATION IN TRANSLATION INSTRUCTION AMONG STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

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Abstract

An asynchronous online translation discussion forum was created and used to post texts to be translated by participating English-Arabic student translators from different countries. Volunteer translation instructors read participants' translations and gave communicative feedback on the location and types of errors. Errors were color-coded. No correct translations were provided. The participants revised their translations and re-posted them for further feedback. Each translation was subjected to several revisions and re-submissions before it reached an acceptable level. Translation tips were given. The participants had access to a variety of online dictionaries and resources. At the end of the semester, participants responded to a questionnaire regarding their online collaborative experience. Participant views and further reflections on online translation instruction are given.

I. Introduction

Trainers and practitioners have long identified the need for integrating computer-based tools and resources into translation instruction (Király 2000; Lee-Jahnke 1998; Massey 1998; Owens 1996). A survey conducted in 2001 with a web search of 121 institutions of higher learning in Spain, Portugal, France, UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, where training for translators was available and ongoing, showed only a few percentages of online programs (Alcalá 2001).

Examples of the programs where online translation courses are offered are the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Cardiff University offers high level translation (French English) Distance Learning Course. The Center for Interpretation and Translation Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa offers online translation courses. The School of Continuing and Professional Studies at New York University offers Online Certificates in several Translation Studies, Translation Certificates and Non-Credit Translation Courses. The School of Continuing Studies, University of

Toronto offers workplace translation courses, distance learning courses; in addition to the Words Language Services (WLS) translation courses in Dublin, the Online Translation Courses of Logos, Open Distance Learning MA Translation Studies, run at the Centre for English Language Studies, University of Birmingham, and a Postgraduate Translation Diploma through Distance or Independent Learning is offered by the Division of Languages at London City University. The Department of Modern Languages at Florida International University offers a fully online course called Practica in Medical Translation using the WebCT platform. The Universitat Rovira i Virgili offers 10-week postgraduate certificate courses in technical translation and localization between English and Spanish (Pym et al 2003).

In Italy, the Vicenza-CETRA Project involved on-site translation classes integrating email and the Internet; shared translation project via email and the Internet; translation theory classes integrating email, the Internet and videoconferences; a simulator software package for teaching, self-teaching and practicing the simultaneous and consecutive interpreting techniques and sight translation. Students use IT in the translation classroom and had direct links with their L2 counterparts in other countries, had ongoing links with Salford, Málaga, Marie-Haps and had links with an American university in the past (Pym 2003).

During the 2000 Fall semester Stecconi (2003) taught an introduction to translation studies at the American University in Washington D.C. The coursework was carried out in collaboration with students at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain, and with Frank Austermühl at Germersheim, Germany. Cooperation ranged from having remote native speakers revise translations and clarify originals for local students, to bibliographical help and other research assistance. The exchange was planned to be a two-way affair. The participants mainly used email messages and attachments. Attempts to use the Blackboard electronic forum turned out to be frustrating. One chat session was also carried out, which ended up as a mere test of the channel.

At Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, Fictumová (2004) reported a case study of courses taught for three years using Moodle. Preparatory translation and interpreting courses, technical translation and an introduction to interpreting were presented. Course content seemed to be the decisive factor in evaluating any of the courses taught. The content could be made more attractive or more accessible through Moodle. However, too much variety or too many resources can ruin the positive impact of e-learning and become a negative feature. Intelligibility of the course materials, particularly the presentation and/or use of TM tools, was a real challenge. All instructions in e-learning courses had to be formulated

very carefully. Finding a balance between theory and practice was the key problem in most courses.

Those studies show that information communication technology (ICT) has been used as a teaching tool and has been extensively researched for its pedagogical implications. So far, researchers have consistently identified two major benefits of asynchronous communication technology: A deeper thought process manifested in the discussion threads, and the facilitation of collaborative learning. Access to tutors and a strong identification between instructors and students proved to be a powerful motivational factor for e-learning participants (Frankola 2004). The use of ICT permits students and instructors to overcome time and space barriers, to design new methods and instruments of teaching, tutoring and evaluation, and at the same time preserve a personalized approach (Salinas 2007).

To take advantage of the opportunities presented by e-learning, a non-credit asynchronous online translation discussion forum was created as part of the World Arab Translators' Association (WATA) forums. The course was an experiment with volunteer students who were members of the WATA organization and its online forums. The online discussion forum was a distance learning course where students learned translation skills and practiced translation tasks for a semester. The present article aims to describe the online collaborative operative learning environment, the process of teaching translation online, the kinds of texts posted, the kinds of tasks emphasized, how feedback was provided, how web-based collaborative learning was used to facilitate students' learning performance and to enhance their translation competence and performance, areas of improvement, and report students' attitudes towards the online translation discussion forum and their views of the benefits and disadvantages of their online training experience.

II. Participants

Five students from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and Syria majoring in translation at several Arab universities, and 4 freelance translators from Jordan, Palestine, UAE and Canada participated in the online collaborative translation project. All of the students, and freelance translators were native speakers of Arabic with English as their target language. The course was a non-credit course. The students were of different proficiency levels in English (L2), had varying degrees of translation experience. The freelance translators were all on the onset of their translation career and joined the course to polish their translation skills. The author, who was the main instructor, has 20 years of experience teaching EFL, ESP, translation, and interpreting courses to undergraduate students at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and has

experience teaching EFL courses online using different forms of technology mainly Online Course Management Systems such as Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle, forums, blogs, e-mail and others.

III. Identifying Students' Translation Needs:

Based on my teaching experience with translation students, I anticipated some of the weaknesses that participating students would have (i) Reading comprehension weaknesses; (ii) Inadequate background information in the topic of the text; (iii) Difficulty with certain grammatical structures such as embedded and complex sentences; (iv) translating a text like a word-processor imitatively rather than discriminately; (v) difficulty making a translation cohesive; (vi) all kinds of mistakes in translating a text.

IV. Aims of the Online Course

The online translation course aimed to: (i) help students recognize translation problems and their solutions; (ii) practice translation quality control and know where to find help; (iii) identify good/poor translations with specific reasons for the assessment; (iv) work as a team; (v) develop students' awareness of the stylistic, grammatical differences between English and Arabic; (vi) develop students' ability to revise their own translation focusing on one aspect of the target text; (vii) help students focus on meaning not exact words of the source text while translating; (viii) develop students awareness of their own translation errors as well as other students translation errors and monitor their own translation process; (ix) develop students' ability to distinguish between good style and accuracy; and (x) respond to students' questions and needs.

V. Prerequisite Reading Skills

- **Ability to** recognize the main ideas and details such as sequence of events, comparisons, cause-effect relationships, and character traits that are explicitly or implicitly stated in the text to be translated.
- Using **phonic clues** to determine the pronunciation and meaning of unknown words by spelling-pronunciation correspondences.
- **Using word structure clues** to determine the pronunciation and meaning of unknown words by breaking words into their appropriate units; by recognizing derivatives, roots, prefixes, and suffixes; by identifying inflectional endings denoting plurals, comparatives; by identifying compound words, contractions and possessives.
- **Using syntactic clues** to determine the meaning of unknown words and compounds by identifying the part of speech, number, gender, person, tense, mood, and voice of verbs; by noting the inflectional endings of verbs, and the position of a word in a sentence; by

recognizing sentence patterns, word order sequences, mandatory subject-verb, noun-adjective and pronoun-antecedent agreement; and by recognizing the function of punctuation and typographic devices such as apostrophes, exclamation points, hyphens, question marks, periods, quotation marks, brackets, colons, commas, dashes, parentheses, capitalization, italicization and bold face.

- **Using semantic or contextual clues** to obtain the meaning of unknown words through the examination of the surrounding context by using implicit or explicit clues. Implicit clues are those inherent in the written context such as the topic, words preceding and/or following the unfamiliar words in the same sentence; and commonly used expressions such as idioms, colloquialisms, figures of speech, proverbs and other familiar sayings. Explicit clues are synonyms, antonyms, definitions, direct explanations, descriptions, examples, parenthesis, comma enclosure, appositives, mood, tone, and pictorial representation available in the written context.
- **Recognizing syntactic relationships such as:** (i) Perceiving the constituent parts within a sentence as chunk units; (ii) Recognizing the various types of word order (two possible positions for the indirect object after certain verbs, the multiple function of the word 'that' as a determiner, a clause introducer and a pronoun); (iii) Identifying and understanding complex sentences, complementation, modification by adjectives, adverbs, phrases, clauses; coordination of phrases, independent clauses, sentences, verbs, objects of preposition, and objects of verb; (iv) Deriving different meanings from sentences that are exactly the same. e.g.: 'I had three books stolen' may mean: 'I had three books stolen from me'; 'I had three books stolen for me'; 'I had three books stolen when someone interrupted my burglarizing'; (v) Seeing differences in sentences that seem to be the same as in: 'the cow was found by the farmer' and 'the cow was found by the stream'; (vi) Seeing similarities in sentences that do not look the same as in: 'the cow was found by the farmer' and 'the farmer found the cow'.
- **Recognizing Organizational clues**, i.e. signaling devices or sentence connectors that indicate a particular pattern of organization such as: (i) Listing: the following, in addition, also, another; (ii) Sequence: first, second, meanwhile, afterwards, while; (iii) Cause-effect: since, for, because, as a result, therefore, consequently; (iv) Comparison/contrast: however, yet, nevertheless, although; (v) Classification: is divided into, is categorized into; (vi) Exemplification: for example, for instance, such as, like, as; (vii) Chronology: before, after, during, throughout, in the year; and (viii) Analogy: like, same as, similar to.
- **Making Inferences** such as: (i) Making forward inferencing: if a car

runs out of gas, the car will stop. (ii) Making backward inference: Jane's brother is coming tomorrow. Robert is making a cake.

- **Recognizing anaphoric relationships**, i.e., recognizing words and phrases that refer back to other words and phrases used earlier in a text.
- **Recognizing Types of Cohesion**, i.e., grammatical and/or lexical features that link the component parts of a text together. It is the relationship between different sentences or different parts of a sentence.
- **Using Background knowledge**, i.e., students' familiarity with the facts, information, and ideas contained in a text. Background knowledge has 4 components: (i) background knowledge in the content area; (ii) prior knowledge that the text is about a particular content area; and (iii) degree to which the lexical items in the text reveal the content area; (iv) Cultural ideas (Al-Jarf, 2007a).

VI. Online Translation Instruction

An asynchronous online translation discussion forum was created and used to post English texts to be translated by participating English-Arabic student translators. The online discussion forum was designed with professional literary and nonliterary translation in mind. Since the translation task is very complex, instruction focused on helping students recognize the different components of a written text: ideas, how ideas are organized, sentences, cohesion, choice of words, syntactic and morphological aspects, the correct association of spoken sounds with their printed form and meaning, anaphora, making backward and forward inferences, and using background knowledge in comprehending the source text. The online translation course was process-oriented and learner-centered, and it utilized social constructivist methods to translator training. The author served as a facilitator and encouraged student-instructor and student-student interaction and communication. Participants felt free to express their needs, and instruction was geared towards helping students overcome their comprehension and translation problems. The instructor and students shared information regarding sources available in book form and on the Internet (Al-Jarf, 2006a; Al-Jarf, 2006c).

Materials

The selected materials included children's stories, literary texts and scientific texts. The texts were taken from book and online resources such as encyclopedias. The students could post texts of their choice such as children's stories. The students had access to a variety of general and specialized online Arabic-English and English-Arabic specialized dictionaries, translation literature and forum posts on the art and science of translating available in the WATA website.

Tasks

The instructor posted the texts one by one accompanied by instructions such as: Print the English text, read the whole text, then re-read the text paragraph by paragraph, turn the paper over and write what you have understood in Arabic without looking at the English text. You do not have to remember all of the details. Read the second paragraph as a whole, understand well (do not memorize it), turn the text over, then write what you have understood in Arabic without looking at the English text. Follow the same steps with the rest of the paragraphs. Post your translation in order for the participants to look at it.

The participants took turns in translating the texts and posting and re-posting their translations of the same text for feedback. Each participant revised her translations and re-posted it for further feedback. Each translation was subjected to several revisions and re-submissions before it reached an acceptable level. The online discussion forum assignments focused on the process and quality of translation. The students worked on solving stylistic, syntactic, cultural, terminological, and technical problems encountered in the translation process. Types of corrections made were prompted by the instructor.

Feedback

The instructor always gave a general impression of each translation. Focus was always on the positive aspects of a translation. The author would compare a student's performance on the first, second and third drafts and aspects of improvement were noted and reinforced. Communicative feedback on the location and types of errors in a translation were always given. No correct translations were provided. A student would work on her weaknesses and types or error, one by one.

When students submit a good translation, the author would explain why their translation was good as follows: Because the student had some background knowledge about the topic or story, the ideas were clear in her mind and she could express those ideas and organize them clearly. She focused on transmitting the idea not the superficial words and sentence structure. She did not try to follow the exact words of the source text, sentences were cohesive. The author would tell them how these characteristics could be applied in the translation of unfamiliar texts.

Marking Errors

The author always read all of the translations and errors were color-coded. For example, she would mark the students' translations in black and her explanation of the difficult parts in blue, highlight typos and grammatical errors in yellow, use ^ where a punctuation mark is missing,

highlight deleted punctuation marks in yellow, mark sentences that were miscomprehended in green, highlight verbs, prepositions, punctuation marks that were not pinpointed by the students, and parts of the source text that were deleted, i.e., not translated in the target text.

Guided Corrections

The author helped the participants correct their errors as follows:

- Having students highlight the verbs in the target text, and correct tense and form errors.
- Having students highlight their prepositions and check those used in phrasal verbs and so on.
- Highlight the words and phrases that show the organizational structure of the text such as: (1) enumeration: first, second, third, as follows, last; (ii) chronological order: in the year, during, since, for, then, while, throughout; (iii) spatial order: under, above, beside, behind, in front of; (iv) cause-effect: because, so, as, for, consequently, as a result, therefore; (v) compare-contrast: but, however, yet, on the other hand, by contrast, similarly, likewise, whereas, like; (vi) problem-solution: because, as a result, results in, lead to; (vii) classification: divided into, classified into, types, kinds, consists of; (viii) definition: defined, means, referred to, known as (Al-Jarf, 2001; Al-Jarf, 1999).
- The author translated the text sentence by sentence and explained the difficult parts, with which the students had comprehension problems, in parentheses.
- The author would break the text down into thought groups by enclosing noun clauses, verb causes, and prepositional clauses in parentheses.
- Putting translated sentences one after the other and asking the students to read them as a connected discourse and judge clarity of ideas, translation accuracy, cohesiveness, and whether TL has the same effect as the ST in expressing the author's philosophy of winning and losing or success and failure (Al-Jarf, 2006b).
- Asking students to imagine an audience, such as high school students, for whom you are translating and trying to give clear, simple information in Arabic, to help them understand.
- Providing some background information about the author to help the students put the topic of the ST in context.
- Asking students to read a paragraph as a whole and write the meaning in Arabic without looking at the English text.
- Giving the students examples of questions that a student might ask herself before starting to translate a text such as: Do I understand the

text, is it clear, cohesive, with a language that is appropriate for the receiver/reader. When translating a children's story, what kinds of answers would the students get for those questions? Does the Arabic translation of the story begin in the same way as the traditional Arabic story. What kind of style is used in Arabic stories? Did you choose words that are understood by Arab children? (Al-Jarf, 1996; Al-Jarf, 1990; Al-Jarf, 1995)

- Drawing the students' attention to the difference between the Arabic and English typographical conventions and word orders such as Arabic sentence have a VSO word order, i.e., begin with a verb.
- Having students review and check certain Arabic grammatical structures (Al-Jarf, 2005b; Al-Jarf, 2000).

Developing Awareness

To develop participants' awareness of their own errors and their own translation process, and other translators' errors, the following strategies were used:

- Having students compare their own performance on 2 translation drafts of the same text.
- Posting sample translations of the same text translated in class by some of my students and asking participants to compare and contrast them and show the strengths and weaknesses of each translation.
- Having students exchange translations and check each other's errors.
- Having students go through their own translation, focus on one type of errors, mark them all and correct them themselves.
- Having students record the amount of time spent in translating a particular text.
- Having students monitor their own translation process and verbalize how they translated the text the first time and the second time (Al-Jarf, 2005a; Al-Jarf, 2004; Al-Jarf, 2002).

VII. Data Collection

At the end of the semester, participants responded to a questionnaire regarding their online collaborative experience, and the key elements in an online collaborative learning environment, such as effectiveness of teamwork, interdependence, leadership, and communication. The author also kept a daily log on the difficulties I had with online translation instruction and the differences between online and in-class face-to-face instruction using an overhead projector or a tablet laptop. Results are reported qualitatively below.

VIII. Results

Students Views

Analysis of the participants' responses and comments revealed positive attitudes towards online translation instruction. They found it useful and fun. It heightened their motivation and raised their self-esteem. They found the course useful as it provided extra practice, gave instant feedback and provided an opportunity to improve their ability to translate, identify errors and weaknesses and correct them.

Participating students and free-lance translators were pleased with their e-learning experience. They all seemed to have benefited greatly from the online collaborative project because, at school, they were never taught by a currently practicing professional translator and thus found her revisions and commentaries quite different from those their instructors gave them in class.

Participants developed a sense of responsibility that professional translators should possess when accepting a translation assignment. They acquired translation skills, learned to overcome difficulties in translating language structures and syntax from English to Arabic. They learnt a lot from the discussion and feedback they received from other participants. They were allowed to participate at their own convenience, and everyone was able to see everyone else's contributions. Reading other students' translations of the same text (several translations) was enlightening. They were able to compare, discern strengths and weaknesses in each, and see for themselves how other people translate. The students benefited from the variety of online resources available. They had a chance to improve computer skills related to document manipulation and formatting, differences between, file uploading, participation in forum discussions, and English and Arabic typographical conventions.

The participants found the online learning environment supporting, encouraging and secure to make mistakes and to continue revising their drafts enthusiastically. The online class created a warm climate between the students and instructor and among the students themselves. They felt free to communicate their needs, talk about their weaknesses and ask questions. For example, some students found the source text very difficult. Some could understand the overall meaning of the text but could not formulate the ideas in Arabic. Some had difficulty expressing their ideas in Arabic. Some students did not receive enough writing practice in English in class.

All of the participants were appreciative of the time and effort the instructor spent in revising their translations and providing them with written feedback. They found her tips very helpful (Al-Jarf, 2007b; Al-Jarf, 2006b).

However, some students wished there were more students in the online course, to have more interaction and feedback.

Findings of the present study are consistent with findings of prior studies such as the student evaluations of the “Tools for Translators” module at Zurich University of Applied Sciences. Massey (2005) reported students’ strong satisfaction with the learner-centered collaborative assignments, tutor-student interaction and peer interaction. Seán Golden, Director of the Center for International and Intercultural Studies, at the Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona, reported research findings that elearning tends to enhance the communicative ability of students who do not normally participate in class. It tends to motivate students in a new and different way because their audience is not the teacher but their fellow students (Pym et al 2003). Students’ questionnaire and feedback sessions showed that, overall, the course was felt to be extremely useful. The most positive responses concerned its didactic aspects, structural clarity, quality and frequency of moderation, adequacy of content and comprehensiveness, although the large amount of information and resources presented in the course prompted a number of informants to request continued access for reference purposes (Jekat and Massey 2003). However, some findings of Jekat and Massey’s study are inconsistent with finding of the present study in that there were some negative findings in Jekat and Massey’s study regarding peer-to-peer collaboration. Most groups tended to divide up tasks among members and work individually or in pairs. Three of the seven groups that completed the course resorted to face-to-face communication and simple e-mail collaboration. Asynchronous discussion-board communication was generally felt to be confusing and unsuitable for the sort of complex interactions required by the large-scale collaborative assignments. Although the original overall estimate of the time needed to complete the course proved accurate, too little time was allowed for the collaborative phase.

Instructor’s Views

The author found online instruction to be more challenging for her as an instructor, dealing with students whom she never met face-to-face, had little information about their linguistic and training background. The process of providing detailed feedback on each and every translation and revision by each participant was tedious and time consuming. The fact that students could go online anytime and the sense of competition prevalent in the online environment made it difficult for an instructor to give feedback on a daily basis. It was difficult to keep up with the speed and amount of re-submissions on the part of the students, especially when long or literary texts were posted for translation.

Online discussion of a particular text, especially literary ones, took much more time than in-class discussion of the same text due to the

absence of face-to-face interaction and discussion, which made it mandatory to provide all the feedback and discussion in writing.

Some of the problems the author experienced in attempting to discuss the online students' translations were similar to those described by Mossop (Pym et al. 2003). In face-to-face discussion, she can encourage students through tone of voice and gestures to defend their translations and choices. There is no need for several online exchanges extending over a long period of time. It is much less time-consuming for her to give oral comments than to highlight errors and insert written comments in the revised version of an electronic text. She found it difficult to write comments on issues like coherence, focus and consistency that require reference to previous parts of the text. In a live in-class discussion, she can simply gesture to point out the relations under discussion or mark parts on a transparency or tablet laptop.

Another challenge was the order of texts presented to the students. The author started by posting a literary text which the students found difficult in terms of comprehension and finding Arabic equivalents to certain expressions. It would be better if beginners begin translating short and easy texts then move on to translating more difficult and longer texts. They can begin with children's stories, scientific then literary themes as they become more proficient and experienced.

When selecting a text, it is better if a student translates a text in her major. If a student is political science major, it is better if she translates texts in political science not literature, as she is familiar with political science information. This will help her understand political science texts in English, and she will be better able to formulate ideas in Arabic as she is familiar with the register, style and technical terms of Arabic political science texts. A translator cannot be efficient in translating all kinds of texts. A translator has to focus on an area of his/her choice.

A third challenge was that participants had many linguistic weaknesses in L2 (English) as well as Arabic (L1). They needed to learn advanced English grammatical structures such as emphasis theme and focus, cleft and pseudo-cleft, embedded sentence, complex sentences, reduced clauses, defining and non-defining clauses, anticipatory it and so on, and needed to review certain Arabic grammar rules. They also needed to develop advanced reading comprehension and writing skills.

IX. Conclusion

The online translation course in the present study was an experiment that the author carried out with some volunteer students and free-lance translators from several countries. The course was an asynchronous, distance learning course. It proved to be effective and successful in enhancing the students' translation skills and performance. As Jia has (2005) indicated, collaborative learning in a Web-based environment may

give as good results as classroom learning or even better.

In order for online translation instruction to be more effective and less tedious for instructors, Pym (2001) suggested the use of heightened interactivity, controlled asynchrony, variable workloads, rationalization of resources, and the creation of a communication-based learning community. It is equally important to design e-learning courses that are highly interactive, and which permit a maximum degree of tutor-learner and learner-learner collaboration. Studies on learner drop-out rates show community-building through asynchronous and synchronous interactivity.

An online forum can become a very lively forum for debate and exchange of information if more visual resources such as videoconferencing and webcams are included in translation pedagogy, and if synchronous online instruction is used instead through videoconferencing, Skype or video and voice chatting to be able to have live discussions of participants' translations. Pym et al (2003) suggested that a combination of face-to-face teaching and web-based teaching is the best mix.

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