

Teaching electronic tools for translators online

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*Abstract. The growing demand for training in translation technology can partly be met by courses in a 100% online mode. These courses, however, cannot simply transfer the experience gained in face-to-face environments. This paper reflects on the teaching of electronic tools for translators in a 100% online training environment, comparing the difficulties encountered with similar problems that surfaced when the same contents were taught face-to-face. It is concluded that a key factor when selecting students for online courses is their initial computer literacy, and that this is especially true in courses on translation technology.**

On online training

There is a huge demand for online courses. Nowadays, studying is not something that people do before entering the labor market; it is a lifetime activity. Today's professionals are ready to invest in training, but they must combine it with other adult responsibilities such as working full-time and raising children. The traditional university face-to-face teaching system thus fails to provide an adequate means of training for this sector of potential students. On top of that, online training is suitable not only for practicing professionals, but also for other profiles (traditional young students included), so the scope of student intake is very wide.

There is also a strong supply of online courses. In an effort to catch up with the times and attract more students, most universities offer now virtual or semi-virtual courses. This is as true in the field of translation as it is in any other field of professional training.

On translation technologies

Personal computers and the Internet have brought about a shift in the way translators work. Twenty years ago most freelance translators used a typewriter or dictated translations to a secretary; ten years ago they had a

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computer with a word processor; nowadays most translators need to know how to use translation-memory software and terminology managers, and must be expert Internet users. They might also have replaced the secretary with a voice-recognition software system. Telecommuting is now a reality within the profession, since electronic means of communication mean that customers and translators no longer need to be in the same geographical area, and members of the same translation team may live and work in different places. The Internet (and, by extension, computer proficiency) is not only a source of information or a tool for translations, but also the platform for communication with clients, agencies and fellow translators.

Online courses at Tarragona

The Intercultural Studies Group at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona currently offers two certificate courses in 100% online mode. One of those courses is the “Online Postgraduate Certificate in Technical Translation and Electronic Tools”. Here we use data from the way that course was taught between October and December 2002. There were 12 students, from Bolivia, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States and Venezuela. The course tasks were based on the English-Spanish language pair, so all students were fluent on both languages and were expected to work in both directions. English was the language of instruction, but Spanish was also used when interacting with the students.

The course comprised 50 hours of learning time, distributed over ten weeks. Of those 50 hours, 5 (10%) were devoted to the translation market, 15 (30%) to translation strategies, 15 (30%) to CAT tools and 15 (30%) to translation projects. The module topics were as follows:

- Advanced Internet searches
- Revision tools with MS Word
- Terminology management with MS Excel
- HTML basics: Creating a simple website with Netscape Composer
- HTML for translators: Identifying translatable text inside code
- Using Translation Memories:
 - Trados
 - WordFast
 - DéjàVu

Learning tools and resources available for students

Although there are many online learning platforms available (WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle), this course was based on very simple technology allowing maximum accessibility.

There was a course website with all the lessons and exercises available in web format. If the exercises to be done in a specific file format (Excel, PowerPoint), they were posted in that format.

There was also a non-moderated email discussion list, which was the main means of communication between teachers and students. All the participants could send messages to the list, and the messages would be forwarded automatically to all course participants (teachers and students). Messages were also automatically posted to a website, so it was possible to read messages even if students had no access to their own email account temporarily.

From the course website there was a link to the Shared Files, a web-based application (BSCW) to put and share files on the Internet without the need for any extra tool or knowledge. An Internet connection and a web browser was all the students needed. Students posted their work, and teachers posted their feedback. The Shared Files were also used to share some off-topic materials, such as articles on translation not used for the lessons, personal pictures and jokes.

A chat channel was made available from the course website. Students were free to use it at any time as a means to communicate with each other, apart from the scheduled sessions with the trainers.

According to replies to a questionnaire given to students after the course, the website was easy to use: none of the students said it was difficult to use or that they would have liked more time to get used to the learning environment.

Time for the sessions was calculated based on the experience of face-to-face classes.

Pedagogical approach

The course was very practical, making students translate texts and otherwise practice the lesson contents. Tasks were set at the end of each lesson. The basic interaction pattern was as follows:

For each lesson, the teacher sent a message to the list specifying what had to be read and which exercises the students should do, and gave a deadline for the exercises. If students had doubts or comments on the activities, they would send another message to the list, and the teacher or another student would reply. This developed discussion threads. When students finished the exercises, they posted them to the Shared Files, teachers revised the tasks and posted the feedback in the Shared Files. This led to discussion on the exercises and the feedback (difficult points, applications in the market, investment in technology, questions on the feedback, ethical issues, etc.). Finally, the teacher would send another email indicating further readings and activities, thus starting the cycle again.

As the course advanced, the session threads overlapped. Students also sent emails and opened new lines of discussion based on their own needs and interests. All this enriched the communication between all the course participants and gave an added value to the list.

The email list

We analyzed the topics of all the emails sent to the list. It was found that the emails could be grouped into the following four general areas, following the classification used by Fallada (2003) and adapted from Schlager (2003: 7).² The description of each of the categories is as follows:

- *Pedagogy*: messages directly related to course contents.
- *Technology*: messages on technology issues not directly related to the course contents.
- *Management*: messages on the overall functioning of the course (pedagogy and technology excluded)
- *Social events*: messages with personal information, organization of local meetings or information relevant to translators.

Many emails did not fall neatly into one category or another. When an email had two topics, for instance, we used the following criteria to allocate them to a category:

- *Position*: if there was more than one topic in one single email, the first topic was picked.
- *Length*: if there was more than one topic in one single email, the lengthiest topic was picked.

If the two previous criteria contradicted, length had priority. The results of this analysis are shown below.

Category	Percentage of total
Pedagogy	38
Technology	26
Social events	21
Management	15

² The same categories have been used to analyze other learning groups at Tarragona. Those analyses were made by Jill Orenstein, Magdalena Talaban and José Ramón Biau Gil. The results were presented in conferences in 2005 by Jill Orensten and Magdalena Talaban.

Here we see that, of all the messages sent to the email list, only 38% were on class issues. That could be seen as negative, since it means that more than half the emails were on issues other than the specified business of the course. However, the course organizers had actually fostered the sending of non-pedagogical messages. Although the course syllabus included some technology, the educational goal was not to focus on that alone but to expand the technological horizon of both students and teachers. Thus, comments on software not used for our course were very much welcome. Also, we expected some extra-curricular questions regarding computer skills, as this was a course dealing with computer programs and we did not want people to be silent when facing a problem.

Management emails dealt with the overall functioning of the course. In a face-to-face course with local students, teachers and students may share the same experience and assumptions on how the course should work. In an online environment (new to some of the participants) with people from several countries, rules and guidelines had to be made explicit, in our case by emailing to the list.

The justification for having off-topic social messages in our discussion list is very simple: to fight student distress. When studying online, many students feel isolated, which may lead to them dropping out of the course (Palloff and Pratt 1999: 29). By fostering social messages, we expected to build a greater sense of community, and that this would help students stay motivated. The social emails were thus thought to have a positive effect on the overall pedagogical results of the course participants, apart from making the experience more enjoyable for everyone.

When looking at the number of emails on technology sent to the list, we found that both low-tech and hi-tech students sent the same number of messages. However, this did not mean that both groups needed the same amount of teacher support. There was a notable difference in the way students interacted. Students with good computer skills did the exercises and then sent comments to the list, adding extra value to the task by talking about their experience and raising awareness on interesting issues. Students with low computer skills sent questions on how to do the tasks, since the written lessons and tasks on the web were not clear enough for them. Also, some of the questions were sent more than once and some questions needed more than one message to be answered. Further, despite the teachers' efforts to have all the messages sent to the list, some students sent private emails to the teachers asking for help on technology issues. Those messages are not represented in our statistics.

The sample exercise

Two chat sessions were organized. The first session was set up as an open discussion on practical issues such as prices and the advantages and

drawbacks of specific tools. All the students were invited to participate. The second session was designed to provide individualized, synchronic support to two students who needed extra help with the following exercise.

Students were expected to do advanced searches on the Internet. By restricting the search of two terms to a specific country domain (.es, .uk, .ar, etc.), they had to find out which term was used more widely in a given country. All the necessary steps were available in a web-based lesson. Some students did the task and sent comments, others asked the list for help and received replies to most of their questions. There were, though, two students who did not manage to complete the activity. For them, we set up a chat session in order to work synchronically, to identify the problems and to find a solution.

The chat session lasted just over one hour. At the end of it, the students managed to do the assigned task, but failed to apply the mechanics to other similar searches. Both students were then invited to come to the teacher's office to have a face-to-face session: only one was able to accept, as the other lived on a different continent. The teacher saw the student working on the computer and identified the student's problems quickly (missing quotation marks, commas, spaces, Boolean operators in the wrong place, etc.). The teacher made the student aware of the importance of commas and spaces when doing advanced searches, and performed the search before the student's eyes. After that, the student was able to apply the concepts to other searches. The whole session took less than 20 minutes. The Tarragona program runs the same activity in a face-to-face environment for Masters students, who usually spend one hour to learn the concepts (equivalent to reading the lesson in the online environment) and do the tasks.

Conclusions

In the online course, students with low computer skills needed to spend much more time than expected in order to attain the course objectives. Moreover, they needed more time from the teacher, who was obliged to provide a lot of individualized attention to each of the students with low computer skills.

From this general experience, we can conclude:

- For students with low computer skills, a face-to-face environment is more fruitful than an online environment.
- Students with good computer skills tend to be very independent learners: they can manage technological problems on their own.
- Students with low computer skills are dependent learners: they need a lot of external help, usually requested from the teacher. These students tend to seek "the human factor", that is, a person to help them, rather than find solutions by themselves.

- Economically speaking, the teachers' income needs to be calculated to compensate for the time commitment involved in online education.
- Blended learning environments (combined face-to-face and online sessions) cover a wider range of students' needs and abilities.

Adjustments

On the basis of this experience, some modifications have been made to the course design:

- The number of exercises on electronic tools has been reduced so that students have extra time to download, install and interact with these new programs, since the learning curve is longer in online environments. The original program, based on experience in the face-to-face environment, proved to be too ambitious for the average profile of students in the given amount of time.
- Prospective students are given more detailed information on the skills they are expected to have in order to finish the course successfully.
- Teachers are now paid according to a formula that accounts for the number of students they teach as well as the hours of course content.

Final thoughts

Online education involves efforts that are different from those demanded by face-to-face classes. The same activity may have very different timing depending on whether it is offered in a face-to-face, blended or online environment.

To be an effective online learner or teacher, one must be familiar with computers, be ready to interact with them, and be very independent at solving potential problems, as participants do not share the same physical space. Moreover, communication skills are crucial for the course to move forward smoothly. Students with low computer skills may have problems with the means of delivery, and this is likely to affect their performance. In courses on technology, the ability to interact with a computer is even more important. It is thus crucial to check the student's initial computer literacy so as to make sure they can get the most out of the course.

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