Introducing IT in translator training: Experiences from the COLC project

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Abstract. *One of the major recent developments in the translation industry is the introduction of computer technology. From 2000 to 2004 the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies responded to this general development through the specialized three-year COLC project (Computing for Language Careers), designed to update the curriculum of its degree program in translation and interpreting. A total of 15 new computer-related courses were offered within the project. It was shown that both students and teachers were aware of the need to familiarize themselves with the new translation technologies. But at the same time the project revealed several problem areas. The major challenges of the project were organization and timetables, outsourcing teaching, transfer of knowledge, and student attitudes.*

The way translators work has changed: commissions arrive by email, and translators are expected to use the internet, electronic dictionaries, translation memory tools, electronic corpora and concordance software, etc. to increase the efficiency and quality of their work. As the Finnish POSI committee stated in their final report in 2000: "Employers on the public as well as the private sector, translation agencies and translators themselves all agreed that one of the things urgently needed on the market are better computing or IT skills" (translation RJ).

In this paper we will describe one of the ways in which the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies has responded to these recent changes in the translation industry. In November 2000, a project known as Computing for Language Careers (later COLC) was launched, and its main aim was to update the curriculum of the degree program in translation and interpreting at Savonlinna.

The three-year project, which ended in June 2004, was funded by the European Social Fund of the European Union and the State Provincial Office of Eastern Finland, and it employed four persons full time and several part-time teachers. The facilities and hardware were provided by the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies. These included a state-of-the-art computer class known as the Translation Lab, which had 13 workstations for students equipped with a wide variety of language and translation technological software.

The aims of the project

As was mentioned above, the main aim of the COLC project was to improve the undergraduate training at Savonlinna by (1) updating the contents of the curriculum and (2) by adding a new minor subject: Information technology for translators. The emphasis was on teaching information and translation technological skills. One of the most important issues was to address both aspects of the changes in the market, i.e. not only to provide teaching of translation tools, but also to give relevant theoretical background on working in different areas of the translation industry, such as localization projects.

In addition to improving the undergraduate studies, the COLC project aimed at providing training for the trainers. The COLC staff arranged short courses on translation tools as well as other tools such as presentation software. These courses provided the staff at Savonlinna with an opportunity to update their knowledge and to learn about the possibilities of integrating for instance translation tools into "normal" translation classes. One example of such integration would be to build and use translation memories, term bases and/or corpora in special field translation courses.

Finally, the project aimed at promoting equality between men and women, since information technology courses are often offered in male-dominated technical fields of study. In contrast, 85% of all students of translation at Savonlinna are women. As roughly two thirds of the participants in the COLC courses were women, it can be said that this goal had already been achieved.

Studies

The COLC studies consisted of 15 different courses, divided into basic and subject studies, each package comprising 30 ECTS. In addition to completing one or both of these packages, students could also choose individual courses to complement their studies. A list of courses offered in each package is shown in Table 1.

Most of the COLC courses were taught by COLC staff members, who had different areas of expertise ranging from translation tools to software engineering and globalization. On some courses teaching was outsourced to experts of that particular field. Outsourced courses included Databases, Software testing, and Project management. During the first three years, over 100 students took at least some of the COLC courses, and the project produced nearly 1500 ECTS.

Feedback

An intermediate survey was carried out at the end of 2003 to collect feedback, which could be used to improve the project in its final year and in

Basic studies
Introduction to localization
Basic computer skills (for translators)
Graphical user interfaces
Introduction to software engineering
Software documentation
Translation memory tools and term databases
Corpus linguistics and corpus-aided translation

Subject studies
Introduction to programming
Databases
Localization in practice
Software testing
Working with text and hypertext
Project management
(Additional) Tools for translators

Table 1. Courses offered in the COLC project

planning for the future. The survey was carried out as a web-based questionnaire.

Feedback from teaching staff (n=14)

The teaching staff seemed to agree that the COLC project had improved the profile of the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies and that all our graduates should know the basics of translation technology. The integration of key courses (e.g. translation memory tools and corpus linguistics) into normal curriculum was also seen as an important step.

Twelve out of 14 respondents had participated in the training offered by the project. The most popular course with a total of 22 participants was the introduction to presentation software (PowerPoint), which is not, however, a course in translation technology. Paradoxically, nine out of 14 respondents had not familiarized themselves with the new IT tools, such as educational networks or new translation technology software (e.g. translation memory tools). These findings suggest problems with regard to integrating translation technology into the "normal" curriculum.

Feedback from students (n=40)

The students seemed to almost unanimously agree that key courses should be integrated into the normal curriculum. Similarly, Basic Computer Skills,

Translation Memory Tools and Corpus-aided Translation should be made compulsory for all students of translation. Some students would also have liked to receive more information about courses to make them sound less frightening and forbidding. This seemed to imply that fear of computers still existed among Arts students.

Students also expressed their concern that if the courses were no longer available after the project ends, this would be a considerable loss for the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies.

Challenges

The main challenges in the COLC project could be divided into four categories: Organization and timetables, outsourcing teaching, transfer of knowledge, and attitudes of students. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Organization and timetables

The organization and timetabling of courses created some difficulties. Trying to avoid overlapping with mandatory courses and finding slots both in terms of suitable times and appropriately equipped classrooms was not always easy. Students and teachers had to compromise and make special arrangements to avoid canceling courses. As a partial solution to this problem, the COLC project also successfully experimented with introducing the third semester into the Finnish university system, i.e. providing courses during the summer.

Outsourcing teaching

Finding teachers with the necessary qualifications and expertise for IT courses was not always easy. Based on the student feedback and our own observations, it is very important that instructors have sufficient knowledge of Translation Studies, in addition to their special field of expertise. Lacking knowledge of translation can make it virtually impossible to make the necessary link between the course and Translation Studies. A failure to establish this link can easily result in students losing motivation, as they cannot see why they should be aware of the issues they are being taught.

Transfer of knowledge

Projects do not last forever. Therefore it is vital that the experiences and knowledge accumulated in the project be passed on to the permanent teaching staff who will stay in the School after the project. The transfer of

knowledge proved to be an unexpectedly difficult task. One reason seemed to be that many teachers and staff members did not realize that the project will come to an end and that it is not guaranteed that the project staff will remain in the School. Particularly the beginning was hard, as there were few people willing to participate in the training. During the project's final six months many staff members woke up and started to ask for extra training sessions. As the saying goes, better late than never; however, this is a problem in terms of for instance integration of translation technology into the curriculum.

Attitudes of teachers and students

Traditionally computers and information technology have not played any important role in translation studies at Savonlinna or elsewhere. Some students and teaching staff still harbored certain prejudices against using computers in translation. Some even said that they suffered from a fear of computers. Fortunately, the important role of computers and information technology in today's translation industry was recognized in several publications (e.g. Mortensen 2000:28, Pym 2002), which has made both staff and students aware that computers are not there to replace translators but to help them where possible.

Implications

The COLC project was developed in close co-operation with software companies offering translation technology solutions, and this model proved very successful. Most of the applications were received free of charge or with minimal costs for educational purposes. As a result, at that moment the School had an extensive set of translation technology tools installed in most of the computer classrooms. The students could familiarize themselves with tools used throughout the industry, and free updates enabled the teachers to be always among the first to know about new solutions.

The project also increased the visibility and profile of the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies both locally and in the field at large; it also made the school more attractive to potential new students. In addition, the 15 available courses considerably increased choices in the curriculum.

Computing for Language Careers was the first of many interconnected projects on the Savonlinna Campus. Together with projects such as Continuing education for language professionals, Customs terminology project and Audiovisual communication for translators and interpreters it has made the Savonlinna campus of the University of Joensuu one of the centers of translation technology in Finland.

Future at Savonlinna

Two of the projects—COLC and Audiovisual communication for translators and interpreters, which offers courses on topics such as journalism, new media, subtitling, dubbing, distance interpreting (videoconferencing)—ended. In 2005 with the introduction of the European Degree reform in Finland the Savonlinna School of Translation Studies aims to introduce a separate, specialized Master's program on "Translation and communication technology".

References

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