

Teaching an Online Translator Training Course

The fare of translators in the marketplace...

by Debbie Folaron

Professional translators in today's marketplace spend a lot of time dealing with electronic, digital or online media in one way or another. Gone are the days when translated material consisted almost solely of simple word-processed documents with no special formatting. Now, translators can expect their source language texts in file formats that are both standard and proprietary, DTP, Web-based, graphic, and even audio.

Furthermore, given the quick turn-arounds, keen competition, frequent content updates, and need for accurate and consistent terminology, translators must often be thoroughly acquainted with and proficient in both electronic and computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools in order to comply with the professional standards expected of them. Yet more specific skill sets are required of those entering the field of localization. This is the reality on the ground, and this is what students graduating from a translator education program can expect when they enter the workforce as freelancers or in-house translators.

...and how we educate translators to fare

The overall objective of any program in translator education, of course, is one of a comprehensive set of goals designed to achieve translation competence (*Christina Schäffner and Beverly Adab, 2000*) and to prepare students for the profession. The ways these goals are defined, and the degree to which they are ultimately accomplished, are largely dependant on the institutional infrastructure, its scope and mission, resources, faculty, and administrative support in place for the program. An inclusive translator education program ideally comprises traditional academic and training objectives. In the category of a traditional *academic setting*, the educational objectives are typically formulated within the following areas and goals:

- Linguistic comparison of the source and target languages;
- Source language text comprehension;
- Linguistic, pragmatic, and functional analysis of the text;
- Analysis of elements providing cohesion and coherence to the text;
- Understanding of the transfer that occurs between source language and target language;
- Understanding the notion of equivalency;

- Understanding theories of interpretation;
- Competency in a specific subject area;
- Competency in target language writing;
- Fluency in researching and use of reference sources;
- Developing criteria for assessing the quality of a translation.

In the category of a traditional *training environment*, educational objectives are typically established to instruct and develop the following skills:

- Analyzing job specifications
- Calculating target audience specs, price and turnaround for the client;
- Independent project management;
- Working with project managers at translation agencies or companies;
- Working as a team translator on a large project;
- Working in accordance with professional standards and ethics,
- Educating clients;
- Seeking and finding appropriate parallel documentation;
- Consulting references and professional sources;
- Working in revision mode with editors ("peer review");
- Developing and maintaining glossaries and terminology databases;
- Mastering electronic file processing;
- Mastering computer-assisted translation tools;
- Understanding and adhering to standards of quality assurance.

On-site and/or Online?

The general educational objectives above are currently developed and implemented to one degree or another for on-site translator education programs on a regular basis. Updating skills and knowledge of the profession is obtained through membership in professional organizations and continued training. Now that the translation profession is squarely positioned within a reconfigured world of high-level technology, and use of the World Wide Web has increased across the globe, how might translator education programs meet the same objectives online in a virtual environment?

This article argues that an online environment for delivering a translator education program can be beneficial, insofar as it can be designed to meet not only the educational content objectives, but also teach and reinforce professional procedure.

The Students

First, let us consider the students. Clearly, students enter translator education programs with backgrounds that are diverse, not always traditional, and varied in terms of previous foreign language study, which ranges from structured language acquisition in an academic setting to fluency acquired by living for an extended period of time in a foreign country. Some may be expecting to translate into their second or third languages, depending on regional market requirements. A "global" class online may be comprised of students

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whose native languages are both the source and target working languages for the course, and residing in opposite corners of the planet.

Students enrolling in an online program also have disparate levels of computer literacy. Functional computer literacy, along with adequate technology and technical support, are the backbone of a satisfying online educational experience for students or teachers. By the same token, functional computer literacy is basically a prerequisite for professional translators by today's standards. For an online program, students need to expect that they will have to deal with the technology component as well as the language one.

Learning the Discipline

Second, let us consider the acquisition of "knowledge", specifically in terms of the practice and theory of translator education and the goal of achieving translation competence. Historically, translation competence has been defined in terms of the skills translators acquired as they

learned their profession, trade, or art: by emulating senior translators, consulting with each other, observing each other's work, and refining their skills through a good deal of practice. Even while translation schools were created at various moments in history, the academic institution as a place of acquiring knowledge of the profession did not exist on any wide scale until the 20th century.

In the broadest sense, translation competence is currently being defined in terms of language competence, world and experiential knowledge, proficiency in specific subject area content, professional and technical competence, and up-to-date field skills.

Online translator education programs can capitalize on features where online learning has proven it can excel, namely providing timely, reliable, and relevant content due to ease of update on the Web; innumerable options for interactivity and feedback (synchronous and asynchronous); ease in community-building and networking; and many opportunities to practice electronic skills and techniques. Online learning can expand and build on the notions of traditional mentoring, apprenticeship, practice, and collaborative work.

As literature on instructional technologies and learning paradigms in online learning environment indicate, collaborative work on many levels enhances individual motivation, while the practice of skills and techniques simulating the workplace (and in a more risk-free environment) reinforces, authenticates, and maximizes the learning experience. A carefully thought-

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out curriculum with sound pedagogical aims will always be the key to generating authentic learning experiences, be they on-site or online.

Acquiring Competence

Third, let us concede, in terms of translation discipline, language, and technical competencies, how some of the educational and training objectives mentioned earlier might be fulfilled in a course deployed in a strictly online environment:

1. Professional translation discipline competence

Learning the terminology (the "metalinguage") that expresses concepts and processes proper to the field of translation is important for professional clarity and precision. Understanding and interrogating the notion of equivalence is important for developing criteria of assessment and standards of quality. An understanding of our human interpretive faculties and how this relates to different theories of interpretation is fundamental for understanding human subjectivity and the ways in which subjective readings influence target language text production and target audience perceptions.

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Reading the literature written by translation scholars and professionals in the translation field will broaden a translator's "knowledge base" of the discipline. Translators cognizant of the processes and issues inherent to translation, and who are able to articulate and communicate their complexities in a manner so they are comprehensible to clients, publishers, and agencies, will ultimately render a more professional face to the sectors and industries requiring our translation and consulting services, and assist in client education.

There are many options available to online instructors for responding to the above. Short articles on the works of translation scholars and practicing professionals can be prepared (and easily updated!) as electronic Word or PDF files and uploaded to the Web site for students to read. Critical questions can be formulated and discussions encouraged on the asynchronous discussion board threads. Synchronous capabilities such as live online chat and virtual classroom allow for brainstorming in these discussions. Selected bibliogra-

phies can also be prepared as electronic files and uploaded for reference. Web site links to the publishers producing literature on translation and translation scholarship can be provided. Likewise, links can be created to the many interesting online journals and dynamic discussion groups on translation and language.

2. Professional language competence

Learning to be competent in language in terms of translation is important for both understanding the unique space in which a translator performs, and communicating to clients why an apparently bilingual person may not always be qualified to translate. Language competence in terms of translation means not only being proficient in source language comprehension and target language writing, but also thoroughly understanding the many nuances and "sub-languages" that exist within a single language, i.e. the register, tone, style, and jargon that constitute and are proper to specific areas and text types. It means keeping abreast of the day-to-day changes in the source and target languages, and knowing which terminology and phrasing are appropriate and required for the context of any given translation assignment. It manifests itself in the skill of adequately transferring this language and language-related knowledge, context, and style from one language/culture into another that is different, sometimes radically so.

Again, there are many options available to online instructors for responding to the exigencies of language competence in today's environment. Current foreign language media is readily available online and exercises can be developed that take advantage of this resource. For example,

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following a specific case (like the "anthrax" story) in source and target language media from different countries is one useful exercise. Accessing online specialized content sites and reports helps in building a specialized repertory of terminology and reference material. Consulting online terminology databases and glos-

saries provides students with viable translation options for a wide variety of fields.

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Learning how to define criteria and search for appropriate parallel documentation on the Web provides students with opportunities to see how both source and target languages are being used in context, and how this language use might be applied to the translation assignment at hand. Translating texts that are characteristic of specialized fields quickly reveals how terms may connote entirely different meanings in different contexts.

3. Professional technical competence

Finally, learning to be competent in terms of technical and professional procedures is important both for honing practical skills and supporting standards in the translation profession. Skills that simulate workplace techniques and practices are transferable from the educational environment directly to the workplace. An important part of translator education is also the discussion and implementation of professional standards, ethics, best practices, procedures of collaboration with colleagues and peers, and procedures for educating clients and other professions about translation.

This competence provides the online instructor with perhaps the most visibly useful arsenal of tools. Weekly procedures for class may include a combination of useful operations such as:

- Submitting (1) a summary that includes intended target audience, text specs, strategies and decisions used; (2) a parallel document resource for the assignment; (3) the translation; and (4) an invoice for the job. This encourages students to think of the translation assignment both in terms of process (pedagogical exercise) and job (practical application). Writing an invoice quickly brings home the point that striving for efficiency and quick turnaround without jeopardizing quality is indeed a challenge.

- Working in revision mode with class partners. This allows students to collaborate, consult, and discuss issues relevant to the task at hand. They learn to respond to peer review and deadlines, establish working criteria of quality assessment, and become proficient at using the track changes feature to electronically edit and review. On another level, this procedure creates and sustains much interactivity and allows the class to get to know each other more personally.
- Working with diverse electronic formats and experimenting with different CAT tools. The possibilities for this operation are endless, given that technology is very innovative! Translation assignments can be prepared in various formats, including Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, PDF, scanned documents, HTML with graphics, or DTP files. For each session, students practice uploading and downloading documents, zip-

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ping and unzipping attachments, reformatting documents, and preparing and labeling files for useful retrieval by others. Introducing students to the world of HTML might include both translating a few pages from a manual on how to write basic HTML, and then translating a coded Web page to get a feel of the Web publishing environment. Finally, accessing demo versions of standard industry CAT tools on the Web allows students to see and experiment with some of these tools' most fundamental features. Understanding how these tools can increase individual efficiency and productivity is an important asset to the professional translator.

Given that the class takes place in an online environment, students quickly learn to feel comfortable working with elec-

tronic tools, Web-based resources, and digital formats. They learn to implement these tools and skills as a matter of course and procedure.

Virtual Reality

Information Technologies and Knowledge Management have inspired renewed interest in learning across the wired world. As institutions and corporations assess the landscape and realize that knowledge and training is now fundamental to productivity, efficiency, intelligent strategy and decision-making, as well as a competitive edge, they are devising plans and programs that take advantage of the new technological and virtual environments in order to comply with their objectives of enhanced performance.

Online learning as defined by scholars and professionals in the field is the use of Internet technologies to communicate skills and knowledge that promote and enhance competence, learning, information, and performance. The verdict is still out, but the question remains: can we use Internet technologies to communicate and enhance the practical skills and traditional academic knowledge necessary for developing translation competence? Can this transpire effectively in an online translation class? The panorama of the current marketplace, and the possibility of expounding virtually on time-tested translator apprenticeship methods and practices, would seem to indicate that a strong case can be made on behalf of an online translator education today.

The thoughts and observations offered above stem out of my professional experience as both part-time Assistant Adjunct Professor at New York University's online Translation Studies Certificate Program (Introductory classes) and full-time Language and Technology Manager at Eriksen Translations, as well as my academic background at Binghamton University's Translation and Research Instruction Program.

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References:

Developing Translation Competence, edited by Christina Schäffner and Beverly Adab (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), is a valuable collection of essays on defining, building, and assessing translation competence.