

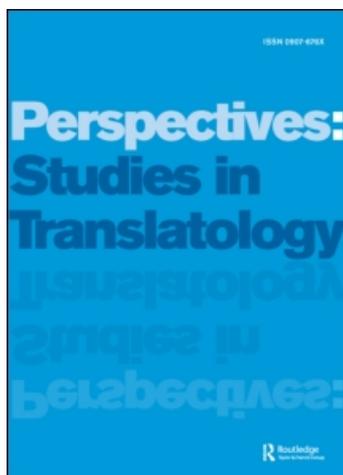
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Teaching Audiovisual Translation Online: A Partial Achievement

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Teaching Audiovisual Translation Online: A Partial Achievement

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While some sceptics have argued against the feasibility of online translation teaching, the experience gained after two years running the PG face-to-face course at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona has given us belief in the project, even though we still lack a complete knowledge of the most effective workings of the online format. At the same university there is a team of experts on online teaching – Metodologies en educació (<http://mem.uab.es>) from the Facultat de Ciències de l'educació – who have designed and run online courses for the past 10 years. The team of experts from audiovisual translation (AVT) joined the online teaching team and we formed an interdisciplinary team of AVT online, who designed, created and ran successfully the first course on AVT online. This paper will briefly analyse the problems encountered at the moment of designing, establishing and running the course and also the further problems when in Year 3 we extended the course from a Diploma to a Masters.

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Keywords: eLearning, audiovisual translation, teaching online, learning online, subtitling, audio description

The Context Behind the Organisation of the Online Course

In September 2001, at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, the first postgraduate diploma course (PG) on audiovisual translation (AVT) in Spain (Díaz Cintas & Orero 2003) began. It was a pioneering course. Its contents went beyond the two traditional modules of subtitling and dubbing, which were the standard courses or workshops, offering also a voice-over module and a multimedia translation. It had two software programmes – subtitul@m and REVOice – which made it possible to teach simulating the working conditions in subtitling or dubbing studios (Bartoll & Orero, forthcoming). All the lecturers were professionals and were experienced in their particular field within AVT. It also offered work placements and regularly updated employment offers. Over 30 students applied for the course, and we had many enquires from around the world. After two years of running the course we felt we had a team of experts who understood how to teach AVT, who had managed to create teaching materials from first-hand experience which matched students' expectations. It seemed we could provide the next step,

which was to create the online format¹ – not to be confused with a distance-learning course (cf. Millán-Varela, 2001).

The Postgraduate Diploma Course on AVT Online Course: A Short Description

The postgraduate diploma course on AVT online started in January 2003, and we are now in its fifth edition. A major difference between the online course and the traditional face-to-face version is that it has been designed to be taught by linear development. That is, students follow only one module at a time. Each of the four modules – Theory of AVT, Dubbing, Subtitling and Multimedia Translation – consists of 10 units which have a theoretical framework, although the emphasis is predominantly on practical aspects. A unit takes place over one week – Monday to Monday. Students hand in their work on the Monday, the same day they receive the previous week's marked work. The process of linear development also means that whilst all students are able to work at the same pace and receive general weekly feedback from the teacher, they can also participate in group discussion either via chats or forums. A further benefit is the possibility of incorporating new intakes who can join the course every 11 weeks, and that teachers are employed for a 12-week period.

Most teaching material is posted on the platform for the duration of the course. Files containing audiovisual material take up considerable memory space and cannot be posted online for long periods to allow students to download them in their own time. This is one of the first obstacles we had to face which will no doubt disappear in the future as most countries update their communication systems to keep up with the expectations of the market, but at present we have to cater for the lowest downloading facilities in order to be compatible with the majority of students and their equipment's capabilities. Hence, in the meantime, we have chosen to send our students several CDs with clips from the films used as case studies for each unit in each module. Other material is maintained as part of the teaching virtual learning environment.

The virtual learning environment – an intranet – has an area for curricular content where materials are created in a multimedia format to be exploited individually by each student (Amador *et al.*, 2004). Completed exercises are sent weekly to the teacher, who corrects them and returns them with feedback to the students the following week. Comments are made individually, though some more general issues that seem to be commonly recurrent in exercises tend to be focussed on in weekly group discussions.

The communication area offers students the following facilities: personal e-mail, a forum where general topics are posted, a chat service for those connected synchronically or wanting to carry out a group activity, a resource area – where the course bibliography is kept for any student to download, and some general links of interest to (audiovisual) translators. The job-offer area is also located here, together with a diary of events such as seminars, conferences, etc.

The course was designed to be run and taught by a team, designed to offer a similar course as that on offer with the traditional face-to-face postgraduate audiovisual course. This was in order to follow the approach for creating materials which focus on the process of creation rather than evaluation. For this approach the experience of previous face-to-face experience is important, as is working in teams, which in the case of the face-to-face course worked; there was an understanding and empathy with all its members.

The team also opted for an approach on the creation of high-quality material rather than testing these created materials, as 'good quality can be built in, rather than bad quality being inspected out' (Koumi, 1995: 341). Koumi also lists the following recommendations, which have been followed for this course:

- recruiting high-quality staff for the creation of materials;
- training of staff;
- incorporation of substantial face-to-face student contact within staff duties;
- striving to retain staff so that they will become experienced;
- working in well established teams;
- teams permitted plenty of thinking time to redraft and refine materials; and
- teams working to a student-centred set of design principles, which are frequently reappraised.

As the teaching does not focus on assessment requirements, the students are naturally inclined to have a 'deep learning approach' – against a surface approach (Harris, 1994: 203; Morgan, 1995: 57) – where the interaction and dialogue in learning – student–teacher/student–student – helps the students towards reflexivity in their study and encourages them to construct meaning. The encouragement to students to adopt a deep approach to their learning is a key issue in our course in order to teach the many skills within a context and taking into consideration the discourse of each subject material.

With all these basic considerations we can see the experience gained in the year of preparation, setting up and running, and the year we decided to expand to a MA.

Evaluation and exercises

As explained in Matamala and Orero (2008), students are assessed in each of the 10 units contained in a module. Participation in the chats, comments and replies to the forum are taken into consideration as well as the individual performance in the exercises set by the teacher. Some modules have a final assessment, such as the module in audio description where students have to hand in the AD of a film opening and the initial credits of a film along with a text where they explain and justify the decisions taken. Evaluation in this case takes into consideration the choices made, along with the justification given for them. It also takes into consideration the vocabulary and terminology, plus the overall effect of the AD, as it has to be synchronic. The teacher corrects

each assignment and sends the comments and marks to the student. The final mark will take into consideration all these aspects.

As for exercises, there are two types: those created to provoke thought and general reflection, and those prepared for exploitation of whatever translation modality is taught. The first type of exercise is developed as a group either in the forum or in synchronic chats. The second is individual work which is handed in and gets personal comments and marks from the teacher. Orero and Bartoll (2007) have given a detailed description of the two types of exercises for the translation and the creation of subtitles. The idea behind the subtitle module is to simulate working conditions in a studio or as a freelance translator. The first group of exercises, those which are considered as general activities, consist in giving clips of films with examples of translations. The excerpts are carefully chosen to trigger thought and reflection about general issues and questions on subtitling such as: reducing the text or paraphrasing it to fit into a given number of characters, or being confronted with the translations of dialogue with some difficulty, such as dialects or slang terms. An example would be: watch a subtitled film and write a list of five features which describe the subtitles. Then watch a film with intralingual subtitles, for the hard-of-hearing, and make a list of five features of this type of subtitles. Compare them both, draw some conclusions and post them in the forum (Bartoll & Orero, 2008).

The second group of exercises are more specific and consist in translating short film scenes. To continue with the same translation modality of subtitling, in the subtitling course there are 10 different audiovisual clips and each one is accompanied by a dialogue list and the commercial subtitled version of the same scene. Students have to translate a clip per unit, which means that they have to translate a clip every week. Each scene belongs to a different genre and students have to deal with songs, documentaries, Westerns, sci-fi, classical plays, thrillers and comedies. To do the translation, students work with the clip in mpeg format and the subtitling software Subtitle Workshop.

To give a particular example, we chose the first clip to be subtitled. It is a song from the film *Singing in the Rain* (Donen & Kelly, 1952). This exercise was created to focus on the translation of the text. It was thought to be a good departing exercise given the fact that, being a song, it had a rhythm, and in this case the tempo is quite slow – sentences are pronounced quite slowly – enabling students to spot the subtitles without difficulty. This song also offers scope for analysis in the so-called ‘classical’ translation, as the first version was done back in the 1950s. The commercial procedure in those days was that the film was first dubbed into Spanish, and only recently has it been subtitled, which provides valuable information regarding the adequacy of the first translation and about whether we should use the dubbed version for the subtitles rather than making a new translation that is more suitable for the subtitles.

The procedure for marking this work is that the teacher receives the exercise and marks the translation of every student. He then sends his feedback to each and every student. Then in the forum the tutor posts a general comment about the difficulties encountered by all students, who in turn reply to the teacher to discuss the comments and corrections suggested and, if they want to, they can try again at a new set of subtitles, taking into account all the comments. Hence

we achieve an active communication between students and the tutor, sometimes even more dynamic and personal than in traditional face-to-face courses.

Agents

Though some training had been offered to the teachers and the material creators, some of them did not follow instructions. For example, one material creator did not meet with the team, and handed in material with no consultation. The material proved to lack the focus required for interactive student-content, which challenged its objectives: students' motivation, to facilitate the learning process and the acquisition of new knowledge. The contents should, therefore, be conceived more from the perspective of the student and the environment, and less from the linearity of the contents themselves, which was the case in point. The content also lacked the format which took into account a logical structure and at the same time was psychologically appropriate to the student and the method.

Another problem – common to all modules – was the creation of exercises. While learning material creators had been introduced to the many possibilities when designing exercises and evaluations, they presented traditional exercises which could be easily corrected in a face-to-face format, but was time consuming for marking in online format. Whereas the former problem was solved by employing a new learning material creator, who was prepared to work in a team, the latter problem was easily corrected by the learning material creators after the first-year experience of long periods of marking and evaluating student's work. New exercises were designed and some case-study discussions were set up as online discussions in the forum as a form of group exercise (Romiszowski, 1995).

Bibliography

From a very early stage, the team was aware of the problem caused when students who lived away from a university needed to consult some bibliography. As the course starts with a module whose contents are theoretical, the bibliography was one of the first issues raised by students, who – as expected – could not access libraries with such a specialised topic. There were some seven students living abroad, hence the bibliography had to be adapted to a more international perspective. When the works cited were the Spanish translation, it was obvious that a simple reference to the original was needed, but when the reference was an article, which in some cases can be difficult to find, we resorted to contacting the author and asking for permission to reproduce it in an electronic format. We now have some 80 articles, which gave us the idea of starting an online Documentation Research Centre for Audiovisual Translation (CETAV) (Díaz Cintas & Orero, 2003: 386–387).

Technology

Server

The server is situated in the Faculty of Education of the Universitat Autònoma. This means that any general cuts of the electrical supply affect the server, as has happened on two occasions: one was due to some general works in the building and the other to torrential rain. In both cases the server was back in use within 24 hours. This is a recurring problem that is difficult to solve, as maintenance to the building is arranged through external contractors.

Software programmes had to be adapted for an online environment

Though we started using Subtitul@m, the simulation computer programme for subtitling developed by Toni Cumplido for the UAB had to be adapted for the new environment. This programme was not developed for simulating intralingual subtitles, that is subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, which made us look into a new software programme. At present we use the freeware Urusoft's Subtitle Workshop 2.51.²

Sending CDs

Files containing audiovisual material take up considerable memory space and cannot be posted for long periods of time on the server to allow students to download them when it suited them. This obstacle was one of the persistent problems we had for the first five years. Its repercussions were manifold. We had to burn the CDs and post them by mail to our students. The post was not always reliable, or fast, and to some countries, such as those in South America, it was particularly slow in reaching its owner. CDs may arrive in a poor state or broken. It also meant that enrolling students had to be done well in advance as we had to allow over two weeks for the delivery, and students couldn't start the course without the audiovisual material. From 2007 we have been able to shift to posting all the clips on the server and we can now be more dynamic in running the course.

Legal Aspects

Another key problem was the copyright aspects of both the content of the learning materials and the clips of films used within the materials. There were no first cases to rely on or to gain experience from. Thus some time was spent with the university's legal office drafting a copyright contract with the learning material creators, and looking into the copyright of clips of films to be used for educational purposes.

Copyright of material

The materials were created by a team of experts following the recommendations described by Koumi (1995) to create high-quality materials. Once the materials were created and digitised, the authors signed a copyright contract with the university, who was then entitled to exploit the materials in an online

format. The intellectual rights of the materials remained with the authors, but the right of the exploitation was transferred to the university.

Copyright of film clips

There was also a problem with the clips of the films used to illustrate explanations or to be used for exercises. As the course is posted on an Intranet with restricted access, the similarity between the face-to-face teaching where a physical door closes the classroom, and a password which limits access online is identical. Taking this access restriction into consideration, and under Spanish law 'Ley de propiedad intelectual' from the Real decreto Legislativo 1/1996 from 12 April 1996, in the exception to the 'artículo 32' under 'Citas y reseñas', it is permitted to show, for teaching purposes, and under restricted access, some excerpts from audiovisual material. The same cannot be said for paper format documents where there is a clear specification of the percentage of what is considered under an 'example' or 'quotation'. Nevertheless, as we were also producing a book on subtitling (Díaz-Cintas, 2003), which would be sold and did not fit with the Spanish 'exception', we obtained, from the distribution company, the copyright of some 20 films, which we used in the course for examples.

Administration

This seems a very silly issue as, after all, it lies outside the academic boundaries of setting up and running an online course. Yet we have found it to be one of the biggest problem areas. We have identified the following steps.

Enrolment

The free-access web page <http://www.fti.uab.es/onptav>, amongst other items, held the online enrolment facility. Each module had the application form in .pdf which could be downloaded, filled in and sent by "snail" mail to the university PG administrative office. This protracted hybrid step of reverting from online back to paper format seems illogical as today anyone can, for example, choose, buy and pay for a pair of shoes online. This will take us to the following issue.

Payment

The university's preferred method of payment is by a barred cheque, which is only issued by banks for a fee. In some exceptional cases VISA payments are accepted, but the cost of a course is over €3000, so the majority of people do not have such credit facilities, hence the payment bounces back. The university fails to take this into account and subsequently declines enrolment, creating very difficult and embarrassing situations.

As mentioned in the previous subsection, the possibility of using a facility similar to any internet shopping set-up would be an advantage for both university administrators and students. It would also save considerable coordination time, as it shifts the responsibility of having to inform the potential

student of the VISA rejection, or any irregularity, on to the coordinator. The following is an example.

Titles

The courses offered are both PG courses, which means that a three-year degree, or a diploma, is the minimum academic qualification required. Alternatively, modules can be taken separately, removing the requirement of a degree qualification. The accreditation given after the completion of each module is a certificate of that particular module. The problem arises when the student is from a different country and the university requires a translation of the original degree certificate. This may take time, and the university has finally accepted to delay this requirement until the time the course has finished – 2 years.

Running of the Course: Coordination

Leaving aside the many problems related to the setting up and learning material creation, the first problem to be faced was advertisement of the course. It was decided that a massive mailing with information would be sent to all translator associations in Spain and South America, and also to those countries with any Spanish links. The economic effort to set up the course was enormous, and we needed over 20 students at the start of the first year to avoid any additional losses. We had planned for a three-year economic deficit before any profits would be created. We managed to enrol 14 students for the whole course, but thanks to the open system of enrolment, three more students were taken on board on the second module, and more followed in the third and fourth modules, finishing the first edition with 21 students.

The course started with some hiccups: the learning materials were not ready in time because the author of the material had not handed them to the digitising team soon enough. Worse still, the materials were found to be unacceptable, hence more time was needed to make urgent corrections. The first edition finally opened four weeks behind schedule.

The first couple of weeks were amazingly rewarding, as the students and the team worked well, displaying dynamism and empathy. We seemed to have managed the online transformation, but hit bad luck again as the teacher who was in charge of the module went on sick leave. This presented us with the first dilemma: should we stop the course and wait for the teacher to come back, or find a replacement? Considering the circumstances, we opted for the replacement option, which worked suitably.

Soon after, we discover that no materials were produced or handed in for digitisation for the following module. This required a rearrangement of team members, and also a rescheduling of timetables. New people entered the team, and we settled and quickly found more problems. This time the team who were teaching the second module realised that the exercises they had produced were not adequate for online marking – as already mentioned in the third section. Each exercise would take up to three hours to correct. This meant that the course dynamics were flawed: students handed in work on

Mondays but did not receive marked work from the previous week. This was a common problem for two modules and required a further training session with the online exercises advisor to create online exercises. The changes were updated online, and the second edition did run smoothly on the marking front.

Students and lecturers getting used to the visual learning environment

While some students will familiarise themselves rapidly with the platform, others will find problems, usually due to technical updates or configurations. It seems that the first week of any module, with the new student intakes, has proven to be more taxing for both coordinators: academic and technical. Though students are reminded to make technical consultations to the technical coordinator, questions are mostly posted first to the academic coordinator.

Deadlines for handing in homework

Not only did teachers find marking a burden, but also some students – for diverse reasons – either did not hand in the exercises on the due day, or fell behind. This created a backlog of work for teachers towards the end of the module, when students realised that they might not be awarded the pass mark. In the first year, students were allowed to hand in exercises at any time, within or out of synchronisation of the module which was being taught. This was corrected in the second edition, and unless there are exceptional circumstances, students are only permitted to hand in work with a two-week delay, otherwise correction will not be offered.

Employability

One of the features of this audiovisual course is close contact with market reality. This has been achieved by only hiring teachers who were practitioners in the specialised area. The learning materials were also created by those who worked in the field, and the software programmes simulated those used in professional subtitling and dubbing studios, hence recreating real working conditions. One commitment of the team was to help students become incorporated in the working world (Rico Pérez, 2002), and one of the most frequently asked questions regarding enrolment was the availability of work placements. Mas and Orero (2004) explained in great detail this commitment at the Girona (Spain) conference in July 2003. Also in the online format, we created an area of the FORUM for Work opportunities, which is updated daily. Students are also sent to work placements. The work placements represented a problem because of the online format. Nevertheless, a company was prepared to send some texts – related to the audiovisual world – for translation. This work placement didn't work; students weren't motivated and it was reflected in the quality of their translations, so we have stopped using this facility. Students who want to do a work placement either live nearby or come for a short stay in Barcelona, Madrid or Seville. Though it seems an extra burden to ask students to travel and stay for a month – more or less – to one of these

cities, they are willing to do so in order to have first-hand experience of the job and the opportunities that may be opened for them.

Finance

Before having any revenue from student fees or franchises, which as Lockwood explains (2001: 4) is ‘not only vital to any innovative task but needs to be agreed at the highest level of the organization’, the following expenses (cf. Oliveira and Horrible, 2003: 215) had to be met before starting the online course and having any revenue from students’ fees:

- funding for design of virtual learning environment;
- funding for design of material;
- funding for digitisation of materials; and
- funding for the creation of materials.

In our case, we were able to start the course from the profits from the second edition of the traditional PG course on AVT, also on offer at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The second year, we had to fend for ourselves and planned a three-year development, which means a large intake of students, and no profits. After the third year, we have decided to reinvest any profits, and we opted for the creation of the master degree, offering two new modules, which broaden the offer and, hopefully, with a similar growth in the years to come we will be able to offer a more complex degree with a certain amount of optionality.

New Degree, New Challenges

To expand the diploma into a MA we needed to increase the number of credits on offer. We did so by creating two new modules: intralingual subtitling and videogame localisation. We also felt the need to increase the number of hours devoted to a more theoretical approach, hence a MA dissertation was included as a requirement at the end of the seven compulsory modules.

While we had gained experience at creating teaching material and online exercises, we lacked the experience of running a two-year course in a simultaneous and synchronic environment. This meant that two sets of students were in the learning environment at the same time, so we had to warn teachers about dates for chats.

We also found the new problem of people wanting to start the MA in Module 5 – interlingual subtitling – which is a follow up from Module 4 – subtitling. Students were not taught to subtitle, but to do specific types of subtitles, from English into English.

This module proved also to be difficult regarding the software. While Subtitul@m had worked well for some five years, it was not updated, and it didn’t have the many features needed to create subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing – following the many recommendations given by the Spanish

government normative for teletext TV subtitling UNE 153010.³ A new software programme was adopted which offered new possibilities, but this meant students had to be trained in using the new programme.

The MA dissertation meant creating a document which explained:

- what is an MA dissertation;
- duration;
- style sheet;
- possible lines of research; and
- how to have online supervision.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing this paper, no students have undertaken the dissertation, hence no feedback can be offered, but we foresee many new challenges that will give us new experience and add to that already gained.

Conclusions

After three years of designing, creating and preparing the setting up and running of the first online course on AVT Diploma and Master's, we have come to accept that it has been a very tough experience, but immensely rewarding nonetheless.

In this paper we have pointed out the many errors, problems, flaws – from diverse areas – and also how we solved them.

The course was an ambitious enterprise which was able to establish itself thanks to the work of experts and enthusiasts who believed in the project from its outset. Each individual member of the team has worked very hard, and has been recompensed not in economic terms, but in the certainty that the online format works. Perhaps most surprisingly for many is the finding that its environment is warmer and more human than the face-to face traditional teaching format.

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Notes

1. Online or eLearning means 'using new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to facilities and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration'. www.elearningeuropa.info/index.php?lng=1.
2. It can be downloaded from the following address: <http://www.urusoft.net/downloads.php?lang=2>.
3. Characters are identified by colours, and some emoticons are used along with the text of the subtitle.

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