

Compiling an Interactive Literary Translation Web Site for Education Purposes

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Abstract

The project under discussion represents an attempt to exploit the potential of web resources for higher education and, more particularly, on a domain (that of literary translation) which is traditionally considered not very much in relation to technology and computer science. Translation and Interpreting students at the Universidad de Málaga are offered the possibility to take an English-Spanish Literary Translation module, which epitomises the need for debate in the field of Humanities. Sadly enough, implementation of course methodology is rendered very difficult or impossible owing to time restrictions and overcrowded classrooms.

It is our contention that the setting up of a web site may solve some of these issues. We intend to provide both students and the literary translation-aware Internet audience with an integrated, scalable, multifunctional debate forum. Project contents will include a detailed course description, relevant reference materials and interaction services (mailing list, debate forum and chat rooms). This is obviously without limitation, as the Forum is open to any other contents that users may consider necessary or convenient, with a view to a more interdisciplinary approach, further research on the field of Literary Translation and future developments within the project framework.

Keywords: e-Learning, CALL, Computer-Mediated Communication, Translation studies, Literary Translation

1. Introduction- Why this project

An introduction is needed to explain the reasons that first led us to tackle this project. First, a quick note on the more specific scope.

1.1. Project scope: a Literary Translation module

The English-Spanish Literary Translation module (hereinafter referred to as 'the course') is a non-core module taught in the second semester of the fourth (final) year of the Translation and Interpreting degree at the Universidad de Málaga (UMA). Credit rating is 6 credits (60 hours of lectures).

As to the methodology of the course, we have been implementing a methodology inspired in the social-constructivist approach to learning, directly deriving from John Dewey's idea of *learning by doing*. This concept soon found widespread acceptance in the academic environment and has been applied to foreign language teaching (FLT) and the teaching of translation¹. Implementation of the *learning by doing* premises in the field of FLT is achieved through task-based learning and, more specifically, through the assignment of 'projects', or rather 'tasks' or 'task chains' leading to a general goal which will have been stated beforehand.

In our experience, the best method to articulate such 'projects' within the subject matter of Literary Translation is to assimilate all projects to real-world professional situations; in other words, to ask students to deliver mock translation 'briefs', i.e., translation proposals or research projects which are done either individually or in groups and more or less under the same circumstances and requirements they are bound to encounter in the market as professional translators².

Classes start in late February and translation briefs must be submitted by the end of March, April and May,

respectively. Briefs are the backbone of student activity during the course, along with translation of a number of proposed texts (coursework dossier) and discussions of translation issues from such texts.

1.2. Structural issues on teaching the Literary Translation module

The course and the related web site project make up a coherent didactic set³ insofar as the director of the project is the course convenor, the rest of the project members all conduct regular research on this domain and have a keen interest in literary translation. But, more importantly, the field of Literary Translation epitomises the need for debate and exchange of opinions in the world of humanities. Detailed discussions are, however, rendered very difficult or impossible due to the following circumstances:

- a) The number of students is relatively high (60 to 80 over the last three years, 75 this year). It is indeed an unfortunate but inevitable fact that structural (logistic) restrictions have a strong influence on course activities in the sense that teachers must adapt to overcrowded classrooms and are forced into using a strictly traditional methodology. In these circumstances, it is virtually impossible to monitor the progress of each student. Attempts to implement novel pedagogic techniques (such as project work, see above) will be at odds in the face of excessive student numbers.
- b) Time restrictions. As mentioned above, the course covers a total of only 60 hours, with roughly 3-4 sessions a week.

¹ For an in-depth view, see Kiraly (2000).

² For more details on our approach to course methodology and assessment, see Zaro (2001, 2001).

³ In Spain, the professional practice of Literary Translation is also regarded as a coherent and observable field where objective data can be obtained (Escobar 1998), as opposed to the growing liberalisation of the translation market in general (Castro Roig, forthcoming). This will prove decisive in the future, when the time comes to involve publishing houses and professional translators in our project.

For these reasons, we have considered it very convenient for everybody (both teachers and students) to have an additional space for communication where everyone can contact each other in a friendly, relaxed, perchance even entertaining manner and, above all, without any fuss as regards time or actual face-to-face meetings.

It is our contention that the setting up of the UMA's Literary Translation Interactive Forum at <http://www.ieev.uma.es/tradlit> will opportunely solve some of the previously outlined issues. For one thing, hypertext is a neural, non-linear space that encourages associative thinking, freedom, a healthy challenge to the concept of the lecturer's undisputed authority⁴... in a word, more open debate. Also, hypertext is an essentially open environment revealing an infinite succession of links that may help the user to understand the nature of human thought. This new dimension of communication is highly valuable (perhaps decisive) in the field of translation studies, a domain where hermeneutics, interpretation and the tasks involving the unravelling of sense and expression are undoubtedly of the utmost importance. This is even more the case when dealing with literary translation, an intersection of the domains of literature and translation.

On a more pragmatic note, we expect the set of resources which are to be described here will, on the one hand, allow us to easily monitor individual students and, on the other hand, offer students a number of tools and instruments. Increasing familiarity with the Internet and its relevant place in our day-to-day activities is resulting in a wealth of new and useful resources⁵. These, however, are not, as of today, very much in use by our students.

2. History and context of the project development

2.1. Context

The Literary Translation Interactive Forum has been one of the selected projects within the UMA's DEV (e-Learning Department) 2001-2002 Call for e-Learning Projects, a University-wide scheme directed at improving teaching practice. Generally speaking, our project can be classified under the following sections (as found in the general guidelines of the Call for e-Learning Projects):

- Promotion of student interaction through the use of different web resources (mailing lists, message boards, web site use for educational purposes, etc.).
- Didactic use of computer rooms.
- Effective use of the DEV's teaching support services.
- Compilation of supplemental course materials and technological resources in order to support

⁴ In many cases, students in Spanish universities seem to resent dependence on teaching staff's criteria and the shortcomings of face-to-face learning (for a practical example, see Aguilar, forthcoming).

⁵ For a recent and comprehensive discussion of hypertextual and web resources in the teaching of translation, see Cerezo, Corpas & Leiva (forthcoming). For a more general approach, see Marcos Marín, specially 11-37 and 687-750.

teaching staff and free lecture time by transferring sections of course contents on to the web.

2.2. Project members

The idea behind the project necessarily implied an interdisciplinary group, including:

- 2 full-time translation teachers with a strong Literary Translation background (both are professional literary translators), a wide didactic experience, and a keen interest in the domain of Computers and the Humanities.
- 1 research scholar with an adequately balanced background (Academia/professional translator) and an interest in Literary Translation and Computers and the Humanities.
- 1 professional translator with a strong professional background and a keen interest in literature, web design and DTP.

To this must be added the UMA's SCI (Computing Central Service) staff for advice on the following aspects:

- UMA's computing services and software
- Steps towards full scalability and easy updating of project contents
- NLP and programming issues
- Web design and structure

Also, and precisely because interdisciplinarity is a must, we have not lost sight of the need for future collaboration with students, scholars and professionals with a strong background in related fields, such as NLP, IT and computer science.

3. Our goals

As a whole, the project may be seen as relatively simple if we compare it to heavily-funded transnational efforts to automate exchange of linguistic information. But simplicity and ease of use have been basic premises of the project ever since its inception- an *ad hoc* didactic project such as this *must* be simple to be operative, since the idea is not to introduce new and confusing elements (see a discussion of annotated web links below), but to encourage information exchange and interaction through an additional space that proves as uncomplicated and user-friendly as possible.

First of all, statistics typically admit that users will access a maximum of eight consecutive sections in a web site or portal before their level of attention starts to diminish. To ensure that users get optimum results from accessing their web site, webmasters can cut down on contents (as is usually the case with personal sites) or rely on sophisticated management and full-time staff (commercial and institutional sites). Because we are somewhere in the middle of these options, we have tried to go for a solution that is also somewhere in the middle- on the one hand, contents in our Forum are centralised and simply but characteristically organised through a gradual forking design; on the other hand, strict selection criteria are observed to check that all new information is relevant to the field of Literary Translation.

Also for transparency's sake, and although design and technical issues have not been ignored, we have preferred to devise an elegant but unspectacular design, rather than complicating functionality and jeopardising the operational capacity of the didactic instrument. In other words, it is better to have virtually flawless contents,

however humble, that appear clear, informative and useful to the users in the first (experimental) stage of the project—the students taking part in the course. We specifically intend to provide students (but also a potential and ever-growing audience on the Internet) with a multifunctional debate forum that may...

- Allow for a more fluent interaction between students and teachers, hence contributing to improve tuition quality. Users are encouraged to submit any queries or suggestions they might have as regards the contents of the Forum.
- Exploit the possibilities of information exchange over the web in Spanish. As suggested by Schulte (2000:3), 'the influx of foreign literature in English translation needs to be drastically expanded in the future [...] the collaboration of translators, editors, critics, and scholars is needed. The Web offers an enormous opportunity.'
- Emphasise the need for Translation undergraduates to have adequate and well-equipped CALL facilities and computer rooms.

A more detailed description of goals includes the following:

3.1. Academic goals

3.1.1. General goals

- To improve current course methodology by supplying an additional didactic instrument (see 1.1. and 1.2. above).
- To explore a new approach to course methodology where e-learning (distance learning in general) and the use of web technology have a more relevant role.
- To achieve a greater cohesion between the students taking part in the course, and also between the students and the teacher.
- To create a space for sharing translation strategies, procedures and techniques.
- To reassert the UMA's position as a reputed educational institution offering a Translation degree, and also as a prominent research centre where the attention towards Literary Translation has resulted in the setting up of a postgraduate programme on Literature and Translation.

3.1.2. Specific goals

- To perform an over-the-web monitoring of student progress.
- To promote students' use of the web for different data mining tasks: searching for texts to be translated, locating documentation on those texts, researching on tools that may be of help to them and, to be sure, e-publishing students' translations.
- To make it possible for students to get in touch with authors (especially authors of unpublished texts found on the Internet), editors, publishing houses, etc.
- To open a debate forum between all involved parties: teacher, students, literature and Literary Translation scholars, associations of translators, professional translators, etc.
- To present on the Internet the results of the authors' research, other scholars' works and the

opinions of all those who may wish to express their views on the issues that the web deals with, thus contributing to a richer debate.

3.2. Technical goals (effectively setting up the web site)

- Integrating different features on a single environment.
- Using the UMA's computing services and UMA-owned software, such as the Alfil application for teacher's management of students' statistics and data.
- Achieving environment scalability and quick, easy update processing through open-ended design.

4. Project contents

Contents include, without limitation, the following:

4.1. Information

This section will include an overview of the project, a detailed description of the course and a section for news and events. The first are relatively fixed; the latter, however, will be constantly updated as new information reaches us that may interest our potential audience.

4.1.1. Project overview

It is conceived as an introduction to the project's genesis, basic facts and participating members. Users may use this section to contact project members or to submit their own FAQ by using a form specifically designed for this purpose.

4.1.2. Course description

This section may be of particular interest to students taking the course. It includes a detailed description of course guidelines, training activities and assessment criteria, as well as practical advice regarding course requirements.

4.1.3. Student interaction hints

This page provides a framework for interaction between students and teaching staff *and* between students themselves. We have suggested a number of areas where we anticipate students might take particular advantage from using the Forum, but our ideas will doubtless be enriched by interaction with and further suggestions from students.

4.1.4. News and events

This section will deal with the following:

- Forum and course new features
- Conferences and news on literary translation.
- Project members' reports on their own lines of research (literary translation, translation teaching, e-publishing, computers and the humanities, computers and literary translation), as well as other scholars' research contents.

4.2. Reference materials

These include domain-specific bibliography, information regarding electronic dictionaries and CAT tools, the possibility of downloading the coursework dossier and a comprehensive compilation of relevant web

links and resources. Ours being an on-line project, it is the latter two elements that seem to deserve further reference.

Downloading the coursework dossier is an essential first step for students taking the Literary Translation (English-Spanish) module, as lectures are conducted on the basis of issues encountered while working on the texts included in the dossier. For copyright reasons, downloading is restricted to students, who can access the dossier file through a password-protected URL.

Last but not least, links to web resources for students include data mining hints and quick links on the following topics:

- Literary Translation resources.
- Literature and Translation Studies on the Internet.
- Translation departments and resources (e.g. <http://www.hltcentral.org/page-799.0.shtml>)
- Translation and Linguistics magazines.
- e-Literature (virtual libraries, such as Project Gutenberg, Proyecto Cervantes...)
- Professional aspects of translation practice.
- Spanish- and English-speaking publishing houses
- Collection of consolidated and efficient search engines
- Web sites dedicated to or containing short stories. Chosen stories may be published or unpublished, but they must be copyright-free.

The list of links must be annotated and a comment must be provided for each element or section. It is our firm intention to avoid providing users with yet another unexplained, non-updated list of lists, as this may add up to the current cognitive overload on the field⁶. What is needed is a crystal-clear and properly spelt out point of reference so that users may know where they are going before going there. All featured links refer to aspects which are part of literary translators' real-life activity; in that sense, we consider Literary Translation is a coherent domain, and, surprisingly enough, a very neglected one as far as representation on the Internet is concerned⁷.

4.3. Purely interactive services

4.3.1. The TRADLIT-UMA mailing list and the ALUMNOS debate forum for students

We have articulated student interaction via the Internet through a double instrument- a combination of a mailing list and a debate forum.

Our debate forum is similar to a newsgroup in that messages can be posted to it but not all members will receive them, as is the case with a mailing list to participate. It will not be screened, as the idea behind the

debate forum is a completely free and unmoderated⁸ first-stop space for debates between students. Contents and users will not be screened and everyone will have the opportunity to express their views on any topics, as long as they are in relation (either directly or indirectly) to literary translation, but not necessarily with those aspects that the course deals with. This is done for two reasons:

- Of the three types of speech events (announcement, request for information and discussion) that McElhearn (1996) distinguishes in mailing list interaction, it is the latter that we intend to encourage among our students.
- All messages sent to the TRADLIT-UMA mailing list will logically be received by all users. Shifting the active attention of our students (basically not expert users of these types of communication instruments) towards a debate forum where information is retrieved on a what-you-search-is-what-you-get basis (as opposed to the mailing list) will help reduce the ratio of irrelevant contents and help the mailing list be faster and work better.

Both elements are initially and primarily conceived for student use, but whereas the debate forum will initially be restricted to students, the mailing list will be open to everyone with a view to stimulating debate on the course contents and Literary Translation studies in general. We expect users themselves to be the best censors of private, trivial and irrelevant contents, as is usually the case with mailing lists (McElhearn, 1996); in any case, webmasters will act as a filter, selecting contents that will permeate from the debate forum to the mailing list in order to enhance quality of debate on the latter.

4.3.2. Downloading and uploading files

Students are being provided with a digital copy of the coursework dossiers (see 4.2. above), a standard template for translation assignments ('briefs', see 1.1. above) and relevant academic texts. All of these can be downloaded from a password-protected folder, access being allowed only to students and exceptionally to other members of the Academia. Students can likewise submit their translations and finished assignments via FTP, provided they conform to submission guidelines.

4.3.3. Other interactive services to be implemented

The users' FAQ and a hypertext glossary of literary translation terms were considered important but not essential elements of the basic set of resources; for this reason, they are still being refined and are not available yet. E-tutoring services are currently in the process of being implemented by SCI staff and will prove very helpful as a complement to face-to-face tutoring.

4.4. Other contents

Such as students or any other future users may deem necessary or convenient.

⁶ For an example on how disruptive non-updated web links may be, take the journal *Language today*, which appeared over a 2-year period (1997-1999) as a web-zine at the Logos corporation web site. A simple web search (for example, "Language today" AND "Logos") will yield a high number of hits, as many lists of translation resources still refer to this already dead link. Many times the user must take a blind-box approach to web resources- this cannot be the case if we are to create useful reference tools.

⁷ Honourable exceptions include Kirk McElhearn's personal pages (<http://www.mcelhearn.com/lit.html>) and the Pen American Center's *Handbook for Literary Translators* (<http://www.pen.org/translation/selected.html>)

⁸ For a comprehensive taxonomy of mailing lists and other CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) instruments, see McElhearn (1996).

5. Project implementation

5.1. Project development stages

5.1.1. First stage

This has spanned over more than 3 months and has resulted in a first version of the web site and has been devoted to the following tasks:

- Achieving full operating capacity in order to be able to use the web site as a virtual administrative and organisational centre for the course and a meeting point for information exchange between students and tutors.
- Promoting and advertising the Forum by creating mirror sites in popular free hosting sites, submitting the Forum's URL for indexing in the most widely used search engines and notifying project availability to professionals and scholars working in the fields of Translation Studies, FLT and Literary Translation for revision and information purposes.
- Receiving feedback and doing a first refining of the web site.
- Implementation and progressive tune-up of the debate forum, chat rooms and mailing list.
- Observing interaction tendencies on the distribution list with a view to introducing a list moderator figure.

5.1.2. Second stage

This implies an open process and a constant effort to refine contents and web functionality; we expect significant results approximately two months after the Forum is set into motion, as users' comments will help us tackle major shortcomings. This second stage will involve the following tasks:

- Adding contents on a regular basis (for example, a permanent compilation and updating of web links) and performing an integral web site maintenance to preserve long-term operating capacity.
- Including project members' research contents
- Establishing a contact scheme/network to advance towards near-automatic update with information about events, collaborating scholars' research, etc. that has been submitted to the webmasters.
- Web site evolution to become a Literary Translation web-zine

5.2. Technical issues and solutions

5.2.1. Scalability

Even the simplest of contents is subject to change and reform. We have been aware of this since the very beginning of the project- for example, the fact that the web site is bilingual and directed at both Spanish-speaking and foreign students implied a true localisation of contents to cater for different students' needs. Since, in our case, contents are dependent on human and educational factors, automatic updating may not always be possible, but we have at least ensured scalability and easy updating (however manual) through the use of a basic frame structure where:

- a top panel gives access to all the first-level sections and all the site services;
- a left panel that makes project members' contact information available at all times and includes quick access buttons (top of page, choose language, etc.);
- a main content panel allows for quick and easy content update without having to alter the overall structure of the site.

5.2.2. Designing the web site: content integration and cross-platform compatibility

A great emphasis has been placed on attractive appearance and a common look-and-feel in the site's interface and with the DEV's pages. However, web functions that are common to all DEV's projects have a standard appearance, which we intend to tailor to cater for our needs. Implementation of such changes is not as yet effective, as the setting up of the didactic instrument was a priority, but standardisation of the site's contents is in the process of being done in the face of students' comments and interaction results.

The site is currently best viewed with version 5 or later of Internet Explorer and is not fully compatible with Netscape Navigator or Mac. The reasons for this are tow and interlinked:

- A survey among students proved that 100% of them use this application.
- Because our students are currently our priority (see 3. above), compatibility issues are not a source of urgent concern at the moment⁹.

5.2.3. Server issues

Some minor technical problems with the UMA's servers occurred at project start-up. This was a source of worry, as we have opted to encourage students to an active use of the Forum and the Internet in general. As the shift towards a less face-to-face-based learning experience gradually occurs, more and more aspects of course methodology and development will come to depend on e-learning and web services availability. At such point, any web access technical issues will prove tremendously dangerous and difficult to solve, as they may disrupt course activities. It is true, however, that no technical issues have been found to exist either- students have in fact praised the Forum's ease of access and user-friendliness. At the time of writing, the web site has only been running for two weeks and course lectures have only just started, hence contributions from students so far are logically scarce.

6. Possible future developments

We expect to monitor the project's development by means of two basic instruments:

- Regular meetings between project members and with student reps
- Project evaluation and feedback from students after the end of the course

We also expect to broaden the project's horizons in the near future and break fresh ground in the following fields:

⁹ They will be, however, in the near future, if, as pointed out above, we want the project to become something more than just another useless repository.

6.1. Setting-up of a web-zine

As mentioned before, we envisage the possibility of turning the web site into a Literary Translation web-zine. It is a definitely feasible next step with highly interesting and practical applications from a scientific point of view. It is, however, a step which will require a greater number of members and a great leap forward as regards the interdisciplinary nature of the project. For these reasons, it does not seem convenient to take this step until solid experience and expertise have been acquired as a result of the project itself.

6.2. Creating e-Learning products

The teaching of web-based translation workshops seems a most appropriate course to expand international dialogue. Distance- and e-learning have a brilliant future (or rather a brilliant present) and represent a suitable answer to the shortcomings of traditional face-to-face learning. Our project is but a first step that may lead to creating a brand new web-based Literary Translation course in the context of the UMA's Own Courses Programme and the 2000-2001 Call for e-Learning Projects.

As of today, it seems that e-learning has not yet received the attention it deserves in Spain. But there is a further, more complicated issue in connection with the design of syllabi for the teaching of translation workshops via the electronic highways, and with web-based learning in general- the specification guidelines for the writing of on-line course material¹⁰. As pointed out by Balkan (2001:7), 'It is not just a question of transferring traditional lecture notes to web pages, but a skill in itself. The development costs can be very high, and are usually only justified where there are a large number of students.' Much research is still to be done in this field, but given its potential value from the point of view of Didactics, we are determined to explore its possible applications in the near future for the creation of digital and on-line courses.

6.3. Exploring intersections between Literary Translation and computer technology

The present project may certainly be a touchstone for future studies on the role of CAT and MT tools for literary translation. Translation Studies and Literary Translation scholars¹¹ have recently begun to discern the importance of computer hardware and software as a means to gain 'an insight into the working procedures of the translator' and to retrace the 'working habits and decision-making processes of translators' (Schulte, 2000), e.g. by compiling databases or corpora illustrating how specific translation problems are handled and solved. The creation of such research products has already been undertaken by the scholars taking part in this product as a way to provide information that may help us to a better understanding of cultural differences involved in translation and, more specifically, to increase the quality and applications for research and education in an attempt to meet market needs by using the tools at our disposal.

6.4. Exploring related didactic domains

The academic community may benefit from a permanent interaction with UMA's ICE (Institute for Educational Research) staff to engage in a permanent debate over the following aspects:

- To emphasise the importance of the learning by doing concept and, more generally, of social constructivism and its application to higher education.
- To solve some of the problems related to social dynamics in the classroom: overcrowded groups, absenteeism, need for a fair distribution of tasks, need for active participation from students, etc.
- To discuss and define with students a set of assessment criteria that may be in relation to the resources which are offered.

It is our belief that our project of a Literary Translation web will provide students with a collection of resources which will help redress many issues caused by the impossibility to overcome the inadequacies of current teaching practice. Positive results from previous years' teaching experience can only reassert us in our perception that ours is a valid approach that will nevertheless be enriched by putting the web project into practice.

7. Conclusions

The first conclusion to be drawn from our first experiences is the need for greater involvement of more technical and computer-literate project members (see 2.2.) if the Literary Translation Interactive Forum is to grow and evolve into a bigger and more complicated space, which will require that we meet more complicated requirements from different actors (for example, cross-platform issues). This, however, has not been considered a major issue, as the Forum is still in an experimental stage and shortcomings were to be expected.

Nevertheless, even this first stage the Forum is already, in Dr Juan Jesús Zaro's (project director and course convenor) words, yielding fruitful results in the sense of greater student involvement on course development at an earlier stage than ever. We expect to gain valuable insights that may allow for a more adequate approach and increase our awareness of course shortcomings and the ways to work around them.

In a more general sense, we must understand that research on e-learning, CALL, CMC and related fields will most of the time be quickly outdated (sometimes even before it is published), owing to the tremendously fast pace of technical resources (r)evolution (McElhearn, 1996; Marcos Marín, 1994). In any case, we must accept this as a lesser evil- after all, it will not be questioned, research that may lag behind is better than none at all.

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¹⁰ See, for example, Lee et al. (1999).

¹¹ For three prominent examples, see Baker (1999, 2000), Schulte (2000) and Álvarez Luján (2001).

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