



ICT for Translation and Interpreting: the Relevance of New Technologies for the Training of Expert Linguists

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Abstract

"Without a new generation of trained linguists and professionals with language skills, international organisations will be unable to perform their vital tasks" (the Paris Declaration, June 2010). This strong statement, published under the banner of the UN and issued by the IAMLADP (International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications), reinforces the message sent by the European Commission, through the launch of a Europe-wide campaign to make young people more aware of the career opportunities for translators and interpreters. The need for competent translators and interpreters has also increased in the private sector, with more and more companies going global, thus needing to resort to highly-trained, reliable professionals.

So at a time when the need for competent, expert linguists is rising, we need to consider with great care the training provision for translators and interpreters.

ICT can and must be a key element in the curriculum, providing they are embedded in the learning process in a way which is consistent and constructive with the development of professional skills.

This paper will focus on the way ICT have been fully integrated in the combined experiential and situated learning approaches to translation and interpreting courses at Heriot-Watt University, by using examples of pedagogical strategies used as part of the undergraduate course in Translation and Interpreting. We will first consider the added value that ICT bring to the training in terms of resources for interpreting students in particular, highlighting the use of modern tools in the acquisition and consolidation of skills for specific language tasks. Secondly, this paper will demonstrate how ICT can empower students and foster a professional ethos, using a case-study based on translation classes for final year students; this case shows how ICT can familiarise future graduates with working practices specific to the field they intend to work in. Thirdly, we will look into how ICT can facilitate a reflexive and critical learning experience for these very demanding career-paths by showing how translation and interpreting students are encouraged to use a virtual environment platform to build upon the classroom experience.

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1. Introduction

Expert linguists are more and more in demand in an increasingly globalised society, yet there is a growing shortage of competent, trained language experts. This worrying situation has been highlighted recently in the Paris Declaration [1]: the participants to the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications released a statement, condoned by the UN, in which they highlighted the "global shortage of qualified linguists" and warned that if the situation wasn't addressed, "international

organisations will be unable to perform their vital tasks”. The latest recruitment competition for EU translators and interpreters was launched shortly after with a similar message ; European institutions anticipate a similar shortage in the next ten years, as between 40% and 50% of the current Directorate General for Interpreting staff are due to retire [2]. The industry is equally concerned: a study revealed that 49% of employers are disappointed in graduates’ language skills [3]. A further study, based on 2,000 European SMEs, established that the cost of this lack of language skills represents an average loss of €325,000 per business [4].

To tackle this crisis, we need to consider training provisions with care. The current school of thought on teaching strategies for skill-based professions leans towards experiential and situated learning, methods which have been used with success in translators and interpreters programmes over the years. These methods aim at enabling learners to “bridge the gap between the theoretical learning in the form of the instruction of the classroom and the real-life application of the knowledge in the work environment” [5], so as to prepare them efficiently for the professional world.

For the learning experience to be consistent with the demands and expectations of the current market, ICT need to be considered and integrated in the training process. Kiraly (2000) has made a case for a constructivist approach to ICT for translation, proposing to use computer-based classrooms to familiarise learners with translator’s workstations. But as he rightly stresses, software and electronic tools evolve rapidly, so rather than focusing on language professional ICT skills, in this article, we will consider how these technologies can be used to accompany and support the learning process of these future professionals. To do so, we will present a critical analysis of the way ICT are used in translation and interpreting courses at Heriot-Watt University, by considering how they support different stages of the learning process. We will first raise the issue of study resources, and we’ll show that ICT can facilitate the production of topical materials and their accessibility, by taking the example of interpreting training. Then we’ll consider how specific tools like wikis can be used to empower trainee translators and contribute to fostering team work and other key professional skills. Finally, we’ll look at the way ICT can facilitate a reflexive and critical learning process for trainee translators and interpreters, thus preparing them to be independent professionals.

2. Using ICT for expert linguists training resources : production and accessibility

As Dewey (1938), Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (2005) have stressed, experience is essential in the learning process: learners “learn by doing”. But for the experience to be valid, it is essential that they learn “in context” (McLellan, 1994) and the context and activities need to be authentic. While traineeships and “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) are commonly integrated in other skill-based professions, it is however much more difficult to set up internship schemes for interpreting students: there are practical issues like the size of interpreting booths, for instance (booths tend to be too small to accommodate for the interpreters and observers) and there can be more complex issues (such as access to court rooms, where public service interpreters work). ICT can however help overcome this issue, as Herrington and Oliver suggest:

“Many of the researchers and teachers exploring the model of situated learning have accepted that the computer can provide an alternative to real-life setting, and that such technology can be used without sacrificing the authentic context which is a critical element of the model” [6]

Course material design at Heriot-Watt University is based on lecturers’ professional experience as interpreters and also on the research they carry out with interpreting users. Professional experience



enables lecturers to include specific difficulties in class exercises, based on their field observations. Speeches and dialogues are then scripted and recorded either in video format in a studio (for a slightly artificial "clean" sound quality ideal for early interpreting practice), or in audio format, using audio-recording software, or using an mp3 recorder during an exercise in class (the recording then sounds more "authentic", as speakers don't read from a script and the machine picks up "normal" background noises).

The research led within the institution is also used for course material design. Perez and Wilson, who have produced a report on translation and interpreting services provision for the Scottish Executive (2006) and work in close cooperation with the Scottish Police Training College, have used the findings of their research to design videos, with experts from the Police Services. These interpreter-mediated police video interviews are used as part of the Public Service Interpreting course.

These authentic training materials are produced in formats which make them easily transferable and accessible: Heriot-Watt University uses a Virtual Learning Environment platform (Blackboard) which enables students to access audio-visual resources online. ICT have considerably improved training possibilities for expert language students here: access to practice resources used to be limited (practice materials for interpreting could only be used in specific labs on campus) but the VLE overcomes these limitations by becoming, in effect, a purpose-made media-library accessible at all times and from anywhere. It facilitates a continuum in the learning process. The VLE also enables lecturer to make students aware of professional resources: links to terminology data-bases such as IATE can be made available and linked to practice exercises.

However, to be efficient, the programme must also focus on professional practice and a cooperative, constructive work. It is therefore essential to place the interactive multimedia resource in a social context (Herrington and Oliver, 1995).

3. Empowering students and fostering team-work and professional skills

Kolb (1984) identified a dichotomy in learning styles, between learner who apprehend the process as "active doers" and those who are "reflective watchers". The analysis refines the pattern into four types of learners (learner-reflectors, learner-theorists, learner-pragmatists and learner-activists), which correspond to different entry points in the learning cycle: expert linguist training needs to be designed to ensure that all types of learners can engage with the tasks, something which ICT facilitates.

To illustrate that, let us consider the case of translation classes for final year MA students, and see how the use of the VLE, and in particular of the wiki tool, enables a situated-learning approach, as explained by Herrington and Oliver (1995).

Firstly, it can support a collaborative construction of knowledge: groups can be created on the VLE, and then be assigned a page on the wiki, where they exchange and annotate their joint translation. Having a virtual common work-page enables each type of learner to intervene at the stage which corresponds to their learning process. The learner-activist, for instance, will immediately attempt to translate, and the learner-reflector will find it easier to work on a draft and improve it. This exercise promotes exchanges and cooperation; the work-space is not limited in time or space, so each learner has more flexibility to work in his own way.

The wiki tool can also be used to make learners play different roles and consider different perspectives: the class is split in teams of translators and editors. A text is made available to the first team for a limited amount of time, using the adaptive release function of the VLE; then access is granted to editors who

work on the translation in another colour. Deadlines are implemented automatically, making students aware of their importance. This exercise also highlights the different stages of a translation project, and their relevance (proof-reading is often neglected by students). Exchange students can be involved in an innovative and constructive way, showing to all the benefits of collaborative work.

Wikis also facilitate targeted coaching and scaffolding. The exercises described are completed by feedback provided by the lecturer (using a different colour for annotations). Specific grammar or language issue can be corrected in detail and links to useful resources can be integrated: one student's mistake therefore provides useful support to all. It is also possible to allow students to contribute anonymously, so they can overcome the fear of failure they sometimes experience in class.

Finally, wikis can help provide access to expert performance, using public texts for which an official translation exists (like EU documents). The source-text is posted on the wiki, a page for collaborative terminology research is created, and at a set date, the official translation is added on. For the exercise to work, students need to agree not to check the existing translation, but it is a good way to make them aware of the relevance of research and parallel texts.

The learning process mustn't, however, be limited to mere know-how. As Pym stressed,

“The institution must allow young professionals to develop as multifaceted citizens, rather than just as bearers of industrial skills. They must be taught not just how to do things; they must become members of the various overlapping professional communities engaged in the production of translation.” [7]

4. Enabling a reflexive and critical learning experience

For the learning process to be complete, it is important that the observation and practice of the tasks be followed by an analytical process and an evaluation. This is the reflection, articulation and integrated assessment which Herrington and Oliver (1995) refer to.

ICT can contribute to this process too : as explained, the wiki tool of a VLE facilitates an analytical reading of the translations through the editing/proof-reading task. Students fulfilling that role have naturally taken upon themselves to not just correct but also annotate the changes they make to the text. Similarly, assessment can be integrated in this exercise with the intervention of the lecturer. In this case, it will be a formative assessment, which again is consistent with the need for coaching and scaffolding identified as part of the situated learning experience.

The reflexive and critical dimension, which will foster flexibility and an awareness of professional skills in expert linguists, can be further enhanced by ICT, in particular for interpreting. Access to professional booths is limited during the training and after, but graduates need to keep those skills up. So as part of the course, students are taught to use ICT as a continuous professional development tool. They are shown how freeware like Audacity can be used, and are given interpreting assignments during breaks, when they don't have access to the self-study laboratory. The recording they need to work from is made available on the VLE, with an assessment sheet identifying the key areas they need to focus on (content, delivery, language, communication management). Learners are encouraged to take as long as they need to complete the exercise, so as to produce a near perfect version. This task makes them look at their own work critically, embedding the analytical process in the professional practice. By guiding learners through the different stages of the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), the process and its benefits are made explicit and learners then consider the online resources as a source of experience rather than as an experiment, thus taking ownership of their further personal skills development.



5. Conclusion

ICT can add to the quality of the training of expert linguists in a time when such specialists are in great demand. The variety of pedagogical tools provided by these new technologies facilitate the production of authentic materials, enabling a valuable situated learning approach. ICT also offer flexibility, and the means to adapt the learning process to suit different types of learning patterns so that learners can all engage with the process. These technologies also foster collaborative work, making students aware of the various roles around their future profession, and they provide the means to accompany and support learners in a constructive way throughout the acquisition of techniques and skills, allowing also for the assimilation of a critical attitude which empowers them and enables them to become independent professionals.

ICT clearly have a place in expert linguists training programmes, but there are still issues to consider. According to Pym :

“The use of electronic communication for class interaction and learning materials of all kind ('e-learning') is now a feature of many programmes, but much remains to be discovered about how it can intermesh with the professional use of the same technologies.” [8]

The debate on the place of professional ICT tools in the training of translators and interpreters is an interesting one, rendered complex by the ever-changing and varied nature of the market, for translation software in particular. Learners need to be able to adapt to professional work-tools, and ICT are now at the heart of the translation field. More research is therefore needed to consider how best to introduce these tools, and at what stage, i.e. during the academic training or once in the workplace. The number of professionals working free-lance makes this matter even more complex and worthy of further investigations.

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