Changing Perspectives: aligning the placement curriculum with current industry needs

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Introduction

This paper evaluates the extent to which the learning outcomes (LOs), the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and the assessment underpinning the MA Translation work placement are aligned with current industry requirements. It also proposes a redesign of the aforementioned main components of the MA Translation curriculum based on the evaluation results. Access to information was facilitated by the author's role as a work placement coordinator.

Translation work placements can be seen metaphorically, but also practically, as a bridge between the academic and the professional world. They are considered an important step to enter the translation industry in a very competitive job market. This study suggests that the placement curriculum is viewed as a journey of learning in which teachers are the travel guides who provide guidance and facilitate learning.

Context and approach

In this section, the intellectual, local and wider contexts are described. These constitute the first stage of Hounsell's curriculum evaluation cycle (2003: 210) which includes the following key stages: "set the context & focus, identify feedback strategy, gather feedback, interpret it, agree on action and implement changes".

For the evaluation and redesign, I have followed the Model of Constructive Alignment in Curriculum Design by Biggs (2003) and current industry trends in terms of skill requirements through job adverts, students' and employers' feedback, as well as placement descriptions. Biggs (2003) defines the model as follows: '…coherence between assessment, teaching strategies and intended LOs in an educational programme' (adapted by Mc Mahon & Trakore, 2006: 10).
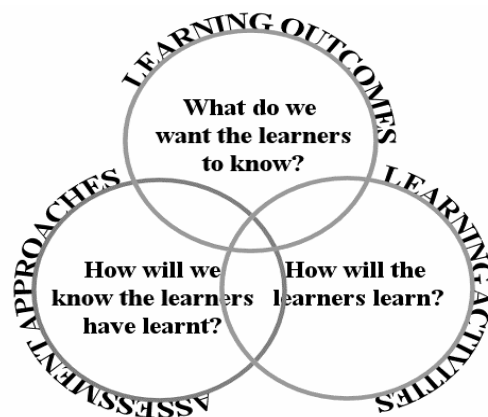
Figure 1: Components of the constructive alignment model:

This model was chosen because it can be implemented in most university courses (Biggs and Tang, 2007) and these three components are consistently employed to design any curriculum.

The evaluation and redesign of the module draws on Kelly's assumptions (2005)[1] that the teaching objectives and the learning outcomes should be defined by the industry's needs.

The alignment and redesign of the LOs relies on current industry requirements and the redesign of the LOs will be done by 'using a verb indicating a standard of performance and the content to be learned [...]' (Biggs and Tang, 2007:109). For this purpose, I have also used the metalanguage of the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs et Collis, 1982)[2] which describes the level of increasing complexity in a student's understanding of a subject. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956)[3] was also used as a template to ensure the use of the most appropriate type of learning in order to develop the required skills.

As for the local context, the subject discipline is Translation and the work placement module constitutes an integral feature of the London Metropolitan MA translation programme[4]. It offers students the opportunity to gain hands-on professional experience with one of the many translation placement providers in London or abroad. The standards for the industry that can recognise good quality service are the EMT[5] and CIUTI[6] and the MA Translation is a member of both associations.

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[2] See: http://www.johnbiggs.com.au/academic/solo-taxonomy/
[3] http://classweb.gmu.edu/ndabbagh/Resources/Resources2/bloomstax.htm
[4] http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/2013/translation---ma/
[5] http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/index_en.htm
[6] http://www.ciuti.org/

In a wider context, this research takes into account the standards set out in the UK Quality Code for HE where it is stated that: 'HE providers implement appropriate strategies for learning and teaching.'(QAA, 2011:1). The evaluation and redesign was conducted taking into account the QAA[7] and ASET[8] code of practice for placement learning which provides an important framework for the monitoring and developing of work placement provision.

Methodology

The research relied on empirical data from three main sources: interviews with employers (five), with students (five) and placement reports (five). Interviews with employers were held to obtain information on requirements in terms of skills and knowledge required prior to the placement and to show their views on the main competences that students develop during the placement. They were also asked the type of competences that students mainly develop during their placements.

Students were interviewed to find out to what extent the placement had met their expectations and they were also asked to mention the main competences developed. Finally, data was also gathered from the placement reports written by students to see to what extent translation skills were developed. In the placement reports students describe the skills they feel they developed during the placement.
To collect the data, a textual analysis of the interviews and placement reports was made in order to find the most quoted skills practised during the placement and the three sources were treated equally. The latter process constitutes stages 2 and 3 of the evaluation (Hounsell, 2005).

Following Biggs (1999) and Kelly (2005), the evaluation has investigated what are the desired LOs for translation work placements, what teaching methods will help us to achieve such LOs and what assessment will tell us if the proposed outcomes match the desired ones.

Findings about the LOs: evaluation and redesign

First, I analysed the validity of the LOs of the MA translation to see if they are aligned with current industry requirements. The current LOs put a strong focus on translation as it is expected that by the end of the placement the student would:

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[7] Our job is to safeguard quality and standards in UK universities and colleges, so that students have the best possible learning experience.
[8] ASET is the professional body for placement and employability staff. It has been at the forefront of developments in sandwich courses and other forms of work placements in higher education, for almost 30 years. We represent over 1300 academic and administrative placement staff at more than 90 HEIs.

> *'have performed a range of tasks such as translating, proofreading, collection data, post-editing, or revising in the context of the translation market and be able to operate effectively as a (junior) translator/terminologist'.*
> (LO2 of the MA Translation Placement Curriculum)

From the interviews and placement reports, we learnt that all the students agreed that the learning objectives were clear to them and achievable and relevant. However, although the LOs seemed clear, the findings demonstrated that many students doing in-house placement spent little time translating but took on other tasks such as administration and project management which led to certain disappointment as they were expecting to practise translation.

On the other hand, employer feedback on the LOs was that some of the LOs were unrealistic and unachievable, as they could not give students translations to do but only tasks such as administration and how to run the business.
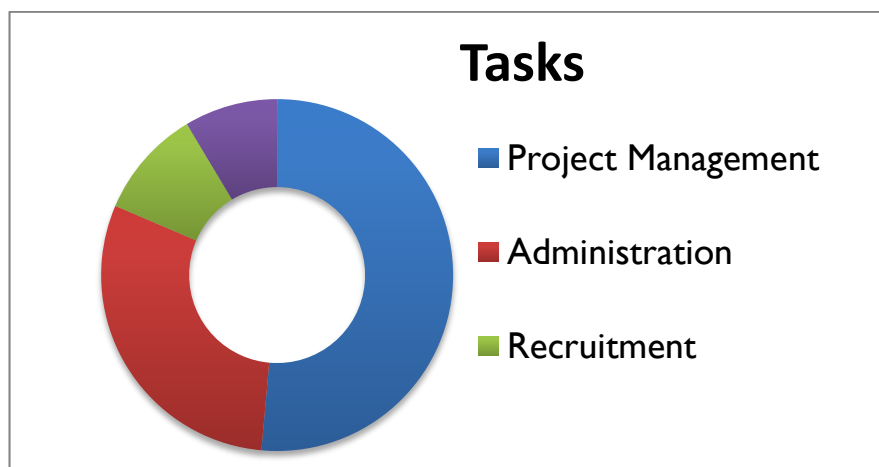

Figure 2. Findings from this research

In the analysis of this data the key employment competences developed during the placement, employers mentioned: project management, administration and personal skills. Other competences such as negotiating and communication skills are competences which are clearly learned in practice.

From the interviews with employers we also learnt that communication skills and time management are highly valued by the industry. This is perhaps something which needs to be addressed previous to the placement. Team working and relationship building was also highly rated by employers, meaning that the placement year is contributing significantly to enhancing this employment competence.

Based on these findings, we can see potential room for redesigning the LOs of the MA Translation placement. For this, we need to focus on the development of a variety of skills such as translation as well as other transferable skills including: team work, relationship building and getting students to reflect on the skills developed via

the placement experience. This seems to present worrying evidence that translation skills are missed in work placements.

Following these findings, some possible redesigns of the LOs are suggested below:

Example One:

Original version: **"**Be able to identify strategies for establishing and maintaining effective working relationships and work in accordance with a relevant code of conduct for translators (as required".

Revised version: (application level) – "…apply strategies for establishing and maintaining effective working relationships and work in accordance with professional practice…"

Explanation

'Apply' is a higher level of learning than 'identify'. It can be assumed that the student will be able 'to identify' the process prior 'to applying it'.

The code of conduct for translators has been replaced by professional practice as some of the students may be involved in activities which do not include translation (project management). Professional practice is more generic than code of conduct for translators.

Example two:

Original version: "… have performed a range of tasks translating, proof reading, collecting data, post-editing, or in the revising context of the translation market and be able to operate and be able to operate effectively as a junior translator/ terminologist…"

Revised version: "… perform one or more of the following tasks: translation, proofreading, or project management by combining life skills with theoretical knowledge to solve problems..."

Explanation:

Project management has been included as it is one of the most common tasks requested by the translation industry. Working as a junior translator/terminologist is now an option as many students end up doing tasks other than translation.

Findings about the Assessment: Evaluation and Redesign

The second component of this research study was an evaluation of assessment outcomes. 'Assessment defines the actual curriculum' (Ramsden, 1992: 187). The current work placement is assessed via an academic report where students describe the skills developed with a strong focus on translation.

The data collected from the interviews demonstrated that most of the students were aware of the assessment methods for the module. However, it appeared that those students who were unable to practice translation during the placement felt slightly left out: 'The assessment is set for students doing placement for translation but it does not take into account those doing project management'. (MA student 1)

According to the QAA (2011:19) 'it is important that assessments are designed to test whether the particular agreed LOs have been achieved'. The issue is that translation placement reports usually put a strong focus on translation and this is problematic for students whose placement involves mainly project management.

To overcome this issue, the current placement report could be replaced by a personal learning plan[9] (PLP) based on reflective learning and following some elements of the psycho-model by Fugate *et al.* (2004) like career identity because students will be able to reflect on past experiences in order to determine who they are and how they want to be in their PLP. Here, I have deviated from Bigg's model because the evidence suggests that students would benefit from a more reflective approach to their learning (Gibbs, 1988).

The PLP will allow students to evaluate various skills developed during the work placement and reflect on personal goals within the context of translation and beyond. The employer will provide ongoing support and feedback to the student but the PLP will be marked by the module coordinator as the employers may not have a didactic mindset.

Findings about the TLAs: Evaluation and Redesign

The third component of this research involved an evaluation and redesign of the TLAs. In the interviews, students also mentioned that relevant topics were covered in the pre-placement sessions. Nevertheless, they also mentioned that there was hardly any preparation on project management as the industry currently demands.

When they were asked about their placement experience, the response of one student illustrates the general trend in the sample:

> *"In terms of actual translation skills there was not a great deal I could do. One surprise towards the end of the placement was that I could have done some project management work, or at least received some training for that and I think it was a shame I did not have that experience […]"* (MA student 2).

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[9] A personal learning plan is a 'dynamic working document, owned and used by the learner, supported by the teachers, employers and others' (QIA, 2004).

If we look at the current industry trends, work placements include mainly project management because first, the assignment of real translation jobs, especially at the beginning of the placement is rejected by some employers, as they believe that the students cannot produce satisfactory translations, something that would displease the client; this is why it is also harder to find placements on a freelance basis. Second, a substantial amount of work is sent to freelance translators. The primary reason has to do with costs and flexibility of resources. Third, many of the current translation companies and agencies have only project managers and project coordinators working in-house; whereas the translations are resourced to freelancers, as shown in the placement reports as follows: "I worked at an in-house position as an intern, but all the translators the company uses for the translation/localisation of documents are freelance" (MA student 3).

The proposal puts forward new tasks in preparation for the work placement which will be aligned with the LOs and will be based on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984)[10] in a way that students will be introduced to some basic work placement concepts during the placement introductory workshops.

Following these findings it is suggested in this paper that a greater emphasis is placed on CV writing, interview techniques and the development of competences highly valued in today's job market such as project management. In the elaboration of the TLAs we will ask for collaboration from career services in the delivery of lectures.

Conclusions and implications

There seems to be a general impression from both students and employers that the work placement equips students with further knowledge of the industry but it does not necessarily develop their translation skills. Work placement reports, job descriptions and interviews from employers and students demonstrated that most students doing placements in house were involved in activities such as project management, administration, recruitment but not translation. The findings also demonstrated that internships give students the opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of how a translation company works and to establish links with the industry; but again students have limited opportunities to practise translation.

Based on these findings, we may consider a redesign of the work placement curriculum in order to emphasise the skills required by employers. The process of redesigning the MA Translation work placement curriculum will involve proposing the above mentioned changes to the institution for approval and the implementation

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[10] It offers both a way to understand individual people's different learning styles, and explanation of a cycle of experiential learning that applies to us all (Kolb, 1984)

of them into the module. The latter will constitute the last stage of the evaluation (Hounsell, 2003).

In conclusion, we need to ensure that the LOs match the current industry requirements. Students have to be ready for a globally competitive work market and the curriculum must keep up with the changing times. From this perspective, this paper has argued that the curriculum is always in progress because it is a journey and not a destination.

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