

Maintaining student engagement in an online short course in Translation

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Introduction

This paper examines some ways of maintaining student engagement on a short course delivered in a distance-learning mode by London Metropolitan University and it discusses the results of a Technology Intervention (TI) administered to this course. The first part outlines the context in which the TI has been administered. This is followed by an explanation of the need for the TI and its design, and finally the results are presented, together with conclusions and implications for further practice.

The educational context

The context for this TI is a preparatory course for an examination leading to a Diploma in Translation and delivered entirely in an on-line mode. The course aims to prepare participants for sitting the DipTrans examination organised and held by the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CloL). The structure of the examination is outlined in Table I.

Like the CloL, the LondonMet DipTrans course has no formal entry qualifications. It is open to all translators who wish to have their expertise acknowledged with a formal qualification. This has some implications for selecting an adequate TI since potential candidates will have various levels of IT literacy. They are assumed to have a certain degree of mouse-and-keyboard skills, together with rudimentary knowledge of the internet because in order to enrol on the course, candidates have to email a recent CV and a short personal statement to the course coordinator. However, one cannot assume that they are comfortable with ICT on the whole.

Before the TI, the course had the following format:

Units 1, 2 and 3: 4-week cycle	
Week 1 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 2 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 3 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 4 – assessment	Timed translation

Table 1. Format of the course pre-TI

The whole course took 12 weeks to complete and the same structure was used for the three units. In the first three weeks of each unit, the ‘practice’ week cycle involved candidates downloading a text from WebLearn on the Monday and emailing their translation (target text) as a Word file to their tutor by Thursday midnight. The tutor then annotated the students’ target text and emailed it back to them by Sunday midnight. The student analysed their tutor’s comments and could contact them via email for clarifications if desired. The same pattern was repeated for all the three practice weeks. Week 4 was different in that tutors and students agreed on a date for a timed assessment. They received a text which they had to translate and email back to the tutor within a specified time frame, consistent with the requirements of the actual exam. The tutor then not only annotated the translation but also provided more in-depth feedback on specific areas of the student’s performance, following the CloL guidelines: (1) Comprehension, Accuracy, Register; (2) Grammar, Cohesion and Organisation; and (3) Technical Aspects (spelling, punctuation, accentuation, etc) (CloL 2011).

Necessity and justification of TI

The first cohort expressed general satisfaction with the course but also indicated that the tutors’ feedback could be more elaborate and engaging throughout the course. This was addressed by the course coordinator who consulted the relevant scholarly literature to identify a number of areas in feedback provision which could be improved.

The first area identified was ‘presence’, especially social presence and teacher’s presence. Research (Swan 2002, Garrison *et al* 2000) shows that one problem with distance-learning courses is the lack of participants’ physical presence, which may result in students’ low level of engagement in the course. This was the case with the DipTrans course, since the students’ sole contact with tutors was via email exchanges used only to send source texts and their annotated translations. So, learning-oriented rapport between the participants seemed to be insufficient.

As a result of this lack of ‘cyber’ presence there was a possible risk that deep learning (Ramsden 2003) was not fully explored by the students. Arguably this was partly due to the fact that feedback provision did not allow tutors to confirm to

what extent their students engaged with the feedback they provided. There was no way to check whether students had acted on the tutor's comments and used them as a frame of reference to reflect on their performance or whether they had confined themselves to merely reading the tutor's comment.

The next two areas which seemed to be neglected in the provision of feedback to students is the social constructivist nature of knowledge-construction and the multi-faceted nature of learning itself (viz. the UK Professional Standards Framework). The first was problematic in that because of the transmissive nature of the feedback, students were not encouraged to relate to the tutors' comments. In other words, when they read the tutor's feedback providing alternative versions of translation, this was experienced as them providing the 'right answer' and the element of 'constructing knowledge' (Brunner 1984) was missing. This aspect is vital in translation because sentences may be translated in many ways, each generating an accurate rendition in terms of meaning but each with different implications for the target reader's reception of the translation. This is an area where feedback could be used to construct possible translation solutions emphasizing their possible implications for the overall meaning.

As for the second area, the Higher Education Academy (HEA 2011) recommends that students' learning is supported on every possible occasion taking into account their varying learning styles; however, the structure and experience of the course did not promote this. It was thought that this could be achieved by the DipTrans course offering a wider range of potential technologies to provide every student with a choice of technology fitting their individual preferences.

3. Designing and implementing the TI

A decision was taken to design and implement a TI to enhance the means of providing students with feedback on their progress throughout the course. It consisted of adding one week to each of the three course units. The fifth week was called Revision Week and resulted in the following format of the course.

Units 1, 2 and 3: new 5-week cycles	
Week 1 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 2 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 3 – practice	Monday – Thursday – Sunday cycle
Week 4 – assessment	Timed translation
Week 5 – revision	Revision Week

Table 2. Revised structure of the course, post-TI

In Revision Week, tutors discussed students' progress throughout the unit choosing from the three following options: Skype, WebLearn-based Discussion Board and Email Exchange. Since each technology involves both advantages and limitations, this

choice was carefully thought through so that the deficiencies of one technology are compensated for by the other two.

Skype is a synchronous audio-visual communications tool allowing virtual face-to-face exchange. It is argued to be an effective means of enhancing students' learning in an on-line mode mainly due to its video capabilities (de Freitas and Neumann (2009), Daft and Lengel (1986). Its attractiveness lies in its ability to convey participants' non-verbal language, which re-creates student and teacher presence (Garrison et al 2000), so crucial in distance-learning. Skype is also free of charge and easily downloadable although it requires a relatively good bandwidth due to the volume of data required for video transmission. Moreover, a certain level of IT literacy is required to use Skype because even though it is widely available, its usage still requires downloading the installation file, executing the file itself, registering as a user and adjusting sound settings in Control Panel. Its synchronous properties can be problematic in the case of people living in different time zones, which may be the case in distance-learning courses.

As for asynchronous tools (Weblearn and Email Exchange), their advantage is their flexibility in terms its participants' contributions (Mason and Kaye 1989, Kear 2011). Tutors and students may communicate at a time convenient for them, planning their study around their other daily activities. Also, these means of interaction are more attractive to students who feel uneasy providing their answers in a real-time mode. However, these two technologies have limitations in terms of efficiency: expressing thoughts in writing is more time-consuming than actually saying things in a real-time mode. Also, emotional language is much more difficult to convey in a written mode despite such developments as emoticons and e-jargon such as: HTH (*hope that helps*).

One advantage of Weblearn is that it enables group discussion because all students see the content of exchanges between them and the tutor. However students who do not want to share their thoughts with their peers may not feel comfortable with this. Email Exchange is more private and involves only a tutor and a student but this can be time-consuming, another disadvantage is the lack of the peer-to-peer engagement and feedback, offered by Weblearn. Another advantage of Email Exchange is its low level of requirements in terms of IT competence, since students and tutors use emails to send and receive source and target texts.

The TI provided a relatively wide choice for both tutors and students, taking into account their work pattern, IT literacy and individual expectations.

Data analysis and collection

In order to gauge the course participants' response to Revision Week, a four-question survey was designed. The first question elicited the participants' choice of

tool. The following questions asked the respondents to justify their choice and their opinions on their advantages and disadvantages. The last question enquired about the respondents' opinions on the usability of Revision Week in general.

The students who chose Skype commented on its fast and convenient way of exchanging information, as well as being able to meet their tutor face-to-face via camera. Some of the comments were as follows

It was quite nice to be able to see my tutor after having had so much email communication with her. I felt it was a more personal approach.

It was great to put a voice to the feedback I have received throughout Unit 1

They also appreciated the fact that they received answers to their questions straight away and that they could discuss their overall progress with their tutor. One of them commented:

This was also a good opportunity for me to ask questions... Chatting to the tutor on the phone he was able to give me a better idea of where I am on the scale and put my mind to rest.

Students who chose Email Exchange indicated that this was easier to plan around their daily schedule and that it was easier to retrieve the content of the discussion at the later stage. A student commented that interaction via email allowed them to think through relevant questions and answers much more effectively.

Answers to the last question clearly indicate that all the students found Revision Week useful and enjoyable:

I think it's an essential part of the distance learning experience, as you get to ask your tutor as much as you want.

The tutors' responses also point to a clear preference for Email Exchange and Skype; one tutor explained that: "... it was a confidence-building exercise because they had an opportunity to discuss strategies useful for the actual CloL examination..."

Another tutor who used Skype explained that "...they used a text-messaging feature because the student's broadband was insufficient for video transmission..." Although this was an unexpected inconvenience, the tutor reported that on the whole Revision Week was successful. The tutors who used Email Exchange explained that they had done so because their students were based in a different continent with a large time difference.

Results and implications

The respondents' answers allow us to conclude that students and tutors clearly benefited from the choice of technology and appreciated the fact that technology was not imposed on them. The respondents also appreciated the 'presence' of each other, which allowed the students to benefit from deep learning and enhanced feedback. Also, tutors were given an opportunity of sharing their examination

experience with their students so that they could alert them to common pitfalls of the actual CloL examination. Moreover, an element of the social-constructivist nature of learning (Brunner 1984) was introduced and modelled with students and tutors having an opportunity to discuss specific issues in their translation and by negotiating the answers and constructing adequate solutions.

However, some tutors felt that a great deal of attention was paid to students, somewhat disregarding the tutors. Tutors also may feel overwhelmed by the technology, even though it is widely available and commonly used. It appeared clearly that when designing a TI, both students and tutors need to be considered in terms of their comfort with technology. This can be done by introducing a wider range of tools, including those which are in daily use by tutors such as Facebook, or MySpace. Another implication is the availability of resources. The fact that a given tool is free and downloadable does not necessarily mean that it can be used without any restrictions. As mentioned earlier, even Skype requires registration and activation. In the context of universities, it is also necessary to deal with such aspects as staff's admin privileges: not all members of staff are allowed to install new software on their PC.

Conclusions

This TI allowed us to increase the participants' social presence giving them the possibility to project their characteristics and present themselves as real people with emotional expression and open communication. This resulted in a more positive learning experience and greater engagement on the students' part. The TI was implemented in the context of a Translation course, but the implications are much wider, since the issues discussed are far from being discipline-specific. Students and tutors' awareness of technology as well as their IT competence is of paramount importance if the TI is to be successful. Designers of modules, in any discipline delivered in an on-line mode, will contribute to the success of their module if students' and tutors' familiarity with a given technology is taken into account.

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