

TECHNOLOGY IN THE TRANSLATION CURRICULUM – A PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, professionals have had to come to terms with rapidly changing work methods, moving swiftly through the typewriter, and the word processor (as simulated typewriter) to a range of complex software to support the translation process, increasingly as part of a document or even content management system. In reflecting these changes in the postgraduate translation curriculum, technical and financial problems challenge ingenuity. But finding appropriate methods of assessment challenge the pedagogical imagination, particularly in an academic culture traditionally focused on essays and written weekly translations. In this presentation, we will describe and review an assessment scheme for a new module entitled Terminology and Translation which we introduced this year to our postgraduate programme in translation at the University of Surrey. The students are required to work in teams of three, each assigned a role as either a project manager, terminologist/translator or translator. The task is presented as a role play in which project teams are competing for a large translation contract by carrying out a test translation using designated software. We will describe the *process*-focused methods we have devised to assess the process of managing the project compared with the *product*-focused methods of traditional programmes.

THE CHANGING TRANSLATION WORLD

In the last decade or so, the translation profession has moved from cottage industry to global industry, facilitated and enabled through the availability and use of increasingly specialised software of various kinds. Where two decades ago the most pressing concern was whether to opt for a general-purpose stand-alone computer or a dedicated word processor (as hardware), today translation companies—and hence also translation trainers—are dealing with an array of software programs offered in various configurations by multiple suppliers. This array is now well-known and includes, in addition to word-processing software, spreadsheets and web browsers: terminology management systems, terminology databases and termbases, term extraction software, translation memory, text alignment tools, ‘tag editors’ (i.e. web translation tools), localisation software, project management and content management tools. And yet, the basic profile of our students as humanities students has barely changed. They are in the majority of cases still language graduates whose IT skills are highly variable and whose expectations of translation as a profession may be at best unformed and at

worst, romantically out of touch. They tend (rightly) to perceive themselves as creative individuals, but such an approach can lead to luddite tendencies with respect to the use of technology in the translation process. Our students also come from a wide range of age groups, which tends to exaggerate further differences in IT skills. It is against this general background that we introduced in 2003-4 a new module as part of the MA in Translation entitled 'Terminology for Translation', of which more below. The module builds on incremental changes made to the curriculum over a number of years.

ISSUES TO MANAGE

The introduction of technology into a curriculum which has traditionally been humanities-based requires clear change management strategies vis a vis the broader university culture with its low-cost expectations of academic programmes outside science and technology. The first non-trivial problem is therefore a budgetary one. The second is an educative one: university managers do not necessarily understand that specialist translation software is not simply machine translation at one end of the scale and multilingual word processing at the other end. The following issues need in our view to be explicitly drawn to the attention of budget managers in the broad context of the changing translation profession: the high cost of specialised software, the cost of training, the need for experienced professionals to teach and to evaluate competing products in a fast-changing market, the ongoing need for regular updates/licence renewal, the essential role of technical support.

ASSESSMENT

The traditional approach to assessment has been product-oriented, whether this is the result of individual course work, team projects, or examinations, and regardless of whether it is delivered on paper or electronically. The grade is awarded on the basis of the finished translation according to stated criteria such as fitness for purpose. We decided that that particular model was not appropriate to the assessment of translation software use, in which the stages of the translation process and how these are managed become much more important from the learning perspective. For instance, we were interested to know whether tools were used effectively to produce outputs which would feed well into the next stage of the translation process. We were also interested in fostering team work and basic project management skills, as well as getting some insight into problem-solving skills.

The particular stages we were concerned about were:

- the use of a terminology management system to create a termbase intended to serve as a resource for the team
- the building of a translation memory to support the assigned translation project
- the use of text alignment software to prepare a translation memory
- the use of the translation memory in conjunction with the termbase to produce a translation
- quality checking procedures

- the presentation of project outcomes to the commissioning client to highlight project management issues and problem-solving techniques

Our context for this is the translation process, as presented in Figure 1 below.

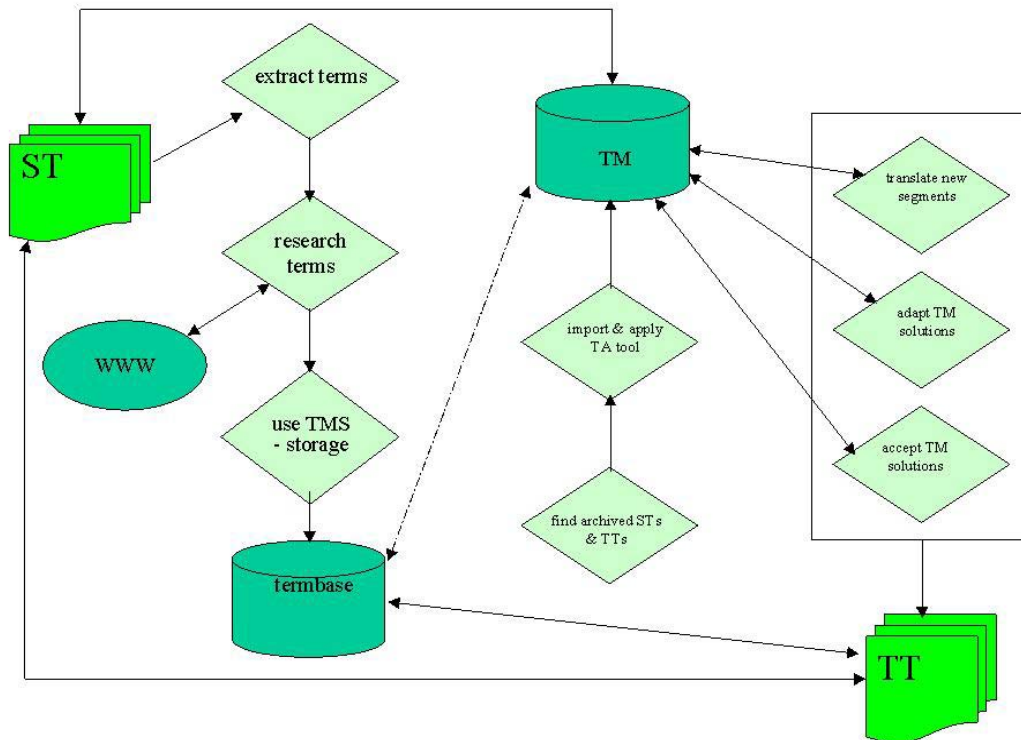


Figure 1: The translation process

THE MODULE

The module entitled ‘Terminology for Translation’ is worth 10 ECTSs. Students have 12 hours of lectures on basic aspects of terminology for translation, taught partly in parallel with hands-on laboratory classes consisting of a combination of demonstrations and practical exercises, overseen by two tutors (with classes of between 15-25 students). These classes are taught for 10 weeks, totalling 20 hours class contact time for each student. The parallel timetabling of lectures and practical sessions is designed to encourage reflection on systematic ways of solving practical problems on the one hand, and on the challenges of practical experience to theoretical constructs.

Students are required to undertake two assessments. The first is an individual project which can be the creation of a mini-termbase, or the evaluation of TMS software or terminology resources. We are not concerned with the first assignment here. The second assignment consists of a team project, consisting of three to four students who are assigned to groups and roles by the module tutors. The brief is as follows: a large translation company is seeking to place a contract for a large translation job and is therefore conducting a competition. The task is to translate a given text using TMS and TM software within a two-week period and to make a presentation to company representatives at the end of the project outlining what the team has to offer in terms of project management, trouble-shooting capacity, quality

assurance, and so on. In each group members are assigned roles by the module tutors; these are project manager (whose translation languages may not coincide with those of his or her team members), terminologist/translator, and translator. During the course of the two weeks, one module tutor (VK) plays the role of the client, making himself available only within business hours and springing the odd surprise such as a new version of the text in week 2. Only the project manager from each team is allowed to communicate with the client.

TASK SPECIFICATION

On the outset of the project, the “client” provides each translation team with a source text and a brief with which the team needs to comply for the duration of the project. The brief contains particular instructions with regard to the deliverables (the translation, a clean and an unclean copy of the translation memory, and a termbase) but, as part of the challenges incorporated in the scope of the assignment, it may also feature errors (e.g. the subject matter stated in the brief is inconsistent with the actual content of the source text, there is an error in the date of delivery, etc.) which the team’s project manager should be able to spot in the first instance and confirm the details with the client before proceeding. Apart from being the sole point of contact between the team and the “client”, the project manager is generally responsible for the co-ordination of the team’s activities (e.g. scheduled meetings), the organisation and distribution of files (including queries and reference material), the timekeeping of the team’s progress and the monitoring of all communications between team members. In the last stages of the project, the project manager’s tasks also include the technical QA on all deliverables and eventually the dispatch of all deliverables to the “client” in a format compliant to the original brief.

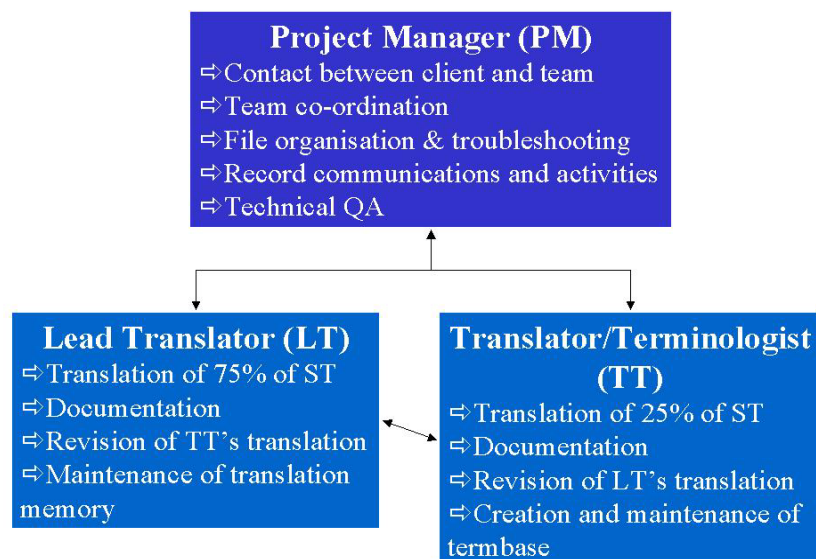


Figure 2: Summarised specification of tasks

As far as the other two team members are concerned, their duties are rather similar, but they have a different weighting as far as translation and terminology management are concerned, depending on their respective roles in the team. The lead translator is responsible for translating 75% of the source text and for updating and maintaining the translation memory that will have been created for the purposes of the project. On the other hand, the translator/terminologist needs to translate the remaining 25% of the text and to update and maintain the termbase that will be delivered to the “client”. Both teams members are expected to contribute in the documentation and background research required for the translation of the source text and also to review their colleague’s translation, until eventually agreement is reached on a single uniform translation.

A brief outline of the project’s task specification is given in Figure 2 (previous page).

THE TUTOR’S VIEWPOINT

Depending on the total number of teams involved in this project, the management of the project can be highly labour-intensive for the tutor playing the role of the client. In addition to running a refresher session with all the students before issuing the project, in order to explain the specifics of the project and highlight particular software functions that will be relevant during the project, the “client” normally has the following tasks:

- reply daily to e-mails with queries sent by project managers and judge which of these queries require explicit replies or not
- monitor the progress of each team based on individual project manager reports and log preliminary point-by-point assessments which will be considered later in the final stages of each project’s evaluation
- act as a client and convey the spirit of role play to the project managers
- ensure that various challenges are thrown in at various stages of the project.

Upon completion, all observation regarding the performance of each team need to be collated and team-specific queries can be formed in view of the presentation that follows two weeks after the final delivery of the project. In this presentation, the “client” sits on a panel which listens to the teams’ comments and can also direct questions to either the project manager or the team members with regard to their tasks and/or their performance.

PROJECT EVALUATION

A number of different factors are involved in the overall assessment of the project, but generally these can be divided in two types: the form-related elements and the process-related elements. Conformity with the client’s guidelines and requests during the project and compliance with the role play’s conditions are the most important form-related elements that should be considered and evaluated. However, there is a number of process-related elements (among which is the presentation delivery) which can significantly contribute in the overall evaluation, and these elements can be derived by

reflecting on certain, rather subjective, features. Has the group worked well as a team? Were there any issues/problems that arose – how were those dealt with internally within the team? To what extent has the team used the presentation as a vehicle for business promotion (in the spirit of the role play)? What is the team members' own impression on their performance? What are the outcomes they feel they have achieved, beyond the factual elements involved? These are just some of the questions that can arise in the evaluation process and the replies to these questions can, in their own way, contribute to a more comprehensive assessment.

The real problem, as with every evaluation procedure, is quantification. Form-related elements are factual and can be relatively easily quantified and weighted. In fact, as this project is process- rather than product-oriented, certain form-related elements which would normally carry most of the weight in an evaluation (such as the quality of the translation or the quality of metadata in the entries of a termbase) are those with the least weight. In contrast, the process-related elements are much more important, which is why the team presentation is an integral part of the project (and eventually its assessment). The framework and the delivery of the presentation gives the students the opportunity to present their work in their own way, beyond numbers and words, and support the methods and troubleshooting techniques they may have used. That way the evaluators have a first-hand opportunity to witness, consider, and even question process-related elements, such as adaptability, resourcefulness, communication and management skills, which should be taken into account in the overall assessment of the project. In order for evaluators to pinpoint all these elements in the presentations, a brief questionnaire is used with questions checking the aforementioned elements and available space where each evaluator can enter relevant comments. The impossibility of objective quantification for all elements of the project means that each team is eventually awarded one group mark.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In similar fashion, the learning outcomes of this exercise are two-fold. The students will have gained significant practical experience in using a TM and a TMS tool (individually or in combination), thus understanding to some extent the capabilities and limitations of such tools in a “real-life” translation project, and they will have also gained some good understanding of the importance of compliance to client guidelines about deliverables and deadlines as well as the basic principles of project management in translation work. At a less tangible level, this group assignment should have enhanced the students' communication skills (as they are all forced to communicate in English because the project manager and the other two team members have a different working language), and it will have raised their awareness on issues such as team work and co-ordination, troubleshooting skills and resourcefulness (when the “client” can't or won't provide an answer to a query, then they obviously have to find it themselves!). As a simulation of a real-life translation project scenario, this type of exercise can provide students with valuable insight on what really takes place in the professional world of translation, beyond the “insulated” academic environment which, even at postgraduate level, can at times be quite deceptive. This has been, in

fact, supported by feedback provided both by students themselves and recent graduates who have moved on to the workplace.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

This particular exercise has been well received by the students themselves, but it has also been positively reviewed by professionals in translation companies where such team set-ups and group projects are part of the daily agenda. As a matter of course, this continuous feedback process has already generated a number of ideas that can be in the future applied within the framework of this project. In the short term, based on the feedback received, particularly by professionals of the field, some modifications and refinements can be made on the role specification of tasks for each member of the team. As this is a quite flexible model, such modifications can be made every year without significantly changing the pedagogical scope of the exercise. Additionally, although formalised student feedback is collected for this assignment, alternative feedback procedures can be explored, particularly with employed graduates, in order to collect structured data about their own perspective on their learning experience – which in turn may have an impact on the structure of the project itself later on. In the longer term, a desirable goal is the expansion of the array of available tools for all aspects of the project (i.e. terminology management, translation memory, text alignment, etc.), in order to promote, on the students' side, comparison and critical thinking with regard to translators' needs within a specified task. The feasibility of such an expansion is indeed a question mark, nevertheless the positive effects of such a development are numerous at various levels and certainly worthy of careful consideration in the planning of a modern postgraduate translation programme