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LEARNING THROUGH REAL ASSIGNMENTS IN THE AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The educational system is more and more interested in training not only individuals capable of integrating theoretical knowledge, values, and attitudes, but also competent professionals in their fields of expertise (Gil Montoya et al, 2007). Consequently, different tasks oriented to recreate the professional environment are being included in university programmes, with the aim of fostering student motivation and self-learning (Cifuentes and Meseguer, 2014; Meseguer and Ramos, 2014; Ramos and Meseguer, 2015). The present study aims at testing whether professional practices in the translation classroom can bring better learning results than pre-designed tasks. With this aim in mind, a translation project was included in the programme of the course “Introduction to Audiovisual Translation” taught by both authors at the University of Murcia. In the present paper, we describe the working process designed to achieve in classroom environment the quality standards required by the client, and give an account of the students’ response to such a

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learning experience. Our results show that working with professional assignments in the translation classroom can foster students' motivation and improve the quality of their performance.

Key Words: Higher education, translation, Audiovisual Translation, professional aspects of translation, professional assignments

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has encouraged a change in the university environment, which, during the past years, has been forced to abandon the traditional training methods and adopt a new educational model based on competences. At the same time, this change of perspective has contributed to a reorientation of teaching methodologies, as professors are testing the benefits of new approaches that allow them to train their students to become competent professionals, capable of responding to the demands of society. Thus, different tasks oriented to recreate the professional environment are being included in university programmes, either through teamwork tasks (Cifuentes and Meseguer, 2014; Ramos and Meseguer, 2015) or through professional assignments (Meseguer and Ramos, 2014). This methodology becomes especially interesting in the translation classroom, where a thorough selection of materials can allow professors to bring the professional world into the classroom. In that way, students will acquire their first professional experiences while still at

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university. According to Kelly (2008), the recreation of the professional environment in the classroom fosters students' self-learning, motivation, and interest. In her study, Kelly also gives various guidelines for choosing proper materials. However, our research is not about designing tasks that recreate the professional context, but rather proposing an actual professional assignment.

In the line of recent studies (Meseguer and Ramos, 2014; Ramos and Meseguer 2015), the present paper aims to (i) unveil the benefits of this kind of methodology in the translation classroom and (ii) evaluate the students' response to this kind of professional assignments. With this aim in mind, a translation project was included in the course programme for “Introduction to Audiovisual Translation” (from English to Spanish) for students in their final year of a BA degree in Translation and Interpreting at the University of Murcia. The translation project was a professional translation task in which students were assigned the subtitling of a documentary film for the Barcelona Human Rights Film Festival. For the 2014 edition, the film assigned to our students was *One Day After Peace* by Miri Laufer and Erez Laufer. In order to assess and analyse the benefits and limitations of this kind of classroom practice, a 5 point Likert questionnaire consisting of 10 items and 4 open questions was constructed. In the present paper, we describe the working process designed to achieve the quality standards

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required by the client in a classroom environment and to give an account of the students' response to such a learning experience.

2. WORKING WITH REAL ASSIGNMENTS IN THE TRANSLATION CLASSROOM

2.1. Professional realism in the translation classroom

The reorientation of the educational system is favouring the development and implementation of new competency-based pedagogical models aimed at training not only individuals capable of integrating theoretical knowledge, values, and attitudes, but also competent professionals in their fields of expertise (Gil Montoya et al, 2007). The principal aim is thus to narrow the gap between higher education and the professional world. However, these kinds of professional competences have become secondary competences which are not addressed through specific learning tasks. Furthermore, it is expected that students acquire these particular competences as a consequence of the exercises oriented towards the acquisition of the rest of the competences. As a response to the necessity to find a proper selection of materials (Nord, 1991; Kussmaul, 1995), the design and

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development of the exercises oriented to train these professional competences is being reconsidered also in the translation classroom. The materials traditionally used in the translation classroom are highly conventionalised texts that do not meet the intended learning objectives. According to Nord:

At the basic level, we start working with highly conventionalized, transcultural or universal text types, whose constellation of factors allows little variation, and whose intratextual features are conventional (1991, p. 156)

Therefore, students lose motivation and interest in the classroom, a fact that prevents the achievement of the programme objectives: “Students should be able to take a positive attitude toward their task. They should like their text (and maybe their teacher) or at least should like translating” (Kussmaul, 1995, p. 51). In an attempt to distance themselves from traditional methods, some authors advocate the design and execution of tasks which set the professional world closer to the classroom, recreating a real-life translation context (Kelly, 2008). In her study, Kelly proposes a selection of materials meeting the following criteria: (i) the texts must be original; (ii) the assignment has to be realistic; (iii) the materials have to respond to an immediate professional demand; and (iv) the tasks need to raise questions on professional ethics.

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Kelly strives, thus, to recreate the professional context in the classroom through the appropriate selection of texts to be translated. But these are still pre-designed tasks, and their principal object, i.e. bringing the professional world to the classroom, remains somewhat diffuse. The environment recreated is still an idealised context, in which professors play an active role in the orientation and guiding of students towards pre-defined results. Therefore, it is still a classroom practice, a simulation of reality, and not a professional assignment. However, in this paper, we present the design and implementation of a professional translation task in the translation classroom. We also intend to establish whether professional practices in the translation classroom yield better learning results than pre-designed tasks. With this aim in mind, we conducted a study to collect students' opinions on such an exercise.

2.2. Working with professional assignments in the translation classroom

Interesting studies have emerged defending the inclusion of professional assignments through translation projects (Király, 1995) or cooperative learning tasks (Meseguer and Ramos, 2014; Rey and Cunillera, 2014). These kinds of tasks are indispensable in the translation classroom, as they allow for students to have experience with the real world while still at the university. Although some

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lecturers are reticent to adopt these methodologies – because of the extra effort they involve – these assignments have proved to have important benefits for both professors and students. According to Kiraly:

The observation of learning processes within the context of real translation projects carried out in a pedagogical setting will not only confirm the inestimable value of such projects for the development of translator competence, but they will also shed light on the cognitive and social aspects of the translation process itself (1995, p. 1099).

These assignments allow professors to observe the learning process of their students, while students can learn the ins and outs of the professional translation world, awakening their interest and motivation. It is inarguable that adopting this methodology involves certain risks and demands great effort on the part of the professor, who has to ensure the correct organisation and supervision of the practice. To ensure that these professional assignments accomplish their didactic function, the following guidelines have to be taken into account:

a) *Characteristics of the assignment*: the assignment has to be clearly defined and fulfil the following characteristics: a limited number of

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words, well-defined guidelines and a fixed deadline.

b) *Student's role*: the student assumes full responsibility of the assignment, as the author of his/her translation.

c) *Professor's role*: the professor supervises and guides students through the assignments. He/she does not give solutions but encourages them to search and discern different proposals to specific problems.

d) *Context*: the assignment is carried out in the classroom where professors can monitor students' progress.

On one hand, we should ensure that the assignment is manageable – we are not working with qualified professional translators but with students who are not receiving any economic remuneration for their work. For this reason, it is important that the number of words in the assignment be limited. Working with well-defined guidelines and respecting deadlines will make students become aware of their responsibilities and organisational skills that are required from them. On the other hand, the professor has to organise the exercise, individually or in groups, and ensure that the learning process is taking place. In this way, the assignment continues to be a real professional practice, being simultaneously a classroom task supervised and evaluated by the professor. In spite of

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the effort on the part of professor and students, the inclusion of this kind of professional assignments has revealed its usefulness in the translation classroom. In Translation Studies, a fundamentally practical degree, the recreation of the professional context turns out to be both necessary and interesting (Meseguer and Ramos, 2014). The present paper aims to unveil the real benefits of this kind of methodology in the audiovisual translation classroom and evaluate the response of the students to these kinds of professional assignments.

3. METHODS

The present study was carried out in the framework of the course “Introduction to Audiovisual Translation (English–Spanish)” of the 4th year of the BA in Translation and Interpreting at the University of Murcia, during the academic year 2013–2014. As a final assignment, the students were assigned the translation and subtitling of a documentary film for the International Human Rights Film Festival (Barcelona, <http://www.festivaldecineyderechoshumanos.com/presentation/>). For the 2014 edition, the commissioned film was *One Day After Peace* (Miri & Erez Laufer, 2012). The coordinator of the festival sent us a handbook with the guidelines we would have to follow when creating the subtitles. The 2014 edition was the second time our class collaborated with the International Human Rights Film

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Festival. The previous year, our students translated and subtitled the documentary film *War on Terror* (Sebastian, 2011) as a final commission of the course. However, the subtitles created by the students did not reach the quality standards required for a work that would be shown on a cinema screen, and the lecturers had to revise and redo a significant part of the work. For this reason, we decided to redesign the task for the second edition and establish some quality controls that could ensure better results.

In the first phase of the task, all students in the course had to translate and subtitle a 10-minute fragment of the documentary film *War on Terror* that had been translated for the previous year's edition of the Festival. 14 coordinators were selected from the 56 students who performed the test. Those 14 coordinators were chosen to assemble their own translation teams, and they were responsible for the final result of their team's work. Each team was composed of 4 translators, including the coordinator, and they were assigned the translation and subtitling of 1,500 words of the film *One Day After Peace*. After finishing the translation and subtitling of the film segments, the coordinators had to write a report on the work performed by each member of the team. After evaluating the work of all 14 groups, the lecturers chose the best two coordinators who revised the translation and handed the final version of the subtitles. Last, the two

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lecturers made a joint final revision of the translation and the subtitles.

Students were informed of this procedure before starting the exercise, and they were told that the two general coordinators would be rewarded with +10% in their final grades of the course. This reward encouraged coordinators to strive for quality work by their team. With this design, we achieved higher student motivation and better quality control on the work of each student. Finally, all students were asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire designed to assess the influence of professional translation tasks on the learning process. The completion of the questionnaire was a necessary condition to pass the course. The questionnaire was a 5-point Likert test in which students were asked to assess their level of agreement with 10 items, 1 being “totally disagree” and 5 being “totally agree”. The 10 items measure the motivation, quality, difficulty, and learning process in relation to the professional translation task. Table 1 shows the heading and the 10 items of the questionnaire.

“As you know, the exercise performed in the course is a professional translation task that will be shown in a cinema screen in Barcelona in November 2014. Compared with pre-

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designed exercises that are usually carried out in the translation classroom, with this professional translation task:”

Please indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements, 1 being “totally disagree” and 5 being “totally agree”

1. I have been more motivated
2. I have found it more difficult
3. It took me longer to perform this kind of professional task
4. The final result has a higher quality
5. I have the feeling of having learned more
6. I prefer this kind of professional tasks
7. Working with professional translation tasks will help me to be a better professional in the future
8. I have learned at a personal level
9. I find the system created by the lecturers to organise the practice to be adequate (selection of coordinators, distribution of the workload, rewards)
10. My evaluation of this practice is positive

Table 1. Questionnaire on the learning process achieved through the professional translation task

Additionally, four open questions were included in the questionnaire to obtain valuable information that could be missing in the items. In the questions, students were asked whether they had had previous experience with professional translation tasks in the BA in Translation and Interpreting and whether they had been given guidelines on how to do it. They were also required to name 3 advantages and 3 disadvantages of this kind of task, and asked whether they could think of some ways to improve

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the design and the procedure of the exercise. All questions were obligatory. Table 2 shows the open questions included in the questionnaire:

11. Please give three advantages of this kind of professional translation tasks
12. Please give three disadvantages of this kind of professional translation tasks
13. Had you performed this kind of professional translation tasks before? In which course?
14. Can you think of a way to improve the exercise?

Table 2. Open questions of the questionnaire

4. RESULTS

In total, 44 students completed the questionnaire. As all items and questions were mandatory, we obtained information on the 10 items and the 4 open questions for all 44 questionnaires. We will first describe the quantitative data obtained from the items and then analyse the answers to the open questions separately. Table 3 presents the rating frequency for all 10 items from 1 to 5, 1 being “totally disagree” and 5 being “totally agree”:

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	1	2	3	4	5
1. I have been more motivated	0	0	4	18	22
2. I have found it more difficult	3	13	16	10	2
3. It took me longer to perform this kind of task	0	1	13	18	22
4. The final result has a higher quality	0	3	9	17	15
5. I have the feeling of having learned more	0	4	15	17	8
6. I prefer this kind of professional tasks	0	0	5	13	26
7. Working with professional translation tasks will help me to be a better professional in the future	0	0	3	13	28
8. I have learned at a personal level	0	1	11	17	15
9. I find the system created by the lecturers to organise the practice to be adequate (selection of coordinators, distribution of the workload, rewards)	1	4	5	14	20
10. My evaluation of this practice is positive	0	0	4	16	24

Table 3. Rating frequency for each answer

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Table 3 shows that students felt highly motivated by this type of a professional translation task, 40 (18 + 22) out of 44 students having declared to partially or totally agree with the first item. However, in general they did not find the task to be more difficult than non-professional tasks: 16 students rated this item with a 3 (not agree/not disagree), and 16 students disagreed with the second item. 10 students agreed with the item and only 2 students totally agreed with the statement of it being more difficult. Despite not finding it more difficult, most of them (40/44) did consider that it took them longer than other types of tasks. This longer dedication seems to have led students to perceive an improvement in the quality of their work, since most of the students (32/44) agreed with the fourth item. It also seems to have enhanced the learning process: most students (25/44) partially or totally agreed with the fifth item. In terms of their preference, the success of the exercise is evident, since 39 students claim to prefer professional translation tasks to other kinds of translation tasks. Most of them (41 [13 + 28]) also think this kind of task can help them to become a better professional (item 7). Most students also claim to have learned more at a personal level: 32 (17 + 15) students rated the eighth item with a 4 or a 5. In regards to the organisation of the task, most students (34 [14 + 20]) seemed to be satisfied. Finally, nearly all students gave a positive evaluation of the practice (16 + 24). Only four students rated this item with a 3 (not agree/not disagree), whereas none of them

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disagreed with this item. Table 4 shows the mean ratings for all items:

	Mean ratings
1. I have been more motivated	4.41
2. I have found it more difficult	2.89
3. It took me longer to perform this kind of task	3.93
4. The final result has a higher quality	4.0
5. I have the feeling of having learned more	3.66
6. I prefer this kind of professional tasks	4.48
7. Working with professional translation tasks will help me to be a better professional in the future	4.57
8. I have learned at a personal level	4.05
9. I find the system created by the lecturers to organise the practice to be adequate (selection of coordinators, distribution of the workload, rewards)	4.09
10. My evaluation of this practice is positive	4.45

Table 4. Mean ratings for each item

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The results show that, despite taking longer than pre-designed exercises (3.93), professional translation tasks succeed in many aspects, especially in achieving higher student motivation (4.41) and helping them to become better professionals (4.57). It can also be seen that students prefer this kind of a professional task (4.48) and that they evaluate it very positively (4.45). Students also think that the procedure followed was adequate (4.09) and that this kind of work involves some type of personal learning (4.05). Finally, professional translation practices seem to improve the quality of the final results, at least from the subjective perspective of students. The lecturers also observed a clear improvement in the quality of translations, since they had to do very little revision in comparison with the previous year's project.

We will now describe the answers collected from the open questions. As previously mentioned, the open questions asked participants to name 3 advantages and 3 disadvantages of professional translation tasks, to comment on previous similar learning experiences and give suggestions for the improvement of the exercise. Students mentioned several advantages of professional translation tasks. Some of the advantages are related to the profession of translators: students claimed that professional translation tasks give them a taste of professional reality, help them to improve their professional self-esteem, and to lose the fear to work as professional translators. Some other advantages have to do with motivation. Students find that the public exposure

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of their work increases their motivation and makes them exert themselves. Professional translation tasks also seem to have a clear benefit on the learning process, since our trainees mentioned advantages such as a better acquisition of the abstract and practical concepts explained in the course and the integration of personal skills such as self-observation and the ability to work in teams. Last, some other advantages are related to the organisational skills and the final quality of the work: students thought that their planning, responsibility, and the quality of their work are fine-tuned when performing professional translation tasks. Students specifically mentioned the increase in the pressure they perceive as the reason for this improvement in their organisational skills. However, despite the evident success of this kind of exercise, students also named different disadvantages related to the extra effort it requires, such as difficulties in coordination between the members of each group and the fact that it demands more time and work. Nonetheless, these coordination problems seem to be the result of teamwork and not of the nature of the task itself. Students also referred to some disadvantages derived from their insecurity, such as the stress they can feel due to the exposure of their work and errors and the fear that their work is not good enough to meet the required quality level. They also complained about their lack of previous experience in this kind of exercise and the need to repeat them in order to acquire the professional skills needed to become a competent

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translator. More than 10 students answered that they do not see any disadvantages in professional translation tasks. When asked about their previous experiences with professional translation tasks in the degree, most students claimed that they had never carried out this kind of exercises before. However, some students mentioned having done similar exercises in Practicum (an optional course in our BA) and in Translation for Tourism, where students carry out the translation of tourist texts for the Tourism Institute of the Region of Murcia. Last, some of the changes suggested by students include better control of all members in order to achieve a higher level of involvement from everyone, more time to perform the task, and rewarding all members of the winning team. Some students also mentioned that it could be useful to organise a preliminary meeting of coordinators to plan how to achieve coherence among teams and divide tasks (translation/subtitling/revision), and to organise a final joint viewing of the whole film with the final subtitles. Some of these improvements, such as the preliminary meeting with coordinators, the rewarding of all members of the team, and the final viewing of the film, have been included in the design of the 2015 edition taking place in the present academic year. However, it is important to note that most students thought the exercise to be excellent and not in need of improvement, and requested more professional translation tasks.

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Table 5 summarises the qualitative data obtained from the open questions:

Qualitative data

- Advantages
 - Awareness of the professional reality
 - Professional self-esteem
 - Loss of fear
 - Prospect of a professional future
 - Public exposure: higher motivation and effort
 - Self-observation
 - Motivation, confidence, improvement of intrapersonal skills
 - Learning, acquisition of abstract and practical concepts
 - Higher demands
 - Better quality
 - Better planning
 - More responsibility

- Disadvantages
 - Difficult coordination
 - Stress, fear, insecurity
 - Errors exposed to critique
 - Require more time and effort
 - Lack of previous training
 - No disadvantages (+10)

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- Previous experience
 - None (majority)
 - Practicum
 - Economic Translation
 - Translation for Tourism
 -
- Suggested improvements
 - Better control of all members through a higher involvement of teachers
 - More time to perform task
 - Joint viewing of final result
 - Division of tasks
 - Previous meeting with coordinators
 - Rewards for all members of the winner team
 - Not in need of improvement: the exercise was excellent
 - We want more!

Table 5. Summary of qualitative data gathered in the open questions

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper, we have presented the design and procedure followed to implement a professional translation task in the translation classroom. Based on the previous years' experience, we introduced some mechanisms to ensure high quality work from our students and the involvement of all students in the translation and subtitling process of the documentary film. With these mechanisms, we finally managed to produce a translation that met the quality standards required from a

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product with a high exposure – a film to be screened at a film festival. We have also presented the results obtained from a questionnaire study performed to collect information on students' impressions on the learning process concerning this professional task. Results from the 5-point Likert questionnaire show that students feel more interested and motivated when performing professional translation tasks compared to pre-designed tasks. This increase in motivation and interest from students seems to be related to their feeling that professional translations are a good training method in becoming competent professionals in the future. It is also interesting to note that despite the greater effort and longer time required by professional tasks, students still give a very positive evaluation and demand more similar tasks. We also obtained some valuable information from the qualitative data: professional translation tasks help students on a personal level, helping them to lose their insecurities and increase self-observation. Students also mentioned some disadvantages to this kind of learning experiences, but all of them seem to be related to the higher effort required – a fair price to pay in order to increase the acquisition of vital translation competences. Finally, the answers collected from the open questions helped us introduce some improvements in the procedure, such as a preliminary meeting with all coordinators and a joint viewing of the final product. The present paper is just a first contribution to promote professional tasks in the

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translation classroom. Notwithstanding the greater effort demanded by this type of learning experience on the part of professors and students, our results indicate that it is worth including them in translation courses and programmes. Our highly intercultural and interconnected world offers countless opportunities for the design of such practices, from collaborating with non-governmental organisations to the translation of Wikipedia entries, just to name a few. The motivation, enthusiasm, and interest that can be felt in the execution of such an exercise are a worthy reward for all actors involved in the learning process.

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