

Translation, Theory and Practice: an interactive approach

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In this article, the development and assessment of a web-course in translation specifically designed for online collaborative learning will be analysed. It will investigate how Modern Languages students at Northumbria University reacted to this problem-based electronic platform. It will discuss the pedagogical considerations behind online collaboration, why the field of translation lends itself particularly well to this constructivist mode of learning, the impact of this project on students' critical thinking, their understanding of translation practice and theory and the application of key skills and finally the merits and potential pitfalls of online collaborative work.

Introduction

This article explores online collaboration in the field of translation based on a problem-based electronic platform created in the French division of Northumbria University. It was designed for second-year language degree students with the purpose of assessing the benefits and potential drawbacks of online collaboration in the teaching of translation from French into English. The educational context of this project will be firstly outlined and the platform will then be presented. The research questions and methodology will subsequently be explained, followed by the findings.

The educational context

With the educational paradigm shift towards constructivism Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has become prevalent in many HE institutions (McPhee 2002; Pearson, 2006). As this mode of learning relies on the co-construction of a solution among a small group it is also known as Collaborative Learning (Johnson and Johnson 1989, 1996; Roschelle and Teasley 1995). The thrust behind PBL and Collaborative Learning lies in the constructivist tenet that in order to gain a deeper understanding learners should be "encouraged to find their own solution and to build on their prior knowledge and experiences" (Neo 2005, p.6). Having to solve "real-life" problems enables learners to construct their own solution, and by taking an "active" part in their learning they can gain a deeper understanding (Jonassen 1999).

The benefits of this mode of learning lie in the "process of articulation, conflict and co-construction of ideas occurring when working closely with peers. Participants in a problem-solving situation have to make their ideas explicit (assertions, hypothesis, denials...) to other collaborators, and their disagreements prompt justifications and negotiations, thus helping students to converge to [sic] a common object of shared understanding" (Barros 1999, p.449). Collaborative Learning leads to knowledge-construction through a process of discussion and interaction with learning peers (Harasim 1989, p.51). By having to formulate their own constructs and solutions, learners think more critically. Indeed, providing an explanation improves the knowledge of the explainer and the process of explaining one's reasoning creates a higher level of conceptual understanding (Dillenbourg 1999). The verbalisation of this knowledge has an effect on both partners. Similarly, by having to justify themselves, learners make explicit the strategic knowledge that would otherwise remain implicit (Dillenbourg 1999). Finally, Collaborative Learning relies on key skills and social skills: students must understand and use conflict resolution skills, build trust within the group, communicate their ideas effectively, listen to other ideas, be able to reach consensus within the group and stay on task. Learners develop a panoply of transferable skills:

project-management, teambuilding, problem solving, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, time management; organisation skills.

With rapid technological progress over the years the next step for Collaborative Learning was to set up online communities and online collaborative learning where learners would collaborate in a shared workspace. These environments are known as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Computer-Supported Collaboration Learning (CSCL) or Computer-Supported Group-Based Learning (CGSGBL) (Michinov and Michinov 2005).

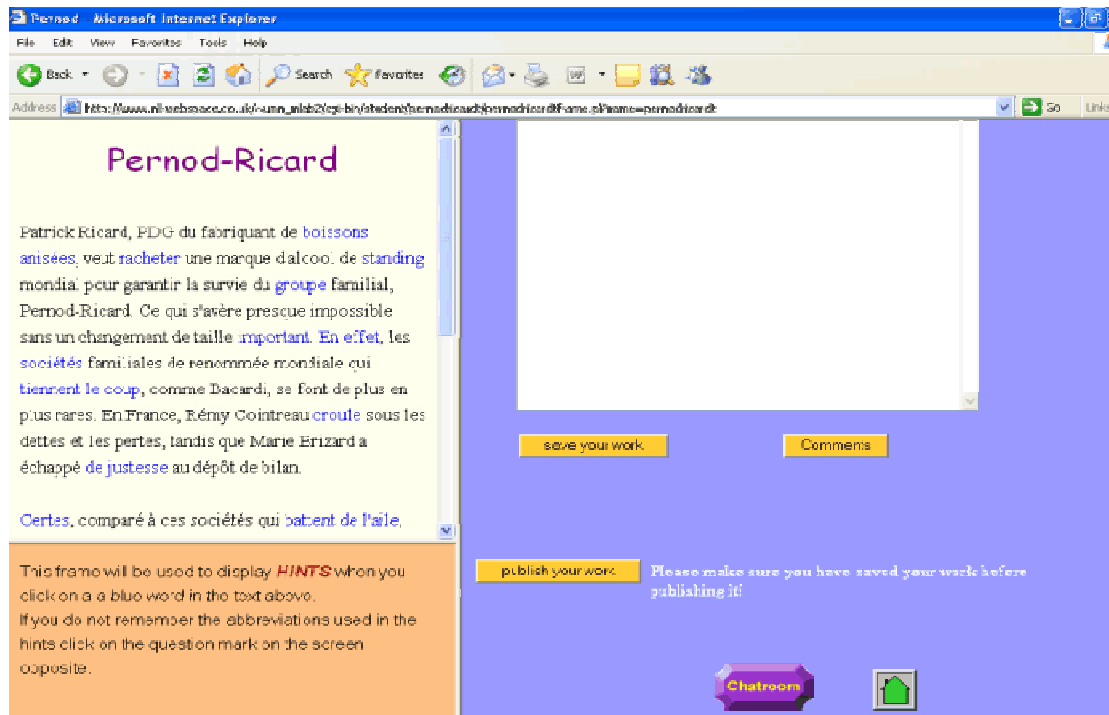
Translation was thought to lend itself very well to online collaboration for various reasons. Firstly, face-to-face collaboration in class is already widely used in translation teaching. Given the enforced reduction in contact hours in Higher Education, online collaboration was a way to provide students with further practice whilst taking advantage of the anywhere anytime nature of the Internet (Nisar 2002). Secondly, translation fits in perfectly with the main criteria of effective PBL which have been defined as being complex, requiring knowledge and skills to be solved, having multiple solutions to a problem and requiring learners to have various hypotheses and to look for further information in order to choose the most appropriate (Pumtambekar 2006). Translation fits in very well as there is no “right” translation, as any translation requires careful thinking and justifications and learners are required to acquire skills to convey the meaning of the original text in another language. Thirdly, the presence of French students taught alongside British students creates an ideal constructivist environment of learning with a “learned other” (Vygotsky 1978, p.86) as French students would be a source of knowledge for British students to understand the French text and British students would perform a similar role for French students when writing the translation in English. Fourthly, online translation fits in well with the development of critical thinking: the translation process becomes far clearer because learners have to justify themselves to the other members of the group, for example by explaining why a word or sentence does not convey the meaning of the original text. Finally, a module on key skills is taught in the first year and thereafter these skills are embedded in the programme in an implicit way. An online collaborative task would provide a good opportunity for students to practise these skills actively.

The problem-based electronic platform

Online collaboration tasks were added to a translation site designed the previous year. This site invites students to reflect on the translation process by introducing them to some of the theory and metalanguage in this field. Theory is elicited, as necessary, during online translation practice and is a tool to analyse and solve translation problems. Students can access a series of passages to translate, a glossary as well as a range of tutorials about the translation process in general and specific difficulties. Students are thereby provided with certain elements of theory and terminology necessary to understand and communicate key points in the translation process effectively. Practice translations are ranked according to their level of difficulty and the amount of help provided. The screen is organised in three frames: one displays the French text, one enables students to write up their translation and one displays hints about particular translation difficulties which students can click on for more detailed explanations.

translating group and a commenting group. To maximise the benefits of learning from each other, each group had a mix of British and French students.

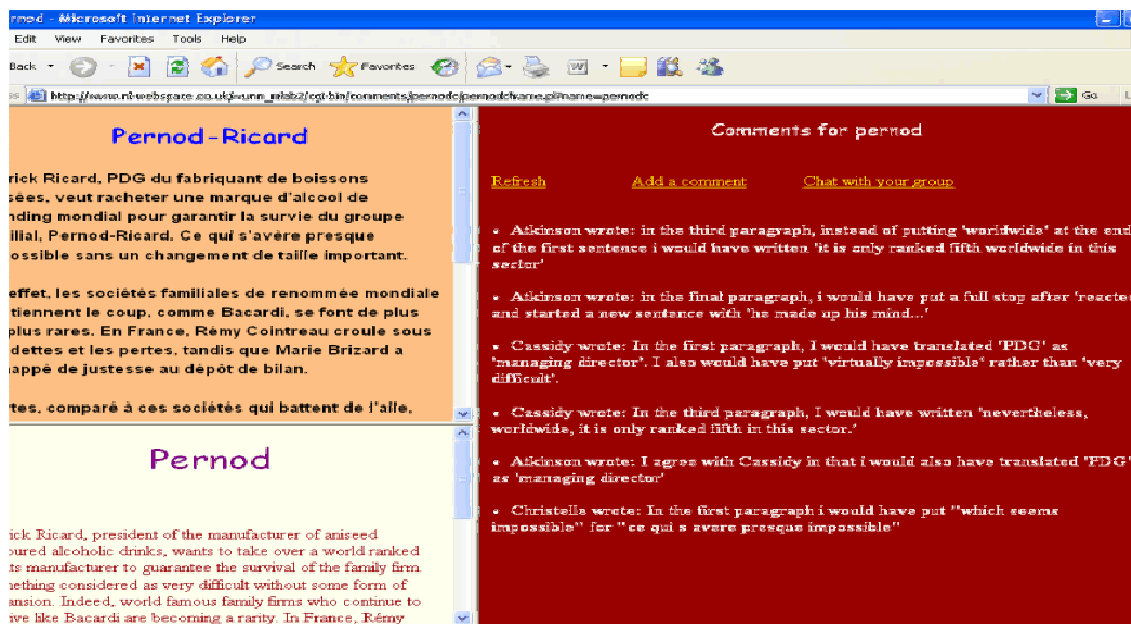
Within the specified deadline, the translating group collaborated using a password-protected workspace and had to agree on and submit a collective translation.



They have the original text, hints and an area to enter their own work. They can save their work, load it back up, post comments to their fellow members asynchronously, chat in real time, access the rest of the site and finally publish their work.

Once the translating team has submitted their work, the commenting team takes over. Within the specified deadline the group has to agree on a critical analysis of the

submitted work by highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. They also have the use of a password-protected workspace.



The commenting group can view the original text and the published work from the translating group and they also have an area to post their comments and give possible alternatives. The group members can choose to conduct their discussions asynchronously or synchronously.

Once the commenting team has submitted its work, the tutor assesses both tasks, gives online feedback to both and provides a fair copy. All students can access the tutor's feedback page.

Aims

Even though Collaborative Learning and its virtual variant are seen by many as enhancing students' learning it is not always successful and an online collaborative task can lead to various problems. Firstly, some students prefer to work on their own (Kirschner et al 2003, p.3). Secondly, communication can become an issue: lack of non-verbal cues (Gunawardena 1995), members experiencing difficulty engaging in spontaneous written communication (Tu 2000) and lack of trust between team members (Rourke 2000). Finally, students might be too passive and might not engage with the task or let others take over. Bearing this in mind, the overall aim of this study was to assess the students' experience and examine which benefits they felt they had gained and which obstacles, if any, they had experienced. The aim was to ascertain whether this type of collaboration learning fulfilled the advantages highlighted in the literature on this subject and should therefore become part of a translation module.

The research questions were the following:

1. What were the students' reactions?
2. Did this task encourage meaningful collaboration among learners?

3. Which strategies were used by the groups, if any, in order to complete the task? How did they use key skills?
4. Did students show a richer understanding of translation and critical thinking?

Methodology

Students had an induction session and a help guide. It was emphasised that each team would have to organise itself independently, as key skills were an intrinsic part of the task. Two pilot groups were created, consisting of two teams each, one translating team and one commenting team. To assess the pilot groups' experience, multiple sources of information were used.

Firstly, a questionnaire was given to the students to assess their reactions. The questionnaire was designed to ascertain their attitudes to their task, their ability to work in a team, to think critically and their perception of the overall team performance (appendix 1). Secondly, verbal feedback was sought in semi-structured interviews with the participants. Finally, a qualitative analysis of synchronous and asynchronous exchanges was carried out. A transcript of the posted messages was used to evaluate student collaboration based on their interaction patterns, individual participation and the cognitive content displayed. To assess the nature of the cognitive content and in particular traces of deep learning, both Bloom's and Solo's taxonomies were used (Bloom et al 1956; Biggs and Collins, 1982).

Findings

All the students involved found the collaborative task useful or very useful and they all enjoyed participating in an activity that most found challenging. Moreover, 83% found it good practice, 66% confidence building and 80% felt that their understanding of translation had been enhanced. The strengths of the activity mentioned were: thinking about the best way to write a translation with more time than in class, being able to compare their own work with the work of others and discuss with the group, learning from one another, being able to tap into the native speakers' knowledge and thinking critically about the work of others.

It is clear from these comments that most students felt that this type of task enabled them to learn from one another and develop their critical thinking and that it made the translation process explicit. It might therefore look as if the advantages of Collaborative Learning have occurred in this project. However, what is perceived to have occurred by students is not necessarily what really happened. This is why a cognitive content analysis of the posted messages was necessary.

This analysis showed a very different picture. Firstly, the work of the first pilot group was purely subjective. The translating team did not have any discussion at all and the translation posted was the work of one individual who overwrote everything. As for the commenting team the comments posted showed that the group not only failed to engage in discussion but also failed to explain their thoughts as students simply gave alternatives without any justification. As a result, the cognitive content was very poor.

Secondly, the second translating group fared much better and moved away from subjectivity to embrace elements of theory. They justified themselves to other group members and explained why another person's ideas would not be acceptable. The cognitive content was very good as students displayed knowledge, comprehension, application and analysis (Bloom's taxonomy). The second commenting team also engaged in more discussions than the first. However, discussions only occurred

between the two participants who knew each other very well, whilst the others simply posted their own thoughts.

It is therefore clear that “deep learning” occurred only with the second translating group. The differences between the groups are due firstly to a total breakdown in communication in the first translating group and secondly to the fact that the two commenting groups treated the task as an individual activity, apart from two participants. It became clear in the interview that they had not organised how to proceed prior to the task and as a result felt inhibited. These two reasons point to the main obstacle of any meaningful collaborative work, i.e. group organisation.

In fact, in retrospect, the students readily acknowledged that lack of organisation was the main stumbling block. Indeed, all students, apart from the second translating group, when asked to list the difficulties they encountered, mentioned their inability to organise themselves, for example to meet beforehand and adopt a strategy on how to proceed or establish a time to meet online. In the questionnaire, even if the majority remained non-committal about whether they felt the team had worked effectively they all commented on the fact that collaboration within the group was not easy.

These points were corroborated by the message analysis. Indeed, it is clear that collaboration amongst the first pilot group was non-existent. In the translating team, only one student used the message board with the very revealing message “hello, is anybody there?”! Similarly, the chatroom was used by one student only, desperate to get in touch with the others. The same pattern emerges with the commenting teams. Only the second translating team put some procedures in place, agreeing that one student would produce a draft translation and the others would then discuss it and make suggestions. As a result, discussions were substantial.

This confirms the findings of many researchers (e.g. Johnson et al 2002) that team performance depends on how well the teams are able to establish procedures, resolve conflicts and collaborate. This point is corroborated by the second pilot group: they had a clear organisation strategy and as a result were able to engage in meaningful discussion and displayed a higher cognitive content. It was interesting to see that all the groups were satisfied with their own level of participation. It can therefore be concluded that participants were willing to embrace the task but, apart from the second translating group, were unable to apply the key skills necessary to organise the activity and as a result could not fully benefit from Collaborative Learning.

Several interesting points were found regarding group dynamics. Firstly, even in the most successful group not every student participated. Some of the French students in particular did not post any messages and seemed invisible. This participation pattern can be explained by the fact that the task was not assessed and students might have had other priorities. Indeed, in the questionnaire some mentioned their heavy workload. Furthermore, there might be a cultural factor to explain the participation pattern of the French students: as the translation was into English, French students might have felt at a disadvantage.

Secondly, the most organised group showed signs of discontentment. Here, one student decided to write an initial draft of the translation and asked the other members to comment. Even though the discussions were very meaningful there was a clear tendency to let that person take over. That resulted in resentment from some members but they were unwilling to tackle the issue directly and limited their complaints to the questionnaire. It was interesting to see that whilst the leader himself felt that leadership had been shared fairly the rest of the group felt the opposite.

Therefore even in the most successful group, group dynamics and hidden conflicts posed problems. Clearly this activity highlights the fact that students must move away from the egocentricity prevalent amongst independent learners to embrace a group ethos, where the contribution of all group members is equally important.

Conclusion

The results obtained in this project were mixed. On the one hand, students' feedback was very encouraging. They clearly felt that they had benefited from taking part and suggested that the activity should be incorporated into the translation programme in the future, as formative assessment. On the other hand, three out of the four groups did not make full use of online collaboration. The results of this research therefore indicate that a collaborative setting does not automatically lead to constructive and meaningful student interaction. In order to collaborate successfully in the future students must have a far greater understanding of the crucial importance of two key skills: organisation and group dynamics. Before progressing to the content of the task, students must firstly organise when and how they will contact one another. Secondly, an understanding of group dynamics is critical. Prior to embarking on the task the group must decide how to deal with passive group members or conversely, with those who prefer to call the tune. The "social cues" so effective in face to face collaboration clearly have to be replaced in an online environment by predetermined group strategies.

It must therefore be concluded that key skills are not only an integral part of effective collaborative work but in fact the key to a successful learning experience. There is clearly a huge qualitative leap between the principles of collaborative work and their application in a face-to-face environment on the one hand (the students in this study do very well in this situation), and their application in an online environment on the other. This suggests that further consideration must be given to how to train students to apply those key skills vital to an online collaborative environment. Students will then not only be better equipped to collaborate to achieve the academic goal of better translations but will also acquire the organisational, team and leadership skills which present day employers find lacking amongst so many graduates (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2006).

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- Questionnaire 2

Please indicate, by using the scale below, how you would classify the following statements which refer to the role of the learners and the collaborative tasks:

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Always 2. Frequently 3. Sometimes 4. Rarely 5. Never |
|---|

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| You participated actively | | | | | |
| You discussed and negotiated solutions | | | | | |
| You shared knowledge with the group | | | | | |
| You had positive interaction with the group | | | | | |
| You shared leadership | | | | | |
| You clarified and elaborated information | | | | | |
| You analysed information | | | | | |

While you were working in the group, which of the following collaborative mechanisms did you use? Please use the same scale.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Clarification or explanation | | | | | |
| Sharing of collaborative work | | | | | |
| Organising group work | | | | | |
| Constructing knowledge | | | | | |
| Conflict | | | | | |
| Compromise | | | | | |
| Encouragement | | | | | |

General comments about the activity:
