

From Translator to Post-Editor: A Different Perspective on Teaching

Translation to Language Majors



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Abstract

With the ever-growing demand for professional translators and the need to prepare students for the workforce, many institutions are developing and implementing a curriculum that includes new translation courses for language students. Many students report being asked to translate different types of documents and materials for their respective jobs or during internships and practicums. Most of them do not have any experience translating and, therefore, they need some training if they want to produce an adequate rendition. As a pedagogical tool when learning a language, translation exposes students to comparing language systems between their native and target languages. This linguistic awareness can then help students to use different strategies to solve problems during the translation process and further develop their linguistic skills. This paper will explore diverse teaching approaches used in an undergraduate translation course, particularly in regard to the incorporation of a computer-assisted translation (CAT) tool in the classroom.

Keywords: language learning, translation, post-editing, CAT tool

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic posed many challenges for all facets of education, including higher education, as traditional in-person classes had to switch to online delivery. One of the core courses that undergraduate language majors must take to complete their degree at the University of Indianapolis is *Spanish Translation*. I will focus on the different approaches I used to teach this translation course at the undergraduate level before and after Covid-19. What tools should we -- translator educators-- use to fulfill the proposed objectives? Are they different from the ones used before the pandemic? The way language and translation educators deal with issues like student level of language proficiency, technology literacy, syllabus creation, types of activities used in the class, use of machine translation as well as interactive tools to engage students in the learning process will have an impact on student outcomes. My goal is to share my experience teaching translation using traditional methods and activities while changing the focus from translating to post-editing using web CAT tools such as Phrase TMS (formerly known as Memsource).

Background

The Department of Global Languages and Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Indianapolis offers a Spanish translation course as a requirement for language majors and minors. With Spanish being the second language in the United States, this translation course responds to the increasing need to prepare language graduates who are able to aptly communicate in Spanish in a variety of professional settings. The emphasis is on the translation of a variety of texts from the fields of business and medicine, as well as consumer-oriented materials and literary pieces. Some of these texts are translated from English into Spanish and others from Spanish into English. While the focus of the course is mostly practical, some theoretical translation principles and

concepts are introduced as they are considered a vital component in the formal training of a professional translator.

Although some heritage speakers enroll in this class every semester, most of the students are English speakers who have had approximately 3 years of language study. Therefore, they are considered intermediate students who still lack the fluency and linguistic mastery needed to produce translations at a professional level. What I aim for with this course is to expose students to real life translation assignments so that they can experience what a professional translator would do in their practice. Translation then becomes a tool for language learning. Although research about the role that translation has in the field of second language acquisition is still limited, some studies suggest that translation in foreign language classes results in better understanding of structures of the two languages while strengthening students' translation skills. Al-Musawi (2014) explains that:

As a strategy for language learning, translation can be used as an effective medium for developing the learners' communicative competence and for teaching properties and types of meaning underlying semantic relationships, communicative language functions, sentential information structure, and discourse values. Seen from this perspective, translation is a cognitive activity that assists students in learning new phrases and expressions in the target language, and using them to communicate meaning to others, on the one hand, and a problem-solving exercise, in which the students develop their capabilities in data analysis and processing, on the other hand (para 5).

Many scholars have also conducted studies that suggest that translation is a highly motivating activity for students and that they perceive it as a useful tool when learning the target language

(Carreres, 2006). Translation, then, is an effective, valid tool in foreign language learning and can be used in the university classroom to improve knowledge of the languages (Braçaj, 2019).

Pedagogical Approaches

My approach to teaching translation comes from Don Kiraly's social constructivist theory, where students reflect about the role and work of professionals in this field and therefore are active translators from day one. Kiraly (2000) suggests that translator education should focus on authentic translation tasks and move towards a form of dynamic and collaborative socio-construct that is shared by translator educators and translation students collectively. This approach moves away from a teacher-centered classroom and is based on the idea that the translation practice is a collaborative and social space. As Kiraly argues, "translators today cannot afford to be linguistic hermits, sitting alone behind a typewriter and surrounded only by dusty tomes. Translators are embedded in a complex network of social and professional activity" (p. 207). Therefore, I try to keep the classroom an open space for my students to discuss and collaborate in their translation assignments so that they understand the social and professional activities that translators complete on a regular basis. For that reason, most of the assignments I present in class are authentic tasks and documents from local sources.

Over the years teaching this class, I have modified the syllabus several times and have revised the student learning goals as well as the content and the activities presented in the course. Some of the topics I have included are literary, medical, marketing and business translation. Since the textbook market for translation courses has been very limited and I was never satisfied with the books I found due to their being either too advanced or not challenging enough, I have created my own materials by gathering activities and real documents for students to practice their grammar and vocabulary in Spanish. Some of the activities that I have created for the class include editing

translated documents, applying translation procedures when dealing with cultural terms, translating short stories, children's books, medical questionnaires, business documents, creating bilingual glossaries, etc. Students work in pairs or groups and discuss their translations, edits, or activities and then the student-translators solve the translation problems by applying different techniques or procedures.

Use of Machine Translation (MT) in Language Learning

During the pandemic, as the class was taught online and students had to complete their assignments at home, there was a notable increase in academic misconduct, specifically using web resources and automatic translators to complete translation assignments. After some incidents related to plagiarism, I realized that not only this use of technology was not going away, and also that incorporating it in the classroom might be beneficial to better prepare students for the realities of translation jobs. The questions that I pose are: Can students use technology in the class and still gain valuable language and translation experience? How can MT help strengthen their linguistic knowledge? The increased quality of MT in the last decades has led to growing use of technology in many contexts. In the professional context, an increasingly common workflow involves the use of a machine translated text as a raw translation to be corrected or post-edited by a translator. Post-editing (PE) “involves correcting the translation output generated by the machine translation system, a task performed by the human editor or translator in order to bring the text to a certain pre-determined standard in terms of language style and appropriate use” (Quah, 2006, p. 11). Some of the pedagogical advantages of using MT and PE activities in the classroom are preparing students to meet the growing demand for professional services, the increase of accuracy and terminological consistency, and the improvement of students' perceptions of MT and its capabilities. However, research on use of MT and PE in language and translation learning is still

insufficient and there is no model on how to teach it. To address this gap, I incorporated a CAT tool called Memsource in my translation class in the fall of 2021. In this class, students were introduced to basic concepts in MT as well as the importance of the role of post-editor in the translation field.

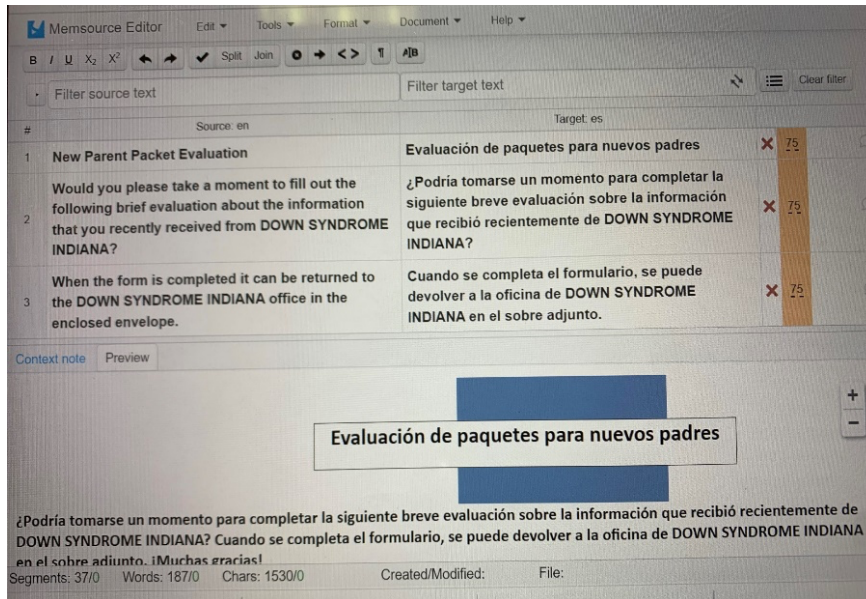
Implementation & Student Feedback

In preparation for the PE activity using Memsource, I brought a medical questionnaire to the classroom that was used with Spanish-speaking patients in a local physical therapy clinic, and students practiced how to categorize authentic errors found in the document. I asked them to recognize the type of mistake (grammatical, lexical, spelling, register, word choice, etc.) and to count the number of errors made in the questionnaire. This activity proved useful for students to put their language skills into practice, as well as their knowledge of terminology in the medical field. Another assignment that students had to complete involved editing a tax information PowerPoint that was translated into Spanish by a novice translator and that contained numerous errors of literal translation which made the document very difficult to understand for Spanish-speaking clients. Students were also given the opportunity to reflect on the role of the translator and the quality of translations that are sometimes published for patients or clients.

Once students were familiar with the process of editing translated documents, I introduced the concept of MT, a brief history of the development of these tools and the definition of PE. Memsource (now called Phrase TMS) is a cloud-based translation management system and CAT tool that is mostly used by freelance translators in Europe. I had some previous experience with this tool and its user-friendly interface and it works well with Word documents. I gave students instructions on creating an account and uploading some documents that we would use to practice with post-editing the translation produced by Memsource.

Figure 1

Memsorce Workbench



For their final project, students worked with a document from English into Spanish called “New Parent Packet Evaluation”, provided by Down Syndrome Indiana, a local non-profit agency whose mission is to support and help children and families with Down Syndrome. As they saw the MT output, they reflected on the quality of the translation, types of errors and improvements (if any) that could be implemented. Another assignment that I asked them to work with using Memsorce was an excerpt of a short story from Spanish into English by Cynthia Alarcón Múgica in which the author uses several examples of colloquialisms and slang. The discussion around this assignment proved to be very insightful for students as they realized the number of mistakes present in the translated document and reflected on the applicability of MT for literary texts. They were also required to turn in a bilingual document with both the original text and the translation with their edits.

Some of the reflection questions I asked them to include in their project were:

- How did you approach the Post-editing task? That is, did you read the ST and then make sure that the MT reproduced the information, or did you just read the MT output and only referred to the ST when you had some problematic words or passages?
- What did you think of the raw MT output?
- What would/did you change/not change?
- What kind of errors did you find, if any? How would you classify them?
- How would Memsorce help you in your translation tasks? Would you use it again or do you think you'd prefer to translate your documents from scratch? Why? Why not?

At the end of the semester, some students included comments about their experience with the CAT tool and I was pleased to see positive reactions and feelings towards working with automatic translators. Some of the comments include:

Overall, however, both outputs were better than I expected them to be. It [the CAT tool] was able to recognize and translate more slang and non-formal language than I thought it would. I also had low expectations because I had never used a service like this. I think it was helpful to have a base to start the translation because it is kind of daunting to look at a piece and have nothing on the paper. I think having something to work with was useful and, for me, it gave me more motivation knowing the brunt of the work was already started. I do think I would prefer it over starting from scratch. I think with using a source like this I have to pay extra close attention because there are so many small details and things, such as register, that are really easy to look over. With Memsorce I think it is a well set up

program and I like the use for being able to create the bilingual documents and being able to edit stuff outside of the application. I think if I needed to use it again I would; I actually really liked it. I would be curious to know if when you select Spanish from different countries how the translations would differ, I do think that might be something interesting to play around with. (Student Comment)

“Memsorce can be very resourceful for translation tasks because you don’t have to start from scratch. However, it eliminates the translator's personal dialect and can be too literal at times”, another student reflected.

In sum, working with a CAT tool like Memsorce in the classroom led to a positive learning experience since students had the opportunity to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of these automatic translators as well as on how they can be of help during the translation process.

Conclusion

Some questions about the use of MT in language classes are still unanswered. With the use of MT and PE in translation classes, will the students rely on technology rather than on language learning? Is using this type of technology not conducive to language learning? Is the use of MT considered a form of plagiarism? Should PE skills be taught in programs that are not translation specific? I believe that more research needs to be done to address these issues.

However, my overall experience using Memsorce in the class taught me that students developed positive reactions to learning how to use these tools in the translation process. PE seems effective in the process of language learning in that students are asked to analyze texts, practice and review grammar rules and sentence structure and vocabulary, in addition to preparing themselves

for the professional world as detail-oriented translators or editors. I believe that I will continue using this and other MT tools in the final modules of the translation courses so that students can familiarize themselves with the real jobs of translators and post-editors, which can then in turn attract them to pursue a career that, without a doubt, will continue to be a profession in high demand in our globalized world.

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