

Acquiring a Truly Holistic Approach to Translation: The Use of LVS 2.5.2 Freeware to Enhance Students' Translational Competence

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According to a preliminary study conducted on students' B.A. theses on AVT (audiovisual translation) of the degree course Linguistic and Cultural Mediation Studies at the Università di Padova (Italy), most students find it difficult to develop a holistic and dynamic approach to translation. The present paper aims at an initial investigation and testing of the concrete applications of LvS 2.5.2 (Learning via Subtitling) subtitling simulator to enhance student competence in translation from English to Italian. For this purpose a pilot study was conducted on a group of third-year volunteers, who were previously instructed on the basics of AVT, in order to test its user-friendliness and learning potential. The software presented here was developed within the framework of the European Socrates programme LINGUA 2 (Levis project) between 2006 and 2008 (http://levis.cti.gr/index.php?option=com_frontpage). It was specifically designed for engaging learners in active language learning tasks, mainly by creating and editing synchronised subtitles. Moreover, the programme raises no copyright issues, is available for free and requires very little ICT literacy, thus being accessible to most teachers and students.

1. Introduction

The present paper reports on a study aiming at testing the impact, validity and effectiveness of interlingual subtitling on language learning and translator training. The introduction of this translation mode in the syllabus of the first-level academic course in Discipline della Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale (Linguistic and Cultural Mediation Studies) is thought to be highly valuable in

the development of both linguistic and translational skills that students need to acquire by the end of their degree course.

The necessity for introducing a further teaching method is also confirmed by the observations of a preliminary study on a sample of B.A. theses on the subject of audiovisual translation (AVT), which showed that students still find it difficult to discontinue a word-for-word approach and develop a higher linguistic sensibility towards texts as a whole and the reproduction of their internal dynamics. Moreover, the concept of translation as the outcome of a number of choices that are first made at text level and then mirrored at micro-level does not always appear to be clear. Hence, the time and place restrictions as well as the degree of re-elaboration imposed by subtitling can be very helpful in discarding this still relatively widespread tendency.

2. *The preliminary study*

The preliminary study was conducted on a sample of 21 B.A. theses on audiovisual translation written between 2004 and 2010 and it analysed the degree of competence developed by students through the observation of their *modus operandi*, i.e. how they structured their theses as well as how they approached and discussed problems. In this framework, the notion of translational competence is understood as ‘the ability to generate a series of more than one viable target text (TT1, TT2 ... TTn) for a pertinent source text (ST)’ plus ‘the ability to select only one viable TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence’ (Pym 1992: 3).

The analysis of students’ selection and assessment procedures of translation problems showed that on the one hand they relate to what is called retrospective assessment (Chesterman 2000: 125), i.e. they focus on the relation between ST and TT and on the text’s compliance with expectations in terms of equivalence at various levels. This is mainly a descriptive approach in which the desired requirements are listed and then tested on the translation. The result can exceed or thwart expectations; in any case, the evaluation tends to be highly subjective, since it depends on the opinions and expectations of the person comparing the two texts at a certain point in time and in a certain place. It is also evident that a positive or negative judgement on a translation strongly depends on the expertise and acumen of the observer, i.e. on his/her translational competence, which is what needs to be improved. On the other hand, students rely on prospective assessment: a model based on Nida’s notion of dynamic equivalence (1977:3, 22, 77, 99-103), which stresses the necessity of achieving an equal

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effect rather than focusing on form. Chesterman labels this approach perspective because 'it looks forward from the target text to the effect that it has, or designed to have, on its readers, rather than back to the source text' (2000: 128).

These two types of assessment seem to coexist in students' works, as they are only apparently in contrast. In fact, they can be, and are, combined in order to have a more complete picture of the translator's performance they analyse in their works. The analysis carried out by students progresses from the first to the second type of assessment, following a pattern like this:

- 1 ST choice and initial analysis
- 2 Theoretical framework (expectations)
- 3 Detection of problems
- 4 Critical analysis of TT on the basis of (1) fidelity to ST and (2) pragmatic/communicative effect.
- 5 Final assessment/conclusions.

Another factor emerging from students' works and deeply influencing their approach is their concept of "the problem of translation." This appears to be often misunderstood, as students tend to confuse objective problems with subjective difficulties. One of the first scholars who theorised this distinction is Nord (1988), who defines a translation problem as something objective that any translator has to solve for a certain translation task, independently from his/her competence and working conditions. On the other hand, a translation difficulty is subjective and has to do with the translator's skills and his/her specific working conditions. A helpful insight in the latter notion can be found in Hale&Campbell (2002:17), who state that

difficulty relates to a number of different factors: the individual's own awareness of an incorrect choice, the individual's linguistic and stylistic competence, the individual's knowledge of the subject matter and of the world, the individual's comprehension of the source text, the text's inherent ambiguity or lack of clarity and the translatability of the text into different languages at the different levels (lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic).

It seems that difficulty goes hand in hand with the previously discussed notion of competence and that the more competent students are, the less difficult they find texts. The main issue at stake here is that subjective difficulty is, in most cases, mistaken for an objective translation problem and treated as such by students. In fact, none of them seems to be conscious of this distinction, and this is reflected in the type of "problems" chosen. The origin of their choices and

judgements might be found in the fact that their training is mainly focused on active translation (IT-EN), while the analyses they carry out require passive (EN-IT) translation skills. Probably, students tend to just apply the principles they are most accustomed to, so that the choice of translation problems is oriented towards a well-tested process of spotting and solving an individual difficulty.

Furthermore, what can be a problem in a certain context, e.g. film subtitling, is not necessarily a problem in another. In fact, they are likely to start from the description of what they consider general translation problems (cultural references, humour, local accents etc.) and then look for them in the film. This is also proved by the fact that students tend to discuss a limited number of very similar issues. The consequence of such attitude is that students approach the filmic text in an *a priori* manner (having already decided what to focus on) and risk overlooking more relevant issues proper of the specific film chosen.

3. *The software*

The software object of the study is LvS 2.5.2, a freeware subtitling simulator developed in the framework of the European Socrates programme LINGUA 2 between 2006 and 2008. It was specifically designed to engage learners in active language learning tasks by creating and editing synchronised subtitles. The software consists of an all-in-one platform divided into four areas: video player, subtitle grid, where the TC-in and TC-out¹ can be entered, along with the subtitle proper, activity window and a space for teacher and student's notes.²

This type of software was chosen because of the many advantages it may bring to the translation class. First, it can be downloaded for free and is provided with a guide to activities along with a complete sample activity including video and subtitles, so no copyright issues arise. The platform also lends itself to being used with any language pair, as any .avi video can be uploaded and subtitles can be entered in any language, thus allowing for both interlingual and intralingual subtitling activities. It is also very user-friendly, as its functioning is intuitive and can be learned without any previous ITC literacy. Moreover, students can play the video and go through the instructions provided in the activity window

¹ TC (Time Code) indicates the exact time at which a subtitle appears (TC-in) and disappears (TC-out).

² For further details on the platform aspect and main functions please visit: http://levis.cti.gr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=110 10 Jan. 2012.

as many times as they need and, once they have learned how to use it, they can also practice autonomously by downloading the software on their own computers. Furthermore, this tool can be used with students at different levels of linguistic competence, in general language courses as well as in more targeted translation courses with a specific terminological focus. Finally, the use of audio-visual resources not only results stimulating for students but also provides authentic material that exposes learners to contextualised situational and linguistic stimuli.

4. The pilot study – Methodology

The software was first tested during a pilot study conducted on a sample of 18 third-year volunteers who had been previously trained on the basics of AVT, including a general knowledge of the mechanisms and problems related to subtitling. Volunteers were then divided into two groups (one consisting of 12 and the other of 6 people for organisational reasons) and exposed to activities aimed at becoming familiar with LVS. Their responses to it were trialled over three lessons, each lasting 90 minutes. In order to avoid biasing students, the experiment was presented as an optional curricular activity carried out for research purposes and the specific goals of the study were not revealed. All the initial testing activities (see below) were always presented as tasks and students were asked to perform them as they usually did with their homework.

In order to gather statistical data on students' performance, all their translations were recorded with Translog, a piece of software designed to record and study text production in translation. This tool allows users to replay the whole translation activity and get statistics on the number of keystrokes in general and deletions, cursor movements, additions and mouse events in particular. Also, the translation activity can both be watched in a sort of video replay and viewed as a linear representation showing all typing events and the duration of pauses; hence, it is considered particularly suited for the present study.

The methodology applied consisted of an initial two-stage profiling of students' level of competence carried out during the first lesson. The first stage was a self-perception questionnaire containing both distractors – as students were not told what the researcher was aiming at – and questions aimed at testing their competence in translation from English to Italian. Most of the questions and the multiple-choice answers were designed on the basis of the translation portfolio in use at the then Dipartimento di Lingue e letteratura anglo-

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germaniche e slave of our university. For the second stage, students were presented with a short tutorial on Translog and thereafter asked to translate a 151-word passage into Italian without using dictionaries or any other external resource. The text did not contain any particular terminological issues but was rather designed to test students' general translational abilities in their mother tongue. However, in order to make assessment possible, a number of indicators were inserted in the text that were then assessed to profile students' competence. In particular, false friends and syntactic problems were inserted. The time slot allowed was approximately 20 minutes. The teaching unit was then concluded with an introduction to LVS and its main features: how to load activities, enter subtitles and personal notes.

The two following units presented students with interlingual subtitling activities, in which they would watch a short video together and then provide an oral summary in order to check comprehension. Furthermore, they were asked to reflect on possible problems and propose solutions. They would then open Translog and translate subtitles considering linguistic, pragmatic and iconic factors, though less emphasis was laid on technical aspects as they would go beyond the scope of the experiment. Once the translation was completed, students could enter their subtitles and play them in order to concretely view their performance, a stage thought to be particularly helpful because students can watch their work and perceive its concreteness, thus feeling more motivated to improve their skills. Finally, the different solutions provided by students were compared and discussed in class.

5. The pilot study – Results

The self-perception questionnaire showed that 100% of participants were native speakers of Italian and that they all studied English as L2 along with at least one more foreign language, e.g. French (61.1%), Spanish (50%), German (44.4%), Portuguese (22.2%), Russian (16.6%) and Serbo-Croatian (5.5%). 11.7% had been studying English for 5 to 8 years, while another 11.7% for 8 to 10 years and 76.4% for more than 10 years, hence the vast majority of them was supposed to have a quite solid linguistic knowledge. Almost the totality of volunteers (94.4%) never took translation courses other than those offered by their university and none of them had any experience as professional translator.

Students were then asked to assess their translational skills in what are considered the four basic stages of translating: source-text analysis, research background information and terminology, translation process and revision

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respectively. For each question, three options were given ranging from minimum (answer 1) to very high (answer 3) competence. A great number of them picked answer two (medium competence), showing that they appeared quite confident in each of the steps that should be performed when translating. As we will see later on, their perceptions did not always match their actual performance.

Finally, attendants were asked to rank the following translation problems from 1 (most difficult) to 7 (least difficult):

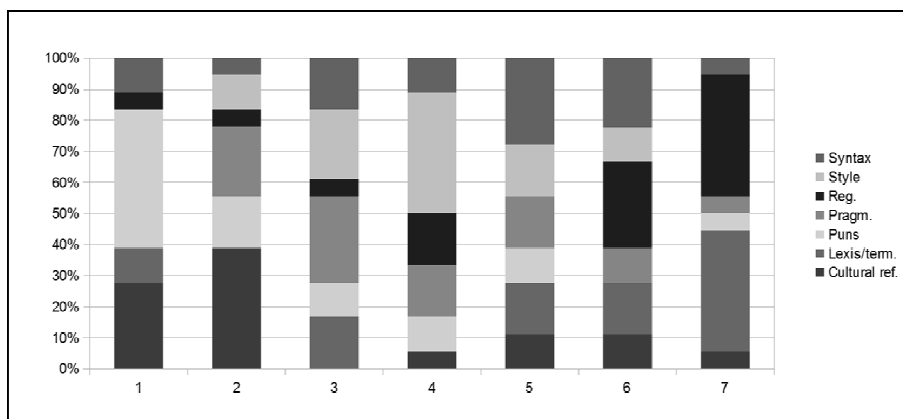


Table 1: translation problems

The table shows that the problems perceived as most difficult are puns and cultural references, and pragmatics too appears in the first positions of students' list. Style is regarded as averagely important, while syntax, register and terminology seem to be considered only relatively or little important by most students.

As for the Translog translation task, the text submitted to students consisted of 967 characters including spaces, and the median values of their performance were:

Total user events: 1876.33
 Text production: 1402
 Text elimination: 236.16
 User events per min.: 85.07
 Text production per min.: 63,98

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If we look at the text production/text elimination ratio, we can see that it is on average fairly high, as every 5.93 words one is eliminated; this shows that the number of re-elaborations carried out for the text given is considerable, from which we can infer that students' translational competence still needs further development.

The observation of students' behaviour through Translog also showed that translation is approached in basically two different ways. One group (61.1%) spends some time reading the text before starting to translate, which then leads to a lower number of re-elaborations when typing, less lexical errors and a higher translation speed. The second group (38.9%) starts translating immediately, thus making a higher number of re-elaborations when typing, many lexical errors and progressing at a lower speed.

If we compare students' self-perceptions to their actual performances, it is evident that they do not always match. In fact, although 88.8% of participants said they have average skills both in the source-text analysis and background research stage, almost 40% do not even read the text before starting. Also, 72.2% of participants stated that they could select appropriate terminology and that this was at the lower end of their list of problems. However, many students encountered problems in solving terminological issues in the text, as they paused or provided an incorrect rendering or both.

As for units two and three, volunteers were exposed to two activities following the procedure illustrated earlier in this section. The first one is an extract from the American sit-com *Friends*, while the second one is taken from the BBC series *Blackadder goes forth*; the activities were administered in this order considering that the second extract presented students with a higher level of difficulty. The average results of students' productions are the following:

Activity one: *Friends* (436 characters, spaces included)
Text production: 584.1
Text elimination: 106.2
User events per min.: 55.62
Text production per min.: 38,84

Activity 2: *Blackadder goes forth* (1027 characters, spaces included)
Text production: 1381.8
Text elimination: 234.7
User events per min.: 95.72
Text production per min.: 75.04

In the first activity, the text produced by students is 148.1 characters longer than the original and text production/text elimination ratio is 5.5, i.e. slightly lower than that in the first lesson test, though still considerably high. These two sets of data show that students are still struggling with translation basics and rather often need to re-elaborate their texts. As for activity two, we can see that the number of characters present in the original English subtitles is lower than in the translation, and even considering that, on average, Italian uses more words than English, the difference is still quite remarkable. The text production/text elimination ratio is 5.8 and the difference between the original and the translation is 354.7 characters, which can be justified by the increasing complexity of the text given.

6. Conclusions

In the light of these preliminary data, we can conclude that the need for students to further develop their linguistic and translational competence is justified. In order to do so, students need to become more aware of the gap between their perceptions and their actual translational performance in the first place. I believe this can be achieved through the introduction of a further teaching method to be integrated in the present curriculum. In fact, the use of audiovisual material can bring several advantages to the translation class; in particular, the translation mode of subtitling is such that it forces students to rethink texts and analyse them also in the light of their pragmatic context, which, in turn, should help them to progressively abandon the word-for-word approach.

The pre-translation discussion stage too is regarded as highly important to achieve this goal, as this can teach students the importance of understanding and contextualising words and expressions before translating, while the post-translation discussion helps students to learn from their mistakes and those of their peers, in a sort of group learning process.

Another important goal of the pilot study was to test users' response to the software both in terms of user-friendliness and applicability to a class environment. In both cases, it appeared to be successful and effective, as students provided positive feedback on its usability and seemed enthusiastic about this new approach. Indeed, we should not overlook the fact that both the mode and the content chosen were aimed at stimulating and arousing their attention.

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The software certainly needs further testing, which has been planned to be carried out in the second semester of the 2011-2012 academic year with a larger group of volunteers and a wider range of material available. The experiment would also include a control group in order to obtain more solid data on the long-term efficacy of this tool.

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