ReCALL **16** (1):114–123. © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0958344004000916 Printed in the United Kingdom

Delivering an online translation course

DERMOT F. CAMPBELL
School of Languages, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin-8, Ireland
(*e-mail: dermot.campbell@dit.ie*)

Abstract

This presentation is a discursive treatment of the migration of a classroom based translation class to online delivery using the Virtual Learning Environment WebCT. The main focus is not on the VLE itself, but on the pedagogical challenges posed by the move to online delivery and the course structure developed to retain as many of the advantages of face-to-face delivery as possible. Key to this is the use of an innovative colour-coding system of error analysis combined with constructivist comments designed to promote reflection on the translation process. The application of colour-coded feedback to categories relevant to translation training is flexible and can be adapted to other disciplines where essay-type answers are appropriate and differentiated comment by the tutor is expected. Since translation is a process-heavy activity rather than content rich, special attention has been paid to pedagogical considerations. Emphasis is also placed on using the VLE to build up a durable learning resource. The advantages and weaknesses of both forms of delivery are compared.

1 Why online?

Since the 1970s the School of Languages at the Dublin Institute of Technology has run classroom-based courses in translation, preparing students for professional examinations in translation offered by the Institute of Linguists, London.

In line with the general diminution of interest in foreign languages in Britain and Ireland over the decades, it has become increasingly difficult to attract students in sufficient numbers per language stream to run viable class groups. While there is a demonstrable student interest, it is very unfocussed and fragmented. For some prospective students the course was ideal – but they just could not attend on the day chosen to run the programme.

To maintain a valuable educational resource, and to gain experience in the area of online learning, the School of Languages decided to offer the postgraduate course in translation online, supported by the Institute's Learning Technology Team. This unit was charged with the task of introducing the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) WebCT to the Institute, which is the largest, single, higher education institution in Ireland.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2 Traditional classroom-based translation activity

The traditional classroom delivery of a translation class suits many lecturers' teaching style and often the following methodology is adopted: Students are given a source text (ST) for translation. This text is then translated by the students into English (the target text – or TT), in time for the next classroom session. The following week, students bring in their translated texts which are the subject of classroom discussion. The main advantage of the traditional classroom interaction is instant feedback – even silence in response to a challenging question can provide feedback.

The face-to-face classroom activity is infinitely flexible – pace of delivery and ensuring that extroverted students do not monopolise class time are comparatively simple tasks for an experienced teacher. Technical problems need not be anticipated. Students' body language provides useful feedback, and managing a full class to everyone's satisfaction is relatively straightforward. The inevitable group discussions on the merits of individual students' translations may become heated, but depending on the teacher's interpersonal skills, these can prove to be stimulating.

At the end of the class a new text for translation is distributed, and so the process repeats itself. More organised students keep full records of the source texts, their target texts and their classroom notes. But not all students are possessed of this degree of discipline.

3 Disadvantages of the 'live' method

Nevertheless, the traditional method is not without its drawbacks, mainly for those who cannot attend class. Notes taken by other participants in the programme are, for example, rarely satisfactory.

From the tutor's perspective, even double-spaced target texts leave insufficient white space for meaningful corrections or extended feedback to the student. It is also irksome to have to repeat the same or very similar corrections for numerous students.

It is not feasible for students to take copious notes of the classroom discussions and still play an active role in the class, so at best only the main points gleaned from the classroom session are retained.

Introverted students can be reduced to an unproductive silence by their more outgoing colleagues, who can all too easily monopolise the discussion.

4 Online procedure

When the classroom programme migrated to an online form of delivery, new and untried procedures needed to be put in place. Though the methodology is still evolving, at present the course is delivered in 'cycles', each of three weeks duration.

In Week 1 students download their source text for translation via a dedicated page within WebCT. This can be pre-prepared by the tutor in a standard word processing package. Being in possession of an electronic document, students may do the translation on their computer directly, or print out the text for manual preparation. The former is preferable, as students can more easily return the target (i.e. translated) text to the tutor for correction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Week 2 is devoted to correcting the students' target texts. 'Correction' is undertaken using a colour coding process (described below) and this annotated version is returned to the students, using the assignment handling facilities available within *WebCT*. This corrected work can also be sent as attachments to regular e-mails.

In Week 3 students study the feedback from the tutor, address the problems identified and confer with other programme participants in pairs or small groups, as they themselves choose.

At the end of the 'groupwork week' the tutor acts as e-moderator in a synchronous, online session whose main function is to reach finality in the translation process. An average of 15–20 infelicities identified by the tutor in the students' target texts will have been reduced by the student partner or group work to a handful of more challenging problems which can then be dealt with online by the tutor in between one and one-and-a-half hours.

5 Source texts

Professional translators have to be able to work at a speed of about 300 words per hour. The ability to work at this speed does not come naturally, but rather through training and practice. After an introductory translation cycle, to ensure that the procedures have been understood, students should be exhorted to work at this rate. Initially this leads to a deterioration in the quality of their work, but encourages students to categorise problems according to whichever schema the lecturer deems appropriate, and arrive at a solution (however imperfect) to the translation problem as quickly as possible.

No matter how carefully the tutor chooses the text for translation, it invariably reveals its secrets only in the act of translation itself. It often happens that problems arise in the course of working on a text which were not apparent when the tutor was scanning the text for suitability.

Length can also be a consideration. A careful evaluation of a source text produces a correction rate of approximately 10–12 words per minute. In order to be cost-effective with the tutor's time, this dictates that a source text should be about 400 words long. Another possibility is to provide longer texts which allow sufficient cotextual information, and select a section of about 400 words marked out for translation by the students.

6 Target text

The students' task is to study and prepare the source text and return the target text in electronic form – using the Assignments feature of *WebCT* or similar VLE. They research the subject matter in both languages and prepare the text for translation by:

- categorising the genre of text
- studying the source text register and style
- estimating the likely readership and end users
- evaluating embedded cultural elements etc.

It is important that a standard word processing package be used, as the tutor has to apply a colour correction scheme to the text for the online feedback to work effectively. No

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

yellow	Please address the comment I have made on this point.
red	You have misunderstood the original / or: serious mistranslation
.....	Omission – You left out part of the ST
blue	Rephrase – not quite the right word / or an unusual turn of phrase
purple	Problem with Style or Register
gray	Wrong tense (or "voice")
green	Good translation – well handled!
(+ …)	Add …

Fig. 1. Use of colour in marking translations.

multiple translation versions are allowed – students must learn to make difficult decisions!

7 The use of colour in the correction scheme

This is at the core of the whole online activity, and is designed to promote reflection on the translation process, which is much more important than the translation product, although students are initially invariably fixated on words and on their target text. Norman Jackson (Jackson, 2003), in exploring the concept of metalearning, quotes John Biggs' (Biggs, 1985) definition of metalearning as: 'being aware of and taking control of one's own learning'. In order to disabuse students of the commonly held belief that there is such a thing as a perfect translation, it is necessary to induce them to reflect on their thinking and learning processes. The use of colour coding to categorise weaknesses (or strengths) in the students' target texts encourages them to approach new source texts in a professional fashion and assess the translation challenges contained in them in a structured way – building on a developing appreciation of the translation process. Students often display a tendency to approach a source text as a collection of lexical challenges rather than a coherent network of meaning with specific surface (lexical) features. Being able to deal with only a limited number of source texts, the online programme seeks to develop in students the ability to evolve and regulate their own learning, in interaction with the tutor and their fellow students.

The current approach adopted by the author is closer to what might be called 'assisted metalearning'. The combination of broad categories (pre-determined by the tutor), in conjunction with carefully judged, constructivist feedback, helps students to reflect on their learning process, which is the internalisation of analytical strategies and the reconstruction of a source text in a form which makes its coherent network of meaning accessible to a readership in the target linguistic community.

Colour is almost incidental. While coloured hyperlinks have proven useful in assisting dyslexics to retain lexical items in long-term memory, in the online translation course its reinforcing role is restricted to assisting in the internalisation of (potential) error categories. Which colours are used is a matter of individual choice and taste, although in the English speaking world green can safely be used to indicate a positive attitude, while red is easily interpreted as pointing up a serious error. Yellow, with its associations of light and warmth, is useful to indicate a less grievous error than – say – blue. Not too many categories should be used, otherwise the ease with which the import of the categories is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

internalised, can be reduced.

Of equal importance to student and tutor is the distribution of colour highlighting in the corrected target text. Once the categorical message of the colour highlighting has been assimilated, the amount of any one colour in the returned target text – used in conjunction with reflection on the tutor's comments – enables students to assess the overall quality of their work.

Figure 1 (which will tax the reader's imagination in its current monochrome version) is not prescriptive, but has been found useful by the author for effective feedback to tutor and students in both summative and formative modes.

Students quickly become used to the significance of the colour highlighting applied to their 'corrected' target texts. The tutor too is in a better position to modify a holistic mark awarded to a translation in light of the amount of 'red' (= serious problem), 'blue' (= comprehension assured, but inappropriate choice of word/phrase in the translated text), 'yellow' (= minor problem). It is even possible for the students to regain a few percentage points in the light of the amount of 'green' highlighting (= inspired – 'I wish I had thought of that!')

Arriving at a fair mark for translations in summative feedback is not an exact science. Awarding or subtracting individual points for sub-sections of a target text can lead to a

Women are more modest than men ~~are~~ – at least when it comes to salary expectations. These were the findings of American psychologists in an experiment involving 200 students. Are women short on self-belief (Too close to ST) or do men tend to overestimate their own abilities?

Even for badly executed work, men are better paid than women ~~are~~ – at least in the US. This hardly means, however, that women don't value money. Men simply have greater confidence in their own achievements even when they (If you used "these", it would avoid the ambiguity which could suggest that MEN were sub-standard ... perish the thought!!) are sub-standard. This was the conclusion of psychologist Brett Pelham and his research team at the University of New York in Buffalo.

The German magazine 'Psychology Today' (I would tend to leave the title in its ST form. If someone wanted to check it out on the web, they would need to know the original title. It could be introduced as: The German popular psychology magazine 'Psychologie heute'.) is now picking up on the results of an open (I'm not sure where you got that from.) study which appeared a year ago in the 'Journal of Experimental Social Psychology'. In an experiment Pelham and his colleagues set tasks of varying difficulty to approximately 200 students. Afterwards the students could demand a fee, even if they had failed in the task.

Both sexes (Ask any advertising buff: this word attracts attention. But since the sexuality of the participants is not highlighted in the ST, but rather the fact that some behaviour is gender specific, I would tend to opt for that more neutral standby: 'Both males and females ...') demanded roughly equal compensation (This TT version attracts more attention to itself than the ST word. Why not simply: pay?) for correctly completed work. The females who could not solve the problem were content with half (I'd be happier if this were expanded. It seems less isolated in German, given the presence of a supportive article.). The men, however, maintained their salary expectations irrespective of what result they had achieved.

A decisive factor in the amounts demanded was whether or not other students near ('Neben' is used in the temporal sense, rather than spatial.) the university worked and for how much. According to Pelham Fazit (This is a fashionable term for: conclusion, findings etc.), 'Holding a badly paid job is like being a woman'. On the other hand, those who earned a lot – and these were generally men – also demanded more money for the experiment ...

Fig. 2. An example of the use of colour marking.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

final, composite mark which is only loosely anchored in reality. A more effective method (though it lacks the deceptive security of a 'mathematically' based scoring system) is to award an initial, global mark based on the 'classification band' in which the tutor would place the work: first class honours, second class upper, second class lower etc. Then, judging the amount of red, blue, yellow distributed over the target text (and making allowances for any above-average performance highlighted in green) the mark initially given can be raised or lowered by 5 to 10 percentage points. While not an exact method, this intuitive approach can lead to a more credible final grade, and is rarely queried by the people most concerned – the students!

In combination with the colour highlighting scheme to indicate the category of error encountered, the tutor inserts comments on the error in a font with a contrasting colour. Providing a model translation of the source text should normally be avoided; the idea is to give an indication of the type of error made in a thought-provoking fashion. This is not unlike clues given in a crossword, but less cryptic. The student is invited to study the target text in the light of the tutor's comments. The task for the student is now to – literally – remove the tutor's colour coding and coloured comments and produce a new target text. The impact of the reproduction in Figure 2 is reduced by monochrome printing, but will still allow readers to assess the merits of the system applied to their own discipline.

Tutor comments which do not succeed in guiding the student to a clear improvement of the original target text are noted by the student and discussed using the *WebCT* platform (either in a Chat room or using the Bulletin Board) with other course participants. In this manner the number of residual, intractable problems to be moderated by the tutor in the concluding, online session at the end of Week 3, is reduced to manageable proportions.

If desired, and if time and cost-effectiveness permit, a student can be appointed per translation cycle to negotiate an 'agreed translation' which could then be commented on offline by the programme tutor.

Sandy McIntosh (2002), describing the provision of EAP courses online noted that 'activities and schedules from the classroom courses could not be duplicated in identical online courses. As a result, the decision was made to design online courses that produced the most relevant outcomes of classroom courses, rather than attempting to directly imitate classroom activities. The intention was that students from the online and classroom streams would achieve the same set of outcomes at completion.'

The architecture of the online translation course enables the same objectives as the classroom based programme to be achieved, since it is reflection on the translation process and the application of the fruits of that reflection to new source texts which is the goal common to both forms of delivery. The online delivery tends to individualise student response more than in a group-activity in the classroom, but the online cooperative work allows more student responses to be made available to the group.

8 Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

DIT has opted for the VLE WebCT, but other products such as Blackboard can perform the same tasks. The VLE is merely a secure vehicle for communication; it is the flexibility of the colour-coded and inserted comments which provide the main benefits of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

teaching/learning approach and which help retain some of the benefits of face-to-face delivery.

The website for the Online German Programme is currently being rationalised and updated, but the main functions so far found to be useful are:

- Communication tools
- Course Content Page
- Assignment/Download Page

The other functions available within the VLE have their place, but play a secondary role. Some tutors hold the view that an online programme should be launched with an informal social gathering, so that participants can meet each other before retreating into virtual reality – but that is not always feasible. Haythornthwaite *et al*. (2000) promote a two week 'boot camp' intensive activity before delivering the remainder of their course in library and information science education online.

The least one can do, though, is to allow tutor and staff to have some idea of the people they are sharing the programme with, by each putting up a home page. It would be worth the tutor's time and effort to scan in students' photographs if they do not have the facilities to do so themselves.

9 Course content within the VLE

The course content page is divided into two parts: the texts for translation and the theory pages which are built up over the length of the programme.

Theory pages are added gradually, allowing students to develop a feel for the translation process over the course of the programme. It is important that students reflect on problems and solutions encountered in the text currently being studied, and derive from them a body of knowledge and strategies likely to be of use in other contexts.

Thus a considerable resource accumulates, which in time can be modified by the tutor, as some elements prove their worth and others show themselves to be redundant.

The delivery of this online programme is under review, and one of the changes proposed is to attach a resource to each text/translation cycle in which some, if not all, student target texts are displayed (with their names removed to preserve anonymity) as a learning resource for the current and subsequent student cohorts. This resource can be locked and released only when appropriate – i.e. after the translation task has been completed by the new group of students.

10 Communication tools within the VLE

It is vital that students use their time wisely in Week 3 of the Translation Cycle. Since the vibrancy of face-to-face discussion is missing online, collaborative effort, based on bilateral or small group discussions of the tutor's comments performs a similar role.

This collaborative work can be performed using the live Chat facility or in threaded discussions, in which students can post comments to the discussion board and reply to other students' postings at a later time.

Students may also avail of e-mail within the secure confines of the VLE, which is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

available only to those who enrol and pay fees.

The calendar is useful for keeping order and making deadlines clear, freeing the tutor of both the need and impulse to 'chase' students individually to produce their work on time.

Student pages can add a personal touch to an otherwise impersonal activity, especially when photos have been added.

Glossaries are another feature which can be added to an individual source text, or – at a higher level in the VLE architecture – applied to the course as a whole. Theory pages, in turn, can be seen as an elaborated version of glossary items.

11 Chatroom

The Chatroom facility in the VLE that our institution uses, is lively but not easy for the tutor to manage when student numbers exceed ten. E-Moderating is a recent form of endurance test and can be eased slightly if a few conventions are established and observed.

The main difficulty arises when everybody chats at once; so it is not clear to the tutor exactly who is replying to whom. Tutors, by their nature, take their work seriously and want to give a fully professional response to student queries. But it is confusing – in the middle of a lengthy tutor response – when several student replies or new inputs suddenly jump onto the screen.

The tutor could enter a series of asterisks '***' to represent the message: 'Please read this (tutor input) text while awaiting more feedback from me on the topic.' When the tutor is finished inputting a reply to a student query or contribution, a series of number signs '###' can signify: 'My feedback is now complete and I am ready for your input now.'

12 Disadvantages of online delivery

In conclusion, it has to be admitted that the online method of delivery – while being infinitely better than not having a course at all – does have some innate drawbacks.

- Technical problems for students
- Slow interaction in online sessions
- Inflexible compared to classroom delivery
- Impersonal
- Correction is time consuming

Not all modems function properly all the time. IT managers are sometimes misanthropic to the point of being reluctant to help students who try to engage in chatroom activities from their workplace. Impenetrable firewalls are the price students pay for secure workplaces, and convincing the IT manager that exceptions should be made can require considerable powers of persuasion.

Enthusiastic interjections in a 'real' classroom are less confusing than in a virtual one, because it is clear to all, who made the comment, when, and in response to whom. There is a lack of equivalent overview in online delivery.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Also, the temperament of the tutor can have an influence on how successful the end-of-cycle, synchronous session will be. It requires quick reflections and good keyboarding skills to keep track of the e-class dynamics and still provide quality, timely feedback.

Some translators are individualists and are happy to be left alone to get on with their work. Others relish interactivity; and these are the people who tend towards finding the method of delivery impersonal. Muirhead (2000:1) states that:

> 'On-line interactivity has the potential of enhancing the quality of distance education, while improving student interactivity to create a climate that supports cooperative learning, critical thinking activities, and meaningful tutor/student academic collaboration.'

It is therefore essential that students participate fully in the bilateral and small group collaboration phase of Week 3, in order to break down those potential barriers.

Correction rates – depending on how particular the tutor wishes to be – can be slow, say, 10–12 words per minute. This is where most of the work goes in delivering the online version of the course; but the advantages far outweigh the time overhead.

13 Advantages of online delivery

- Easier to form a viable class
- Follow-on courses for graduate students
- High quality of feedback to student
- Reflection on translation process promoted
- Record of work done available to current students
- Cumulative value of support materials
- Valuable resource for future students

Class viability is more likely to be achieved by delivering online, especially as modern translators rely so heavily on computer support to source and carry out their work.

An online translation course is a natural follow-on course for graduates of a BA programme in modern languages. Such students tend to be very mobile so they disperse rapidly throughout the world after they graduate. If their undergraduate experiences were positive, however, they are more likely to sign up to a postgraduate programme delivered by staff they already know and trust.

While correction times are somewhat slower than their manual counterparts, the colour coding plus constructivist comments are worth the effort. They promote reflection on the translation process, and translation is process heavy, not content heavy, as is the case with some other disciplines. By capturing the online session there is also a written record of thought processes, not just final translation versions, to consult at a later date.

When several students have made the same error, or when a lengthier comment by the tutor is appropriate, a simple copy-and-paste manoeuvre is all that is required. The corrected target texts are also a lasting and enriching resource for future generations of students taking the course.

Should readers like to obtain a PowerPoint version of this paper (illustrating the use of colour coding), the author will be glad to forward it, upon receipt of an e-mail.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344004000916 Published online by Cambridge University Press