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11 The Professional Linguist: language skills for the real world

Mary Murata[1]

Abstract

This chapter reports on a compulsory final year employability skills module for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) undergraduates at York St John University. The 'Professional Linguist' aims to equip students with a range of skills which they may need when entering the workplace, whilst underpinning it with theory which would benefit those wishing to continue into postgraduate study in the field. The module covers a range of skills, from IT-based ones such as use of specialist software, online dictionaries, etc., to discussion of the ethics of recent developments in translation such as fansubbing and machine translation. The module also incorporates other elements including an introduction to interpreting, using the language features in Microsoft (MS) Word and talks from professionals such as subtitlers and project managers in recognition that not all graduates will go on to become translators.

Keywords: translation, interpreting, translation theory, ethics of translation, employability skills.

1. Context and rationale

When students graduate from an MFL degree, in addition to the skills in the given language(s), they also need a range of skills which will stand them in good

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stead when job hunting and in the workplace. Statistics show that MFL graduates are in high demand: they are the highest earners in the Arts, Creative Arts, and Humanities fields, and at least 86% of MFL graduates are in employment or further study six months after graduation, which is above the national average (Kempster, 2015). They enter a huge range of career sectors which require a wealth of skills above and beyond pure language skills.

2. Aims and objectives

This chapter is an illustrative case study demonstrating how we embed employability skills in the curriculum, some of the challenges we have faced and how we have overcome them.

3. What we did

This module is delivered across 12 weeks with two hours of class time per week. In weeks two to eight, one of the hours takes the form of language-specific translation tutorials in the four languages that we offer to degree level; the remaining class time is taught in a multi-language group.

3.1. Technology for translators

The workplace for most linguists has been revolutionised by technology and is constantly evolving, so technology is central to the module. There is a general assumption that young people of the so-called 'net generation' or 'digital natives', that is to say young people who have grown up in the digital era, are universally savvy and at ease with all digital communications and technology. This assumption is not always borne out in reality, and while they may be proficient at using Facebook and eBay, many of them have poor skills in using standard workplace technologies such as MS word or using different languages or scripts on screen. The technology side of the module comprises lectures and hands-on workshops covering:

- IT skills for linguists
- Introduction to Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tools
- Machine translation (MT) – how it works and how to use it wisely
- Subtitling

IT skills for linguists: this covers language-related skills such as how to set up a language on Windows for typing in a non-alphabetic script, advanced features of MS Word such as the review function/track changes for proofreading or collaboration, and how to use the spell check in non-English languages. These skills are reinforced over the following weeks with class activities.

CAT tools: as increasing numbers of professional translators use CAT tools, knowledge of the principles behind them and some insight into how they work is essential for people wishing to enter the profession. We use Wordfast Anywhere – a free online tool which offers many of the features of the paid-for CAT tools but is open source.

The advantage is that students can become familiar with the principles of CAT tools – translation memory, glossaries, etc., and the terminology such as source, target, fuzzy match and segment. One of the benefits of using a CAT tool can be seen when working on a document with complex formatting such as text boxes in Powerpoint. The CAT tool separates the text from the formatting for translation and then replaces the target text in the original formatting, thereby saving translators a lot of time. As an exercise, students translate a PowerPoint document and there is a great sense of satisfaction when they open their final document with exactly the same formatting but in the target language.

We supply a small glossary and translation memory file for the task, but in Wordfast Anywhere, these features can be difficult to use, as the students do not have the time to build up a translation memory for themselves and so find it difficult to see the real benefit of using a translation memory tool.

MT: all language students are familiar with MT, the most well-known being Google Translate. They often have very strong opinions on the output from Google Translate, either dismissing it as rubbish or seeing it as a godsend when they are struggling with homework. MT coupled with controlled input and post-editing is revolutionising translation, and it is currently used in a number of large multilingual institutions such as the National Assembly for Wales and the European Commission. In future, it is likely that many linguists will find employment post-editing the output of MT systems.

This remains a controversial aspect of the translation industry, but we encourage our students to make a judgement based on knowledge rather than assumptions. As well as attending a lecture on the background, history and current trends in MT, the students carry out a mini-project where they compare the output from several different internet based MT systems. This gives them an opportunity to form their own opinions on MT and learn to use it wisely. We choose free online programmes as then students can use them after graduation as well. The shortcoming of free programmes is that, unlike paid-for software, you cannot 'train' the programme by adding your own glossaries or dictionaries.

Subtitling: this is the form of translation that is most familiar to everyone, including non-linguists. It is also the form of translation which is most open to scrutiny and criticism, with both source and target text being available at the same time. Even people with minimal knowledge of a language take delight in spotting 'mistakes' in subtitles without being fully aware of the constraints that subtitlers work under. The purpose of this section of the module is to give the students an insight into the constraints of subtitling (condensing language, on screen limits on number of letters per line, number of lines, timing, etc.). We use the subtitling feature of YouTube which is freely available but offers many of the features of professional subtitling software. It is user-friendly with online tutorials available and students seem to enjoy this part of the course very much.

Student feedback to the technology-based side of the course is extremely positive; they can see the immediate benefit of familiarity with a range of technologies that have applications in the workplace. They also enjoy the practical hands-

on aspect. The use of open software in the classroom means that the students become familiar with software that they can use any time after graduation – there is nothing more frustrating than being taught how to use a sophisticated piece of software that you cannot afford and have no access to later. It gives them a grounding in the terminology and features of the software types and provides an opportunity to discuss ethics and issues surrounding copyright, ownership and intellectual property.

3.2. Translation theory and practice

This aspect of the course prepares students not only for careers using languages, but also gives them an insight into what would be involved in postgraduate courses in Translation Studies. Topics covered are:

- Translation theory and methodology
- Current trends in translation
- Introduction to interpreting

Translation theory: these lectures encourage students to reflect on the process of translation and apply this knowledge to the work set in the language-specific translation sessions. This also equips them with the metalanguage and knowledge required if they choose to take translation studies further. Often translation theory seems to be divorced from applied translation in the workplace, but our modules encourage students to apply the theory and see the relevance of it. Almost all students have had experience of translation, perhaps in school or whilst on placement in their host university. Often they have never reflected on the process, so this part of the module encourages them to reflect on and discuss their translation decisions.

Current trends: the internet provides many opportunities for amateur translation such as fansubbing, crowdsourcing, scanlation, etc and students are often familiar with the concepts, although they may not have heard the

terms. Some even have experience of being on a fansubbing team for anime or games. This part of the module provides an opportunity to discuss ethical issues surrounding the increase of amateur translation such as (low) pay, loss of jobs, benefits for the fans, ethics (copyright), etc. Discussion of the issues provides not only a framework for considering their own position as future translators but lays the groundwork for the possibility of further study in the field at postgraduate level.

Interpreting: most students have some experience of informal interpreting, so in this part of the module we are able to draw on their own experiences and relate them to theory and practice. Students do a range of training activities such as shadowing, note taking, etc., to experience what would be involved in interpreter training if they took it further.

3.3. Group project

One of the distinguishing features of the module is the group project, which is compulsory but not assessed. The students take part in a multi-lingual translation project, in which they are divided into teams comprising a project manager, translators, editors/proofreaders and (depending on the medium of the translation) subtitle time coders. The role of the project manager is to act as a hub for the project, liaising between the client (played by the lecturers) and the various members of the team. Each year the project changes dependent on overall student numbers, as well as numbers per individual language and student feedback. In previous years, the project has taken the form of translating content for a Tour de Yorkshire website, a FIFA World Cup website and similar topical themes. Most recently it took the form of a subtitling project to create multi-lingual versions of a two-minute promotional video for the University. The remit of each team was to produce a final video in each of the languages represented in their group.

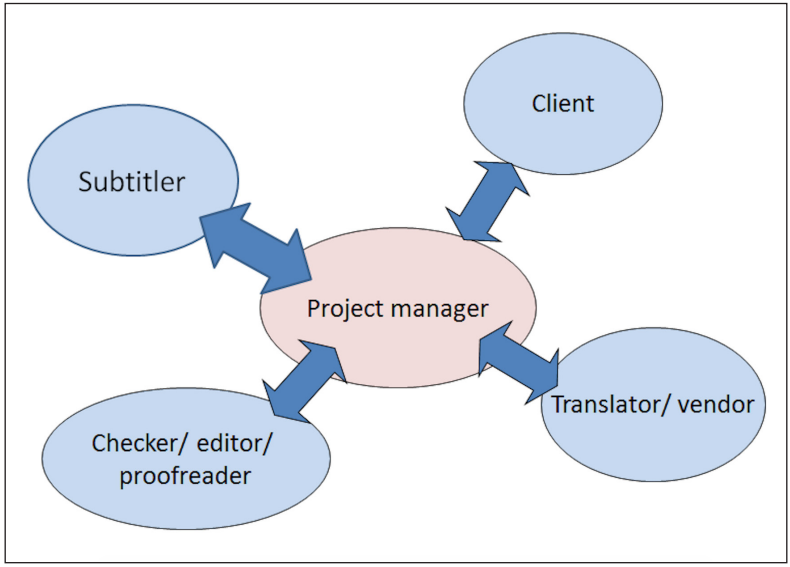
The skills required for the project are:

- Project management

- Subtitling (using free online software)
- Condensing (making the language on the screen suitable for use as subtitles)
- Translating
- Proofreading
- Netiquette
- Time management

Many of the skills required for the project, such as using track changes, use of subtitling software or the conventions for subtitling, were pre-taught in the weekly lectures; see Figure 1 for the project's flow.

Figure 1. The flow of the project



The client role is played by the lecturers. Only the project manager is allowed to communicate directly with the client. Any queries from the other team members have to go through the project manager.

The project manager is at the centre of the project, responsible for communication between the various parties and making sure the project is completed and delivered to the client on time. The project managers set deadlines and must have a contingency plan if someone lets them down.

The translator translates the English into the target foreign language; Japanese, Spanish, German or French as appropriate. Although students are mostly translating out of their strongest language, which is not standard practice, we emphasise that the purpose of the project is to experience the process and not the quality of the actual translation itself.

The subtitler copies and pastes the subtitles to the video using the software and sets the time codes as appropriate. They are required to fulfil the conventions for subtitles such as number of words on screen and length of time as taught in the subtitling theory class. The final product is delivered to the client via the project manager as a YouTube link.

We use the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as a project management tool replicating the kind of virtual project management tools used by many translation companies; all the files for the project are on the VLE. All communication takes place via the university email system, again replicating real world situations where the members of a team often never meet face to face. They are instructed to use language of an appropriate level of formality for a work situation and to reply promptly and politely.

As the project is not assessed, student engagement can be variable; this can be a cause of frustration for other members of the group. During the class discussion after the project, students have the opportunity to feedback to the members of their team. Often it transpires that apparent lack of engagement was due to poor time management. Each team member gives the other team members a rating

out of five stars similar to the rating system on many online services such as Amazon or eBay. They rate their Likelihood of Working Again (LWA) by simply giving a number of stars in answer to the question "Would you work with this person again?" in the style of the Blue Board of the professional translation online community Proz.com. This feedback highlights the importance not only of language and practical skills but also time management, communication skills and a good work ethic.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Student evaluation of the module is always very positive, with some students saying that it was their favourite module of the three years. A recent external examiner's report stated that it "is an excellent example of a module which aims to develop translation skills to a high level". Graduates have gone on to pursue careers in translation, interpreting, or study postgraduate translation studies.

Languages graduates can end up on a host of career paths, and they need to be equipped with skills that are transferable to a variety of workplaces. IT skills are essential in almost all jobs in the present era, so we aim to give students the skills to use a range of software, but at the same time to be reflective about their use of IT and choose wisely how and when they use the tools. The world is becoming increasingly interconnected, and yet with English apparently being the lingua franca, it is tempting to think that there is no place for translation skills in the workplace. We aim to demonstrate to our students that there is still a very important role for skilled linguists, and that judicious use of technology can enhance their skills as a linguist and boost their chances of gaining employment in a competitive world.

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