

Developing Language and Professional Skills through Translation-Reviewing/Editing Projects

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a series of telecollaborative translation-reviewing/editing projects, conducted within the framework of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP), an academic network linking university classes in workplace-like projects. The projects aim to finetune the language and professional skills and, also, to enhance the trans-cultural awareness of four classes of students in Italy, Greece and the USA. The tasks include translation of published materials by students in Italy and Greece, followed by review and editing of the translations by students in the USA. The materials comprise articles on science and technology from magazines and on international or Italian/Greek current affairs from the local press, with the aim of translating them accurately and appropriately for a readership of American English speakers. The collaborative projects lead students to various linguistic and intercultural gains and can be used as a tool to promote realistic international professional communication by effectively preparing students for workplace collaborations of this type.

Keywords: *telecollaboration, editing, intercultural, international, reviewing, translation*

Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP) is a telecollaboration network linking classes among universities in Europe, the U.S. and beyond for over 20 years (Humbley, Maylath, Mousten, Vandepitte, & Veisblat, 2005; Maylath, Vandepitte, & Mousten, 2008; Mousten, Maylath, Vandepitte, & Humbley, 2010; Maylath, Vandepitte, Minacori, Isohella, Mousten, & Humbley, 2013; Maylath, King, & Arnó Macià, 2013; Verzella & Tommaso, 2014; Sorensen, Hammer, & Maylath, 2015; Vandepitte, Maylath, Mousten, Isohella, & Minacori, 2016; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2016; Noronha Cunha, Bigotte Chorão, Moreira Silva, & Ribero, 2020; Verzella, Arnó Macià, & Maylath, 2021). Virtual exchange projects, usually involving collaborative writing and translation/editing tasks, focus on developing students' language, intercultural and professional skills, which promote the employability of university graduates in an increasingly globalized world.

Telecollaboration has been reported as highly relevant to the improvement of language, literacy and intercultural skills (Guth & Helm, 2010) and has been the highlight of European Union policies regarding the internationalization of higher education, such as Internationalization at Home (Verzella, 2018) and the more recently launched Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange platform (Helm & Acconcia, 2019).

The majority of TAPP collaborations are writing-translation projects, which link writing classes with translation classes. However, since shortly after the TAPP's start in the 1999-2000 academic year, some projects have reversed the direction of text travel through translation-reviewing/editing projects (Mousten & Riordan, 2019). In these collaborations, texts originate with translation students, non-native students of English, who then relay their translations to writing or editing students whose first language is usually English. The first iteration of such a collaboration took place between universities in Denmark and Wisconsin, USA. Later iterations involved the same university in Denmark and others in Belgium, Italy, Greece, and, in the USA, North Dakota and Missouri. This paper focuses on recent projects involving Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Missouri Western State University, North Dakota State University and the University of Padova. The benefits for students on both ends of the exchange are manifold. Interacting with native speakers of English (NSE), non-native speakers of English (NNSE) have the opportunity to have their work reviewed and edited by NSE as NSE give explanations on grammar, style and culture, thus enabling the NNSE to understand why and how they can eliminate many of their errant misconceptions and common errors. For the NSE who serve as reviewers and editors, exposure to and awareness of other cultures and languages—and even other varieties of English—heighten their understanding of their own language use and cultural assumptions, in addition to sharpening their editing skills.

[Greek/Italian and American collaboration](#)

The first telecollaboration to include texts translated from Greek took place between an English-for-Specific-Purposes (ESP) course in journalism at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in Greece, and an international technical writing course at North Dakota State University, in the USA, simultaneously with a similar collaboration linking the same class in North Dakota with a specialized translation class at the University of Padova, in Italy. The ESP course in journalism draws on the long-standing tradition of ESP courses at European universities, which place emphasis on students' academic and disciplinary knowledge in English. Based on a comprehensive analysis of students' needs, ESP instruction explores authentic texts and activities related to the students' discipline and encourages interdisciplinary collaboration (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). The design of this ESP course in journalism also implements elements of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an integrated content and language approach which promotes collaborative and experiential learning (Tzoannopoulou & Maylath, 2018). The course content introduces students to concepts and practices of journalism in relation to their realization through the English language, exploring

genres of print and broadcast journalism such as news stories/TV scripts, and specific registers such as the language of headlines.

Benefits to Greek journalists translating

As NNSE, the Greek journalism students had the opportunity to improve their English language and translation skills and also practice their knowledge of style guides and journalistic conventions through their communication with the NSE American students.

Translation is considered a valuable skill for the journalist as most media outlets in Greece do not employ professional translators to translate texts in English but instead rely on journalists to perform this task. Therefore, part of the ESP syllabus is devoted to translating news stories in English. Translating (and understanding) headlines is a particularly demanding task as English headlines are notorious for telegraphic syntax, idiosyncratic vocabulary and stylistic variety. The following example derived from an exchange of emails illustrates the various gains for the translators:

Translation by Greek student

The climate change makes thousands of walruses to resort to an Alaska coast

Edit by American student

Climate change forces thousands of walruses to resort to Alaska

In the classroom discussion that followed this communication, the students noted the changes in the headline, proposed by the American partner, which produce a more authentic and professionally written result: instances of ellipsis such as the omission of the definite and the indefinite article, omission of the word *coast* for brevity, substituting a more dramatic verb to catch the attention of the readers (*forces* instead of *makes*).

A second example provided the opportunity for the fine-tuning of journalistic skills:

Translation by Greek student

Disagreements reign as Europes' discussions about youth unemployment start

Edit by American student

Disagreements Reign as Europe Begins Youth Unemployment Discussions

Comment by American student

"This is okay but I would recommend changing it to something like 'Disagreements Reign as Europe Begins Youth Unemployment Discussions' ...I think this shows more action in the headline and reads a little stronger".

In the above example the American student offers as an alternative a string of nouns (*youth unemployment discussions*) instead of a prepositional phrase (*about youth unemployment*) which makes the headline more compact as space is a major consideration for newspapers. A grammatical error in the Greek translation (*Europe's discussions) allows for some discussion on the grammar rules regarding the genitive case. The edited version offers an added advantage as it avoids the structural complexity of the genitive case 'Europe's discussions', adding to the textual economy of the headline. Greek students, therefore, tackle issues of brevity and conciseness (defining characteristics in media discourse) and at the same time learn how to use appropriate structural devices to arrive at an optimum result. Eventually, through the reviewers' suggestions, the Greek students are able to deliver a well written end-product by polishing both their language and professional skills.

Benefits to Italian translators

Since 2009, when the University of Padova joined the TAPP network, the majority of the post-learning reports by Italian students have stated that the main benefit was having their English edited by NSE. Although language skills are perceived to be the main beneficiaries, students learn that a professional translator needs non-language skills as well. In previous TAPP exchanges, Italian newspaper articles on international affairs were found to include cultural errors, including the U.S. federal agency the Army Corps of Engineers being translated with "genio militare", Italy's military engineering corps. The errors were generally spotted by U.S. editors as they corrected literal translations by students, who, in good faith, had taken the information presented to them as correct, or had gaps in their knowledge of Italian culture. During the 2019-2020 Padova-Missouri Western collaboration, one translation team stumbled across a factual error in a semi-specialized scientific text taken from the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* (RCS Media Group) as they were searching for terminology. Their original translation of the source text (ST) read:

"Like a space skin, these instruments are able to sense plasma with a density much lower than usual, as it is expected to be in the interstellar space."

Although the translators had no reason to doubt the information in the article, their research led them to discover that interstellar plasma is denser than heliospheric plasma. This discovery opened up the dilemma of whether the error should be left or changed in the target text (TT). The Italian translation team coordinator wrote first to their instructor in Italy and then to their partner in the U.S., pointing out the inaccuracy, with the editor replying that accuracy of facts was important and that the sentence should be amended in the translation. The TT sentence became:

"Like a space skin, these instruments are able to sense the plasma of interstellar space which, as expected, has a higher density than normal."

The experience of the TAPP collaboration not only encourages students to search for terminology in specialized English articles, but has the additional benefit of enabling them to fact-check as well, albeit not always intentionally. It is unlikely that the translators deliberately set out to verify the information about plasma, but the discovery of an error was an unexpected bonus that amounted to an improvement in the TT. Students are thus presented with opportunities for discoveries that expand knowledge on translation subjects. Further benefits are the realization that translators are required to make both language- and non-language-based decisions, as well as to interact with other professionals. They also learn to think more critically about the information with which they are presented.

Benefits to American reviewers/editors

As outlined in their assignment sheet, the learning purposes of the projects for U.S.-based reviewers/editors are as follows:

- To give you practice at copyediting in American English
- To provide you an experience operating in a cross-cultural virtual team
- To expose you to other varieties and conventions of English
- To attune you to differences in cultures

In the same assignment sheet, the reviewers/editors are told “to edit their [the European students’] translations, so that they are rendered in idiomatic American English, and to provide the translators, via e-mail, specific reasons explaining why you have made each change (or pattern of changes). You’ll probably need to email questions to the translators as you edit to make sure that you are not distorting the meaning of the source text as it appears in the source language”. Thus, in dialogue with the translators, the reviewers/editors gain practice at determining what needs to be edited to improve the text for the target audience’s reading versus what is merely a change to suit the editor’s style preferences. Most of the U.S.-based students are unaccustomed to reading British English, even though it is the variety of English most widely taught around the world and definitely the foremost variety learned by journalism and translation students in Europe. The editors have to be warned to catch their knee-jerk reactions to British vocabulary differences (such as “expiry date” instead of American “expiration date”) and grammatical differences (especially plural subject-verb agreement for collective nouns, such as “the government are considering...” rather than American “the government is considering...”). While they are expected to render the text in American English, they are also expected to explain to the translators that such textual features are not mistakes but that they are ones that need to be adjusted for a North American readership.

A similar issue arises with explicitation (translators’ making explicit in the language of the target text what is implicit in the language of the source text). The translation students are naturally prone to stick faithfully to the meaning of the source texts.

However, the meaning in the source language is often made clear for the texts' original readers by context, both in terms of culture and in terms of contemporary news or other widespread communication that the texts' source-language writers and readers could take for granted. With a text in translation, the editors of the text in the target language and culture recognize, from their confusion, when the texts carry implicit assumptions that must be explicitated with help from the translators for the target audience to understand. Through dialogue with the translation students, the reviewing/editing students gain cultural awareness that they did not even know that they lacked before launching the project.

In their end-of-semester reflections, and post-learning reports, students described feeling more engaged in their learning because this was a “real” assignment and consequently there were “real stakes” for their counterparts, and for them. Many felt that the assignment was “good practice” for the digital world that technical editors often navigate, where they work remotely or freelance, and consequently never meet in person with their clients. Although students had been exposed to cross-cultural or intercultural concepts (Hofstede, 2001; Thatcher & St.Amant, 2011) in prior classes, the collaboration was an opportunity to put these concepts into practice. The cross-cultural venture meant that many students were exposed to British English for the first time and became aware of differences in grammar, punctuation, writing numerals and approaches to the Oxford comma. Students also learnt to see content through the lens of a non-native English writer. For example, one student wrote:

At one point, they translated this sentence: “Cocaine is a powerful psychostimulant and one of the most widespread in Italy, including the youngest”. That made it sound as if it was one of the most recent drug problems in the country. However, when I mentioned that the sentence should probably be reworded, they helped me understand that they were trying to tell me it was a widespread problem among both the younger and older generations, so I should have done a bit more work to understand where my audience was coming from initially to help them better translate that from the start. Fortunately, they were incredibly understanding, and it taught me a valuable lesson as a translation editor—sometimes I may need to look at sentences from very different viewpoints.

The assignment helped students further their understanding of the elements involved in establishing positive relationships with writers. Students noted that providing a rationale for feedback, one of the guidelines for this assignment, was an effective strategy for building trust and working successfully with their counterparts.

Additionally, negotiating the “directness dilemma”—balancing the need to be direct or clear, “while at the same time using indirectness or politeness to maintain a good working relationship with that writer” (Mackiewicz & Riley, 2003, p. 83)—meant that

they had to weigh the rhetorical merits of choosing a direct vs. indirect method to engage writers who are NNSE. One NSE student noted:

I used bald-on-record ... I wasn't rude, but I said exactly what I was doing without special strategies to work around their feelings...[I] was mostly just clear and honest with them. This worked best because the students obviously aren't native English speakers, so they weren't offended to find out their grammar was wrong. They weren't emotionally close to the work and only wanted it to be correct. Due to this we worked perfectly together.

Other students chose an interrogative stance to help mitigate feedback or a praise/criticism approach to first praise then provide feedback. By the end of the assignment, students came to appreciate the complexity of editing, especially in a cross-cultural context, where varieties of English are used.

Conclusions

The collaborative projects described led to numerous gains, as self-reported by the students, including the students' exposure to different varieties of English, the improvement of language, reviewing and editing skills, the development of trans-cultural awareness and the successful integration of subject content and professional skills in the coursework. The flexibility and the low-stakes nature of TAPP collaborations, the absence of bureaucracy and any sort of funding make such collaborations an attractive tool for instructors on an international basis.

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