

# E-Learning and Translator Training

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## **Abstract**

E-learning (the pedagogical use of electronic means of communication) is of extreme interest in the training of translators because the skills involved are essential for any translation practice at the professional level. E-learning also allows for tandem arrangements and the tapping of new markets for training. However, the many practical problems associated with e-learning include student distress, declining motivation, heterogeneous learning needs, and high resource investment. It is suggested that these problems may be tackled through the use of heightened interactivity, controlled asynchrony, variable workloads, rationalization of resources, and the creation of a communication-based learning community. These strategies are discussed in the light of input from an online symposium on this topic, and on the basis of experience with e-learning programs at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Spain.

## **Concepts and definitions**

Since we enter a relatively new field, with much floating terminology, it is best to be clear about the object of our endeavours:

*E-learning* is understood here as the use of electronic tools in training programs, in this case in the training of translators. The concept is close to what is elsewhere known as ‘open and distance learning’ (ODL), or more generally with distance learning *tout court*. E-learning, however, incorporate awareness that electronic tools are being used in training at all levels: even in the case of face-to-face courses, instructors communicate with students via email, and materials are increasingly made available on websites. At the same time, much traditional distance-learning is based on the distribution of printed material and would not count as e-learning in our definition. E-learning programs may thus incorporate both face-to-face and distance modes, without being synonymous with the latter.

*Translator training* is understood here as the creation of skills needed in the labour market for translators. As such, it is not to be confused with language learning (some of which inevitably takes place at the same time as translator training), nor with the imparting of knowledge on translation (programs in research methodologies or Translation Studies as an academic discipline are aimed at quite a different labour market).

The term ‘e-learning’ is used here instead of ‘e-teaching’ because much of our attention should be on what the learner does, rather than just the benefits and banes that face the instructor. This is because much of the actual learning process occurs in interactions between students and texts, students and internet resources, students and other students. This is also the reason why we have defined the training process as the ‘creation’ rather than the ‘imparting’ of skills. Much of the actual creating of skills takes place thanks to the student’s own practice and interactions, allowing for

discovery processes that are not easily formalized in terms of strict syllabus contents. Others might talk here of ‘learner-centred teaching’, yet that popular concept seems not to encompass the electronic interactions that should be our main focus here.

### **Reasons for e-learning**

Thus defined, the incorporation of e-learning into translator training might be regarded as the way of the future. The various factors converging to bring this about may be summarized as follows:

*Necessary communication skills:* Perhaps the most compelling reason is that professional translating increasingly involves the use of the electronic tools used in e-learning (email, attachments, websites, FTP). Since students will have to use these tools in their professional life, they might as well get used to them in their training: if the medium is not quite the whole message, it is at least part of the competence to be acquired. The future of both translation and training would thus be to some degree pre-inscribed in the technology.

*Tandem learning:* Another important factor supporting e-learning is the way it opens up possibilities for ‘tandem’ learning arrangements. This would involve, for example, a Spanish student in Spain working on a translation together with a British student in Britain. One student will have more competence in Spanish than in English; the other will be better at English: together, the two should be able to combine their complementary competencies in such a way that they effectively teach each other a lot about languages, if not about translation as such. Tandem arrangements have been extensively promoted for the learning of second languages, where they quite obviously make the most sense. Yet they appear not to have risen above the experimental level in translator training, probably because they require significant degrees of inter-institutional organization, across political and cultural boundaries.

*Student demand:* A third reason for e-learning is that there is a strong student demand for distance courses of this kind. The demand is mainly from mature-age students, mostly professionally employed, who want to gain skills of this kind or who are interested in obtaining a recognized qualification. This is the market traditionally addressed by courses at postgraduate (Masters) level. However, the progressive shift of all tertiary education into the spheres of life-long learning means that this market may also be served at second-cycle level, if not earlier. The trend is also aided to some extent by the growth in the numbers of ‘international’ students, those who seek skills and cultural environments that are not available in their home countries. However, such students are also in search of first-world visas and immediate linguistic contact. For them, e-learning should mostly be envisaged as a means of extending or prolonging face-to-face training programs.

### **Reasons against e-learning**

Despite the above factors, e-learning is no immediate panacea for the many problems facing our training institutions. Those problems might be summarized as follows:

*Investment of resources:* The most obvious drawback is that it takes considerable time and effort to set up a web-based course, and even more time and effort to keep things

running via email and chat. The investment of resources is on both the teaching and learning sides, and can be problematic for both. Instructors rarely have all the skills necessary to produce attractive and useful websites, and students also need time to master the basic tools of e-learning interaction.

*Student distress:* Difficulties with the technology may lead to various kinds of 'student distress', especially in the initial stages of the learning process (see Hara & Kling 2000). Not everyone is equally expert in basic internet skills; it takes time to learn how to use email efficiently; struggling alone with a computer can be a very isolating experience. The problems here are both social and linguistic. On the social level, instructors and students alike suffer from the lack of physical presence, which makes it hard to admit a basic problem or ask or offer helpful advice, and students suffer even more so from the lack of easy exchange with other students. Linguistically, electronic words suffer famously from the lack of intonation, body language, hedging and back-channeling that make face-to-face contact a much richer and more subtle mode of communication. All these problems, however, are part and parcel of the electronic means of communication that students will have to master in the professional environment, in order to communicate with clients, fellow translators, or project managers. In a sense, the distress will come sooner or later, and in the training of translators it is probably best to meet and manage it as early as possible.

*Heterogeneous learning communities:* A more serious problem with e-learning stems from the tendency of the learning groups to be heterogeneous. Gone are the days when we could walk into a classroom full of students all aged 18 or 19 and all relatively fresh from secondary schools in our local region. As we extend our teaching space electronically, and as we progressively pitch our training at second-cycle and postgraduate level, our learning groups will comprise a wide range of ages and cultural backgrounds. In some respects this should be seen as a clear advantage, in accordance with the logics of tandem teaching outlined above. On other levels, though, one quickly runs into problems of unequal technical and linguistic competencies. One also discovers widely different cultural concepts about the underlying procedures of the learning process, in some cases complicated by seriously entrenched differences concerning the nature of translation. The wider the physical space we cover, the more these cultural differences become apparent, and the more work we have to invest in making our basic concepts at once clear and open to negotiation.

*Waning motivation:* A fourth drawback would be declining motivation among part-time students. This is a feature remarked virtually across the board in distance programs for mature-age students. For as much as one might expect students to spend something like a minimum of five hours a week on their coursework, the demands of work and family inevitably gain priority. The translation exercises are then done in a last-minute ditch on a Sunday evening, or put off until next weekend, or simply postponed forever. Of course, these factors also concern students in face-to-face classes. Yet the very fact of attending a class is often a major source of motivation. A specific social environment is created when one's body has been shifted into a specific learning environment where there are other bodies that have also made the trip. Within that special space, outside disturbances are held at bay, the learning process is the order of the day, and the gossip between students, even at its most banal or critical, is constantly framed by the shared purpose behind mutual presence. When

electronic tools conquest this distance instead of physical bodies, the motivating environment is much harder to create (cf. Pym 2000).

### **Strategies for solving problems**

There are no generally established rules or principles for tackling these problems, since there is simply not enough empirical experience for such things to be based on. We necessarily work at the level of experiment, if not of simple trial-and-error. Here we must thus draw on our own direct experience with the online programs in technical translation developed at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain. These programs comprise a 100% distance course lasting 12 weeks, integrated with the initial modules of a face-to-face course at Masters level. This actually means that some students are doing 100% distance work, others are 100% face-to-face, and some are combining the two modes. The following are a few of the strategies we have tried, albeit not always with success:

*Make everything very explicit:* Given the limitations of electronic language, great care should be taken to make all instructions and interactional arrangements as clear as possible, even at the risk of insulting intelligent people with apparently undue repetition (for good pointers in this vein, see Folaron 2001). This also means encouraging students to be explicit about their problems, especially when they believe that the source of all difficulty is their own ignorance rather than the many failings of technology. It is better to have a storm of open complaints rather than seas of silent doubt.

*Highly interactive lessons:* Since the fundamental problem of e-learning would seem to be a perceived lack of interaction, everything should be done to encourage exchanges on both the student-student and student-instructor levels. This first means designing lessons so that they mimic face-to-face dialogics. Preliminary tasks ideally make the student aware of a problem or difficulty; the actual lesson presents ways of solving the problem; a series of tasks and links invite the student to investigate further. Efforts must thus be made to stop teachers writing essays for their students to read, as happens all too often when we speak instead of write, and when our interlocutor is not directly in front of us.

*Controlled asynchrony:* One condition of interactivity is that the group work at more or less the same pace. E-learning does of course allow for complete asynchrony, where each student is free to go as fast or as slow as they want. Yet the cost of that freedom tends to be the isolation of the student from interaction with other students, and often a lack of motivation-creating compulsion. 'Controlled asynchrony', on the other hand, means everyone is expected to complete the lesson or tasks within the same one-week or two-week period. This enables teamwork and chat-based discussion following completion of tasks. Controlled asynchrony is an important prerequisite for the formation of an interactive social space.

*Variable workloads:* The desirability of controlled asynchrony clearly runs into contradiction with the relative heterogeneity of the learning groups we are concerned with. Since the students are very different, they will want to work at different paces. The solution here would seem to be to allow for a relatively high proportion of optional readings and tasks, especially those that involve web searches, with the

minimal requirement that a certain number of them be done. We provide our students with a CD containing more software than we actually require them to use, inviting them to experiment with the available alternatives. We also use online and printed textbooks in the same way, insisting on a few obligatory chapters and leaving the rest as optional coursework. And for students requiring work on basic IT, we have a 'computer skills' website that they are invited to visit for instructions on the skills they need.

*Tandem tasks:* Within the constraints of controlled asynchrony and variable workloads, group work should be encouraged as much as possible. In programs involving face-to-face sessions this may involve the formation of groups of up to four or five students, allocating roles of translator, terminologist, documentalist, reviser and project manager. In 100% distance sessions this tends to become quite complicated. In our experience with distance learning, more can be done in the level of pairs, where two students have complementary competencies. This should involve the linguistic competencies on which language-learning tandem tasks are based. However, it may equally be done on the basis of technological competencies, especially in cases where one student has a background in language and the other comes from information technology.

*Creation of a learning community:* The problems of isolation and declining motivation are to be tackled through the creation of a learning community as social space based on communication (rather than a mystique of presence). This is indeed the general sense of all the above strategies. However, the creation of a community can also be approached in less obvious ways, notably by encouraging off-topic interactions of all kinds. Chat sessions and email discussion lists can be used informally for exchanges of information and views, and indeed for polite gossip, jokes and the like (our one rule is that there be no personal insults). Chat sessions tend not to have high pedagogical virtues, but they do work well for community formation (especially when the instructor is not online). Coupled with this, our online students are invited to attend face-to-face classes whenever they can (our students from Britain come and visit us from time to time), and they attend occasional dinners and *calçotades* (Catalan barbecues). This is a general lesson drawn from distance learning: interactions work much better once there has been face-to-face contact, no matter how informal that contact may be. The philosophical lesson is that presence is no guarantee of greater truth (such is the message of Derrida), and social relations are all communication anyway (this from Luhmann). The iconic illusions of face-to-face can now be imitated not only electronically, but also linguistically, in the wealth of personal details that can be conveyed in off-topic trivia. Such are the communities of our day.

*Rationalization of resources:* The one problem to which we have not found a real solution is the amount of time and effort required for e-learning projects. All our modules are entirely web-based, with fully written lessons using original material plus just one reference textbook (Frank Austermühl's *Electronic Tools for Translators*). This avoids problems with copyright (which will become a serious issue as web-based courses evolve) and ensures that instructors are in full command of their material. Yet it means that we have invested a lot of money in paying teachers for their efforts. Of course, it would be easy enough to design a course based entirely on printed textbooks and web-based translation exercises, with no actual lessons written up as such. But

even then, considerable effort is involved in maintaining the websites, correcting tasks, and conversing via email. The only real solution here is to rationalize resource by using the material in a variety of ways, as a part of face-to-face classes and as modules that can be mixed and matched to produce a variety of courses for different markets and successive years.

### **A online symposium**

Have these strategies been successful? Commercially, we have found that there is a real market for e-learning courses of various kinds, and that distance students are prepared to pay the fees necessary to cover the costs incurred. Pedagogically, though, there is still much to be done, especially with regard to the formation of a learning community and the maintenance of motivation.

Our experience in Tarragona is still too limited for us to suggest that our strategies are any more than experimental. Much is to be learnt from other initiatives in this field. To this end, our Intercultural Studies Group organized the online symposium 'Translator Training and E-learning' in November 2001, with some 380 participants across the globe. The discussions are available online (Intercultural Studies Group 2001) and will be summarized elsewhere (Fallada & Biau 2002). Here it should suffice to note that a wide variety of e-learning arrangements were found, that several platforms are available, and that there are numerous degrees to which e-learning is being integrated with face-to-face classes. Perhaps more surprising was the extent of international interest in this field, not only in the relatively high-tech centres but also in parts of the world where the technology is not readily available. One of the richer threads was initiated by a message from Slovakia asking how translators could be trained 'on a shoestring'. When you do the sums, the resources invested in e-learning may be less than what might otherwise be spent in setting up large computer labs and well-stocked libraries: one might just have students use their PCs at home and search the web, since that is what they will have to do as translators anyway. E-learning can thus allow new institutions to leapfrog over our larger well-established training centres.

The discussions in the online symposium were nevertheless rather one-sided. As Brian Mossop observed at one point:

[...] the great majority of contributions to this forum might be placed under the heading 'technology information exchange', while only a small number of contributions concern the pedagogical differences between face-to-face learning and e-learning. What does this mean?

Well, it might mean that we think we know what teaching is, and we want to know about how to use the technology to help us teach. That would seem entirely reasonable. Yet the nature of that discussion also means that we avoided a more serious set of questions, notably the possibility--indeed, the certainty--that electronic tools alter the nature of the learning process itself. On that latter level, much more thought and experiment is needed.

### **Three questions for the future**

The various challenges facing e-learning in this field are inseparable from the general tendencies affecting translator training itself. Here we will go out on a limb and try to say how some of the major questions could or should be answered:

*Should e-learning be at undergraduate (3+2) or postgraduate (5+) level?* Tentative answer: The more mature and self-motivating the students, the more e-learning can be used. At present, we see e-learning as working best at postgraduate level. But here we suffer from a fixed belief that all translator training should be at second-cycle or postgraduate level (and that is an argument for another paper).

*How much should distance modes be integrated with face-to-face classes?* As above: the more mature the students, the higher the possible proportion of distance-mode learning. Yet there are further principles involved: all distance learning benefits from having as much face-to-face contact as possible, and all face-to-face classes should these days be complemented by websites and email discussion lists.

*What platform should be used?* This is a pragmatic question that is increasingly solved by institutional powers above our heads. We have seen experiments with Blackboard, Prometheus, Learning Space, BSCW, plus several platforms developed within individual universities. From all of this, two lessons can be extracted: first, be prepared to adapt platforms to your own specific needs, since what you get will almost never suit all your needs; second, never develop content for one platform that can then not be transferred to another. There is also a practical third lesson: If your students have slow internet connections, keep the websites simple and the documents short.

### **Is it worth the candle?**

The one repeated question is whether, at the end of the day, the energies invested in e-learning will really pay off. Obviously, I believe the investment is justified, since I keep investing in it. But let us not pretend that the doors will open soon onto some kind of magical paradise.

Many things can go wrong. Many have, for us. For example:

- It took us two weeks to teach one student how to introduce a password to enter our website.
- We occasionally have to spend a similar period explaining the basics of email.
- From time to time, private comments erroneously circulate on public discussion lists, to the embarrassment of some and the amusement of many.
- Our chat channel, called 'trans', was suddenly invaded by people discussing their hometown: Transwaya or somesuch, in Malaysia (no joke!).
- Just when you're admiring the cool Java-script movements and Fireworks buttons you've put on the website, you discover that your students are using Netscape browsers that can't read any of it.
- The software we used pedagogically one year was out of date by the next (this applies to versions of TradosWB, but also to freeware like TransWebExpress, which was quite fun while it lasted).
- Thanks to problems like the above, we failed to budget adequately for the updating of lessons from the previous year.
- Students tend to know a lot more about websites than their instructors, and this can be embarrassing for some instructors.

- Our server went down on the very day we opened an online conference.
- When we heroically transferred the conference website to an alternative server, that one went down after two days.
- We opened an online conference on the wrong email discussion list.
- We participated in a multilateral videoconference session where we could hear but not see the other centres (our technology only worked for bilateral links).
- ... and much more.

Anyone who has worked with e-learning could add copiously to this list of problems and mistakes. However, the whole exercise can be rewarding if and when pointers such as the following are observed:

- *Budget adequately*, paying instructors and technicians for all the time they really put in, and charging students the fees that they are prepared to pay in this sector.
- *Create a team*, since you need people who know about both technicalities and pedagogy, and some kind of group dynamic has to be developed on the side of instructors as well as students.
- *Experiment*, since the teaching situations tend to be very specific, and there is still a great deal to be discovered.
- *Work with people as well as technology*, since the people, not the tools, are the ones who are going to solve your problems and achieve progress in learning.

This last point perhaps deserves special emphasis. As translation itself becomes an increasingly technical concern, much of our teaching inevitably concerns techniques, skills, tools, procedures, in fact anything except people. An exclusive focus on the technicalities of e-learning is likely to take us even further down that road. And yet, when all is said and done, all our communication is human-to-human, be it face-to-face or across the planet. If the social principles of learning communities and teaching teams can be maintained and developed, there is no overwhelming reason why technology should not extend rather than restrict the humanity of our task.

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