Learning translation strategies in a CSCL framework

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Abstract

This study investigated the extent to which the social constructivist approach can be applied to the teaching/learning of translation strategies in an e-learning environment. To advance the inquiry, three research questions were developed that focussed on: individual learning vs. social learning; knowledge seen as content versus knowledge sees as process; teacher control versus student control. The method of research was located within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm based on multiple case studies associated with the classes involved. Data collection included reports from participants, issued periodically in the semesters investigated.
Techniques of qualitative analysis were used to identify, describe and interpret the forms of argumentative collaboration and co-construction of knowledge participants were experiencing online. The main conclusions of the inquiry were: (1) evidence of a change in the ability of students to think and solve problems in ways that match the characteristic methods of the academic discipline (translation studies) and – to a certain degree – of professional experts; (2) critical issues revolving around the difficulties of effectively managing discussions and/or work progression as a result of the more or less effective management of the social relationships between students in the smaller and larger groups; (3) full blending of the contrasting pairs focussed on as research questions, leading toward integration rather than confrontation of the dual views of acquisition and construction of knowledge.

Keywords: social constructivist approach, e-learning, collaborative learning, knowledge construction, translation strategies.

1. Introduction

The objective of the present work is the investigation of the collaborative paradigm – as applied to translation-trainee groups collaborating in an e-learning environment – and its contribution to knowledge construction in the specific field of translation studies.

To define the scope of this study, we need to pinpoint the term *collaboration* first. As its definition tends to vary depending upon the interests and applications of those investigating, generally from a mono-disciplinary perspective such as fine arts, IT theory, network theory, educational theory, to name but a few, the paper's first goal is to contribute to the picture with further data from a different research context (Translation Studies) while supporting a transdisciplinary framework applicable to collaboration in every field of human activity. We'll base our discussion on the definition of collaboration provided by Schrage (1991): "Collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none has previously possessed or could have come to on their own."

This paper explores the idea of *collaborative translation*, and describes a translation assignment designed to implement collaborative translation in translation courses. Unlike previous studies (Scott-Tennent at al., 2001), whose focus was primarily on learners' translation skills, the main objective of this paper is to evaluate the level of understanding that groups of students have achieved with respect to "real world" translation problems by using an online translation project. The project relied heavily on group interaction to increase the "quality" of the final, shared artifact, which consisted in the translation of a complex source text, managing complexity being one of the aims of the translation project.

The Learning Management System (LMS) based on the Dokeos platform offered the joint arena in which students could build their capacity to upgrade and leverage knowledge via argumentative communication and reflective conversations. The Learning Management System enabled students

to collaborate and coordinate their action through real-time and asynchronous tools, from anywhere, anytime.

2. Collaborative translation

The fundamental idea of collaborative translation is that individuals gain certain types of knowledge best through a process of communication with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978), and that especially knowledge involving judgment is learned best in this manner. As translating involves making judgments about a number of issues (e.g. linguistic and cultural equivalences, style, target readership, text cohesion, etc.), collaborative translation can be especially important in translation assignments, since students can learn to look at issues from different perspectives and may examine ideas that they may not have seen on their own.

2.1. Motivation of and communication of project requirements

The translation assignment described in this paper was used in the Spring of 2008 at Salento University in Lecce, Italy, in the 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate translation courses. The primary goal of the translation assignment was to give students direct experience with "real world" translation problems while giving them the opportunity to demonstrate translation skills and to learn to work as a group.

The major purpose of the translation project was to foster students' understanding of lexical coherence and text cohesion in the target text (TT) and of how TT quality could benefit from collaboration.

The parameters of the translation project were communicated to the students after a session on the different types of group interaction: the difference between cooperation and collaboration was focused on so that students could be aware of and make informed choices as to the best methodology – sequential, parallel, reciprocal – to apply throughout the project.

General guidelines were provided to ensure that each project report contained the minimum information necessary to meet the project goals: 1) a preliminary analysis of the source text; 2) the shared "artifact" (TT); 3) comments for equivalence problems, and the translation strategies used to overcome them, with reference to the translation theory studied during the course. Evidence of the relevant group work was available on the LMS.

2.2. Collaborative aspects of the project

The assignment relied extensively on group interaction firstly to improve the translation skills and communication product of translation students, and secondly to allow them to develop some sense of a community through the perception of mutual interdependence, the promotion of individual initiative and creativity, the negotiation of common lines of action, the research of common areas of interest. Reference was made to the online community classification suggested by Jonassen, Peck and Wilson (1999) which helped to identify the different forms of community the students were experiencing in their project work – discourse, practice, knowledge-building, and learning communities, while the related quadrant of online learning architecture (Rivoltella, 2003) provided a snapshot of the various discussion and collaboration strategies used by online communities, some of which were applied in students' group work.

Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978) and reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1984) were the discussion strategies used in the project at a macro (class) and micro (group) level.

The former strategy consisted in letting students decide how to manage and organize their own learning. Starting from a brainstorming session in which the whole class group (50 in the case of 3rd year students) was faced with the complexity of the translation task (step 1), students subdivided the source text based on the subsections contained in it, and created as many groups as the subsections selected (step 2). Each group was asked to work collaboratively on the translation of the subsection

assigned, of which they would become “experts” (step 3). After completion, new groups were created so as to host one “expert” out of each of the subsection groups. By sharing the knowledge of the individual members, the new groups were able to reconcile the translation problems faced and solutions found by adding lexical coherence and cohesion to the target text (step 4). A final brainstorming session with the whole class group (step 5) concluded the project work engaging students in inter-group review and editing activities to promote collaboration and improve the final product.

The latter strategy (applied to 2nd year students, 70 altogether) consisted in creating small groups (max. 6 members) and assigning each group a topic of their preference and the relevant translation task. Each group member was requested to take the leading role by stimulating discussion and inviting other members to provide and justify solutions to help group reflection. Four discussion strategies were applied: 1) summarizing, i.e. pinpointing the translation problems in the ST for group discussion; 2) question generating, i.e. pointing out different viewpoints regarding the same problem within the group; 3) clarifying, i.e. explaining the meaning of text chunks (words, collocations, extended units of meaning) for shared ST comprehension; 4) predicting, i.e. hypothesizing solutions for TT coherence in line with the author’s intention.

Doc sharing, collaborative searching and online co-construction activities helped group members to contribute to the group decision-making process and the development of the project.

3. Evaluation of the project

Most groups functioned productively. Productive group interaction appeared to be highly correlated with the overall quality of the final report. The few groups whose evaluations reflected problems in working together produced a lower quality final report. The best reports also reflected extensive use of resources other than dictionaries and direct course material. Most reports reflected considerable gains in knowledge and understanding of translation strategies through teamwork. Furthermore, the “ability to use and negotiate with a plurality of propositions and opinions” (Pym, 2003) as part of translation competence was apparent in most reports.

Group coordination imposed time burdens on some students. In general, the need to plan and coordinate group activities is valuable experience for students, and vital to learning effectively in groups. However, these difficulties were overcome when necessary by allowing students to self-select into groups with compatible schedules and work attitudes.

3.1. Student responses

As part of the evaluation of their translation course, students filled in five self-assessment forms aiming at providing feedback as to the teaching/learning approach used, the learning goals achieved, class participation, project work and homework. Student comments and self-assessment suggest that students benefited from collaborative work; they found it useful to learn from their class mates, reflect with them on translation strategies, and be aware of different approaches to the same text.

For many students this project represented their first attempt at working together, on an online translation project. Initially, the effort proved frustrating for many students, especially for those in the 2nd year of translation studies, but the experience was then perceived as vital to a smooth transition from student to practicing translator. Students also gained experience reading, understanding and interpreting complex, “real world”, source texts, and using electronic resources such as corpora and the web.

The assessment approach tried to capture the interpretative, situational, implicit, insightful, community-enacted nature of knowledge.

4. Conclusion

This paper described an online, collaborative, translation project designed for students in undergraduate translation courses. In this translator-training context, the process of creating new knowledge involved communication through a shared artifact (the translated text) for the sake of creating new understanding (of both translation problems and translation strategies) that the students could not achieve on their own.

The Learning Management System used provided a "learning space" where students reflected on their experiences, explored their thinking, suggested their ideas, and experimented their hypotheses. The LMS offered the space for *knowledge-in-action*, a space in which student competence was continually negotiated through direct participation.

The implementation and conclusion of the project provided evidence of a change in the ability of students to think and solve problems in ways that match the characteristic methods of the academic discipline (translation studies) and – to a certain degree – of professional experts (stigmergic collaboration), while bringing to the front critical issues related to the difficulties of effectively managing discussions and/or work progression as a result of the more or less effective management of the social relationships between students in the smaller and larger groups. Student's comments testify of the fact that the contrasting pairs presented as questions in the approach self-assessment form – individual learning vs. social learning; knowledge seen as content vs. knowledge seen as process; teacher control vs. student control – lead toward integration rather than confrontation of the dual views of acquisition and construction of knowledge.

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