

Improving Language Skills through E-learning Training: An Experience from the Field of Interpreting

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Abstract

The demand for professional interlocutors is growing in our increasingly multicultural Western societies. As an answer to this demand, the *university of Alcalá* offers a training programs on intercultural communication and public service interpreting and translating (*PSI&T*) since 2000, in different language pairs (Spanish and Arabic, Bulgarian, English, French, Romanian, Russian and other minority languages). Since 2003 an online course on intercultural communication has been offered, and in 2006 a new on line course on medical interpreting was developed as part of the Masters on Intercultural Communication and *PSI&T*. In this article I will concentrate on this last experience, which has been highly rewarding for both students and instructors, and in the English-Spanish language combination. I will briefly introduce the course, reflect on our experience of teaching interpreting online, and provide some tips for successful e-learning training as well as some results from the students' exercises. Due to time and topic restrictions, I will only concentrate on some linguistic aspects inherent when learning a second language (in this case English-Spanish), leaving the interpreting skills for a future occasion. The on line interpreting experience has revealed to be a good strategy to improve language competence and fluency as well as to provide elements to develop remedial work for the students' deficiencies in listening and speaking skills.

1. Introduction

The need to meet the demand for professional interlocutors in a growing multicultural society push some teachers and researchers at the *University of Alcalá* (Group *FTISPos*) to develop a training programs

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on intercultural communication and public service interpreting and translating (*PSI&T*) almost a decade ago (See <http://www2.uah.es/traduccion>). The main objectives were two:

1. Providing students with the theoretical knowledge and the skills, abilities, and tools they need to act as linguistic, communicative, and cultural liaisons between institutional, medical, judicial and/or educational staff and the users of these public services who do not speak Spanish well.
2. Becoming familiar with and to practice the primary techniques used in this type of communication (direct and inverse translation, simultaneous interpretation, sight translation, specialized terminology, etc.).

The program consisted of several courses and it was aimed at:

1. People with an extensive knowledge of Spanish and/or Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, English, French, German, Polish, Romanian or Russian.
2. People who have served or are currently serving as liaisons for immigrants and refugees, eliminating barriers in a variety of settings (schools, hospitals, police stations...).
3. People who have experience as linguistic and cultural mediators on either an oral or written level (interpreters and translators), but who have not been trained.

Since its beginning the program has been changing and accommodating to new demands as well as incorporating new technology. Thus, since 2003 an online course on Intercultural Communication has been offered, in 2004-5 a Masters degree was offered, which was approved as an Official Master in 2005-6; and in 2006 a new on line course on medical interpreting was developed as a module (and part of compulsory subject) of the Official Masters on Intercultural Communication and *PSI&T*.

In this article I will concentrate in this last experience and in the English-Spanish language combination.

2. The project: an on line experience with audio texts

Let us begin by saying that, while on line delivery may not be the best choice for a field that relies so heavily on human contact and practical skills as it is the case of interpreting and many colleagues openly criticize, however we decided to include part of the instruction for interpreters on line as a way to provide de students with more chances for practicing, and at the same time to facilitate the teacher's evaluation. With these two aims in mind, and after having had some experience with the development of online courses, and having taken myself an online course on medical interpreting, I decided to incorporate some of this learning to the module on medical interpreting, offered as part of the Masters during November and December every year.

As the literature about e-learning shows (Stiggins, 2005; Downes, 2004; Castellanos, 2004), this new tool offers flexibility, independence, and productivity for the instructor and the students. With this in mind and also following the recommendations by the European Union (http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/es/com/cnc/2001/com2001_0172es01.pdf), I felt we could achieve satisfactory results in both medical interpreting instruction and language practice using the extended Christmas period –almost 4 weeks due to the fact that foreign students (40% in the academic course 2006-7) wanted to come back to their own countries.

The results have been quite satisfactory. Initially we had expected –and we had– some technological problems, but the system worked reasonably well, the students were already familiar with the WebCT platform, and we had given them clear instructions in class and hanged them in the website. Furthermore they could always use the email or phone us.

The students (31) had different backgrounds, but all of them were graduate students and with a good command of the second (sometimes the third) language. Some of them had received some training as interpreters, some others had worked as volunteer interpreters, and almost all of them had helped friends or relatives translating or interpreting in different occasions or they had jobs or activities which require the use of both languages.

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As for the students' computer literacy, half of them have an intermediate knowledge of computer skills and of the handling of sound files, very few have advanced computer skills, and only a small number possess only very basic skills. All of them have previously taken an online course on intercultural communication. This fact had helped the students to get used to the technology, and this new course just helped them to learn how to use diverse types of software.

As for the structure of the course, all learning activities took place and were managed within the WebCT interface and through e-mail. The website contains absolutely all the coursework, and it was upon the students to decide what to work on and when, worrying just about meeting the deadlines for submission of assignments.

The main activity related to this paper consisted of exercises for interpreting practice, including: a) common medical expressions; b) sight-translation exercises; and c) consecutive interpretation of intermediary difficulty. The audiotexts were simulated medical encounters, and were recorded as sound files in MP3 format, and they could be listened on Windows Media Player (which comes with Windows) or on Winamp (download it for free at www.winamp.com). These are recorded, presented in MP3 format. The students learn how to download the audio files and record a rendition in their working language in MP3 format, which they must submit for feedback using the WebCT platform.

Considering the different degrees of computer literacy and knowing by experience the importance of having clear instructions, the following concise information was given about how to record and submit their renditions:

Figure 1. Instructions

Instructions

1. The consecutive interpreting exercises come as sound files. They are in mp3 format. You can listen to them on Windows Media Player (which comes with Windows) or on Winamp (download it for free at www.winamp.com)
2. There are two exercises (two dialogues) in ENGLISH and two exercises in SPANISH.

3. You must select ONE of each. That is, you will submit ONE interpretation into Spanish and ONE interpretation into English.

4. You should listen to each exercise JUST ONCE before you interpret it.

5. As you listen, make a note of each word or concept that you may need to look up.

6. Then, look up any unknown terms.

7. Think of ways to render all the information in the target language. If you feel that you really need to listen to the exercise one more time, then do so, but do refrain from doing it if you can.

After that...you will be ready to record your rendition!

How do I record my interpretations?

You have two different ways:

1. You can record your TWO renditions electronically, i.e. on your computer.

You need:

- A regular microphone (any inexpensive one will do).
- PC Speakers

The recording software you will use is **Goldwave**, which is very easy to use. Get Goldwave for free at www.goldwave.com. Go to "Download", then "Download Links" and click on one of the self-installing Goldwave links. A little further down on that same webpage is the link to install "LAMEWIN". This plug-in complements Goldwave, as it allows you to save your recordings as mp3, thus producing much smaller sound files. Please install that, too.

2. You can use a digital recorder. Once you record your rendition, you need to copy it in your computer following the instructions given for each digital recorder, and later copy it as the answer to the exercise and submit using the WebCT.

Based on the experience of other colleagues, especially these at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and on my own experience as

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an online student, two more sections were included: “Routine for interpreting exercises” and “Some practical advice”. The first one contained practical tips about how to play the original dialogue, to deal with long speech segments, to open a new file on Goldwave, to record the dialogue, to pause after each segment of speech, and to check the size of the recording. It also offered information about sound quality, volume, ways to save the recorded material and ways to email it to the instructor to be graded.

The second, “Some practical advice”, contained the following information:

Figure 2. Some practical advice

1. As a general rule when you do the interpreting exercises, forget the wording of the original and imagine the way of speaking of a person who DOES NOT understand a word of the original language. Consider the tone, the register, the pace that would be most appropriate.

2. Avoid language interferences, beware of cognates.

3. Please DO NOT WRITE your rendition before you record.

There is no point in recording yourself while you read your notes. First, it won't help you to develop your consecutive interpreting skills. Second, the instructor can tell, in most cases, if someone is reading or really interpreting.

4. Before you send your recording, LISTEN TO IT. Modify whatever is necessary.

5. When the instructor corrects these exercises he will not have the original scripts handy. The point is for him to pretend that he is a patient who depends on your interpretation, and seeing whether he understands everything you mean to say. That's how we'd like you to approach these exercises: have in mind someone who does not know a word of the language of the original.

3. Some practical results

Coming back to the topic of this paper –investigating linguistic aspects inherent to the learning / use of a second language– some interesting results arise. As I said before, all the students have a good command of both languages, some of them being almost bilingual. Nevertheless, the study of the renditions and the instructor’s feedback for each student still reveal some problems when transferring from one language to another. I classified them into four main sections:

1. Pronunciation, stress and intonation
2. Grammar
3. Vocabulary
4. Discourse

Some information follows for each section related to mistakes made by the students, based on the on the instructor’s feedback:

1. Pronunciation, stress and intonation
 - Problems for distinguishing between short and long vowels.
 - Difficulties for pronouncing words such as “nauseous,” “anesthesia,” “biopsy,” “jewels,” “cough,” “eyelashes”.
 - Changes in the stress as, for example, when saying “doCUment,” “proceDURE,” or “hurt” and “harmless” omitting the “h” sound.
 - Changes in intonation more than in articulation, that makes the text quite unpleasant to listen to.
 - Problems with speed as some students sound extremely rushed, often lag behind and need to summarize or lose content.
 - Heavy foreign accent when pronouncing some words and phrases that might not be understood by some patients.

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Some of these problems will not interfere with comprehension but, if eliminated, the interpreter will transmit reliability and will sound more confident. Speaking more slowly and articulate syllables more clearly could be the immediate strategy to be used.

2. Grammar

Some mistakes related to the use of tenses, specific structures or word order were found such as:

- (1) Did the surgeon took out....?
- (2) Have you defecate?
- (3) When the operation finish....
- (4) If they would find....

Sometimes the English translation was too literal, close to the Spanish original text, which may be an obstacle for the interlocutor's comprehension.

All these mistakes make the interpreter sound unreliable and indicate that more practice was needed.

3. Vocabulary

Different kinds of problems were found in this section. The students have already practiced consecutive interpreting with role plays in class, but this seems not to be enough, and it also reveals the importance of knowing an extensive vocabulary as well as a good command of the specific terminology.

Some mistakes which may affect comprehension were:

- Difficulties for distinguishing colloquial from formal speech, e.g. using “innocuous” instead of “harmless”, as a result of the influence of Spanish.
- Inaccurate renditions due to interferences or literal translations: e.g. *objetos personales* translated as “personal belongings”; *dedos de los pies* as “fingertoes”; *ropa interior* as “inside clothes” (instead of “underwear”),

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autorización as “authorized document” or “authorization” (instead of *consentimiento informado* or “consent form”), *sala de reanimación* as “rehab room” (instead of “recovery room”), *poner un enema* as “to put an enema” (instead of “to give an enema”).

- Wrong equivalents, e.g. *bata* translated as “coat” (instead of “gown”).
- Repeating the word in the original language, that is, not translating as, for example, *gotero* (“the IV unit”).
- Producing wrong translations as, for example, *quitarse la ropa, la dentadura, el maquillaje* reproduced as *“take away your clothes, dentures and take out your make up” (instead of “take your clothes off, remove your dentures and make up”); or even
- Omitting words and expressions

As a result the renditions are not always accurate, all the information received in Spanish is not always put into English, and sometimes misunderstandings take place when using unknown words, false cognates or copying directly technical words.

4. Discourse.

When considering the rendition as a whole, some of the most common recommendations by the instructor were:

- Need to work on fluency so that not to struggle with the words and eliminate hesitations
- Need to slow down when speaking and try to pronounce more accurately
- Need to work on the heavy accent and intonation
- Reduce long segments /sentences
- Renditions sound like a literal translation
- Student sounds as shy and not confident

All the above comments show the instructor the level of competence of the language of each student but it also gives him a general idea of the whole groups. Having these data, remedial work

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could be developed with appropriate materials to work individually or in group. It is also worth mentioning that the instructor has the possibility of listening to the student's renditions as many times as he wants, and even asks them for new activities.

4. Summarizing

Our initial findings are that the e-learning environment is an excellent complimentary tool to add to the classroom experience. Students need not worry about missing class, or taking accurate notes, or coming late to class. Everything is on the course website. They just need to have access to an Internet connection and a password.

E-learning allows students to better concentrate on understanding, memorizing, doing assignment properly, and practicing whenever they feel ready or have time. For the instructor, e-learning can also be more convenient than the classroom (e.g. they free themselves from constantly repeating information and instructions, they have access to the students' answers all the time). In other words, everyone knows upfront what is expected of them and when.

Our experience also shows that e-learning tends to enhance the communicative ability of students who may not normally participate in onsite classes as they have to answer the activities in the website. As for the teacher, he/she can check the students' knowledge of the language individually and better than in class, and he/she can also give the student some individual feed back and more specific exercises depending on the difficulties shown. As a colleague said, distance can bring teachers and students closer.

However, confirming what other online instructors have discovered, online instruction is more time consuming than face-to-face instruction. Apart of preparing the materials, the instructor actually fills different roles: lecturer, webmaster/graphic designer, advisor, tutor, (consultant), in short, a facilitator for any need the students have concerning technical, formal or content problems. Thus, extensive preparation and lots of interactivity are necessary conditions to succeed in on line courses.

We have also learned that students have different learning paces, different learning styles and different feelings about working in a

fully electronic mode. When the students were asked to evaluate the experience, more than 90 % answered positively. Most of them liked the individual contact by email and from the feedback with the instructor, and said they would have liked to have more audio activities online.

As for the instructor, I consider the experience highly positive as a complementary tool not only in the training of interpreters but also in the teaching of second languages. I agree with some professional interpreters that interpreting training –and also L2 learning– requires face to face interaction and onsite classes, but I disagree with these colleagues that openly criticize and reject the online resources as a way of teaching languages and/or training interpreters.

As a conclusion the e-learning is an effective educational system that offers flexibility, independence, and productivity for both instructors and students.

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