Training tomorrow's translators

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Resumen

Los adelantos tecnológicos surgidos en el campo de la traducción y los cambios producidos en la práctica profesional del sector lingüístico han transformado las demandas que los traductores tienen que atender en la actualidad. ¿Cuál ha sido la reacción de los académicos y de los formadores de traductores ante estos cambios? ¿Qué pueden esperar las empresas que proporcionan servicios de traducción de los licenciados en traducción de hoy en día? En primer lugar, esta ponencia tiene como objetivo evaluar la práctica actual. A continuación, pretende argumentar que la colaboración entre profesionales y académicos de la traducción es necesaria para valorar las nuevas demandas de las empresas y para diseñar cursos de formación rigurosos, desde el punto de vista académico, y relevantes, desde el punto de vista profesional. Recientemente, Esselink (2000), Kenny (1999), Kiraly (2000) y Pym (2001), entre otros, han argumentado que dicha cooperación es la manera más eficaz de avanzar en la dirección correcta. Esta ponencia describirá en qué medida el modelo de la Universidad de Leeds, que tiene muy en cuenta las necesidades de la industria de la traducción a la hora de diseñar e impartir sus cursos, cumple los requisitos mencionados por estos autores. Asimismo, aportará información novedosa al debate mediante el análisis cualitativo de un estudio realizado acerca de las empresas que proporcionan servicios de traducción y acerca de los recién licenciados que han asistido a cursos de traducción de posgrado organizados por universidades europeas.

Introduction

New tools and working methods mean that professional translation practice has changed radically in recent years. From the former model of the independent, often isolated, worker receiving a paper-based source text for translation, using paper reference works then typing or dictating a target text, the industry has moved to fundamentally different ways of working. This transformation is linked to the growing dominance of global companies and international organisations, producing hugely increased quantities of multilingual documentation in multiple file types, for translation and localization using computer-based

resources. Of course, time to market has not risen accordingly: in fact it has typically shortened. This means we now see a reliance on multilingual teams of translators, more often than not spread across the globe and coordinated by project managers, with colleagues working in a new way in growing networks of other language industry professionals – terminologists, software engineers, technical authors and so on.

This new way of working has been possible largely because of the introduction and increasing sophistication and reliability of various types of Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools, notably translation memories[i]. As the LETRAC survey[ii] of translation industry requirements and then-current training provision in the European Union noted in 1999, 'In most European countries, the job profile of translators has changed or is about to change.' From this starting point and their subsequent international research, the LETRAC team reached some worrying conclusions. First, 'Translators do not feel well prepared by their institutions for the real world of work.' More damningly, 'All training institutions have more or less failed to prepare translators for the real market situation by not providing them with the required [computer] skills.' Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'training in IT should be obligatory.'[iii]

Around the same time, industry professionals and some academics were also increasingly critical of training provision and began making dire predictions about the future. For industry professional Geoffrey Kingscott, 'There is a real danger that the university teaching of translation may become so remote from practice that it becomes marginalised, that it will be widely perceived as irrelevant to the translation task' (1996: 295). Academic translator training might even be on its last legs, according to Lambert: 'The bureaucratic protection offered by the institutionalization of diplomas, curricula and institutes will not survive the globalization and the worldwide competition process unless it [is] open to continuous revision, adaptation, tests, research and discussion' (1996: 291).

The LETRAC team tried to address this evident training gap by asking those working in the languages industries what they needed from graduates. They then drew up a 'translator profile' and outlined suggested curriculum content for training such individuals. The clear problem with this approach, of course, was that virtually as soon as the report had been published, the industry was moving on, and requiring more and different skills and training.

Since the publication of the LETRAC report in 1999, to mention but a few, the translation industry has witnessed the growing importance of eContent localization, xml format for production and updating of documentation, the wider introduction of tmx[iv] format with its revolutionary implications for translation memory exchange, the increasing use of server-based applications and overall, a considerable progression in the capabilities of CAT tools (for example, with greater Unicode[v] compliance, most can handle a wider range of language pairs effectively).

Of course, such developments introduce new challenges and problems for the industry, of which training providers must also take account if training is to be relevant. The growing headache of data management as documentation and translation memory/terminology database volumes continue to increase is one emerging example of such strategic industry problems.

It is clear then that, if we want to train graduates for long-term future careers in language services, simply adopting and implementing one set of time-specific findings is insufficient. Nor is the EU likely to fund research on this scale at sufficiently regular intervals for us to wait for the next LETRAC report and update our training then. This raises various questions which this paper will now address. First, how far are we already responding to industry needs as outlined in LETRAC and by the industry itself? Second, how can we continue to provide professionally relevant and academically rigorous training? In other words, how do we ensure course content, training methods, assessment and so on keep up as the language industries evolve, and how do we maintain this

evolution? How do we train tomorrow's translators rather than yesterday's?

To address these questions, this paper draws on:

- recent research and publications in the field, including the author's ongoing original questionnaire-based research. This monitors both industry requirements and translation studies graduates' perceptions of skills essential for finding work in language services today;
- research into claims made regarding current training provision in academic institutions across the EU;
- practical training experience, including over five years' close involvement in a Masters-level course in CAT tools for applied translation students (see www.leeds.ac.uk/cts);
- practical experience of industrial-academic collaboration in the design and delivery of training, whether for university postgraduate students or industry professionals.

Training provision in 2004

How have academic institutions reacted to industry evolution thus far? What can Language Service Providers (LSPs) expect from the graduates of 2004? Generally, if universities' website claims for their Masters-level training provision are assessed, the picture painted by the LETRAC report in 1999 still holds true. That is, provision of training in the tools of the trade is patchy: 'LE/IT[vi] in translator curricula vary from nothing but basics in word processing to a broad range of sophisticated software tools (terminology management, translation memory, machine translation, Telecommunications/Internet, CD-ROM-based information systems...)' (Badia et al, 1999: 49). There does seem to have been some positive evolution in the past five years though, if we look at awareness among academics of industry

requirements, and at the range of courses available to today's students in comparison with 1999.

From about the mid-1990s, ever-increasing numbers of academics and institutions have been recognising the need for the introduction of translation technology into translator training programmes.[vii] Researching course content on the Internet in 2004,[viii] an increasing number of institutions now acknowledges the need to train students in awareness of skills such as project management, translation workflow and localization. Some go further, to provide hands-on experience of a range of tools and working methods (such as practical multilingual translation projects). New courses introducing translation technology have grown up in the past five years (for example, at Imperial College, London, UK). There has been a parallel introduction of a technical element to existing courses, or the creation of sister training courses to complement more traditional training (for example, at the University of East Anglia, UK, where a new Masters in Applied Translation now runs alongside their respected course in literary translation). New staff appointments have clearly been made to allow for such developments, and where national academic administration makes this a lengthy or unwieldy process, visiting lecturers and industry professionals have been co-opted to deliver technical training (for example, at the Université de Rouen, France).

Encouragingly, where technical training already existed, there has been a move to increase the range and depth of such training. For example, at the University of Leeds, the past two years have seen the introduction of specialist applied courses in subtitling, technical communication, corpus linguistics and machine translation in addition to existing training in CAT tools. Improvements in the capabilities of the tools themselves have led to further progress in training. Thus the more widespread compliance with Unicode among recent editions such as Atril's DVX[ix] means that training can be provided in languages which were not previously well-supported (for example, Arabic and Chinese, among other major world languages). As a result, the number of tools to which

students are exposed can be increased: a 1999 graduate might have worked with two or three translation memory tools, but the class of 2004 can expect to use five or six, some of these in conjunction with machine translation, giving a greater critical and comparative awareness of each tool's limitations and benefits. Students' greater initial competence in the use of IT has also played a role here, of course.

Some obvious gaps do remain, however. First, many language pairs are still not included in technical training courses, partly because the software is at different stages of development, partly because the developers have not seen some of the world's major languages as worthy of investment (see Somers' 2003 work for a discussion of this point), and partly because training institutions have found it difficult to recruit qualified staff in some language pairs. A related problem is that certain states' institutions generally still offer less technical training than others, meaning that trainees in some parts of the world find it more difficult to access training. This is particularly true in Eastern Europe and less economically developed countries, of course. Where training is offered, problems relating to poor support from some software manufacturers means their tools are omitted from curricula, leading to gaps in training. Further gaps relate to the difficulty of recreating real-world working practices in the classroom (for example, exposing students to project management software is difficult as they would need access to a large existing database of information). Finally, training provision suffers because many (most?) courses still seem to see technical training as an optional element of translators' curricula. Indeed, some courses still offer no technical component at all, yet often fail to acknowledge this in the course title, making it difficult for potential applicants to assess the relevance of training for their needs.

Even on these problematic points, however, there has been clear progress in the very recent past. First, where cost has been an obstacle to academic institutions hoping to provide training in CAT, the release of a new tool, Wordfast,[x] has made it possible to include some basic hands-on training, since Wordfast is available

free of charge to education providers and to users in developing countries. Second, the now-widespread adoption of an industry standard exchange format for translation memories, tmx has made sharing materials more straightforward than ever before. This means that training in even one translation memory tool, while perhaps not ideal from an academic perspective, has clear benefits for students. Third, academics seem to be becoming gradually more open to new working practices. Just as translators and localizers have adopted more collaborative working methods than their predecessors did, some leading trainers are now freely disseminating training materials which are academically rigorous while being professionally relevant, rather than viewing other trainers as competitors. Recent publications, whether online or in more traditional formats, make this evolution clear; see, for example, Kiraly (2000) or work by leading industry figures such as Bert Esselink (2000, new edition due 2004). Finally, employers and potential students are also gaining in awareness of those courses which are training translators in the tools of the trade, leading to more informed choices among applicants and improved recruitment opportunities for graduates of such training.

Training provision for tomorrow

What then can we do to secure and build on these successes, and to make training more relevant, now and in future? One clear area for consensus here is that 'close cooperation between industry and academia is essential in order to meet market needs.'[xi] This can work in both directions, with academics researching and monitoring the evolution of the industry, while industry figures can get involved in the design and delivery of training, something which will be considered later in the paper.

One example of such academic research into the evolution of the language industries can be found in the author's questionnaire-based investigations of what LSPs expect or hope from graduates of translation studies programmes, begun in 2003.[xii] The questionnaires have been -and continue to be- distributed by the British national professional body, the Institute of Translating and

Interpreting, by the Association of Translation Companies and via the eCoLoRe website (see www.leeds.ac.uk/ecolore). While this is ongoing research and based on only a relatively small sample thus far (approximately 50 responses), some clear patterns are emerging and conclusions in this section of the paper will draw on analysis of these initial results.

A good starting point for comparison here is the LETRAC 'translator profile', which outlines key features identified as essential or desirable by the industry in 1999.[xiii] The first point of comparison is a clear, in fact unanimous, agreement on the need for the technical skills identified in advanced word-processing, with 100% of industry respondents seeing these as essential or desirable skills in 2003-4. A majority of 60% further agreed that knowledge in desktop publishing (DTP, including skills in word-processing, graphics and layout) was essential or desirable. However, a small sub-group of respondents did point out that such skills were irrelevant when employing freelance, as opposed to in-house, translators: if a freelance translator was slow or less proficient, s/he simply would not be given the work or would earn less per hour.

As for the ability to use translation-specific tools, the questionnaires confirmed the LETRAC results, with nearly 90% of respondents seeing translation memories and terminology management software experience as essential or desirable. Only machine translation systems bucked the trend, with 40% of employers considering experience of these essential/desirable and 60% seeing it as irrelevant, though this might be explained by the sample including smaller translation companies who do not typically make as much use of MT and post-edited MT as large multinational organisations and businesses.

Beyond these technical skills, LETRAC also stressed the importance of the acquisition of practical problem solving techniques related to the translation process within a reasonable time and using technical skills. Initial results from my research back up the importance of this observation. In addition to

technical competence, a clear majority of employers see as essential qualities reliability, flexibility, technical and linguistic accuracy, speed and general computer skills (any applicant for work should 'not be a technophobe,' as one put it). Recent academic research into the language industries does seem to be drawing similar conclusions here. Wilss, for example, ends his 1999 study with the assessment that 'What is required today are practical knowhow, mental agility and a balance of rationality and imagination, routine and creativity. Acquiring such 'key qualifications in a carefully planned and methodical training course seems [...] to be the most important thing in improving translator competence'.[xiv]

This ties in to the earlier observation here that, as the industry and technology keep evolving (and do so quickly), hands-on experience or training in one CAT/TM tool or even several currently-available tools is insufficient – exposure to a range of tools and working methods is best so trainees become self-reliant users of translation technology, with the confidence to explore and evaluate the usefulness of new tools as they arrive on the market in future.

It seems clear that some of the best people to ask whether we are in fact doing this are our alumni, yet such research has rarely been carried out thus far. As Emma Wagner, then a practising translator at the European Commission, pointed out at a recent translation studies conference,[xv] 'There never seems to be any formal follow-up, to see if a student's academic training was appropriate to the world of work. Professional translators are rarely invited to give feedback to their former teachers.' The author's current and ongoing research aims to start addressing this gap, with graduates from translation studies programmes invited to respond to a matching questionnaire, beginning in Leeds with a survey of recent TS graduates from over 10 countries, including some native speakers of Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

What is immediately striking when graduates' responses are compared to those of employers is that graduates believe

employers insist on even more developed technical skills than employers in fact state they require. This might be partly explained by graduates applying to larger companies than this sample has thus far addressed.

First, those applying for work in the language industries agree unanimously with employers that advanced word-processing skills are essential, and two-thirds of the sample think advanced DTP skills are essential or desirable. When it comes to translation-specific tools, however, graduates clearly feel these to be even more important in obtaining work than employers do: fully 100% of graduate respondents argued that experience of translation memories was essential or desirable when looking for work in language services, and 95% said the same of terminology management tools. A notable difference between alumni and the employers relates to the value of machine translation: over 80% of graduates felt experience of using MT to be essential or desirable in today's job-market.

Graduates further emphasised the practical problem solving techniques valued by employers: 100% of respondents viewed reliability, time management skills and communication skills as essential or desirable. Accuracy, speed and highly-developed general computer skills were also more highly valued, with website design and authoring, for example, seen as essential or desirable by over two-thirds of graduates (compared to just over 50% of employers). Individual comments from graduates at the sharp end of recruitment also confirmed academic research into industry preferences, with such responses as 'Employers prefer universities which offer practical courses (i.e. less theory, less literature)'.

Implications for future training

These results and those of recent or ongoing studies such as LETRAC and LEIT[xvi] have three broad implications for training. First, closely monitoring the evolution of the industry via continuing research is clearly vital if our training is to be relevant. The obvious corollary of this is that trainers must be sufficiently

flexible to adapt methods and course content at relatively short notice in reaction to the findings of such research. Effective widespread dissemination of such research findings is also key. Continued positive developments are likely here though, as can be seen in the flourishing of conferences where industry professionals, academics and trainers meet and share best practice as it evolves. The benefits of technology can also be harnessed to this end, with Internet access to research findings clearly reducing the time necessary to communicate research findings, for example.

Related to this is the second implication: that is, the necessity of involving the industry in the design and delivery of training. Fortunately, there are existing models for this, as Wright (1998: NP) points out:

> "Ours is not the only industry that faces ongoing change and a need to modify curriculum on the fly in order to deliver just-in-time training to state-of-the-art future industry experts. [Long-term cooperative relationships such as those between Goodyear and the KSU School of Business] represent models for the synergy that can exist between academia and the commercial sector. These cooperative relationships provide for leading-edge teaching and research, personnel development and technological innovation."

This can be managed in various ways, as has been done at Leeds over the past seven years. Guest lectures by industry figures, masterclasses and work placements are effective and relatively straightforward steps which can lead to greater industry involvement in course design and delivery. Industrial-academic cooperation in identifying and updating course content, design and delivery of teaching materials, and feedback on assessment leads to increased relevance and usefulness for students, and arguably increased motivation and enthusiasm on the part of both students and academic colleagues.

The third implication for training is the clear need to train students in transferable skills. The tools of the trade and the trade itself are not about to stop changing, so our trainees need to be confident users and explorers. As Somers points out (2003: 324), it is often impossible to teach in a truly convincing real-life scenario as there

are too many players in typical translation projects today. What we can do instead is train our students to communicate electronically in multilingual teams, emphasising the need to do so effectively and clearly, while respecting tight deadlines. This can be done via class team projects, for example. Continued monitoring of translation studies graduates is also essential to ensure the ongoing relevance of such training.

There are some potential drawbacks associated with such an approach to training. First, practical matters such as initial and ongoing costs, location, and appropriate technical support can represent obstacles. These do seem to be decreasing in part, as more universities invest in a suitable IT infrastructure, as hardware costs come down and as some free or low-cost tools come on to the market. As others have commented before,[xvii] finding competent teaching personnel and persuading university authorities to employ them without traditional academic qualifications is also problematic. Guest lectures may be one way around this problem, however, and as more graduates come through appropriate training programmes, qualified demonstrating staff come on stream. A linked problem here is the need for ongoing staff training and support, given the continuing development of technical tools and changing face of the industry. With a certain amount of goodwill, this can be managed by industrial placements, by employing industry figures alongside academics, and by team working.

Also problematic thus far has been the poor quality of available training materials and the consequent need for trainers to author appropriate manuals and exercises. As DeCesaris (1996: 266) indicates, a linked problem has been the enormous investment of time required to build up initial translation memory and terminology resources so that students may gain hands-on experience of technical tools. Again there have been positive developments here recently. For example, the EU-funded eCoLoRe project[xviii] is currently producing just such training resources in over 20 languages, to be made available freely via the web in tmx format. Exchange of training materials is also taking place more

and more via online discussion groups and via electronic publications.

Some trainers have raised concerns that introducing new elements to existing curricula or redesigning courses might mean that training in more traditional skills is abandoned. There does seem to be some room for manoeuvre here, with Wright (1998: NP) arguing that it is time for academia to

> "recognize the importance of language and information engineering and to turn their curricular interests away from outmoded concentrations in areas where there is no market demand. There is a clear need to focus instead on skills acquisition strategies that will ensure their graduates lucrative positions in today's and tomorrow's job markets."

Current and future students' increased baseline skills in computing now mean less time is devoted to training in basic skills, so this is also arguably becoming less problematic. A final way forward on this point would be greater integration of technology into training in more traditional translation skills.

Fortunately, as well as problems raised by this approach to training, there are benefits. No doubt the most important of these is the positive recruitment record for graduates of such courses. Moreover, such recruitment tends to be to a far wider range of language industry jobs now open to those with transferable skills and a confident attitude to technology. Working in multilingual teams on technical translation or localization projects which aim to recreate real-life working scenarios also results in gains in inter-cultural communication skills relevant for any future career in language services. Perhaps most encouragingly, the perceived relevance of such training for students also leads to increased motivation and enthusiasm during study, with obvious advantages for teaching staff. Kingscott even claims (1996: 296) that, 'If taught properly, this can become quite exciting'.

Conclusion

In summary, the following points ought to be addressed in any

course claiming to train translators for the workplace:

- ongoing research into our industry;
- effective communication with relevant partners, whether in industry or academia;
- using evidence-based knowledge to take decisions and plan training;
- flexibility and openness to new ideas, approaches and working methods;
- an ongoing commitment to learning and change.

That is, all the things we typically ask of our students.

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[i] For a clear outline of the purpose and appropriate use of TM tools, see Esselink (2000) or http://www.multilingualwebmaster.com/library/trmemories.html

[ii] The EU-funded Language Engineering for Translators' Curricula (LETRAC) study was carried out in the two years before publication in 1999 and is the largest study of translator training provision completed thus far

[iii] Badia et al (1999: 49)

[iv] tmx stands for Translation Memory Exchange; see www.lisa.org/tmx for further details

[v] See www.unicode.org for further details

[vi] Language Engineering/Information Technology

[vii] See Williams and Chesterman (2002: 16)

[viii] Though this is clearly not any indication of the quality of

training, such claims do demonstrate an increase in awareness among academics that training in the new tools of the trade has become an essential element of their programmes

[ix] See www.atril.com for further details

[x] See www.wordfast.net for further details

[xi] Wright (1998: NP)

[xii] Further copies are available from www.ecolore.leeds.ac.uk where results of the research will also be posted

[xiii] LETRAC Feasibility Report, Deliverable D4 (4-5)

[xiv] Wilss (1999: 236)

[xv] Wagner (ND: 400)

[xvi] See www.lisa.org/leit for further details

[xvii] See, for example, Hung (1996: 39)

[xviii] See www.ecolore.leeds.ac.uk for further details and free downloads of training resources