

# Puzzling it out - Creating web-based teaching materials to support translation classes

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has come to play a prominent role in translator-training curricula, although mainly in the more advanced stages of training. In the earlier stages, i.e. when students are still being introduced to the basics of translation methodology and to contrastive aspects of the languages they learn, the use of CMC resources is much more limited. After a brief overview of some problems and issues involved in the creation of CMC resources for the initial training of translators, the paper reports on work carried at the University of Padua for the creation of a web site (called *Puzzle it Out*) intended to support the English-Italian translation modules offered within the degree course in Cultural and Linguistic Mediation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which computers have come to play a fundamental role in translation. Today no professional translator could ever think of doing without them: computers are used to write and edit texts, to archive and retrieve translations and, through the WWW, to conduct searches for reference materials and resources on an unprecedented scale. The advent of computers and the Internet has quickly changed the translation profession as regards both the object and the tools of the translators' work. Virtually all texts to be translated reach the translator in electronic format and a large share of these texts is actually never going to the press. Most manuals, especially those of software applications, are today only

provided as pdf files, while web pages and interface files are a classic example of “virtual texts”, i.e. texts that never get printed and that are specifically written and presented to be read on a computer monitor. Even texts destined to publication in print, however, are today processed by dedicated software tools, and translators are often required to use these tools.

In short, the set of basic skills required of a translator at the beginning of the Third Millennium looks very different from what it was only fifteen years ago. In the past, what was required from a translator was essentially a good bilingual linguistic competence, which included some knowledge of the foreign country’s “culture” (read “literature”). No experience in editing was necessary – agencies or publishers dealt with copyediting, proofing and formatting. Today the picture is completely different: a professional translator has to add literacy in computer technology to the set of skills necessary to tackle most modern-day translation jobs. Dedicated software applications such as translation memory systems and term banks are the bread and butter of many translators and the use of such systems is no longer restricted to specialized sectors such as software localization.

As far as the training of translators is concerned, research on the nature and development of translation competence has shown how part of this competence (what some scholars have referred to as *translator competence*) consists of procedural skills, many of which have to do with the way translators (learn to) interact with computers and digital resources. Leaving aside the question whether this is a realistic model of translation competence and the way it develops (see Pym 2002 on this regard), it is a fact that most translator training institutions have rushed to include computer literacy and specific training on CAT tools in their curricula. Dedicated teaching materials for such training have also been developed, such as those created by the eCoLoRe project<sup>1</sup>.

As regards the training of translators on professional skills, then, computers and digital resources can today be said to play a major role. But what happens to the use of digital resources, online environments and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general at earlier stages of the curriculum, i.e. when the focus is still largely on the development of a “transfer” competence that relies essentially on linguistic and cultural knowledge? Is there anything similar in translator training to the resources that have been developed in the context of computer-assisted language learning (CALL)? The rest of this paper will discuss problems related to the creation of on-line resources for translator training in the early stages of the curriculum, with reference to some proposed models and to work carried out for the creation of a web site (called *Puzzle it Out*) which is addressed to students of translation at the University of Padua in Italy.

## 2. COMPUTER-MEDIATED TRANSLATION TEACHING MATERIALS – A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH AND APPLICATIONS

Trainers engaged in the creation of translation teaching materials based on digital resources have soon realized how problematic it is to adapt didactic approaches based on classroom interaction to the new digital environment. Neunzig (2002) notes a tendency to simply “copy” methods and systems used in more traditional educational settings to the new medium, whose potential is therefore often left

unexploited. This difficulty in devising effective didactic models is especially evident in the creation of digital courseware materials (both on- and offline) aimed at favouring self study. Some scholars (see, for instance, Nord [1996: 326] quoted in Reinke [2005: 12]) even believe that the fundamentally argumentative nature of translation teaching is ill-suited to accommodate self-study in whatever form. In other words, whereas language learning can, at least to a certain extent, rely on feedback of the closed-class type (“right/wrong” at its simplest), feedback on translation tasks is rarely suited to accommodate concise and black-or-white responses. Translation has a lot of “grey” areas and needs lots of qualifications – it is probably no coincidence that the most frequent reaction of trainers to inadequate translation solutions is some variant or other of the type “It’s correct, but...”. Anthony Pym has even built a theory of translation competence on that “but” (see, again, Pym 2002). Therefore, while CALL has a long tradition of research and applications, computer-assisted translator training, especially as far as the training of beginners is concerned, is still in its infancy. Research on the topic is not extensive and the resources that have been developed at various translator training institutions are often guarded as well-kept secrets (not least, probably, because of the copyright issues related to the authentic materials that these resources employ in the translation tasks they propose for practice).

Already towards the end of last decade, Neunzig (1998: 566-567) identified some factors to be taken into consideration when preparing CMC courseware materials for translation teaching:

- a) the theoretical framework or approach the materials refer to: approaches that focus on textual equivalence will find it harder to devise appropriate computer-based tasks; computers lend themselves better to tasks centred on smaller units such as sentences or phrases;
- b) the type of texts used for the translation tasks: texts where stylistic features (such as irony, hyperbole or ellipsis) are of primary importance are more difficult to adapt to computer-based tasks, as they are usually more difficult to segment in smaller units; informative texts seem to be better suited for the requirements of computer-based activities;
- c) the need for documentation: texts used for computer-based translation tasks should be about topics that require a minimum of documentation; therefore, specialized texts won’t do for such tasks;
- d) the aim of the tasks: computers can be used to propose tasks to students at different stages of the learning process; the particular nature of translation tasks, however, makes it difficult to conceive of computer-based practice as completely autonomous and student-centred – computer based tasks, in other words, will remain part of a wider pedagogical process, or a complement to classroom activities where the text to be translated is discussed in more detail.

Most of the factors identified by Neunzig remain relevant even after technological advances and the scant methodological/conceptual progress in the creation of CMC translation teaching environments are taken into account. The one aspect that has perhaps been partly superseded by advances in technology is the requirement that the texts used for translation tasks be very general so that no documentation is needed. In Web-based environments, users have today avail-

able to them a virtually unlimited supply of reference materials – by searching the Web they can find information, both encyclopaedic and linguistic, on any topic. Apart from the methodological considerations, Neunzig's paper is also interesting as an attempt at measuring the effectiveness of CMC resources on an empirical basis – effectiveness being a crucial issue when trying to establish the viability of a didactic approach that relies (partially or not) on digital resources.

More recently, some ideas for developing courseware materials based on CMC are discussed in Reinke (2005) who, however, only presents a list of *desiderata* and makes no reference to already available resources. Different scenarios for integrating CMC methods into translation courses are described and the corresponding need to change teaching (and learning) habits is acknowledged. One particular point stressed by Reinke is the need for CMC resources used at all levels to establish a “feedback loop”. Following Nord (1996), critical feedback is considered to be an essential element of any form of translator training. Reinke (2005: 12) also points out, however, that when self-study allows access to a tutor, then self-study exercises may constitute a useful supplement to classroom activities.

A description of available CMC resources for the teaching of general translation is provided in Espunya (2005). Following Bou *et al.* (2004), Espunya identifies two modes for translation learning: “e-learning” and “self access”. E-learning is a form of distance learning which requires a model of the learning process and the design of a dedicated infrastructure to implement the model. It is self-paced, self-directed, capable of accommodating multiple learning styles and aimed at fostering contact either between students and instructors or between students themselves (e.g. through discussion forums). Self access, on the other hand, is more of a complement to classroom activities and can rely both on digital platforms and traditional paper-based resources in a library. Once they have gone digital, however, self-access resources can serve «a double role in traditional as well as in e-learning settings» (Espunya 2005: 4). The materials Espunya presents, collected in an environment called ED@T, are characterized not as an e-learning system but as «an activity bank with resources for e-learning». Espunya does not give practical details of the courses that use ED@T. In particular, she gives no indication of the number of potential users of the resources – a factor, as will be seen later, that can be decisive in devising a suitable model for the creation of online resources.

Some advantages and disadvantages of distance teaching/learning in translation are discussed by Scarpa (2006). Advantages, especially in online environments, derive from the possibility to enhance knowledge-mining skills and to train the students in group work, an aspect that has become essential in today's translation profession. Disadvantages can be summed up as follows: a) preparation of online materials is time-consuming; b) groups of learners can be of mixed levels and abilities; c) it is difficult to keep in contact with students via e-mail or forums; d) giving feedback, particularly on individual basis is, again, very time-consuming.

### 3. THE *Puzzle it Out* (HENCEFORTH ABBREVIATED TO *PIO*) WEB SITE

The *Puzzle it Out* web site is part of CLAWEB, a portal that gives access to the resources created by the teaching staff at the Language Centre of the University of Padua<sup>2</sup>. The materials created for CLAWEB fall within two broad categories: general-purpose language-learning resources and (for the most part) materials especially developed to support specific courses. The *PIO* web site supports the English-Italian Translation Module of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year English-language exam of the degree course in “Discipline della mediazione linguistica e culturale” (“Disciplines of Cultural and Linguistic mediation”; from now on abbreviated to MLC). This is one of the many degree courses in “linguistic mediation” and the like that Italian universities have started to offer after the major overhaul conducted on the country’s university system towards the end of the 1990s. Whereas previously the only Italian schools for translators at university level were based in Trieste and Forlì (the latter as part of the University of Bologna), in the post-reform period courses have sprung up all over the country offering training in foreign languages with a more or less pronounced focus on translation. The demand (and supply) for translator training has consequently boomed, as these courses are generally attended by large crowds of students – a factor, as will be seen below, that has no small effects on devising e-learning materials and resources.

Students who have reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the MLC course have only had limited exposition to translation practice. Their experience is still largely that of translation as a language-learning activity (there is some practice on translation into English in the second year). The very first opportunity for them to look at translation “in its own terms” is the Translation Theory module offered in the first semester of the third year (again as part of the English Language exam). The English-Italian translation module comes in the second semester and the *PIO* web site supports the classroom activities carried out for this module. Links with what students have been presented with in the Theory module, however, should be obvious (and indeed the teacher responsible for that module has contributed some materials to the site).

The aims of the *PIO* web site as regards learning objectives can be characterised in terms of the four general objectives of a translation course as identified by Hurtado Albir (1999: 53), i.e. the methodological, the contrastive, the textual and the professional. The focus of the site materials is clearly on the first two (methodological, contrastive) as students are only really being introduced to an approach to translation as a communicative event. References to the other objectives (the textual and the professional) are of course present, but their role is mainly that of clarifying matters pertaining to the methodology of translation or of providing support to a view of translation as a decision-making activity. More specifically, as regards the methodology of translation the site seeks to raise the students’ awareness of the factors that are likely to influence translation decisions (communicative context, addressees, text types) and the importance of the target language<sup>3</sup>. Space is also devoted to an illustration of, and practice on, translation procedures. From the contrastive viewpoint, the site concentrates on aspects such as the difference in writing conventions between the two languages, the importance of collocation and a comparison between cohesion mechanisms.

Other factors which have influenced the creation of the *PIO* web site are not related to the learning objectives but have to do with a series of diverse aspects that nonetheless end up playing a decisive role in the way the materials are being developed. Among such aspects, the following two are worth mentioning:

- *number of potential users*: students attending the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year English language modules of the MLS degree can literally be counted by the hundred. This constitutes a major problem in terms of the feedback to be given to them when they use the site. All researchers and teachers engaged in the creation of CMC resources agree in acknowledging the need for a “feedback loop” to be established between students and the teacher responsible for the site, in his/her different guises as tutor, facilitator or moderator. When numbers are high, however, this feedback loop has to be conceived of very carefully if teachers do not want to end up inundated with materials sent in by students.
- *usability*: materials need to be concise, have a degree of interactivity and guarantee sufficiently broad coverage of topics. Conciseness follows from the unwillingness of readers of online materials to spend too much time on a page<sup>4</sup>. A certain degree of interactivity is necessary, so that students do not limit themselves to passively reading the materials but are actively engaged in tasks. Feedback in this case is problematic because of the large number of potential users. Finally, coverage has to be broad so that students are not put off and teachers can combine different classroom tasks with what they have available online.

To sum up, the *PIO* web site is not a resource for autonomous learning but is rather an online self-access platform offering an activity bank. The web site supports classroom practice but can also be used by students for reviewing purposes. The site is intended to reach the largest possible number of students, offering them opportunities for reflection and practice on actual translation tasks. The potential number of users being extremely high, however, opportunities for critical feedback to be delivered on an individual basis are limited, which is why the site only remains a complement to classroom activity. The rest of this section will present some features of the *PIO* web site in more detail and hint at possible ways of improving it in the future.

### 3.1 A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SITE: ON-LINE TRANSLATION TASKS

As noted earlier, the materials developed for the *PIO* web site mainly aim raising the students’ awareness of a) some methodological aspects of translation in general and b) some particular aspects of English-Italian translation, discussed contrastively. As regards the methodology of translation, a whole section is devoted to translation procedures (i.e. transfer procedures at the linguistic level; cf. the definition in Delisle *et al.* [1999]). A wealth of examples (all taken from authentic materials) is provided and students are invited to try their hands on employing the procedures (see Figures 1 and 2).

**AMPLIFICAZIONE (1)**

L'amplificazione consiste nell'utilizzare nel testo di arrivo un numero di parole maggiore di quello del testo di partenza (cfr. Detiste et al. 2002: 44). L'amplificazione può essere usata per chiarire il senso di un enunciato, nel qual caso si può anche parlare di "esplicitazione". Ecco qualche esempio di traduzione eseguita in base a questa procedura.

**a) 85% of Americans are concerned about pornography being too available to young people through the Internet**  
L'85% degli americani ha paura che i giovani che navigano su Internet possano accedere a materiale di carattere pornografico.

**b) In a world of rapid technological change, the EU is increasingly active in helping European research to achieve scientific excellence.**  
In un mondo di rapidi cambiamenti tecnologici, l'UE è sempre più attiva nell'aiutare la ricerca europea a raggiungere un livello scientifico di eccellenza.

**c) In most of the EU you can travel without carrying a passport and without being stopped for checks at the borders.**  
I cittadini dell'UE possono viaggiare nella maggior parte del suo territorio senza passaporto e senza doversi fermare per controlli alle frontiere.

[CONFRONTA >>](#)

Figure 1. Illustrating translation procedures – page on “amplification” from the *Puzzle it Out* web site

Provate a tradurre le seguenti frasi ricorrendo ad un'amplificazione, ossia introducendo elementi che non trovano diretto riscontro nella frase di partenza, e confrontate le vostre soluzioni con altre possibili traduzioni facendo clic su "Confronta".

- 1. The European Central Bank is in charge of the single currency, the euro.**
- 2. Some new member states may accept Schengen visas or residence permits of Schengen countries, so check with their consulates.**
- 3. Do not forget your travel, health and car insurance documents. See below for further details.**
- 4. When people are educated to the links between environment and government, they can improve both.**

[CONFRONTA >>](#)

Figure 2. Tasking users – practice on “amplification”

The task illustrated in Figure 2 provides a good example of the difficulty in giving critical feedback immediately and automatically from within the site. When clicking on “Confronta”, students are only presented with a possible translation using amplification for each of the four sentences. They can then compare these sentences with their own renditions, which, even if different from the model translations, may still be perfectly adequate. A comparison between the model translations and their own solutions is left entirely to their own judgement or possibly to later discussion in class.

Another example of a task that students can carry out on their own without immediate feedback is the guided-translation exercise (similar to that presented



in Espunya [2005: 6]). Here, a text or an extract is presented where possible problematic spots are highlighted, and a hint is given as to the nature of the problem and to possible ways of solving it (see Figure 3). The choice not to provide a model translation is deliberate, as students of translation in general, and especially at this stage, tend to see model texts as the only possible correct translations.

#### **Guildford and surrounding area**

Situated just 30 minutes from London, Guildford is a lively and attractive town with a long history. The University's modern campus is overlooked by Guildford cathedral and is close to the attractive town centre, which dates back to Saxon times. The town enjoys excellent rail links with London and the South coast, and is within easy reach of London's Heathrow and Gatwick airports. Stansted airport is also accessible by rail. Guildford boasts numerous historic buildings, including a Norman castle and the famous 17th century **Guildhall**, (1) as well as excellent leisure and sporting facilities, a multi-screen cinema and a professional theatre. The town offers outstanding shopping and a wealth of restaurants, pubs and cafes. The beautiful surrounding countryside boasts many **traditional** (2) English villages with tea-shops, old churches and village **greens**. (3)

#### Note

1. Traduciamo con "municipio"? Oppure lasciamo, magari in parentesi, il termine inglese così da permettere all'eventuale turista di trovare più agevolmente l'edificio una volta sul luogo?
2. "Tradizionali"?
3. Secondo il Collins English Dictionary un green è "a small area of grassland, esp. in the centre of a village". Qual è qui l'equivalente più appropriato? "Parco", "giardino", "prato"? Forse la scelta dipende dal modo in cui si è scelto di riformulare l'intera frase.

Figure 3. Guided-translation exercise: some possibly problematic spots are only highlighted; others are discussed in short notes at the end of the text

An area where the tasks proposed to students are followed by immediate, on-line feedback is the discussion of contrastive aspects relating to English and Italian. The site covers aspects such as register and collocation, where tasks can sometimes resemble language-learning exercises (as in the task requiring students to provide collocates for given lexical elements in Italian). As noted earlier, insistence on the target language is intended to raise the students' awareness of the need to conform to writing conventions while accurately transferring meaning.

Apart from the tasks focussing on the target language, however, the site materials are generally based on a view of translation as *selection* whose criteria are governed by factors linked to the context of situation and to considerations of relevance. The problem in adapting this view to a computer-based environment is that selection draws from open-ended classes. This conflicts with the fact that computers can only give feedback from pre-established classes. A common way to get round this problem is to turn online environments into communication



channels, either one-to-one (teacher-student or student-student) or one-to-many (as in forum discussions). Considering the large number of potential users, a site such as *Puzzle it Out* cannot resort to one-to-one communication, especially between teacher and students – as much as this would be desirable, the workload for whomever was in charge of keeping in touch with users to provide individual feedback would be overwhelming. The site could, however, be made to accommodate opportunities for peer communication between students, by providing, for instance, an online forum or some other means for them to exchange ideas and discuss problems. It is felt, in other words, that a better balance could be achieved as regards the two conflicting needs of catering for a very large number of students and providing them with opportunities for guided practice.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Online didactic materials are certainly an effective way of reaching a large audience of students. They can make practice more meaningful and thus complement classroom activity. If devised appropriately, they can provide opportunities for autonomous learning. The creation of such materials, in whatever discipline or topic, also has a role in enhancing the prestige of an academic institution in a variety of directions: towards other members of the academic world (both other departments within the institution and other universities) and towards the general public, which includes future students and other interlocutors of the institution (among them the potential sources of funding which might take the creation of online materials as a sign of the academic institution's dynamism). These we may call the "institutional function" of CMC teaching resources: although in theory it has nothing to do with the content (and the effectiveness) of the resources, in practice it can be as powerful a guiding principle for their development as are disciplinary and methodological considerations.

Given its essentially argumentative nature, translation teaching is sometimes ill-suited to accommodate self-study, whether it is based on online digital resources or on traditional paper-based materials. Self-study, however, is only one possible form of distance learning and online environments can be made to accommodate varying degrees of interaction between teachers and learners. The *Puzzle it Out* web site is, in this sense, still work in progress. It is a first attempt at making practice more meaningful for a large group of students: the materials created so far are able to reach a large audience, but they can certainly still be improved as far as interaction with, or among, users is concerned. Further work on the site will be aimed at ensuring that this second aim is achieved more effectively.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://ecolore.leeds.ac.uk>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://claweb.cla.unipd.it/>

<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by Espunya (2005: 4), traditional approaches to translation teaching, and more specifically those centred on textual analysis, run the risk of downplaying the problems inherent in the target-text generation phase. In a web site for students of translation, part of the tasks can consist in practice on the target language, with or without reference to a source text. This can help in raising the students' awareness of a possible lack

of competence in their own native language, one of the "classic" findings for those who are approaching translation in a communicative perspective.

<sup>4</sup> Research on reading habits of Web surfers has shown that users tend to scan pages rather than read them in full (for references, see the various reports quoted in the "Readability Research" web page of the Society for Technical Communication, to be found at <http://www.stcsig.org/usability/topics/readability.html>).

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