

# Using Non-Professional Subtitling Platforms for Translator Training

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## ABSTRACT

Some non-professional subtitling communities have succeeded in tailoring structures where newcomers learn from their peers using collaboration as a key to develop the necessary skills. These environments are compatible with the collaborative translator-training environment promoted by the social constructivist approach. This study intends to shed light on how non-professional collaborative environments could be used in translator training. An experiment was carried out in 2013 using Amara and aRGENTeAM, two non-professional subtitling communities, as training environments for seventeen undergraduate students of translation at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain. Each student was asked to translate for both Amara and aRGENTeAM, and to adapt to their translation guidelines and time constraints. The data was collected over three weeks. Questionnaires were designed to collect data on the participants' opinions regarding non-professional subtitling and its quality, the participants' attitude towards the phenomenon and the possibility of using these environments for translator training. Results show that participants see non-professional translation activities as engaging projects that could provide them with skills they will need in the future if they decide to become translators.

## KEYWORDS

translator training, non-professional subtitling, non-professional subtitling platforms, collaborative environments.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been pointed out that translator-training programs should establish environments where students could evolve into professional translators by experiencing translation activities as similar as possible to real ones (Kiraly, 2000: 17). Over the last two decades, translators' activities have undergone in-depth alterations, mainly due to the ever-constant innovations made possible by technology. The profile required for new translators is in continuous transformation thanks to these quite rapidly changing conditions. Under these circumstances, it is necessary for translator training to adjust to these changes. Training institutions should be aware of the needs of the markets and be ready to foster the required competences in the future translators they are training.

Non-professional translation is produced by unpaid volunteers who are often Internet users and operate in collaboratively structured environments. Among the advantages made possible by technology, the translation industry has started to look at the abundant possibilities created by non-professional translation (McDonough Dolmaya, 2012; Pym, 2012). Although newly discovered, this is already a highly active front for translation activity in the world. The professional and training sectors of translation need to define what position non-professional translation activities should occupy in the panorama.

In view of these developments, this paper presents the results of an experiment carried out to test the possibility of using non-professional translation environments as a means to train translation students. The experiment included activities carried out in two non-professional online subtitling communities (Amara and aRGENTeaM). This report is on the students' perception of the activities and their satisfaction after doing them. The main aim of the experiment was to provide a training environment where methodologies are not teacher centered, where students can have different guides in the process and can be faced with real collaborative environments. Within these collaborative environments, students' work has to adapt to translation guidelines that are external to the classroom, and students' actions need to integrate into wider frameworks.

## 2. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR NON-PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES IN TRANSLATOR TRAINING

In the complex social network where professionals, trainers and students live nowadays, the collaboration environments developed thanks to new technologies are compatible with the collaborative translator-training environment promoted by the social constructivist approach. These environments provide the possibility to shift from a teacher-centered training model to a model where students interact and participate actively in their own learning process, as described in the social constructivist approach adapted to translation training by Kiraly (2000). According to Kiraly's seminal work, translator-training activities should present authentic situations, motivating students and empowering them to develop their own skills. He claims *situated* translation experiences should be developed based on the students' previous knowledge and the skills targeted in the curricula.

The framework proposed here gives truly collaborative work a central role in the learning process. Students are not given correct answers but they are given the tools to find them. Further, as the activities progress and become more demanding, students start to co-control the learning process. One of the more relevant aspects of Kiraly's proposal is the way he understands translator competence as an ability to join new communities and interact with other translators, users of translation, specialists and other agents within these communities (Kiraly, 2000: 13). This approach to translation competence can help us see non-professional communities as a suitable translator-training environment.

Both in non-professional online subtitling communities and in constructivist classrooms, great importance is attached to the role of motivation in the fulfillment of activities. In non-professional subtitling environments the participants' involvement depends solely on their willingness to collaborate. Similarly, as has been argued, constructivist-oriented activities rely on the students' motivation to maintain an interactive environment where translator skills can be developed. This shared perspective suggests compatibility and leads us to consider a possible integration of the online communities into a training environment. The workflows and internal organization of non-professional subtitling communities provide a framework to practice the social constructivist principles, since students can be asked to interact with other group members and participate in the communities as if they were external collaborators joining the group. Senior group members would continue with the activities they normally perform and can offer students advice on their tasks, as well as feedback on their translations.

The idea of exploring the possibilities of non-professional translation settings in translation training has already been suggested by scholars in the fields of localization and audiovisual translation. In 2008 O'Hagan presented an experiment in which she highlighted the degree of expertise deployed by a Japanese fan translator in terms of awareness of style and textual genre conventions as

well as global concerns regarding the translation. Despite a number of errors in the final version of the fan translation, O'Hagan pointed out that the work of the fan translator participating in her experiment was qualitatively better than the work of a novice in the profession and that the strategies applied by the translator indicated a certain progression to a professional level, comparable with the level requested by publishers. O'Hagan sees potential for a "more productive and effective genre-specific translator training" (2008: 180) using the advantages brought by non-professional translation settings. She recommends that translator training try to see this potential instead of blindly dismissing all volunteer communities, along with their possibilities.

Along the same lines, Gambier (2012) reflects on the implications that fansubs, fandubs and amateur subtitling in general can have not only for the way we perceive subtitling, but also for the whole process of audiovisual translation. As argued by media scholars such as Flew (2011) and Aris (2011), this claim also finds support in areas different from Translation Studies. They argue that the current media industry has been reshaped by co-creational initiatives, altering the media flows and redefining the agents involved in decision-making processes. Gambier (2012) claims the new technological platforms and the development of open-source software could have an impact on translation at several levels, including professional ethics and the formal training of future translators. According to him, "fan translation forms a potentially highly effective learning environment" (2012: 55).

Some researchers have already started to apply these ideas. At the First International Conference on Non-Professional Interpreting and Translation, Federici (2012) presented the results of a subtitling task he gave to his students at Durham University (United Kingdom). Using freeware and working in groups, undergraduate students translated a film from Italian into English, while MA Translation Students participated in the project as project managers, editors and revisers. He notes the advantages of creating controlled environments that raise students' awareness of professional translation and, at the same time, motivate them to participate in the activity. Elsewhere, an MA thesis proposing a framework to use *romhacking* environments for training purposes has been defended at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona by Muñoz Sánchez (2013). The model describes all the stages of the *romhacking* process, along with indications of the tools and resources needed, and detailed instructions for every stage. The proposal has not been tested in a translation classroom, but it certainly has potential and offers a new possibility for localization training.

### 3. A STUDY TO TEST THE INTEGRATION OF NON-PROFESSIONAL SUBTITLING ENVIRONMENTS INTO THE CLASSROOM

In order to test the possibility of integrating non-professional subtitling environments into translator training, I was interested in testing students' attitude towards the activity. The questions I included in the questionnaires were related to the students' motivation and disposition to participate in activities involving non-professional translation environments, as well as their attitudes towards non-professional translation and their opinions about the utility and benefits of non-professional activities as part of their learning process.

The data was gathered over three weeks in May 2013 at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona (Spain). Participants in the study were third-year English-program students. As part of the curriculum of the English BA in Tarragona, students have to pass a mandatory Introduction to Translation module. Students translate from English into Spanish, and occasionally into Catalan. Since this is the only mandatory course in translation, it is the only place they can be made aware of the translation profession and what it entails. The study included two different non-professional communities: Amara<sup>1</sup> and aRGENTeam.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.1. AMARA

Amara is an open source, non-profit online subtitling project. Its main goal is to make videos on the Internet accessible to everyone by overcoming language barriers. They have a user-friendly crowdsourcing platform that breaks the subtitling task into four different stages: transcription, spotting, translation and revision. The entire subtitling process is carried out online. Video creators can post their videos to the platforms, where volunteers can transcribe, translate or revise them. The service is used by individual creators, as well as organizations and companies that have arrangements with the company (such as TED, Netflix, PBS Newshour). Anyone can sign up to translate and link videos from video-sharing websites such as YouTube or Vimeo. It was decided to include Amara in the study because its platform is user-friendly, the community is highly active and there is a significant amount of instructive material describing how to work with the platform.

<sup>1</sup> <http://amara.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.argenteam.net/>

### 3.2. ARGENTeAM

aRGENTeAM is one of the oldest non-professional Spanish-speaking subtitling groups. They translate TV series and films, mostly but not only from English into Spanish. As shown in Orrego-Carmona (2011), the group is structured in such a way that its translation workflow is similar to that commonly used in the subtitling industry. Translation, organization and management tasks are divided among four different volunteer roles: managers, revisers, translators and moderators.

One of the most relevant features of aRGENTeAM is their internal training program. Whenever a new member expresses a wish to become a staff member and has been a regular participant in the Forum, this person is assigned to a more experienced member (generally a reviser) who will engage in a type of one-on-one training program with the new member. The reviser will answer the queries of the new member as well as revise and provide feedback. The same training scheme is used when a regular translator wants to become a reviser.

The group has also defined a set of internal guidelines, which are under constant revision and include 19 of the 26 items listed in the Code of Good Subtitling (Carroll & Ivarsson, 1998). Each TV series is assigned to a reviser at the beginning of the season. This person is in charge of managing the process: searching for the original subtitles in English, dividing the subtitle file into different parts, assigning the subtitles to volunteers, then receiving the translated files, combining them into one, revising the subtitles and finally posting the file. The time allowed for the translation varies depending on the popularity of the series. The most popular series are translated in a 48-hour time frame.

### 3.3. PARTICIPANTS

A total of twenty-nine undergraduate students were registered in the Introduction to Translation module for the second semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. Nevertheless, only seventeen of them (15 women and 2 men, mean age = 23.05 years,  $SD= 1.4$ ) were able to complete all the activities and questionnaires that made up the study. In class, students were informed about the research and were told that the study was aimed at investigating new methodologies for translation training. All participants agreed to take part in the experiment and they signed a consent form. All the participants included in the study have Catalan or/and Spanish as their mother tongue and were translating from English.

### 3.4. PROCEDURE

To follow the process and collect the information, questionnaires were designed and administered using the online platform provided by *Encuestafacil*. Data was collected at four different times during the experiment: three times during class, and once in the participants' free time. In total, each participant filled out four questionnaires: an initial questionnaire to set the baseline for the experiment, one questionnaire after each one of the activities (one after the translation with Amara and another one after the translation with aRGENTeaM) and a final questionnaire. The questionnaires included 10, 11, 18 and 10 questions respectively and each took about 10 minutes to answer. Some questions appeared in all the questionnaires, but additional specific questions related to each task were also included.

All of the questionnaires asked about the participants' attitude towards non-professional subtitling, their willingness to participate in these activities during their free-time, the advantages they saw in these environments, how they perceived the quality of the subtitles and how they felt about having their work exposed to revision and criticism by people outside the classroom.

The first questionnaire was filled out in class right after the students were informed of the details of the experiment. The second was answered after the students' participation in Amara. Students were asked to sign up to the forum and see how it operates. They were instructed to follow the introductory videos and watch some videos already subtitled on the website in order to get acquainted with the platform. They then had to look for a video that was available for translation into Spanish<sup>3</sup> and translate it following the instructions provided in the subtitling tutorial by Amara. The activity was done in class, but some students decided to work on longer videos, which they finished after class.

The activity with aRGENTeaM was more complex and lasted longer than the one with Amara. I contacted one of the group's administrators and he agreed to participate and to look for other people among the staff who were interested in the experiment. Five revisers decided to join the activity. Students were asked to sign up to the forum and carefully read the information about the group and its working mechanisms. As regular members of the forum, students had access to the instructions as well as to the online forum archives of the group, which provided them with the knowledge required to translate in accordance with the group's requirements.

The materials requiring translations were posted online. Each student was asked to translate a segment of between 180 and 200 subtitles. They had to follow the regular subtitling workflow of the group:

3 Taking into account the popularity of Spanish in Amara, some students were allowed to translate into Catalan for this activity, since more material was available for work into this language.

- 1) Inform the reviser in charge of their wish to translate a given segment.
- 2) Receive the original segment in English from the reviser and submit the translation within the following 48 hours.
- 3) Translate the subtitles according to the guidelines.
- 4) Submit the translated version and wait for the feedback.
- 5) Receive feedback from the reviser.

Once both activities were completed, we had an in-class discussion about the experience. Right after this discussion, students were asked to fill out the final questionnaire.

#### 4. RESULTS

As explained, each questionnaire included a different number of questions. Questionnaires 2 and 4 (Q2 and Q4) were designed to collect information on the participants' opinions about the two online subtitling platforms. In the following paragraphs I will report mainly on the results from the first and last questionnaires (Q1 and Q4) because this will give a more general impression of the participants' attitudes and evolution over the time of the activities. I will comment on specific aspects from the other two questionnaires in cases where they provide interesting insights.

##### 4.1. OPINIONS ABOUT PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR FREE TO TRANSLATE ONLINE PLATFORMS LIKE FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE, TWITTER AND WIKIPEDIA

The participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*, their degree of agreement with statements related to the people working for free to translate content for online websites. As shown in Table 1, the participants' attitudes became more positive regarding the work of non-professional subtitlers. In Q4, 94% of the participants say that volunteer translators are doing a good job because they are helping other people to access content that would hardly be translated otherwise, up from 71% at the beginning of the experiment. On the other hand, around 35% of people agreed in both questionnaires that the activity is good as long as volunteer translators work for non-profit organizations only.

The percentage of participants who think companies should be paying for these translations drops significantly, with about half of them having a neutral opinion by the end of the experiment. There is also a decrease in the number stating that translation should be done by paid professionals only and that volunteers should not be doing this work.



To what extent do you agree with the following statements about people who work for free to translate online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia?	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree		Mode	
	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4
What they are doing is good because they are helping people to access content that would hardly be translated otherwise.	0%	0%	6%	0%	24%	6%	53%	41%	18%	53%	4	5
I think it is good as long as they work with non-profit organizations only.	0%	0%	6%	6%	59%	59%	29%	24%	6%	12%	3	3
Companies should be paying for this.	0%	0%	6%	0%	29%	47%	59%	41%	6%	12%	4	3
I think they should not be doing this. Translation should be done by paid professionals only.	12%	24%	35%	41%	41%	24%	12%	12%	0%	0%	3	2

TABLE 1. Participants' opinions about people who work for free to translate online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia

#### 4.2. OPINION ABOUT NON-PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Another question asked participants about their opinions regarding non-professional translation activities and the possible benefits deriving from this type of communities. The results of the items included in this question are shown in

Table 2 below. After the activities, all participants think non-professional translations are good practice for becoming a translator. The community setting is also seen as an environment where people can meet and discuss things they like. In Q4, 71% agree with this statement, while in Q1 it was only 59% of the participants who agreed. Additionally, by the end of the study, 83% of the participants thought the communities could be a good source of feedback on students' translations.

As shown in Table 2, personal dimension also becomes more evident as the activities unfold. The sense of belonging to a community is reinforced by the end of the experiment, when 82% of the participants think the website allows volunteers to enter the community and interact within it. The participants' agreement with the opinion that this work helps other people to access more content also changes. Initially, all participants think non-professional translation helps people access more content: 65% agree with the statement and 35% agree strongly. In Q4, the number that agree strongly rises to 65%.

To what extent do you or would you agree with the following reasons for translating for free?	1. Strongly disagree		2. Disagree		3. Neutral		4. Agree		5. Strongly agree		Mode	
	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4	Q1	Q4
It is a good practice for becoming a professional translator.	0%	0%	12%	0%	0%	0%	76%	53%	12%	47%	4	4
It is a way of meeting people and discussing things I like.	0%	0%	0%	0%	41%	29%	47%	53%	12%	18%	4	4
This work helps other people to access more content.	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	65%	29%	35%	65%	4	5
The websites allow volunteers to become part of a community.	0%	0%	6%	0%	35%	18%	41%	53%	18%	29%	4	4
You could see what others think of your translation.	0%	0%	6%	6%	35%	12%	41%	65%	18%	18%	4	4

TABLE 2. Participants' opinions of non-professional translation activities and communities

#### 4.3. PERCEIVED QUALITY OF VOLUNTEER TRANSLATION

To obtain information related to the participants' opinions of the quality of non-professional translations, they were asked to rate, on a scale from 1=*very poor* to 5=*very good*, the translations produced by volunteers online in platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and online subtitle websites. After direct experience of the two non-professional subtitling environments, the participants rated non-professional translations higher, as shown in Figure 1.

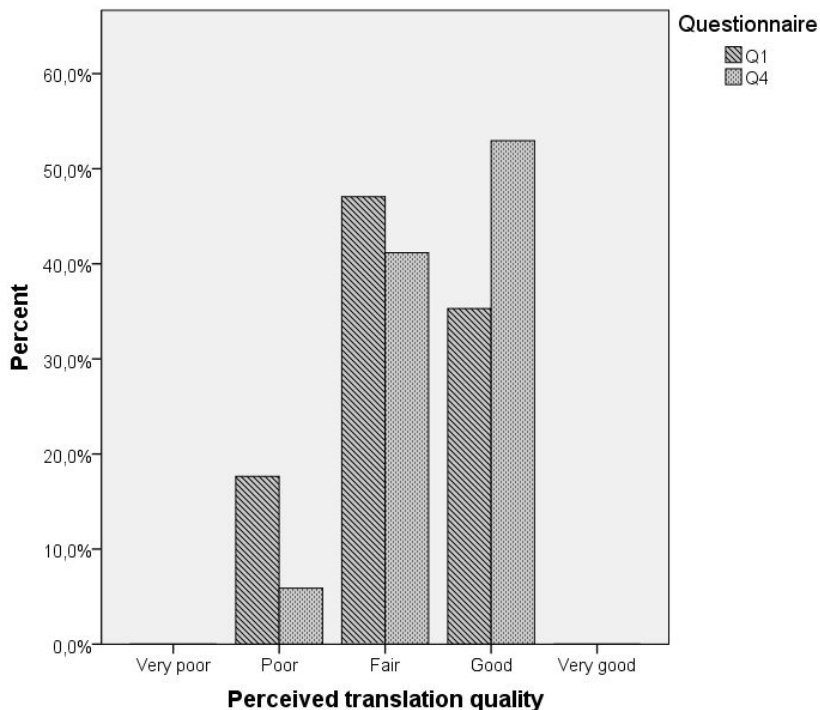


FIGURE 1. Participants' quality ratings of translations produced by volunteers online

It is relevant to point out that the participants were still cautious about this aspect of non-professional translation. When invited to comment, they referred to cases they found both during the tasks and in previous experiences. They say some of the translations are *good* in terms of what they expect, but others are very bad and barely inform the user about the content of the material.

#### 4.4. FUTURE PARTICIPATION IN NON-PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATION PROJECTS

One of the ideas behind the questionnaires was to know if participants would feel motivated to become involved in further non-professional translation initia-

tives. The participants were offered five possible answers and had to choose only one. As shown in Figure 2, for about half of the participants, it was important by the end of the study to translate things they also like, so they can also enjoy the *content* as well as enjoying the translation process itself. On the other hand, 33% say they are willing to translate content online regardless of the initiator or the end users of the translations.

To obtain more detailed information about the participants' disposition to take an active part in non-professional translation activities, they were asked about the amount of time they would be willing to invest in these activities. When they answered affirmatively to the question about future participation in non-professional translation projects, they were also asked about the approximate number of hours per week they were willing to dedicate to non-professional translation. On average, the number of hours fell slightly. The average for Q1 is 5, while the average amount of hours by Q4 is 4.8.

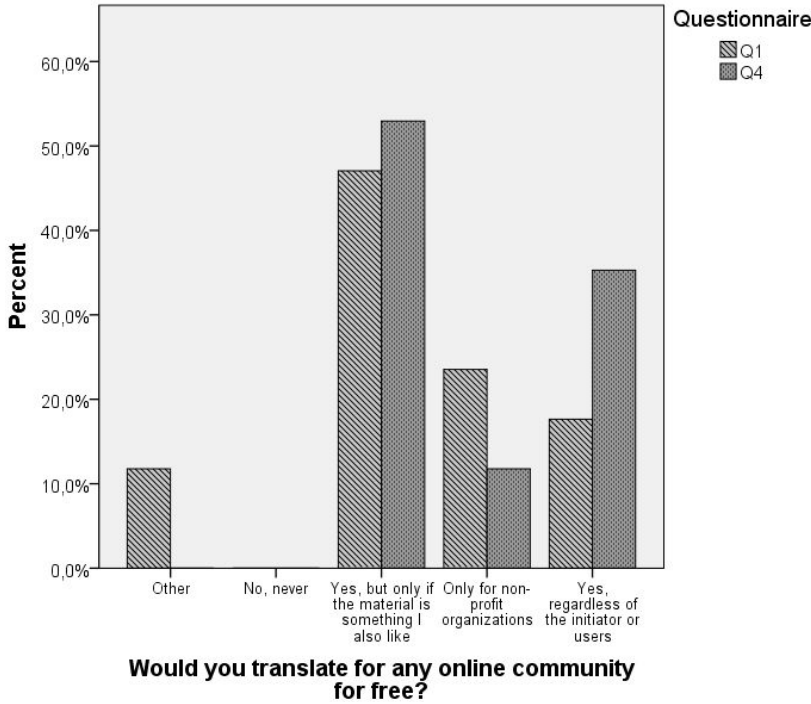


FIGURE 2. Participants' disposition to participate in non-professional translation projects

4.5. PARTICIPANTS' SATISFACTION

The idea of integrating non-professional subtitling environments into the translation classroom derives from the rationale of making classes more enjoyable

and, at the same time, more involving for students. In Q2 and Q3, the participants were asked to rate, on a scale where 1=*one of the worst* and 5=*one of the best*, each activity in comparison with other activities carried out as part of the course. For the activity with Amara, 24% of the participants said it was *above average* and 47% rated it as *one of the best* in the class. The activity with aRGENTeaM received also positive feedback, with 50% and 44% respectively.

Most of the participants had positive comments about the activities, as shown in opinions 1 and 2 below:

*Opinion 1:* I have enjoyed this activity because I have chosen a video I really desired (*sic*), and I think people work better if they work on something they really like.

*Opinion 2:* I think subtitling has been the activity that I have enjoyed the most, even more than translating text. Watching the video and doing the subtitles keeps you active and you don't get bored of translating after a time, that's why I think is a bit more entertaining than translating texts.

Nevertheless, it should be reminded that subtitling is a demanding activity. Apart from linguistic knowledge and translation skills, it also requires a significant amount of time and a specific set of technical skills (Díaz Cintas, 2003). As some participants put it:

*Opinion 3:* It depends... There were parts [that were] easy to translate, but there were other parts [that were] a bit confusing.

*Opinion 4:* I had to do another activity, so I did not have much time to do it. Besides, the text is not simple at all, I mean, there are many nouns and phrases that I do not know how to translate.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The rationale behind this study was to test if non-professional subtitling could be integrated into the translation classroom, and if non-professional translation environments could motivate students to take a more active part in translation tasks and to find some value in these activities as part of their translator training. As can be seen from the results, all the students considered non-professional translation environments useful as part of their translator-training program. Additionally, they seemed interested in the exchanges that are made possible in this type of environment and valued the feedback provided. This connects with the fact that non-professional communities allow students to become part of a community, giving them the feeling that, while they are learning, they are also doing something that will benefit other people. When more agents are involved in the translation process, the participants are made more conscious of the network in which they operate and have a more general perspective on the implications

of their actions. The integration of agents external to the translation classroom helps students understand translation as a real-world activity that involves and affects other people – the training process is no longer restricted to the student and instructor dyad. The combination of the background knowledge and the new skills they are developing help students take more control of the process and be more conscious about the translation activity.

By the end of the experiment there had been a decline in the number of participants who said companies should be paying for this type of translation and that translation should be done by paid professionals only. This seems mostly due to the participants' awareness that most of the material translated by volunteers was never intended to be translated by professionals. During the discussions, they seemed interested in pointing this out as being one of the decisive factors supporting non-professional translation. From a training point of view, this might be an indicator that the proposed model, or variations of it, allows students to acquire more comprehensive knowledge about the current conditions of the translation markets. They should then be able to define their own opinions about the way professional and non-professional translation should interact.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The experiment reported on here was intended to give some insight into students' opinions of non-professional subtitling and their motivations for participating in this type of activity. The results show that participants see the non-professional translation activities as engaging projects that could provide them with skills they will need in the future if they decide to become translators. Apart from that, some students are also willing to participate in future volunteer projects, aware that translations help people overcome language barriers.

From a more product-oriented standpoint, non-professional environments seem to enhance motivation to participate in the translation class and attract the attention of students. It would be necessary to carry out longer longitudinal studies to test if the translated products as such also benefit from this environment. It would be interesting to test this in line with what O'Hagan (2008) found when comparing a professional and a non-professional translator. One of the aspects that still seems worth investigating is how translations actually improve throughout the experiment process (and whether they do).

Finally, the role of students in their own training process and the possibilities for translator training created by non-professional translation need to be investigated further. In this case the group was engaged in the activities, but the time-frame was rather short. Thinking of other possible avenues for research, from a sociological point of view, the way relationships develop and the students' reactions to feedback and corrections could provide greater understanding of how to integrate non-professional environments into the classroom. How do students

react when someone external to the classroom edits their translations in Amara? Would they communicate with the revisers from aRGENTeaM more over time or would communication rather decline? Additionally, considering the implications for future work environments and students' careers, students could benefit from these types of problem-solving scenarios and trainers could integrate more realistic scenarios into their classes.

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