

The World Café and the flipped class technique as collaborative learning methodologies in a Translation Course: A case study

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Abstract

When discussing translation, theory and practice seem at opposite ends. However, a mediation between the two cannot be discarded when designing and planning a postgraduate translation course. Translation teaching, though a relatively recent field, has traditional methods and manuals. In 2014, Kiraly argued for a revision of his cognitivist approach to translation teaching (first claimed in *Pathways to translation*, 1995) and its focus on mental translation processes, to embrace a constructivist perspective whereby meaning and knowledge are built in social interactions. Acknowledging previous research and aiming to stimulate students' participation, a 30-hour theory and practice translation postgraduate module was designed. Flipped class activities and the *World Café* technique were implemented, aiming at dealing with short translation tasks (practice) alongside a focus on historical approaches and methods (theory) via selected readings from Venuti's *The Translation Studies Reader* (2000). This research makes a case for the effectiveness of *World café*, a collaborative learning methodology, and of flipped class as a useful complement. The intention is to describe such teaching/learning strategies and the authentic assessment adopted alongside them to offer some provisional thoughts on the impact such learning experience had on students.

Keywords: *World café, flipped class, authentic assessment, translation course* ***

Introduction

The paper is organized in five parts: the first offers the theoretical background claiming for a more interactive and collaborative translation classroom. The second part presents the *World café* approach (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and the flipped class as a complement to it. The third section introduces the First Assignment, its design and aim, as a guided task within authentic assessment. The First Assignment is further tackled in the fourth, as a student's early output and compared to individual end-of-course performance at the final exam, i.e., an interview based on each student's portfolio. Finally, the last section is devoted to a tangential issue emerged during the Covid pandemic, when teaching and learning were forced out of the classroom and into online platforms and digital tools, e.g., Microsoft Teams, Moodle and the Perusall app.

Such e-learning means helped to consistently adjust some units to the *World Café* approach, to the collaborative learning environment, and the authentic assessment originally planned. In the conclusion, some overall considerations are offered, and further research paths hinted at.

Theoretical background

Translating is, as Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1937, an “excessively demanding task” (Venuti, 2000) that in translation courses typically calls into play, within Bloom’s taxonomy (1956), the first three of his six categories – *Knowledge*, *Comprehension* and *Application*. Usually combined (Kiraly, 2000), such skills are among the foundation objectives of several translation courses and manuals offering language teaching alongside translation activities as in Newmark’s (2001), and others favouring a contrastive linguistics approach, e.g., Vinay and Darbelnet’s (1995). Proposing a shift, Nord’s functionalist approach to translation teaching (2005) encourages learning through real practice simulation. Yet combining theory and practice, that is, learning more about translation studies, methods, approaches and historically highly debated issues (e.g., *equivalence*), seems a challenge not frequently embraced.

Aiming at Bloom’s higher-order thinking seems not only reasonable, but particularly purposeful if translation is regarded from a broader perspective and greater weight is given to *collaborative learning*, *social constructivism*, *empowerment and reflexive practice* (Kiraly, 2000). Creating a participative learning class may be counterintuitive especially in academic contexts traditionally favouring lectures. However, such shift may be worth attempting to guide students into metacognitive paths. As Clavijo & Marín put it, a collaborative class “facilitate[s] the individual construction of knowledge to solve complex and real problems, which develop cognitive flexibility and self-concept to solve translation problems” (2013: 72). Such goals are more than balanced within Bloom’s three higher objectives (1956): *Analysis* represents the way communication is split into its constituent components and ideas are hierarchically ordered, made clearer, and their relations made explicit; *Synthesis* involves gathering components to form a coherent whole; *Evaluation* engenders assessing strategies and procedures for specific aims. How does a participative course based on continuous assessment enhance the higher-order thinking categories? In any translation task, for instance, a sound Source Text Analysis (STA) is paramount, that is, the breaking down of the source Source Text (ST) into its linguistic constitutive parts that eventually should help the trainees identify the various layers of meaning in the text. Linguistics and functional theoretical approaches can offer tools and confirm the crucial role an STA plays in any translating job. The analytical stage can then inform the decision-making process towards the more appropriate strategies and procedures, developed in an ST/TT contrastive perspective and related to any inputs a prospective commissioner may give (synthesis). Theory can then offer a supportive complement to the revision process and enable trainees to discuss and support how their choices meet a given purpose (evaluation).

This paper takes the form of a case-study focused on the adoption of the *World café*, a collaborative learning methodology, and on how it can provide, alongside a flipped classroom approach, an interesting option to equip students with an intertwined theoretical background knowledge, while they also practice translation tasks. Translating as process and translation as product can thus be discussed simultaneously and both be investigated with increasingly more sophisticated and metacognitive tools.

Creating a collaborative learning environment: World Café and flipped class

Originally born (1995) to suit a variety of communities and conversation goals, the World Café has been exploited by companies, governments, universities, health institution, and adopted among various cultures and age groups with different aims (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). It is built on seven main principles: clarify the purpose, create a hospitable space, explore questions that matter, encourage everyone's contributions, connect diverse perspectives, listen for patterns and insights, and share collective discoveries. The approach is based on creative group-conversations held around specific issues, while sitting café-style around tables. After a limited time (approximately 20 minutes), groups move from one table to the next and the conversation continues in at least three rounds – *movement* is key. One member of the initial group, a Café facilitator or host, remains at the table to share the main points of the initial discussion, thus facilitating connections between the different conversation threads. Those who move are called *travellers* or *ambassadors of meaning*. In the last round of conversation, people return to their first table to synthesize their discoveries.

World Café and flipped class in a translation class

The 30-hour postgraduate translation course was designed so that theory and practice were presented as intertwined learning areas. Class would typically start with an individual short translation task – or the discussion of a completed one – followed by a World café session. For the latter, students would be randomly organised in 4-student groups and each given a different open question to discuss, relative to a specific theory essay – the first three were Roman Jakobson's *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* 1959, Nida's *Principles of correspondence* 1964 and Catford's *Translation shift* 1965. Such reading was part of the flipped class approach whereby "instruction that used to occur in class is now accessed at home, in advance of class. Class becomes the place to work through problems, advance concepts, and engage in collaborative learning" (Tucker, 2012). Each reading was assigned two/three weeks in advance and students were encouraged to bring to class their own annotated copy that may include questions and/or doubts.

During the World Café class session, all learners were asked to take notes on a common white large sheet (one per table) to collect key ideas on the debated question(s). Such note-taking activity would turn into a collective task at each new round of conversation (coloured markers used). This allowed the recording of the diverging perspectives

learners were exposed to while dealing with the question(s). Once learners were back into their initial group, they were asked to wrap up and prepare for next class a presentation that had to include the group own reasoning as well as the discoveries made through the group-conversations. Such presentations resulted in lively opportunities for peer-learning as each group engaged in a Q&A session and thus each essay was further analysed. Eventually, learning was a dynamic effort that relied on collective wisdom. Critical thinking improved as learners engaged with others' point of views and also as they had to formulate more assertive statements, when wishing to counterargue. Each new essay also enhanced a compare-and-contrast attitude.

First Assignment: a task based on authentic assessment

When the first three essays had been fully investigated and further processed while revising the short translation tasks (EN>IT) in follow-up classes (Jakobson, Catford, and Nida), students were asked to complete a guided compare-and-contrast written work over three weeks at the end of term one – the First Assignment (FA). Each student had to select one of the three discussed essays and to compare-and-contrast it to another essay of their choice among a selection of fourteen ones, among the most important contributions to the principles and procedures of translation (1930s-1980s) collected in Venuti's *The Translation Studies Reader* (2000). Each essays/scholars' pair had to be unique to one student only. The choice-making process was left entirely to the learners' responsibility as a group, to enhance accountability (soft skill).

The First Assignment has four progressively more demanding and integrated tasks: first, students isolate 10 keywords per essay (20 all in all). This is called *Glossary*. Second, using the keywords, they sum up concepts by drawing a concept map or a Venn's diagram. Third, a summary of each essay (max 200-250 words each) is completed. Last is the proper compare-and-contrast task (400-450 words), the most challenging. In order to guide this final activity, learners are offered to choose from five options. The first four options, i.e. A-D, complete the sentence "The two essays/scholars...": A. *Clarify something unknown or not well understood*. B. *Offer a combined insight or a new way of viewing translation*. C. *Bring one or two main concepts into sharper focus*. D. *Show that one perspective is more efficient than the other*. Option E suggests an altogether different approach, i.e.: E. *Use the two essays to comment on one of our short translation tasks* (verbs in bold as in student's template).

Authentic Assessment

According to Pierce & O'Malley (1992), "performance assessment and portfolios" represent authentic assessment, that is, "possibilities for integrating assessment with instruction, assessment of learning processes and higher-order thinking skills". In the 30-hour postgraduate course, the continuous assessment includes class attendance and interaction, contribution to forums, short translation tasks, and the FA. All activities are counted in and generate a student portfolio, but the FA is also the starting point for the final oral exam at the end of term two. The goal is threefold: first, make

classroom work and approach consistent with exam content; second, avoid rote learning of key information from the essays; and finally, encourage critical thinking.

Results: how the early task (FA) compares to the final exam

As a students' early output (end of term one), the FA also represents an interesting tool to compare students' development. The final exam is an individual interview based on each student's portfolio, which typically would move from the FA and span through the syllabus. Each interview often turned conversational as all students were well aware of their FA inaccuracies and fully prepared to self-correct or fill in for missing or vague information. In addition, even among the weakest students, a compare-and-contrast method seemed to have been acquired as they could talk more efficiently about the essays and refer to about 5/7 out of the 14 included in the syllabus (Benjamin, Ortega y Gasset, Nabokov, Vinay & Darbelnet, Quine, Jakobson, Nida, Catford, Levy, Reiss, Steiner, Even-Zohar, Toury, Vermeer).

Compensating Covid-19 pandemic restrictions towards a collaborative environment

This last part, as anticipated in the introduction, is a tangential issue. Just before term two, as Covid-19 spread, teaching and learning were forced out of the classroom and into digital platforms. Microsoft Teams was adopted by the University of Genoa as a whole and, as a netiquette was shared, students were required to turn on their cameras during class time to maintain interactivity and a collaborative mood. Moodle, a tool already in use, was integrated with the compatible Perusall app, for collective reading, which allowed to consistently adjust some teaching units to the *World Café* and the flipped-class approach: students read and individually annotated one shared essay at a time as a homework activity. The result was a lively discussion, enriched by individual comments, added references, and questions to which a peer-collaboration often provided interesting feedback. Class time was more focused and used to discuss new or unsolved question(s) in groups that met in secondary channels, set up as café-tables. Thanks to these digital means, the original collaborative learning environment as well as the authentic assessment could be not only maintained but further explored.

Conclusions

This study set out to present an interactive, collaborative and innovative learning module in translation courses, aimed at facilitating the intertwining of theory and practice within a metacognitive learning perspective. The limits of the study are related to the lack of collecting and processing quantitative and qualitative data of the educational proposal. Yet, each student's progress was appreciated thanks to authentic assessment and, as compared to the beginning, the final interview showed promising

improvements in various demanding skills such as a sounder STA, efficient use of metalanguage, critical and higher-order thinking, compare-and-contrast approach, cooperative work. It was also noted an increase in learners' awareness on both core translating abilities (i.e., strategies and procedures) and soft skills – e.g., the intrinsic collaborative nature of the job; how to cope with deadlines and time pressure; how to discuss and support individual choices, showing sound understanding of the ST meaning layers and more experience in shaping the TT.

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