A Virtual Learning Environment for English Philology students

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The Information and Communication Technologies have become an important part of our daily personal and professional lives. University professors must be aware of these technological advances and make advantage of them in our courses. The learning process does not consist any longer in just attending teacher’s explanations in class; it has turned out to be also autonomous. The virtual learning environments (VLE) help both professors and students to carry out with this autonomous learning. VLEs have become a necessary tool to accomplish our goals. In this article, we explain the design and the main pedagogical functions of the VLE addressed to philology students in their 3rd year. In the subject of English-Spanish translation, this virtual environment (we call it ‘Aula Virtual’ in Spanish) is intended to have two main objectives: on the other hand, provide all the information (documents, texts, resources, syllabus, forum, etc.) needed in order to follow the course and on the other hand, enable the students to upload the required tasks, activities and assignments.

Keywords virtual learning environment; ICT; university students

1. Introduction

The important role that literary translation plays currently in our society is out of discussion. No extensive research is needed to know about the big market literary translation has in Spain and other countries whose official language is Spanish. You only have to go to a library or a bookshop and check the literary sections. How many books are originally written in Spanish? Or put it differently, how many books written originally in English have been translated into Spanish? The course is an introduction to the theory and practice of literary translation. Though this is a fairly short course to go into a deep study of the fascinated and complex world of literary translation, we aim at providing you the essential tools to be able to solve problems that may appear when translating this kind of texts. On the other hand, as university teachers, we have to be aware of the latest advances in technology implemented in the teaching/learning process. In order to prepare this course, we have looked up some important experts in the translation field [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]

In this specific course, we have amalgamated the art of translation with the new technologies. We have designed a virtual learning environment where students will be able to compile all the information from the course (articles, assignments, news, forum, etc.) and also to produce and upload information.

A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a software system designed to support teaching and learning. A VLE typically provides tools such as those for assessment, communication, uploading of content, return of students’ work, administration of student groups, questionnaires, tracking tools, wikis, blogs, chats, forums, etc. over internet. [8] VLE software is a collection of integrated tools that enable the management of online course delivery and access to resources, discussion groups and assessment. Most VLEs can track learners’ progress, which can be monitored by both lecturers and learners. While no two educational institutions use their VLE in the same way, they are most often used to supplement face-to-face classroom based teaching and learning, with an on-line element. [9]

A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a set of teaching and learning tools designed to enhance a student's learning experience by including computers and the Internet in the learning process. The principal components of a VLE package include curriculum mapping (breaking curriculum into sections that can be assigned and assessed), student tracking, online support for both teacher and student, electronic communication (e-mail, threaded discussions, chat, Web publishing), and Internet links to outside curriculum resources. In general, VLE users are assigned either a teacher ID or a student ID. [10]

According to Mason [11], there are 3 models of VLEs:

Content and support model: where pre-prepared content is delivered in print or online, and support is provided online. Content and support are not integral to one another, ie online support is an optional extra and is not integrated into learning activities. Relatively easy to establish but does not fully exploit the benefits of online learning.

Wrap-around model: where there is a mixture of pre-prepared content and online learning activities. The learning activities involve online discussion and collaborative activities.

Integrated model: where most of the learning takes place via collaborative online activities and content is largely determined by the learners, either individually or as a group. Learning is very much student centered and highly collaborative.
In this course, we follow the wrap-around model, where there is a mixture of classroom and online activities. Students are collaborative as they interact with the environment and can also take part in online discussion through the forum. Although VLEs have some disadvantages, we want to highlight the advantages according to Ros O’Leary [12]:

1. Easy online delivery of materials.
2. Easy to use for both teachers and students.
3. Widens student access on and off campus to learning materials and resources.
4. Offers flexible support for educators who do not need to be in a fixed time or place to support and communicate with students.
5. Has the potential for new ways of learning and teaching such as active and independent learning which make use of online communication, online assessment and collaborative learning.

As Scott B. Follows [13] says, a VLE provides the student with context for the learning process to take place. Students create cognitive maps of information based on their experiences. Contextualizing content supports the mapping process, making concepts more concrete, thus facilitating understanding, recall and the integration of knowledge. The notion of a learning activity in virtual learning environments refers to something richer than in traditional class and allows teachers and students carry out online activities, tasks and assignments. All the university staff can create an online course in the Aula Virtual. The Aula Virtual is based on the freeware Moodle [16]:

Moodle is a course management system (CMS) - a free, open source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities. (http://moodle.org/). Moodle is a software package for producing Internet-based courses and web sites. It is a global development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education. Moodle is provided freely as Open Source software (under the GNU Public License).

Before, virtual learning environments were designed with only one objective: to provide the students with all the information related to the course, that is to say, teachers were the ones who could upload information (dossier, articles, links to internet resources, multimedia...). Teachers were the information senders and students were the information receiver. The message only went in one direction: from teacher to student. However, this situation has changed as internet has. It is what it is called Web 2.0 [17]:

The term Web 2.0 is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. A Web 2.0 site allows users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications...

Web 2.0 advocates that users are no longer passive individuals only receiving information, they can now interact, receive and send information. They are also producers.
Moore [18] describes the importance of distinguishing between three types of learner interaction - learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner:

In learner-content interaction, learners effectively "talk to themselves" about the information and the ideas they encounter.

In learner-instructor interaction, learning effectively takes place from a "sage on the stage", who supposedly imparts knowledge and wisdom to the students. This is still by far the most common method employed by most educational institutions, from primary schools through to universities.

In learner-learner interaction, students help themselves to learn, by sharing ideas and discussing problems, often in a real or virtual group setting. This is clearly the least common and least conventional of the three modes of interaction, but one of the most exciting for those interested in online delivery, since the use of online forums and email lists generally enable group discussion to a far greater extent than is possible in a conventional lecture / tutorial environment.

The objective of the paper is to show how technology is taking advantage in the university classroom. Apart from the classroom activities, students are engaged weekly to upload some assignments in the virtual environment. Students become, thus, aware of the importance of the VLEs in their learning process.

2. Method and Results

The subject can be followed in two ways: itinerary 1 (class attendance, continuous assignments and assessment) and itinerary 2 (written exam). The content in both itineraries share the same syllabus but different assessment. All the materials are available in the virtual environment (Aula Virtual).

In this paper, we will focus in itinerary 1 methodology. At the beginning of the semester, students following itinerary 1 (91% of the enrolled students in the subject), signed a learning contract where they engaged to enroll in certain tasks and assignments as well as class attendance.

The course is divided in two big modules:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:
0. The concept of translation
1. The role of the translator
2. Translatability/ Fidelity/ Equivalence
3. Translation techniques
LITERARY GENRES:
4. Translating prose
5. Translating children’s literature
6. Translating comics
7. Translating dramatic texts
8. Translating poetry

Lectures are interactive lessons, so students will be encouraged to take part in group discussions. This is very important for a full understanding of the main contents of the syllabus.

The methodology employed will be based on collaborative work by means of pair and group work. However, individual work will be also demanded at first stages of translation activities, as well as in the reflection before discussion sessions. Discussion sessions will be face-to-face.

The assessment of the subject is as follows:
1. Coursework assignments and participation in class activities: 50%
   - Participation in class and activities (pair work + whole class discussion) 10%
   - Assignments- activities (individual) 10%
   - Paper + interview (group work) 15%
   - Presentation + interview (group work) 15%
2. Final project: 50%
   Translation of a book (group) 50%

In this paper, we explain the assignments activities part. In the virtual learning environment (Aula Virtual), we can find some modules for the students to produce and upload information. We focus on the assignment activity module. As it is explained in the Moodle web page [16], the explanation of this module is as follows:
The assignment activity module allows teachers to collect work from students, review it and provide feedback including grades. Students can submit any digital content (files), including, for example, word-processed documents, spreadsheets, images, audio and video clips. Assignments don't necessarily have to consist of file uploads. Alternatively, teachers can ask students to type directly into Moodle using an online text assignment. There is also an offline activity assignment which can be used to remind students of ‘real-world’ assignments they need to complete and to record grades in Moodle for activities that don't have an online component. In this module, files can be uploaded, allowing students to type a message alongside their submission and returning a file as feedback. Students can also type directly into Moodle, teachers can provide inline feedback. This could be a Word document, spreadsheet or anything in digital format. Multiple files may be zipped and then submitted. After students upload their files, the teacher will be able to open the submission and use the Moodle interface to assign a grade and offer comments as feedback. A student may submit a file as many times as they like up until the deadline. Only the latest file is retained, and this is the one the lecturer marks. Teachers can grade them online, and even add inline comments or changes.

http://docs.moodle.org/en/About_Moodle

During the semester, students are asked to upload 14 assignments in the virtual environment. They must upload one or two assignments per week. This is a compulsory weekly task if they want to follow this itinerary. Assignments are explained both in class and in the Aula Virtual. Students can access anytime, anywhere and they have a deadline to upload the required assignment. Once the deadline, the application is closed and no opportunity to upload the activity is given.

We have focused our paper in the assignments, but in the Virtual Learning Environment, students can find, on the one hand, what we have come to call unidirectional resources (papers, articles, teacher’s notes, internet resources, etc.) where students can get information from the course and on the other hand, we have already opened a forum (bidirectional) where students can interact with the teacher and with other students.

Table 1. Screenshot of the virtual learning environment

Assignments
Here there is an overview of the 14 assignments students must do and upload in the Aula Virtual during the semester. We have included only a piece of the statements of the activities as they are very lengthy and it would many pages to add the whole text in the assignments.

1. Getting started: traps & tricks of translation
Before getting started into the translation process, students have to translate some passages. They encounter several difficulties in each one. After the translation, students must answer which structural and idiomatic problems present these sentences and compare their translations with the group and discuss all the alternatives proposed.
2. Questionnaire
Students are asked to answer some questions about their expectations about the course.

3. The concept of translation
Students are asked to answer question about the concept of translation and what aspects of language are important in translation; then, they have to rewrite some sentences without changing the meaning.

4. The role of the translator
They have to answer the following questions: What is translation competence?; Which are the main types of subcompetences within translation competence?; What skills are required to the translator in order to translate literary texts?; What are the implications for novice translators? Justify your answer.
Faber, P. 1998. Translation Competence and Language Awareness

5. Assignment 4 rewriting
As activity 4 must be reviewed in class due to a certain level of difficulty, we decide to mark as an assignment the revision of this activity.

6. Translatability/ Fidelity/ Equivalence: reflection
Students are asked to answer the following questions: How faithful should we be (or can we be) when we translate? Discuss the notions of literal and free translation and the merits of each; they have to describe the main approaches to (un)translatability. What do you think about the issue?; Exemplify the main types of equivalences between two different languages (please note the Kade’s, Kutz’s and Rabadán’s taxonomies are very important!); What is meant by realia? Why do culture-specific term lead to translation problems?

7. Translation techniques
Students suggest suitable translations into Spanish for all the sentences below. Whenever possible, offer several translations for each, using at least two different procedures, or strategies.
1. He was seen yesterday, while he was having lunch
2. Oh! Don’t be silly!
3. Oh, what a shame! I’m soooooo amazed!
4. Holy cow! He’s a Cockney.
6. I got this fridge from the Salvation Army.

8. Translation techniques
They have to translate some passages into English and note which translation strategy they consider better suited for this task (according to the context). Consider the degree of faithfulness or literality of your translation, comment on it.

9. 10. 11. Translating prose
This passage is an example of the type of text you will have to translate in the exam. They try to use 1 hour to translate it.

12. Translating children’s literature
Students have to make a critical comment on the Spanish translation of the fragment below from R. Dahl’s The Giraffe, the Pelly and Me.

13. Translating Comics
Students are asked to translate into English a page from Vertigo a series of Fables comic book

14. Translating poetry
Students have to translate a couple of limericks. The poems are from Lear’s Book of Nonsense.

In the figure 2 below, you can see all the assignments expected to be done by the students during this semester, as well as the timing (due date) and the number of the assignments submitted:
3. Conclusion

Integrating the information and communication technologies in the university classroom has become necessary in the current system of education. If we, university staff, want to be updated and linked to the real world, it is crucial to incorporate the new technologies in the teaching/learning process. Virtual Learning Environments play an important part in the teaching/learning process in Upper education. They are no longer just means of transmitting information in one direction (teacher-student) but they are interactive and bidirectional, as students can take an active part in these educational environments.

We have been working with the new technologies for years with computer science students. It may be seen more understandable as this profile of students require more knowledge in this field. But, nowadays no matter the students’ field of study, new technologies must be present in the course. We believe that university, apart from knowledge, must prepare students for the real world; we know our students use the technology in their free time (Internet, electronic mail, social networks, chats, messenger…), and we want them to use it in their academic lives as well.

So, this year we have been working with Philology students and the results (graded by the amount of people and assignments submitted) show that 90% students of the students enrolled in itinerary 1 finished the course having fulfilled all the activities. We think that our main objective has been accomplished as we have successfully integrated the new technologies with an educational purpose. We will keep on working on this as we are convinced in a near future, the information and communication technologies in the university classroom will be compulsory. We, as teachers, are aware of this fact, and we are obliged to get to know and use them in class.
4. References

[16] Moodle site at www.moodle.com