The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching English Worldwide in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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CHAPTER XXX

COVIDIDACTICS: ADJUSTING *FLIPPED LEARNING* TO TEACH (ENGLISH) TRANSLATION REMOTELY

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Defining the context

In compliance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the Italian Ministry of Education provides teachers with specific indications concerning the English language proficiency levels that learners should progressively demonstrate at the end of each respective education cycle, including primary education (ages 6-10; A1 level), lower-secondary education (ages 11-13; A2 level), upper-secondary education (ages 14-18; B1 or B2 level, depending on the school pathway), and higher education (19 years of age onwards; B2, C1, or C2 level, depending on the programme type). For higher education in particular, English proficiency levels are autonomously set by each university according to the type of implemented programme. Adherence to the British English variety is recommended for all cycles, although the spread of English as a lingua franca paradigm has been officially recognised and is thus worthy of attention in the context of both pre-/in-service professional development for teachers and the acquisition of language and intercultural competencies among students.

Unfortunately, national conditions show that student preparedness is largely fragmented at the end of each cycle. This is primarily due to the lack of true structural harmonisation across cycles, which creates a complex instructional process that can even demotivate students during an English class. In turn, frustrations can arise among teachers whose pedagogical strategies are thereby challenged. Such conditions require an intense focus on adopting the correct self-attitude and behavioural approach while employing appropriate teaching methodologies and increasing interest and engagement for students.

I teach a 60-hour module in *English Translation 1* for the BA programme in Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Tuscia. This typically attracts around 80 first-year participants (typically aged 18-19 years) with B1 (or higher) entry-level English proficiency, although annual student numbers tend to vary depending on new enrolments. I had only taught classes for three days of the second semester when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across

Italy; that is, during the first week of March 2020. At that time, the government announced a national lockdown, which suspended all in-person business, professional, and educational activities, thus requiring students to begin learning remotely. This new experience demanded special resilience in all fields, which impelled me to seek an adequate alternative pedagogical approach that could easily be applied in the pandemic context but would prove to be also inclusive and capable of helping students acquire the fundamentals of English translation theory and practice. After careful exploration, I opted for the *flipped learning approach* (FLA), which is a type of blended learning that reverses the traditional educational arrangement in which "the teacher is the primary source of information" (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). Instead, through the FLA the learner becomes central within the teaching process. However, I first needed to adjust this framework for use in a remote university translation classroom. My procedures are outlined in the following sections.

Available resources for online teaching and learning

As at other institutions that were similarly affected throughout the world, the alarming nature of COVID-19 required immediate action to ensure instructional continuity for students at the University of Tuscia, including the implementation of virtual classes via an ad hoc e-learning platform. While online universities were already equipped with relevant information technology (IT) tools and frameworks, most traditional universities were not, and therefore had to invest in the required systems. Normally, in the Italian university context, government support funds are provided based on 'merit', with factors including the availability of accessible facilities for students and staff, participation in international programmes, outstanding research, and innovative teaching methodologies, among others. Just prior to these events, a national survey had already found that funding conditions were creating interinstitutional disparities in terms of student provisions, including those pertaining to proper facilities and relevant preparations; here, the COVID-19 pandemic worked to increase existing inequalities.

With its existing e-learning platform, the University of Tuscia was able to promptly respond to this emergency using the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle), which was soon implemented with the Zoom cloud-based application for video and audio conferencing. Another inclusion was the EasyReading Font, a typeface designed to help people with dyslexia read quicker and more easily. As such, students could access their personal Moodle accounts to a/synchronously attend virtual classes and download lesson materials. To protect copyrighted resources, access was restricted to those with valid login credentials.

During the initial stage of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education, followed by all Italian universities, realised that financial and technological support should be provided to students who needed help. For example,

assistance was provided to ameliorate cases involving inadequate IT devices, problems with home Internet connections, or more general family financial problems. While the Italian government pushed major Internet providers to upgrade their coverage throughout the country and improve high-speed Internet connections where necessary, the University of Tuscia also provided 760 eligible students with opportunities to borrow department-owned laptops for educational purposes. Here, the main goal was to offer similar learning conditions throughout the student body. A subsequent internal survey of 243 students who submitted assistance requests revealed that 100% were satisfied with this 'inclusive' opportunity. Despite some hindrances (most notably those resulting from bureaucratic issues), this decision received an excellent response from interested students and families; in fact, the approach was wholly successful due to the synergistic cooperation that developed across all relevant categories at my institution.

Structuring a typical flipped learning lesson

Grounded in the seminal works of Alison King and Eric Mazur from the 1990s, flipped learning is a type of blended learning that reverses the traditional teacher-centred educational arrangement by delivering instructional content out of the classroom. In this regard, teachers should record their lessons and offer them to students via videos and/or podcasts for asynchronous access. Students may therefore acquire knowledge from these materials prior to scheduled lessons, thus enabling them to use class time to practice and apply concepts and ideas through co-constructive interactions with peers and teachers.

I adjusted this approach to fit my online class requirements, as lessons were live-streamed, and I was not given sufficient time to create a lesson plan including pre-recorded videos or podcasts. Further, at that time the theory could not be satisfactorily imparted through these tools prior to lessons. Complying with procedural rules implemented by the University Chancellor, all live-streamed lessons were recorded so that non-attending individuals could independently access the materials through Moodle at their own pace.

My 2-hour lecture-based classes were held three times each week, and were structured around four principal phases: (1) presenting the topic and imparting necessary theoretical notions/concepts (depending on the topic, this could require multiple lessons); (2) sharing the source text to be translated on-screen, then uploading it to the relevant Moodle section within seconds (this stimulated preliminary student discussions through reflective practice); (3) assigning students the translation of the text intended for the following lesson, while encouraging their critical reflection; (4) opening the new lesson with a general and interactive recap of the main points explained in the previous lesson, then engaging students in highlighting and discussing any translation issues they encountered during their self-study.

The FLA generally provided students with a deeper understanding of the concepts, applications, and content. They received my support upon request and were given immediate feedback. These results were clearly corroborated by the positive outcomes of a compulsory anonymised and structured questionnaire, which all participating students were required to complete at the end of the 2019/2020 academic year, prior to taking the *English Translation 1* examination. Notably, most students passed this exam with satisfactory marks. Regarding the questionnaire, the outcomes of 3 of the 14 questions (Qs) emphasised a high degree of satisfaction among the 87 respondents, who were asked to express their opinions by selecting one of the following options for each answer: *Completely satisfied – Partially satisfied – Partially dissatisfied – Completely dissatisfied*. Details are as follows: (Q7) Does the teacher stimulate/motivate your interest in the discipline? (97.7% satisfaction); (Q9) Did the teaching approach facilitate subject acquisition? (98.68% satisfaction); (Q14) Are you overall satisfied with how this module was structured and managed? (94.25% satisfaction).

These results constituted an important indication for me, particularly in helping me refine my teaching methods for the following year if required by the circumstances.

Challenges and issues with flipped learning in remote (English) translation teaching

It is not simple or easy to teach (English) translation remotely, as the discipline and its theoretical notions inherently entail an overwhelmingly practical orientation. When on-site, teachers can supervise and support students via hands-on lesson activities. Conversely, support is not as consistent in the online format, and can only be provided if expressly needed. There are also technical problems, including slow Internet connections and outdated IT devices, which can diminish the quality of online lessons, even though these were not major issues in my case. Rather, two of the main issues (and simultaneous challenges) were developing my module contents to deliver English translation classes with a practical orientation in a virtual environment for a large number of participants and ensuring vigilant supervision and support.

In sum, there were several benefits to adjusting the FLA methodology for use in my online classes. During *phase (1) [translation theory impartation]*, students learned the theoretical notions required to translate a certain type of source text in the most correct manner. For example, in order to translate a newspaper article from English into Italian, students were first instructed on the tenets of interlingual and (inter)cultural translation, different text types, the main features of a newspaper article (e.g., title, subtitle, lead), the distinction between broadsheets and tabloids in the UK, and common features of the English language as used in newspapers (e.g., typical grammar, vocabulary, register, style).

During *phase (2) [text presentation]*, the introduction of the source text functioned as a brainstorming activity, which stimulated preliminary discussions among students by predicting its possible content. Here, I encouraged them to contribute their considerations to the discussion, even via the Zoom chat box (this option, for example, was particularly enjoyable for students who had concerns about public speaking). As a result, all students had opportunities to apply the acquired notions in a meaningful way to the genuine material provided.

Thanks to *phase (3) [assignment]*, students could use their own resources at home while reflecting and focusing on translation accuracy. This phase was also implemented to foster self-confidence and preparedness through individual study sessions prior to the lesson.

Finally, in *phase (4) [discussion of the translated texts]*, I opened the new lesson with a general and interactive recapitulation of the main points covered in our previous lesson, and then I engaged students in highlighting and discussing co-constructively (Lin, 2019) any translation issues they encountered during their self-study. Students could take random turns reading portions of their translations, following my guidelines. While doing so, their fellow students could interject comments or observations, thus helping to improve the texts translated by their peers. Through such reflections, students could also improve their own translations. On a different note, students who could not synchronously attend a given class, and who were thus unable to reasonably benefit from co-constructive peer collaboration, were instead able to reach me by email to seek clarifications, which helped diminish any feelings of disadvantage.

Possible solutions

In my online classes, the integration of the FLA helped students combine their acquired understanding of theoretical notions (see phase 1) with relevant empirical applications involving specific translation materials in two distinct contexts; that is, during the preliminary group discussion of the text when presented for translation in phase (2) and when students collaboratively presented their translated texts while receiving comments from peers in phase (4). The FLA was ultimately a valuable methodology that enabled me to incorporate meaningful and interactive practical activities into my online English translation classes.

I provided students with constant supervision and lively support when needed, and also adopted a *humanistic approach*, which emphasises "the importance of the inner world of students […], their thoughts, feelings, and emotions" (Arifi, 2017, p. 194). One immediate advantage was that students were not uncomfortable when making mistakes, even when considering the possibility of receiving negative feedback from their teacher or peers. As such, comments and observations were seen as constructive, especially as I instructed students to focus on achieving the best translation possible in a

manner that would increase their knowledge (see Q9). Importantly, the humanistic approach to foreign language teaching also enhances self-confidence among students while developing their social and emotional abilities, as "success in learning a foreign language is determined by the cognitive structure [of an individual]" (Arifi, 2017, p. 195) as well as within their emotional and affective spheres, which are bound to personality traits.

This approach also complied with the integration of the four components required by flipped learning, including the (1) flexible environment, in which teachers create flexible spaces so that students may decide when and where to learn, (2) learning culture, in which the traditional teacher-centred model shifts towards a learner-centred model so that students are mutually engaged in the dynamic co-construction of knowledge, (3) intentional content, in which the teacher provides specific study materials and purposely decides/elucidates how students should use them to maximise their active learning strategies, and (4) professional teacher/educator, referring to the requirements of constant classroom supervision, conducting student evaluations, providing relevant feedback, showing empathy for students during instruction, and assuming a less prominent role in the classroom to enable flipped learning (Flipped Learning Network, 2014).

Opportunities and benefits of remote teaching: Concluding remarks

The remote teaching experience highlighted many flaws in the Italian education system, including poor technological/structural facilities, insufficient departmental preparations for using the IT tools and devices needed for remote teaching, initial reluctance among students to accept online lessons as equal to in-person lessons, the lack of physical interpersonal relationships, and difficulty managing assessments and examination sessions. Personally, I faced this situation with resilience and encouraged my students to do the same, thereby taking full advantage of the experience. For example, the FLA allowed students to work independently while at home, then introduce their assumptions, observations, and perceptions into the online classroom. There, they could engage creatively, dynamically, and co-constructively through peer discussions, then reflect on any feedback to expand their learning. Further, students from different regions across Italy enjoyed a sense of proximity, as perceived through the virtual environment. In turn, I became acquainted with them and remembered their names, which is not common in the context of in-person lessons with many participants; indeed, the survey results indicated that this was a highly appreciated improvement. I also managed my online classes with the aim of empowering students in developing higher-order cognitive skills while engaging in meaningful learning, particularly by shifting the focus from a teacher-centred model toward a more learner-centred model, which emphasises the needs of students over pre-set learning objectives.

My humanistic experiences with students demonstrated that the combination of a learner-centred approach and empathetic attitude could create a virtual 'third place', wherein our mutual interactions progressively pushed the boundaries of the formal teacher-student relationship while still maintaining our respective roles. This also enhanced the learning process and increased their appreciation of the module (see Q14). In addition, the opportunity for peer collaboration seemed to increase students' awareness of the multifaceted complexity of the translation process, which not only has linguistic implications but also involves socio-cultural matters and other outside concerns.

In sum, I refused to allow the alarming situation to distress me professionally or psychologically, and instead faced the challenge with a positive attitude by focusing on the advantages and benefits of online teaching. Rather than complaining about the disadvantages and problems, I duly considered and addressed them. This chapter discussed the implications of the FLA for online teaching as well as the benefits of the humanistic approach to pedagogy in the virtual classroom. I hope this offers valuable suggestions for teaching online English translation in the university context while serving as a rough guideline for applications in other contexts and languages.

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