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The role and impact of volunteer translation in translators' training

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Résumé

Le cadre de cette étude est la communauté des traducteurs TED et ce que la recherche sur le sous-titrage TED en classe nous apprend sur la motivation des traducteurs bénévoles. Plus particulièrement, si dans le domaine de la traduction, la technologie façonne le contenu et modifie considérablement le paysage de la pratique, la présente recherche vise à saisir, à décrire les expériences des participants qui entreprennent une activité authentique, expérientielle et située, et à explorer la perception de l'impact social du sous-titrage TED par les traducteurs en formation. Sur la base de l'analyse des points de vue des participants, nous avons exploré, au moyen d'un questionnaire, la motivation des stagiaires traducteurs à participer.

Mots-clés: traduction TED, méthodologie, motivation.

Abstract

The context for this study is the TED Translators' community, and what research on TED subtitling in the classroom tells us about volunteer motivation. Since, in the field of translation, technology not only is shaping content, but also substantially altering the landscape of practice, this research sets out to record and represent the experiences of participants undertaking an authentic, experiential, situated activity, and to explore the trainees' perception of the social impact of TED subtitling. Based on the analysis of participants' views via a questionnaire, we explored the translator trainees' motivation for participation.

Keywords: TED translation, methodology, motivation.

1. Introduction

The context for this study is the TED Translators' community and what research on TED subtitling in the classroom tells us about volunteer motivation. The aim of this paper is to explore a more dynamic and creative approach to teaching translation using audio-visual material. According to Al-Shehari (2017), translator trainers need to look outside the traditional forms of academic learning in order to provide students with the skills and competences necessary to become professional translators. Moreover, the democratizing effect of the internet has blurred the lines between experts and non-experts in many fields and changed our understanding of the concept of knowledge and how and where learning takes place (Tapscott and Williams, 2008).

In the field of translation, technology is not only shaping content, but also substantially altering the landscape of practice. TED's popularity, "one of the most prominent science popularization initiatives in history" (Sugimoto and Thelwall, 2013), has been attributed to the successful harnessing of technology in reducing the gap between the experts and the public. This research sets out to record and describe the experiences of participants undertaking an authentic, experiential, situated activity (Kiraly, 2015) and to explore translator trainees' perception of the social impact of TED subtitling.

TED Translators, an online community of volunteers involved in the translation of audio-visual open content, provides an opportunity to translator trainees to complete authentic tasks that make a real contribution to society, in this case, by disseminating ideas across languages and cultures whilst practicing the skill of translating video subtitles. Based on the analysis of participants' views in a questionnaire, we explored the translator trainees' motivation for participation, following the categories set by Olohan (2014). We focused on students' perceptions of the learning derived from participation in TED Translators, as well as the social impact of subtitling for TED and found that participants valued the learning of new skills, potentially useful for professional development, and taking credit for their translation in a well-known and respected community. They were mostly positive about the role of this kind of activity. Many of the trainee translators interacted and supported each other through the associated Facebook group of Greek TED Translators.

2. Translating for TED

Within the last few years, TED Talks have become very popular and even seminal, mainly due to their interesting topics, influential speakers and insightful information that covers everything from human behaviour to scientific breakthroughs to design trends.

TED is a not-for-profit organisation, established in 1984 as a conference for those interested in technology, entertainment and design (TED), which has evolved into a "global community [...] welcoming people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world" [1]. At two annual conferences, speakers, often

well-known, give talks lasting up to 18 minutes on topics considered of global relevance. Many of these presentations are filmed and released as TED Talks on the TED website through a Creative Commons license.

The setting is simple: Most often there is a black background, with or without a projector screen, and a round, red carpet where the speaker stands in order to focus on the talk and speaker, rather than the setting.

2.1. The TED Open Translation Project

TED disseminates video presentations by leading thinkers on technology and other current issues, providing transcripts of the talks in English for TED events and in many other languages in TEDx events which are then translated into other languages and function as subtitles on the online video clip. TEDx events are independently organised, local events following the TED format and are conducted in languages other than English. About 150 TEDx events have been organised in Greece to date.

The TED Open Translation Project is designed to make TED Talks more accessible by offering subtitles and transcripts in languages other than English. In the past, transcripts and subtitles were prepared by TED staff, while the translations into other languages are produced and reviewed by volunteer translators.

The idea of translating TED Talks came about by popular demand. Several viewers around the world started asking if they could translate talks in order to share them with friends and family. Recognizing a real need and an opportunity to radically open up accessibility, TED developed a system to allow volunteers to translate their favourite talks into any language.

Seeded by TED with a small number of professional translations initially, the Open Translation Project was launched in May 2009 with 300 translations, 40 languages and 200 volunteer translators. Within a year, 21,000 translations by over 1,000 translators had been completed. By the end of 2018, around 32,000 volunteer translators had provided over 137,000 translated talks in 116 languages.

In outlining requirements for volunteer translators, TED stresses the importance of "crediting translators for their work". For each translation, the translator and the reviewer are named, a measure which also has a quality assurance function.

TED Translators, an online community of volunteers involved in the translation of audio-visual open content, provides the opportunity to translator trainees to complete authentic tasks that make a real contribution to society, in this case, disseminating ideas across languages and cultures whilst practicing the skill of translating video subtitles.

3. Volunteer translators' motivation

3.1. Volunteering and Motivation

It is important to acknowledge the complexity of defining volunteering; volunteering activities take diverse forms, and public perceptions can also vary (Cnaan, Handy & Wadsworth, 1996; Handy et al. 2000).

Acknowledging these variations, we may nonetheless note four dimensions which generally inform judgements about volunteering: free will, reward, context for the activity and beneficiaries (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996).

3.2 Previous Research on Volunteer Translators' Motivation

A working definition of volunteer translation might be, therefore: translation conducted by people exercising their free will to perform translation work which is not remunerated, which is formally organized and for the benefit of others (Olohan, 2014).

O'Brien and Schaler (2010) studied the volunteer translators for a not-for-profit volunteer translation facilitator, the Rosetta Foundation, using a questionnaire distributed to volunteers in the initial months of the Foundation's operations. They categorized motivations as personal or social (drawing on Shirky, 2010), formulated three "self-serving needs" and two "beliefs in external causes", and asked respondents to rate these motivating factors for relevance on a five-point Likert scale, from high relevance to no relevance. These motivations were formulated as follows: (1) to improve their language skills; (2) to improve their translation skills; (3) to gain professional translation experience; (4) to support the Rosetta Foundation's cause; (5) to support translation of information into a lesser-used language; and (6) to gain intellectual stimulation.

O'Brien and Schaler deemed motive (4) as most relevant, followed by motive (3). They concluded that these volunteer translators are motivated by both social and personal factors.

In a second question, respondents were asked to indicate from a list of eight rewards which one would motivate them even more to volunteer. Rewards included payment, gifts, recognition in a top-10 list or website profile, invitations to events, feedback from Foundation clients and feedback from qualified translators. The most popular answers were the two forms of feedback, correlating with the motivations identified in the previous question. On the one hand, feedback from the clients would give volunteers more information on how their volunteering supported the Foundation's cause. On the other hand, feedback on the translation output from qualified translators would help volunteer translators improve their translation skills and thereby advance their professional careers.

4. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, a set of three questionnaires was distributed to 35 participants, that is, the translator trainees who attended the course on Translation Tools during the academic year 2016-2017 in the Department of French Language and Literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

4.1. The First Phase of the Questionnaire – Before Subtitling

The majority of the translator trainees (63 %) had not heard about the TED Organisation before taking the course on Translation Tools [2]. Their feelings about volunteer translation were mostly positive. In open-ended questions they expressed opinions such as:

- It makes the world a better place.
- It offers fast translations but at the same time does not have the necessary quality because translators are not always professionals.
- It is extremely useful and necessary.
- We are contributing to having very interesting material translated into the language we are interested in, and there may not be many who can do that.
- Volunteer translation is quite interesting, especially if one can do it to relax before bedtime.
- I find it quite interesting. Firstly, because the translator is given the opportunity to practice, to discover new means and ways of working new tools but also knowledge that arises through the texts themselves, videos etc., also through the research. In addition, the ability to offer and help someone who does not know the language [of the talk] is excellent.
- It is useful because everyone shares his knowledge in the language, he/she translates.
- It is a way to improve a translation, plus it promotes teamwork and collaboration with other people.
- It is really a pleasant and constructive undertaking.
- It is an opportunity to gain experience in translation.
- In my opinion, I think that voluntary translation is very helpful in enlightening the student of a foreign language about translation. Personally, I would like to practice subtitling because I think it will help me to watch TV series and films and better understand them.
- In my opinion, voluntary translation is great nowadays. Technology is evolving, and we
 must use it to our advantage. For example, with voluntary translation, we can practice
 new translation techniques and broaden our knowledge and horizons.
- I have formed the highest opinion because I'm offering something.
- Volunteer translation helps us improve our translation skills. Also, thanks to volunteer translation, we help the world understand some talks and/or written texts.

More sceptical trainees considered also a negative aspect of volunteer translation, expressing concerns about the quality of translation: "I think there are positive and negative things about volunteer translation. When you volunteer, you gain experience,

and for me this is very important. On the other hand, if one does not take this job seriously, there is a great chance of a poor result. But when you love something, you always have something to gain in the end".

When asked to choose a set of motivations, gaining experience in subtitling was the most significant one (Fig. 1).

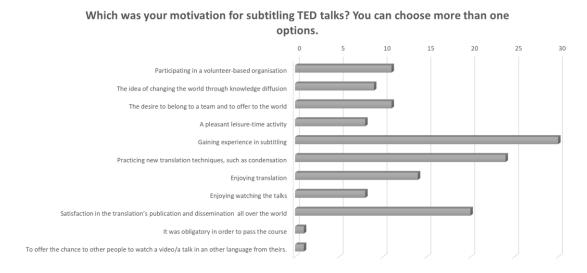


Figure 1 – Motivation for subtitling TED Talks

It is interesting that there was almost complete opposition to Olohan's sample of translators who were motivated by intellectual interest in the content of the talks they translated, and translating for TED is described as opening up "a whole new world of knowledge" to them and fulfilling a desire to learn or a love of learning. The learning and intellectual stimulation achieved through translating TED Talks was described in purely personal terms and not in relation to learning about translation. None of those translators in Olohan's sample admits to professional aims or interests, i.e., they were not motivated to gain translation experience because they aspire to careers as translators, which perhaps explains why they were motivated to learn about the content of the TED Talks but not about translation per se. The volunteers are motivated by the enjoyment of translating; translation is described as "fun". It seems to be not so "fun", at least not at this stage, for translator trainees.

4.2. The Second Phase of the Questionnaire – During Subtitling

In open-ended questions, there was positive anticipation of receiving feedback, but also stress and anxiety was expressed as regards the reviewing procedure of the subtitles:

- I will be able to see where I was wrong, It is very positive because we will be able to see my mistakes and be corrected by an experienced reviewer, I will see my weaknesses and learn from them, It is fair and reasonable.
- It is very useful to have an understanding of my evolution in subtitling.
- The truth is that I'm afraid to see the remarks and corrections, but I'll take it as an opportunity to improve as a result of the mistakes I made.
- I consider this correction to be necessary as the product of the translation will be published to a wide audience and the result should be flawless.
- Editing and proof-reading are essential components of the translation process, so
 I am pleased with this as it minimizes the possibility of making mistakes, since we
 are just amateurs.
- I do not mind because I will gain experience.
- It is perfectly reasonable, especially since it is conducted by people with greater experience.
- It is a good thing that our translation will be reviewed by an experienced reviewer.
- My work will gain prestige, I feel honoured.
- Excellent! Necessary, Perfect, very nice experience, useful, I feel thankful.
- I will see the mistakes I have made as a student and try not to repeat them. The knowledge and experience of an experienced translator will help me reduce my mistakes in translation.
- I like this idea very much because in this way we will become better translators in the future.
- Very good because I will have the opportunity to learn from my mistakes.
- It makes me nervous a bit because not everyone in the web is actually polite, but if
 the comments are good, then it is definitely good to get feedback from experienced
 people.
- It is very interesting and also stressful, it is the first contact with the translation, it is important to know that someone more experienced than you will take your work seriously!
- As expected, I did not expect that a translation could ever be published under the name of an organization like TED without passing through at least one evaluation stage. Also, the feedback you receive helps you to correct your mistakes and to improve.

As regards difficulties, synchronisation and condensation were considered the hardest to achieve, while complying with TED translating rules was not an issue, since they had no previous experience with any other set of rules besides subtitling YouTube videos, where there are almost no rules. Also, a deadline was not considered important, as four weeks were considered sufficient for a video of 10 to 15 minutes long (*Fig.* 2).

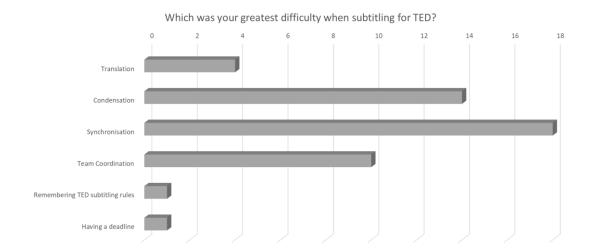


Figure 2 – Motivation for subtitling TED Talks

4.3. The Third Phase of the Questionnaire – After Subtitling

A few weeks after submitting the team's subtitles, the translator trainees of the Department of French Language and Literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens saw our team featured at the official TED blog [3], by Jesse Zurawell.

The blog post referred to our struggle to translate "death" from French. The whole subtitling project started with the students' collective translation of a talk by Gilda Gonfier at TEDxPointeàPitre 2016 [4]. This initial effort unexpectedly forced the class to confront the common subtitling issue of how to proceed when the gender of a subject or an object differs in the two languages involved: Gilda's talk includes a story in which a man marries Death, who is typically female in Romance languages like French; in Greek, however, Death is a male figure due to the gender of the noun in the Greek language. One student eventually remembered that in the Greek song form called "rebetiko", Death can be a woman named Charondissa, and so the class adopted this word for their translation.

After subtitling Gilda's talk, the class broke into eight groups of four or five students in order to translate eight more TEDx Talks from events such as TEDxCannes, TEDxChampsElyseesSalon and TEDxParis, to list a few. Everyone obtained an Amara account for the work, and eight students were designated as coordinators for their respective teams. One student, who was already familiar with translating for TED prior to the course's project, helped supervise all eight groups.

The effort was a resounding success, so much so that the class arranged a screening of their translated talks for friends, family and university staff on June 8, 2017. Among the attendees were the Department of French Language and Literature's president, as well as TED Translators Maria Perikleous and Chryssa Rapessi, both of whom reviewed the class's translated talks, post-subtitling.

Invariably though, the initial sharing by TED translators with friends and family developed into a wider motive, extending to a desire to address broader audiences: "many of my friends loved it, so I worked hard and translated a bit more".

The "most active translators" are highlighted in TED Translators' web page. Translators' "contribution to the TED community" is also given a numerical "TEDcred" score. Through these various mechanisms TED appears to address those who are interested in accruing recognition or social esteem for their volunteer translation activity.

The translator trainees' final remarks about the experience of translating for TED included statements such as the following:

- Very useful, very interesting.
- I loved it very much because I was engaging in something, I had never thought I would be interested in, and eventually I liked it so much that I would like to work in this field as well.
- Necessary for our career as translators.
- More difficult than expected, still very interesting, difficult and time consuming, but still interesting and I enjoyed it.
- It is a pleasant experience that offers technical knowledge necessary to translators today and at the same time it is something different, a hands-on experience instead of memorization.
- The study of subtitling as part of a university course is very interesting. However, the organization of the work could be better, unfortunately we did not all have the opportunity to work in the context of this work in the environment of TED and AMARA since only the team coordinators had that opportunity.
- Subtitling as a subject seems particularly interesting to me, but the majority of the class mainly dealt with the translation of the subtitles and not with the synchronization and familiarity with specific subtitling programs. For this reason, I agree with the creation of a subtitling course within the faculty so that all students will have the opportunity to deal with synchronization and other functions, and not just the team coordinators.
- It was very interesting, but I was saddened by the fact that I was not given the opportunity to work in the Amara environment, as I was not a team coordinator, but simply a member. I understand that the choice was made in the limited time frame in order to save time, but I would have liked to have been given this opportunity.
- Difficult, stressful. The coordinator undertakes the most difficult tasks all alone.
- Very different from the process of a literary translation. Subtitling requires a new technique, that of condensation. This comparative process helps me, at the same time, to more easily identify the limits in literary translation.
- This lesson developed students' knowledge by putting them in the position of a professional translator. Excellent work, organised, lots of knowledge and positive energy.

- I liked it very much! At first, I did not expect to be given the opportunity to attend such a course during my studies, which I consider not only very useful but creative; it made me understand language more deeply.
- I never expected to do this as a university class and I can say it was a very good and beautiful experience. I hope it will continue in the following years.
- It was definitely something unprecedented! I was delighted to have had the opportunity to become acquainted with these tools.
- It was an unprecedented experience for me and an opportunity to discover how much time and good mood it takes to produce all those movie subtitles that we all download each time.
- *It strengthens the sense of teamwork and the virtue of patience and hard work.*
- It was a delightful experience, however, if there was more time the result would be even better.
- Very good, although I would prefer to work on my own, because it is very difficult to coordinate so many people with different backgrounds in translation. Despite being a very beneficial experience, I would not repeat it.

Overall, TED Talks were perceived as beneficial and therefore simply "worth sharing". Students have seen TED translation as a chance "to contribute to the changing world". 94% stated that would continue translating TED Talks after completing the course.

5. Conclusions and perspectives

This study focused on students' perceptions of the learning derived from participation in TED Translators and also the social impact of subtitling for TED, and found that participants valued the learning of new skills, potentially useful for professional development, and taking credit for their translation in a well-known and respected community. They were mostly positive about the role of this kind of activity. The responses indicated that they wanted to make information available to other language users. They also found the project intellectually stimulating. Many of the trainee translators interacted and supported each other through the associated Facebook group of Greek TED Translators.

This paper also examined a more dynamic and creative approach to teaching translation by using audio-visual material and collaborative translation. This procedure enabled us to effectively use TED Talks in translators' training. The observation of the comments given by students highlighted the feasibility of using this methodology as pedagogical material.

This methodology was evaluated on the basis of a small set of statements from translator trainees. The test case prepares the ground for much-needed, larger-scale studies into translator trainees' motivations.

Footnotes

- [1] https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization.
- [2] At the time, for the academic year 2016-2017, "Audio-Visual Translation" was part of a course on "Translation Tools". Subsequently, for the academic year 2017-2018, a separate course on "Audio-visual Translation" was created and became part of the Programme of Study.
- [3] https://tedtranslators.com/2017/07/10/translating-tedx-talks-at-the-university-of-athens/
- [4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdGFXE1GbfE

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