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6 Using online volunteer translation communities for language learning in formal education

Anna Comas-Quinn¹

Abstract

This paper reviews three attempts to incorporate technology-enabled online volunteer translation communities into language teaching in formal education. Through taking part in these communities, participants can develop many important skills, including digital, participatory, and information literacy, alongside improving their language skills and acquiring knowledge of translation and subtitling. Despite the challenges, an open pedagogy that connects learners with communities outside the classroom offers valuable opportunities to engage learners in meaningful tasks that add value to society, and relates well to a project-based, situated, and experiential pedagogy. Through an action research process, several activity designs for using TED Translators in language and translation education were implemented, evaluated, and refined to offer learners and teachers effective ways of engaging with this rich resource. An overview of the opportunities and challenges is presented, including ethical considerations of using open online communities in formal language education.

Keywords: translation education, language learning, open pedagogy, situated learning, TED Translators.

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1. Introduction

Technology has made possible the creation of online communities in which participants engage in voluntary activities to produce and consume content. TED Translators is one example: over 30,000 volunteers transcribe, translate, and review the subtitles of TED Talks into over 100 languages. In the process, they develop a number of skills, both linguistic (vocabulary building, translation, writing...) and organisational and transversal, such as digital literacy, online collaboration, or research. Motivation to participate ranges from enjoyment of the activity and affinity with the mission of spreading knowledge across languages (Cámara de la Fuente, 2014) to an interest in developing translation and subtitling skills as part of a path towards professional translation.

There is great potential in the learning opportunities afforded by these communities as part of learner-directed informal learning but also in more formal educational contexts (Wikipedia Education Program, 2012). Besides the chance to engage students in a meaningful, real-world task that makes a visible contribution to society, working with these open communities fits well with an open pedagogy (Beetham, Falconer, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2012) based on project-based, situated, and experiential principles (González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído, 2016; Kiraly, 2016). This brief paper examines the potential of using these communities in formal educational contexts whilst acknowledging the challenges, as the rigid schedules of formal education rarely match the more relaxed and unpredictable rhythms of volunteer activities.

2. Ways of working with TED Translators

The learning designs trialled to engage higher education language and translation learners with TED Translators are briefly described here in chronological order, and further information can be obtained from the relevant publications.

In a first pilot project (Cámara de la Fuente & Comas-Quinn, 2016), five translation graduates from the Universidad de Valladolid, Spain, volunteered to

take part in a teacher-guided activity that introduced them to TED Translators and to translating the subtitles of a talk. The teachers, who are TED Translator volunteers themselves, arranged for the tasks to be reviewed, approved, and published within the time scheduled for the activity. The number of participants was small and the feedback largely positive, but a number of challenges became evident: the steep learning curve to deal with the technical side of the task; the lack of familiarity or acceptance of community customs which led to most learners using the wrong form of address in their translations as they chose Peninsular Spanish over the Global Spanish convention agreed by the community; the impossibility of scaling up a design that relied on teacher input to overcome the delays in review and approval inherent in a volunteer project; and, in the case of one participant, the rejection of volunteering as a legitimate learning activity.

The second project (Comas-Quinn & Fuertes Gutiérrez, 2017) involved several language combinations and 15 students, all language graduates from The Open University, UK. The activity introduced them to translation and subtitling, and to ways of using online open and free content to keep up their language skills post-graduation. The activity design was expanded to include a peer review stage once the translation was completed so that participants could give and receive feedback to improve their work before deciding whether to submit it to the TED Translators review process for publication. Some technical challenges were experienced by participants but, with one exception, they all reported a very positive experience which included high levels of enjoyment and the discovery of a new recreational or professional interest. This project also trialled a way of assessing the activity through a reflective essay in which participants were asked to comment on linguistic, cultural, and technical challenges encountered in the task.

Other ways of using TED Translators in language learning have been incorporated into the Master of Arts in translation at The Open University, UK. In the section ‘gaining experience’, students are introduced to volunteering as a way of practising their translation skills, building up a portfolio of work to showcase to prospective employers, and networking with other professionals. When they

study ‘audiovisual translation’, they are directed to TED Translators where they can practise their subtitling skills using an open-source subtitling editor (Amara). Beaven (forthcoming) explains how in their ‘language development’ work, students are directed to TED Talks to build up-to-date technical vocabulary in their chosen area of specialisation. Students are not required to volunteer for TED Translators and their participation is not assessed.

3. Results and discussion

Sauro (2017) notes that support is not universal for “domesticating language-learning practices from the digital wilds to the formal classroom” (p. 140). Teachers attempting this should be mindful of preserving key components of learning in online communities, such as self-direction, collaboration, and engagement (Curwood, 2013), and of respecting the cultures of the communities the learners and teachers are entering (Minkel, 2015).

Ethical considerations need to be contemplated and managed too when directing learners to volunteer communities. Besides some negative perceptions of volunteering (Cámara de la Fuente & Comas-Quinn, 2016) shared by some translation scholars (O’Hagan, 2012), there is an ethical contradiction in mandating learners to volunteer or to create content to be published openly online (Martínez-Arboleda, 2014). Designs that allow learners to make these decisions themselves can be developed to allow different paths to participation and respect learners’ ownership of their own time and content.

4. Conclusions

Open pedagogy is a way of bringing formal and informal learning contexts together and placing knowledge production in the hands of learners in a more distributed knowledge and expertise model that builds on and better reflects the connected nature of our digital society. In the projects reported here, the teacher’s role is to direct learners to existing learning opportunities, helping

them to recognise and take advantage of these opportunities, whilst retaining their right to make their own decisions.

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