Revamping a Translation Studies Program

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3

Model Background ....................................................................................................... 3

Context ......................................................................................................................... 3

Environment ................................................................................................................. 4

Model Purpose ............................................................................................................. 5

  Generalizability ......................................................................................................... 5

Key Personnel & Roles ............................................................................................... 5

Intended Audience(s) ................................................................................................. 6

Rationale for Model ..................................................................................................... 6

Model Assumptions and/or Constraints ................................................................... 6

The Model .................................................................................................................. 8

Analysis and Design of Model .................................................................................. 9

  Model Components ................................................................................................ 9

Communication & Diffusion Plan .............................................................................. 10

Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 11

References ................................................................................................................ 11

Enhancements to the Model Informed by Peer Feedback ........................................ 11
Introduction

Translation Studies is a field of study (a sub-branch of Linguistics) which explores the methods, techniques, and theories of how translation occurs or should occur. Many people assume that knowing a foreign language is enough in and of itself in order to be a translator or interpreter. However, it is merely a myth that is debunked as soon as a person who was never trained to be a translator is given a task to do a translation and compare his or her translation with that of a professional translator.

All Translation Studies programs at institutions of higher learning aim at both providing the training in the field and shaking general myths regarding translation. All programs emphasize that the major problem in translation is not in the target (foreign) language but in the native language which is not used properly when translating. This can be accounted for by different grammar and syntax rules in two languages as well as different cultures in which two languages operate. To give an example, in English the most important information comes first (Kevin came into the room), while in Russian the most important information goes at the end of the phrase (Into the room came Kevin). Failure to take it into account leads to the client’s confusion when s/he gets the translation (“Why does it sound a bit unnatural?”). This should be avoided.

Now that globalization is taking over and English has become a lingua franca, the need for more people who can translate well from and to English is rapidly growing. In Belarus, Translation Studies departments are popular choices of teenagers once they graduate from high schools. But those students who chose to major in other disciplines feel the need to learn translation skills for their future jobs or simply to increase their employability on the job market. Hence, not infrequently do they choose short-term courses or programs that promise to teach striving learners the practical skills they need.

One such place in Minsk, Belarus, is a Study Center “Lingua+” at Belarusian State University, where I taught Translation Studies for two years in 2012–2014. This department offered an intensive program in Translation Studies to students of different backgrounds. Yet in actuality the program was complex to all students because of its big focus on translation theory. The purpose of this document is to provide a model of teaching Translation Studies in this department for students with no prior knowledge in the field of translation or, more broadly, in the field of Linguistics.

Model Background

Context

The context for the model is teaching the Introduction to Translation Studies (Russian to English, a 3-credit core course) in a higher education setting as an additional specialization for students who are already getting a degree in a non-linguistic major (accounting, health care, management, sociology, etc.). The duration of the course is only two semesters, each lasting 17 weeks. Students who come into the program lack any knowledge about Translation Studies and the basic skills that translators need to have when they translate professionally.

The way this discipline is taught now does not allow students to fully put an avalanche of translation theory into practice. The current program curriculum is taken from the main linguistic university of the country and was only slightly adapted. That original curriculum was designed to
teach Translation Studies in a 5-year program to students of linguistics who already took Linguistics courses to support their studies at the Translation Studies department.

While theory is vital to understand why translators do what they do, there is no time to delve into theoretical details and sometimes cumbersome terminology in the two-semester program for students with no Linguistics background. However, the expected outcome of this two-semester program is that learners of Translation Studies will be able to translate texts from English into Russian, be able to explain and/or justify their translations, and discuss their performance as translators knowledgeably.

Classes are located in one of the university buildings not far from the subway line. Most classrooms have projectors, a teacher’s computer, a blackboard, and a whiteboard. Students are selected annually. Because the majority of learners are full-time students of other academic programs, there are morning groups and evening groups. The former has translation classes scheduled once a week at 9am–11:20am and the latter at 6:30pm–8:50pm. There are roughly 12–15 people in each of these groups, making a total of 30 students in a program. The morning and evening groups do not meet one another. The traditional way of communication between teachers and students as well as the faculty administrator and students is through personal emails (there is no Moodle, or Blackboard, or university emails).

Environment

Translation Studies is a core course in the program and is one of the ten courses that are overall taught in the program. Ideally, this course has to link well together with other courses in the program, meaning that all other courses will also lead to building up the skills in the field of Translation Studies. Other courses include English Grammar, Conversational English, Introduction to Interpretation, Lexicology, Dictionaries and Bibliography, British and American Literatures, the Russian Language, and the Ideology of Belarus (the last course is required by the state).

Therefore, the Translation Studies course is an open system. It has inputs (in the forms of questions and content) from other courses and those other courses may serve as a kind of feedback to this core course. Walonick (1993) mentions: “The basic characteristics of an open system is the dynamic interaction of its components, while the basis of a cybernetic model is the feedback cycle.” The Translation Studies course interacts with other courses insofar as certain topics that are taught in other courses are taught in a different light (such as synonymy, international words, syntax, etc.).

Although the Translation Studies course sets the tone for the program and somewhat informs the content for all other courses, it is also formed by the content of other courses. For example, some grammar structures are emphasized in the English Grammar classes; therefore, they are not paid much attention to in the translation classes. Or, the differences between American English and British English are not discussed in detail in the translation classes, since they are well discussed in the Conversational English classes.

So, the whole program is a suprasystem to the Translation Studies course. However, there is a bigger suprasystem to the program level—higher education. This program functions in the context of higher education in Belarus and is aimed at providing the necessary skills in translation to the learners of non-linguistic majors.
Model Purpose

The purpose of the model is to improve teaching of Translation Studies in the two-semester program at a large state-run university, whereby learners with no previous knowledge of translation and/or linguistics (hence, lacking the professional jargon and skills necessary for professional work) will learn to use the fundamental principles of translation.

Generalizability. The model will be practical, repeatable, and scalable, because what it does is transfer and condense an academic program to a practical training program. This can be used across contexts. Once completed, this model will provide the teachers with a framework of how to limit the topics that need to be taught in the introductory Translation Studies course. This, in turn, will allow the teachers to equip their students with the necessary hands-on skills and principles that can be used in the profession of a translator. Part of the proposed solution is transfer a lot of materials online and use the classroom time as a lab for polishing the translation skills (flipped classroom model). This model has its limitations. Because it is a practical skills model, it cannot be generalized to programs where a certain discipline is taught as a primary major. It is only good as a quick and rapid introductory framework.

Key Personnel & Roles

The table below summarizes the activities that will be done by key personnel involved in utilizing the proposed model. Overall, these include a developer (who is an instructional designer, evaluator, SME, and communicator), program director, and translation teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description of the Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The developer</strong>—instructional designer, evaluator, and subject matter expert, communicator</td>
<td>The developer is responsible for the front-end analysis, design of the course, and summative evaluation of the program. The role of the developer of this model is to be the content expert (or, subject matter expert, SME), the instructional designer, and the evaluator. The developer designs the solution, using the instructional design process, to reach specific purposes of an introductory training program for absolute beginners. The developer makes sure that the course syllabus allows for the teachers some time to either explain certain topics in more detail or practice them longer than initially planned. After the program is complete, the developer of the model is responsible for the summative evaluation of the program—both short-term and long-term. Also, his/her role will be to communicate the model to the faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program director</strong></td>
<td>S/he uses the model as a framework of how the process of instruction is organized. S/he also presides in the committee during the board exams and can see the immediate outcomes of the program. The role of the program director regarding the model will be to make sure the model is followed by all faculty members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers of Translation Studies</strong></td>
<td>They are key figures in the development part of the model and are responsible for creating their own instructional materials, conducting classes, and conducting formative evaluations of their class sessions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intended Audience(s)

The audience for whom the model is designed are the teachers of the Introduction to Translation Studies in the two-semester program in a higher education setting to students from a variety of academic backgrounds.

Rationale for Model

The model came about as a solution to close the gap between the current students’ performance and the desired students’ performance. In particular, the abundance of theoretical knowledge (and time spent on teaching it) did not provide students with enough opportunities to practice translational skills and get a substantial feedback.

The model acts as a metaphor for freshness. Visually it is the molecule of water—H₂O. The molecule of water has three components: two atoms of hydrogen and an atom of oxygen. Life on Earth depends on water, so the metaphor may be particularly useful when talking about learners in the context of Translation Studies. The water metaphor also stands for an essential nutrient that can be absorbed by learners of Translation Studies in this two-semester program. The hydrogen atoms are the power forces that drive the model and the oxygen atom represents the air that translation teachers use to breathe freely in their classes with students.

Overall, the model is based on the process of instructional design as described in three steps by Smith & Ragan (2005):

1. Perform an instructional analysis to determine “where we’re going.”
2. Develop an instructional strategy to determine “how we’ll get there.”
3. Develop and conduct an evaluation to determine “how we’ll know when we’re there.”

(p. 8)

For our purposes, the first and third steps are left unchanged (analysis is referred to as “front-end”), whereas the second step was remodeled and called “development.” What is also different from Smith & Ragan’s process (2005) is that each step also has three major steps, and those also have the shape of the water molecule. It will keep the model clean and not burdensome as well as help translation teachers avoid confusion in the process of teaching and use the model effectively.

Model Assumptions and/or Constraints

The following assumptions concern the learners, teachers, and methods of teaching.

Learners

None of the students have taken any courses in Linguistics and Translation Studies prior to joining this two-semester program. A lot of students do not have an excellent command of English either (as demonstrated annually after pre-testing). The overwhelming majority of students are in their early twenties, with a few exceptions of non-traditional students. Most study full-time at other institutions of higher learning (their majors range from sociology, management, and economics to chemistry, medicine, and physics). All this places constraints on the amount of workload they can reasonably do in this program. It will be legitimate to use John Locke’s metaphor of a “blank slate” with regard to these students insofar as their previous involvement in translation is concerned.
Teachers
All teachers in the department are those who had a training in the Linguistics and/or Translation Studies programs in Belarusian universities. Some of them have a rich practical background, some have been fully dedicated to their academic careers. It may be challenging to some of them to remember what it was like for them to start learning about Translation Studies from point zero. Also, there is a big turnover in the department every year presumably due to small salaries. New teachers are recruited though not advised as to what they can or should teach. Usually they are given the existing curriculum and should decide for themselves how they will condense all topics into the semester. There are no formal meetings for teachers to discuss professional experience and/or share best practices. A lot of times new teachers are not introduced to the current faculty and in that sense left alone to themselves and students.

Methods of teaching
Traditional methods of teaching Translation Studies to students of Linguistics do not work for this two-semester program, because non-linguists do not possess the necessary vocabulary that linguists usually use in their professional life. It is impossible to put everyone on the same page with the traditional approach in the given time frame, because it is a matter of a few linguistics courses to introduce all important concepts and theories to students. So, there is a need to escape the cumbersome linguistics jargon yet teach students the necessary principles that help enhance their translation skills and make their translations more accurate. Instead of being a full-fledged Translation Studies program, this two-semester program can be an Applied Translation Studies training.
The Model

Figure. H₂O model for re-designing and improving the Translation Studies program
Analysis and Design of Model

Model Components

As is seen from the visual on the previous page, the instructional design model consists of three components: front-end, development, and evaluation.

The H₂O model starts at the front-end phase, in which analysis is being done—of learners, goals, objectives, and content coverage. This phase for this particular model is less likely to be changed much. Every year the incoming students are those that never before studied translation. The gap in knowledge and skills will practically remain unchanged. What should be done, however, is establish the level of English of the would-be learners. As was the case during the time I taught the course three times in three different groups, the higher the level of English students had, the faster they learned the new content and showed more engagement in the instructional activities. This learner analysis will allow to form groups of students according to the knowledge of English, and if some students still have gaps in the English grammar, that will be addressed promptly in their English Grammar course as well in the Translation Studies courses. The design piece of the inner water molecule in the front-end phase will be a plan of the content that should be covered. The purpose of it is to exclude unnecessary content for this particular program.

The analysis part of the model will also specify course goals and objectives. As such, the goal of the Translation Studies course will be to develop fundamental translational skills in students. The objectives will be: (1) to list 7–10 major translation principles, (2) to classify 13 translation techniques into three groups as described by V.N. Komissarov, (3) to apply translation principles and techniques in students’ translations, (4) to explain and criticize translations from English into Russian of other translators, using the translation principles and techniques; (5) to edit students’ own and other people’s translations, using translation principles and translation techniques; (6) to justify and defend students’ own translations, using translation principles and translation techniques.

The oxygen element of the model, the development phase, is supposed to be the phase which is produced by the teachers. By being informed of the data from the front-end analysis (learners’ level, learners’ backgrounds, objectives, and a plan of topics to cover), the teacher of Translation Studies will be responsible for developing instructional materials. S/he becomes free to choose whatever assignment they will find meaningful for their particular groups as long as they speak to the predetermined objectives of the course. S/he will have to implement those materials, reflect on students’ results and engagement, give students feedback, and analyze in the end what went well or didn’t go well (this will serve as a formative evaluation). Teachers will also be free in choosing the media of instruction (individual translation, peer tutoring, collaborative activities, etc.). For those teachers who may need more guidance in utilizing the new model for each unit, the instructional designer will provide information about the choices of what materials, topics, terminology should and should not be used in order to reach the stated objectives and overarching goals. In the development phase, it will be the responsibility of the teacher to reflect on the work and do a small formative evaluation of the methods, resources, and strategies they will use.

Finally, the last piece of the model is summative evaluation. This evaluation will look at two things: short-term effects and long-term effects. The short-term effect will become obvious at the board exams, where students come and perform a translation of a text from English into Russian,
followed by the questions of the boarding committee. Questions will aim at evaluating of the techniques students used in order to translate their texts. The final grade will serve as an indicator of the success of instruction: the higher the grade, the more successful the immediate results are. Long-term effects may be harder to trace. Ideally, a survey will be distributed to the graduates of the program a year after they complete the program. In the survey, they will be asked if they use translation skills in their jobs or further studies, whether the program was useful for them, what particular topics were most important, and what topics could have been taught in more depth. This will serve both as evaluation of the program in the long term as well feedback to the department as to what may be changed to the current program.

The important difference from a general instructional design model (such as ADDIE) is that this model is quasi-iterative. The front-end analysis will be a quick activity for the most part, because the prior knowledge of translation of incoming students is the same year after year—none. There may be differences in the levels of English among different students, so this analysis may address that aspect of the process. It only slightly affects the goals and objectives of the entire program. Also, the summative evaluation at the end of the course informs the outcomes of the program in the short term and in the long term. However, this may cause changes in the overall goals and objectives only slightly, because the content that is supposed to be learned by students is already reduced to the very essentials. At the same time, the summative evaluation informs greatly the development stage of the model (the oxygen molecule in the model) and may serve as a way of improving teaching in classrooms.

Communication & Diffusion Plan

In order to start implementing the model, it should first be communicated to the program director and the faculty. At first, the meeting with the program director will be arranged in the second semester of the program, during which the model will be presented and described. During this meeting, the benefits of this model will be described in detail. After the program director considers the approach and approves of it, a meeting will be organized with the whole faculty at the end of the academic year. The meeting will cover the model, its benefits, and basic operations. I choose to conduct a meeting at the end of the year, because there may be attitudinal problems on the part of the teachers (“we don’t like it and we don’t want it”). It is expected that the summer period will allow them to come to terms with the idea that the process of teaching the Translation Studies will be modified and actually help them focus their classes.

It may not be easy to win adopters instantly, so one of the steps in the diffusion of the idea will be to develop for and provide to the teachers a fully-developed sample of Module One for the Translation Studies 101 class. This will include the content of the topic to be read by students at home, a small translation exercise to be done at home, a lesson plan with all supporting materials (a text in English, pre-translational activities, translation of the text into Russian, the description of where the learned translational techniques were applied in the texts, post-translational activities, peer activities, and questions for debrief at the end of the class session). This module can eventually be used as is in the beginning of the next year and serve as a model to the teachers.

After the initial meeting, all faculty will receive a follow-up email with the Translation Studies syllabus for the next year, statement of goals and objectives for each module, and the exemplary Module One. It is expected that such an approach will alleviate the majority of
concerns of the teachers as to what they should do in order to ensure that learning will occur successfully for students.

Conclusion

The model presented in this paper (H$_2$O) was designed to improve the teaching of Translation Studies in the study center “Lingua+” of Belarusian State University. It addresses the specific needs of this program to enhance students’ skills in translation, because the current model puts much emphasis on theoretical rather than practical knowledge. This model transforms the one-year academic program in Translation Studies into an intensive training program; thus, it justifiably limits the theoretical underpinnings of the field of Translation Studies. The rationale behind this decision is such that the majority of students come from non-linguistics backgrounds and seek specifically for practical skills in translation that they can later use in their work or studies.

This model has limitations in two ways. First, the instructional designer performs multiple roles (such as SME, evaluator, communicator). It was not designed in communication with other translation professionals who teach the subject, hence, not everyone may agree with the identified fundamental goals and objectives that the instructional designer proposed. Second, the nature of the model is semi-iterative, meaning that the evaluation does not inform the front-end analysis part but the development part (for which teachers are responsible). To implement changes for future may mean that the instructional designer will have to discuss with teachers their teaching styles, which may be a sensitive topic.

This document included the description of the model, its visual, its basic operations, the roles of the key personnel, major assumptions, communication plan, and major limitations. This document can be distributed to the interested parties, and the process of change can happen in the program in the short-term.

References


Enhancements to the Model Informed by Peer Feedback

The peer feedback to the model was provided during the IDE632 Instructional Design II class session on 19 April 2016. The model was presented and followed by the short Q&A. The major question and critique was the terminology. Originally, the second part of the model, Development, had a small molecule of water within itself that consisted of “develop,” “implement,” and “asses” phases. The criticism was that the word “develop” is already used in the name of the process (“development”), so this created confusion (redundancy) and needed more clarification. The word “develop” was changed to “prepare” to signify that it is the teacher who prepares instructional materials. Initially, this word redundancy was overlooked by the model developer. Instead of defining the “development” part and then specifying what “to develop” meant, I chose to change the vocabulary. This word is better than “create,” because what the teacher really needs to do is to find a good piece of text and prepare activities around it, including content analysis, translation, pre- and post-translational exercises, and critical reading questions.
Earlier in March, I had a consultation with the course instructor. At that point the model was three circles connected by lines, all of them being in a bigger circle. This was meant to specify that the model exists in a larger system. However, the professor’s question reminded me of the fact that the model should be clear for an outsider to take it and implement. Initially, I did not include the front-end analysis section, because the idea was that it is me who, as an instructional designer, will initiate changes, so I know how to do the analysis part. Yet in that way, the model may not be used by people other than me (which makes it highly contextual and not scalable), and that’s why by bringing in the front-end piece, the model got its form as it is now. Later, the metaphor of the molecule of water naturally developed.