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Writing, Translating, and Revising Menus: An
International Virtual Exchange Project

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Writing, Translating, and Revising Menus: An International Virtual Exchange Project

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Overview

This assignment is informed by a pedagogical tradition that emphasizes the connections between the fields of writing and translation (Matsuda; Horner and Tetreault), a connection that becomes even more relevant in technical communication (Gnecchi et al.; Petts et al.). Just like writing, translation is process-based, iterative, and responsive. By presenting writing as an iterative and collaborative process based on mediation, composition scholarship has incorporated concepts that have always been foundational in translation theory. Several tasks that translators need to complete also characterize the writing process: Understanding the purpose of a text, carefully analyzing the target audience, and reflecting on genre conventions are key steps in the translation process. It might be easier for students of composition to see how translation projects require professionals to follow a complex process. At that point an instructor can make the point that writing itself must follow a process. In addition, all forms of writing involve a negotiation with previous authors and texts. Reflecting on translation can help students see writing as the product of a conversation, rather than a solitary endeavor.

Importantly, reflecting on translation and how difficult it is to translate many types of texts word by word will also help students focus on language as a code that is never transparent. All human languages are inherently ambiguous. Language is not the "means whereby knowledge, which is discovered and stored in the mind, is represented and communicated to other minds" (Turner 56). Language is in the way and exercises an influence on how we develop ideas, how we translate our thoughts into coherent messages, and how we socialize with others through spoken or written interactions. Translators can rarely resort to literal translation or formal equivalence because languages are enmeshed with cultures and

complex rhetorical traditions.

To help students of English composition reflect on translation and learn to collaborate with translators, I organized a virtual exchange (VE) project (O'Dowd, 2018). VE projects are an example of internationalization-at-home: on-campus initiatives that connect students from different countries. The simple fact of having Zoom conversations with non-native speakers of English can help students develop their intercultural communicative competence (Byram). As Helm and Guth argue, a crucial aim for VE projects (they use the alternative term Telecollaboration) is to encourage students to "communicate, collaborate, create and negotiate, effectively in multilingual, multicultural global networks using any number of languages" (p. 72).

As a member of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP) and Penn State's Experiential Digital Global Engagement (EDGE) — organizations of teachers who promote VE initiatives — I regularly link my writing courses with English as a foreign language courses and translation courses taught at several different universities around the world. For this specific type of VE project I link my English composition course (Penn State Behrend, USA) with a course in translation (Spanish into English) taught by Belén López-Arroyo at the University of Valladolid (Spain). Every fall semester we pair up Spanish and American students to work on the following project: They have to produce bilingual (Spanish and English) restaurant menus for English-speaking tourists visiting Spain.

A highly codified genre, the restaurant menu has several rhetorical goals, which can be somewhat contradicting. Menus must contain information about ingredients, preparation methods, and cooking methods; they should also include allergen information. At the same time, information must be presented succinctly due to space limitations and constraints presented by layout and design. Also, readers expect short and clear descriptions for dishes. They don't want to be overwhelmed with information. Many readers will access menus

on their smartphones; this means that digital versions must be mobile-responsive and possibly interactive. Finally, menus must persuade readers to order specific dishes. They have a persuasive and promotional function because they can be accessed from home, before even selecting a restaurant.

To further complicate things, food reflects profound connections with local communities, their traditions and traditions. For this VE project, Spanish translators and US writers – who acted as target audiences to provide feedback on the translations – have to select the most appropriate translation strategies to create functional target texts.

A key decision translators will have to make concerns the degree of domestication for the English version of the dishes. Keeping in mind audience needs, is it wise to preserve foreign words like *tapas* or *chorizo*? When should one opt for literal translations? What specialized words need to be 'neutralized' (generalized) through description or definition? How can target audiences, who are also students of composition, help determine what are the most effective solutions to render the uniqueness of the dishes without confusing English-speaking customers? The English version of the menu will have to be patiently negotiated by the two groups of students.

Time Commitment

 5-6 weeks

Materials

Students in the two countries can establish rapport through Zoom meetings or by connecting through WhatsApp, FaceTime, Discord and other platforms. To collaborate on the translation and revision of the menus, students can use Google drive and Google docs. Translators can share Google documents and invite their project partners to add comments to their files or use the chat function when

both team members are online.

Assignment Process

- This assignment requires that an instructor from an English speaking country links his or her writing course with a translation course taught in a country where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. The translation course can focus on any language pair that includes English.

- All students are prepared for the virtual exchange project through workshops on translation theory, localization practices, intercultural communication, and the use of English as a lingua franca in professional communication

- Students enrolled in the two different courses are paired up randomly by the instructors

- All student pairs organize a Zoom meeting to build rapport with their project partners

- Next, using a Google document shared with their project partners, translators create a menu for English speaking audiences by translating dishes that are popular in their countries into English using a set of translation techniques learned during the semester.

- Next, writing students use the comment function in Google docs to share feedback on the translation of the dishes into English. Feedback focuses on the clarity, usability, and persuasive power of the English versions of the dishes.

- Finally, Spanish students and US students negotiate solutions by interacting on their selected communication platform, or using the Google docs chat function, until both team members are satisfied with the final version of the translated dishes.

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Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this virtual exchange project will:

- Gain an understanding of writing and translation as process-based activities

- Think critically about the importance of peer review and collaboration in different types of writing and translation activities

- Reflect on the importance of audience analysis and the impact of different cultural traditions and rhetorical conventions on writing and translation processes

- Reflect on how languages influence the way we think and the ways in which we translate thoughts and encode messages

- Develop intercultural communicative competence as a key component of integrated socio-professional competence

- Learn about project management and the challenges of working in cross-cultural virtual teams

- Learn about participatory localization and user-localization

- Learn about English as a global lingua franca, a shared code for communication that connects speakers of different languages.

- Develop digital literacy and an ability to appreciate the affordances of new media and multimodal communication systems

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose to exchange videos or audios

asynchronously if they are concerned that synchronous communication with a person they have never met before might cause them too much anxiety.

- Students who find it complicated or challenging to use Google drive or Google docs can identify a different collaborative platform with their project partners.

- When students need more time to complete their tasks, they must inform their project partners and their instructors to obtain extensions.

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Organizations that promote virtual exchange

COIL: Collaborative Online International Learning.
https://coilconnect.org/

EDGE: Experiential Digital Global Engagement.
https://globaledgeucation.psu.edu/

TAPP: Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project.

https://www.uhd.edu/academics/humanities/about/departments/english/the-trans-atlantic-and-pacific-project.aspx

UNIcollaboration. https://www.unicollaboration.org/