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Translating Wikipedia Articles: A Preliminary Report on Authentic Translation Projects in Formal Translator Training

This article reports on a promising type of assignment in formal translator training which involves translating and publishing Wikipedia articles. Enthusiastically embraced by the trainees, the assignment seems to offer significant benefits over traditional forms of instruction by making it possible for trainees to work on genuine translation projects (where *genuine translation projects* mean projects carried out for the benefit of actual users, as opposed to tasks which may involve real-life texts but are not intended to be used outside of the classroom environment). Wikipedia translation as a genuine translation project appears to be a natural application of, and a welcome addition to, the social constructivist paradigm in education, specifically the *natural critical learning environment* model of education proposed by Ken Bain, a concept which dovetails with, and lends support to, the *transformationist* model developed by Donald C. Kiraly for the field of translator training.

1. Natural Learning Environments

In this report, I rely on the concept of *natural critical learning environments* as popularized by Ken Bain, historian and founding director of several major teaching and learning centres in the United States,[1] to describe what I see as a useful and valuable variation on the social constructivist educational paradigm.

Based on a large-scale study of the teaching practices of exceptionally successful academic teachers, Bain identifies natural critical learning environments as a mainstay of successful learning experiences. Because knowledge is constructed rather than received, such environments invite critical learning by getting students to confront intriguing or important problems in the shape of authentic tasks which force them to realize the insufficiency of their mental models of reality. According to Bain, natural learning environments ideally share a number of characteristics (cf. Bain 2004: 47): they involve authentic challenges which can be related to at a practical level; they give learners "a sense of control over their education" by tackling problems which the learners find attractive and relevant; they involve challenging tasks, both in terms of workload and, more importantly, in terms of needing to confront and change one's existing assumptions and mental models of reality; and finally, they provide a safe environment where students are free to fail, suffer frustration, and re-engage with problems in a supportive environment (assistance and feedback provided in the work phase should be divorced from grading procedures).

Bain's concept of natural critical learning environments is a natural ally and supplement to Donald C. Kiraly's transformationist model of translator training, which emphasizes the

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[1] Center for Teaching Excellence (New York University), Searle Center for Teaching Excellence (Northwestern University), Center for Teaching (Vanderbilt University), Research Academy for University Learning (Montclair University).

interpersonal and social aspect of knowledge-building. Because "people have no choice but to create or construct meanings and knowledge through participation in … interpersonal, intersubjective interaction" (Kiraly 2000: 4), Kiraly recommends an approach where translator competence is built up through interpersonal and intersubjective interaction. Instead of straightforward transmission of "right" knowledge and "correct" information, training should be predicated on "transformationist" lines to provide trainees with an authentic learning experience, preferably using authentic material. In other words, natural critical learning environments provide an archetypal transformationist framework where the trainees are invited to shape and create their own learning environment and experience with collaborative assistance from the instructor.

2. Genuine Projects in Translator Training

At a declarative level, the ideal of authentic experience is embraced in modern translation training. Assignments based on adapted real-life texts have become more or less standard practice in translation training, having largely superseded the traditional language-focused approach. In her article on training skilled and effective translators, Christine Nord (2005) recommends using a range of real business and specialist texts ("practice-oriented text types"), which should ideally should be "practice-relevant." To make such texts even more closely resemble "real texts-in-situation," Nord recommends that classroom jobs should be accompanied by briefs outlining their context and purpose.

However, even such real-life texts selected by instructors arguably still remain, at best, a simulated challenge. In fact, much of formal translation training is faulty practically by design; in her book on decision processes in formal translator training, Maria Piotrowska (2007) contrasts formal training with in-house training (where translation is learned on the job under the supervision of a more experienced practitioner) and identifies a number of shortcomings which hamper formal translator training. The texts used in formal instruction are sometimes ineffective or irrelevant, and even if they are not, the trainees cannot rely on a sense of professional responsibility or on what Kiraly terms the *translator's self-concept* (1995: 100) or a capacity to act in an informed, competent and self-aware manner. The tasks are performed in what is essentially a highly unnatural translation environment (no computers, online dictionaries, CAT technology) (cf. Piotrowska 2007: 139). Finally, simulated projects fall short of recreating the actual pressures of real translation and, by putting the instructor at the centre of the learning process, they also fall within the category of what Kiraly (2000) refers to as the "transmissionist" model of training, a paradigm where educational initiative and "correct" answers are dispensed and controlled by the instructor. Educationally, this is a serious drawback since real-life texts, when used in the context of a non-genuine project, fall short of creating a natural critical learning environment required to foster successful learning.

Kiraly's transformationist approach seeks to remedy those problems in translator training by building up translation competence so that the control over the learning experience can be gradually released to the trainees, ideally leading to the inclusion of genuine projects in classroom instruction, either through securing client approval for outsourcing commercial jobs or helping trainees to get projects on their own. However, translating authentic texts for clients in the real world in the classroom context, *pace* Kiraly, is not at

all easy. Clients may be justifiably wary of such arrangements, which threatens to diffuse responsibility, compromise data confidentiality and still result in inferior translation quality. Christine Nord, who likewise notes that real translation jobs (commercial projects) may be used as part of training "[i]n some exceptional cases" (Nord 2005: 218), makes it clear that genuine translation projects often pose too much of a strain on formal instruction to be feasible except in the case of highly advanced trainees. As a result, the "real-life" aspect of most assignments is often limited to using real-life *texts,* but it shies away from real-life *clients*, *workloads*, *deadlines* or *responsibilities*. What this means is that "real-life texts" in formal training are "real" in a narrow sense only, failing to provide trainees with an adequate exposure to the genuine translation experience.

Translating Wikipedia entries as part of formal translation training helps bridge this gap by combining the productive thrill of genuine translation with the more leisurely pace of academic assignments while providing a safe environment tailored to the trainees' capabilities. The findings in this paper are based on a survey distributed to trainees enrolled in my translation courses. I discuss the trainees' reactions to the exercise and reflect on the advantages and limitations of Wikipedia translation assignments as a genuine translation project.

3. Wikipedia in the Classroom

The idea of creating Wikipedia content as an educational aid is not new. I was inspired by the experience of Cory Doctorow, Canadian writer and proponent of Creative Commons licensing environments, who asked his students to refine and improve the Wikipedia articles relevant to their class projects when he was teaching at the University of Southern California (he describes the experience in a lecture recorded at the Perimeter Institute in Ontario on 26 October 2009). Given how educators often complain about derivative or borderline plagiaristic student work churned out using Wikipedia material, it makes intuitive sense to turn the problem on its head by having the students do original and much-needed work as part of their credit requirement, and I used a similar assignment in a course I co-developed with Dr. Paweł Wojtas in 2010 (English for Academic Purposes, 4018-CW1-CLASS).

3.1. Assignment Format

In the winter term of 2012–2013, I carried out a pilot project to see if the format could be adapted for the purposes of translator training.[2] I made it part of the credit requirement for students to translate a Wikipedia article and post the translation on Wikipedia. Students were asked to find articles in the source language with no equivalent version available in the target language. The recommended article length was 350–750 words, with a bit of

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2 Volunteer translations of publicly useful projects have been recognized as a promising platform for socially engaged instruction in higher education. In Poland, Prof. Lech Mankiewicz, Director of the Theoretical Physics Department at the Polish Academy of Sciences, promotes a volunteer platform to provide Polish translations of Khan Academy educational videos. Individual teachers, such as Joanna Pietrulewicz (Institute of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw) have successfully used genuine translation projects (such as TED Talk subtitles) in formal translation training (personal communication on 9 April 2013). Susan Cranfield reported a positive experience with a project predicated on the social constructivist model where students engaged in a collaborative effort to deliver a genuine translation for the purposes of an environmental awareness-raining project on the Canary Islands (Cranfield 2006).

leeway at the longer end. As with the other course assignments, the Wikipedia translations were assessed in terms of text quality and fitness for purpose.[3]

I was teaching five groups in three different translation courses taken by students in their second and third years of study. All of the courses are part of compulsory English instruction at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, meaning that only some of the trainees had a personal interest in translation and few, if any, had active professional experience. A total of 47 different students were enrolled in my Polish-English translation courses (Introduction to Polish-English Translation, 3301-L3PA-IPET, and Textual Aspects of Translation, 3301-L3PA-TAT). A further 28 people were enrolled in my English-Polish translation courses (Introduction to English to Polish Translation, 3301-L2PAIEPT). Two persons (one in each language pair) were not required to complete the Wikipedia assignment (an alternative credit path was arranged for one person, and another dropped out of the course), which means that a total of 73 people were asked to produce and publish Wikipedia translations.

3.2. Highly Positive Trainee Response

Ten weeks after the end of the course an anonymous survey was distributed via email to each of the 73 participants using the SurveyMonkey platform inviting them to reflect on and share their experience of Wikipedia as a learning tool. The survey consisted of nine multiple-choice questions with an option to offer unscripted comments on some aspects of the experience. Both the response rate and the completion rate were high (82% and 75%, respectively). The response and completion rates were similar for the English-Polish and the Polish-English language pairs.

Given the modest size of the sample, the findings cannot be meaningfully analysed in terms of variables, but it is clear that the students in my groups really enjoyed the experience. Practically all of the respondents concluded that the experience was either "positive" (31 people, 56% of the respondents) or "very positive" (23 people, 42% of the respondents). Only one person in 55 found the overall experience to have been "negative." When asked whether this type of assignment should be kept in future courses, more than 90% of the respondents (50 people) recommended that the exercise "should definitely be kept, maybe with some improvements," and the remaining 5 people (9%) cautioned that improvements to the format were needed before it was used again. No-one recommended culling the exercise from the syllabus. This is an overwhelmingly positive reaction, which is particularly remarkable given the compulsory nature of the courses and the fact that the assignment was burdened by certain design and execution flaws (more on which later). The survey revealed that the students particularly appreciated such aspects of the assignment as its *social utility*, *freedom of choice*, *excitement* and *novelty*, suggesting that the success of the format is owed to its affinity to the concept of natural critical learning environments. When asked to evaluate the positive aspects of their Wikipedia translation projects by comparing them to standard classroom exercises, the students overwhelmingly

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3 To bring the assignment closer to the concept of a natural critical learning environment (where students should ideally feel free to fail and learn from their mistakes), I subsequently changed my assessment criteria in later courses by scheduling penalty-free feedback sessions before the final assessment. This way areas of concert could be flagged up in advance for improvement or reworking before the assignments were marked and graded.

found that their Wikipedia work was "useful to others" (*social utility*), with more than 90 per cent believing that Wikipedia assignments were superior or far superior to a typical classroom task in this respect (see Table 1). Only three people out of 53 (5.5%) felt that the Wikipedia task was essentially "no different" from standard exercises.

This question was part of a larger matrix of characteristics, inviting the respondents to compare their Wiki assignment with classroom-bound exercises in terms of the following aspects:

- personal relevance ("dealing with a topic I'm interested in")
- excitement value ("doing something exciting")
- novelty value ("doing something new")
- personal utility ("doing something useful to me")
- social utility ("doing something useful to others")
- exposure to authentic translation problems ("getting a taste of real translation challenges")
- language instruction ("making me a better user of English")

The complete dataset is contained in Table 1 below, but even without going into detail it is clear that the assignment was perceived as overwhelmingly superior to regular classroom tasks. In addition to social utility, positive reactions were very strong in terms of novelty and personal relevance: 80+ per cent of the respondents believed that their Wikipedia assignment was "better" or "much better" at giving them a chance to "do something new." 75+ per cent of the respondents found Wikipedia superior in terms of "dealing with a topic they were interested in."

	Wiki not nearly as good	Wiki not as good	Wiki no different	Wiki better	Wiki much better
doing something useful to others	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (5.5%)	24 (43.6%)	**28 (50.9%)**
doing something new	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.8%)	10 (17.9%)	**23 (41.1%)**	22 (39.3%)
dealing with a topic I'm interested in	0 (0.0%)	3 (5.4%)	10 (17.9%)	**30 (53.6%)**	13 (23.2%)
getting a taste of real translation challenges	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (25.0%)	**25 (44.6%)**	16 (28.6%)
doing something exciting	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.6%)	14 (25.0%)	**33 (58.9%)**	7 (12.5%)
doing something useful to me	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.6%)	**22 (39.3%)**	**22 (39.3%)**	10 (17.9%)
making me a better user of English	0 (0.0%)	4 (7.1%)	**35 (62.5%)**	15 (26.8%)	2 (3.6%)

Table 1. Number of answers to the question: "Compared to a typical class assignment (one not intended for real-life use), what do you think of Wikipedia translations as a translation training tool?"

Most respondents (45 out of 56) offered unscripted comments on what they felt were the most positive aspects of the experience. They valued the social utility of the exercise highly and relished being given a chance to work on their personal interests (with comments like "Dealing with a topic I'm interested in – the freedom of choice was much appreciated" or "Personally, I found the task inspiring, it gave me an idea of how to start the realization of my own project which had got stuck at some point, before I got in touch with Wikipedia.") They talked about the novelty factor, which seems to have been mostly related to the experience of coding. The excitement factor was often accounted for in terms of the thrill of publication, e.g. ("Creating something in real life – being an author," or "Doing something which could potentially be used in real life by other people was especially motivating and made the task fun.") This kind of experience is the intended product of a natural critical learning environment, and it meets the expectations of Kiraly's tranformationist model which emphasizes trainee independence.

4. Advantages

Those comments seem to indicate that the Wikipedia assignment successfully creates a transformational experience within a natural critical learning environment, and that it goes some way towards making up for the shortcomings of formal training as opposed to in-house training. Wikipedia projects can be seen as mitigating practically all of the negative characteristics of formal training listed above. Because the texts are intended for real users, they foster a sense of professional responsibility; because each project is unique, there is more individual focus in the feedback and grading process; and because the trainees are empowered by working for the benefit of actual users, the texts stand a better chance of being perceived as relevant, helping the instructor to discuss concepts in translation theory in a more tangible context.

     This is particularly relevant since traditional classroom tasks involving authentic texts are not easily assimilated by trainees. Students who lack professional experience often find it difficult to meet (or indeed to grasp) the challenges involved in translation problems, no matter how detailed the translation brief. However, when dealing with a Wikipedia article on a subject of their personal choice, the students were faced with a comfortably familiar format and an area they were knowledgeable about. As a result, they were probably better able to recognize the various aspects of social, sociocultural, and strategic competence involved in translation work (on the classification of the various types of competence see Komorowska 2003: 9–10, qtd. in Piotrowska 2007: 118).

     The familiarity of the Wikipedia format and the fluid nature of the encyclopaedia (where other users can be relied on to jump in and correct our mistakes) probably helped to reduce the fear of making a mistake, which otherwise tends to have a debilitating effect in translation training (cf. Piotrowska 2007: 91). When asked to identify those areas where more instructor assistance was needed, handling the stress of publication was at the bottom of the list, on a par with dealing with language problems.

5. Problems and Design Flaws

These findings make it clear that Wikipedia translation assignments and similar projects offer an exciting and socially useful way of training translators using genuine translation

projects produced in a low-cost, high-tech format. However, the format also has some disadvantages which are discussed below in order to highlight its limitations and recommend ways of mitigating them.

5.1. Problems Related to Language and Text Types

Because Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia, some of its linguistic qualities are far from ideal. Many of the texts tackled by the trainees were drily factual entries on their favourite artists or on natural and architectural landmarks in their home towns. This is not a pressing problem; translator training should be guided by translation-related considerations, and many of the actual translation jobs done on the market are even drier and more rigorously factual, but this aspect can still be improved by recommending problem articles as opposed to biographical pieces. Still, the trainees tended to see the language instruction aspect of their Wikipedia project as less exceptional than the other aspects, although it must be pointed out that the positive effects of the exercise were felt across the board to what seems a frankly unrealistic degree. Even in the category of language instruction ("making me a better user of English"), where the effects were felt to most resemble the classic instruction mode, favourable scores outnumbered negative ones by a factor of more than four to one. In this instance, the positive opinions were probably coloured by the halo effect, an overly generous appraisal being generated to reduce cognitive dissonance.

5.2. Problems Related to Outcomes and Instructor Workloads

In Bain's natural critical learning environment model and in Kiraly's transformationist model, the instructor's role involves a flexible approach where the trainees are encouraged to explore and make independent and personally relevant educational progress. In Kiraly's term, the job of the instructor is to provide a "scaffolding" or a framework of instruction which helps the trainees to press beyond what their level of competence would otherwise allow by assisting them in establishing goals and preparing their projects (cf. Kiraly 2000: 97). One major advantage of Wikipedia translations in this context is that the Wikipedia platform provides a highly convenient and paperless environment for marking and feedback. Because the trainees were instructed to create draft versions in Wikipedia's user space, the texts were available online and could be easily edited, eliminating the need to exchange emails or printed copies.

In terms of quality and feedback, the English-to-Polish translations were mostly accurate and stylistically accomplished. Where required, instructor's revisions related to translation-related (and not linguistic) problems and provided good concrete examples of theoretical concerns (gaps in intercultural equivalence, niceties of textual convention or stylistic register, etc.) In translations into the native tongue, such assignments are strongly recommended.

In the case of the Polish-to-English jobs, however, the scaffolding often proved rather laborious to put up, as the amount of feedback required to produce publication-quality material was considerable. Although some undergraduates were capable of producing quality texts into L2, most texts, though serviceable, took some extensive and time-consuming editing before they were ready for publication. This meant delays extending far into the next semester and led to the assignment getting dropped from the credit requirement list.

To cut down on the amount of time spent marking and revising the entries for publication while still giving the trainees a chance to experience genuine translation challenges, future Polish-to-English translation assignments should probably be handled as group projects.

5.3. Learner Difficulties

When asked about the most challenging aspect of their Wikipedia experience, the trainees did not seem particularly fased by the format. Some of those without Wikipedia-friendly interests found it difficult to find an article (44% believed that it was "hard," and 9% believed it was "very hard"). As one of the students noted plaintively in a different survey, "it's bad enough having to do my homework, and now I actually had to go and look for it, too."

With one other notable exception, other areas of difficulty tested in the survey (time required for completion, language difficulty, stress of publication) were seen as either perfectly reasonable or even easy/very easy. The single notable exception was "technical skills." The assumption that the trainees would have no trouble finding the information on how to edit Wikipedia proved overly optimistic. Although some of the respondents appreciated the chance to master new skills, such as the basics of computer coding, most people found the technological aspects of the assignment frustrating, with most students assessing them as either "hard" (39%) or "very hard" (16%) to complete. The technical skills involved not only coding and formatting using Wikipedia's idiosyncratic syntax, but the practical aspects of publication. In a companion question, asking the trainees to identify areas requiring better assistance, the respondents predominantly focused on the need for better information on coding/formatting the article and on publishing the entry. Thirty-nine people (almost three quarters of the respondents) found the publication criteria baffling enough to postulate that more assistance was needed. That is even more than the 36 people (68%) who had problems dealing with Wikipedia's admittedly idiosyncratic code.

In connection with delayed or missing feedback, this must have contributed to what was the greatest frustration of the study, namely the fact that only a handful articles actually made it into Wikipedia despite the fact that practically all of the respondents completed their Sandbox (rough draft) versions. Of the 59 respondents, only eight had their work accepted. Seven people were asked to revise their entries to bring them into line with Wikipedia's publication guidelines but neglected to do so, and 36 did not even try to publish. Some of those people were still waiting for their feedback to get a green light, but this result can only be described as a big disappointment. The failure to anticipate these problems in advance was an obvious design flaw, but it can be mitigated by providing the students with an information pack early in the course, followed by a troubleshooting session before the end of the course. After a resource pack on how to translate and publish a Wikipedia entry was distributed to a fresh batch of students in the following semester, the successful publication rate proved significantly higher.[4]

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4 A free student resource pack in English on how to translate and publish a Wikipedia article is available for download from my website (piotrszymczak.info) under a Creative Commons license.

Conclusions

Using genuine translation projects in formal translation training is a promising practical contribution to the repertoire of social constructivist translator training by providing trainees with a way of experiencing natural translation challenges in a safe but realistic environment. Wikipedia is a high-tech platform of instruction available at no additional cost to either the trainees or the training institution, and the projects do a genuine service to the community. The exercise is highly flexible, making it possible to scale workloads, select areas of specialized expertise or create collaborative projects. When prepared well (information resources, better course design over a longer period of time), Wikipedia assignments are ideally suited to the requirements of natural critical learning environments, and trainees respond to the format with great enthusiasm.

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Streszczenie

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