E-learning for Translators and Interpreters: The Case of CMS Moodle

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The aim of the paper is to present courses in specialized translation and interpreting taught in "*elf*" (an acronym derived from e-learning and the Czech name of the faculty) at the Department of English and American studies <http://www.phil.muni.cz/elf/>. Information from the Consortium for Training Translation Teachers' seminar and the project description prepared as part of the CTTT Certificate programme is reflected in the paper – it summarizes the main features of the Open Source Course Management System "Moodle". The paper deals with various methodological issues involved in the teaching. In conclusion, the future of distance learning and online testing is considered.

1 Introduction – Current state of affairs

The idea to combine classroom teaching with e-learning, i.e. blended learning, is not a new one. The first attempts used the online-based CMS Nicenet <http://www.nicenet.org/>, which has advantages (it is free and easily available to everybody) and disadvantages (notably, that it does not allow uploading files). As any translation teacher would agree, uploading various formats of files is essential for students of translation and/or interpreting. One of the reasons for our choosing Moodle was exactly this – the fact that you can upload any kind of files, ranging from .doc documents to .tmx or MP3 files. The main advantage of the system is the ease with which teachers can manage and create the course content on their own, without a technician's direct involvement.

Since 2003 courses in translation, and since 2004 also in interpreting, have been taught with the support of CMS Moodle. Gradually, the many options the system can offer were adopted, and new ones have been developed to suit our specific needs (for a detailed description see 2.1) in co-operation with the Pedagogical Faculty (Váňová 2005: 11).

This development has shown that online learning can change and positively influence students' approach to studying a foreign language. In addition to using Internet resources (BNC, Cobuild, and Webcorp, to name just a few), they are taught to master the tools developed at the department (parallel corpora of Czech and English texts Kacenka I and II) or at the Faculty of Informatics of Masaryk University (graphical user interface Bonito of the corpus manager Manatee). Students also have the opportunity to use the online resource Lion (LIterature ONline) – a digital library containing the complete texts of over 350,000 works of literature in English (poetry, prose and drama), all fulltext searcheable, including criticism and bibliographies.

Another interesting and rewarding resource is *The Times (1785-1985)*, a fulltext archive of the Times from the beginning of the paper. The text is displayed as a facsimile of the printed pages (articles can be printed out but not downloaded as text). It is also possible to access the Times Literary Supplement from its origin in 1902 to 1990.

2   CTTT Seminar

The Consortium for Training Translation Teachers organizes seminars and a certificate programme for teachers of technical translation. "The aim of the seminar is to facilitate the acquisition of the teaching skills most in demand in the training of professional technical (non-literary) translators at university level. Those skills principally involve the use of electronic tools, awareness of the current processes of technical translation and localization, and interactive use of the teaching space, both face-to-face and via e-learning techniques.

The seminar is designed to address many teaching environments in many countries. It does not insist on a profile of any one 'ideal teacher', nor on a set of fixed 'best practices'. Instead, it encourages awareness of a number of approaches and is based on exchange between professional translators and teachers." <http://isg.urv.es/cttt/tarragona_2004/ program.html>

2.1   Project description

Having participated in an online postgraduate e-learning course in editing and revising technical texts in English organized by Universitat i Virgili in Taragona in Spain, I was subsequently invited to attend a seminar for teachers of technical translation. I was then given the chance to write my project description, supervised by Frank Austermühl, Assistant Professor at the School of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies, University of Mainz at Germersheim, Germany. This project description, together with other papers, can be found under "Research papers" at <http://isg.urv.es/cttt/cttt/research.html>. It provides a detailed description of the various features of CMS Moodle, as used in *elf* in teaching translation and interpreting courses.

The following analysis has been based on the project description. However, it focuses on the methodological aspects rather than the technical ones, and offers a few practical hints for implementing a student-centred approach and computer-supported collaborative learning. Students are divided into groups and monitor each other's work. They can see each other's assignments before the lesson on the web and discuss them in class when they meet. It is useful to make them bring a printout because, under certain circumstances, technical problems might otherwise prevent them from working in class.

Another practical hint concerns naming the files. If you want to download the files with students' assignments to correct or read off-line, it is necessary for each student to use

his/her surname and the number of the assignment, as well as an abbreviation of the course name to name the file. Otherwise it may be very time-consuming to pin down whose assignment you have just downloaded and corrected.

3   Types of Course

3.1   Preparatory Courses

In the first year of their studies at the department, students must attend two courses of Practical English (I and II) to get a solid foundation in English before they start any specialized courses.

They also attend all the "introductory" classes in history, literature, linguistics, etc. The face-to-face teaching time for practical English is fairly limited – just two lessons per week. Due to large numbers of students (about 160 entrants each year) and the number of seminar groups (10) in which they are taught, it is advantageous to have a "unifying" element in the form of an online learning environment. There is a common ground, where students are able to practise as much as they need and want, and to have their progress monitored by their tutors.

Our main concern in the first year is to eradicate "Czenglish", i.e. mother tongue interference. This may sound nice and easy but has in fact been a stumbling block for many, as well as a bone of contention among the teaching staff. Finding ways of coping with this difficult task has been a long process in which the use of online exercises with feedback from the teacher meant a real breakthrough.

In the second year, students interested in developing their English further with the aim of taking more practical translation seminars later, can opt for two courses called **Collocations A and B**. These have been developed with online support, and are currently taught in a computer room. "Welcome to the exciting world of collocations" is the slogan that students see in their online course. And indeed – through the course, they can discover so many resources that are readily available for those who know how to use them. All these resources serve the purpose of finding illustrative sentences for the collocations – phrasal verbs, idioms, clichés, proverbs, etc. – that the students encounter in their course. A database of illustrative sentences with translations, developed at the Faculty of Informatics, has been put together and can be used for creating exercises and tests for advanced students of English. These tests can also be published in *elf*.

Collocations A mostly focuses on strong collocations and phrasal verbs. **Collocations B** is a topic-based course – each student is working on a different topic and sharing his/her work with the class via *elf*. Three textbooks and online resources from previous courses (specifically, glossaries of terms) have been included in Collocations B, drawing on various Internet resources, as well as published dictionaries. The collected materials are shared and distributed on CD after the course is finished.

3.2   Courses in Translation

All students interested in taking a translation course must first attend **Introduction to Translation.** After a successful completion of this course a range of specialized courses is available in *literary translation.* These are taught by several teachers at the department.

There are also two specialized courses in *technical translation*, which I have developed. Both courses are based on collaborative knowledge construction and make it

possible for the students to design and personalize their syllabi (they can choose topics or text types for presentations and final assignments according to their interests).

The course title **Becoming a Translator A (B)** is borrowed from D. Robinson's book of the same name. The course materials are not limited to this book, and thus it proved to be impossible to cover all of them in just one term. Translation is a special skill and needs to be practiced a great deal. It is not acquired quickly or easily. Both courses are an attempt to combine theory and knowledge with practical translation exercises. Students are expected to choose their own area of specialization and compile glossaries of specialized terminology at the end of the first term, and to translate a text of their choice into English in the second term. Translation from their mother tongue into English, generally considered "taboo" among translation theorists, has become a part of the syllabus. Students are taught to deal with this challenge using comparable mini-corpora they put together themselves, as well as the well-known big corpora and other databases of texts in English (as mentioned in the Introduction to this paper). "The ideal version" of the translation is posted each week after the class discussion, and all students have the opportunity to re-consider their own versions of the text. CMS Moodle makes it possible for the students to re-submit their homework if the teacher allows them to do so. Collaborative assessment and group work is also possible, as well as uploading of the corrected files with feedback. And again, course materials are shared and distributed on a CD once the course is finished.

3.3   Courses in Interpreting

In 2004, the first introductory course in interpreting was established – **Interpreting I.** As there is almost no formal training for interpreters available anywhere in the Czech Republic (the only specialized department being the Institute of Translatology at Charles University in Prague), this was a pioneering effort. The students learned about the history and development of interpreting, and looked at the various categories of interpreters and their activities. Extra-linguistic aspects, such as the physical, moral, and personal qualities of interpreters were tackled. The theoretical aspect was supplemented by hands-on involvement of students who were taught the basic skills. These include summarizing, training long-term and short-term memory, developing clear and concise delivery, as well as strengthening the ability to speak in public. The students were exposed to the necessary technology. After recording themselves, they uploaded their sound files in *elf* to be shared with others and used for interpreting practice. Compiling and sharing glossaries on topics of general interest, covering current issues and world affairs (see Fig. 1), based on articles in Czech and English, formed the core of the end-of-term examination. CMS Moodle makes it possible to include links to various websites that can be used for practising interpreting. Links to the official UN webcast, an online speech bank, BBC and VOA news, and other useful websites were included.

Currently, a pilot version of **Interpreting** is being taught. The focus is on consecutive interpreting, but elements of preparation for simultaneous interpreting are also included (shadowing, chuchotage, sight reading, etc.) With the help of modern technology, students can do a lot of work on their own. The teacher is their "coach and parental figure", and should, ideally, be an interpreter himself / herself.

3   The future

Only time will show whether our hard work in e-learning can produce better results than the traditional teaching approach. Certainly, establishing a new system is a challenge. However,

we would like to believe that once the groundbreaking work is done, the teaching must inevitably become much easier and better. We are more flexible without the paper resources and can adapt the content of the courses according to our ideas and wishes. "Blended learning" certainly has a future at our universities.
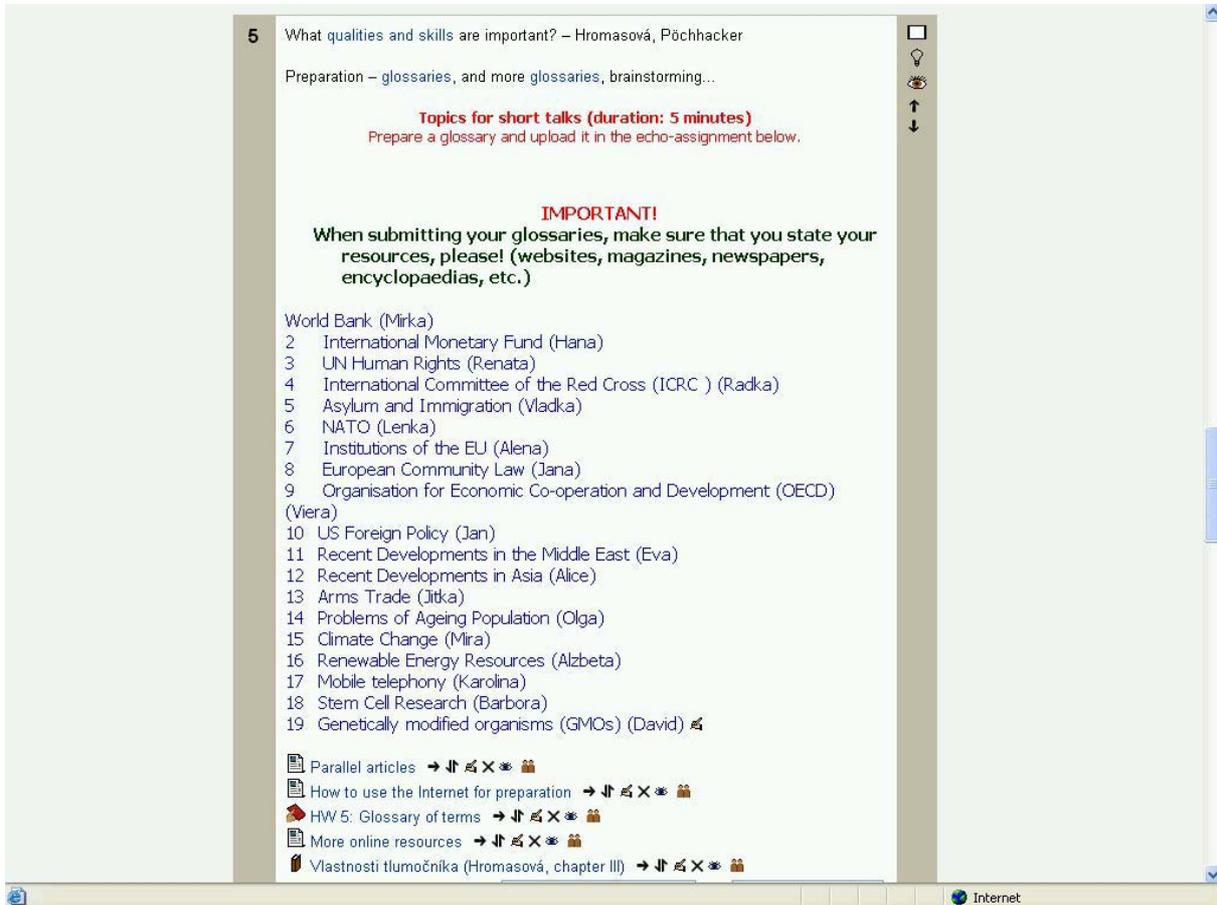

Fig. 1 Interpreting I in *elf*, topics for talks and glossary preparation

3.1 Distance learning

Distance learning, however, is a different cup of tea. It assumes a complete absence of the teacher and requires thus a completely different approach. The classroom only exists in virtual reality and clarification and explanation becomes more difficult. Co-operating with other students, who will probably be complete strangers, is extremely unlikely. A successful and popular classroom teacher can, in my view, experience a failure in distance learning. More pedagogical research and careful preparation of the course developers is essential to meet this challenging target.

3.2 Online testing

Online testing, on the other hand, was successfully started in our courses in 2004. A detailed description of the first attempts can be found in Fictumová and Mikšík (2005: 10).

4   Conclusion

It is my firm belief that the future of education lies in e-learning. However, it is like a wild horse that has to be tamed before it can serve its owner. E-learning could, very easily, become an end in itself, rather than a means of achieving learner independence and encouraging communication between people. It has to be approached with caution, and awareness of its possible weaknesses. Through this approach, it will be possible to harness the strengths of e-learning and turn them to the best advantage.

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