Learning translation through the use of portfolios: description of an experience*

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Abstract

This paper describes a pedagogical initiative consisting in the introduction of the student portfolio as a learning and assessment tool into a university translation course. The description is based on data gathered over a period of two years and on the results of a survey carried out among participants. We provide a detailed contextualisation of the experience, followed by a discussion of the most relevant features of the portfolio for the teaching and learning of translation at university level. Examples of the positive effects of the tool on the learning process are then offered. Participants' opinions close the report and lead into a final reflection on the overall assessment of the experience from the instructors' point of view.

Keywords: portfolio, higher education, translation teaching/learning

Resumen

En este trabajo se describe una experiencia pedagógica consistente en la introducción del portafolios como herramienta de aprendizaje y evaluación en un curso universitario de traducción. La descripción se basa en datos recogidos durante dos años y en los resultados de un cuestionario administrado a los participantes. Tras una breve contextualización de la experiencia y la reflexión sobre los aspectos más relevantes del portafolios para la enseñanza de la traducción, específicamente en la universidad, se ofrece una descripción exhaustiva de los efectos positivos de la utilización del instrumento en el curso. El trabajo termina con una valoración de la experiencia por parte de los participantes.

Palabras clave: portafolios, enseñanza universitaria, enseñanza/aprendizaje de la traducción

Resum

En aquest treball es descriu una experiència pedagògica consistent en la introducció del portafoli com a eina d'aprenentatge i avaluació en un curs universitari de traducció. La descripció es basa en dades arreplegades durant dos anys i en els resultats d'un qüestionari administrat als participants. Després d'una breu contextualització de l'experiència i la reflexió sobre els aspectes més rellevants del portafoli per a l'ensenyament de la traducció, específicament en la universitat, s'ofereix una descripció exhaustiva dels efectes positius de la utilització de l'instrument en el curs. El treball acaba amb una valoració de l'experiència per part dels participants.

Paraules clau: portafoli, ensenyament universitari, ensenyament/aprenentatge de la traducció

1. Introduction

Cooperation between educational institutions across Europe within the framework of the so-called Bologna Process has brought about dramatic changes to higher education in the 47 countries that have adhered to the Bologna Declaration since 1999. Emphasis on comparability and student mobility has led, for example, to the adoption of a new credit system (ECTS) and a complete overhaul of the degree structure, developments which may be regarded as officially accomplished with the launch of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in March, 2010. The most relevant of these changes are, however, of an organisational nature and have affected actual teaching practices only indirectly. Both the contents taught and the methods used in university rooms seem bound to evolve much more slowly, struggling against diehard traditions, institutional inertia or simply material constraints – e.g. large student numbers, inadequate teaching spaces, insufficient implementation and/or lack of promotion of new technologies, etc. – (Gairín, 2003; MEC 2006: 44-47). On a more positive note, it is only fair to acknowledge that the Bologna Declaration, and successive ones signed at ministerial conferences held every two years during the last decade, have triggered wide debate around issues focusing more directly on teaching/learning quality and on the objectives of higher education today (Rodríguez Escanciano, 2008).

At academic conferences and other forums, *student-centredness* and *lifelong learning* have become the new catchphrases of our time, and *learning to learn* and *transferable skills* seem to be some of the most frequently mentioned priorities for higher education in the years ahead (Martínez Segura, 2009b: 21-23; Monereo and Pozo 2003). In response to the new demands, many universities have set up in-service training programs aimed at developing teachers' pedagogical know-how, encouraging innovation and fostering dissemination of more or less successful teaching practices.

This paper aims at contributing to this process by describing in detail a pedagogical initiative which found inspiration in a workshop attended by the authors within the framework of the in-service teacher-training programme at our university. The experience we report consisted in the introduction of the student portfolio as a learning and assessment tool into a translation course (*Traducción I*) offered as an optional subject to students of the degree in English Philology at the University of Santiago de Compostela. It started in the academic year 2005-2006 and continued as a compulsory element in the course design for one further year. At that point difficulties deriving mainly from too large numbers of students prompted us to reconsider its status and set it as a voluntary task in successive years. It will be reintroduced during the current academic year in a subject with similar focus and objectives, offered for English majors within the new degree system at our university.

The description that follows is based to a great extent on data gathered during that initial full implementation of the tool and on a small survey carried out among that first set of participants at the end of the year. We will provide a detailed contextualisation of the experiment by looking at the course objectives and the techniques used in lectures. This will be followed by a brief discussion focusing on the most relevant features of the portfolio as a learning tool and on how these features were to help students attain those objectives. Some examples from different sections of the students' portfolios will then be commented upon as a sample of the positive effects of the tool on their learning. The participants' opinions about the activity will close the report and lead into a final reflection on the overall assessment of the experience from the teachers' point of view.

2. The context: an undergraduate course on Translation

As indicated above, *Traducción I* is an optional course for students of the English Philology degree during their first year at the University of Santiago de Compostela. In spite of its optional character, the number of students taking the course tends to be high, with an enrolment of 85 and 81 respectively in the first two years of implementation of the portfolio. It is an introductory course focusing on the acquisition of general translation skills and aims at laying the basis for more specialised translation training, which is dealt with in a more advanced course in the fourth year. A similar arrangement and subject complementarity applies in the new degree system. The following is the set of aims stated in the descriptive booklet distributed among students at the beginning of the year (Fernández Polo and Cal Varela 2005: 5-6):

- To acquire basic practical knowledge of the major differences between English and Spanish/Galician and become aware of their relevance as potential translation problems.
- To raise the students' awareness of the importance of expressing themselves in their native language with precision and correctness, and more generally of becoming critical users of their own native tongue.
- To raise the students' awareness of the communicative nature of translation, i.e. that translation consists in the re-creation of a pre-existing message in a second language.
- To acquire working procedures and translation strategies that will ensure effective translation practice.
- To learn how to analyse and thus prepare a text for translation, specifically focusing on such relevant aspects as: communicative intent, main ideas, typical language features, style, text-type or general organisation.
- To acquire the necessary skills for an effective use of reference tools for translation purposes.
- To develop group-work strategies that will help students collaborate in the resolution of specific translation problems.
- To be able to critically analyse and succinctly express the nature of specific translation problems.

As can easily be gathered from this list, the course is essentially practical and, although some systematic presentation of content by the instructor is involved in the first of these aims, the largest share of activities that take place during lectures and seminars is aimed at developing instrumental skills, attitudes, and values. And yet, judging from students' class notes, much of the work on these other aspects of the translator's competence seems to be taken for granted or tends to go completely unnoticed by many trainees. They seem too intent on collecting and organising content in the form of interlinguistic, lexical or structural correspondences to be applied more or less mechanically in future translation tasks. In sum, we noticed that learning to translate at this early stage consists, to a great extent, in unlearning harmful, preconceived ideas about translation work, particularly those which imply that it is a mechanical search for equivalence. Students must develop strategic competence and rigour in the use of resources, as well as creativity and critical awareness of translation as a communicative event.

In our experience, however, even though strong emphasis was laid upon these issues, they seemed to be quickly moved to the background, in favour of seemingly more useful knowledge about matching language patterns. All the rich learning that had undoubtedly taken place while students were working on their own and then during the class discussions seemed to lose much of its relevance as soon as a satisfactory translation was agreed upon. Class notes tended to boil down to these *validated* final versions, with all comments and alternative translations discarded as useless. Bringing as much of this hidden learning back to the surface became an important objective of the course. The student portfolio, with its emphasis on self-awareness and explicit reflection, seemed to provide an adequate framework for this.

3. The portfolio as a learning and assessment tool in a translation course

3.1. The portfolio defined

A portfolio is essentially a collection of samples of an individual's work put together as evidence of her/his capabilities and achievements in a particular area. Photographers, artists, architects and other professionals have traditionally used portfolios to showcase their best work for the purpose of presenting it to others. Learning portfolios inherit this idea of self-presentation and develop it further to become extraordinarily flexible tools for self-assessment and reflective learning. Students' portfolios include not only samples of work but also personal accounts of their most meaningful learning experiences over a period of time (a term, an academic year, etc.), as well as other materials that may provide a good basis for reflection on a specific subject area. By means of portfolios, therefore, students assume greater responsibility in their own learning, become aware of how they learn best, internalise quality criteria and set their own goals and priorities. From the instructor's point of view, the tool provides a framework for monitoring the students' progress and contains the necessary evidence for a fair and balanced assessment of their true capacities (Palacios Martínez *et al.*, 2007: 286-7).

The use of portfolios in education has become increasingly popular in the last few decades. Their versatility has made them suitable for a wide range of contexts and purposes, including students' self assessment, skill development and reflective practice or teacher training and promotion (Klenowski, 2002: 10 and ff.). Descriptive accounts of experiences of use of the portfolio in Spanish universities (Martínez Segura, 2009a) provide strong evidence of its potential in a wide range of subject areas, including teacher training, biology, veterinary medicine, nursing, economics or computer science, to name but a few. In the specific area of translation learning, Albuquerque (2008) has shown how electronic portfolios can be fruitfully combined with task-based instruction to create a professional learning environment that allows students to develop transferable skills and enhances their awareness of the different stages of a translation process.

Common to all these uses of the portfolio is a fair amount of reflection as one of its necessary components and a strong emphasis on the owner's responsibility regarding content selection, organisation and presentation. In spite of its appearance as a repository of finished products, the portfolio is, above all, a process-oriented experience. During its elaboration, students engage in small research tasks, discuss

their decisions, making their criteria and values explicit, and learn to use available resources in a critical way. These are some of the key features that turn it into such an apt instrument for autonomous learning in the current higher education context.

3.2. Using the portfolio for the teaching of translation

Our decision to introduce the portfolio in our translation course was motivated by the wish to transfer greater responsibility to the students and to emphasise the importance of reflection and critical awareness as components of the translator's competence. We also wanted our students to make their own learning visible to them, by forcing them to be explicit about their translation decisions and their strategies. The portfolio was thus to become a well organised and neatly presented repertoire of useful resources and accumulated know-how, together with their own views on the whole learning process. More specifically, the tool was felt to be particularly well suited to our own purposes in a number of respects.

Firstly, the portfolio provides a framework within which teacher and student roles can be fruitfully redefined (Klenowski, 2002: 104 and ff.). In the making of the portfolio, students cease to see themselves at the recipient end of a one-way channel of information and assume a more active role in their learning. They make decisions as to which objectives are primary for them, provide new content and adopt a critical view about what goes on in lectures. Additionally, they also play a significant part in their own assessment, which involves understanding, internalising and being able to apply clear quality criteria to their own work. Instructors, for their part, stop being mere providers of content and become mediators who guide and offer inspiration, but also let students work things out by themselves as far as possible. We expected this freedom to boost the students' self-confidence and motivation towards the subject.

Regular work on the portfolio also enhances students' self-awareness and allows them to monitor their own learning. In the process of collecting and annotating samples of what they do, they realise how they change as learners, how their learning strategies improve and how their own objectives evolve as new experiences accumulate. Thus, the focus shifts from the finished product to the process that leads to the elaboration of that product. Specifically, we instructed students to avoid storing only final, validated solutions to a given translation task while getting rid of earlier, less polished or even wrong, versions of the target text. On the one hand, we argued, such failed attempts may prove useful on a different occasion, as we shall later see; on the other, they provide a convenient basis for reflecting on strategies that work and those that do not. Also, we suggested that looking back on their own *mistakes* over time would allow them to visualise their own progress.

The portfolio provides students with an opportunity to integrate out-of-class experience into the learning process in a meaningful way. Every task constitutes an invitation to observe critically and research around them, to explore beyond the limits of the subject and learn to link its contents to other parts of the curriculum and to their own everyday reality. The only condition is that what is included in the folder is proved relevant to the course objectives. Developing an awareness of the pervasive presence of translation all around and of its impact on language should turn students into critical users of their own native language, a basic trait of the translation professional.

The portfolio is, in sum, not just a dossier where evidence accumulates as the course progresses. It encourages students to exercise a wide range of skills in order to make the most of their learning experiences. The inclusion of any new element must be conveniently justified and reflected upon, and the overall organisation of content must also be meaningful in some explicit way. Students must show a fondness for doing research and a good capacity for analysis and synthesis of sources, which are again important components of the translator's competence. They must also be able to relate items in their portfolio to one another, highlight particularly valuable experiences and express their opinions, reactions, etc. in a clear, articulate way. Finally, their own creativity should play a key role in conferring a truly personal dimension to the task.

The writing of a portfolio involves a wide range of activities: exercising self-initiative and creativity, as well as research and organisational skills, writing short reports and critical comments, summarising, justifying decisions in a coherent way, discussing preferences, etc. The importance of all these skills in translation training can hardly be overstated. These are all tasks that contribute essentially to the trainees' professional development in general, and to their development as competent communicators – ultimately as translators – in particular.

The implementation of the portfolio in our translation course sought to capitalise on all of these positive effects in order to improve learning, and at the same time bring assessment more clearly into line with the stated aims of the course. The complexity of the task and the amount of work involved in its elaboration, in addition to the students' presumed lack of familiarity with this technique, required a careful presentation of the tool. The idea was to make expectations, procedures and evaluation criteria very clear from the start.

4. Presentation of the task to the students

The significant weight of the portfolio in the final assessment of the course (30%) required devoting a considerable amount of time to its supervision throughout the year. Clear instructions had to be given at the beginning and a reasonably detailed feedback should be provided at different stages during the course. For the first of these purposes, a whole four-page section in the study guidebook (Fernández Polo and Cal Varela 2005: 11-14) detailed the expected benefits to be derived from the task and provided advice and suggestions on how to complete it successfully. In addition to this printed set of instructions, which was handed out on the first day of the course, the second class session was devoted specifically to the portfolio, to make sure that the objectives, the monitoring procedure and the assessment criteria were clear to all students.

During the presentation, the purpose of the tool was explained in very simple terms and its relevance to the course objectives was pointed out. Emphasis was particularly laid upon the way the portfolio was expected to help them develop their communicative skills and their creativity, as well as their ability for critical analysis and for systematic research. Students were also made aware of the responsibility they were assuming as learners, given the open nature of the task and the need to account for every decision made while doing it.

In order to overcome initial misgivings about the task, possible contents and approaches were discussed and illustrated with examples. The second year that the tool was implemented, this illustration was enriched with scanned images of work from portfolios submitted the previous year. However, care was taken not to insist on the necessary inclusion of specific components in the portfolio. We wanted to avoid excessive standardisation of the final product. The exceptions to this were a table of contents to make the overall organisation of the dossier visible and facilitate its use, an initial self-presentation of the author describing her/himself and her/his expectations and preferences, and a sample of class activities with their own comments.

The procedure for monitoring the activity was also described in this presentation session. Three small-group tutorials were set on specific dates, which would constitute key deadlines along the way. Attendance to these tutorial sessions was made compulsory, since they would be the only opportunities to receive written feedback from the instructors and exchange views and ideas about the task with their classmates.

Finally, the assessment criteria were also made explicit and justified in this initial session. Neat and clear organisation, as well as creativity in the presentation of materials in the dossier, would be highly valued. Diversity of contents would provide a measure of the level of involvement in the task. Lastly, regularity and depth of reflection and careful use of language were certainly to be considered essential dimensions of the activity.

5. The final result: the students' portfolios

As emphasised in the previous paragraphs, we were particularly wary not to give students too precise instructions, either on the form or on the content of their portfolios, for fear that this might go against the open nature of the tool and excessively constrain the students' creativity. We insisted on the importance of using their portfolios to register their individual impressions on their class work, on their progress, on their everyday observations and on research on a wide array of translation issues. We encouraged them to apply their own criteria in the selection of the contents of their portfolio, as well as in their organisation. They were also invited to use as much of their creativity as possible to underline and call attention to those aspects they considered more important for themselves and for their teachers and classmates. As a result, we did not expect to find great homogeneity across individual portfolios and therefore were not particularly surprised by the disparity of their products.

This heterogeneity notwithstanding, the analysis of the portfolios actually revealed the existence of a number of favourite topics. Undoubtedly, our own suggestions and comments in the presentation session had motivated general interest in these issues: their class activity – class and homework, class notes, etc. –, the contents and development of the course, the relationship between the translation subject and other subjects in their curriculum, real translation practice outside the academic context and, finally, suggestions and proposals about the course. In any case, naturally each and every student approached these common issues differently.

5.1. Students' class notes

One of the major sections in many portfolios was the students' class notes. Many of them actually seemed to conceive the portfolio as a simple repository of class exercises and homework, so they included all their in-class activities indiscriminately. During the first group tutorial, we realised

that their intention was to register in this section the ideal solutions for the translation activities done in class. However, what we expected from them was to rather focus their attention on how those ideal solutions had come about, to reflect on the process and not simply to register ideal products. We suggested they enrich their notes by registering the variety of correct solutions that had been actually offered by their classmates and the instructor, as well as their arguments. This was a good opportunity to reflect on the complex nature of the translation process and on the many factors influencing translators' choices. We also invited them not to discard their own *wrong* solutions, so that they could trace their learning process when they came back to their notes in the future (to prepare themselves for the final exam, for instance). Finally, we also encouraged them to include a short overall reflection at the end of each activity, where they would address what they had learned from it and critically assess their performance.

5.2. Reflections on the learning process

In general, as already mentioned, promoting self-reflection as a way of learning was a crucial idea behind the use of the portfolio. However, many students originally conceived their portfolios as a simple showcase for their best class work and their observations of real-world translation phenomena. During the group tutorials, we recommended them to reflect on these issues: what they had learned from the course activities and from their observations about translation at large, how those self-reflections and observations had led them to modify their learning strategies, etc. They were also invited to reflect on the actual teaching and classes: the role of the instructor, their own relationships with their peers, their degree of satisfaction with the proposed activities, their feelings about group work, their progress in the acquisition of the course contents, their learning strategies (things that worked for them and those that did not), their learning plans (their *to do's*), etc. Some of these reflections took the form of a personal diary, where students registered their ideas on all these matters on a more or less regular basis (once a week, after completion of a course unit, etc.). Some of the ideas expressed by the students in these diaries turned out to be actually useful for us, the instructors, as they offered a unique, most valuable insight into the effect of many of our proposals on the learners and into their wishes and expectations about the course: translation activities, class dynamics, etc.

All in all, personal assessment, making plans and all forms of self-reflection about the course and their own work was hard for the students and met stiff resistance from many, probably because they had rarely been required to do these things during their school years. However, as they commented in their final assessment of the subject, those who got really involved in these activities found them increasingly easier to perform, very effective as a learning tool and one of the most satisfactory tasks of the portfolio.

5.3. Out-of-class observations on translation

Another regular section in the students' portfolios contained their comments on translation phenomena. Actually, this had been suggested by the instructors as an interesting topic during the initial presentation. In this section they included, for instance, items of news in the daily press, on the Internet, on television, etc., where translation, in a general sense, was an issue. This section typically contained news on the release of a revised translation of a classic book or on faulty translations that had resulted in personal conflict, accidents, etc., editorial articles about bad translation practices, and most frequently their own identification and comments of mistakes they found in translations published in the media. To a great extent, their sensitivity to the overwhelming presence and negative effects of translation interference, particularly in the mass media, had been honed during a group discussion on this topic, and was raised by the instructors' repeated encouragement to always have a critical eye towards the translations they came across in their everyday lives.

One favourite section in many of the portfolios was the observations and comments on the translation of film titles: this was a very popular topic among students, given their particular fondness for and familiarity with the American film industry's latest productions. Their comments generally consisted in a critical analysis of the translation strategies that had resulted in the Spanish version. This led them to reflect on such major issues in translation theory and practice as the relative weight of source and target addressees and their cultures, the translation of puns and metaphors, the translation of irony and cultural presuppositions, the tension between fidelity and freedom, translation as a vector of cultural change, etc.

5.4. Translation and their other subjects

During the presentation session, students had been encouraged to ponder on the potential problems posed by the translation of many of the English texts they were confronted with in other non-translation subjects and, more generally, in their everyday lives. Regularly students would collect short texts or text excerpts that they found particularly challenging, adding comments on the translation difficulties they foresaw, and sometimes also offering their own commented translation of the whole text or selected passages. This activity was not only of interest for the students but also for us as instructors, giving us a privileged perspective on the range of topics and text types that were favourite with our students. This helped to better plan our own course activities to target their actual needs and expectations. The most popular text types students included in this section were, not surprisingly, song lyrics and literary texts, a choice that undoubtedly reflected both their own private and academic interests.

These were all typical components found in our students' portfolios, but naturally there were other sections that only appeared seldom: lists of new words and grammatical structures students learned in, and sometimes also outside, our translation course; language curiosities about English and/or their own mother tongues; lists of translation-related websites, particularly dictionaries and glossaries, etc. In this sense, the portfolio also revealed itself as a good indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the students' self-learning styles. In fact, this is, we would argue, a major role of the portfolio in higher education. Given the overwhelming weight of self-learning in today's universities, it is important to provide students with a tool where they can register their experiences. And it is also crucial for instructors to be able to monitor those self-learning activities and strategies, so as to eventually offer students guidance to optimise their choices.

6. Students' assessment of the portfolio experience

At the end of the first year, students were asked their opinion on a number of issues regarding the role of the portfolio in the course by means of an anonymous written questionnaire. We wanted to assess the degree of fulfilment of the

	1 Not at all	2	3	4	5 A lot	Nr. of responses
Get a deeper understanding of the course topics	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	15 (37.5%)	**17** **(42.5%)**	6 (15%)	40
See the real-world relevance of translation	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	**16** **(40%)**	**16** **(40%)**	40
Make the most of your working time	0 (0%)	8 (20%)	9 (22.5%)	**18** **(45%)**	5 (12.5%)	40
Follow the course contents regularly	0 (0%)	3 (7.7%)	13 (33.3%)	**16** **(41%)**	7 (18%)	39
Take active part in your own learning	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	9 (23%)	**16** **(41%)**	14 (36%)	39

Table 1. Students' perceived fulfilment of the portfolio objectives (mode in bold)

	1 Not at all	2	3	4	5 A lot	Nr. of responses
Group tutorials helped you to better understand the portfolio task	1 (2.6%)	3 (7.7%)	11 (28.2%)	**16** **(41%)**	8 (20.5%)	39
Sharing ideas with your classmates was positive	0 (0%)	7 (18%)	**15** **(38.4%)**	10 (45.6%)	7 (18%)	39
Teachers' written comments and advice contributed to improving your portfolio	0 (0%)	5 (13.2%)	4 (10.5%)	13 (34.2%)	**16** **(42.1%)**	38
The nr. of group tutorials was sufficient	2 (5.1%)	4 (10.3%)	7 (18%)	**14** **(35.9%)**	12 (30.7%)	39

Table 2. Students' perceived usefulness of group tutorials and teacher's supervision (mode in bold)

objectives specified at the outset of the activity, the usefulness of the periodical monitoring tutorials and instructors' advice, the time and effort invested in the task, and the weight of the portfolio in the final course grade.

Table 1 contains a tally of the questionnaire answers regarding the students' satisfaction with the task.

In general, the questionnaire results reveal a high degree of student satisfaction across all five dimensions in the poll. Their attitude was particularly positive concerning the contribution of the portfolio to a heightened awareness of the real-world relevance of translation and their assumption of a more active role and an increased responsibility in the learning process. In other words, the students' answers indicate that the portfolio had heightened their awareness of the real-world relevance of the translation topics dealt with during the course significantly and, in general, found this very encouraging. Also, on the face of it, the use of the portfolio had boosted students' self-initiative and self-responsibility in the course, and they were ready to devote both extra time and effort to the task voluntarily.

With regard to the usefulness of the monitoring sessions and the instructors' periodical supervision of the task, the results of the questionnaire were equally satisfactory (Table 2).

Unsurprisingly, the contribution of both the group tutorials and the instructors' supervision and written advice were estimated to be crucial for the success of the task. Given the inherent open-nature and, therefore, indeterminacy of the tool, and the fact that these first-year students had probably received little training in the kind of learning dynamics underlying the portfolio itself, the guidance, support, advice and encouragement they received from both their peers and the teaching staff were most welcome.

The third dimension in the students' questionnaire was the time and effort they devoted to the portfolio. According to their estimations (Table 3), most of the students spent in the task between 1 and 3 hours per week, i.e. around 60 hours per academic year. This was slightly more than the estimated reckoning in the course programme (45 hours), but the elaboration of the portfolio may have also involved the total or partial completion of other course activities, for instance, the preparation of exams.

According to the course programme, the compulsory portfolio was worth 30% of the final grade. The questionnaire results (Table 4) show that the majority of students found the weight originally allocated to the portfolio to be insufficient, and would welcome an increase to 40 or 50% of the final grade. This testifies to the students' profound awareness of the central role of the tool in the course, in their acquisition of the course contents and the attainment

	N	%
1 hour	8	20%
1 to 3 hours	26	65%
Over 3 hours	6	15%
Nr. of responses	40	100%

Table 3. Time devoted to the elaboration of the portfolio per week

	N	%
30%	11	27.5%
40%	15	37.5%
50%	14	35.0%
Nr. of responses	40	100%

Table 4. Students' expectations regarding the weight of the portfolio in the final course grade

of its objectives, but also, more pragmatically, shows their desire to have all the time and effort devoted to the portfolio during the year more fairly recognised.

7. Instructors' assessment of the portfolio experience

The introduction of the portfolio in our translation course resulted in a considerable increase in the workload of the teaching staff, particularly in the amount of time spent in assessing and supervising students' work. The individual assessment of each and every student portfolio at three points during the year and, particularly, the writing of three reports for each individual portfolio, can be a heavy, very time-consuming task.

All in all, however, the introduction of the portfolio as a learning tool brought significant benefits for both the students and the attainment of the course objectives. Naturally, the experience also highlighted some aspects of the implementation that still needed refining.

7.1. Limitations of the experience

The most serious problem resulted from the fact that the underlying philosophy of the portfolio clashed with the previous educational trajectory of some of our students. They had often been socialised into a rather passive form of learning, in which their role as students consisted mainly in taking notes, rote learning and repeating memorised contents in a final exam. In contrast, the portfolio forced them to assume a much more active role, doing research, showing creativity, organising contents, displaying design skills, etc. These activities, while motivating for the majority of students, were met with staunch resistance by not a few of them as well. For those students, and for the instructors, the first task ahead was then to unlearn those passive educational habits. Sometimes, this goal was the more difficult because students were receiving contradictory cues from just *next door*, e.g. other core courses, where note-taking and rote learning were the norm, reinforcing the popular idea, and their assumptions, that college education mainly consisted in master lectures.

For those who were unable to overcome these preconceptions, the compulsory portfolio experience did not live up to their – nor to our – expectations: all too often, our advice and suggestions were met with scepticism, and led to rather disappointing results. As against the intrinsically open nature of the tool, paradoxically the main feature of these failed portfolios was their predictability: they contained little else than those, so to speak, compulsory sections that had been suggested as examples, and the few reflections they showed were extremely cliché and occasionally mere plagiarism.

7.2. Benefits of the experience

Despite our deep concern with the relative failure of some of the students' experiences, the introduction of the portfolio in the course was most welcome by the vast majority of students and can only be described as a huge success.
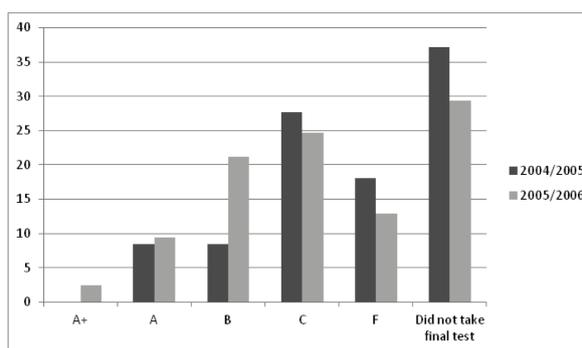

Figure 1. A comparison of students' grades before and after the introduction of the portfolio as an assessment tool (bars represent percentage of total number of students enrolled in the course each academic year).

Quantitatively, the students' learning benefited dramatically from the experience, with students obtaining final grades in the subject which were significantly better than in previous years. As shown in Figure 1, compared with the previous year, during the first year of implementation of the tool, the course statistics show an important decrease in failure rates and a general improvement in students' final grades.

Qualitatively, the portfolio provided an excellent framework for an enhanced dialogue between students and teaching staff. For instance, at the beginning of their portfolios, students were required to write a short essay introducing themselves. Students are generally eager to talk about themselves, offering instructors a privileged insight into a myriad of academic and personal traits: likes and dislikes, expectations and ambitions, typical moods, their relationship with the group, etc. This personal information was crucial for the eventual success of the individual exchanges between students and instructors, for instance, during the individual tutorials and the writing of individual reports on the portfolios.

Throughout the year, the portfolio offered students ample opportunity to express their opinions and feelings about the development of the course – topics raised by the instructor and their peers, work dynamics, amount of class and homework, etc. –, and also about their participation in it – difficulties with contents, problems with the timetable of classes and activities, problems with some members of their working group, etc. This was invaluable information for the instructors. Eventually, the portfolio proved to be a very effective tool to monitor the development of the course permanently, to identify and correct existing problems as they occur.

Finally, the portfolio also revealed itself as an excellent instrument for continuous assessment. For one thing, it reflects students' relative degree of involvement in the subject at every stage of the course: their class participation, completion of class activities and homework, self-learning initiatives, the quality of their participation in group activities, etc. And secondly, the portfolio allows an incomparably more comprehensive and fairer assessment than, for instance, the typical final test, because in its elaboration students display a whole array of both personal and intellectual skills, such as interpersonal skills, personal autonomy, self-observation, research and text-comprehension or writing skills, etc., which are contemplated in the course objectives together with the specific translation-related skills.

8. Conclusion

This paper has reported the results of a pedagogical initiative consisting in the implementation of the student's portfolio in an undergraduate translation course. We started by arguing that the new normative framework for the organisation of higher education in Europe demands from both the education institutions and the different agents the adoption of new pedagogical strategies and tools centred on the learner. The learner's portfolio is one such tool. The portfolio, we have argued, is particularly suitable for translator training. It favours students' acquisition of a series of skills whose importance for the translation profession is widely recognised, such as research, clarity of expression, creativity, observation or self-analysis. The importance for translators of all these skills, which traditional pedagogical methods in higher education tend to minimise, can hardly be overstressed. The observed results of our experience of using the portfolio to learn translation at an undergraduate level were highly positive and extremely encouraging for the future. For instructors, the extra work-load that came with the introduction of the portfolio clearly paid off: among others, it provided a unique opportunity for personal contact with students, and privileged access to their problems, expectations and wishes. For the vast majority of students, the experience brought about a significant improvement in the quality of their learning and in their final grades. In view of these results, we would suggest that the use of pedagogic tools like the portfolio, which put the emphasis on the initiative and responsibility of learners and on an enhanced, more personal interaction between learners and instructors, be generalised to higher education learning. Students are eager, and ready, to take up the challenge.

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