



Translating Solidarity into Action: Creatively Enhancing the Translation Classroom

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Abstract

Service-Learning (SL) is an educational approach that combines academic instruction skills and values with the provision of service activities for the betterment of the community (Puig, Gijón, Martín, and Rubio (2011). However, this pedagogical method is still new in some Higher Education settings, such as the case of the Translation Classroom.

The objective of this study is to assess the pedagogical impact and potential benefits of a project-based activity that has been introduced in the translation classrooms of an undergraduate course offered by a Higher Education Institution in Portugal. Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the influence of these initiatives on the students' learning outcomes and engagement levels.

The methodology involves students actively participating in community service activities that are relevant to their coursework by means of a partnership established with a Portuguese non-profit organisation. This project aims to bridge the gap between academic learning and its application in the professional realm by getting students to realise that translation involves the meticulous negotiation between their inferential, communicative, and creative abilities. Following their involvement, students reflect upon their experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, acquire practical skills, and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility (Sánchez and Rovi, 2015).

As a result, our overall aim is to investigate how Service-Learning can be used to direct the creation of teaching models that improve and strengthen not only the students' academic competencies and theoretical knowledge, but also their roles as agents of solidarity and humanitarianism.

Keywords: *Service-learning benefits, translator training, higher education, student motivation*

1. Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence and advanced technologies into society is reshaping the higher education landscape, presenting both opportunities and significant challenges. While advances in digital tools and AI offer new possibilities for interactive and student-centered learning, many undergraduate programs are still in the early stages of integrating these innovations into their curricula.

Within this transformational landscape, traditional teaching methods have become increasingly misaligned with students' evolving needs and expectations. Many students are showing less motivation in classes, less patience for sitting in on theoretical, teacher-led sessions, and a growing tendency to rely on Generative Artificial Intelligence for carrying out research and/or assignments. This shift highlights an urgent need to rethink educational methodologies to better foster student engagement, critical thinking, and the development of essential soft skills.

Now, more than ever, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must evolve to prepare students not just to complete their education successfully, but also to thrive in an unpredictable tech-driven future. Within this scope, it is our perspective that the Service-Learning teaching approach may be perceived as one of the possible methodologies that can address these needs at the higher education level.

Service-Learning aligns with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework, which is proposed to develop knowledge, skills, values, and behaviours in youth as a part of the global development agenda. SL is a type of experiential learning in which students combine academic coursework with community service, i.e., it serves as an educational approach that combines academic instruction skills and values with the provision of service activities for the betterment of the community (Puig, Gijón, Martín, and Rubio (2011). The project under study aims to bridge the gap between academic learning and its application in the Translation professional realm by prompting students to realise that translation involves the meticulous negotiation between their inferential,



communicative, and creative abilities. Additionally, and following their involvement, students reflect upon their experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, acquire practical skills, and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility (Sánchez and Rovi, 2015).

Our research is guided by the following questions:

1. How can service-learning be implemented as an innovative teaching strategy to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes?
2. What are students' perceptions of service-learning as part of their educational experience in translation studies?
3. What are the broader academic, professional, and social benefits of integrating service-learning into higher education curricula?

2. Service-Learning and the Translation Classroom

It is important to distinguish Service-Learning from activities such as community service or volunteer work. In its essence, Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning that intentionally integrates academic learning objectives of a specific course unit (syllabus) with meaningful real-world service activities (Salam et al., 2019, p. 573) aimed at encouraging active citizenship (Allen, 2003; Bringle and Clayton, 2021) and addressing real community needs. This approach not only reinforces academic learning, but also fosters civic responsibility, increases awareness to support those in need and encourages active citizenship.

Integrating Service-Learning methodologies into the Translation classroom comes at a important time in today's tech-driven reality. The evolving landscape of the use of Machine Translation and more recently, Generative AI, highlights a pressing need for translator educators to innovate teaching practices. It also calls for a critical reassessment of the translator's role and agency in a process that is increasingly influenced by machines. In other words, the unique contributions that human translators bring to the table must be reconsidered and revalued. This rethinking should influence how translation curricula is designed with this perspective not only of fostering the professional development of future translators, but also encouraging socially responsible practices that contribute to the public good.

2.1. Participants

The study was carried out at Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP), a university guided by a humanist vision, dedicated to advancing knowledge and promoting the well-being of society. UCP is actively working to include and promote Service-Learning as a foundational teaching approach throughout its four campuses. This effort is being led by the *CAPs Project, Catholic University and Service-Learning: Innovation and Social Responsibility*, which is dedicated to promoting SL as a key component of academic and social engagement at UCP. The CAPs Project highlights UCP's dedication to both educational innovation and social impact. CAPs has been actively involved in disseminating this approach to all faculties and teachers. Their initiative has given rise to the current project under the name *Translation for Equality and Inclusion*.

The project was developed as part of the Translation of General Texts - English course, a first-year course belonging to the Applied Foreign Languages undergraduate program with a major in Translation. The course is divided into two, 1.5 hour weekly sessions, and provides students with their first contact with practical translation tasks. As the name of the subject suggests, the source texts assigned for translation vary in nature. The course aims to foster students' awareness of the translation process and the translator's role, to encourage the reading and translation of diverse text types, and to ensure accurate rendering into the target language, using style and register appropriate for the text's purpose. Additionally, it seeks to consolidate students' knowledge of both English and Portuguese languages and cultures, and to promote familiarity with translation technologies, while also highlighting the interplay between machine translation and the work of the human translator.

The implementation of the SL methodology does not require major changes to the existing syllabus. In the specific case of this study, course topics, objectives and learning outcomes remained the same, while the assessment of the SL project was included in the already existing 20% of the final grade allocated to Project work.

2.2. The Partner Association

After some initial challenges in identifying a suitable institution to collaborate with, a partnership was eventually established with an association committed to promoting inclusive discourse and supporting



individuals facing discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, domestic violence, and abusive relationships. The association welcomed our proposal enthusiastically, recognising the urgent need to raise awareness about their work. The involvement of our student translators would represent an added value for the dissemination of the association's work beyond national borders, as well as offering support to the foreign community living in Portugal. The translation work involved translating texts in both English and Portuguese (EN-PT and PT-EN), using the association's website pages as the primary source texts. The materials included a wide range of genres, such as the 'About Us' section, mission and objectives, information on founders and partners, as well as legal and financial reports.

Given the volume of the content and the fact that students are only allocated the project at the end of the semester, when their translation skills are more developed, completing the translation with only one class in a single semester proved to be unfeasible. The intention is to continue the work over two additional semesters, which will culminate in a final event to celebrate the completion of the project.

2.3. The Process

The Translation of General Texts class consisted of a total of 19 Students, which were divided into five groups of four students each. Each group assumed the role of an independent "Translation Agency". Within each agency, specific roles were assigned by the teacher: a project manager, responsible for receiving texts from the "client" (the teacher) and distributing the work among the "translators"; translators, who carried out the translation tasks; and a proofreader, who handled the final revision and post-editing of the completed work. The project manager was also responsible for managing the workflow and setting internal deadlines to ensure the project was completed on time and ready for final submission to the client. It was the responsibility of the project manager to submit the final work to the teacher. A dedicated space on the university's institutional Moodle page was created for the project, where a detailed guide was posted along with the team names and the division of tasks. The project was fundamentally collaborative and took place outside of regular class time. To accommodate this, homework assignments were reduced, allowing students more time to focus on the project. After the introductory class to SL and the project 'kick off', the duration of the project lasted one month. During this month, the teacher would dedicate only 15 minutes of class time once a week to answer any questions, share experiences and essentially reflect on the work carried out. Upon completion of the project, only one more session was dedicated to the project, once again for reflection, and for answering questionnaires. It was then the teacher's responsibility to put text together and carry out final revision before sending it out to the "client"/ "association".

From the pedagogical view point, the project was guided by Kolb's model of experiential learning theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984), which emphasises the importance of direct experience and reflection in the learning process. Learning is defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1984, p.41). Kolb's model presents two dialectically related modes of grasping experience, Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualisation (AC), and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). (Kolb & Kolb, 2021, p.7). By entering into contact and taking knowledge of the existence of the association and its work, students had concrete experience and engaged directly in community-based experience. In this context, abstract conceptualisation was achieved through the application of translation theories and strategies, which students reflected on when working on their texts. As a consequence, students not only apply but consolidate what they have learned to new context by means of active experimentation.

2.4. Evaluation and Student Feedback

In terms of evaluation and already mentioned, the SL assignment was integrated in the 20% of the final course grade allocated for Project work. A rubric was created and provided on the Moodle page. On a scale of 1-20, following points were attributed: Translation (5 marks), Language (5 marks), Presentation of translated document (5 marks) and Student participation and reflection (5 marks).

Evaluation focused on four key areas. First, particular attention was given to the translation exercise itself, including the semantic equivalence, adherence to terminology and the appropriateness of the translation in terms of cultural and contextual relevance. Second, the quality of the language used in the target text was evaluated. This included grammatical correctness, vocabulary choice, syntactic structure, and overall clarity and readability. Third, attention was given to the presentation of the



translated document, including the layout, as well as the translator and/or proofreader's comments, including the group's compliance with deadlines. Professionalism in handling the assignment is an essential part of this component. Finally, the students' reflection on and participation in the SL process was assessed. This includes their level of contribution and the depth of critical reflection during the learning experience. Each of these four components was marked out of five, for a maximum score of twenty marks, in accordance with the 1–20 grading scale used in Portuguese higher education.

Since this is an exploratory project to integrate Service-Learning methodology into a translation course, the main focus of assessment is based on students' competence in translation. While the SL component undoubtedly enriches the educational experience by introducing real-world relevance and social engagement, it brings with it a range of complex and often intangible factors such as teamwork, agency, ethical sensitivity among others. These elements are vital to the overall development of the learner, yet they are difficult to measure in a fair and consistent way.

2.5. Sample and Data Collection

Besides the interim group discussions promoted on a weekly basis, the research was conducted on a sample of 19 students. A structured questionnaire using a Likert scale was applied to students (Table 1). For the purpose of this study, the following results are particularly significant:

In response to the question (Q2) *“Overall, do you feel the project was a success?”*, 11.11% of respondents considered the project to be “extremely successful”, 77.78% rated it as “very successful”, and 11.11% as “moderately successful”. These results indicate a high level of overall satisfaction with the project, with nearly 90% of students perceiving it as a success to a strong or very strong degree, suggesting the project achieved its intended outcomes effectively.

For Question 3, *“Do you think the project was an effective way to learn about the translation process (strategies, solutions, challenges)?”*, 77.78% of respondents rated it as “extremely effective” and 22.22% as “very effective”. This positive feedback reflects the perceived pedagogical value of the project, reinforcing its effectiveness in facilitating students' understanding of core aspects of the translation process through experiential learning.

In response to Question 5, *“All members of my group contributed equally to the project,”* 55.56% of students “strongly agreed”, 22.22% “agreed”, and 22.22% were neutral (“neither agree nor disagree”). These findings suggest a generally positive perception of group collaboration and equity in participation, though the presence of neutral responses may point to variability in group dynamics or perceptions of fairness among some participants. Finally, for Question 6, *“My group members and I learned from each other while working on the project,”* 22.22% of students “strongly agreed” and 66.67% “agreed” and 11.11% neither agree nor disagreed. This majority response indicates that collaborative learning was a central and successful element of the project, highlighting the value of peer interaction and mutual support in the development of translation skills.

| Questionnaire Questions |
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| 1. Overall, how challenging did you find the project? |
| 2. Overall, do you feel the project was a success? |
| 3. Do you think the project was an effective way to learn about the translation process (strategies, solutions, challenges)? |
| 4. Overall, how much did you like participating in the Service-learning project? |
| 5. All members of my group contributed equally to the project. |
| 6. My group members and I have learned from each other while working on the project. |
| 7. Working on the Service-Learning project encourages critical thinking towards translation. |
| 8. Working on the project has helped me improve my level of understanding of translation classes. |
| 9. Working on the paper helped me increase my self-confidence as a translator. |
| 10. The translation project has helped me become an independent learner. |

Table 1. Questionnaire Questions

3. Results Analysis



In the following section, we provide final considerations and results analysis aligned with the study's initial research questions:

3.1. How Can Service-Learning be Implemented as an Innovative Teaching Strategy to Enhance Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes?

Service-learning can be implemented as an innovative teaching strategy by aligning course objectives and learning outcomes with real-world tasks that address the needs of a specific target audience. By engaging students in meaningful, community-oriented projects that require the practical application of academic skills.

3.2. What are Students' Perceptions of Service-Learning as Part of their Educational Experience In Translation Studies?

Students perceived service-learning in Translation Studies as a valuable and enriching experience that bridges theory and practice. They appreciated the opportunity to apply academic knowledge to authentic tasks, develop professional skills, and engage in meaningful collaboration. Many also report increased motivation, a stronger sense of responsibility, and greater awareness of the social role of translators.

3.3. What are the Broader Academic, Professional, and Social Benefits of Integrating Service-Learning into Higher Education Curricula?

In regards to academic benefits of the SL methodology and within the scope of the course unit and students' area of specialisation, students were able to deepen and consolidate their understanding of key theoretical concepts in Translation Studies. The project promoted contextualised learning and encouraged a more reflective approach to the translation process and its strategies, resulting in a better grasp of how translation works in real-world contexts. It enhanced their ability to analyse and summarise information, as well as their written and oral communication. By dealing with different text types, they also realised that translation involves the meticulous negotiation between their inferential, communicative, and creative abilities.

Students also enhanced their teamwork and interpersonal relationships, i.e., the ability to work collaboratively, which constitutes an essential skill for their future careers. This collaborative experimental learning should always integrate decisions about whether and how to their overall digital literacy skills and research skills. These include how to deploy GenAI, CAT Tools or Machine Translation (MT), skills in validating terminology, using parallel texts effectively, recognising credible sources, and becoming more aware of the risks of online misinformation. The experience of peer review proved particularly valuable as it fostered a greater sense of responsibility and accountability towards classmates and feedback more impactful.

Regarding future professional skills, although the project was role-based, simulating a translation agency allowed students to gain practical insights into the demands of the professional world. It highlighted the importance of time management, organisation, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. Not only did students learn to take accountability for their work, but also developed their leadership skills, which are crucial for their future careers (Miletić et al., 2023). Additionally, understanding that failing to carry out individual responsibilities could compromise the success of the entire team.

Beyond these academic and professional outcomes, the project also brought attention to the translator's role as a social agent, an aspect that is often overlooked when choosing this career path. While roles such as audiovisual, literary, or game localisation translators are frequently considered, the broader social impact of translation is not always recognised.

This project served as an entry point for students to engage with core values such as inclusion, empathy, and ethical awareness. Service-Learning fosters civic engagement (Bringle, Hatcher, & Clayton, 2006), encouraging students to develop a sense of responsibility toward social issues and active participation in their communities. In the end, they expressed a stronger willingness to contribute to the community and to participate in future university projects with social impact.

Many of these transferrable skills and values are not easily measured using traditional quantitative methods, yet they represent essential outcomes of higher education. As such, they should be



recognised and integrated into university curricula, reflecting the broader mission of universities to shape not only knowledgeable professionals but also responsible and engaged citizens.

4. Final Considerations

The fact that this was a small-scale project which involve only 19 students, limited the potential for broad generalisations or significant conclusions. However, it provided valuable insights into the implementation of the Service-Learning methodology and the assessment criteria involved. Most importantly, it highlighted the project's positive impact on student behaviour and engagement and how the “learning by doing” premise can change group dynamics.

While the use of machine translation (MT) and generative AI tools was encouraged, students engaged in group discussions to evaluate and negotiate the most appropriate translation and solutions, demonstrating critical thinking and not simply for supplying the answers.

Our first observations suggest that students’ consolidation of knowledge and their development of translation literacy occurred more quickly and effectively compared to previous years. This outcome presents an interesting opportunity for further research and deeper analysis.

Looking ahead, there are plans to continue the project which will include the completion of the website translation and a final event to celebrate the completion of the project with the partner association.

5. Conclusion

By enabling students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world societal needs or challenges, SL not only enhances learning outcomes but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility.

These initiatives rely on strong partnerships between Higher Education Institutions and the communities they serve, reinforcing the relevance of education beyond the classroom.

Insofar as the field of Translation is concerned, this learning experience highlights the potential direction for addressing the evolving responsibilities of translator educators and researchers. This may include not only re-evaluating translator agency within society, as well as considering what constitutes the distinctly human dimension in translation amid an increasing AI-driven and technology context.

When educators implement pedagogies that promote student agency, motivation, and critical thinking, they help transform the curriculum into a dynamic tool for realigning education with purpose, relevance, and impact. In doing so, teachers shift from being transmitters of knowledge to becoming facilitators of deeper, more engaged student learning.

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