Discipline-Specific Writing in a Spanish-English Translation Course

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Abstract

The integration of writing assignments in courses whose subject matter may not be the development of writing skills is framed in the principles of writing across the curriculum. One key principle is that the writer needs a reason to write and that reason is best framed within the content of a course and the academic discipline within which it is situated so that writing may be informed by both discipline-specific and general writing norms. Writing in any language, whether that language is the first one or not, requires explicit teaching and intentional learning. Writing mastery in different genres develops over time through the interaction between observing models from different genres and writing in those genres. This presentation will discuss a translation course that is offered to Spanish-English translation undergraduate American students in the fourth year of their baccalaureate degree in Spanish at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte). This course included learning outcomes that involved the completion of writing assignments in the students' first language (English). Providing opportunities for students to develop as writers within the translation studies discipline required defining those opportunities and adopting a framework that guided the process of defining writing assignments. The principles of Universal Design for Learning served as a foundation to design the writing tasks that were to expose students to experiencing writing in the discipline of translation studies. Those principles were also used to design the grading rubric that assisted students with facilitating their understanding of the writing tasks. The paper will discuss the nature of the assignments, the process that led to their design, and the learning outcomes as measured by the rubric associated to each assignment, namely, a reflection paper and a synopsis of a research paper published in a scientific journal.

Keywords: *universal design for learning, UDL, translation, writing across the curriculum, WAC.*

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education in the United States resort to different strategies that aim at ensuring that, in spite of the different academic background of first-year students, all students will have comparable opportunities to develop a working knowledge in certain subjects outside their academic major as well as developing their ability to write in an academic setting. This is the reason why, regardless of the field of specialization chosen by students, all of them have to fulfill a number of so-called general education requirements in the form of courses or assignments integrated in courses within the academic major. General education requirements may stipulate that one of the courses within the student's academic major needs to include a certain amount of writing that will expose students to the experience of writing on topics and in genres relevant to their major.

The focus on developing writing skills in American higher education is evident in the effort that has been allocated since the 1970s to date to cement the presence of writing in the undergraduate curriculum through the guidance provided by the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement [1, 2].

Academic writing entails being proficient in a language within the language. It needs to be explicitly taught whether the writing is to be performed in the first language or in the second language. In this regard, the learning needs of undergraduate students do not differ from those of students aged five to nine in that they need to be linguistically socialized [3, 4]. Undergraduate students' language development in the academic language domain usually is in an incipient stage when they enter the university. Therefore, American institutions of higher education are intentional in providing opportunities for students to develop their abilities to write for academic purposes.

The opportunities to write for academic purposes may take different forms depending on the subject matter and the instructor's understanding of the learning process and theories of learning. The purpose of this paper is to present the design of academic writing tasks that were grounded on the fusion of WAC principles and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. These writing experiences were included in a Spanish-English translation course that Spanish majors typically take in their last year, which is the fourth one, of their baccalaureate degree.

2. Universal Design for Learning as a Foundation

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework founded on three tenets: 1) learners learn in different ways; for instance, some may learn better when information is auditory and others may learn better when the information is written, 2) learners need to have different ways to demonstrate their knowledge as the very instruments of assessment may make it easier to demonstrate knowledge for some and more difficult for others, and 3) learners need to be motivated to learn and the means of motivation may be more or less effective depending of individual characteristics of learners [5]. At the core of the UDL framework is the recognition that individuals, even when they do not have to overcome a learning disability, learn in different ways, may be motivated or discouraged differently and may perform more or less competently depending on how learning outcomes are measured. Another central UDL notion is that there is a difference between access to information and access to learning. Awareness of this difference and its implications for the learning process is ever more important in the digital age, characterized by the rapid generation of information and misinformation that learners need to learn to navigate in order to become lifelong learners [6]. The differences that emerge across learners are magnified when learners have learning disabilities. These learners are particularly sensitive to instructors' ability to conform the learning experience to the UDL framework. The extent of the commitment to these learners in institutions of higher education in the USA can be observed in the rich body of research on including learning-impaired learners as full participants in the experience of achieving a higher education degree [7].

3. Fusing WAC principles and UDL framework

WAC and UDL tenets either intersect or complement one another. They have in common the implicit recognition that expertise in subject matter and expertise in writing do not guarantee instructors' ability to guide learners through the learning process. They also conceive the learning product as the result of intentionally designed steps that will ultimately yield the desired learning outcome. A key element is understanding the learning products as the result of a process and that this process rests upon opportunities for learners to correct mistakes by benefiting from formative feedback before the summative assessment is performed. WAC principles and the UDL framework recognize that each learner may need different levels of support. Therefore, the success of student-writers will depend on some level of individualized instruction that is tailored to their unique needs as learners [8].

4. Writing Tasks in a Spanish-English Translation Course

The Spanish-English translation course is the third and last translation practicum that students take in their Spanish major at UNC Charlotte. It typically enrolls 15-24 students. This course includes two writing projects, of some 800-850 words each in length, that provide students with the opportunity to experience writing as a process. The purpose of these writing assignments is to develop writing skills in English while framing the writing within the field of translation studies. Because writing in the real world is often connected to reading models or content that informs the writer's writing, the two assignments are linked to material that students have to read in order to be able to complete the writing tasks.

4.1 Assignment #1: Reflection Paper

This assignment focuses students' attention on making connections among ideas they may have studied in the course under discussion or in previous translation courses, and ideas they may have generated empirically by virtue of having to find solutions to translation challenges. The bulk of the material studied is available in the textbooks used in translation courses. These textbooks are written in Spanish. Students are guided through the process of writing in seven ways: 1) instructions that define the different components that need to be integrated in the assignment (task and how to present the information), 2) description of procedures, 3) preview of the rubric (adapted from existing ones [9, 10]), which is used to assign a grade to the final version, 4) draft, 5) formative feedback on the draft, 6) individual consultations as needed to discuss the feedback, and 7) final version.

4.2 Assignment #2: Synopsis of a scholarly article

The aim of this assignment is for students to experience writing that involves a key component of the scholarly review as a genre, the summary. This experience makes writing accessible to the students in the sense that they do not need to engage in the most complex element to the scholarly review, namely assessing the merits of the work. Nevertheless, summarizing a scholarly article gives the

student the opportunity to have a partial experience of a genre that is widely present not only in the field of translation studies but also in most academic fields. The scholarly article that students had to summarize was written in English. Students are guided through the process of writing in a way similar to that of Assignment #1: Reflection Paper.

5. Conclusion

The learning outcomes as described in the grading rubric that was used to assign a grade to the final version of each assignment included the following elements: 1) delivery timeliness, 2) language accuracy, 3) clarity of expression, 4) organization of ideas, 5) documentation of sources of information, 6) analytical thinking in the conclusion, and 7) following instructions. The average grade for the final version of Assignment #1 was 90 out of 100. For Assignment #2, the average grade was 89 out of 100. The amount of feedback that I had to provide on the first draft ranged from five to twenty-five comments depending on the student. Most students were able to address my feedback on their own without a one-on-one consultation, but all of them had the option to meet with me.

While these writing assignments served a very specific academic requirement at UNC Charlotte, they may prove to be a useful model for assignments such as research papers or writing assignments in foreign language courses whose purpose may be developing language proficiency through writing.

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