TAPPING INTO INTERPRETING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO ENGAGE IN TARGETED TRANSLATION PRACTICE

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Abstract

Translation and interpreting are different in many aspects. For the former, the source and target text remain available and communication between participants happens asynchronously; the latter demands immediate interaction and speech signals are fast fading. The two activities and their respective contexts, including working conditions, are also dissimilar in the professional world. A quick glance may leave an impression that entirely different training is in order. However, translation and interpreting as a profession also share tremendous similarities — the European Master's Translation competence framework adequately applies to interpreting. This action research study aimed to motivate beginning interpreting students to overcome challenges in interpreting practice via translation activities. A two-stage translation workshop was designed, and the results show that students became more engaged in the workshop when the authenticity of the tasks and the relevance between translation practice and interpreting performance were elucidated.

1. INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, translation and interpreting
activities render messages from one language into
another in written and oral form respectively (Baker
& Pérez-González, 2011)[1]. What obviously tells the
two activities apart, aside from modality, is the
immediacy of communication and the transience of
the message (Riccardi, 2002, p. 77). These
fundamental differences seem to attract students of
different qualities and personalities. For example, as
interpreting requires robust public speaking and
memory skills, and the ability to think on one's feet,
students embracing challenges that demand quick
reactions tend to move towards the interpreting track
(Russo, 2011, helpfully reviews the "interpreters'
aptitudes"), whereas how translation is done —
cognitively and in the professional context — is
largely different and normally invites students of
distinct attributes. It is also due to the above

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[1] The definition here is incomplete as sign language has been missing in the
picture, as well as intralingual and intersemiotic translation (see Jakobson,
1959/2012, p. 127), but in-depth discussion of the definition is beyond the
scope of this paper.

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disparities that many interpreting students, the target
group of this study, tend to limit their attention to
their narrowly defined perception of interpreting
training.

Nevertheless, translation and interpreting require
overlapping skill sets and share more similarities
than students would intuitively expect. The
European Master's in Translation (EMT) network
published a competence framework in 2017,
dividing the competences a translator should
develop into five categories, namely "Language and
Culture", "Translation", "Technology", "Personal
and Interpersonal", and "Service Provision"
(European Commission, 2017, p. 4). The specifics,
albeit devised with translation in mind, adequately
apply to interpreting as a profession.

Accordingly, persuading students to reap the
benefits afforded by practicing translation to
sharpen fundamental skills underpinning
interpreting performance is a logical but difficult
move. The teacher has to make explicit the
relevance between translation and interpreting
because these students need to know the value of
engaging in this seemingly dissimilar activity
(Merriam & Bierema, 2013; National Research
Council, 2012) before committing themselves,

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rather than funnelling their time and energy into interpretating practice..

2. CONTEXT AND ISSUE IN QUESTION

The current study is situated in the context of the interpreting programme of Queen's University Belfast (QUB, henceforth) in the UK. The entry requirement for this one-year MA programme is IELTS 6.5 (overall). There are six modules across the academic year: one year-long theoretical module, four semester-long interpreting modules, and a dissertation module, totaling 180 CATS points (the maximum a student of Interpreting can earn for an MA degree). This means any other training or learning activities, including translation workshops are shoved into the optional category.

2.1. Context of the Motivation Issue

As a lecturer, I spend most of my contact hours with interpreting students and have acutely sensed fluctuation in their motivation level in different classroom settings (see relevant discussion in Turner & Patrick, 2008). Generally, students are motivated to engage with both theoretical and practical modules, although their interest and amount of effort put into learning vary from context to context

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and are even mediated by the nature of each activity within the same context. For example, students unanimously love role-plays and mock conferences, which obviously change the dynamics in the classroom and wrap the venue in an authentic, stressful, yet rewarding atmosphere, as these events make them feel more closely connected to the real world of professional practice. The events are stressful in the sense that students cannot practice in pairs first or pause and clarify meaning as much as they need without consequences before interpreting in front of the whole class — interruptions, when happening too often, damage the interpreter's professional image and the students' image in the mind of their classmates. In addition, I, as a participant to the event, do not correct the interpreter or "scaffold" their performance by providing hints (discussion on this education-specific term see Gibbons, 2015; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) but simply allow communication to break down, so students would understand the consequences of their choices. Meanwhile, simulated events are also rewarding and motivating because communication hinges on the interpreter's performance and students genuinely feel the need for their service, so practice is no longer seen as a form of assessment or learning activity but as an authentic interpreting assignment (Meyers & Nulty, 2009, p. 567).

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An interesting observation is that, as we move on to discuss addressing the issues emerging from the peer and lecturer feedback students receive after each round of practice, I sense a lack of momentum to get to the root of the challenges that arise, which are mainly due to insufficient language proficiency and flexibility, and start tackling each individual aspect via deliberate practice — this helps students develop true expertise (Ericsson, 2002). The pressure on and expectations of the interpreter to immediately provide interpretation leaves little time for the interpreter (Angelelli, 1999) to think over the meaning of the source speech or the core message intended to be conveyed, to select word choices or strategies that are more appropriate for the context, or even to re-organise sentence structures to ensure idiomatic rendition. Previous research has pointed out that the myriads of problems interpreting students frequently encounter include a poor understanding of the expressions used or the intended message, or that the interpretation sounds "foreign" and unnatural, even if students are working from a foreign language into their mother tongue. If the student manages to avoid the above problems, there is still a high possibility that the cognitive load becomes unbearable and leads to a huge variation in the register of the student's interpretation in the same segment or poor choices of diction (e.g. Agrifoglio, 2004; Her, 1997).

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In the context of translator and interpreter training, learning through translation practice is the most beneficial and relevant approach than pure language acquisition/learning to improving students' bilingual competence. After all, translation and interpreting share the same goal: bridge the comprehension gap between people who do not share a common language. Although translation handles written symbols, mostly words, and the time pressure for providing immediate translation is mostly absent — except in urgent cases — whereas verbal information is specific to interpreting activities and the transience of the source messages together with the precariousness of the outcome of communication, which depends entirely on the instantaneity of interpreting service provision, pose unique challenges (Gile, 2009), the two modes share largely similar principles and strategies. The success of each still hinges on solving language issues, with social, cultural, environmental, and interpersonal factors taken into consideration.

With its resemblance to interpreting but with the pressure of immediate response lifted, translation is a perfect opportunity for sharpening language and reformulation skills. Trainees have more time to contemplate their available choices when running into certain obstacles, compare the (dis)advantages

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and adequacy of each option in a particular context, and try out different strategies to see how each will fare. In order to successfully complete a translation task, additional efforts, such as reading extensively on the same topic in both languages, are sometimes necessary to learn concepts and idiomatic expressions in a certain field. Reading and using languages with a clear goal in mind, i.e. translation, is a much more interesting and motivating way to improve one's language abilities (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Fernández Guerra, 2014).

2.2. Issue of Insufficient Motivation

However, many students seem to be clinging to the idea that sheer quantity of interpreting practice is the best solution to all problems, and not deliberate and targeted practice, which aims at addressing specific aspects of performance (Ericsson, 2002; Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Shreve, 2006). Therefore, I tend to sense tidbits of reluctance at times from several students to slow down for a moment and brainstorm various solutions to certain language structures posing great challenges for rendition; a more tell-tale sign is observed in some comments in the teaching evaluation suggesting even "more videos to practice at home", "more topics", and "more mock conferences" — when we are already spending more than 70% of the total contact hours on actual

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practice, and simulation events are taking place every other week.

The suggestion of adding translation practice to their routine by coming to my weekly translation workshop receives only lukewarm responses from some students; others are more open-minded but do not seem motivated enough to actively partake in the activity. When asked about the reasons behind their reactions, many consider translation "irrelevant to a career in interpreting", and the two modes are "still widely different due to the presence of time pressure in one and its absence in the other". Furthermore, some students just feel they cannot "bear with the time spent on searching for information" and prefer to "keep practicing all the time and do practice only".

In reality, the truth is translation is likely to be an indispensable source of income for many interpreters, given the interpreting industry is composed mostly of freelancers (Chen et al., 2012; Luo et al., 2018; cf. Pöchhacker, 2009, p. 177), whose nature and the working conditions received are more similar to contingency workers (Payne, 2013) than to full-time employees. Added to the challenges faced by freelancers is the unpredictability of the amount of work available on the market. Consequently, erratic interpreting assignments could become an unreliable stream of

income, especially for new graduates of interpreting who need more time to make a name for themselves and build personal networks. Translation is thus another avenue via which interpreters can maintain a living by relying on professional skills they already possess, instead of selling their labour for any work that is available.

Considering that students are even more enthusiastic about simulation events than pure practice, I take it that they need to be able to see the direct relevance or usefulness of an activity to the real life of an interpreter before their motivation rises sufficiently to sustain their efforts engaging with it. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether a quasi-authentic context, resembling the professional world of translation with project-based learning at its core (see Blumenfeld et al., 1991 for discussion of its fundamental concepts, advantages and challenges), can effectively mitigate students' initial rejection of translation practice and, further, motivate them to willingly and consciously spend time building up their knowledge base, discussing translation strategies that could both apply to translation and interpreting, and sharpening bilingual and reformulation skills.

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3. INCREASING MOTIVATION IN A TWO-STAGE PROJECT

This study falls into the category of action research, which "operates in the context of practical problems which affect all those involved" (Hatim, 2013, p. 201). The overarching aim here is to tackle interpreting students' lack of interest and motivation to engage in translation activities, which lets the golden opportunity to address challenges encountered in interpreting practice slip through their fingers. The setting of this project is my translation workshop, a year-long, value-added element to the MA programme in Interpreting at QUB with no credit offered. With the concept of iterative instructional design in mind, I used observations and interaction with students in the workshop to gather feedback to effect changes needed as the workshop progressed (Jonassen, 2008).

3.1. Finalising Parameters and Project Initiation

In order to achieve my goal, set out in the beginning, I broke away from the traditional didactic approach. It decontextualises the product and process of translation (Kiraly, 2005), turns translation into a boring learning activity done solely for the purpose of passing a module, and presumes there are certain

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"rules" that can be followed to counter all problems once students master the skills to translate each individual sentence. The reality is that

Translations are, by definition, written for new situations, purposes, recipients and cultures. When you learn to translate, you have to learn how to gain an overview of a new situation with all its different cultural factors and, perhaps even more importantly, you have to learn how to position yourself in this communication system and define your own situational role, goal and tasks. (Risku, 2002, p. 526)

This clearly shows that "translation is the epitome of an ill-structured domain" (Kiraly, 2005, p. 1103), as translation is

a highly complex and ill-structured social, cognitive, and cultural process. There are few if any 'rules' for translators to follow; there are no commonly accepted inventories of techniques, strategies or procedures that need to be acquired through classroom exercises and implemented in clearly categorized problem situations; there are no translation methods which, if carefully learned and applied, will lead the translator to the 'right' solutions. (Ibid., p. 1103)

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Furthermore, "as extensive research in the fields of expertise studies and cognitive science has demonstrated that cognitive strategies in ill-structured domains are largely heuristic and dynamic in nature and both personally and socially constructed," (ibid., p. 1102) it makes perfect sense for the workshop to centre on teamwork (Massey, 2017). Here, concerted efforts are devoted by a small group of people towards a project to achieve a common goal (Varela & Mead, 2018, p. 173) via interaction, collaboration, discussion, and negotiation.

Considering the better suitability of teamwork for my goal, translation projects were assigned to or chosen by students in groups throughout the year (see the two different stages below). One thing worth mentioning is that, different from using actual translation cases from clients as advocated by Kiraly (2000, 2005), the materials used here were mostly texts that had genuine needs to be translated but had not yet been requested by any client at the time of this study. One reason for this deviation is that most clients are reluctant to work with students because quality control is less straightforward. The whole project will require a longer timescale, as students only meet for limited time each week and I make final revisions after detailed discussion with students to ensure the translation meets industry

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standards. Another reason for this selection is that materials cannot be chosen randomly simply because they are authentic. Only those that present enough challenges but do not completely overwhelm students — and thus "quash" their motivation to even start pursuing excellence — are suitable for fresh trainees. Thirdly, connecting students to the industry too early before their abilities develop further runs the risk of leaving them chasing deadlines instead of making the best use of every difficulty they encounter in training. Students need the chance to make mistakes and discuss them freely without worrying about any external constraints placed on them, and it is this kind of safe environment that effectively facilitates development (for relevant discussion see Hansen-Schirra et al., 2018, pp. 270-272).

Accordingly, articles about global and social development, especially in underdeveloped countries, were chosen for the first semester because the content is closely related to daily life with a certain, but not disproportionate, amount of domain knowledge that requires deeper reading and research efforts. In addition, facilitating the flow of information around the world across different languages is a key interest of mine. Hopefully, my personal motivation and dedication to this topic, which I deem of crucial importance to the global

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society, could also exert some positive influence on students' motivation to participate (Lam et al., 2008). Moving onto the second semester, with certain familiarity and some experience in the professional work of a translator and some interest to keep developing their skills, students had complete autonomy and could engage with any topic of their interest as a group.

To tap into students' tendency to "stay connected" in this new era, I used Edmodo, a platform with an interface similar to Facebook, to manage communication and all the translation projects. Notifications were sent to students' phones in real time to provide a sense of urgency of the real world — in which translation cases could come and be taken by competitors in minutes. Google Drive, on the other hand, was used for collaborative translation activities, so everyone could see written feedback and suggested translations at the same time and make instant adjustments accordingly during the discussion phase. A self-evaluation chart was also provided to students to prompt self-reflection and deeper peer discussion.

Seventeen students attended the first week of the workshop, and most had not received any formal translator or interpreter training prior to their studies at QUB. I used the occasion to introduce my ideas

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of running the workshop and the intention to adjust along the way as an action research project to improve teaching and learning experience. I also mentioned soliciting their informal feedback from time to time and a short, anonymous questionnaire at the end of the second semester for my research. In addition to the rationale of my instructional design, we discussed the expectations of myself, as the facilitator, and theirs, as trainees/practitioners. I elucidated how they could address challenges encountered during interpreting practice via translation and the similarities between the two activities, along with how sight translation plays a role in both (Biela-Wolonciej, 2007; Dragsted & Hansen, 2009; Dragsted et al., 2011; Weber, 1990). Fourteen students stayed on and finished the journey with me, and 11 voluntarily filled out the questionnaire at the end.

3.2. Stage One: Students as Trainees and Practitioners

The first semester focused on walking the students through the life cycle of a real case, from how the translator receives an assignment and negotiates expectations and conditions, to the final delivery of the translation. We started with an introduction to the translation and interpreting industry and the

necessity of keep translation as a service even for an
interpreter. In addition, different computer-assisted
translation (CAT) tools that could boost productivity
were discussed, along with the expectations of
clients, and the standard workflow adopted by
translation companies. To offer students a taste of
the professional world of translation, I took up the
role of client to assign cases and communicate
expectations with a translation brief, which "is a
good starting point for discussions on
conceptualizations of well-defined tasks"
(Angelone & Marín García, 2017, p. 135). To help
students familiarise themselves with the guidance
that could facilitate their work, we walked through
the brief together for every translation assignment,
elucidating the genre, style, time of delivery, the
medium used, and purpose of both the source and
target texts, as well as what guiding principles and
strategies should be borne in mind when translating
the document before starting to labour away at the
task.

Students worked in pairs ahead of each class — one
would translate and the other review the assignment
and provide feedback. In the classroom, the
translator and reviewer would have a pair discussion
first, defending their own strategies and translation
choices, and then we compared translations from
different groups with my written feedback as a

professional practitioner and an external reviewer. A small period of time was also reserved for groups to share good information-searching techniques or resources they found. Students then made revisions based on the suggestions before I finalised the translation, which helped clarify the criteria and standards for good performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205).

Spontaneous chat with students indicated that the workshop was positively received by students. They could better appreciate the time spent on researching and considering the reformulation strategies, which made their language use more flexible. Most students were engaged in carrying out the tasks. However, some students reflected that bigger-class discussion was helpful but could be time-consuming and led to less interaction between members, and some of the questions raised were peculiar to other groups and therefore were less relevant. For a select few, asking questions in front of everyone was slightly intimidating, as this was sometimes associated with a "negative impact on one's self-image" — according to one student in private conversation — and hence opportunities to expound on some challenges were lost; they also tended to avoid voicing their opinions when feeling less confident, and even more so when what they thought conflicted with other groups. Another notable

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phenomenon was that the format of each class was quite stable, although various activities were planned. Simply put, students needed some other forms of stimuli, as could be seen from lacklustre reactions in class at times.

3.3. Stage Two: Students as Freelancers and Business Owners

Some adjustments were made based on the informal feedback. The second semester became more market and project-oriented: aside from sharpening language and reformulation skills, students had to promote themselves by managing two social media accounts (on WeChat and Weibo), established for this workshop, to attract viewers and potential clients — exactly what freelancers nowadays need to do to build their reputation (cf. Meyers & Nulty, 2009) — thereby echoing the real world in the workshop's simulated setting.

The whole class was divided into groups of 3-5 people, and each group would author a "column" (by translating texts of their choice), in which they would focus on one area, such as finance or tourism. To pick up the pace and offer students a real sense of building one's own business, discussion was limited to each group, and I rotated among them to

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facilitate discussion and provide guidance. The same procedure for translation and review still applied, and the final translated texts were uploaded to the said platforms, with students' names and roles included in each article. Google Drive was again used for back-end management, and students were encouraged to share resources and glossaries they compiled with others. A short period of time at the end of each class was allotted for them to exchange information.

While they were plugging away at projects of their own, I brought in some real cases when opportunities appeared — incentives treated as their efforts paying off. We helped a local studio translate texts for an escape room and posters for a Mandarin movie for the Queen's Film Theatre (QFT) of QUB. Students received a small amount of monetary reward, enough for some snacks and soft drinks at the end of the semester, but more importantly they could see their work hanging in the foyer of the QFT, were invited to play the escape game, experiencing their work in-situ. The tasks helped students see the relevance between translation practice and the real world and served as stimuli to put in more effort. It is worth noting that the number of external cases was kept to a minimum at this stage, as too many assignments from actual clients, with their deadlines and extrinsic rewards, could disrupt the training,

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taking away time and potentially motivation for the students to spend on reflection (Deci et al., 1999).

4. QUESTIONNAIRE AND FEEDBACK

At the end of the second semester, students were invited to reflect on the format of the workshop adopted in the two semesters and fill out a questionnaire which asked them to make comparisons. Participation was voluntary, and the intention of collecting formal feedback for my research was explained. Eleven responses were registered, and the results are reported below.

The first question asked whether the new format — students shouldering the responsibility of promoting themselves as freelancers — made them more motivated to practice reformulation and bilingual skills. As Figure 1 (below) shows, respondents who strongly agreed or agreed were five (45.45%) respectively, while one student was neutral about the effects of this new format.

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Figure 1. Participants' motivation to practice reformulation and bilingual skills within the new, freelancer format
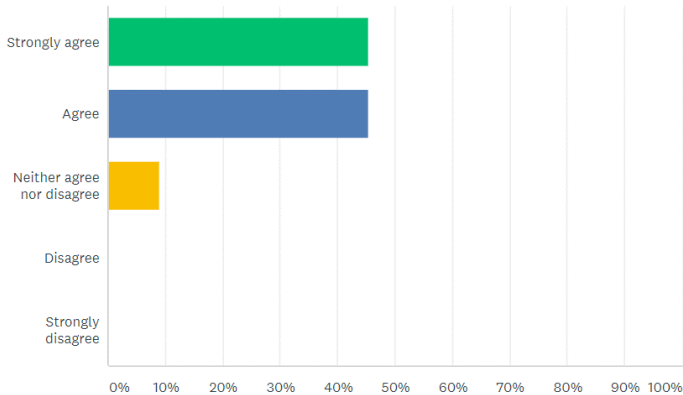
Setting out to address the informal feedback from students who felt somewhat intimidated about voicing one's opinions in public, I wanted to know if the small-group dynamic in semester two would ease their burden. Figure 2 (below) indeed proves the success of the core-team model. All eleven students agreed, and nine (81.82%) were strongly in favour of this approach. They felt more at ease discussing their interpretation of the source text and corresponding strategies, and even challenging each other to come up with a better solution, when in the smaller groups.

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Figure 2. Feeling about openly giving opinions within the semester two small group dynamic
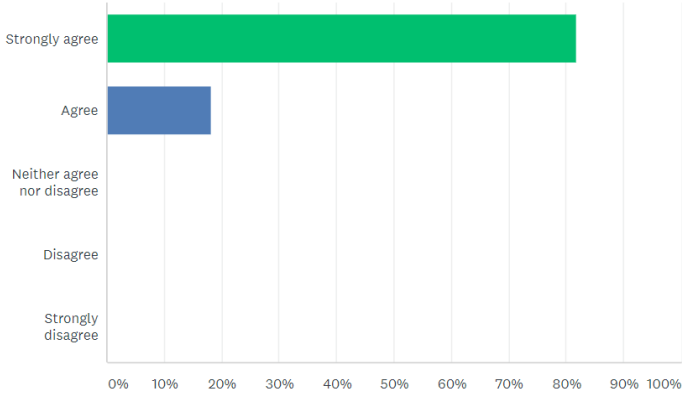
The third question wanted to understand the group dynamic in class and if the drawback of bigger-class discussion was mitigated. Figure 3 (below) again shows that nine out of eleven respondents (81.82%) strongly agreed that working in teams of 3-5 helped focus the discussion, and team members were more devoted than they had been to the larger group.

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Figure 3. Responses regarding whether there was an increased interaction between group members and a more focused discussion, within the smaller groups
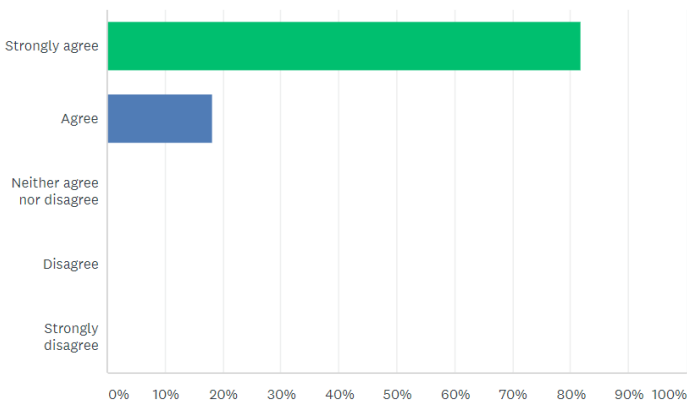

Some students mentioned previously that discussion involving everyone was time-consuming because the discussion was at times side-tracked by questions pertaining more to certain students than others. Accordingly, I intended to learn if the new team-working model solved the issue. The responses depicted in Figure 4 (below) are mostly in line with my expectation, with ten out of eleven students in favour of the new format — 54.55% strongly agreed and 36.36% agreed — except one dissident. As the questionnaire was anonymous, I could not hazard a guess why based on the other sources of data, i.e. informal chats and in-class

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observations. Still, it could be that what efficiency means varies from person to person. For instance, better "efficiency" could mean the discussion was focused and relevant to each group, and exchanges of opinions flowed freely; worse "efficiency" could mean interaction within the second semester groups was disorganised with less straightforward progress because no one took up the role to lead the discussion and control the pace, which I had done in the first semester.

Figure 4. Opinions regarding the efficiency of discussion in the new, smaller group format
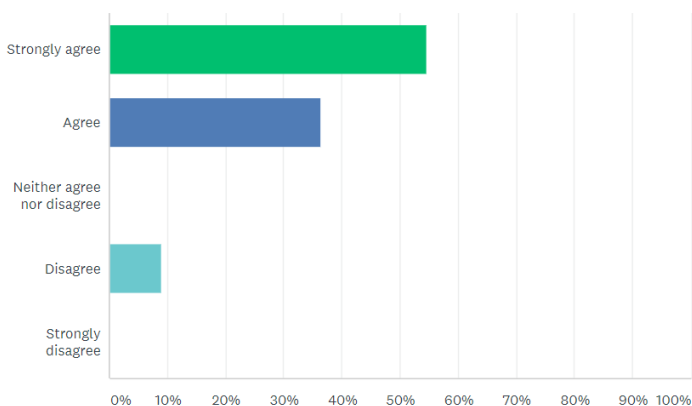

Regardless of how efficiency was interpreted, Figure 5 (below) shows that all respondents either agreed (five; 45.45%) or strongly agreed (six;

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54.55%) that the feedback I provided in the second semester was more targeted for each group, and hence discussion could go deeper and inspired more creative solutions to problems.

Figure 5. Individuality of feedback from the lecturer in smaller groups compared to larger groups
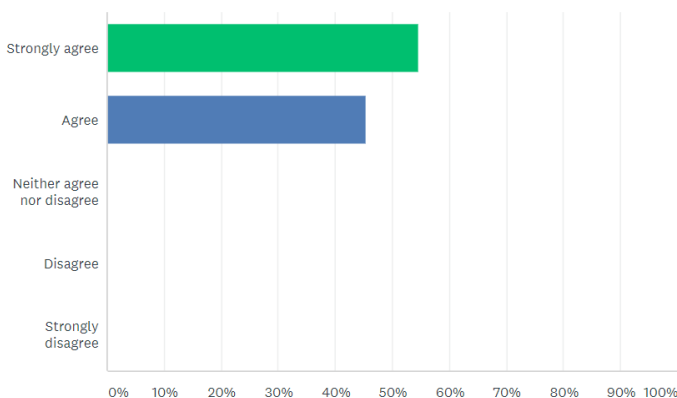
Students' feedback via different sources was overall positive. The findings show that the new format of the workshop sparked extra motivation in them to practice skills. The platforms used to showcase their works seem to have played some role in exerting a positive change. Students felt encouraged when seeing their work out in a public space, knowing they were doing exactly what freelancers would do; hence, they considered it helpful to "try out the real

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deal" in a safe (academic) environment where they had support (Hansen-Schirra et al., 2018). In the meantime, I noticed that students were more at ease working in smaller groups. They felt more comfortable voicing their opinions and devoted themselves to their own projects. In addition, most students appreciated the more efficient interaction and sometimes heated discussion between group members, and the feedback from me, as I rotated among groups, was deemed more closely relevant to the problems each individual and group faced. This was also the time I challenged them to apply sight translation skills, or even interpret the same longer sentences as if it were consecutive interpreting practice to address syntactic differences between their working language pair. They were then requested to compare their oral and written versions for some inspirations. The link between translation and interpreting was thus again forged, foregrounding the relevance and mutual benefits between the two (Meyers & Nulty, 2009).

However, two obvious drawbacks with the second semester approach came to my attention. The first is that the interaction between groups was insufficient and less organised — almost to the point of working in parallel closed circles. Small-group teamwork is more motivating and efficient, as an adequate number of people work diligently towards the same

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goal, giving members a sense of belonging.
Nonetheless, the benefits cannot scale if information
does not travel across the group boundary.
Sometimes, a simple tip for searching or sharing
experience can go a long way, saving other teams a
lot of trouble in the same situation. A short,
knowledge-sharing session was indeed arranged,
but working on different assignments made it harder
for students to provide essential background
information and quickly dive into the crucial
revelations. In this regard, future lecturers and
facilitators should provide guidance in effectively
sharing insights with listeners of various levels of
background knowledge and even demonstrate how
this can be done. This also links to another
observation, which could maybe answer why one
student felt the discussion with team members was
less efficient: no other roles were assigned to each
team, aside from translators and reviewers. It was
recommended the students designated a project
leader, but the importance of it and the
responsibilities of each role were not clearly
communicated. My original intention was to let each
group develop organically. In hindsight, division of
labour could be installed as the default setup, with
reasons explained at the outset when students were
still new to this kind of close-knit teamwork.

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5. CONCLUSION

This action research project has effected positive change in students' motivation towards addressing issues arising during interpreting practice via translation activities. Authenticity of the classroom activities and their context secured students' active participation because they fully understood that translation activities had practical utility and were done to serve the purpose of developing their reputation. Therefore, they willingly went through the process of research/preparation, translation, discussion, and revision to sharpen fundamental skills and safeguard translation quality.

Several aspects that have not been sufficiently covered due to the focus of this study can inform future studies. Future studies can be informed by several aspects not sufficiently covered in this study (due to its focus). For example, the next cycle of instructional design can address inter-group communication and project management. In addition, improvement of abilities was not systematically examined, though my observations were optimistic. Future research can investigate whether the development of core competencies does benefit in a similar setting by quantitative and qualitative measures, and how assessment or feedback practices influence motivation in a similar

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design, or vice versa. It would also be interesting to see how a prototype of this kind could be developed and integrated into, or interact with, the curriculum.

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