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Training Museum Translators through Linguistics Theory, Practical Experience and Civic Engagement: A Case-study

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ABSTRACT

This paper, situated at the intersection of Translation Studies, translator education and linguistics, aims to present a didactic project on interlingual museum translation conducted by the author at the University of Bologna, Italy, over the past three years. The project-based methodology draws its data from a qualitative case-study reporting on the so-called "Museum Project", carried out with postgraduate students in a Translation Studies course within the international second cycle degree program in Language, Society and Communication of the Department of Modern languages, Literatures and Cultures. The project involved three cohorts of students, who were tasked with producing target texts (translated from Italian into English), for the Civic Archaeological Museum in Bologna, immersing them in a 'situated learning' context. Following an overview of the linguistics framework underlying the project – i.e., Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1994) as applied to museum texts by Ravelli (1996, 2006) – the paper focuses on the background, context and methodology. It details the setting and participants, materials and resources, and elaborates on design and procedures, all underpinned by a student-centered approach. Preliminary findings from the ongoing project are provided, with a goal to show the potentials of such a project-based method in translator education. It is argued that task-based activities for the real world not only enhance students' motivation and engagement, but also raise self-awareness of their learning processes, thanks to the acquisition of a broad range of skills and competences. The study aspires to stimulate similar projects in different museum contexts, with other language combinations, other students and new researchers.

Keywords: Museum translation, project-based learning, situated learning, translation studies, systemic functional linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in its widest sense is on the agenda of museums nowadays. With the development of global tourism and the growth of international visitors in the world, along with the impact of migration, which has increased linguistic diversity in contemporary societies, the need to engage multilingual audiences in museum contexts has become paramount. The main instruments by which museums communicate with their multilingual and multicultural visitors are language and translation. Nevertheless, despite more general major studies about museums and communication (e.g., Coxall, 1991, 1994; Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, 1994; McManus, 1989, 1991), language issues have been rarely addressed in Museum Studies (with some exceptions such as Koliou, 1997; Blunden, 2016, 2020). Furthermore, although translation plays a crucial role in providing multilingual visitors with essential information and enables them to learn about other cultures, translation practices in museums across the world are not widespread.

Recent research shows that an awareness of the importance of translation in museum contexts has grown. As Neather (2025) remarks,

> "This growing interest is likewise seen in the research literature. In the translation studies field, a significant body of research now exists in the subfield that has become known as "museum translation", while in museum studies and heritage studies, there have been a number of contributions investigating the experiences of multilingual visitors and the multilingual resources that they use during the visit. Despite this growing scholarly interest, however, there remains remarkably little in the way of practical guidance for those involved in translation work in this important area." (Neather, 2025, p. 1)

This paper focuses on museum translation from the perspective of Translation Studies, particularly in the area of translator education. It aims to illustrate a didactic project on interlingual museum translation that I carried out in an academic context, at the University of Bologna, Italy, over the past three years. The project-based methodology in this paper draws its data from a case-study embedded in a translation course of a second cycle degree program in Language, Society and Communication. This project, combining academic study, practical experience and civic engagement, consists of a series of activities in a context of 'situated learning' (cf. González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído, 2016) with the purpose of strengthening the connection between pedagogical practice and a real-world context.

Museum translation

The field of museum translation had long been under-researched within Translation Studies (Neather, 2005, 2012a, 2012b; Sturge, 2007; Jiang, 2010), but over the past decade, it has attracted increasing scholarly interest (Guillot, 2014; Deane-Cox, 2014; Silverman, 2014; Chen & Liao, 2017; Liao, 2018, 2019, 2023; Kim, 2020; Perego, 2021; Manfredi, 2021a, 2021b; Pireddu, 2022; Spiessens & Decroupet, 2022; Neather, 2021, 2022) with a first monograph on it (Neather, 2025). Nevertheless, studies on museum translation education are still rare (see Neather, 2025).

The term "museum translation" may be interpreted differently and may also refer to a whole exhibition (Bal, 2011) or an entire culture (Sturge, 2007). However, this paper will use the common meaning adopted within Translation Studies, that is "the study of interlingual transmission of texts in museum exhibitions, with a set of source texts (STs) and target texts (TTs) as data" (Liao, 2018, p. 47).

Ravelli (2006, pp. 1-2) puts forth a distinction between "texts in Museums", i.e., "the language produced by the institution, in written and spoken form, for the consumption of visitors, which contributes to interpretative practices within the institution" and "museum as texts", i.e., "the way a whole institution, or an exhibition within it, makes meaning, communicating to and with its public". Here, the first meaning is opted for, and a museum text will be defined as "a linguistic product found in a museum" (Manfredi 2021b, p. 63).

Museum Studies has increasingly shifted from the concept of the "elite museum" to embrace the idea of a participatory institution designed to serve "for all". This is confirmed by the latest definition of "museum" provided by the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

> "[a] museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." (ICOM, 2022)

The concept of "accessible and inclusive" museum encompasses a range of conditions. Museum accessibility, as a matter of fact, is not only practical, physical, intellectual and cultural (Kjeldsen & Jensen, 2015, p. 92) but also linguistic. From the perspective of linguistics, Ravelli (1996, 2006) advocated the concept of accessible language in museum texts. In her pioneering studies of accessible language in museum texts from a Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective, the scholar argued that language accessibility does not presume a high level of reading knowledge (unlike a very academic textbook) and "does not compromise the scientific integrity of the information needing to be conveyed", privileging a cohesive and coherent texture (Ravelli, 1996, p. 371). In addition, the scholar acknowledged that "a breakdown in any of these domains will cause problems for the reader, making it difficult to follow the text, to take it in, or to retrieve information from it" (Ravelli, 1996, p. 371). From a monolingual point of view, Ravelli was concerned with intralingual accessibility, entailing "equal access to language" (Liao, 2018, p. 56). From a Translation Studies perspective, the issue of language accessibility could be interpreted in the sense of availability of multilingual texts addressed to the members of a community who speak different languages; accessible language

could be viewed as referring to linguistically accessible target texts, thus comprehensible to international visitors. When the target language is English, a translator should consider that the audience will not necessarily be from an English-speaking country; conversely, they may understand English as a global language. As a consequence, museum translators should be able to produce easily understandable texts in the target language.

This leads us to a crucial question: who are these museum translators? They might be freelance translators (Renner et al., 2015) or members of the museum communication team or even the curator. In the Italian context, the Italian Association of Translation and Interpreters, AITI's (*Associazione Italiana Traduttori e Interpreti*, http://www.aiti.org) website does not include the category "museum translator". Recently, in France, the Louvre Museum in Paris has seen a coordinator of translators, Benjamin Rouxel (cf. Neather, 2025, p. 2). While this is not the most common situation in contemporary museums, "non-effective linguistic choices in a translated text may have negative consequences on the impact of the museum and the cultural inclusiveness it should convey" (Manfredi, 2021a, p. 260). In other words, in front of a museum text, "a sense of frustration, cultural misunderstanding and exclusion" (Neather, 2005, p. 191) may be the result of ineffective translation choices. This problem calls for the need of museum translation expertise, which is frequently not possessed neither by the museum community, who have the domain-knowledge, nor by the translation community, with a meta-discursive competence (Neather, 2012a, p. 258). Collaboration between museums and translation professionals is therefore vital.

Training museum translators: A didactic project

This section aims to illustrate the "Museum Project", a non-funded project on interlingual museum translation, conducted by the author at the University of Bologna, Italy, in agreement and collaboration with a city museum, i.e. the Archaeological Civic Museum. The project, at the intersection of teaching and civic engagement, consists of activities carried out in a postgraduate Translation Studies course held at the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, in the master's degree program in Language, Society and Communication, over the past three years.

The project focuses on the theory and practice of museum translation and encompasses students' translation (from Italian into English) of introductory panels, descriptive labels and website texts provided by the city museum in the domain of archaeology, and specifically related to the Etruscans – ancient Italic people – and their civilization, and the Romans, with the goal of being offered to Anglophone as well as international tourists and visitors.

The background

The project addressed a gap in the context of museum translation, recognizing that many Italian museums either lacked translations or offered poor-quality, and at times, incorrect interlingual products. It draws on a previous article, which concluded with the claim that "experimenting with special training for museum translators is desirable" (Manfredi, 2021a, p. 277).

In the fall of 2018, I conducted a series of museum visits and interviews with museum professionals in the city of Bologna (see Manfredi, 2021a). Most interviewees acknowledged the importance of, and the urgent need for, museum translation in contemporary museums, while admitting that there was no dedicated staff responsible for translations. They confirmed the necessity of specialized translation professionals, capable of dealing with museum domains. While most of them identified accuracy in vocabulary as the most important element of translation quality, some also stressed the importance of effective communication. Significantly, all the interviewees posited to be in favor of a special training for museum translation. The idea of combining different types of expertise and embark upon a didactic project in collaboration with a museum institution in the city of Bologna was contemplated and in 2019 this path was concretely explored through constructive meetings with two archaeologists at the Civic Archaeological Museum in Bologna, planning collaboration for 2020. Regrettably, any plans had to be suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown and the closure of museums for an extended period. Once back to the 'normal', or rather 'the new normal', the project took shape.

At the foundation of the project lays the idea that an effective museum text is likely to be produced by a linguistically trained translator. I strongly believe that translating museum texts may benefit from the application of a linguistics theory that allows us to express not only the so-called "content" but also other levels of meaning (Manfredi, 2021a, 2021b). More specifically, I argue that the ideal translator is capable of conveying, in a different language, the "organizational", "interactional" and "representational" functions (Ravelli, 2006) that are interlocked in a museum text (Manfredi, 2021b).

Theoretical framework

A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, as proposed by Ravelli (2006) from the perspective of intralingual museum communication, may be fruitfully extended to the translational activity (Manfredi, 2021a, 2021b).

According to SFL, any text simultaneously realizes three different strands of meaning that Halliday (1994) names the "textual", "interpersonal" and "ideational" metafunctions, dealing with the message, the relationship between the interactants and the representation of experience respectively. In the context of museum language and communication, Ravelli (2006) labels Halliday's metafunctions as "organizational", "interactional" and "representational".

Analyzing textual/organizational meanings is not an obvious step to start since ideational meanings are usually the main (if not exclusive) interest (Ravelli, 2006, p. 9). However, in museum texts, even though the technicality conveyed by ideational meanings is a key issue, the way the text is organized often poses problems to translators, and potentially to museum visitors if they are faced with an ineffective TT. Ravelli (2006, p. 9),

from her monolingual (English) perspective, asserts that "it is the issue of organizing texts which poses some of the more challenging communication issues for museums". The scholar pays special attention to the grammatical resources of thematic structure, cohesion and lexical density. For example, in a museum label, there should always be some correspondence between the theme of the text and the object being described (Ravelli 2006, p. 37) and in general, an English unmarked structure makes the text easier to follow. As far as the lexical density is concerned, the scholar points out that "a text overloaded with nominalization is unlikely to be desirable in a museum context" (Ravelli, 2006, p. 61). I argue that these tenets should also be valued from a translational perspective.

The interpersonal/interactional function concerns the dialogical interaction between addresser and addressee, therefore «how [language] functions to create a relationship between interlocutors» (Ravelli, 2006, p. 70). This perspective has changed over time and is linked to 'old' and 'new' approaches to museum communication. Over the past few decades, a paradigm shift has brought the role of the visitor to the forefront of museum research (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Anderson, 2004; Kjeldsen & Jensen, 2015), affecting, from a linguistic point of view, roles, style, and stance (Ravelli, 2006). If in the past the relationship between the museum institution/curator and the public was asymmetrical, that is "authority to novice", with the rise of the modernist museum, the two interlocutors tend to be viewed as equal partners. This social relationship affects style, which used to be formal and impersonal, and tends to become more informal and personal nowadays, as well as being engaging. As suggested by Ferguson and other scholars, "it is appropriate for museum texts to engage readers as people, in a personal but polite way" (Ferguson et al., 1995, p. 5). Similarly, the stance of the text writer shifted from being neutral and objective to being opinionated and subjective (Ravelli, 2006, p. 72). In terms of English language, one of the most typical resources for making a text closer to the reader is the use of a personal pronoun like "you" (Ravelli, 2006, p. 85). Obviously, the scholar refers to the English language communicative style; when translators of a different language community have to produce an inclusive and effective English target text, they should not underestimate this aspect.

The ideational/representational function is closest to the traditional sense of 'content', which in museum texts is typically highly specialized. Undoubtedly, since a museum text aims to communicate technical knowledge of a given field – be it scientific, historical or cultural – it includes technical vocabulary. However, it is also concerned with how events are portrayed and which activities are construed. In addition, it should be noted that a text unfolds through logico-semantic relationships.

Within the framework outlined in this section, I developed the didactic project presented in this paper, based on two main assumptions:

1. The fundamental issues put forth within linguistics by Ravelli (2006) regarding the museum language may arguably be useful for the practices of museum translation;

2. The guidelines derived from the collaboration between museum and language experts in Australia (Ferguson, MacLulich & Ravelli, 1995) from a monolingual perspective may also prove to be valuable for multilingual practices in contemporary museums and museum translators training.

METHOD

The project-based methodology in this paper draws its data from a qualitative case study reporting on the so-called 'Museum Project,' implemented at the University of Bologna over the past three years in the context of Situated Learning. In a project-based method, "the students must find and/or develop and use the cognitive, human, and documentary resources necessary to produce a professional quality job on time" (Kiraly 2005, p. 1109). Situated learning is generally understood as "a context-dependent approach to translator […] training under which learners are exposed to real-life and/or highly simulated work environments and tasks, both inside and outside the classroom" (González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído 2016, p. 1).

The choice of such a didactic approach stems from the belief that students taking part in a real-life translation project – with a 'client', task-based activities, and deadlines – which enhances civic engagement, feel more motivated, involved and, at the end of the project, more confident about their translation skills and competence.

Setting and participants

The setting of this ongoing project is a Translation Studies course held at the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Bologna, Italy, in collaboration with the Archaeological Civic Museum of the same city.

Two agreements between the two institutions were signed by the heads of the Department and of the City Museums Institution and the Civic Museums Division of Bologna respectively. I was appointed as a scientific coordinator responsible for the project on behalf of the Department and two archaeologists also took on the same role on behalf of the museum.

The first agreement was signed in 2022. Since this was considered an experimental year, it will be referred to as 'Year 0' in this paper. When it ended, the 'clients' expressed their desire to continue our collaboration and accepted to sign another similar agreement for a translation project in the same field. A second 3-year agreement was therefore signed in 2023 and it still goes on. In this paper, the two years will be referred to as 'Year 1' (2023) and 'Year 2' (2024). The project was carried out in the second term of each academic year, from February to May of Year 0 (in the academic year of 2021 and 2022), Year 1 (in the academic year of 2022 and 2023) and Year 2 (in the academic year of 2023 and 2024). Year 3 will start in the second term of the current academic year, namely from February 2025.

The Archaeological Civic Museum in Bologna is one of the most prestigious and most-visited museums in the city and boasts among the most important archaeological collections in Italy. It

houses notable artefacts representative of the local history dating from the Iron Age to Roman times and also hosts a collection of Egyptian antiquities, one of the most renown in Europe.

The project has been developed within a Translation Studies course that I have been presenting for 18 years, currently named "Translation-English I." It is a course of the "Language, Society and Communication" International second cycle degree program. My course focuses on the theory and practice of translation, offering an introduction to the main theories in the discipline of Translation Studies, and involving translation practices, from English into Italian from a range of text types in the fields of journalism, popular science and literature. Students are also requested to submit a commentary in which they discuss the main translation strategies employed by them to cope with any translation problems or relevant issues. Language classes linked to the course provide students with the opportunity to translate various types of texts (mainly tourism-related and museum texts, promotional material, and abstracts of scientific articles) into English from Italian, with the primary goal of language accuracy.

The project has involved 47 postgraduate students (in their first or second year) attending the Translation-English I course. As will be explained below, students took part in the project on a voluntary basis. In Year 0, after the Covid-19 pandemic, when the teaching mode was still hybrid, 7 students participated in the experimental project. In Year 1 and Year 2, 21 and 19 students respectively were engaged. In Year 0 and Year 1, all students were Italian native speakers; Year 2 saw the participation of 12 Italian native speakers and 7 international students, including three from English-speaking countries, namely UK and Australia.

Material and resources

Being the project based on real-life tasks, all authentic materials were provided by the Civic Archaeological Museum in Bologna. The text types were different over the three years, following the factual needs of the museum and meeting the didactic expectations of training students to get familiar with various text types. In 2022, the corpus of texts consisted of introductory and section panels of the Etruscan Hall, which was closed for restoration. During Year 1, the students were provided with the opportunity to work on descriptive object labels, which accompanied artefacts found in the necropolises around the city and collected in the museum. Finally, in Year 2, students worked on more descriptive labels and website texts, drawn from the website "History and Memory" (https://www.storiaememoriadibologna.it/lapidario-museo-civico-archeologico), which hosts texts describing the Lapidary Collection and also comprising a narrative part closer to storytelling.

In the experimental year, students produced one introductory panel (828 words in English) and 12 section panels (approximately 300 words each). In Year 1, 84 'descriptive' labels (approximately from 80 to 200 words each) were translated and in Year 2, 15 labels and 25 website texts (the latter approximately 250-300 words each) were translated.

In fact, more texts were translated – 3 section panels and 17 website texts – within the dissertations of 2 students who decided to explore museum translation in greater depth, as a consequence of the interest raised by their participation in the museum project. Presently, two more students are involved in similar works.

The bibliography on museum translation it is requested to study consists of one article (Manfredi, 2021b) because the rest of the preparation is built on hands-on activities and assignments.

Resources for carrying out the translation tasks are partially suggested and partly chosen by the students, depending on the texts they are assigned. As for specialized terminology in the archaeological domain, students are recommended by the museum experts to refer to the Beazley Archive at the University of Oxford. Moreover, some further resources are suggested during their classroom and individual translation activities, both lexicographic and encyclopedic. Moreover, each student also develops their own resources, including specialized corpora accessible through the Sketch Engine software, and parallel texts found on the websites of important English or American museums such as the British Museum, UK and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, US.

Design and procedures

The first experimental year, involving a smaller number of students, allowed to set up the procedure, which was implemented in the following two years.

The project has been designed for the postgraduate course described above, with the goal of integrating its various components. On the one hand, the theory of museum translation is part of the general theory of Translation Studies; on the other hand, museum translation becomes a new text type to work on from a practical perspective during language classes, under the guidance of the English language expert collaborating with the course (a British native speaker of English) and my supervision.

Students are actively involved in the project on a voluntary basis, an aspect deemed fundamental from a pedagogical perspective, as it contributes to motivation and active engagement. They are given the opportunity to experience a new field of translation, grounded in the real world, through purposeful activities. The basic requirements — active participation, enthusiasm, and translation skills — are clearly communicated to them.

The procedure consists of three main phases: a pre-task phase, a first phase, and a second and final phase. It should be noted that the first and second phases are project-based and learner-centered.

Students are first introduced to the field through a theoretical overview of museum translation, focusing on its main features and challenges, along with an illustration of the linguistics theory that is deemed useful to be applied to the practice of translating museum texts. More specifically, the theoretical framework earlier illustrated (Ravelli 2006) is explained.

Moreover, within the framework of Translation Studies, the major functions of museum translations – i.e., informative, interactive, political, social-inclusive and exhibitive (Liao 2018) – and the competences required to a museum translator – i.e., meta-textual, meta-generic and meta-social (Neather 2012a) – are outlined. In addition, moving from theory to practice, key suggestions drawn from guidelines for effective museum writing in English (Ferguson et al., 1995) are provided.

In the following week, students start their practice with short museum texts during their language classes, under the guidance of their language instructor.

Importantly, before students express their interest in participating in the project, they are also confronted with the client, or commissioner, i.e., the museum experts from the Civic Archaeological Museum. In this case study, over the first three years, students became acquainted with the clients' needs and requirements in different ways. In Year 0, when the museum was closed for restoration, the museum experts visited our classroom during a lesson (lasting one and half hour) and presented the museum context, explained the types of artefacts on display, discussed the key communication issue involved in an archaeological museum in Italy and stated their needs and requests for translations. In Year 1, for the new cohort of students, one of the lessons was moved to the museum site, where the archaeologists introduced the cultural institution, its historical and archaeological context, the communication needs and expectations and then guided the students/visitors through the hall where their translation would have been displayed. In Year 2, a formal event at the museum was organized, open to students, professors and anybody interested. The program included interventions by the museum experts, ours (mine and that of the language collaborator), and also three talks delivered by a former student, recently graduated with a thesis on museum translation, and two students from the previous academic year who had already experimented museum translation and had started focusing on it in their dissertations. The five talks covered a range of relevant topics for museum translation, both theoretical and practical. More specifically, the event started with a presentation of the Museum from an historical point of view and a focus on its main communicative needs, followed by an introduction to the Museum Project, with an illustration of its goals and tenets, along with an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning it. The more practical part included reflections on the risk of interference from the Italian source language in the translated texts, considerations on the aspects of communication and negotiation in translation, examples of the relationship between verbal texts and visual elements to take into account during the translation process and, finally, evidence of the importance of rendering organizational meanings (Ravelli 2006) for effective museum translations. This deliberate choice of involving different speakers with diverse roles aimed to underline that the museum project is a learner-centered activity based on collaboration among the different actors involved. This event culminated in a guided visit to the museum hall where students' translations from the first experimental year

were finally displayed for the benefit of the Anglophone and international visitors.

It is worthy of note that the experts' invaluable involvement in the project does not constitute a one-sided process; being the project founded on mutual collaboration, students, who are proficient in the English language and are trained to apply the most useful translation strategies for the goal of an engaging communicative style, also negotiate with the commissioners the extent to which they could move away from literal translation, in order to produce effective target texts for an international audience. In our experience, the museum experts demonstrated to value our suggestions even aimed at simplification and clarification, although they pointed out that a high degree of preciseness in the archaeological domain was required from translations, given the role of the Civic Archaeological Museum in Bologna, and Italy at large, and the type of typical international visitors, interested in delving into Bologna's – the ancient Felsina – history and culture.

After these preliminary activities, students have more knowledge in order to decide if they wish to be involved in the museum project. If they feel that this is a good opportunity for them, they have to express their interest in taking part in the project by writing an e-mail to us, after which they will receive an assignment, consisting in a short text to translate. This task is meant to check if they feel at ease with museum translation and have enough confidence to carry out a professional-like task. After one week, they receive feedback on any critical issue and a score range, which is not part of the final assessment but only functions as yardstick for their own judgement. At this stage, they have the possibility of withdrawing; however, in the three years of the project, all participants felt enthusiastic and motivated enough to proceed. In the following weeks, training in museum translation continues through class work and/or an assignment, without excluding practice of other text types.

At the first stage, those students who wish to be involved are assigned two translation tasks, most frequently concerning texts pertaining to different text types, both for practical reasons and didactic principles. For example, in Year 1, a historical narrative text could be associated with a specialized descriptive label. Texts are assigned to each student following two parameters, i.e., word count and difficulty, equally balanced.

Participants in the project have to meet two deadlines: the first one entails the delivery of a draft, a second of a final version, considered part of their exam. At the first stage they are requested to translate the two texts to the best of their ability. Although they are expected to devote a significant number of hours to self-study, they are also given the chance to address questions that will be forwarded to the museum experts. As already said, collaboration among the various actors involved in the project underpins the whole process. During language classroom activities, students have the opportunity to discuss translation problems and possible solutions with their peers – also those not directly involved in the museum project – under the guidance of their instructor. At the stage of the first draft, students could count on the support of the

archaeologists, who kindly provide technical explanations and/or historical information. Moreover, if during the translation process they realize concretely that museum translation cannot be isolated from the object being described, they may request visual support, such as photographs or illustrations.

In due time after the delivery of their first draft, students receive informative feedback on it, including suggestions on language aspects to work on (be it the use of articles or verbal tense), advice on terminological issues to explore, warning on critical aspects to pay attention to and also tips for finding more effective solutions, as well as any response from the archaeologists. Feedback is not meant to provide solutions to translation problems, but encompasses multiple aspects, leaving students the responsibility of improvement.

After this, students have about two weeks to revise their work and deliver their final translations, through the modality of a take-home exam, along with a commentary on the most significant translation strategies they have employed in their translation tasks.

It should be pointed out that the scope of designing a double-phase assignment is twofold. On the one hand, it is a necessary condition for a real-life task, since at the end of the process students have to produce accurate translations for a *real* client to be displayed in a *real* museum. On the other hand, it is part of the learning process, since constant support and feedback help them gradually improve their translation skills and acquire confidence in their abilities.

At the end, students receive their final assessment on the Museum Project, valid for the language component of the course and a part of the Translation Studies exam. If they are interested, they are shown their final translations with any further comment or correction. Only after this didactic process, I collect the translated texts and edit them for consistency before sending them to the museum experts, who check them for accuracy in the archaeological domain, before setting up the procedure of printing and displaying in the museum or uploading on the website.

FINDINGS

This section will focus on some preliminary albeit significant findings from the still ongoing project and provide a general overview of the final assessment of students' translations over the three years. More specifically, I will delve into results obtained at the first phase of the project, consisting of feedback on students' first draft, which is considered the core of the learning process, whereby they cope with a range of problems and are guided to find effective solutions to solve them. As a matter of fact, corrections are rarely provided at this stage, which privileges constructive advice.

For each year, quantitative data were collected by considering all comments and suggestions offered to the translations of each participant in the first phase. Although every participant in the project was assigned different source texts, these pertained to the same text type and context and thus recurring

aspects were the norm. However, multiple occurrences were treated as single cases and counted as many times as they appeared in the target texts. General suggestions were occasionally provided with respect to problematic aspects of some translations (such as "check your article use throughout" or "tense use to be revised") although these data were not included, since not quantifiable.

Due to the fact that the practical activity of translating museum texts was carried out during language classes, language accuracy played a major role in the type of feedback. However, since translations aimed at a concrete use in an authentic context, feedback also encompassed a range of other aspects, such as adequate rendering of the source text, effective style and consistency with the museum context. For the purpose of the present analysis, language issues were divided into different categories, comprising a broad traditional notion of 'Grammar' (including, for example, the proper use of articles or of prepositions, word order, use of English), 'Capitalization and Spelling', 'Punctuation', 'Lexical choices' (in terms of general language and collocation) and 'Specialized terms'. Aspects strictly related to the rendering of the source text – such as adequate interpretation, excessively literal rendering, and the use of proper translation strategies – were categorized as components of the 'Translation process', while features related to the specific text typology and the type of audience involved in museums were collected under the label 'Museum text and context'. 'Style' included all comments and suggestions that were not related to errors or inaccuracies but were meant to improve the target text. Finally, aspects connected with 'Editing' were also examined, as is typical of professional environments, given the final purpose of translations.

It should be acknowledged that categories sometimes overlapped, and problematic issues could be classified under different labels; in order to overcome this issue, the most prevailing aspect was chosen and instances were fundamentally analyzed on the basis of their function in the text. For example, 'capitalization', which was considered separately and combined with spelling, could refer to traditional grammar (e.g., noun vs adjective) or a specific use in the specialized domain. Likewise, a common issue such as 'verb tense' was not necessarily analyzed under 'grammar' but could also be included under 'museum text and context' when it referred to the most adequate choice for English museum texts such as those dealt with in the project.

The following sub-sections will present quantitative results of this study, subdivided into the three years in which the Museum Project was carried out. Some qualitative considerations will be added.

Year 0

Figure 1 illustrates findings from the first phase of Year 0, when the type of designed feedback was first experimented.
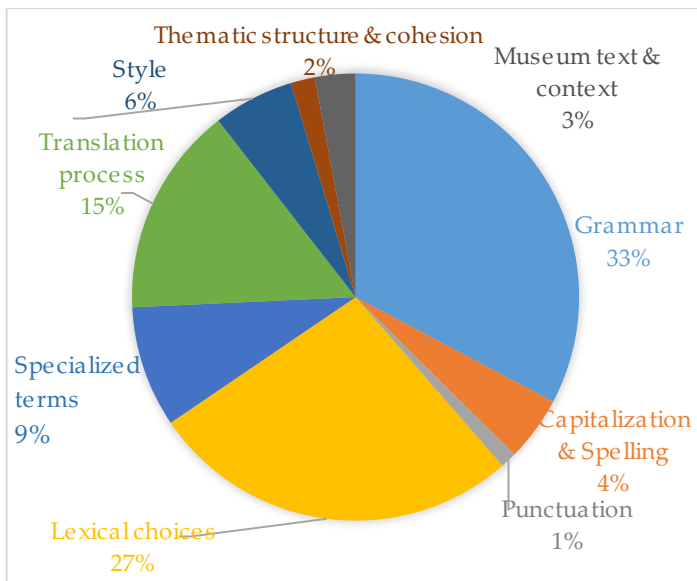
Figure 1. *'Museum Project', Year 0, A.Y. 2021-22: Data from the First Phase*

Grammar issues (which comprised article use, prepositions, word order, word form, the use of Saxon genitive vs prepositional phrases, singular vs plural) prevailed (33%), followed by lexical choices (27 %) referring to general language and collocations, which revealed to be more problematic than specialized terms (9 %). Feedback on lexical choices, when deemed useful, also included links to lexicographical resources (e.g., Cambridge Dictionary) or encyclopedic resources (e.g., Britannica), where mythological episodes and were illustrated and characters portrayed, and could thus provide evidence of the most typical words used to describe them or their activities. As regards specialized terms, including historical ones, solutions and/or explanations were occasionally provided, along with links to resources.

The translation process represented an important issue (15 %), including comments regarding omissions, redundancy, lack of clarity, implausible interpretations, and also suggestions about possible translation strategies, such as amplification. Problems with style (6 %) encompassed wordiness, lack of fluency, and use of informal language in a text type that, in the Italian context and in the field of archaeological museums, was not recommended. Findings also showed problems with capitalization and spelling (4%) – related to grammar or, for example, to labelling historical periods – and issues connected with the museum text and context (3 %), such as the most typical tense used in English descriptive panels and the suggestion of leaving the metric system as in the Italian language, rather than converting it into the British system, given the type of audience, composed of international visitors. Inaccurate punctuation did not represent a major issue (1 %). Interestingly, problems with thematic structure and cohesion (2 %) were not particularly relevant, probably as a result of the theoretical introduction to effective rendering of organizational meanings (Ravelli 2006) provided in the preliminary phase.

Non-adequate rendering of interactional meanings (Ravelli 2006) was not included in the Figure since it concerned only one example.

The quantity of comments concerning specialized terms – and thus the realization of representational meanings (Ravelli 2006) – was not very high. This might be explained with the text type dealt with in Year 0, that is descriptive panels, less technical than other museum texts. Moreover, students probably posed particular attention to this aspect during their translation process and did research; some of them even explained the type of investigation which had led to their translation choices. Finally, specialized lexicon is not the whole story and, especially in panels, clarity of information and communicative efficacy are fundamental.

Year 1

After the first experimental year represented by Year 0, in order to raise students' motivation, it was decided to highlight the role of the project, by asking them to work to the best of their abilities, given the importance of their role as translators in an important civic engagement project, and also to obtain a good mark at the final stage.

Figure 2 shows findings derived from feedback offered to students in the first year of the project.
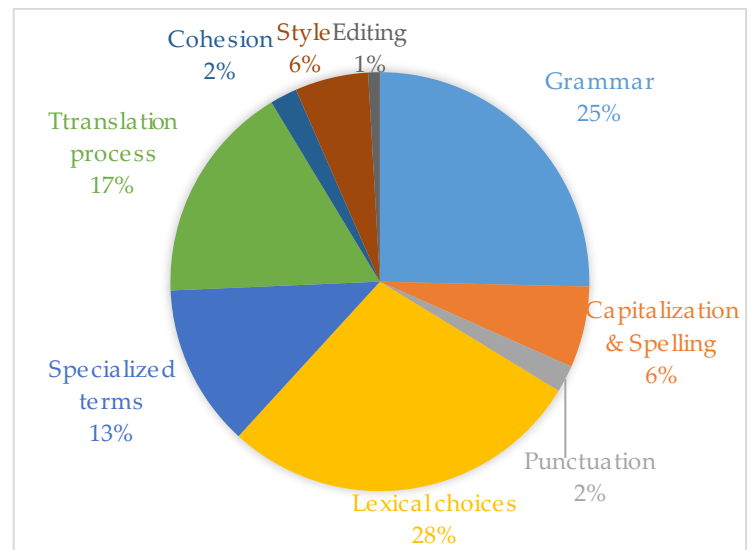

Figure 2. *'Museum Project', Year 1, A.Y. A.Y. 2022-23: Data from the First Phase*

Findings from Year 1 showed that problems with lexical choices were more frequent (28 %) than with grammar (25 %), and this could be related to the text type being dealt with, i.e., descriptive labels, rich in nominal groups. Such labels, which were meant to accompany artefacts and explain their use through a more technical language, also raised the issue of specialized terms (13 %).

The high number of nominal groups featured in descriptive labels might also have determined problems with capitalization and spelling (6 %), for which resources to check were provided –

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encyclopedic sources, such as Britannica, or parallel texts in other museums, such as Getty in the US. Interestingly, spelling frequently concerned specialized terms, thus confirming the key role of technicality in the text type. The translation process (17 %), which appeared to be slightly more problematic than in the previous year, mainly regarded omissions, calques, excessively literal rendering or need for definitions, as typical of specialized texts. Comments on style (6 %) mainly regarded advice to avoid wordiness and be more concise, also using relative clauses, in order to produce effective labels aiming at conciseness and clarity. With the same goal, suggestions about cohesion (2 %) included the encouragement to employ repetition to avoid ambiguity, rather than synonyms or pronouns. This aspect is also related to the museum environment, in which visitors are supposed to read labels to be informed about the artefacts on display in a limited time. Punctuation (2 %) and editing (1 %) only represented minor issues.

Year 2

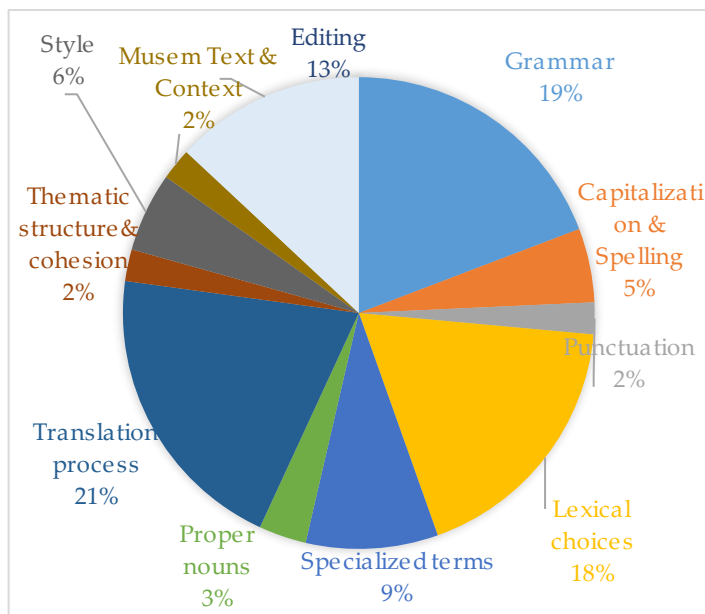Finally, Figure 3 presents findings from the second – and presently last – year in which the project was developed.

Figure 3. *'Museum Project', Year 2, A.Y. 2023-24: Data from the First Phase*

Analysis of data revealed that the most critical issues were raised by the translation process (21 %), in terms of misinterpretations, excessively literal translations, omissions and suggestions concerning strategies to propose more effective target texts from the point of view of communication, which is fundamental in digital media.

Grammar problems (19 %) and lexical choices (18 %) were less represented; similarly, difficulties with specialized terms (9 %) were comparable to those raised by descriptive panels of Year 0; in both cases, the narrative and communicative aspects played an important role. In analyzing data from Year 2, a new category was added, i.e., 'proper nouns', comprising both proper names of

people and toponyms. This feature was strictly connected to the subject matter of texts, dealing with the narrative history of the protagonists of each tombstone and the place where it had been found. This aspect entailed research on the part of students, carried out during the first phase or guided by feedback. For example, problematic issues regarded the name of a painter and the way it is typically translated into English, the names of two mythological figures and five occurrences of a common toponym in the Bolognese area. Interestingly, editing (13 %) was a recurring problem, and this might be explained with the schematic nature of the texts and their systematic structure, needing consistency over all translations. Problems with capitalization and spelling (5 %) – like the suggestion of avoiding contractions – were also related to the nature of the texts, while recommendation to avoid confusing rendering was categorized as style (6 %). As panels of Year 0, website texts also involved problems with the tense typical of museum texts (2 %), although not for many students. Punctuation (2 %) and thematic structure/ cohesion (2 %) represented minor issues. An interesting element of the website texts regarded the effective realization of interactional meanings by most students, although for some of them it represented a challenge. With non-Italian students, explanations for the Italian ST were sometimes offered.

Questions for the Museum experts

As explained above, in this first phase students were also allowed, and even encouraged, to collect questions on problematic terminological issues linked to the specialized domain, to be addressed to the museum experts.

Figure 4 illustrates this aspect with data collected from Year 0, Year 1 and Year 2.
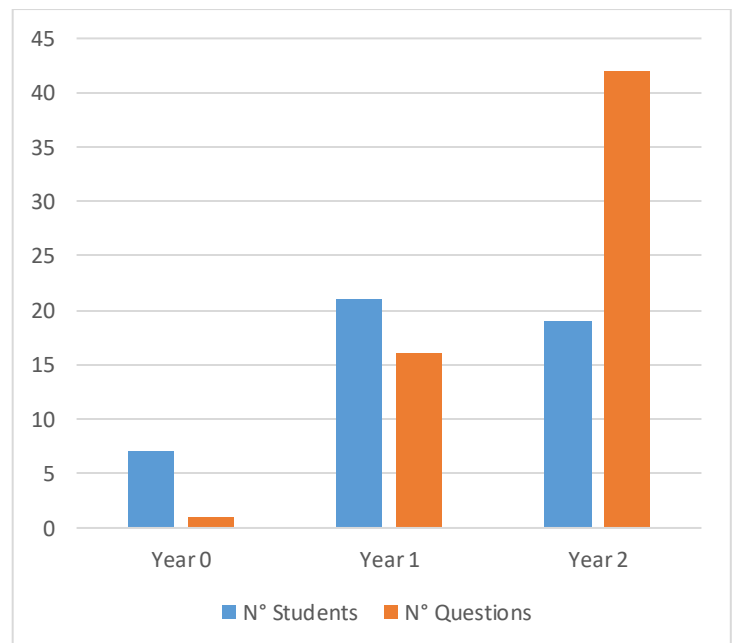

Figure 4. *'Museum Project', Years 0, 1, 2. Students' Questions to the Museum experts*

In Year 0, students posed 20 questions, almost exclusively addressed to the language experts, with only one question for museum professionals. Doubts concerned specialized terms (e.g., historical, religious) and more general lexical choices. However, most prominently, they regarded requests for confirming adequate interpretation and rendering of the source text. Students also offered 11 comments (not included in the Figure) in which they explained their translation choices, concerning in particular their rendering of organizational meanings. One student also suggested changes to the Italian source texts.

In Year 1, students posed 16 questions, which were promptly forwarded to the museum experts, whose feedback revealed to be clear, detailed and thus extremely useful. Most doubts regarded needs for clarifications of the Italian source texts, confirmation of the correct interpretation, and requests for explanations about specialized terms or cultural aspects. Significantly, students also asked for a large number of photographs, particularly useful to translate the object labels in the most accurate and precise way. The language expert also supported such a request, therefore some suggestions had to be verified after looking at visual material. Two students also offered suggestions regarding the Italian source texts, although the experts explained the objective reasons for which they should not have been modified.

Interestingly, one student, after careful research in terms of verbal and visual material, combined with a personal visit to the museum, noticed an inaccurate detail in an Italian source text, in which a mythological figure was mentioned instead of another. The problem was reported to museum experts, who were grateful about the note, thus confirming the collaborative nature of the project, for all the actors involved.

In Year 2, the highest number of questions (42) addressed to the museum experts was collected from students. They mainly concerned issues related to the Latin language, whose knowledge was not shared by all students – in particular in the context of Roman history and culture. It should be noted that questions that should not have been addressed to museum experts – either because they merely concerned the English language or because they simply required efforts and personal research – were not forwarded. Request for photographs mainly concerned the translation of descriptive labels, given the fact that most websites comprised links to visual material.

Final Assessment: An Overview

As mentioned above, the entire procedure, composed of intermediate steps, only entails final evaluation. In a postgraduate university context – where students have two years at disposal to obtain credits for a number of specialized subjects – this seems to be vital for the regularity in their study.

At the final stage, students' final versions were furtherly revised and refined before receiving final assessment. Most students demonstrated that comments, suggestions and corrections provided during the first stage had been taken into consideration and implemented, with the result that their translations had highly improved, reaching a quasi-professional, and in some cases professional, quality. Therefore, translations received positive assessment, which was considered valid for part of the exam. Within the Italian university system, most students obtained top or very high marks.

Points were deducted for aspects that had been ignored during students' revision and for the introduction of unrequested and unnecessary changes, if they had produced clumsy solutions. Smaller deductions regarded the introduction of new problems in the attempt at finding different solutions. Conversely, students who demonstrated careful consideration of suggestions, and improvement of their translations, were positively assessed.

From casual and informal feedback, students' appreciation of the project emerged in many respects. First, many seemed to appreciate the different phases, since they felt constantly guided and helped to improve their translation skills. Second, they valued the experts' support, which also contributed to informed translation choices and the good quality of the final target texts. Moreover, the project made them feel part of an authentic and professional environment. The event organized at the museum in March 2024 was successful, also in terms of participation, by 'new' students enthusiastic about being actively involved in the museum project, and by many students from the previous year who, although they had already completed their exam, were still interested in the project and its outcomes.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of findings suggests that, from the point of view of translation quality, in their first drafts, students applied the insights drawn from the linguistics framework that had been illustrated in the pre-phase of the project; in light of this, their focus was not only on precision of specialized vocabulary, but also on clarity and fluency of sentences and paragraphs to achieve efficacy in terms of communicative style. For example, in most cases they demonstrated to be able to exploit the resources of theme and cohesion to produce effective target texts. Occasionally, they also suggested improvements of the source text for the benefit of Italian visitors.

Specific constraints of museum texts emerged during practical activities, when students were confronted with the multimodal nature of the text type, especially of labels, always complementing artefacts. In order to be able to render the interplay between the written-verbal and the visual codes, many participants took advantage of the intermediate phase to ask for visual support (pictures and photographs). By way of illustration, if a figure portrayed on an ancient vase was lying or reclining (in Italian, the verb *sdraiato* did not convey this aspect) on a *kline*, an image of the object was indispensable to offering an adequate and precise translation. In the students' first versions, interference from the source language was also an issue that was tackled in the feedback session.

Over the three years, students encountered similar difficulties, although with different frequency distribution. This result might be partially influenced by the diverse cohorts of

students involved. Nevertheless, it is argued that, on the one hand, the diverse text type might have posed different challenges and, on the other hand, increasingly greater awareness of the collaborative nature of the project might have produced a different attitude towards the translation task.

Most corrections, especially in Year 0 and Year 1, regarded grammar, and this is not surprising, since translations were carried out during language classes and the students' language level was not homogeneous. However, the highest percentage of grammar issues in Year 0 seems to reflect the nature of source texts, which revealed to be complex in the source language and required interpreting skills and major interventions in order to obtain an effective communicative style. Conversely, the less formal style of the texts included in the website corpus might have facilitated the students' task.

Lexical choices concerning general language also represented a difficult issue with all text types being involved, although they revealed to be more problematic with descriptive panels (Year 0) and labels (Year 1). Thanks to detailed and informative feedback, this aspect was solved in the final translations, leading to important learning advancement.

Challenges posed by specialized terms were particularly evident in Year 1, because, as already observed, descriptive labels were highly technical. Choices strictly related to the translation process represented another slightly critical issue; however, being first drafts delivered towards the end of the course, this problem did not involve many students.

The frequency distribution of problems connected with style and thematic structure/cohesion was exactly the same in the three years, while issues related to the museum text and context only affected Year 0 and Year 2, when panels and website texts were translated. Admittedly, descriptive labels were shorter and did not require much cohesion. Likewise, problems with punctuation were essentially constant over the three years. Significantly, editing represented a relevant issue only in Year 2, probably because of the similar structure of the source texts, partly narrative and partly more schematic.

Generally speaking, results collected over the three years seem to demonstrate that, with very few exceptions, theoretical issues preceding translation practice proved to be useful in helping students to be aware of the fundamental communicative aspects of museum translation. For example, most students demonstrated to be aware of the importance of organizational meanings and only few corrections were needed to that respect. Furthermore, interactional meanings were effectively rendered with respect to the text type, the museum context and the expected audience of international visitors. As regards representational meanings, in particular the accuracy of specialized terminology, findings seemed to demonstrate that accurate research through a range of tools and resources, combined with active collaboration of the domain experts, were the key to success. The highest number of questions addressed to experts in Year 2 might be explained with greater awareness of the importance of collaboration among the different actors involved in the project – an issue widely highlighted in he talks presented during the event at the Civic Archaeological Museum in Bologna.

All other issues that required students' attention seem to demonstrate that translation is a linguistic and multifaceted activity, where a combination of aspects contributes to the final output.

The possibility of working with different text types, while reflecting the actual needs of the museum, was beneficial to learners, who were offered the opportunity to cope with different purposes, constraints and stylistic expectations. The inclusion, in the second year of the project, of website texts – evidence of the most recent trend in museum communication, which has seen an increasing demand for digital contents in the post-pandemic era – permitted to tackle the issue of museum accessibility from different perspectives.

Over the three years of the Museum Project, students demonstrated to be highly committed in carrying out personal research – which for some of them involved visiting the museum and looking at artefacts on site. They also displayed an ethical behavior, admirably meeting all the deadlines of the multiple assignments.

I argue that a project-based methodology and a practice of situated learning inherent in the case study illustrated in this paper have pedagogical potentials, especially in terms of students' motivation, engagement and active learning.

Firstly, the opportunity to deal with authentic translation assignments embedded in a real-life situation, with real clients and a real audience in mind, might help to increase students' motivation and interest rather than performing translation tasks assigned by a teacher, on the basis of a more abstract type of syllabus and with the mere scope of a final examination. Likewise, taking part in a project with professional requirements may also have the potential to foster students' self-confidence. Moreover, the fact of being actively involved in a project on a voluntary basis may contribute to their commitment, sense of responsibility and will to succeed.

Secondly, in a student-centered approach, whereby students handle their individual project, facing constraints and specific challenges posed by the text assigned to them, which may differ from others', carrying out their own research and choosing ways and means to pursue their goal, they are more likely to retain what they have learnt, as posited by Kiraly (2000).

The chance of coping with problem-solving, while raising awareness of learning, arguably helps develop professional skills and competences. The notion of "translation competence" is meant to include both a combination of translation skills – that is, the ability to produce a series of target texts form a source text and to select only one solution for a given purpose and specific reader (see Pym 1992, p. 281) – and, more broadly, "the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or personal characteristics necessary to successfully carry out one's education or one's job" (González-Davies & Enríquez-Raído 2016, p. 6), including aspects such as meeting deadlines.

In addition, in a museum translation project based on real-life tasks in an Italian context, handling inverse translation – which is not the most typical direction of translation training classes in Italy, where English functions as L2 for most student (cf. Perego, 2021) – also reflects the actual needs of the professional market.

Another relevant potential is related to cultural awareness. As a matter of fact, students need, on the one hand, to delve themselves into the history of ancient local populations, and on the other hand have to put efforts in making cultural traditions understandable, and also appealing, for global visitors. The multilingual and multicultural classroom of Year 2 permitted a rich exchange of views and perspectives and revealed to be stimulating.

Finally, but not less importantly, students participating in such a project might foster their civic engagement, by making a significant contribution to the museum and to the city in which it is located and they study, and ultimately, to society, given the increasingly scarce resources assigned to cultural institutions.

This paper's aim was to illustrate a project-based didactic experiment encompassing real-world translation. A description of its background, theoretical framework, context and methodology was provided, without delving into source texts and their translations, because text analysis was beyond the scope of the present study.

After completing the three-year project following the experimental year, once all the data related to the translation process are obtained, I aim to work on them from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, in order to analyze problems, faultiness and successful translation solutions and draw more informed conclusions in terms of translation training and learning.

Furthermore, drawing on the experience gained in the past three years, in the fourth and final year of the project, starting in February 2025, I plan to collect empirical data from participants, anonymously asking for feedback through surveys and other tools.

Obviously, even such data will not permit general conclusions, given the limited nature of the case study, in terms of context, material, participants and language pair. Similar projects should be expanded to other museums, tested in different contexts, and extended to other languages. Personally, I experimented the possibility of working with museum translation during my teaching mobility in Australia, at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, in the summer 2024. Multilingual classes that shared the same target language – i.e., English – but displayed different backgrounds, including Korean, Chinese, Mandarin, Japanese, Spanish and Portuguese – showed the potential inherent in this practice informed by linguistic theory.

Once all the texts translated by students are displayed in the museum, it would be useful to go beyond the pedagogical results and examine the reception of these texts by conducting a study of visitor experience.

Given the increasing role of AI in the contemporary world, its potential in translation and museum education is worth exploring for future endeavors, possibly in combination with an informed post-editing phase.

Admittedly, this case study, which reported on a challenging and rewarding experience for students and other participants, is and will remain a limited project. It is hoped that it will inspire similar experiences and further research in new contexts, with different learners, and by other researchers.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the present study.

Support and Thanks

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