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Launching a Translation Course for a U.S. University's Study Abroad Program in Spain

La implementación de una asignatura de traducción en el programa de estudios en España de una universidad estadounidense

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ABSTRACT: In May 2023, SPAN 435 Translation Strategies, a course offered at James Madison University (JMU) since 2016, was launched within the Semester in Spain (SIS) program at the University of Salamanca. In this course, students gain an introductory understanding of Translation Studies theory, the practice of functional translation, and the translation profession. The professor who established and continues to teach the course at the Harrisonburg, Virginia (U.S.A) campus and the professor who began teaching the course abroad set the basis for a common framework of contents, activities, and evaluation. They also devised a method of assessing the students' prior knowledge and learning outcomes via self-reported questionnaires delivered at the course's beginning and end. Some details about the implementation in Salamanca and some results of the pre- and post-course questionnaires are offered. This coordination can be a model for universities considering expanding Translation Studies courses to their study abroad programs.

KEYWORDS: coordination; evaluation; minor in Spanish translation; questionnaire; translation training; translation strategies.

RESUMEN: En 2023, SPAN 435 Translation Strategies, una asignatura impartida en James Madison University (JMU) desde 2016, se puso en marcha dentro del programa *Semester*

in Spain (SIS) en la Universidad de Salamanca. Es un curso de nivel inicial sobre la teoría de la traducción, la práctica de la traducción funcional y la profesión de traductor/a. El profesor fundador del curso en Harrisonburg, Virginia (EE.UU.) y el profesor que lo implementó en Salamanca pusieron en común los contenidos, las actividades y el sistema de evaluación y también crearon un instrumento para valorar los conocimientos previos y los resultados del aprendizaje mediante cuestionarios administrados al principio y al final del curso. Se presentan detalles sobre la implementación en Salamanca y algunos resultados recogidos en los cuestionarios previos y posteriores al curso. Esta coordinación puede servir de modelo para universidades que deseen ofrecer cursos prácticos de traducción en sus programas en otros países.

PALABRAS CLAVE: coordinación; estrategias de traducción; evaluación; formación en traducción; mención en traducción de y al español.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the model of training for careers in translation or research tracks in translation studies begins mainly at the postgraduate level. Several universities offer Masters and Doctoral programs in Translation or Translation Studies (TS), with prominent examples at Kent State University (MA and Ph.D.), Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (MA), SUNY at Binghamton (MA and Ph.D.), the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (MA, Ph.D.), and the University of Texas at Dallas (MA, Ph.D.). There are only a few examples of undergraduate degree programs with majors in Translation or Translation Studies, some offered at the same institutions mentioned above, another offered at the University of Texas at Arlington (BA, Spanish Translation and Interpreting), and possibly others (see Park 1994 and Venuti 1998).

However, U.S. universities have a significant growth potential for Translation Studies minors and courses at the undergraduate level. Park mentions that «a case could be made for a certain amount of T&I training as a general humanities requirement because of the components that go into both translating and interpreting (linguistic skill, analysis of information, content knowledge in a variety of fields, decision-making, development of native-language writing/speaking)» (1994, 203). Introductory translation courses within language majors or minors can expose students to professional translation career opportunities in international organizations and the language industry (as in-house or freelance translators) and also in technological sectors with customer bases that are highly international (automobiles, computers, the entertainment industry, and many more). They can also prepare students for masters and PhD programs in translation, where scholarly inquiries into the translation process, its products, and their reception in specific contexts, among many other exciting topics, can be highly satisfying, useful to society, and conducive to academic careers.

For these reasons, among others, James Madison University (JMU), in Harrisonburg, Virginia, developed a course within the Spanish Translation and Interpreting minor called «SPAN 435. Translation Strategies». Initially designed in response to a growing student demand, the course was launched in the 2016-17 academic year. Subsequently, JMU offered the course on its Semester in Spain (SIS) program at the University of Salamanca (USAL) in the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. We would

like to discuss the development of the course on the U.S. campus, the launching of the course in Spain, and the administration of a survey to assess the students' prior knowledge and learning outcomes in the study-abroad program. In general terms, students gain a broad understanding of the multifaceted nature of translation studies and how translation plays a critical role in the cross-cultural communication of ideas. Students who register on this course typically major in such degrees as international business, economics, psychology, global justice, intelligence analysis, and international relations, and they are pursuing a minor in Spanish-English Translation and Interpretation, Business Spanish, or Medical Spanish.

Implementing new courses within undergraduate BA degree programs offers challenges in their broad, introductory scope, the kind of majors or minors whose students may be drawn to these new course offerings, and their immediate professional and academic usefulness to students. Hine studied the launch of three introductory translation courses, one of which was the undergraduate course «Introduction to Translation» at Montpelier State University in Vermont, which would be a prerequisite for the subsequent «Technical Translation» course (2000).

2. THE «HISTORY» OF SPAN 435. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

Translation and Interpretation in the Shenandoah Valley of northern Virginia have experienced enormous demand, driven by immigration, public safety, the need to provide quality community services, and the exposure of public services and private companies to liability for language barriers. United States federal law requires healthcare providers to offer qualified language interpreters as part of Title VI of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 2016, the civil rights legislation was reinforced with additional requirements in United States Code section 1557, which states that healthcare providers must provide translation of essential publications and communications to individuals with limited English proficiency (Office For Civil Rights 2017).

The state of Virginia has a population of over 8 million, with approximately a million residents born outside the United States. Many immigrants live in northern Virginia, where about one-third speak a language other than English at home, according to Volatia Language Network, a language services provider (2024). In Harrisonburg, the city's public schools have students from over 40 countries, including many individuals with limited English proficiency.

In December 2023, *U.S. News and World Report*, a nationwide media source of news, analysis, consumer advice, and rankings, listed «Interpreters and Translators» as number six in the ranking for «Best Creative and Media Jobs in the United States for 2024»¹.

Language graduates who want to enter this fast-growing profession in the United States must be proficient in source and target languages, with Spanish most often a must and fluency in additional languages a plus, and know the requirements for linguistic,

¹ See <https://money.usnews.com/careers/best-jobs/rankings/best-creative-and-media-jobs>).

cultural, and technical expertise as well as accurate and effective translation and interpretation strategies and techniques.

The original «Spanish Translation Strategies» course began in 2009, the same year that the Spanish-English Translation and Interpreting minor started. The course was developed by and continues to be taught by Stephen Gerome on the Virginia campus of JMU. The demand for the course and the minor was determined by the Academic Program Review and subsequent meetings of the Curriculum and Instruction Committee, which obtained permission to implement the minor. A minor is «a cohesive set of required and elective courses that, when completed by a student, connotes knowledge and skills in a discipline, region or topic area, but not at the depth of a major. The minor is designed for students not majoring in the same area and requires 18-24 credit hours» (James Madison University 2024). Since 2016, the course, then re-titled as Spanish 435: Translation Strategies, has been offered and taught each semester (Fall, Spring, and Summer Session) and has continued to see consistent student demand. The content of the original course was focused on medical and legal translation, which continue to be focal areas, but now the contents also include a higher-level view of translation studies, including Skopos theory and translatorial action, strategies for approaching general and specialized translation tasks, including adopting and implementing some of today's translation technologies. In the following section, we will describe the current course syllabus used in the JMU campus in Virginia and, subsequently, the implementation of this course in the Semester in Spain (SIS) program in Salamanca.

3. SPAN 435: COURSE SYLLABUS, CONTENTS, AND EVALUATION

The course introduces undergraduates to translation theory, including prominent figures in Translation Studies. The course also introduces undergraduates to translation practice, including strategies and techniques, a variety of text types and genres, and terminology and technology applied to translation. In addition to discussions of readings on significant currents and trends the course also introduces students to the translation profession and some specifics about the translation industry. In the current market, proficiency in terminology management, computer-assisted translation (CAT), machine translation, and pre- and post-editing are essential skills.

This course is worth 3 «credit hours», the standard length of a semester-long course in the U.S., roughly the equivalent of a 6 credit course as defined by the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) within the European Higher Education Area. According to the *JMU Academic Advising Glossary*, one credit hour equals a minimum of 12 hours and 30 minutes of instruction (750 minutes). In the ECTS system, one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of total work, approximately double the number of hours because it counts hours spent outside the classroom (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, European Commission, 2015). In the U.S., students often begin by taking general education courses; then, «in consultation with an advisor or department representative», they must «declare a major», which becomes a part of their academic

record (James Madison University 2024); and they also tend to pursue a minor. A minor is «A cohesive set of required and elective courses that (...) connotes knowledge and skills in a discipline, region or topic area, but not at the depth of a major. The minor is designed for students who are not majoring in the same area and requires between 18-24 credit hours» (ibid.). SPAN 435 is a required or elective course for the «professional minors» in Spanish-English Translation and Interpretation, Business Spanish and Medical Spanish². In most cases, students registered on SPAN 435 are pursuing majors in international business, health sciences, psychology and intelligence analysis, and they are highly motivated not only to become proficient in Spanish but to acquire new knowledge and applicable skills.

Though it is introductory in nature, this course is ambitious in every sense, seeking to cover an array of theoretical, practical and professional topics. It provides a survey of the field that will be useful for students in the future. With several adaptations, this course syllabus and evaluation system were implemented in the Semester in Spain (SIS) program in Salamanca in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

4. EXPANSION OF SPAN 435 TO THE JMU SEMESTER IN SPAIN (SIS) IN SALAMANCA

James Madison University has partnered with the University of Salamanca and its Spanish language service, *Cursos Internacionales*, since 1986, when the Semester in Spain (SIS) was first launched. The SIS program is currently managed by the Program Director, Tomás Regalado López, and the Resident Director, Jesús Jiménez García, who also engage an administrative assistant for support³. In a personal interview held in Salamanca on April 4, 2024, Prof. Jiménez García explained that as a result of changing needs and demands and of the dynamism and flexibility of the U.S. higher education, the program in 2023-24 is an evolution of the one launched in 1986-1987. Initially, this was a general language program, but the courses offered soon grew to include legal and business Spanish. After 2004, courses expanded significantly, including medical Spanish and an internship. The new courses offered over the years «harnessed the bounties» of the University of Salamanca and the institutions, NGOs, and companies that offer internships. The program matched the societal demand for Spanish linguists, translators, and interpreters in northern Virginia and the broader Richmond, VA and Washington, D.C/Baltimore, MD areas. With approximately 90 students per year, the experiential learning basis is one of its many strengths.

In May 2023, the JMU Semester in Spain (SIS) program wanted a renewed focus on Spanish majors and minors. One of the first steps was to broaden the curriculum to include more of the required and elective subjects that students could choose for their professional minors —Medical Spanish, Business Spanish and Spanish-English Translation and Interpretation. Several new courses were implemented to meet the requirements of these three minors, among which was SPAN 435 Translation Strategies

² See https://catalog.jmu.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=51&poid=21813

³ See <https://www.jmu.edu/global/abroad/programs/salamanca/academics.shtml>

that fits seamlessly into the study abroad program. To be accepted, students must meet the language requirements, i.e., they need to have an intermediate Spanish level (SPAN 232 Intermediate Spanish II) or have passed SPAN 300 Credit by Exam for Native or Heritage Spanish Speakers.

The JMU team in Salamanca identified a qualified instructor on-site at USAL, Daniel Linder, and, before launching the subject in Salamanca, a meeting was held between with the directors in which the broad strokes of the implementation were discussed, followed by more detailed meetings with the Resident Director and the professors. Four students registered for the course during the Summer Session in 2022-23, and another four completed the course in the Fall Semester in 2023-24. During the personal interview, Prof. Jiménez García pointed out that there were several ways in which «culture shock» can affect the students in and out of the classroom, including such things as the brusque communication style often used amongst local Spanish speakers and the proximity with which native speakers of Spanish address their conversation partners. A selection of the specific cultural challenges faced by the two groups of SPAN 435 students is described below.

5. BEFORE AND AFTER SELF-EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

A simple, Spanish-language self-reporting questionnaire was designed to provide the students with an instrument to self-assess their knowledge before the beginning and after the completion of the course. The first part of the two-part questionnaire is a quantitative instrument that asks students to rate «to what extent they know» contents related to the theoretical part of the course, contents from the practical part, and contents from the professional part. Students were prompted to select one rating on a 4-item scale (from *nada/nothing* (1) to *muy bien/very much* (4)).

The second part of the questionnaire is a qualitative instrument that asks students open-ended questions about their knowledge, opinions, and experiences with translation theory, practice and the profession. All questions were framed similarly: «At this moment, how would you describe your knowledge of...». Students could provide multi-line answers in the form of a paragraph in either Spanish or English. All students were informed and they consented to participate in the questionnaires.

In the quantitative part of the questionnaires administered at the beginning of the course in 2022-23 and 2023-24, most students answered either *nada/nothing* or *regular/not much* in all contents, except in the practical and professional parts of the questionnaire in which they answered either *regular/not much* or *bien/quite a bit* to practical and professional questions about literary translation, tourism translation, and scientific and technical translation (see Figure 1 below). The legend at the bottom of Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the meanings of the color-coding used in the bar graph.

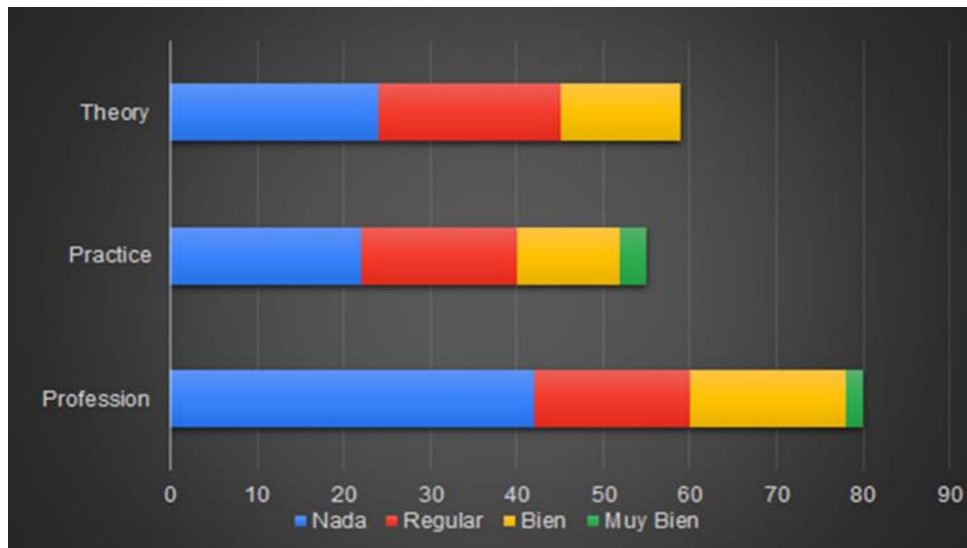


Figure 1. (Pre-course Questionnaire, Gerome and Linder 2024)

When compared to the end-of-course questionnaires (Figure 2), most students rated all contents either *bien/quite a bit* or *muy bien/very much*, except for several who chose *regular/not much* for questions about literary translation, scientific and technical translation, translation for international organizations, professional translator associations, and translator training.

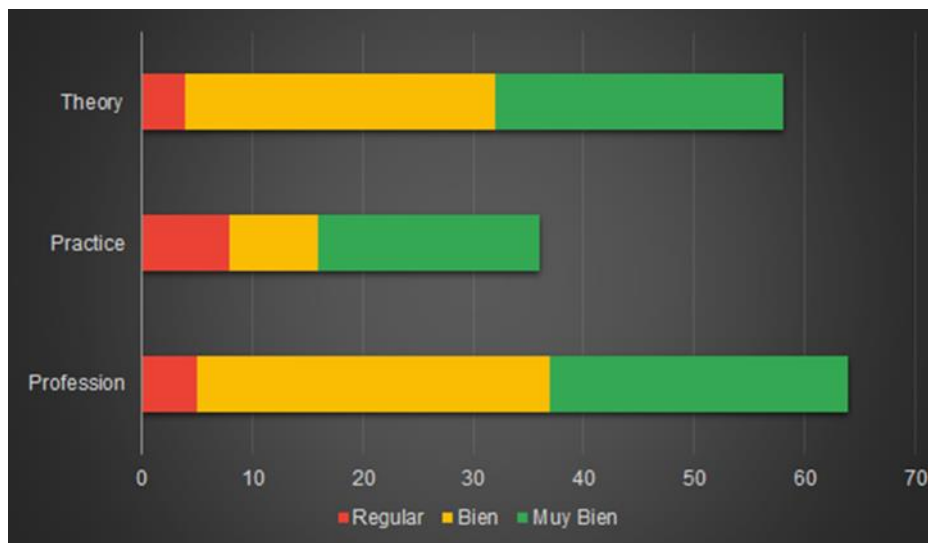


Figure 2. (Post-course Questionnaire, Gerome and Linder 2024)

The predominance of blue and red in the pre-questionnaire and of yellow and green in the post-questionnaire suggests that most students self-reported a very significant degree of improvement, from the 1-2 range to the 3-4 range, with an increase of roughly fifty percent. The contents they learned the most about were those they lacked knowledge about initially. All students marked *muy bien/very much* for translation strategies and techniques, machine translation, and pre-and post-editing of machine translation. This steep learning progression from *nada/nothing* or *regular/not much* to *bien/quite a bit* or *muy bien/very much* corresponds not only to course contents that are valuable for

addressing practical issues in translation but also for understanding the current professional market.

The qualitative part of the questionnaire focused on the three questions about students' knowledge of the course contents, i.e., translation theory, translation practice, and professional translation, but asked students to provide open answers. All answers given in Spanish have been translated into English by the authors. Students who felt they could not express themselves fully in Spanish were allowed to answer in English. In accordance with the informed consent policy, individual responses have been anonymized.

In the pre-course questionnaire, students mostly answered that they needed to learn, needed more knowledge or needed a basic understanding of translation, translation strategies, or professional translation, often expressing that they had never studied a specific translation course. In the post-course questionnaire, they stated that they understood more or much more and that they were «beyond the basic» level. One student said, «I understand its foundations and characteristics (because of our projects and research we did for them), and I know more about the field of work than I did at the beginning of the course». The answers given by the students often demonstrated that they had gained a grasp of translation, translation strategies, and professional translation. We supply three examples below:

Translation is an important topic in international relations and business. The ability to translate texts opens up many possibilities for future job opportunities to work with foreigners.

I know quite a bit about strategies. My presentations centered on the topic of strategies and, specifically, on oblique and direct strategies.

Translation strategies are the ways in which translators work effectively and in accordance with the client's brief.

Our general impression is that students had little prior knowledge at the beginning of the courses and felt the need to justify why. However, at the end of the courses, they seemed confident about their increased expertise, though none of them stated that they had gained extensive knowledge.

6. «CULTURE SHOCK» FACED BY JMU STUDENTS IN SALAMANCA

Since these were the first times this subject was offered in Spain, students were not sure if they should register and wanted to try the course for a few days first. All students who attempted the course ended up registering. Because there were no native Spanish speakers registered and because the intermediate level of Spanish was low for non-mother tongue translation, the directionality of translation was mostly from Spanish into English. However, classroom instruction was always in Spanish, with occasional use of English for clarification or revision of target English texts.

Despite general instruction during orientation on using the University of Salamanca Moodle-based LMS tool, called Studium, the JMU students often needed specific in-class reinforcement. They could find it hard to locate the various resources and tasks in the

platform, identify the available resources and tasks, and access them. The main problem centered on resources housed on Google Drive and shared as a link on Studium with students. To access these, students need to log into their @usal.es email addresses (which they have often received shortly beforehand) and then log into Studium to access the shared resources, and this could be a tedious process for newcomers.

Another challenge had to do with the scheduling of presentations and other evaluation activities, such as the individual quiz. These evaluation activities were announced far in advance, and students received daily reminders of the approaching dates. The Salamanca-based professor attributes the need to do this to the significant differences in the organization of university life in the U.S. versus Spain, where no classes are generally scheduled between 2 and 4 p.m., and academic activities can be held until 8 or 9 p.m. Finally, there is no eating or drinking (except water) in the classrooms, a fact that students had to be reminded of.

7. CONCLUSIONS

We have described how James Madison University identified that applied Spanish language skills, such as translation and interpreting, are in demand in Northern Virginia and the surrounding area which includes the major markets in Richmond, VA, Washington, D.C and Baltimore, MD. In 2009, they implemented the Spanish professional minors (Spanish-English Translation and Interpreting, Business Spanish, and the Medical Spanish) and the undergraduate course SPAN 435 Translation Strategies. We have seen how this course, which covers translation theory, practical strategies, and professional translation, was successfully implemented within the JMU Semester in Spain (SIS) program in 2022-23 and continued to be offered during 2023-24.

The implementation of this type of courses can expand the number of translation and interpreting offerings at the undergraduate level, where U.S. universities currently offer few B.A.s but a growing number of minors. This type of course may be ideally suited for study abroad programs, as our two-part quantitative and qualitative self-reporting questionnaire found evidence of. One student responded, «I think especially taking it while studying abroad will be helpful [with translation] strategies, and I hope it helps [me] to familiarize more closely with the language». Students' qualitative opinions seem to underscore the success of the implementation, with comments such as these: «I have learned a lot about professional translation and how translations can help organizations and [...] companies all over the world»; and «I understand how [translation] can be used in a professional setting».

We believe that JMU and the University of Salamanca, through its Spanish-teaching branch, *Cursos Internacionales*, are offering leadership amongst the universities with study abroad programs in Spain. Park described that this type of innovation typically was found in less traditional universities, stating that «traditional universities, particularly those that have been around a long time, are very timorous about venturing into new fields», while, at the same time, «Institutions which offer T&I programs are generally more innovative, attempting to break away from the comfortable, traditional language

and literature de-grees that were acceptable in the job market of 50 years ago» (1994, 202).

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