Assessing a course on translation with learner portfolios

Evaluación de un curso de traducción a través del portfolio del aprendiz

Andrés Canga Alonso,
Universidad de La Rioja, España

Assessing a course on translation with learner portfolios

Evaluación de un curso de traducción a través del portfolio del aprendiz

Andrés Canga Alonso, Universidad de La Rioja, España
andres.canga@unirioja.es

Resumen
Este artículo muestra nuestra experiencia con el uso del portfolio durante un semestre en la asignatura Traducción español-inglés/inglés español del grado en Estudios Ingleses con dos grupos de alumnos que cursaron la asignatura en dos años consecutivos. Una vez analizado el contexto en el que se desarrolló el trabajo se describirá por qué y cómo se utilizó esa metodología. Finalmente, se presentarán los resultados que revelan que gracias al empleo del portfolio los alumnos son capaces de (a) adquirir las competencias que requiere la asignatura, (b) reflexionar sobre su proceso de aprendizaje seleccionando las actividades relevantes para su aprendizaje y (c) autoevaluar su aprendizaje utilizando como guía las tablas de autoevaluación proporcionadas por su profesor.

Abstract
This article shows our experience using portfolios during a one-semester Spanish-English/English-Spanish translation course in the Degree of English Studies with two different groups of undergraduates in two consecutive academic years. After sketching the context of our work we describe why and how we are working with portfolios. Finally, we will present our findings which reveal that by using portfolios students can (a) acquire the competences required for the subject, (b) reflect on their own learning by selecting tasks relevant for their learning process, and (c) self-assess their own learning using the self-assessment grids provided by the teacher.

Palabras clave
Portfolio del alumno; Auto-reflexión; Autoevaluación; Competencias.

Keywords
Learner portfolios; Self-reflection; Self-assessment; Competences.

1. Introduction

The importance of an effective teaching-language process in which teachers and learners share responsibility has been highlighted in recent decades (Fernández Polo and Cal Varela 2011; Roca de Larios and López Serrano 2011; Martínez Lirola 2012a and 2012b). For the said process to be effective, it must pay attention to evaluation as a crucial component of the whole process. In this sense, special attention should be paid to new methods of assessment in which the whole grade does not depend on a final mark, as has traditionally happened in Spanish universities. For this reason, evaluation should not just measure contents but it should concentrate on how students learn, i.e. the different strategies students use to do the proposed tasks and to apply theoretical knowledge to practice (Oxford 2011).

Competences also play an outstanding role in Spanish university syllabi since students are supposed to acquire the eight key competences for lifelong learning (see http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ll-learning/keycomp_en.pdf) during their four-year degrees. Competences can be defined as attitudes and capacities that prepare students to respond to the demands of their professional environment and let them achieve their learning outcomes (Martínez Lirola 2008). Evaluating competences implies that students will have to demonstrate that they have acquired them. Hence, competence assessment entails student motivation through personalized feedback and detailed guidance at any time of the teaching-learning process. The competences acquired by the pupil are located at the core of educational planning, thus there should be a close relationship between the activities learners have to develop during the semester and the competences they are supposed to acquire during this period.

In order to foster competence development, formative assessment acquires a pivotal role in students' evaluation. Formative assessment implies a change in the role of university teachers in the classroom since they become counsellors or assessors who will guide their students throughout their learning process (Little 1991; Sinclair, McGrath and Lamb 2000; Benson 2007). Following this kind of assessment at university level implies learner involvement (Little 2007) since the teacher draws their learners into their own learning process, making them share responsibility for setting the learning agenda, selecting learning activities and materials, managing classroom interaction and evaluating learning outcomes. It also entails learner reflection (Little 2007) in the sense that it is very difficult to set a learning target or evaluate learning outcomes without thinking about what you are doing. Learner reflection also requires teachers to embrace reflective intervention as a key feature of the teaching- learning process. That is, we must supplement the incidental reflection that planning, monitoring and evaluating learning entail by an explicitly detached reflection on the process and content of learning. This reflection is also concerned with the dialogue between teachers and learners or within learner groups. According to Vygotsky's principle of internalisation, what begins as social speech is gradually transformed into the capacity for inner speech in the target language (Vygotsky 1978). Therefore, a portfolio is an evaluation tool that facilitates students' formative assessment and also helps them develop certain competences depending on the activities which are included in them (Nunes 2004; Pozo Llorente and García Lupión 2006; Little 2009; Lam and Lee 2010; Canga Alonso 2011; Fernández Polo and Cal Varela 2011; Roca de Larios and López Serrano 2011; Martínez Lirola 2012a and 2012b). Specifically, the portfolio allows the integration of the tasks of the learning process within evaluation; it helps to evaluate students' achievements and their degree of maturity and autonomy, and it offers teachers more information about the effort students make, and about the different tasks being accomplished. In this vein, the portfolio illustrates the whole learning process and reflects how, when and where the different concepts, abilities and competences have been acquired by students. It consists of a folder in which students keep several tasks to accomplish certain objectives and competences selected by teachers. O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) distinguish between three types of portfolios: showcase, collection and assessment.

For the purpose of this paper we will refer to the use of collection and assessment portfolios that include all the tasks, reflections and self-assessments students made during the semester. As aforementioned, scholars have purported the benefits of portfolio assembling to foster learning and self-assessment. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, there is a scarcity of research comparing the results of two different groups of students who have been assessed using portfolios in a translation course. Therefore, the present study aims at answering the following research questions.

RQ1. Is learner involvement promoted with the methodology implemented in the classroom?
RQ2. Is competence instruction favoured by means of portfolio assessment?
RQ3. Can students reflect on their learning process during the semester?

2. Methodology

2. 1. Participants

This study presents the results of implementing portfolio as an assessment tool in the subject Spanish-English/English-Spanish Translation during two consecutive academic years. Spanish-English/English-Spanish Translation is an optional subject taught in the third year of the degree in English Studies in a university from the north of Spain.

The research comprises 39 portfolios written by native and non-native speakers of Spanish. 23 portfolios were collected during the first year of the research whereas 16 were collected during the second academic year. We will refer to students who took part in the study in the first year as group 1 whereas group 2 will be used to analyse the performance of the students in the second year of the research.

2. 2. Portfolio Contents

At the beginning of the semester a session was devoted to explaining the main goals of the course as well as the importance of portfolios in students' learning. Table 1 shows how portfolio assessment was integrated in students' evaluation.

Table 1. Assessment criteria

Evaluation system	Percentage
Final written test	60%
Project Work	20%
Portfolio	20%

As can be seen in table 1, portfolio assembling plays an important role in students' assessment since as it was mentioned in the introduction, an effective teaching-language process implies that teachers and learners share responsibility in the classroom in order to acquire the competences included in the syllabus of the subject.

As illustrated in table 2, portfolios should include six different elements.

Table 2. Portfolio contents

1. Self-assessment of compulsory readings
2. Glossary terms
3. Practice on translation
4. Group Work activities
5. Self-reflection
6. Self-assessment

As for self-assessment of compulsory readings, students were required to answer a set of questions about specific texts on translation studies, so that they could activate their communication in foreign languages competence. They had to download the documents from WebCT and upload their answers to foster their digital competence, and they had to correct their mistakes using the key provided by the teacher to put their learning to learn competence in practice.

Regarding the second content of their portfolios, learners were asked to include an alphabetically ordered list containing the most outstanding terms on the field of translation studies, which appeared in the compulsory readings for each unit in their portfolios. A question about these readings was also formulated in the final exam to test students' learning of the aforementioned terms. To facilitate term compilation, at the beginning of the term students were given a handout with some guidelines on how to write a definition and they were encouraged to come to tutorials in pairs to discuss the definitions they had provided for the terms included in the first unit. Online tutorials via email or WebCT were also available in order to continuously guide and assess students' work, not only regarding definition of terms but also concerning any of the aspects alluded to in the classroom.

At the end of each unit, students had to reflect on the own learning by pointing out the most outstanding contents they had learnt and they also had to select the most relevant tasks on practice

on translation carried out during the development of the unit. Self-reflection could be done in the mother tongue to promote the competences of communication in the mother tongue and learning to learn. Nevertheless, most of the documents included in their portfolios were in English, so their communication in foreign languages was emphasised once again.

Learners also worked in groups of two or three (group work activities) every two units in order to find information about topics related to translation studies and they had to present their findings to their classmates by means of a power point presentation. They were given two in-class sessions to prepare their presentations. Before the presentation, their productions were checked by the teacher in order to provide each group of learners with some feedback. Once their group work results were presented to their classmates a handout containing the most outstanding features of the topic they have dealt with was uploaded to WebCT to make it available for the rest of their partners. The aims of this group work tasks focused on three basic competences. Firstly, communication in foreign languages since students' presentations were in English, digital competence as they had to summarize the information gathered with a power point presentation and learning to learn because they had to divide the work each of the group members had to do in order to find the information required.

At the end of the semester they had to answer a questionnaire in English based on a 4-type-likert-scale (see Appendix I) to self-assess their learning process by reflecting on the competences they thought they had acquired using this learning methodology (statements 1-7). In the second part of the questionnaire (statements 8-13) students evaluated their beliefs about their own learning process as well as their motivation towards the subject.

Portfolios were handed in on the date of the final exam, so that students could use all the documents contained in them during the final exam preparation.

3. Results

Regarding RQ1 (Is learner involvement promoted with the methodology implemented in the classroom?), the results for self-assessment of compulsory readings were quite positive since 14 students from group 1 (60.8 per cent) and 12 informants from group 2 (75 per cent) answered the questions before the deadline and checked their incorrect responses including them in their portfolios. All the participants who handed in their portfolios included an alphabetically ordered list with the terms they were asked to include in their portfolios according to the readings and the notes they had taken during lectures. What is more, group 1 students were able to answer the questions about term definitions in the final test, achieving, at least, a pass mark in this question. On the contrary, only 50 per cent of group 2 learners obtained a pass when they were asked about term definitions in the exam.

As regards practice on translation, 17 group 1 students (73.91 per cent) include proof of their work in class to support the fact that they had learnt new approaches to translation practice regarding, strategies, language use and text typology. The results are better in group 2 since 14 students (87.5 per cent) comment on translation examples in their portfolios. As far as group work is concerned, all the learners took active part in the elaboration, organization and further presentation of their tasks in front of their classmates and most of them consider this activity very valuable to gain confidence while using the foreign language in oral presentations.

Despite the fact that self-reflection and self-assessment are closely related the data show that the response to these tasks varied among the informants. Thus, there is only one group 1 student who did not include a self-reflection on each of the units as well as a final conclusion. The findings also show that there is one learner who presented just two units in her portfolio, consequently she just reflected on them. The rest of the participants reflected on their learning at the end of each unit, and they also handed-in an overview of the whole semester. Finally, 18 group 1 students (78.26 per cent) and 14 group 2 (87.5 per cent) answered the self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix I), which proves once again that students were actively involved in classroom interaction. These data show that the first research question was successfully attained by most of the participants. Figure 1 illustrates this assertion:
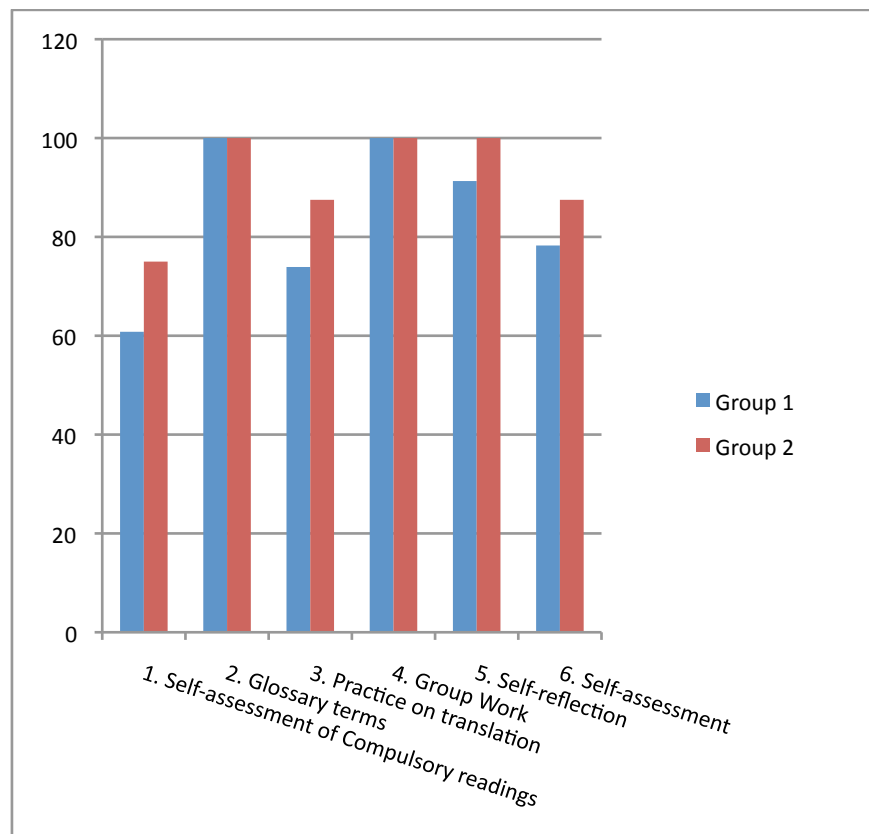
Figure 1. Learner involvement

With regard to the second research question (RQ2: Is competence instruction favoured by means of portfolio assessment?) most of the students achieved all the attained competences for each of the tasks abovementioned. If we analyse the results obtained in each of the tasks included in their portfolios, the data show that 60.8 per cent of group 1 learners and 75.5 per cent of the informants from group 2 were able to answer the questions in the target language using the appropriate register. What is more, they uploaded their final drafts to WebCT before the deadline and they self-assessed their work with the help of the answer key provided in the same online environment. These data confirm that more than half of the students acquired the three competences involved in the first component of their portfolios, i.e. communication in foreign languages, digital and learning to learn competences.

The findings for glossary terms outscore the results achieved by the students with regard to compulsory readings since 100 per cent of the learners were able to write their definitions, so they all put in practice their communication in foreign languages competence.

As far as practice on translation is concerned, 73.91 per cent of group 1 members and 87.5 per cent of group 2 students included evidence from their work in class to support the knowledge they had gained, which shows that they have improved their communication in foreign languages, their competence in the mother tongue as well as becoming more reflective and critical learners so their learning to learn competence was also fostered. The results for students' group work reveal that all the participants in the present research took active part in the elaboration, organization and further presentation of their tasks in front of their classmates by means of a power point presentation, which implies that communication in foreign languages, digital and learning to learn competences have been included in their classroom interaction.

The data for self-reflection show that there are only two learners who did not reflect on their learning by critically discussing the main points they have learnt in each unit together with a final conclusion to the whole process. This result is an indication that learning to learn competence was fostered in both groups of informants.

Most of the students have self-assessed their work since 78.26 per cent of group1 members and 87.5 per cent of group 2 participants answered the self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix I),

which emphasizes once again the fact that students were actively involved in classroom interaction and self-reflection and learning to learn were also fostered. These data show that the second research question had a positive answer in this sample because more than 70 per cent of the students involved have improved their competences thanks to the tasks they were encouraged to do. These results coincide with the student's answers to the questionnaire implemented at the end of the semester. This questionnaire was based on a 4-type likert-scale (see Appendix I). The first seven statements referred to their views on the competences they have acquired using this learning methodology. As can be seen in Table 3, which shows the mean scores for each statement, the majority of the learners in both academic years recognized that the methodology and the assessment implemented in the classroom were adequate to improve their competence in English regarding their oral and written skills. They also had a positive feeling towards the knowledge gained on translation procedures that is why most of them gave the highest score to statement six (I have a wider perspective about what translation implies). It is also worth mentioning that only four informants graded statement three (I have improved my abilities to search for academic information on the internet) with two points (disagree) out of four, and one of these two learners also graded item number five (I have improved my abilities to search for academic information on the internet) with the same score.

Table 3. Competence instruction

Competence	Group 1 Mean	Group 2 Mean
1. I have improved my abilities to analyze and synthesize information	3.38	3.36
2. I have improved my abilities to organize information	3.38	3.38
3. I have improved my abilities to search for academic information on the internet	3.22	3.29
4. I can include references on my work	3.38	3.36
5. I have improved my abilities to make oral presentations about translation issues	3.44	3.50
6. I have a wider perspective about what translation implies	4	3.71
7. I have learned about different techniques to translate a text	3.88	3.86

In order to answer research question 3 (RQ3: Can students reflect on their learning process during the semester?), we will take into account students' reflections about each unit and at the end of the semester together with the answers students they gave to statements 8-13 in the final questionnaire. As it was abovementioned, most of the students have critically discussed the main points they have learnt in each unit together with a final conclusion to the whole teaching-learning process.

This result is reinforced with learners' own views in the final questionnaire (see table 4). In general terms, participants are satisfied with the degree of involvement in the tasks proposed during the semester. They also pointed out that they thought they were more critical and self-reflective than at the beginning of the semester since their mean scores are higher than 3.00. All the participants agreed with the fact that they were able to apply theoretical knowledge to translation practice, thus reflective learning seems to have been attained.

Regarding motivational factors, students recognized that they had felt motivated by the subject being the means of the scores given to this item 3.72 and 3.36 respectively. This response is related to the score given to statements 12 and 13 (I have put a lot of effort in this subject and I have attended most of the classes) as students admitted that they had put a lot of effort in the subject by not only attending most of the classes, but also by their active involvement in their individual and autonomous work, as it has been analysed throughout this section.

Table 4. Learner reflection

Competence	Group 1 Mean	Group 2 Mean
8. I am more critical about different translation issues	3.44	3.36
9. I am able to apply theoretical knowledge to translation practice	3.22	3.07
10. I can explain reflections about what I have learnt	3.27	3.36
11. I have felt motivated by this subject	3.72	3.36
12. I have put a lot of effort in this subject	3.83	3.79
13. I have attended most of the classes	3.77	3.79

Finally, when analysing globally the data obtained in both parts of the questionnaire, it is worth mentioning that only two students' mean score is lower than 3.00 for all the statements included in the questionnaire. This finding proves that the students involved in this research agree with the methodology implemented in the classroom since this approach to translation learning has helped them acquire useful competences for text translation from their mother tongue (Spanish) into the target language (English) and vice versa. Furthermore, these findings reinforce the idea that pupils feel they have become more self-reflective.

4. Conclusion

The data analysed in this paper indicate that portfolio assessment is an appropriate assessment tool to promote self- reflection and foster learning in the subject of Spanish-English/English-Spanish Translation. Our findings also show that the three research questions posed at the beginning of this study have been successfully answered according to the results obtained by the participants in each of the tasks included in their portfolios.

Learner involvement (RQ1) was promoted thanks to the methodology implemented in the classroom since most of the students took active part, either individually or in groups, in all the tasks they were asked to carry out during the semester. Besides, the informants recognized that they had felt motivated by the subject which helped them put a lot of effort in their learning and also encouraged them to attend most of the classes as they recognized in the final questionnaire.

Learners acquired the key competences intended to be achieved in each of the tasks included in their portfolios (RQ2) since they were able to use the target language in their individual and group work activities therefore, the competence of communication in foreign languages was fostered. Furthermore, digital competence was also promoted since they used WebCT to upload their answers to compulsory readings and presented their group findings in their group work tasks by means of a power point presentation.

The vast majority of the informants are more critical and self-reflective than they were at the beginning of the course (RQ3) as they admitted in the final questionnaire. This assertion can be verified with the reflections included at the end of each unit and the turn of the semester in students' portfolios. What is more, students agreed with the fact that they were able to apply theoretical knowledge to translation practice, thus reflective learning and certain degree of learner autonomy seem to have been attained.

These findings resemble those obtained in other research conducted in Spain at university level in different subjects included in the syllabus of the degree in English Studies (Fernández Polo and Cal Varela 2011; Roca de Larios and López Serrano 2011; Martínez Lirola 2012 a and b) which implies that portfolio assessment should be encouraged in Spanish Higher Education. Nevertheless, this study shows limitations since it was carried out with a reduced number of informants and in an optional subject from the degree in English Studies (Spanish-English/English-Spanish translation) in which students are supposed to be more motivated than in a compulsory subject since it is up to them to choose it. Therefore, further research needs to be carried out with a higher number of informants in a compulsory subject to analyse if students' response to the three variables analysed in this paper (i.e. learner involvement, competence acquisition and self-reflection) is better, worse, or remains the same.

5. References

BENSON, P. (2007): Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching,* 40 (01), 21-40.

CANGA ALONSO, A. (2011). El Portafolio como recurso para la reflexión y la autoevaluación en alumnos con dificultades de aprendizaje. *Porta Linguarum*, 16, 137-153. Available at http://www.ugr.es/~portalin/articulos/PL_numero16/ANDRES%20CANGA.pdf. Accessed 10 May 2013.

FERNÁNDEZ POLO, F. J. and CAL VARELA, M. (2011). Learning translation through the use of portfolios: description of an experience. *@tic. revista d'innovació educativa*, 7. Available at http://ojs.uv.es/index.php/attic/article/view/1018/988. Accessed 28 May 2013.

LAM, R. and LEE, I. (2010). Balancing the dual functions of portfolio assessment. *ELT Journal*, 64 (1), 54-64. Available at http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/64/1/54.full.pdf+html?sid=6751bfc2-c8b3-4f5a-83fd-a024e3cad2a0. Accessed 27 May 2013.

LITTLE, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.

LITTLE, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovation in Language and Teaching*, 1 (1), 14-29.

LITTLE, D. (2009). The European Language Portfolio where pedagogy and assessment meet. Available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Publications/ELP_pedagogy_assessment_Little_EN.pdf. Accessed 3 May 2013.

MARTÍNEZ LIROLA, M. (2008). El uso del portfolio como herramienta metodológica evaluadora en el proceso de convergencia europea. *Profesorado. Revista del curriculum y formación del profesorado*, 12 (2). Available at http://www.ugr.es/~recfpro/rev122COL4.pdf. Accessed 30 April 2013.

MARTÍNEZ LIROLA, M. and RUBIO, F. (2009). Students' beliefs about portfolio evaluation and its influence on their learning outcomes to develop EFL in a Spanish context. *International Journal of English Studies,* 9 (1), 91-111.

MARTÍNEZ LIROLA, M. (2012a). Evaluation proposal based on the ECTS: Evaluating the four skills in a University core subject with a portfolio. *Porta Linguarum*, 17, 189-201. Available at http://www.ugr.es/~portalin/articulos/PL_numero17/11%20MARIA%20M%20LIROLA.pdf. Accessed 3 May 2013.

MARTÍNEZ LIROLA, M. (2012b). Evaluating with a Portfolio in the European Higher Education Framework: an Example from English Studies. *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada* (RESLA) 25, 147-164.

NUNES, A. (2004). Portfolios in the EFL classroom: disclosing an informed practice. ELT Journal 58 (4), 327-335. Available at http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/58/4/327.full.pdf+html?sid=6751bfc2-c8b3-4f5a-83fd-a024e3cad2a0. Accessed 10May 2013.

OXFORD. R. L. (2011). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies*. Harlow: Longman.

O'MALLEY, J. M. and L. VALDEZ PIERCE, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

POZO LLORENTE, Mª T. and García Lupión, B. (2006): El portafolios del alumnado: una investigación-acción en el aula universitaria. *Revista de Educación*, 34, 737-756.

ROCA DE LARIOS, J. and LÓPEZ SERRANO, S. (2011). Consideraciones prácticas sobre la elaboración de portafolios del estudiante: su aplicación al aprendizaje de la pronunciación del inglés. *Didáctica. Lengua y Literatura*, 23, 349-367.

SINCLAIR, B., MCGRATH, I. and LAMB, T. (eds.). (2000). *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. Harlow: Longman.

VYGOTSKY, L. V. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

APPENDIX I

Questionnaire on students' beliefs about their learning outcomes and effort during the semester (adapted from Martínez Lirola and Rubio 2009).

	1	2	3	4
1. I have improved my abilities to analyze and synthesize information				
2. I have improved my abilities to organize information				
3. I have improved my abilities to search for academic information on the internet				
4. I can include references on my work				
5. I have improved my abilities to make oral presentations about translation issues				
6. I have a wider perspective about what translation implies				
7. I have learned about different techniques to translate a text				
8. I am more critical about different translation issues				
9. I am able to apply theoretical knowledge to translation practice				
10. I can explain reflections about what I have learnt				
11. I have felt motivated by this subject				
12. I have put a lot of effort in this subject				
13. I have attended most of the classes				

4= Totally agrees; 3= Agrees; 2= Disagrees; 1= Totally disagrees.