

The apprentice

Emma Goldsmith reveals how taking on a work experience student for three days gave her a new perspective on her own routine



Emma Goldsmith MITI is a freelance Spanish to English medical translator who made a career switch from nursing some 25 years ago. She writes a blog called Signs & Symptoms of Translation about medical translation and SDL Trados Studio.

Earlier this year, a 17-year-old friend of my son's asked me if she could do three days' work experience with me. It was a school-guided placement and part of her ESO coursework (the Spanish equivalent of GCSEs). I wanted to help out, but wasn't sure it would work. Can you imagine talking through everything you do as a freelance translator to a teenager sitting next to you in your home office? From 9am until 2pm? For three days?

Roxana, my enthusiastic student, wants to be a translator. She's starting a step ahead of many of us, because she's already bilingual (Romanian and Spanish) and is working hard at learning English. At our pre-placement meeting, she said she'd like to learn a few more languages and do a degree in translation when she finishes school. So we discussed the pros and cons of acquiring more languages, the difference between interpreting and translating, and options for freelancers and in-house translators.

While it was clear that Roxana could learn a lot in three days about translating and the day-to-day

running of a freelance business, I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to get much work done myself. I decided to sort out some simple texts that Roxana could translate from English to Spanish while I was working on my own translation projects. We completed other tasks together, such as answering emails, formatting a Word file and updating my project management system.

Pretend projects

We set up 300-word texts as real-life projects. Although Roxana was sitting right beside me with her laptop, I emailed her the text and asked her to confirm the price and deadline. She translated the text, returned it to me and then issued her invoice. As a reliable client, I paid for the translation on receipt of the invoice. The only drawback for Roxana was that the payment wasn't for real!

Roxana was very excited about the translation process itself. On the first day, she read the text – about a hotel – and thought it looked simple because she could understand it all. But when she started translating it, she was filled with doubts and kept coming back to me to ask how she could resolve the tricky parts. We bookmarked a bilingual dictionary in her browser and she was surprised when I suggested using monolingual dictionaries too.

Roxana asked whether she could use 'check-in' and 'check-out' in her Spanish translation. The solution was to search some hotel websites, to see whether these Anglicisms were in common use in Spanish. The sites were also helpful for getting a feel for the tone of upmarket hotel copy.

Another revelation for Roxana was coming across a 'fresh water pool' and 'fresh fruit and vegetables' and not being able to use the same word for both instances in Spanish. Her school textbook definition of polysemy had suddenly come alive.

Translation technology

On the second day, I set up a project in SDL Trados Studio with an empty translation memory and termbase. Roxana added the new text – this time on student loans – and she soon got the hang of translating segment by segment, and adding terms to the termbase when she learnt a new word. However, despite my explanations, she didn't really see why it was more useful to translate the text in Studio than in Word. (But she did learn another new meaning for 'fresh' when it came up in the context of 'fresh out of university'.)

On the third day, I made some changes to the second text, deleting some parts and editing others. When Roxana added the file to Studio, her expression changed from puzzlement and deep concentration to one of absolute delight, as she realised how the new text was simply falling into place.

Chance for reflection

At the end of the three days, Roxana and I completed feedback forms about what she had learnt from her work placement, but there were no fields about how it had gone for me. Did my initial concerns materialise? Well, yes – there was less time to concentrate on my work, and it takes much longer to talk through different processes than to speed through them alone. But it was an enriching experience, because it allowed me to step back and look at my work from another perspective. I didn't realise how much I jump in and out of emailing, translating, researching and managing the business side. The time I saved not procrastinating, away from social media, was also an eye-opener. Since the work placement, I've been keeping strict 9am to 2pm working hours and more flexible afternoon times, and my productivity has increased. But my biggest take-away was sharing in Roxana's excitement at opening the door to translation.



Mutual learning: Emma and Roxana get down to work