

## *Teaching Translation to Mixed Groups of Blind and Sighted Students*

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### ABSTRACT

Blind translation students have as yet been paid little attention in the literature on translation teaching. To my knowledge, the only two publications that address this topic are Kellett Bidoli (2003) and Figiel (2015). The few other publications on blind people in T&I that I am aware of focus on aspects other than translation teaching. No interest at all seems to have been shown in the dynamics of teaching/learning situations in which blind and sighted students work together. Yet this is crucial to social constructivist or emergentist pedagogical epistemologies as outlined e.g. by Kiraly (2016). To address this gap in translation studies research, I carried out a project with a group of blind and sighted students in 2014/15. The question we set out to answer was how translation teaching and learning can be organized so that both blind and sighted students benefit from working in mixed groups. The theoretical basis students chose was the PACTE model of translation competence (e.g. 2003); and the method, semi-structured interviews with blind translation students, sighted translation students, (sighted) translation teachers, blind translators, and educational theorists specializing in visual impairment. A German-language article which describes the students' findings is available online (Bülbül et al., 2015). In this article, I shall revisit our original research question from the perspective of a different theoretical approach, namely Risku's (1998). I shall draw on the interview protocols from our joint project as well as on additional material e.g. from the mailing list Theroundtable. My aim will be, first, to make some of our results accessible to readers who do not speak German, and second, to provide an interpretation that complements our original one without superseding it.

**Keywords:** translation teaching, blind students, mixed groups, translation competence, inclusive teaching

### 1. Introduction

Blind translation students have as yet been paid little attention in the literature on translation teaching. To my knowledge, the only two publications that address this topic are Kellett Bidoli (2003), who discusses her experiences with blind students in translation and consecutive interpreting classes, and Figiel (2015), who presents some results of interviews carried out with visually impaired translators and interpreters. The few other publications on blind people in T&I that I am aware of – Cook (1976), Kottke (2007), ONCE ([2001]), Owton/Mileto (2011), and Palazzi (2003) – focus on aspects other than translation teaching.<sup>1</sup> No interest at all

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Figiel (2015: 194) for the reference to Kottke (2007). – Minina (2013) reports on a project carried out with blind and sighted students of English at Syktyvkar State University in Russia. The project included translation and interpreting exercises, but its focus was on language teaching. Since I cannot read Russian, my summary is based on

seems to have been shown in the dynamics of teaching/learning situations in which blind and sighted students work together. Yet this is crucial to social constructivist or emergentist pedagogical epistemologies as outlined e.g. by Kiraly (2016).

To address this gap in translation studies research, I carried out a project with a group of blind and sighted students in 2014/15. The question we set out to answer was how translation classes can be organized so that both blind and sighted students benefit from working in mixed groups. Our interest was thus not in the general conditions under which blind translation students work, nor did we discuss aspects of translation-studies programmes such as foreign-language competence, linguistics, or cultural studies. Our focus was, rather, on translation teaching and learning, and more specifically, on the dynamics of mixed groups. It should be noted that this includes the perspectives of all class members, and therefore goes beyond asking how translation classes can be made accessible to blind students. The theoretical basis our research group chose was the PACTE model of translation competence (e.g. 2003); and the method, semi-structured interviews with five different case groups. A German-language article which describes our findings is available online (Bülbül et al., 2015).

In the following, I shall revisit our original research question from the perspective of a different theoretical approach, namely Risku's (1998). I shall draw on the interview protocols from our research project as well as on additional material. My aim will be, first, to make some of our results accessible to readers who do not speak German, and second, to provide an interpretation that complements our original one without superseding it.<sup>2</sup> I shall focus on mixed groups with blind students, rather than students who are partially sighted, since the latter's needs vary considerably depending on the type of visual impairment (for examples, see Figiel [2015: 195–196]).

While I shall not discuss the technical details of how blind students work, a brief summary of some important points may be in order (for a more comprehensive description, see Kellett Bidoli [2003: 191–195] and Figiel [2015: 196, 199–200]). Blind students usually access electronic texts by means of a so-called screen reader. The screen reader sends text on the computer screen to a voice synthesizer or to a braille display; in other words, it can provide both auditory and tactile access (for further information, see King [2013]). Some students also work with braille printouts. Texts in conventional black print need to be scanned in order for blind students to be able to read them.

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machine translations into English and German and on information from Ekaterina Pankova, to whom I am indebted for alerting me to this publication.

<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, in describing our project and the method we chose, I have to make use of material previously published in Bülbül et al. (2015). Thus, the first two paragraphs of this introduction are largely, though not exclusively, based on our joint article (2015: 1–2). My subsequent analysis will draw on my own reading of the interview protocols, but there will of course be some similarities with our group's findings. I shall reference similarities that involve entire paragraphs but not individual sentences or interview summaries.

## 2. Method and Theoretical Basis

Our research project was carried out in the German Department of Mainz University's Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies (FTSK) in winter 2014/15. Sixteen students with seven different A languages took part. Thirteen of them were sighted; two were blind, and one, having two percent vision, was technically blind according to both German and WHO standards (DBSV, n. d.; WHO, n. d.: 2, 4) but identified as visually impaired. The teacher was (and is) sighted. In addition, an interested sighted colleague from the German Department joined our discussions on a regular basis.

Since the only data that was readily available in relation to our research question was anecdotal, consisting as it did of various group members' personal experiences, we decided to carry out semi-structured interviews with different case groups in order to provide a broader basis for our study. Semi-structured interviews as described e.g. by Helfferich (2014: 560–570) are qualitative methods suitable for small groups of respondents. Interviewers use an aide-mémoire with questions, prompts, etc., but are not bound to its structure or phrasing. Case groups are groups of respondents who have certain characteristics in common (Flick, <sup>4</sup>2009: 114–116). For our project, we decided on five case groups in order to cover diverse perspectives. Blind translation students were asked about their experiences in translation classes as well as their ways of working both in and outside the classroom. Interviews with sighted translation students focussed on their attitudes to mixed groups. (Sighted) translation teachers were questioned about their experiences with blind students in general and mixed groups in particular. With blind translators, the interviewers discussed connections between degree programmes and experiences on the job. Finally, with educational theorists specializing in visual impairment, priority was given to teaching approaches that can be suitable for blind as well as sighted students. From each case group, three or four respondents were interviewed; the total number of respondents was seventeen.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I shall use Risku's 1998 model of translation competence to analyse our interview transcripts. Her general concept of translation can be summarized as follows:

Risku views translation as complex problem solving (1998: 129) and, consequently, translators as experts. [...] Expert competence for Risku involves the social as well as cognitive levels (1998: 15–16). The former comprises the translator's social role(s), powers, and responsibilities; the latter, the personal abilities that enable him or her to act as an expert. Cognitive and social processes are interlinked (e.g. 1998: 25, 51–52). Cognition, which includes emotions (e.g. 1998: 43–44), has both constructive and situative foundations.

(Cynrim/Hagemann/Neu, 2013: 12)

More specifically, Risku's model of translation competence comprises five dimensions:

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<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is largely based on Bülbül et al. (2015: 2–3). A detailed description of how interview guides were drafted, respondents sampled, and interviews carried out and documented can be found in Bülbül et al. (2015: 2–4).

- guiding images of translation (i.e. representations of the purpose of translation, of what we do when we translate),
- macrostrategy formation (i.e. determining the goal of translatorial action; this includes dynamic strategy adaptation in the course of the translation process, strategy verbalization and concretization, and prioritization of competing goals),
- information integration (including the use of previous knowledge and material provided by the client, research, source-text reception and evaluation, and target-text revision),
- planning and decisions (i.e. procedures, including microstrategies, chosen in a specific translation situation),
- and self-organization (including self-management, i.e. modelling and improving the translator's self-awareness as well as the translation process, and co-organization, i.e. integrating the translation process into parallel and/or superordinate frameworks of social action).

(Cynrim/Hagemann/Neu, 2013: 12)

In contrast to enumerative models such as PACTE's, which attempt to isolate distinct sub-competences, Risku's approach is more strongly holistic and therefore well suited to the complexities of both translation and translation teaching situations. Her emphasis on the social aspect of translation is highly relevant to a research question concerning mixed groups of blind and sighted students.

In the following, I shall discuss the results of our interviews from the perspective of Risku's five dimensions of translation competence.

### **3. Guiding Images and Macrostrategy Formation**

Guiding images according to Risku are general representations of what translation is about, whereas macrostrategy formation occurs in a particular translation situation and has close affinities with Vermeer's *skopos* concept, focussing as it does on what a translator wants to achieve with a specific commission (Risku, 1998: 138–139; Vermeer, 2006: 343–346). Since our interviews were not designed to elicit responses based on Risku's model, it is not always clear whether respondents are talking about translation in general or about the various individual texts that they have translated. This is why I have decided to bracket the two dimensions together.

Guiding images are explicitly verbalized by only two respondents. A blind student uses the well-known metaphor of translation as a bridge built between different languages and cultures (Bernd<sup>4</sup>); and a blind translator compares translation, and more specifically the search for words, to a Sudoku game (Tobias). In addition, when blind respondents are asked how they handle the source text when translating, some of their answers shed light on their macrostrategy formation and, by

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<sup>4</sup> Students in our research project decided to give fictitious names to respondents. Names beginning with B were used for blind translation students; with S, for sighted students; with D, for translation teachers; with T, for blind translators; and with P, for educational theorists. For the sake of consistency, I shall use the same names here for referencing respondents' answers. Bülbul et al. (2015: 14–15) includes a full list of names and profiles. It should be noted that both the origin and gender of respondents' fictitious names may diverge from the real ones. Thus, a respondent called Bernd (a German masculine name) will not necessarily be either German or male. In referring to respondents, I shall use the pronoun that goes with the gender of the fictitious name.

extension, on their guiding images. Thus, some respondents say that when translating specialized texts, they will stay as close as possible to the original (Belinda, Bernd, Tobias), but the importance of fluency is also emphasized (Benito, Bernd for non-specialized texts, Tobias), as is the importance of preserving the sense (Tina, Theresa). The fact that some respondents refer to specialized texts, and some explicitly mention differences between various types of source texts (Tobias, Theresa), may be taken as indicating that for these respondents it is the source text that determines their macrostrategy. The guiding image underlying this assumption is presumably reproductive in the widest sense: translation is about reproducing certain features of the original. The translation commission or assignment, while explicitly included as a possible factor in our question about handling the source text, does not figure in any of the respondents' answers.

These results are very similar to what I would expect from sighted students. Anecdotal evidence (from my own teaching experience as well as conversations with colleagues) suggests that even students who have been offered a thorough grounding in Vermeer's skopos theory and/or Holz-Mänttari's theory of translatorial action (1984) may find it quite difficult to clearly distinguish between the function of the target text and that of the source text, and to realize the relevance of translation commissions which require a substantial amount of rewriting. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find a similar source-text orientation for example in some blind FTSK students.

The number of respondents in our project was of course small. Four blind students and three blind professional translators are not a sufficient basis for generalizations. Nor does Theroundtable, a mailing list for blind and low-vision translators and interpreters to which I have subscribed since November 2014, provide much additional relevant information. Moreover, my anecdotal evidence about sighted students is necessarily local and partial. All I can therefore say is that at present I have no grounds for assuming that there are any substantial differences between blind and sighted students as far as guiding images and macrostrategy formation are concerned.

This does not mean, however, that these two dimensions are an area where blind and sighted students cannot benefit from working together. Mixed groups can be turned to good account for example by making the concept of macrostrategy formation more easily accessible. Thus, a mixed group could be given a source text with a significant amount of visual elements (such as a PowerPoint presentation with numerous graphs, or an inaccessible website) and set the task of translating it twice: once for a target audience assumed to be sighted, and once for an audience that includes blind people. This would necessitate forming two quite different macrostrategies.

A text chosen by one of my students for project work provides a good example. The text, published on the citizen media platform GlobalVoices, is entitled "Understanding Southeast Asia in 19 Infographics", and largely consists of jpg and png files, each of which has an introduction comprising 1–3 lines. These brief introductory sections would probably be accessible to blind readers, but the infographics themselves would not. Thus, both blind and sighted readers would learn that "Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. There are also large Muslim communities across the region" (Palatino, 2014), but the jpg file that



follows these introductory lines provides much more information to those who can see it (Figure 1).



Figure 1: ASEAN's Halal Economy (Palatino, 2014).

Blind readers would need to be explicitly told that the infographic, entitled “ASEAN’s Halal Economy”, shows the Muslim populations of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and the corresponding estimated market values (e.g. \$78.5 billion for Indonesia’s 202 million Muslims). In the original html file, the “alt” tag could, and indeed should, have been used to supply this information; but in actual fact, the alternative text in this case only reads “Image from Mcedralin Files”. Thus, readers who cannot see the jpg image will be led to believe that the infographic is about religion only, whereas it really makes a point about the connection between religion and the economy. A macrostrategy geared to the needs of blind readers would aim to remedy this source-text defect.<sup>5</sup>

More generally speaking, while classroom discussions about the needs of a certain target audience can be somewhat speculative – notwithstanding methods such as the one recommended by Nord for identifying addressee profiles (1999) –, having blind students as real-life receivers present in the translation group would enable an immediate and concrete feedback on whether a translation aimed at both sighted and blind readers was suitable for its purpose. Moreover, such an assignment might have the additional advantage of sensitizing sighted students to acces-

<sup>5</sup> Figiel (2015: 196) points out that blind readers can use optical character recognition to access text included in images. However, it would depend on the degree of readers’ interest in the text whether they would consider processing nineteen infographics worth their while. Moreover, OCR would process the words, but it would not necessarily convey the information provided by their visual arrangement in the infographics.

sibility issues. Before deciding on this approach, however, teachers might want to check with their blind students whether they feel comfortable with the prominent role it will assign them.

#### **4. Information Integration and Planning/Decisions**

Information integration plays a more important role in our interviews than guiding images and macrostrategies do. I shall focus on the two most prominent aspects, namely source-text reception and research.

As far as source-text reception is concerned, our interview respondents tend to perceive the text on its own, whereas Risku (1998: 176–177) emphasizes the importance of viewing it from a holistic perspective that includes the macrostrategy chosen for the assignment. In analysing blind respondents' answers, it is useful to distinguish between verbal and visual elements. On the verbal level, the majority of blind students and translators begin by reading the entire text (Belinda, Benito, Bina, Theresa, Tina, Tobias), but one student starts with individual sentences (Bernd). Subsequently some focus on sentences or even words (Bina, Tobias), while others give priority to paragraphs (Benito, Tina), and one says that this depends on the text type (Belinda). This variety does not strike me as substantially different from the approaches taken by many sighted students. If that is the case, then this is a useful finding because it may help sighted teachers not to stereotype blind students. When I discussed our project with colleagues, one of them suggested that blind students would have a more holistic approach to the source text than sighted students; and another, that they would be more adept at noticing details. Similarly, in our interviews, a number of sighted translation teachers and students say that blind students are better at paying attention to, and remembering, the source text (Dirk, Dominik, Silke), that they concentrate better (Sara), and that they have a better ear for style when a text is read aloud (Dominik). All of these hypotheses may well be true for a number of blind students<sup>6</sup>; but sighted teachers will have a greater chance of enabling meaningful learning processes if they respond to students as individuals rather than as representatives of certain categories. This is of course a truism, but one that I find worth remembering in connection with a group as small as that of blind translation students.

The visual level of source-text reception, which includes elements such as illustrations but also complex formatting, is very relevant to mixed groups in so far as this is an aspect where blind students almost always need help and sighted students can arguably benefit from giving them this help. In professional practice, blind translators deal with strongly visual texts in different ways, which range from not accepting such assignments (Theresa) via getting help from a sighted colleague or family member (Tina) to paying sighted friends or colleagues for handling the visual elements (Tobias). One translator moreover says that long experience

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<sup>6</sup> It has been shown that, in comparison with sighted test persons, blind test persons are more skilled at auditory language processing and that they remember more things after hearing them once (Saum-Aldehoff, 2009). However, since these are statistical findings, they do not mean that all blind translation students will necessarily do better at certain tasks than sighted ones.

enables her to guess at the information conveyed by complex layouts such as text associated with a picture or text arranged in columns, and that she therefore often simply needs verification by a sighted person (Tina). Blind students likewise respond differently to texts where the visual dimension is important: one of them expects the teacher to provide suitable descriptions (Benito), while others have had sighted fellow students describe visual elements to them (Bina, Bernd).

Describing visual elements to blind students may seem an obvious solution. However, one blind student points out that fellow students' descriptions of what they see do not always work well (Bernd). In a similar vein, one of the educational theorists says that while sighted students can be sensitized for the needs of blind students, they will still lack the expertise necessary for professional support, and that, moreover, sighted students should not feel they are being used as assistants (Patrick). One of the translation teachers likewise draws attention to the fact that impromptu verbalizations of the visual dimension can prove too challenging for sighted students (Daria). However, she at the same time suggests that, since such verbalizations are actually intersemiotic translations, it might make sense to have students practise this translation form (Daria). And in fact this might also help sighted students to focus on, and think about, the information provided by visual elements, so that they, too, would benefit from being part of a mixed group. In my experience, it is not rare for sighted students to largely ignore the visual dimension when working on a text. The infographics about southeast Asia mentioned above are a case in point. The student who chose this text translated the introductory lines for each image into German but did not explain the infographics. The result is a translation that will only make sense to German readers who understand the English text contained in the infographics – which begs the question of why these readers would need a German translation of the introductory lines. Asking the student for an intersemiotic translation might have helped to counteract this problem. Any difficulties encountered by sighted students in such translation situations can moreover give blind students an opportunity to practise obtaining relevant information from sighted persons.<sup>7</sup>

Another translation teacher reports on a different method successfully implemented in a technical translation course, namely bringing parts of engines to the classroom so that a blind student was able to understand their workings by means of touching them (Daniel). This hands-on method could also benefit sighted students who favour haptic learning. As one of the educational theorists points out, mixed groups will encourage teachers to use a mixed repertoire of methods, which in turn will give different learning types a better chance of achieving their learning needs (Patrick). – In principle, a tactile approach could be used for other visual elements as well; but while tactile graphics do exist (see e.g. Hinton, n. d.; Müller/Seifert/Fischer, 2009: 5–6), they do not seem to be widely available, as neither the blind respondents in our project nor the educational theorists specializing in visual impairment mention them.

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<sup>7</sup> A discussion of the benefits of intersemiotic translation, as well as of the tactile approach described in the first part of the following paragraph, can also be found in Bülbül et al. (2015: 8).



The second aspect of information integration that plays a certain role in our interviews is translation-related research. When asked about this, blind students and translators mention various online and offline dictionaries as well as personal glossaries (Belinda, Benito, Bernd, Theresa, Tina, Tobias). Some respondents also comment on the fact that not all print dictionaries are available in accessible electronic editions (Dirk, Theresa). Two blind students moreover refer vaguely to “internet research” (Belinda, Benito). This may or may not include resources explicitly mentioned by blind translators, such as Linguee, IATE, and EUR-Lex (Theresa, Tina), as well as parallel texts (Theresa). One of the blind translators emphasizes the importance of terminology research, and draws attention to the fact that she needs help for research which involves pictures; her example is a text on farm equipment, where illustrations can help sighted persons to find target-language terms (Tina). The responses given by some blind translators are thus more differentiated and specific than those given by blind students. On the one hand, this is not surprising in view of the fact that professional translators will tend to have a greater breadth and depth of experience than students; on the other, it might also indicate that our student respondents have not learned to reflect on a variety of research methods. In so far as the problem lies in a lack of reflection, both blind and sighted students could benefit from a discussion of various types of resources.

Another point raised by a blind student as well as a sighted translation teacher concerns assessment in the form of a classroom test with limited translation aids. This is the traditional form of translation assessment at FTSK, though other forms have come to the fore in recent years. The student describes a situation where monolingual dictionaries only were allowed. Since accessible monolingual offline dictionaries did not exist and internet access was not available during the test, she was allowed to use a bilingual dictionary, but felt this was somewhat unfair towards her sighted fellow students (Belinda). In the assessment situation outlined by the translation teacher, a blind student was allowed to use an online dictionary because there was no accessible offline dictionary; and the teacher emphasizes that he made the student promise not to carry out any further research online (Dirk). While both of the solutions described are viable, the problem could also be approached from a different perspective. Instead of trying to find the best accessible equivalent to specific print resources, all students could be allowed to use the full range of offline and online resources. Both blind and sighted students could benefit from carrying out research with the resources used in professional practice. Moreover, assessment could take the form of a translation commentary or a portfolio rather than a traditional-style test.<sup>8</sup> This could encourage all students to reflect on and explain their research methods, including any difficulties encountered, and it might help sighted teachers to better understand the conditions under which blind students work.

Risku’s fourth dimension, planning and decisions, comprises the “procedures and modes of production” chosen by the translator in a specific translation situation (1998: 206<sup>9</sup>). Since our interviews did not focus on specific situations, planning

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<sup>8</sup> For this suggestion, see also Bülbül et al. (2015: 11).

<sup>9</sup> All translations from German texts are mine.

and decisions play a very minor role here. However, the issue of CAT tools straddles several of Risku's dimensions, including information integration and planning/decisions. Both translation memories and terminology databases are obviously relevant to information integration; and their use will also affect the translation decisions taken, for instance through segmentation or through matches suggested. Among the blind students interviewed, only one mentions trying out software such as SDL Trados and finding it inaccessible (Belinda); but CAT tools are discussed by two of the blind translators (Tina, Tobias), and figure frequently in the mailing list Theroundtable. Blind translators mostly use Fluency by Western Standard, though Déjà Vu X2 is also accessible (Kungurov, 2016). In addition to the various advantages and disadvantages that CAT tools have for sighted users, they can help blind translators to preserve text formatting; Déjà Vu seems to be particularly effective in this respect (Kungurov, 2016).

What does this mean for the teaching/learning of CAT tools? Focussing on the market leader, SDL Trados, will exclude blind students because its recent versions are not accessible to screen readers, though earlier versions were (Owton/Mileto, 2011). But will sighted students benefit from learning a tool such as Fluency, which has quite a small market share (Tabor, 2013)? I suggest that they may, depending on the learning outcomes we define for our tools courses. If our aim is for students to be able to mechanically use a tool that they are likely to encounter in professional practice, then we will teach SDL Trados to sighted students, and offer blind students Fluency as an alternative option. However, if we would like students to understand the working principles of CAT tools, and to be able to familiarize themselves with all such tools that they may be required to use, it could make sense to start by teaching a less well-known tool such as Fluency, and subsequently encourage students to experiment with other tools on the basis of what they have learned. Mixed groups can thus raise fundamental questions about what translation teaching is intended to achieve.

## **5. Self-organization**

The dimension of self-organization relates to the way in which translators form "flexible action schemata" (Risku, 1998: 228). It includes, on the one hand, aspects such as self-reflectiveness and responsibility and, on the other, co-organization, i.e. the social, cooperative domain.

In her discussion of self-organization, Risku focusses on how it affects translation as complex problem solving. However, for our interviews, this dimension also lends itself to analysing respondents' attitudes on a more general level. Two interviews with blind students are particularly pertinent here. When asked about her general experiences in translation classes, one student says that she usually tries to handle any problems, for example with formatting, herself, and in most cases will manage to find a solution without asking the teacher for help (Belinda). When faced with a teacher who worked with print texts and failed to send electronic versions as promised, she at one point decided to do her own scanning rather than wait for the teacher to come through with the files (Belinda). Another blind student, by contrast, says that if he receives a text as an image file, he will expect the teacher

or client to send him a text file, and that a simple request will suffice for the file to be provided (Benito). This is the same student who, as mentioned earlier, would look to the teacher to describe visual elements in the source text for him even if this meant keeping the rest of the group idly waiting.

Belinda's and Benito's attitudes are clearly quite different. From one perspective, Benito is of course right in expecting others to meet his needs. For instance, sighted teachers should certainly be able to provide text files to blind students. However, as Belinda points out, all teachers are not the same, which is why it makes sense for students to show some flexibility. With her strong sense of self-responsibility, Belinda may have a better chance of successfully integrating herself into the translation market than Benito (who, among our blind respondents, seems to come closest to what Figiel [2015: 202] calls "entitlement mentality"). In this connection, it is also noteworthy that Belinda recommends teachers not to pamper blind students:

In my opinion, if teachers know that they'll have a blind student in a class, they should try and find out what blind people can be expected to be able to do, because this can sometimes be a problem. I think that blind students should get all the support they need, and they still don't always; but unfortunately there is also the other extreme. Blind students are sometimes mollicoddled; if they take a brief look<sup>10</sup> at something and then tell the teacher they can't do it, the teacher will say they needn't do it.

Two blind students I have worked with may illustrate this issue. One of them told me that the online learning platform I use, ILIAS, was not accessible; I therefore sent her all files and other information by e-mail. The other, by contrast, said that while ILIAS was not very user-friendly for a blind person, she felt sufficiently able to handle it. The two students may have used different screen readers, but since "techniques that work for one screen reader almost always work in other screen readers" (WebAIM, 2014), it seems more likely that the second student was simply more successful in familiarizing herself with ILIAS than the first.

Different degrees of self-responsibility are of course not a phenomenon limited to blind students. In fact, I have had sighted students telling me that it was impossible to accomplish certain tasks in ILIAS; and while in some cases this was indeed a problem with ILIAS, in others it was not. This is why self-organization is a relevant topic for mixed groups. When students, whether blind or sighted, report that they cannot do something they have been asked to do, it makes sense to have them specify the details. For a student (or, for that matter, a teacher) to find something impossible may mean that it is actually impossible; but it may also mean no more than that it would take a disproportionately long time and is therefore a low priority, or that the solution is less than self-evident, or that the student (or teacher) was in no mood to try. Discussing the problem may point the way towards an appropriate solution.

The examples of self-organization I have so far mentioned relate to students' self-responsibility but also to the social contexts in which their learning processes take place, and therefore to co-organization within the university. The social con-

<sup>10</sup> As Kellett Bidoli points out (2003: 7), visual metaphors such as *take a look* are frequently used by blind as well as sighted persons.

texts of the translation market are another aspect of co-organization. I have already touched upon some relevant cases, such as blind students acting as real-life receivers of their sighted fellow students' translations, and blind translators working with sighted persons to handle visual elements in source texts. CAT tools are also pertinent to co-organization because, as blind translators point out, agencies often require translators to work with such tools (Theresa, Tina, Tobias).

Administrative aspects such as deadlines and file formats are also relevant to both teaching/learning and the translation market.<sup>11</sup> There is a widespread consensus in our interviews as well as in secondary literature that accessible text files should be provided to blind students in good time (e.g. Belinda, Daniel, Paula, Silke, Tina; Figiel, 2015: 199–200, ONCE, [2001]: 23). One of the educational theorists draws attention to the fact that this applies not only to texts chosen by teachers but also to files produced by students (Paula; see also Kellett Bidoli, 2003: 191). Another emphasizes that formatting details need to be taken into account; for instance, not all pdf files are equally accessible (Patrick). Since practising translators need to be able to meet deadlines and supply files in the format requested by the client, the presence of blind students in a group can provide an opportunity for sighted students to realize the importance of time management and a high degree of IT competence.

Another, much more fundamental issue relating to co-organization is whether or not blind and sighted persons feel at ease working together. The blind students interviewed report positive experiences with group work (Belinda, Benito, Bernd, Bina). The blind translators do not mention any specific problems either (Theresa, Tina, Tobias). However, two sighted students take a somewhat different position. One says that she does not feel comfortable working with blind students because she does not know how to behave towards them (Sophia). The other says that she initially found it difficult to talk to a blind student but grew used to it in the course of time (Silke). An educational theorist explains that some behaviour patterns resulting from blind students' inability to perceive visual cues may adversely affect social interaction in mixed teams (Patrick). He suggests that this may also be relevant for translation situations in so far as a client needs to have trust in the translator, and unusual behaviour will undermine trust (Patrick). At a somewhat different level, one of the translation teachers thinks that some clients may simply be prejudiced against blind translators (Daniel). A blind translator puts it more drastically in a post to Theroundtable: "having to reveal the fact that we are blind [...] would be extremely detrimental to our reputation." (Alexandra, 2016)

What are the implications of this issue for mixed groups? A sighted translation teacher argues that such groups provide a good chance for sighted students to practise cooperation (Dominik). On the one hand, this is perfectly true; on the other, sighted students will only take this chance if they can overcome the fear of dealing with an unfamiliar situation (Dirk). Group work with blind and sighted students can be productive, but it can also go very wrong (Dirk). Thus, I have seen mixed teams in which sighted students studiously ignored a blind fellow student. The solution proposed by an educational theorist is to practise communication in social situations, including the way students project themselves and the effect this has on

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<sup>11</sup> For these aspects, see also Bülbul et al. (2015: 10).

others (Patrick). In a similar vein, a translation teacher suggests that it could be useful for blind as well as sighted students to learn how to control their posture and voice in order to leave a good impression (Daria). More specifically, a blind translator says she would have liked to be taught about how to communicate with an agency (Tina); and this, too, is something from which both blind and sighted students could benefit. Practising communication might also help to address the problem of low self-esteem discussed by Figiel (2015: 204).

The fact that the ways in which we communicate are culturally specific may make communication practice even more relevant. For instance, I have met a number of students from subsaharan Africa who have consistently avoided eye contact when talking to me. This seems to be a sign of respect in their cultures (Grossman, 2004: 162, 169; Mbele, 2005: 40–41), but in Germany, it would more likely be interpreted as a sign of insincerity, insecurity, or perhaps boredom. Moreover, we should not assume that it is only blind or international students who face this sort of problem, since local (in my case: German) students planning to study or work abroad may well find themselves in a similar situation. It could therefore make sense to have mixed groups discuss and practise professional communication on both the verbal and nonverbal levels in a secure classroom environment.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, Risku's model of translation competence has proved a useful theoretical basis for my analysis. Its comprehensiveness means that it can cover a wide range of issues relevant to mixed groups. A good example is the dimension of information integration, and more specifically the element of source-text reception. This can easily accommodate visual elements such as illustrations and complex formatting, which would be somewhat more difficult to integrate into a model like, say, PACTE's (2003: 58–59). Moreover, since social factors play a prominent role in Risku's model, for instance in the dimension of self-organization and co-organization, it can also take account of the dynamics of social interaction in both the classroom and the translation market.

Asking how translation classes can be organized so that both blind and sighted students benefit from working in mixed groups involves focussing on the opportunities that such groups offer, rather than on the (real or potential) downside. However, I do not wish to suggest that no downside exists. I have mentioned possible problems such as sighted students providing inadequate intersemiotic translations or group work going wrong. Other examples from our interviews include a sighted student saying that when the presence of blind students slows the class down, this will interfere with her concentration on the text (Sophia), and a translation teacher reporting that he did not know how best to support a blind student in his class because he received no feedback from her (Daniel). However, a detailed discussion of problems arising in mixed groups would require a different research question from the one I have asked here.

My analysis has, I hope, shown that exploring opportunities involves considerably more than simply giving blind students the support they need in the form of accessible files, etc. Opportunities for mixed groups can mean rethinking our



teaching approaches. In some cases, blind students may act as catalysts for innovations that could, or would, have been introduced anyway; in others, their presence may be essential to developing new ideas. To give an example from my own faculty, while new forms of translation assessment are being used by a number of teachers without the incentive of mixed groups, it is much rarer for intersemiotic translation to be practised. Rethinking our approaches may affect various aspects of the curricular design process as set out by Kelly (2005: 3), including learning outcomes, course content and structure, teaching and learning activities, and assessment activities. Both the original research project I carried out with students (Bülbül et al., 2015) and my present analysis of interview protocols suggest that mutual benefit is a realistic possibility.

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