

F.I.T. Closet Translation Tool and Written Reflection

by

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Abstract

My Honors Project focused on creating a translation tool for the volunteers at the F.I.T. Closet in Manhattan to utilize when helping Spanish-speaking shoppers. Using my semester's experience volunteering as a Spanish interpreter at the F.I.T. Closet (during Fall 2022), collaborating with the coordinator, the English-speaking volunteers, and Spanish-speaking shoppers at the F.I.T. Closet, and researching and comparing similar materials, I created translations of Spanish words and phrases that would facilitate communication for these different linguistic groups. In a written response, I give background information about the project, detail what I learned while volunteering at the F.I.T. Closet, reflect on how my experience at the F.I.T. Closet shaped my decisions in the production of the translation tool, explain how my research on other materials influenced the design of the tool, consider some of the difficulties during the process, and share what I have discovered during the community-based learning experience.

Background

As I considered what to do for my Honors Project, I was interested in utilizing the skills I had been developing in my Spanish minor, specifically in relation to translation. In the spring of 2022, I took SPAN 575 Intro to Translation. This class challenged me to think more deeply about how closely language and culture are intertwined, and it revealed to me that translating and interpreting are immensely difficult - yet very powerful and necessary - disciplines. Because of how thoroughly I enjoyed this class, I decided to enroll in SPAN 774 Community Translation and Interpreting in the fall of 2022 despite not needing any more credits to complete my Spanish minor; I had found translation so interesting, and I was eager to learn more. Dr. Kanost was teaching the course, so I reached out to her. Together, we brainstormed different possibilities for my Honors Project. We ultimately determined that volunteering as a Spanish-speaking volunteer at USD 263's F.I.T. Closet, an organization that provides clothing, school supplies, and toiletries for free to low-income families in the Manhattan School District, could serve as a launching point for further developing my translation skills and considering future research.

I began volunteering at the F.I.T. Closet on Monday nights from 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m., beginning on August 15, 2022 and ending on February 6, 2023. During my time at the F.I.T. Closet, I made observations about the challenges of volunteering as an interpreter as well as the current system in place at the F.I.T. Closet to support Spanish-speaking shoppers. I learned about the difficulty of speaking in a foreign language over the phone as it is harder to hear, and you are unable to read visual cues that aid in understanding during an in-person conversation. Additionally, I discovered that practicing professional interpreting sessions in the classroom was very different from offering interpretive services in a volunteer position. In class, we knew the context of the situation we were practicing in, and we role-played the conversation from start to

finish. Volunteering at the F.I.T. Closet, the English-speaking volunteer and the Spanish-speaking shoppers often had already attempted to begin a conversation and ask questions, sometimes not related to the same topic at all. As I went into these conversations, I had to figure out what was each party's concern and how I could address it.

Another difficulty I noted was trying to determine when to offer to speak Spanish. Many of the clients did not know that I was able to speak Spanish unless they spoke Spanish first themselves and then were not able to be understood by the English-speaking volunteers; then I would be sought out and I could speak Spanish with the shoppers. We also did not know the preferred language of any of the shoppers as we had no documentation of this. I also did not want to assume the language anyone spoke because of their appearance, and I thought many shoppers may either want to practice their English abilities or could perhaps communicate better in English than I could in Spanish. I convened once again with Dr. Kanost to voice what I had been finding challenging, and we considered ways to remedy these issues.

Near the end of the fall semester, I met with the F.I.T. Closet coordinator to discuss some of my observations and to offer potential suggestions to best serve the Spanish-speaking shoppers going forward after thinking through solutions with Dr. Kanost. I mentioned to the coordinator that, in the future, any volunteer that is able to speak Spanish could wear a lanyard with the phrase "Hablo español" - "I speak Spanish" - to indicate to shoppers that they are able to speak to them in Spanish if they desire to be helped in that way. This would eliminate some of the awkwardness of assuming people's preferred language, and it would prevent limiting the shoppers to only speaking in Spanish if they wanted to practice their English abilities; wearing the lanyard provides an opportunity for the shopper to initiate a Spanish conversation if they would prefer it. I also discussed with the coordinator the possibility of finding a way to

document the shoppers' native or preferred language so that English-speaking volunteers could be more prepared for some of the linguistic challenges they will have that shift. Additionally, Spanish-speaking volunteers would have another way of knowing which clients would like to be spoken to in Spanish during their visit to the F.I.T. Closet. We considered having families indicate this when they register with the F.I.T. Closet, which they must do before they can utilize its resources.

One of the final suggestions I offered was creating some kind of tool that contained some of the words and phrases volunteers use regularly translated into Spanish. I got this idea after volunteering one night when one of the other volunteers asked me how to say "door" in Spanish. She was placing a bag of toiletries near the door for a family and wanted to indicate where she was putting them. I realized that having such a resource could be very helpful. The coordinator agreed, and she sent out an email asking volunteers their most commonly used words and phrases that they would like to have a translation of. I met once again with Dr. Kanost, and we decided that creating this tool would be a great option for my Honors Project.

Creating the Translation Tool

There were many factors I had to consider when making the translation tool. I wanted to have words and phrases that were genuinely useful for the English-speaking volunteers and Spanish-speaking shoppers at the F.I.T. Closet, and getting suggestions for words and phrases from the volunteers at the F.I.T. Closet helped in accomplishing this. However, I also had to consider that many of the volunteers are probably not familiar with the pronunciation of Spanish words, so simply having the translated phrases would probably not be sufficient. Spanish-speaking shoppers and English-speaking volunteers could look at the translated phrases

together and attempt to understand what the other was wanting to communicate, but some of the Spanish-speaking shoppers are illiterate. To solve these potential problems, I made two versions of the translation tool, one with a pronunciation guide – which utilized familiar English words and sound segments rather than the IPA as many people do not have experience using it - and one without; I also included a QR link to videos of me pronouncing the Spanish phrases and words on both versions. The QR link would enable English-speaking volunteers to listen to and practice the correct pronunciation if they desire additional help, and it could be utilized by the illiterate Spanish-speaking shoppers if the volunteers' pronunciation is still difficult to understand. I also added cartoon images to provide a visual reference for the English-speaking volunteer and Spanish-speaking shopper to look at in order to have a shared idea to center their conversation on. Some of the volunteers also sent in questions that they would like to know the translation of in Spanish, so I also translated some potential responses the shoppers may give. This way, the volunteers could ask questions and understand the answer, too.

In order to think about the organization and content of my translation tool, I referenced other infographics and glossaries. Many of the glossaries I looked at, such as the California Department of Social Services English-Spanish Glossary, included translated terms and phrases, but it only provided text. There were no questions or complete sentences translated. This formatting fits the medium of a glossary, but for the purposes of my tool, some of my entries would have to be more extensive. I also desired to include some visuals in addition to text.

The various infographics I looked at incorporated both Spanish and English in different ways. The infographic titled “El sodio puede ser engañoso,” made by The American Heart Association, had Spanish and English on it, but there was only one short English paragraph at the top. Apart from that, the infographic was all in Spanish. The English paragraph seemed to me a

general summary statement about the topic of the infographic, but it did not convey all the information that was written in Spanish. For my translation tool, I wanted to have equal amounts of Spanish and English text and translation to avoid privileging one language over the other. An additional infographic that I found had a version completely in English, “What are viral vector vaccines and how do they work?,” and a version completely in Spanish “¿Qué son las vacunas de vectores virales y cómo funcionan?,” and these infographics were created by Americares. This was more similar to what I thought would be most beneficial for my tool, but instead of having separate copies, I thought having the English and Spanish text on the same page would be most convenient for the F.I.T. Closet volunteers and shoppers to use.

Both of the infographics I examined employed visuals to help communicate the ideas within the text. “El sodio puede ser engañoso” had images close to the text in order to illustrate that the specific visual and the blurb of text were related while “What are viral vector vaccines and how do they work?” and “¿Qué son las vacunas de vectores virales y cómo funcionan?” used bold lines to directly connect a piece of text to a visual. In my translation tool, I thought that having the images close to the text, but not having a direct signifier like a line, would work best; I worried that adding lines or some other kind of element could make the pages of the tool feel too crowded with some of the pages having quite a bit of text on them already.

Experiencing Difficulties

While creating the translation tool, there were a few difficulties that I encountered as I continued making progress. I wanted to involve the F.I.T. Closet volunteers and shoppers in the creation of the tool as much as possible, but I did not receive as much feedback from these groups as I was anticipating. In the early stages of drafting the tool, I took a printed version to

the F.I.T. Closet on a Monday night to ask volunteers and some Spanish-speaking shoppers for their thoughts and suggestions, but they did not have much input to give. I think if I had been able to send a draft beforehand to some of the volunteers and shoppers and given them ample time to view the draft and consider what they may like to see changed, I could have received more feedback. On the Monday night I visited, there also were supposed to be four Spanish-speaking shoppers. However, only one showed up to their appointment, so I was only able to consult one Spanish-speaking shopper. Some of the other individuals may have had a different perspective or more feedback to offer.

Another challenge was figuring out how to give the F.I.T Closet volunteers and shoppers access to the recordings of the pronunciations of the words and phrases on the tool. One volunteer suggested purchasing a book that had a recording device built into it. I was hesitant to do this because I thought the batteries could potentially die, or the book could be damaged, perhaps erasing the recordings and making the tool not as accessible. Instead, we decided that attaching a QR code to the pages with links to YouTube videos seemed the most efficient. However, many of the QR code generators require yearly subscriptions, and there are certain QR codes that expire after a certain amount of time passes. I was able to find a QR code generator that provided a free static QR code - meaning the QR code would not expire or change - but it only offered one for free. I used this one free QR code, placed it towards the beginning of the translation tool, and linked it to the YouTube channel that has all the recorded pronunciations on it. The video titles are the names of the phrases or title sections within the tool so that it would be easy for the volunteers and shoppers to navigate to which specific video they need.

Reflection

One of the biggest things I learned in the course of completing this project was how to observe and think critically. Seeking to understand the ways in which the F.I.T. Closet operated and the needs of the Spanish-speaking shoppers helped me to think about areas that could be improved in the F.I.T. Closet's service. I was reminded of the importance of getting to know an organization and the people within it before suggesting changes or alterations; having this kind of familiarity often creates the most effective kinds of help. In addition, I also developed my ability to work collaboratively with others and have productive conversations. Depending on the other volunteers during my shift and talking with the F.I.T. Closet coordinator about potential ways to improve the organization increased my cooperation skills along with my communication skills.

Spending time at the F.I.T. Closet also enabled me to learn more about the linguistic demographic of the students and families in the Manhattan School District as well as the resources available to them. There were families who were not Spanish-speaking or English-speaking, but they had few linguistic resources to facilitate their use of the F.I.T. Closet. Through previous research and experience in my SPAN 774 class, I discovered that there are many students and families from Afghanistan in the Manhattan schools, but the means for the parents and school staff to communicate with one another is extremely limited. My experience at the F.I.T. Closet confirmed that there is a great need for increased resources for the variety of the families in Manhattan who are not able to speak English.

Through my Honors Project, I also gained more knowledge about community-based learning. Before my Honors Project and taking SPAN 774, I had not intentionally participated in a community-based learning experience. It often feels easier for me to see and gauge my growth and development through completing assignments, but the community-based learning experience

at the F.I.T. Closet required me to trust that the time I was investing and the experience I was garnering would cultivate skills and knowledge that would prove useful. In the introduction to *Language Beyond the Classroom: A Guide to Community- Based Learning for World Language Programs*, Jann Purdy says that the community engagement that comes through community-based learning often results in “satisfaction of purposeful work in the community,” increased “impact on student’s lives,” “the effectiveness of service learning on cultural literacy,” and the students’ “own discoveries about language acquisition and culture” (Purdy 2). These kinds of results are often hard to measure, but I believe I experienced results similar to these because of my time working with and serving the F.I.T. Closet. Engaging with the community at the F.I.T. Closet showed me the need for individuals who are able to bridge the gap between languages and who possess the empathy and open-mindedness that often comes with learning another language; this discovery encouraged me to apply myself more diligently to the study of Spanish. My experience demonstrated to me that the knowledge students acquire in the classroom equips them to be actively involved in their community - and it should drive them to do so - and this engagement with the public can help students to gain knowledge that they may not build in the classroom context.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my Honors Project gave me the opportunity to practice both interpreting and translating Spanish, showed me some of the perspectives and experiences of those who do not speak English in the Manhattan, revealed to me the value of working collectively with the community, and allowed me to think about practical, beneficial ways to apply my skills. I know that the principles I learned and the abilities I developed through my Honors Project will prove immensely applicable in my future academic and professional endeavors.

Works Cited

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