

Spanish Network Mentoring Pilot Scheme

Sarah Griffin-Mason, 2011 (revised JM)

When I first started work as a translator in Montevideo, Uruguay, I was trained up in-house by the InterPress Service and for the first six months everything I produced was checked over by other translators and editors, taking me on a steep learning curve that helped iron out many of my personal translation foibles.

Today's translation market offers few opportunities of this kind for inexperienced translators and many young translators complete a post-graduate degree to face the Catch 22 situation of their lack of experience barring them from getting experience.

In response to the repeated cries of frustration from less experienced members, the Spanish Network decided to dedicate some dormant network funds to the greater good by funding a Pilot Mentoring Scheme.

Individual mentoring schemes had been tried before in ITI history but were no longer up and running by the time I joined six years ago. Previous efforts had culminated in ITI's superb PSG and Business Orientation schemes run regularly each year by experienced members for a set number of ITI newcomers.

We wanted to be certain that we would be meeting a need and plugging a hole without duplicating anything already on offer, so we polled potential Mentors and Mentees on the Spanish Network to find out what type of mentoring they wanted and what types of Mentors we could offer.

Our initial survey elicited 15 responses from potential candidates on each side of the relationship.

All but one of the Mentees were interested in specific advice and guidance on a specialist subject; most wanted revision and advice on sections of their own general translations; and around half wanted general professional advice. The leading specialisms requested were: Technical, Legal and Medical, with some interest expressed in Business and Financial translation.

The overriding concern of the new translators was: "Is my work good enough for me to compete as a professional and receive a decent fee?"

Potential Mentors were required to be either MITIs or have worked professionally in a specialist area of interest to Mentees for more than five years. All of our Mentor respondents stated that they were happy to offer general professional advice; about two-thirds were happy to offer revision and editing; and around a third could provide a desirable specialism to Mentees.

Half of the potential Mentees wanted an initial arrangement that would run for 6 months, but around a third would have liked a full year. Most were happy to work on the basis of translations of around 1,000 words per month.

After much discussion, our committee decided we would avoid offering advice on the professional aspects of translation covered by the Orientation Course and the PSG Course, concentrating instead on the provision of one-to-one feedback on the Mentee's work.

Knowing that good translators are often very busy people, we decided that Mentors should be paid a professional rate of £30 per hour for their time and that network funds would subsidise half the cost to Mentees.

Our call for Mentors and Mentees in October attracted a great deal of interest and we kicked off our pilot with a select group of five trial pairs in November.

Operating on the principle that 'simple is best', we asked the Mentors to find six texts of up to 1,000 words that they had already translated professionally and were now in the public domain, as these would, by definition, be 'fit for purpose' texts. The Mentor and Mentee were provided with basic guidance documents on etiquette and the parameters for the relationship.

The pace of work is driven by the schedules of individual pairs of Mentors and Mentees, on the basis of roughly one session per month over six months. The main guideline is that the Mentor will spend no more than one hour examining the most pertinent aspects of the Mentee's work and will then provide feedback in a way that suits both parties – in most cases this has been by e-mail but some have skyped.

A quick check-up at the half-way point in early March showed that all the pairs were progressing well, having refined some initial issues with time management and the boundaries of support to be provided by the Mentor. Everyone involved in the scheme gave positive feedback on the experience and I think what they say speaks for itself:

"I have found the mentoring scheme run by the ITI Spanish network invaluable from two points of view: [it] offers me the chance to get very sound advice on my translation skills [and] helps me prepare in a constructive and safe environment when planning to branch out into what may be a lucrative niche... I genuinely believe that there has been a gap in the translator training market here; ITI SpanNet has spotted it and it could perhaps be beneficially exported to other ITI interest groups."
(Peter Cummings - Mentee)

"[My Mentor] has really gone out of her way to find texts that I need and to provide me with the feedback I was looking for. She has probably done far more than necessary to tailor the experience to my needs, and I can honestly say that I have really learnt such a lot from her. She has really let me capitalise [...] on her legal experience."
(Jillian Jones - Mentor)

The Mentors were also full of ideas on how a similar scheme could be extended to more experienced members, helping them to develop a new specialism or build up translation partnerships or revision pairings with other experienced colleagues.

This type of enhanced informal mentoring is a flexible tool that that can be used to provide a hand-up to new translators or help more experienced members to hone up on higher skills and knowledge.

A simple, discrete project like this could easily be rolled out by any of the other ITI subject or language networks with a minimum of effort, and when our Spanish Network Mentoring Pilot Scheme is completed and evaluated in June we should have a nice neat little pilot package ready for the rest of ITI to use – so watch this space!

If you have any comments or would like any further information on the mentoring scheme, please contact sarah@griffin-mason.com.