1. Introduction

Translations as products are the result of who translators are and how and where they work. This is, in a nutshell, the idea behind the sociological turn that developed in the field of Translation Studies in the 1980s, when translation started to be seen as a social practice (Berneking, 2017; Zheng, 2017; see also Kiraly, 2005). This entailed a shift in focus from the text to the agents of translation and the context where the translation process takes place. In the audiovisual translation (AVT) field, there are not many studies adopting a sociological stance (see Pavesi & Perego, 2008; Perego & Pavesi, 2006 on the sociological profiling of film translators in Italy; but see e.g., Gentile, 2013; Katan, 2011 focusing on translators and/or interpreters). This approach however is crucial to the understanding of the field itself and to the development of new norms, theories, recommendations and training perspectives.

In this chapter, we will give an account of a study conducted within the EU project ADLAB PRO focusing on the professional audio describer.1 The audio describer, or describer, is a special type of audiovisual translator catering for the translation of visual elements into words for the benefit of people with sight loss (PSL). When the visual signs of any audiovisual product are translated into aural verbal signs, the result is audio description (AD), a narrated text delivered aurally that accompanies PSL in the access to semiotically complex products (Fryer, 2016; Perego, 2014; Remael et al., 2015; Snyder, 2007, 2014).

Although AD is being produced – unevenly – in several countries (ADLAB, 2012; Maszerowska et al., 2014), outside the inner, professional circles, little is known about who audio describers are, nor whether, where, for how long and how they have received training (for a recent account see ADLAB PRO, 2017a; Chmiel & Mazur, 2017). Drawing from a project report (ADLAB PRO, 2017b), we will outline the social context of European audio describers. This will include the educational and professional setting they come from, their interactions and relationships with each other and with users, and the context where ADs develop. We will also show how crucial it is to carefully prepare the building blocks before running an effective training course. After briefly illustrating the ADLAB PRO project, we will describe the
Elisa Perego

study and its methodology. We will give an account of the survey questionnaire used to gather the data and we will analyse results using descriptive statistics. We will offer a demographic picture of the sampled AD professionals and focus on their experience, training and working habits; on their educational and professional origins and on the way in which they interact with peers and with end-users. We will also illustrate how they improve their skills and competences and what AD production stages they practice more often. These factors have never been researched before in the AD field, but they are essential to draw conclusions regarding ways of improving training and practice in this flourishing and dynamic subfield of AVT.

2. The ADLAB PRO project and the study

The study that will be presented was developed as part of the EU project ADLAB PRO (Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile, 2016–2019, www.adlabpro.eu), which focused on the definition of the AD professional, on the creation of a course curriculum and of training materials.

The project work was carried out through the synergy of educational and non-educational partners with the aim of delineating a professional profile that could meet multiple market needs as well as creating a flexible course curriculum capable of training future AD experts effectively. The academic partners in the project were the University of Trieste (Italy) acting as leader, the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and the Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland). The non-academic partners included Utopian Voices, a private UK company supplying high-quality AD, training, research and data analysis in the field of AVT; Soundfocus, an audio post-production studio specialised in media accessibility and responsible for all major AD projects in The Netherlands; RTV Slovenija, the national public radio and TV station; the Royal National Institute for the Blind, a UK charity for the blind.

The project was organised into six activities, each with its own tangible result or “Intellectual Output” (IO). As a result of these activities, ADLAB PRO was able to produce a snapshot of current AD training practices in Europe (IO1), as well as profiling the AD professional, with a list of required skills and competences (IO2). ADLAB PRO also delineated a course curriculum based on different types of AD including screen AD, AD of dynamic performances and events, recorded AD for static arts and environments, AD integrated in revoiced translation modes, AD for new audiences and AD interacting with new technologies (IO3). In addition, the project created open, free, modular and fully customisable training materials (IO4) based on continuous internal and external evaluation and testing (IO5) (see also Taylor and Perego in this volume). The project also looked at the accreditation of the educational components for both academic and vocational scenarios through the attribution of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) and ECVETS (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) to each of the six modules constituting the course, i.e.:

- module 1: general introduction, 6 ECTS | 6 ECVETS;
- module 2: screen AD, 6 ECTS | 6 ECVETS;
- module 3: AD of live events, 6 ECTS | 6 ECVETS;
- module 4: AD for static arts and environments, 6 ECTS | 6 ECVETS;
- module 5: additional services, 3 ECTS | 3 ECVETS;
- module 6: additional technical issues, developments and change, 3 ECTS | 3 ECVETS.

Besides directly affecting higher education as well as trainees interested in AD and the AVT market, the results of ADLAB PRO are expected to have a long-term impact on a wide
The audio description professional

spectrum of potential beneficiaries of the ADs that will be produced by the new AD professionals. These include the blind and visually impaired communities and more generally, a wide array of persons with specific needs who might find it easier to listen to rather than to watch or read audiovisual information.

The study presented in this chapter outlines part of the activities of IO2 (Audio description professional: Profile definition). IO2 had the aim of setting out the profile, skills and competences of the AD professional and describing the social context describers come from and live in. Data derived from IO2 through a survey questionnaire addressed to AD professionals served as a key for the definition of the course curriculum (ADLAB PRO, 2018a) and the creation of the training materials (ADLAB PRO, 2107b).

3. The survey questionnaire

Most IO2 activities revolved around the construction and distribution of a survey questionnaire as the privileged research technique for collecting the information relevant to the objectives of the IO. The survey questionnaire (ADLAB PRO, 2017b; www.adlabpro.eu/results/intellectual-outputs/ for a complete version in all project languages) was meant primarily for distribution in all project partner countries and was designed for three categories of respondents: professional audio describers, AD users and AD providers. These were, in fact, the categories of respondents that could provide the most useful feedback on the gaps to fill and on the elements to be emphasised in future training. They were all crucial purveyors of what is currently missing but needed in AD training and we believed they could provide useful information regarding the most difficult, undervalued and critical aspects of AD to be considered when designing an AD course curriculum.

The survey questionnaire was organised into four sections. The general section, addressed to all respondents, included a brief introduction to the project and to the questionnaire as well as the terms of participation, instructions on the compilation of the questionnaire and demographic questions. Each of the remaining three sections was designed for a specific respondent category. The section for audio describers was designed to elicit information on their range of activity; on their educational and training background; on the skills and competences they believe the AD professional needs; on the status of AD and on the professional circle where AD professionals operate. The section of the questionnaire for AD users was designed to gather information on their AD experience, on their view regarding the work of the audio describer and on their main sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in relation to the provision and quality of the ADs they are exposed to. The section for service providers was intended to collect information on their activities and on the skills and competences that, according to them, the AD professional needs.

The questionnaire drew from the literature on AD and accessibility (e.g., Díaz Cintas et al., 2007, 2010; Maszerowska et al., 2014; Orero, 2008; Perego, 2014; Remael et al., 2012; Snyder, 2007), didactics and course design (Beetham, 2013; Kiraly, 2005; Krejtz et al., 2012; Matamala & Orero, 2007; Orero, 2005; Remael & Vercauteren, 2007; Snyder, 2007, 2014), empirical research in the fields of AVT and AD (ADLAB, 2013; Bogucki, 2013; Chmiel & Mazur, 2012, 2017; Perego, 2016a, 2016b; Hutchinson, 2017) and questionnaire development (Wyse, 2012; Rea & Parker, 2005).

AD guidelines (Rai et al., 2010; Remael et al., 2015) as well as project results (ADLAB PRO, 2017a; Chmiel & Mazur, 2017) were also consulted. This enabled us to take into account where – in theory – the gaps in training reside and to look for the skills and competences still to be taught or emphasised in a future course curriculum (ADLAB PRO, 2018a). We were also
able to gauge expectations of both AD professionals and users in a constantly evolving market as well as pedagogical and didactic paradigms (Beetham, 2013; Kiraly, 2005).

We designed a usable survey questionnaire for non-academics and also adapted its language and structure for PSL. We avoided jargon from the fields of AVT, linguistics and narratology to suit the language of all respondents. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and later translated into all the project languages (Italian, Polish, Spanish and Slovene; Dutch was used only for the user section of the questionnaire) to increase the number of respondents.

We distributed the questionnaire online and used the Web Survey Creator platform which ensured the creation of accessible pages for blind respondents thanks to ARIA (Accessible Rich Internet Applications) tags and links for assistive technologies such as JAWS (Job Access With Speech).

The protocol for the questionnaire distribution and ethical matters were discussed with and approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Trieste, which was the project coordinator. The questionnaire was distributed as an anonymous survey, sending respondents a link via email or sharing the link via social media. The questionnaire was distributed between the 4th July 2017 and the 17th August 2017, showing a higher response rate during the first week following its release. The overall number of completed responses was 183. Sixty-five respondents were audio describers, 100 AD users and 18 AD providers.

In the following sections, we will focus only on the responses of the audio describers (N = 65) and we will discuss their effect in determining the training offering developed by the project.

Results reflect the European context and cannot be generalised. The lack of responses from non-EU countries, including the United States where AD was initiated (Snyder, 2007, 2014) and where many professionals are currently working, simply reflects the scope of the ADLAB PRO project and emphasises the need for future investigations outside Europe.

4. Who are the European audio describers?

The analysis of the demographic data offered an interesting snapshot of who the EU audio describers are today, in terms of age group and gender, country they come from and language they speak, work experience as well as training and professional background.

Overall, we gathered responses from a slightly feminised group (66% female professionals), with no sight loss, mostly falling into the 30 to 60 year-old age group (mean age = 45.5, mode = 55). Most respondents are trained and paid workers, suggesting that only a few agree to audio describe if they are not professionally involved in this activity.

Data suggest, or rather confirm (EBU, 2016; Remael & Vercauteren, 2010), that there are some European countries where AD is most practiced (the UK and Spain) and these are the countries where legislation favouring accessible AVT has been introduced and implemented for a while now. Data also show that most respondents have been involved in professional AD activity for a timespan that ranges from 1 to a maximum of 15 years. This shows that in Europe AD is not yet a long-established AVT practice. The number of hours of AD (over 300 and over 1000 for a small minority) produced by approximately half of the sample suggests an intense activity, possibly resulting from a flourishing market especially in some sectors.

The age of the survey-takers was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>71–80</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61–70</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–60</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The mean age of most respondents (45.5 years old) seems to indicate that the established group of describers in EU comprises professionals who have received training and have been practicing for some time. This seems to suggest that they have gained experience, autonomy and specialised competences over time and may be considered “professional” (Katan, 2011). The low percentage of young (20–30 year old) describers might be attributed to the fact that they are still receiving training. Most describers were fully sighted, two were partially sighted and one totally blind.

Respondents were mainly European (92.3%) from the United Kingdom, followed by Spain, Italy and Poland (Figure 16.1). English (26.2%) is the most represented mother tongue.

These results are consistent with the results of the first ADLAB project report (2017a) on the assessment of AD training practices in Europe. When asked to list the countries where they teach AD, IO1 respondents (86 AD teachers and trainers) mentioned Spain (31%), Poland (22%) and the UK (20%). When asked what languages they use to draft ADs during training they mentioned English (29%), Spanish (24%) and Polish (20%) (ADLAB PRO, 2017a: 6). These results may reflect the fact that to some extent these countries are especially active in AD training and implementation.

In terms of experience and AD production, 65% have less than ten years of experience as audio describers and only 8% (two from the UK, two from Spain and one from Slovenia) exceed 20 years. Most have been operating for approximately a decade (mean = 8.3, mode = 3). These data suggest the novelty of the AD profession (vs. the general translation profession, Katan, 2011) and the fact that it has been practiced in Europe for a rather restricted span of time. The audio described material produced by respondents in their career is, however, significant. 46% have produced over 300 hours of AD material, with one respondent declaring a production exceeding 2000 hours. Two mentioned approximately 1000 hours and one declared an “uncountable” number of AD hours produced (Figure 16.2). This seems to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–30</td>
<td>11%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 16.1 Countries of origin of the respondents
suggest that at the moment the number of expert leading figures within the AD community is still restricted, as was the case in other fields of AVT a decade ago (Pavesi & Perego, 2008; Perego & Pavesi, 2006: 103).

Most describers (89%) are paid. Only 11% declare performing semiprofessional work compensated with a small token payment or payment in kind (e.g., tickets), while 14% perform voluntary work, with no payment.

Finally, only 20% of professionals work full time while the others normally have an additional job. Jobs are varied, but most respondents work as translators, interpreters, or traditional audiovisual translators. A few are teachers or work in the media industry as filmmakers or scriptwriters. Others have jobs that seem to be unrelated to AD but which possibly help them working in niche AD sectors – for example musicians, museum curators and theatre managers. All this certainly has implications on the perception of AD writing as a profession (vs. an activity, or an occupation, see Katan, 2011; Pym, 2012), which surely deserves further investigation.

5. Training and specialisation

Even though training comes in many different forms (in-house, conducted at a company: 25; workshops: 20; university courses: 13; vocational courses: seven; one-to-one instruction: nine; internship: three), nearly all respondents (N = 54) had some form of training and specialisation in at least one type of AD. This shows that training is valued and it complies with the view argued by sociologists that to be a professional a person has to master and apply a body of knowledge in a specific area of inquiry (Greer et al., 2007; Pym, 2012). A closer look at the data shows that most audio describers specialised in film AD (N = 13), in both film and TV AD (N = 36) or in TV AD only (N = 3), whereas other AD types such as museum, theatre, opera, other live events and AD for teaching materials, appear to be less taught, chosen or perhaps offered during training. This might be the result of the current penury of specific guidelines and training materials in areas other than film and TV, or to the lack of demand on the market. Indeed, the professional describers who also answered the questionnaire declared that film
and TV AD are the products that they describe most often (film only: N = 13; film and TV: N = 33; TV only: N = 9). Other products, such as museum, theatre, opera, other live events and teaching materials are described substantially less frequently. We also know (ADLAB, 2012; ADLAB PRO, 2017a) that nowadays the majority of AD teaching concerns, in this order, film and TV AD, museum AD, theatre AD, other live events, AD of visuals in teaching materials, AD for the opera (ADLAB PRO, 2017a: 7; Chmiel & Mazur, 2017). This is in line with the results of the first ADLAB project, showing that television is the area where AD is most used and appreciated by the target audience (ADLAB, 2012) and with the responses of end-users to the ADLAB PRO IO2 questionnaire, declaring that they access AD for films and TV more often than they access AD of other products (ADLAB PRO, 2017b: 25).

This state of affairs might have the undesired downside that professionals having to deal with less established and taught AD types might deliver lower quality ADs. Or that the AD of products other than films and TV is left in the hands of non-professional – untrained, non-qualified (Katan, 2011; Pym, 2012) – or improvised describers. In this respect, IO2 results highlight the need for the provision of training materials that focus on a comprehensive array of AD genres that go beyond films and TV products and that can be used selectively even by learners or professionals with no background in AD or AVT (ADLAB PRO, 2018b, 2019). For instance, keeping Figure 4.1 and the ADLAB PRO course in mind, we can speculate that a museum director could decide to have their staff take up Module 1 and 4 to integrate their competences with the theoretical and the practical AD notions necessary to become museum describers. This shows the flexible and customisable nature of the ADLAB PRO course and moves AD training away from the “academicisation” of the practice (Baker, 2008) to a growing array of professional environments interested in specialised qualifications.

The ADLAB PRO course curriculum and training materials were conceived to professionalise AD activity and to contribute to enhancing the future employability of AD professionals in diverse settings. Currently, describers specialise in a given AD genre mainly on the job, working on products they are not familiar with: 57% declared that they accept all AD jobs offered to them, even if they fall outside their AD specialisation. This general direction enables them to stay in the market loop as well as to explore, practice, learn and expand their skills and competences in those sectors and AD modes with which they are least acquainted. This suggests that today, AD professionals learn how to describe uncommon text types indirectly and do not always have the chance to access adequate materials or established training sessions.

This however does not seem to have an effect on the employability of the describers: 71% of the respondents obtained a certificate after training, but only 15% of those who obtained a certificate were asked to show it to obtain the job. This indicates that official training is not required by companies or service providers. These select their internal personnel based on other criteria and focus on in-house training to accomplish their production needs. This also indicates that what might contribute to self professional recognition in the translation sector (Katan, 2011) is not recognised by the professional world.

6. Educational and professional origins of the audio describers

Today, in most EU countries, the audio describer is not a recognised professional figure. It is not for instance listed among the New Professional Categories in the EU regulated professional database (EU, 2019). However, describers produce ADs, thus confirming the divide between professional activity and professional recognition. In this section, we will illustrate their educational and professional origins in order to understand what are the most useful steps to acquire the skills and competences that are necessary to enter the AD profession.
The answers to the multiple-response questions in the survey show that the educational background of current EU audio describers is wide-ranging. Generally, it belongs to the field of humanities and arts, with a majority of professionals having received education in language and linguistics (N = 26) or literature (N = 27). Translation (N = 22) as well as film and TV studies (N = 18) are other preferred areas of provenance followed by journalism and media studies (N = 11). These results are not surprising, since excellent knowledge of the mother tongue and writing skills are necessary to become an audio describer (and an AV translator in general, Pavesi & Perego, 2008; Perego & Pavesi, 2006) and education in the field of translation and media can strongly support the practice. The fact that some professionals also studied theatre (N = 1), went to acting school (N = 2), or took arts and/or museum studies (N = 5) seems to suggest that in some cases, a specific background in these areas can help when producing ADs in fields that are underrepresented or specialised. Theatre and museum ADs are special subgenres of AD requiring the describer to know the jargon and the basic practices of these sectors well. A focused educational background can certainly facilitate their AD creation process, especially if this is integrated with general AD notions and improves their professional status (Greer et al., 2007).

Jobwise, instead, most describers (97%) started working in a different setting and ended up working in the AD world after experiencing several professional environments. Respondents started as (or still are) audiovisual translators, teachers and actors, or they come from varied professions where the use of language, voice and writing skills is central. They were, for instance, translators, journalists, radio or TV commentators, presenters or writers. These results are consistent with what happened in other areas of AVT (cf. Pavesi & Perego, 2008; Perego & Pavesi, 2006) or in translation and interpreting (Katan, 2011; Gentile, 2013). These professionals seldom had a specific training and they all came from educational and professional realities that had to do mainly with writing, translating, acting and scriptwriting. In fact, up until a few decades ago, AVT academic training was not provided systematically, or even at all.

Knowing where current AD professionals come from confirmed the appropriateness of the ADLAB PRO project initial idea of creating a flexible course curriculum that could be customised according to the real needs, learning styles, skills and competences of those who choose it. In fact, the course is structured in such a way that, depending on their educational and professional provenance, prospective learners can decide to skip course modules or units on topics they already know and take advantage of those modules or units covering unknown or weak subject areas to fill the gaps.

### 7. Entering the AD world

Entering the AD professional environment – starting to provide AD services – follows varied and unrelated paths. Most respondents, who could submit multiple answers to the question, claim that they started working in the field after attending a specialised course on AD and/or AVT. Although some describers created their own company, or have been selected by service providers based on their CV, show reel or portfolio, 17 declared they started working thanks to the help of someone already working in the field, for instance, a family member (N = 2) or an acquaintance (N = 15).

These results suggest that adequate training or experience in the field are appreciated and deemed necessary and can help to obtain the job, even though interpersonal relationships seem to play a relevant role. Again, this is in line with the dynamics of the dubbing context (Pavesi & Perego, 2008 and Perego & Pavesi, 2006), although family relationships in the AD context seem to be less decisive than in the dubbing world. Furthermore, the AD world still
seems to be more open as demonstrated by the number of individuals who managed to create their own company (N = 10) or who were selected based on their CV (N = 11). Based on our findings, we believed that offering a specific AD course curriculum could help to acquire the right set of skills, knowledge and competences to support employability and long-term career success in the AD environment.

8. Improving competence

How professionals maintain and improve the skills and competences they acquired is another crucial area we wished to explore in order to obtain data on describers’ preferred approaches to continuing professional development and in order to develop our materials based on their preferred learning methods and styles.

Perhaps because of the lack of an established training apparatus, most AD professionals (92%) continue improving their competence in diverse ways. Responses (multiple answers could be provided) show that describers opt for a blend of varied activities to develop professionally. Experience in the field and learning on the job is considered crucial and comes as the first answer for 58 survey-takers, whereas in-house training conducted at a company (N = 16) is a less frequent activity undertaken to improve one’s skills and competences. The other activities describers take part in show that they are quite open and are flexible in the way they pursue professional development. Specifically, describers find it helpful to study existing material in the form of guidelines, academic articles, books on AD, and so on (N = 34), as well as to analyse existing ADs (i.e., focusing on the solutions adopted by colleagues) (N = 35) and doing research (N = 21) previous to the drafting of an AD text — this involves, for example, gathering information on the product to be described, discussions with film/theatre directors/ producers, or with museum staff and curators. Participating in conferences and workshops (N = 36) is another activity they like to engage in. We believe that the reason for this lies in the networking opportunities that these environments provide. This enables professionals to compensate for their solitary working environment, to talk and interact with peers, to learn from research results. This choice might also be ascribed to the fact that professional describers are often also involved in research and teaching themselves. In fact, approximately half of the respondents taught AD at least once in their lives. As pointed out also in IO1, “AD is taught predominantly by people who are experts on teaching (academic teachers), have practical experience in AD creation (audio describers) and are interested in AD also from a theoretical point of view (researchers). This ties in nicely with the concept of a practisearcher” (ADLAB PRO, 2017b: 5, 2018a; Gile, 1994).

Responses guided us in shaping the project training materials: knowing that professionals like engaging in activities such as studying materials and analysing AD texts had a major role in the decision to produce a number of “core videos” and to provide as many authentic AD examples as possible. AD examples were introduced as part of the tasks prepared for prospective learners in order for them to become better acquainted with different AD solutions, to analyse them critically and to retain the most effective ones. The eagerness of respondents to read and study AD-related materials also led us to create specific reading lists that can guide learners to easily access the most relevant literature on a given topic (ADLAB PRO, 2019).

9. Networking and interacting with others

Audio describers work always (28%) or mainly (46%) alone: teamwork is not part of their reality, in spite of it being recognised as crucial in most established companies (e.g., Bayerische
Rundfunk, UK National Theatre, VocalEyes) where quality is a main concern and best practices are implemented (Fryer, 2016, 2019; Perego & Benecke, 2014). Consequently, most ADs seem to be produced by single describers. Besides not having a team, they do not seem to cooperate much with PSL during the AD scripting process, with 44% claiming that they rarely (26%) or never (18%) do so. 17% always cooperate with PSL and another 17% do so often when preparing ADs, while 22% do so sometimes.

Data clearly suggest that most professionals do not prioritise the interaction with users while writing ADs, or that they find it difficult (timewise or economically) to get in touch and cooperate with them, even though it is recognised that “the involvement of the visually impaired in the process of creating and teaching AD may enrich it and improve the quality of the final product” (ADLAB PRO, 2017a: 6). Interestingly, the results of IO1 show that in AD training, environments cooperation with PSL during teaching is quite common: only less than one third of the respondents to the IO1 survey rarely (21%) or never (6%) cooperate with PSL when teaching AD, 22% always do so, 23% do so often and the same percentage do so sometimes (ADLAB PRO, 2017a: 5–6).

On the other hand, direct interaction with peers is more frequent. Only 26% of the describers never or rarely feel the need to talk to peers. This indicates a humble approach to the process, the high value given to the opinion of peers, an eagerness to share solutions and perhaps a way of overcoming the solitary nature of AD work. Audio describers like to talk among themselves, which is also confirmed by their eagerness to participate in conferences and workshops as part of their professional development.

The responses of the describers were fundamental to the selection of the type of training materials we would offer. The awareness of the lack of interaction between describers and end-users in the professional environment was a further element that led us to select and create a substantial number of core videos, additional videos and references focusing on PSL’s needs, cognitive processes, preferences, experiences with AD in different contexts. These materials can in fact make up for possible gaps in the knowledge of user needs and give describers a fuller picture of what is needed in good ADs (as illustrated in Fryer 206; Orero, 2008; Maszewrowska et al., 2014; Remael et al., 2015; Rai et al., 2010; Snyder, 2014).

10. Most practiced AD production stages

It is still unclear what describers do more often when they work and which areas and stages of the AD production process they have most experience with. One question of our survey questionnaire was specifically selected to make us aware of what stages of the AD production process we should focus on more in our training materials.

According to all our sample (those who could provide multiple answers to the question), writing and/or revising the AD script is the most practiced process and therefore the activity that needs to be focused on more in training, especially because AD quality depends greatly on this ability. Voicing the AD (N = 42) and controlling the quality of the final product (in terms of checking the script or the recording, or both) (N = 30) follow, which suggests that a substantial number of audio describers are also voice talents. On the other hand, assisting the recording of the AD with voice talents (N = 16) and mixing the AD with the original soundtrack (N = 14) seem to be processes ascribed to specific personnel with technical competences rather than to audio describers. This shows that there is a clear division of work between audio describers and (sound) technicians in most environments. In fact, the competences involved in the two processes are diverse and not necessarily the prerogative of the same professional figure. Only in the case of describers who are also service providers is it common to find the same person
both producing the AD script and dealing with technical aspects – though this scenario might be country or company specific. The interlingual translation of AD scripts is an underexperienced process \((N = 8)\), suggesting that ADs are preferably drafted from scratch rather than translated from other languages \((\text{Remael} \& \text{Vercauteren}, 2010)\).

11. Concluding remarks

Acquiring information on a number of sociological aspects of the AD profession and of the AD professional world was crucial in developing an AD course curriculum and training materials that can comply with the current needs of AVT and AD learners, of AD professionals and of the European audiovisual market – including also end-users in the long-term.

In general, results brought our attention to the fact that training in the field of AD is necessary. More specifically, training in areas that go beyond film and TV AD is ever more essential to ensure that also other types of AD are produced by experts and are not the result of improvisation or unprofessional practices. Up to now, the focus of training has been restricted to those areas where AD was produced, used and taught more often \((\text{ADLAB PRO}, 2017a; \text{Remael} \& \text{Vercauteren}, 2010)\). However, given the expansion, the need and the efficacy of AD in a growing number of both mainstream and niche realms, nowadays adequate training opportunities in all AD fields should be provided to cover them. The commitment, enthusiasm and solid educational pathway our survey-takers come from suggests that they would be willing to invest time and energy in specialised training and in the improvement of their skills and competences. However, we are aware that in general terms this would depend on the wider infrastructure, remuneration levels, the work flow offered in different countries, and within countries in different academic and professional settings.

Currently, AD training in Europe is offered unsystematically both in academic and in non-academic contexts, where the focus is on the same skills, competences and activities – with academic courses being as practice-oriented \((\text{vs. academised})\) as non-academic courses \((\text{ADLAB PRO}, 2017a)\). In either setting, training takes several forms. In the university environment,

- the majority of these courses are offered at master’s level \((61\%)\), followed by bachelor’s level \((20\%)\) and as part of other types of post-graduate programmes \((18\%)\). 41% of these courses are offered as a separate course or module, while in the majority of cases AD is taught as part of other courses or modules. . . . The majority of courses are offered as traditional in-class instruction \((76\%)\), only some use remote learning \((14\%)\) or blended learning \((10\%)\) as a teaching mode.

\((\text{ADLAB PRO}, 2017a: 8–9)\)

In the non-academic environment, 39% of the sampled courses are workshops, 35% are in-house course, 13% are vocational courses and 10% one-on-one instruction sessions \((\text{ADLAB PRO}, 2017a: 11)\).

Given the variety of forms constituting the current training opportunities in Europe, the ADLAB PRO curriculum and materials were developed to fit in as effectively as possible in all of them. Their flexibility and suggested accreditation through ECTS and ECVETS makes them usable both in higher education institutions \((\text{HEIs})\) and in vocational, in-house courses, and assures their customisability \((\text{ADLAB PRO}, 2018a, 2019)\) in line with the current training scenarios, where

A growing number of learners follow “stand-alone” educational units or courses, without pursuing a specific qualification. Higher education institutions are faced with the need to
satisfy a diversified student group and provide opportunities for individual learning pathways and different modes of learning. Consequently, many are diversifying and offering educational components with innovative modes of learning and teaching for all, through new technologies and Open Educational Resources.

(EU, 2015: p. 44)

As far as AVT and specifically AD are concerned, delivering training that accomplishes what clients and the market require is essential. HEIs, such as Universities, may decide to formally adopt the whole course or part of it (selecting just the modules they would like to implement), use it as a guideline, integrate it in their curriculum and teach it after deciding on the exact number of ECTS they wish to assign to each module. Other institutions, such as vocational institutions, can decide to exploit and adapt the ADLAB PRO curriculum and training materials, assuring learners can rely on ECVETS points to add weight to their qualification (Perego, 2019).

In either case, the course aims to contribute to improving the professionalisation of those who already work in the field, to provide it to novices, or to ensure its wider recognition. It also has the ambitious aim of reducing the sharp divide between professional activity and professional recognition. Along with other similar EU projects focusing on different sectors of AVT training (e.g., ACT, ILSA, GTA, EASIT), ADLAB PRO had in fact the priority to improve and extend the offer of high quality learning opportunities, which are at the basis of professional recognition (Greer et al., 2007; Gentile, 2013).

12. Disclaimer

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Notes

1 We will use the expression “professional describers” to refer to those who currently produce ADs. This view is mainly based on Pym 2012, where a professional is someone who can provide a service that the buyers of the service cannot offer themselves (see also Gentile, 2013; Katan, 2011).

2 The terms “skill” and “competence” are not synonyms. We will use the terms as they are used in the context of the European Qualifications Framework and consider competences as “the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development” for achieving observable results (CWA, 2014; EU, 2015: 22; European e-Competence Framework, 2016; Recommendation 2008/C 111/01). In this context, competence is also described in terms of responsibility and autonomy. A competence is not a skill; on the contrary, a competence embeds skills. Whilst competences are holistic concepts, skills are precise and definite abilities, either hard (technical), or soft (CWA, 2014).

3 ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. ECVET points express the competences needed by the learner to complete a qualification in numerical form (EU, 2015). The ADLAB PRO curriculum has been developed in order to meet the requirements of 6 ECTS/ECVETS for modules 1 to 4 and 3 ECTS/ECVETS for modules 5 and 6 (cf. ADLAB PRO, 2018b). The suggested number of ECTS and ECVETS (EU, 2015) will enable
those institutions that use the course to consider whether to adhere to it or to customize it according to their training needs (Perego, 2019).

4 Gender distribution raises the issue of feminization of the profession that was already observed, for example, in a study on the status of conference interpreters (Gentile, 2013), and could be further investigated also in the AVT and AD areas.

5 Core videos are five to ten minute voiced-over lecture-like Power Point presentations illustrating the central notions related to AD theory and practice.

6 The translation of AD has been and still is a debated issue both in professional and in academic areas (see e.g., Jankowska, 2015). Translating AD seems a tempting alternative strategy yet at the same time a challenging and possibly less effective process (Jankowska, 2015).

13. Further reading


14. References


