Perspectives on a Metacognitive Approach to Translation Teaching

Abstract

Translation teaching methodologies ought to be revised to allow students more space to develop their own competence and take in hand their learning enterprise. The traditional approach to translation teaching seems to be void of any serious attempt to meet the requirements of a systematic development of students' cognitive ability, which is at the core of their translation competence. In what follows is a general analysis of the way translation is taught and new perspectives on how it should be taught with a special emphasis on the role of raising students' metacognitive awareness.

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ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال تحليلا عاما للطرق المتبعة في تعليم الترجمة واقتراحات في سبيل تحسينها مع تسليط الضوء على أهمية توسيع الإدراك فوق المعرفي للطلبة.

لابد من مراجعة المناهج المتبعة في تعليم الترجمة حتى يتمكن الطلبة من تطوير كفاءتهم الترجمية والأخذ بزمام الأمور طريقتهم في التعلم واكتساب المهارات التي تعتمد عليها هذه الكفاءة الترجمية، إذ يُلاحظ أن الطريقة المعتادة في تعليم الترجمة تكاد تخلو من أي محاولة جادة للتكفل بالقدرة المعرفية للطالب وتطويرها، وهي قدرة عقلية تشكل أساس الكفاءة الترجمية.

Introduction

Translation is nowadays taught in almost all universities all over the world which means it is no longer considered as an inborn capacity or an artistic talent that only some gifted people may be endowed with. However, satisfaction with the students' achievement in this speciality is far from being attained. The debate is now turned towards deciding on an academic or professional content and how to teach this skill. Besides, a rapid glance at the way translation is taught at the university will surely lead to many questions as regards its underpinning approaches, their validity and efficiency. Research on cognitive psychology and education is rich in illuminating ideas on how to bring positive changes to this state of affairs and overcome recurrent problems standing in the way of students' acquisition of this skill. In fact,

students may take in charge their own acquisition process if they are made aware of what translation is and what their problems are and how to overcome them. Teachers should take more a role of facilitators than of knowledge transmitters. Learners, on the other hand, should be encouraged to be more active participants in the classroom by taking a multitude of roles to externalize their acquisition process to themselves and to their peers.

1- A Brief Historical Sketch of Translation Pedagogy

Translation teaching is a recent field of interest in comparison to translation practice, which is rather paradoxical as J. Delisle described it, "*bien que l'on traduise depuis des millénaires, on enseigne la traduction pour former des traducteurs depuis à peine une trentaine d'année, ce qui est assez paradoxal*" (1980: 14). This paradox can partly be explained by the fact that translation as a phenomenon was not clearly discerned to be taught in a systematic way. Up to now, people still tend to believe that it is merely a linguistic skill that deserves only the attention we already give to teaching languages. For those who see a distinction between a linguistic skill and a translation skill, they usually stumble at such question as "how to teach translation?" or "what to teach in a translation course?" According to Delisle, in teaching translation, we aim to make the intellectual process behind the operation of transferring meaning explicit to the learners. In his own words, he said, " *enseigner à traduire, c'est faire comprendre le processus intellectuel par lequel un message donné est transposé dans une autre langue, en plaçant l'apprenti-traducteur au Cœur de l'opération traduisante pour lui faire saisir la dynamique* " (1980 : 16).

For a long time, translation was practiced as a linguistic exercise and was even used as a means to reinforce the learner's linguistic background. Its development was largely inherent to and dependant on the development of language teaching in its own right. So when language learning was reduced to a "bottom-up skill in language reception and production", translation could not escape this tradition in that it too was treated as "a matter of acquiring a bottom-up skill in understanding source text forms and their content and transforming them in a more or less linear sequence into linguistically 'equivalent' target text forms". (M. Baker, 2001: 61)

At the beginning there were more attempts at teaching languages as translation was made a subsidiary and secondary activity, and was understood to be logically tied to language competence. That explains the emergence of the grammar-translation method as a methodological tool to support learners' acquisition of a second or foreign language. Gradually, people gained better understanding of translation and of its utility to meet the societal need for translators. In this respect, C. Dollerup (1996: 29) was right to postulate that "teachers of translation have not invented translation theory, but they have forced it to take a firmer stand […] Before there was a massive societal need for translators, there was no need for moving beyond belletristic wanderings". This also explains the rise of translation studies as a distinct discipline, and the systematic attempts that were made to reach a general and self-contained theory applicable to more pairs of languages, and to more types of texts and contexts as dictated and constrained by the present era.

2- Can translation be Taught

So, besides the problem of making a clear distinction between teaching translation and teaching languages, translation was also suffering from a lack of a clear status as a discipline. Translation was for a long time seeking identification as an academic field. For some, it was a science, for others it was an art or a craft. Translation is seen as a science in that it sometimes adopts scientific standpoints of neighboring disciplines such as linguistics, neuroscience and even computer science. The most salient characteristic of a science is the notion of laws. This explains why translation students usually expect their teachers to give them a ready-made list of rules or recipes that would allow them to produce correct and acceptable translations. However, translation is rarely if ever an instance of applying laws as language itself is not a matter of applying grammatical rules as Chomsky postulated. It is rather a generating ability that makes them able to cope with novel situations they have not encountered before. It is a matter of selection and decision and a skill that gets enhanced with time and practice in addition to being a kind of awareness about its mechanism and subtleties. In this respect, D. Robinson (2003: 164) emphasized the role of knowledge about translation as a profession in talking about pretending to be a translator. He says, "it is obvious that the more knowledge you have about how the profession works, the easier it will be to pretend successfully; hence, the importance of studying the profession, researching it, whether in classrooms or by reading books and articles or by asking working professionals what they do". Thus, once the phenomenon of translation is understood, the conditions for its acquisition or development may be made explicit to learners.

3- Translation Didactics and Pedagogy

In trying to implement translation into the classroom, language teaching and learning is logically found to be the nearest discipline that can offer insights and appropriate approaches that can fit the context of translation studies, of course, after bringing some modifications and adaptations "because translation competence goes beyond language learning and has different objectives." (Gonzàlez Davies, 2004: 11). So, what is the difference between translation and language learning? In other words, why is not translation to be taught in exactly the same fashion as language?

In a translation task, the translator is supposed not only to have a good command of the languages involved, but also to be endowed with a mental agility to effectuate the linguistic transfer efficiently. A bilingual, for example, is capable to act as a communication mediator between speakers of the two languages s/he masters, but would certainly fail to act as such in real-world translation tasks if s/he is requested to do so. In other words, for a bilingual to be a translator, s/he needs to be made aware of this process of transfer that would make him/her flexible and adaptable to very different situations of use. Moreover, translators are often obliged to take decisions and consider options according to many factors pertaining to texts, recipients, clients, context…etc that they constantly bring to their consciousness. Bilinguals and language learners are generally cautious only about the accuracy and exactitude of their linguistic renditions. They do not even feel obliged to consider options or think of possible recipients of their messages. They are, in a sense, caught inside the linguistic boundaries of the text they may happen to be translating.

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Thus, teaching translation is enhancing this particular ability of moving easily between languages and taking appropriate decisions, and feeling self-confident about the solution one may undertake. In this respect, S. Bernadini (2004: 21) insisted that the aim of an educational program, at the undergraduate level at least, should be concerned with developing students' acquisition of awareness, reflectiveness and resourcefulness. By awareness is meant students' ability to see language as a network of relationships rather than a process of transcoding messages and substituting words in one language for their equivalents in the other language. Reflectiveness allows students to develop their capacity to practice, store and use different strategies and procedures. As for resourcefulness, it allows students to go beyond the set of finite resources they have learnt in order to cope with totally novel situations and challenges.

4-   Trends and Approaches to Translation Teaching

Translation is now recognized as a separate discipline and taught as a speciality in most universities and distinguished schools around the world. However, research in translation teaching and training is still in its beginnings, and teachers are still struggling to be guided in their mission of training future professionals in this field. No wonder, translation suffers as a subject to be taught. Teachers do not seem to know what to teach and how to proceed in the classroom and which theoretical standpoint to adopt and why. A multitude of questions stand in the way of teachers and learners of translation. In what follows is a brief presentation of the major trends or approaches that teachers and trainers may be helped with in their teaching mission. However, one is encouraged here to ask if these trends and approaches are actually implemented in our educational setting. In other words, to what extent are these trends and approaches adopted in translation departments?

4-1- Pèrez's Seven Major Trends in Translation Studies

Although M.C. Pèrez's major trends concern translation studies as a whole, these same trends can be said to be applicable to translation teaching as they provide a source of inspirational approaches for teachers and even for syllabus designers.

For Pérez (2005: 2, 3), thus, there are seven major trends in translation studies which sum up the various research works undertaken about translation and suggest possible theoretical approaches one may adopt in teaching translation. These are:

1-   A focus on (mostly discrete units of) languages (e.g. Jakobson 2000, as well as Vinay & Darbelnet 1977)

2-   A focus on the communicative nature of texts (e.g. Neubert & Shreve 1992; House 1981, 1997; and Hatim & Mason 1990, 1997)

3-   A focus on communicative aims through texts (e.g. Reiβ 1989; Vermeer 1989; Nord 1997)

4-   A focus on the link between translation and target cultures (e.g. Even-Zohar 1990; Toury 1995; Lefevre 1985)

5-   A focus on the 'new translation ethics' (e.g. Bassnett & Lefevere 1991; Venuti 1995; and postcolonialists)

6- A focus on the translator as a rational and emotional being (e.g. Seleskovitch 1976; Krings 1987; Gutt 1991, 2000)

7- A focus on translation corpora (e.g. Baker 1996; Kenny 2001; Laviosa 2002)

These are also the different trends proposed for vocational institutions, university departments and specialized schools in most developed countries for a possible use, depending on the aims and objectives these institutions set for their learners or trainees. Sometimes an eclectic approach is even suggested.

4-2- Klaudy's Translation Teaching Approaches

King Klaudy (2003) reduced the number of Pérez's trends into three basic down-to-earth approaches or principles, especially useful for designing translation courses. These are the inductive, the deductive and the functional approaches.

4-2-1- The Inductive Approach: Through this approach, according to Klaudy (2003), the teacher provides his/her students with a number of texts to be dealt with during the whole semester. The students translate these texts at home or in the class, then they discuss the translation problems they encountered with their teacher who corrects their mistakes and helps them reach a suitable and adequate translation. This approach is obviously based on the number, type and quality of texts dealt with. The problems that the texts fail to show remain untracked. To reach good results with such a time-consuming approach, the learners have to be exposed to a multitude of texts of different types. This, however, is almost impossible as the university program or the program offered by whatever institution is limited to a maximum of five years. With a maximum of ten texts per semester and with the necessity of grading texts in terms of difficulty throughout the academic year, learners cannot be said to have been exposed to a sufficient number of texts.

4-2-b- The Deductive Approach: According to Klaudy (2003), learners are invited, through this approach, to deal with specific problems of translation on the basis of which a text is chosen for translation in the classroom. During the translation activity, techniques are proposed by teachers to suggest solutions for the recurrent translational problems such as the translation of geographical names, institutions and measurements, translation of some grammatical structures in a given language pair, etc. The advantage with such an approach is that the teacher is free to decide on what problems to cover during the academic year with regards to learners' level and immediate needs and according to what s/he judges as being important. The teacher proceeds, then, to prepare a list of problems to be tackled during the semester or during the whole year and to find illustrative examples in texts to be dealt with and discussed in the classroom. The problem with such an approach, as Klaudy hints at and as it may easily be revealed, is that it is not always possible to find appropriate texts that can thoroughly deal with the problems in question. The teacher often resorts to artificial texts that s/he himself/herself devises to solve this problem. This artificiality is often

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counterproductive in a course specifically designed for translators as it fails to foster a natural translation competence in the learners.

4-2-c- The Functional Approach: According to Klaudy, teaching is organized through this approach, around particular skills to be developed in learners. Teachers decide what skills are necessary for the translation competence of their learners and devise appropriate activities or tasks subsidiary to the translation activity per se. For example, to meet the need of making learners able to distance themselves from the source text, the teacher may encourage them, through specific tasks, to use intralingual transformation or paraphrasing within the same language be it source language or target language. S/he can also help them with summaries and semantic mappings to increase their ability in analyzing and comprehending a source text. There are, of course, multitudes of task examples that the teachers can make use of in the classroom. The problem with such an approach might be the fact that these tasks are not always easy to devise and require a sound knowledge about course design and an acute awareness about some basic psychological notions related to psychology and education that not all teachers may have knowledge of.

Practically, however, translation teaching in the department of translation at Mentouri university of Constantine at least, is usually confined to the inductive approach whereby teachers find themselves inclined to adopt the traditional method of correcting students' translations of a given text in the class then providing them, if ever, with their translation model. This is probably due to the fact that the large number of students in a class makes it hard for teachers to adopt a social constructive approach where interaction between peers is encouraged. In some other cases, teachers may be said to lack a clear understanding of what translation is and they themselves do not agree on what competences it requires to be developed. Language teachers taking charge of the translation modules at the department would just insist that it is a pure linguistic exercise, whereas other teachers would just blame it on the poor academic level of the students in languages and insist that there is nothing to do unless a perfect linguistic competence is secured in the two involved languages. Certainly this approach to translation teaching does not give any importance to this skill which, as has been said, is distinct from a pure linguistic competence and needs to be catered for in a special way.

5- Requirements of a Translation Competence:

It goes without saying that the role of the university programs in translation departments or institutions of higher education is to develop the students' translation competence. This competence has been defined differently by many scholars, but a common core may still be sorted out from all these definitions.

W. Wilss, for example, (in Kelly, 2005: 28) suggests that this competence is, in fact, the sum of three main competences which are:

a- A receptive competence having to do with the ability to understand and decode a source text (ST)

b- A productive competence having to do with the ability to use the linguistic resources of the target text to adequately relay the ST message.

c- A super competence having to do with the ability to transfer messages between the cultural and linguistic systems of the source and target languages.

Although D. Gile (1995: 20) makes use of the term "translation expertise" instead of translation competence, he nevertheless proposes guidelines that are of a similar nature to those proposed by other scholars such as the one cited by Wilss above. According to him, students must develop:

a- A passive command of the passive working languages (this is the equivalent of a receptive competence in the source text)

b- An active command of the active working languages (this is the equivalent of a productive competence in the target language)

c- Sufficient world knowledge related to different texts s/he may deal with.

d- An ability to translate, i.e, a knowledge of how to translate (this can be equated with Wilss's transfer competence)

Hatim and Mason (in Kelly, 2000: 30) prefer the terms 'translator's abilities' instead, and define them as being concerned with the following:

a- The ability to decode the linguistic system of the source text.

b- The ability to encode the linguistic system of the target text.

c- The transfer ability.

Although these detailed accounts of the requirements of a translation competence have never been subject to empirical investigation, they do not raise much criticism from an educational standpoint. In other words, they may adequately serve trainers, teachers and syllabus designers to decide on the aims and objectives of their courses (Kelly, 2005: 31). What is noteworthy about the definitions provided above is that they all recognize a particular kind of competence, skill or ability that distinguishes translators from language learners. This is referred to, most often, as transfer competence, the procedural knowledge learners acquire about how to translate and overcome linguistic barriers. A. Pym (2003: 489) went a step further in his proposed definition by clarifying the prerequisites of such a competence. According to him, what is specific to a translator's competence is his/her ability to:

-Generate a target text series of more than one viable term (target $text_1$, target $text_2$…target $text_n$) for a source text.

-Select only one target term from this series, quickly and with justified confidence, and to propose this target text as a replacement of a source text for a specified purpose and reader. This decision, in fact, cannot be possible without a sound awareness of how and what to translate.

6- Metacognitive Aspects of Translation Competence

Metacognition is defined by most researchers as one's cognition about cognition or thinking about thinking. It would be long to suggest a detailed account of what this fuzzy concept implies exactly in the limited space of the present article. However, it would be sufficient to say that as far as translation is concerned, metacognition involves an awareness on the part of the translator of (1) what translation is exactly as a

competence distinct from language competence per se, (2) what factors affect its acquisition and development, and (3) what to do to acquire or develop such a competence. In short, it is the sum of declarative, conditional and procedural knowledge the learner should be aware of.

Translation, then, is not simply a matter of decoding a message in one language and encoding it in another. It is a mental agility that needs a high degree of awareness. In this respect, M. Ulrych (1995, 252) asserts that translators

> will therefore need not only language and content knowledge but also a course specifically designed to enhance their socio-cultural awareness and encyclopaedic knowledge. They also require the cognitive and metacognitive skills that will enable them to evaluate their expanding competence and to monitor their performance in relation to a broad range of text types and fields of discourse.

As regards the socio-cultural awareness and encyclopedic knowledge, they are specifically enhanced through the use of special kind of texts that obey cultural and contextual norms, and specialized domains. Certainly, this area of competence is not easy to cater for, but what matters most is the development of learners' cognitive and metacognitive skills. Thus, learners should develop a mental agility to successfully realize the linguistic transfer, and they should develop their ability to monitor their own processing and understand its mechanism. In this respect, they are particularly required to develop a selective attention, a noticing capability and awareness about the different stages of the process they go through in completing their task.

As such, students should be made aware of translation as a process and a professional skill that needs a high degree of self-confidence and autonomy. A traditional translation classroom cannot cater for these requirements unless sustained by more reliable functional activities that develop students' skills in a more systematic way. Students' awareness cannot be enhanced by simply asking them to open their eyes and ears, and feel the world around them by a magical wand. They need to be assisted and guided in this endeavour. What follows is a suggested sample of activities that are thought to be liable to make the learners reach more tangible objectives and enhance their awareness about the process of translation. These activities are just an example of what a teacher can do with his/her students to foster their awareness about translation and sustain their self-autonomy as learners. Teachers' ingenuity is, nevertheless, trusted to bring more illuminating ideas applicable to every teaching classroom and its defining variables.

7- Suggested Examples of Metacognition-Enhancing Activities

Activity n°1: A student may be asked to provide his/her own translation of a selected passage on the blackboard, for example. S/he will be able to make adjustments, correct mistakes, modify elements on his/her translation by using chalk and duster. S/he will be doing his/her work silently and will not be allowed, however, to answer any question or comment made by his/her classmates. The other student

sitting in the class will take notes on the linguistic behaviour of their friend while s/he his translating. They are required to make guesses at the thought processes of their friend that they will be able to check against the answers their friend will provide them with.

Sometimes, it is rather the teacher who would act as such by verbalizing his/her thought processes through paraphrasing and rewording within the source language, and allowing his/her students to know the motives behind each action s/he undertakes.

The objective of this activity is to make the learners aware of the existence of a thinking process behind the translation activity. In observing the thought process of their friend or their teacher, their attention-with time- might be successfully directed towards their own processes.

Activity n°2: Students may be given a text to read carefully and thoroughly before they are asked to translate it. Afterwards the text is taken away from them. The teacher asks the students questions about some details in the text. The students work hard to find answers as approximate as possible to the original expressions used in the text. At an eventual second stage, the students may be asked questions about the text but this time in the target language. In this way, the students are encouraged to translate naturally by going through the deverbalization process, which is the phase at which they come to produce a conceptual framework of what they decode without being prisoners of the source text. Thus, to activate deverbalization and prevent source language interference, learners are often encouraged to paraphrase the text they aim to translate before embarking on their translation.

The objective of this activity is to help students understand the deverbalization process they are required to go through. The activity also aims to meet the need of the students to develop a competence in recognizing prototypes of the different texts they actually translate and add to their memory archive. This activity, thus, enables them to enhance their ability to grasp a maximum knowledge and acquire maximum skills from whatever text they may process for translation. Translators, it should be emphasized, need to develop a high degree of attention and concentration when processing any text. Their repeated encounter with diverse sets of texts would diminish the time they may spend later on in their translation.

An activity of the same kind was actually proposed by Karla Déjean Féal as has been reported by Jean Vienne (2000: 94). In this activity, Déjean Le Féal displays the text to be translated on an overhead projector screen to enable the students to grasp the content without giving them enough time to concentrate on the words themselves. The students are, thus, encouraged to deverbalize the text in the target language without being influenced by the verbal form of the source text.

Activity n°3: Students may be allowed to play the role of a teacher by asking one student to give instructions to his/her classmates to help them overcome the translation problems a given text may present. In doing so, the teacher may note features pertaining to translation and to teaching that the student-teacher brings his/her attention to when acting as such. The student's performance, in this respect, would be a sort of a

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thinking-aloud protocol that the teacher is encouraged to meticulously analyze to prepare for the appropriate feed-back.

Activity n°4: Sometimes students may be required to play the role of a researcher. By being exposed to the development of the translation discipline through time, students may be invited to think about possible solutions for the drawbacks and difficulties the history of the discipline may reveal. Learners may be required to find the place of translation theory in the field of practice as the relationship between theory and practice is still an issue of controversy. This is what Williams and Chesterman (2000: 75) emphasized:

> One weakness of our field, however, is the discrepancy between the huge amount of research that has gone into developing and refining the conceptual tools by means of interpretive hypotheses, and the much smaller amount of research that has gone into applying these tools to real problems.

In a different version of the same activity, students may be invited to explain the translational methodology adopted by a given translator for a given text. They are even required to search for the socio-cultural context, or the historical constraints dictating this or that methodology.

Activity n°5: Students may be asked to write a text on any topic they like (they act as if they were writers) and bring these texts to the class. The teacher chooses one of these texts and asks the students to translate it. Then, the teacher discusses the translation of the students in the presence of the student writer himself/herself.

The objective of this activity is to direct the students' attention to the importance of taking into account the original writer's ideas while translating. A good translator would always strive to think about what might be the original writer's purpose in choosing one particular expression rather than another. The activity may also bring a different effect as regards students' ability to understand that, often, the same meaning can be rendered differently from one person to another. In this respect, D. Gile (1995) used an interesting exercise with his students whereby a picture was shown to half of the class who were asked to write a sentence describing what they think the picture said. The other half of the class, waiting outside, were then invited to come in the class and were asked to translate the many sentences their friends produced. They produced as many translations as there were sentences written on the blackboard. The teacher, at the end explained that there was no need to produce that number of translations as the sentences just represented idiosyncratic ways of expressing the same idea.

Activity n°6: Students may be encouraged to analyze the source text before embarking on their translation. In this respect, they try to determine areas of difficulties and think of possible solutions beforehand. They may even be encouraged to diagnose their weaknesses, and think of a plan of action to remedy them at present or in the future. As for the teacher, s/he should be ready to help with suggestive solutions or clues for finding these solutions. Students, in this way, are gradually made aware of where they are standing in the course of the development of their translation

competence. Self-assessment is undoubtedly a prerequisite and preliminary condition for achieving success.

Activity n°7: Students may swap translations to evaluate and mark. Evaluating one another's translation products may have the benefit of pushing the students to notice points of strength and weakness in their peers' renditions and then in their own. In a way, the students would feel motivated to analyze their translation process thoroughly to avoid their peers' criticism and strive for a better and irreproachable rendition. This would also be beneficial in preparing the students for their future career as professionals with regards to ethical rules. Translators should strive for the best quality in their production bearing in mind that their work would be evaluated to the client's expectations and appreciations.

Conclusion:

A translation class differs from a language learning class in many respects pertaining to the nature of the discipline itself. Translation is an act of a bilingual communication which requires a sound knowledge of two languages at least and an acute ability to realize the transfer between these languages with ease and mental agility. Learners need to be assisted in understanding the nature of the skill they are acquiring and to develop a high degree of self-confidence that allows them to monitor their own activity and to assess their strengths and weaknesses during the process of learning. A traditional approach to translation teaching whereby a text is handed to students for translation then discussed and corrected on the blackboard does not seem to be sufficient to make the students develop the procedural knowledge they need as translators. The classroom should include as well specific tasks and activities that would meet specific objectives such as making the learners more able to de-verbalize a given text, more self-confident in selecting options to solve specific problems, and more aware of the translation process they undertake. These skills, in short, make up for the metacognitive profile of a future competent translator.

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