

Technical Translation and the Teaching of English

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INTRODUCTION :

Translation has always played a role in language teaching. Until the end of the eighteenth century, learning a foreign language implied learning Latin and was based around bilingual word lists and parallel texts. When 'modern' languages began to be taught at the end of the century, the same approach was followed, and the structures of English, French, Italian and so on were presented in relation to the structure of Latin. Speaking was not the aim of learning the language: the focus was on the translation of model sentences, chosen to exemplify the structural idiosyncrasies of the language system. This approach became known as the Grammar-Translation method, since students were presented with rules and then applied them in translation. The theoretical support was "memorising rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and the syntax of the foreign language" (Stern, in Richards and Rodgers, 1986). The importance of structure in this approach has resulted in the view that translation is unpedagogical and uncommunicative, which still persists today. Therefore, translation is discredited, for, among other things, being 'uncommunicative', or for focusing purely on accuracy, and teachers have been programmed to view translation as 'bad' classroom practice. The 'Communicative Approach', which most teachers today would profess to use (in some form or other) in

the classroom is ambiguous in its approach to translation. Purists argue that all interaction should be undertaken in the L2, although some advocates claim that translation can - and should - be used (judiciously) in class. Howatt (in Richards and Rodgers, 1986), for example, writes: "translation may be used where students need or benefit from it."

I believe that although translation has been cast aside in EFL teaching, students do, and always will, translate into their L1, no matter how often we exhort them not to - Atkinson (in Harbord, 1992) calls it a "learner-preferred strategy . . . and an inevitable part of second language acquisition". Indeed, we should stop working against this tendency and turn it to our advantage. Recent statistics have shown that in this era of globalization and technological rat-race, over 60% of the world is bi- or multi-lingual, so translation is an everyday activity for many people, with extremely practical applications. Advocates of translation claim that the fact that translation has been frowned upon implies that we take a very Eurocentric view of language: since (most) European countries are monolingual (at least officially), we seem to think this is the norm, not the exception, and that 'good' practice should reflect this.

The aim of my presentation is two-fold because it attempts at throwing light on both technical writing and translation, be it pedagogical or technical and the blurring borderline between them. I limit myself to technical writing, which is one among the types of professional writing such as editing, journalism, and commercial writing. It is to be underlined that my reflections are the outcome of a five-year teaching experience in the three-year study program of technical English (D.E.U.A) at the Open University /U.F.C of Annaba. Most learners are either professionals (engineers, medical doctors, lawyers, business or administrative senior clerks) or university students who have (primarily passive) contact with English in their jobs or studies.

Technical Translation and the Teaching of English

Given the diversity if not disparity of their academic and professional background it has not been easy for me to meet their needs. Also, as a teacher of writing and then translation courses, I found it difficult to draw the line between both disciplines or compartmentalize their course contents. Therefore, it is worthwhile debating this question of interdependence by trying to answer the following questions: what is technical writing? what is the relationship between technical writing and technical translation? Why is it necessary to include translation in technical and academic writing curricula? To answer these questions, it is noteworthy to reconsider translation and its merits and pay tribute to all the fervent advocates of its rehabilitation in E.F.L and more specifically E.S.P teaching methods.

First, what is technical writing? Technical writing is the process of preparing documentation, usually computer hardware and software manuals, for mass consumption. Technical writers are expected to combine strong writing skills and superior understanding of technology. However, ESP writing courses are not meant to be strictly oriented to a technical writing career producing professional technical writers but they are rather an introduction to the kinds of writing skills students need in practically any technically oriented professional job. In the writing course of the U.F.C study program one of the main objectives is to lead the students to the elaboration of technical reports which are due in the 3rd year. While in the first two years, the students are initiated to some basic knowledge related to technical writing such as paraphrasing, summarizing, note taking, letter writing (business and academic), writing abstract, resumé, C.V, memos, fiche de lecture, book review, specification sheet, user's manual, etc. In our assessment of this study program, the question that one might ask is this: when we "do" Technical Writing, are we simply turning out well-engineered students, or

are we producing graduates who can engineer the language, that is, who can form and transform knowledge through language?

No matter what sort of professional work students do, they are likely to do lots of writing—and much of it is technical in nature. The more they know about some basic technical-writing skills which are covered in technical-writing courses, the better job of writing they are likely to do. In this context, can we consider the technical writer a translator and vice versa?

However, to use the technical writing classroom as a context to teach critical thinking, we must first make the students understand that language is not a set of molds into which they pour their thoughts, that form and content are not separable, and that they are not simply trying to yoke writing to technology. Teaching technical writing, I believe—indeed, teaching all writing—involves teaching visibility. Dobrin considers technical writing as a means of «accommodating technology to the user» (242). It naturally requires a great deal of translation, demanding that students inhabit at least two worlds simultaneously—the worlds of the specialist and non-specialist. Writing to a lay audience, for instance, is not just a substitution exercise in which general words replace specific ones; it is, instead, an enterprise that requires the sensitive manipulation of language to accommodate ideas and information. Indeed, besides the creative talent, both the technical translator and the technical writer should have some knowledge of the language and a working knowledge of the science or technology they are using. The skills of technical writing and translation overlap. THE types of translation –poetic, technical, journalistic, commercial and official translations—all have their different applications. By its nature, problems of «style» are largely secondary when a technical text is being translated. However, some features of scientific translation should be noted. Firstly, scientific texts are intended to be read by scientists—and so are scientific

Technical Translation and the Teaching of English

translations. Obtrusive « style » should be notable by its absence. Secondly, a scientific translation is usually made from a recent original work, intended to be read immediately—unlike literary translations, which may be made from classical texts, and used for centuries.

As for E.S.P learners, relying on translation in writing courses seems unavoidable. Students constantly refer texts in English to their native or known language, that is mental translation is an inseparable part of foreign language learning whether the teacher wants it or not. Therefore, why not put this tendency to practical use rather than frown upon it if not close one's eyes to it.

In fact, technical translation does have a place in the technical writing course and that its implementation can be beneficial for learners. Using translation in class and encouraging learners to develop useful applicable techniques to deal with it is surely more beneficial to learners' real needs than, say, role-play or cloze exercises.

This argument is backed up by the following reasons:

1. As international integration grows, translation will become more and more necessary for non-native speakers of English. I think it would be unfair of me as a teacher to withhold this valuable technique from my learners.

2. An individual and comparative analysis of the source-language and target language texts will, indeed, show, as Widdowson points out, that there may be "more in common between certain 'varieties' in different languages than between different "varieties' within the same language." Interlingual translation of scientific register, for example, is likely to present far fewer problems than intralingual translation into a different kind of discourse within the same language.

3. Admittedly, translation involves the exploration of the potential of two languages. The ability to synchronize the source language and the target language requires as a pre-condition a

comprehensive syntactic, lexical, morphological, and stylistic knowledge of both L1 and L2. Translation is a means to both explore and develop such knowledge. In English, a formal scientific text with a purely informative function calls for frequent use of passives and nominal groups, and the lexical choice is dictated by the specific scientific register, whereas in an informal piece of popular literature with a persuasive function, collocation and connotation greatly influence the selection of the correct lexical item.

4. Translation should be an integral part of the written examination. Translation from Arabic or French into English is a three-year course for the students attending the technical English course program in the Open University. When I took over the second-year writing class, I compiled a questionnaire to evaluate my students' attitudes towards translation and its place in the university curriculum. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of a translation course that covered a wide range styles and registers, and the majority of students envisaged translation playing a significant role in their prospective careers. In other words, they were aware of the importance of translation as a professional skill, and they felt it should be an integral part of their modern-language syllabus. This confirmed my belief that students should be given the opportunity to engage in translation as an activity in its own right at an advanced level and that it is an appropriate didactic tool in the advanced EFL classroom.

5. Translation goes beyond simply linguistic equation of meaning, since in practice anyone involved in the process must be aware of the paralinguistic implications of the message being conveyed. Obviously, the closer the source language is to the target language, the easier it will be to transfer meaning successfully. Difficulties arise, though, when the L1 and the L2 are more distant, or when the "meaning-patterns" (Sapir, in

Technical Translation and the Teaching of English

Manko, 1998) of the L1 differ from the L2, in which case they are likely to influence target production. Many of the linguistic errors produced by students are put down to L1 transfer, but some educationists prefer calling this phenomenon L1 -L2 mistranslation. Sensibilising students to this will hopefully help them iron out at least the more common of these errors. In other words, showing the students the features of the target language system is not enough to make students competent L2 users (doing so would probably take years in a non-English speaking environment). It is surely more efficient (both for us as teachers and for our learners) to make some of the unique features of the English language system (phrasal verbs, modality, word-final "-s", and so on) more accessible to students by any means necessary, including explicit contrast between L1 and L2 systems.

Using translation can help teachers draw students' attention to errors such as false cognates, word order or time-tense distinctions. In this context, I picked out a series of errors which are due basically to lexical interferences of Arabic and English. (Lexical interference refers to negative transfer of the usage of lexical items from the native language into the second language. Direct interference: the student expressing himself by literal, word-for-word translation from the native language. This interference arises from the student's understanding of his own language, which he considers parallel to the one he is learning.) Among the interferences I found are the following:

While the bus was walking she saw beautiful scenes from the window. (going along)

No shoes can enter into her foot. (fit him)

There are many human books. (books on humanities)

Indirect Interference/ occurs when the student does not transfer the native words themselves. Instead, he transfers associations with these words from his native language. These

associations are incompatible with the new language. The metaphor is a transferred meaning of one word for another.

When the metaphor in the native language is absent in the second language, negative transfer takes place. e.g : He laughed from his heart (heartily)

Moreover, using translation can help teachers draw students' attention to ingrained errors, such as false cognates, word order or time-tense distinctions.

At the cultural level, and this applies to E.F.L. learners in general, translation can be used to help learners to realise that ways of thinking and expression are influenced (or even constrained) by culture, and see the futility of trying to make English fit their own culture/language. Moreover, the student becomes aware of idiosyncrasies in the two languages and realises that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between items in the two cultures/languages. Also, translation enables the student to understand that the two cultures/languages may express similar items in different ways (single word, compound, expression) and becomes aware of different registers. He develops a keen sensitivity to cultural connotations and aware of the importance of collocation, and realise that the two cultures/languages may have different collocations for 'equivalent' words.

Conclusion :

In fact, translation is one of the greatest resources teachers have at their fingertips, since there is a wealth of ready-prepared, authentic materials which have great generative potential if exploited well. Translation can be a very valuable classroom activity. It can be tailored in such a way that it becomes highly practical, learner-focused and process-based. It seems to me that translation can be a highly effective way of drawing learners' attention to the linguistic, semantic and pragmatic features of the

Technical Translation and the Teaching of English

target language. We should therefore make an effort to give our students greater access to translation as a classroom activity if they want it.

In an E.F.L classroom, translation should be used to foster and take advantage of a student's natural ability to assimilate L2 (second language) information via their L1 (native or first language) processing. Therefore, introducing courses like professional English and translation in the language licence curriculum seems necessary in these new university reforms (LMD reforms).

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