

# Translation Competence Development: The Focus in Translation Teaching

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## ABSTRACT

In order to improve students' translation competence through translation teaching, this paper begins with a rigorous literature review and figures out the specific teaching focus as improving students' abilities to evaluate and select the better translation from all seemingly correct ones available. Based on this focus, some suggestions on application of this idea and pedagogical designs are given to ensure the teaching effectiveness.

**Keywords:** translation competence, selective ability, translation teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

By translation teaching is meant, in a practical sense, to help students improve their translating abilities through the regular class teaching and training. This is apparently so easy a concept that most of us just take it for granted, hence unconsciously assuming that with the common and traditional teaching and learning, students can attain what we hope and acquire all necessary knowledge and skills of translation. However, this seemingly sound presumption is very fragile when you take reality into serious consideration. As a matter of fact, many teaching classes seem to have a very low efficiency, students finally failed to achieve the rapid progress in translation competence as expected. With this situation in mind, it is necessary to have a thorough analysis of the teaching process and its theoretical preparations, to see whether a good understanding of all things involved in teaching have been clearly recognized and considered. Specifically speaking, in order to pave the way for effective translation teaching, we need to clarify and list up, as definitely as possible, the components of translation competence, attempting to have a good mastery of their requirements and corresponding training methods before a better teaching plan is scheduled. Then based on the comparison of their distinctions and differences, we need to determine what the most important component is that deserves our priority in teaching. With a clear target to shoot at and the corresponding measures, to increase the class teaching effectiveness will become a matter of time. Simply speaking, questions we are going to consider here are: firstly, in order to improve translating

competence through teaching effectively, what should be the focus in teaching? Secondly, what measures can we take in teaching practice to ensure the attainment of this focus with the point of priority we have figured out in translation competence development?

## II. THE COMPONENTS OF TRANSLATION COMPETENCE

Scholars in this domain have done much work before. Various fruitful conclusions have been drew from a variety of perspectives, each of course with their merits and demerits. As required, the first seminal question worthy of our efforts is what translation competence is. In order to ascertain this definition, scholars always try to break it down into a variety of interrelated sub-competences, which can be analyzed in isolation, as well as in combination with others as a whole. Snell-Hornby argues that alongside with others variables like computer science and linguistics, what remain constant in translation competence still can be specified as "proficiency in the language(s) concerned, basic knowledge of the relevant theoretical approaches in translation studies, subject area expertise, and cultural competence." (2006:134). Obviously, Snell-Hornby views this matter from a very broad sense, or we could safely say, what she stated here are only the basic patches of translation competence, which are required as the bricks you need to build your house. If apply this idea to your class teaching, many of us can't find a right starting point at all due to the diversity and the complexity of those components. In order to increase the effectiveness in translation teaching, a further specification is deadily required for without it, your teaching would turn out to be aimless, or in other case, you find too many goals to shoot at and finally none of them is achieved. Against this background, we found fortunately that Neubert proposes a rather clear

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and specific set of translation competence components, which he calls as "Qualitative Parameters of Translation competence", including five ones," (1) language competence, (2) textual competence, (3) subject competence, (4) cultural competence and (5) transfer competence" (2012:6). In his opinion, it is just the interplay of these five components that distinguishes translation from other areas of communication. But to be precise, these five components are not equally important for translation for the first four are also shared by other communications, while only transfer competence can distinguish translation from them. So as far as translation teaching is concerned, the most important component should be the last one, transfer competence, which is the core component for translators' competence. In view of this, Neubert argues, "competence (5) dominates over all the other competences, i.e., transfer skills integrate language, text, subject and culture knowledge with the sole aim of satisfying transfer needs." (ibid). Put it in a broad sense, other competences all combined serve as the foundation for transfer competence to develop. It seems we need to keep a good balance between these competences, otherwise, students would gain no achievements in developing their translating competence. In Neubert's eyes, the most important component should be the transfer competence for only this could serve as the yardstick to distinguish a translator from other professions. As is well known, translating involves all competences above and they are very necessary in translator training, but to our knowledge, the translation class, with limited time span, is impossible and unnecessary to cover all components at the same time. From what is discussed on Nerbert's analysis and many other similar researches (PACTE, 2000; Wen, 2004; Beeby, 2012), it seems reasonable and feasible to choose transfer competence as the core in translation teaching. What is required next to be further studied is the specific ingredients of this competence.

Transfer competence, as Neubert argues, refers to the tactics and strategies of converting L1 texts into L2 texts, to be specific, transfer most often, though of course not always, is the task of choosing from an embarrassment de richness(2000: 10-11). This definition, to some extent, touches the edge of the focus of transfer competence, but still seems a little abstract and shallow. If looking from the other end, probably a clear hierarchical structure can be obtained. As a selective process, the precondition for selection is the richness of translations, and then it is possible for translators to implement the selection. Chesterman offered a vital idea in this line, he creatively divided transfer competence into the following two sub-competences:

- The ability to generate a series of possible translations for a given source text or items.

- The ability to select from this series, quickly and with justified confidence, one version considered to be optimally appropriate. (Chesterman, 2012: 119)

By so far, this is the most feasible conclusion on translating teaching, for it highly narrows down the scope of the competences involved in teaching and makes possible improving the translation competence through class teaching in a limited span. As a conclusion, there are now two clear goals for translation teaching to achieve: to generate or help students produce enough various translation versions for them to choose from, then try to let them know how to select out the better one (Wang, 2019). To be more specific, of this two parameters, the second is more important, which involves the competence of evaluating and appreciating translations that are the key in translation learning in the long run. Having enough selections serves as the first step in competence development, while how to evaluate and select is the final target in translation teaching, which is of course the essential part in translation teaching.

### III. THE APPLICATION OF THIS IDEA TO TRANSLATION TEACHING

With the focus in translation teaching in mind, the following task is to find a good way to ensure students' effectiveness in acquiring the most important component in their translation competence development. Surely, a clear teaching preparation and class design is the first necessary step to take. In accordance with the focuses above, the following measures are worthwhile to try in translation teaching with each correspondingly covers a definite aspect of them.

#### A. *Offering students enough translations for them to choose from*

As a basic training for students to choose from many possibly appropriate translations, they must produce or generate at least, in my opinion, more than two versions. Only with those versions available can they obtain the opportunity to sharpen their sensitivities in selecting better ones. Unfortunately it is common the case that for many translation learners, in particular starters, it is very hard for them to generate or produce the necessary number of versions with their own efforts due to the limited knowledge in the relevant aspects, like shortage in vocabulary, insufficiency in linguistic knowledge and structures, and other possible obstacles related to translation production. In this condition, does it mean there is no way to get out of this situation and then students are forced to give up their competence development? Of course not. As the analysis above, though the most important thing in teaching is to let them know how to select, let them have many versions

with which they try to copy and learn how to produce more versions is as important as the selection for them. Considering the difficulties students may have in producing more version by themselves, a cooperative model could be applied to solve this problem, that is to let students in a class or a team to share their versions together, thus they will easily have enough samples to copy and versions to select from. Theoretically speaking, how many translators there are, how many translations there will be, this will safely ensure the diversity of translations, hence offering students enough crude materials for them to compare, to appreciate and to select from. Students in this way will lead a coordinating learning by creating a suitable condition for them. It is assumed that sharing their translations can be regarded as laying the cornerstone for them to take the next step in translation competence development.

#### *B. Assigning the task of comparing in different manners*

With a variety of translations available, students should be organized to make comparisons among them in different manners, the more, the better. They can do pair work, or team work, with pairs and teams, they could come together to form big groups to have thorough discussion and exchanges of their understanding and appreciation of different translations. Each student is encouraged to join more types of comparison and discussion, making himself a center for all kinds of feedbacks. In so doing, students will gradually form their own comprehension about how to evaluate and appreciate translations, thus knowing what the principles and criterions are applied in selecting the better ones for particular cases. As well known to all of us, peer coordination is surely contributing to the effectiveness in their translation competence development, they can share what they know and what they feel puzzled together with each student having the awareness that he/she is not learning alone. Suggestions and ideas from other peers will impose the function of broadening their horizons, offering them something though-provoking. It is in this situation that students will get encouraged, turning out to be highly-motivated, full of enthusiasm in seeking for the better translations. However, students' exchanges also, to some extent, have their shortcomings due to their shared scarcity of translation theoretical knowledge. This is what needs to be done to perfect their cooperative learning.

#### *C. Providing some theoretical knowledge about translation*

In order to let students acquire know-how through group or team coordination, some basic theoretical knowledge is very necessary to be provided for them. Otherwise, they would not know where to go in their discussions and reflections, thus consequently making

their learning and exchanging aimless and blind. So it is advisable to educate them with the basic theories, strategies and skills, let them know what the direction and standards are in their exploration. Besides translation practices and comments on it, some lectures in this respect should be added to their class so as to let them have the preparation of know-why in additional to know-how. At this point, a good balance between practice and theory is expected to be maintained in the teaching process. To put it simply, with the relevant theories, one could view practical matter from a higher standing point, and hence it would be easier for students to obtain a panoramic viewpoint, offering them a good opportunity to realize a proper combination of theory and practice, and acquiring both know-how and know-why. In so doing, students will get sufficiently prepared for effective discussion and rapid progress in their competence development.

### **IV. PEDAGOGICAL DESIGNS FOR FACILITATING THE TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS**

Based on the detailed arrangement of the teaching above, a good pedagogical design is urgently needed to ensure the effectiveness of the whole teaching and learning interaction. Or in other words, we say a design at a higher level should be considered as the indispensable supplement to this cooperative teaching pattern.

#### *A. Creating a social constructive environment*

As Kiraly puts it, "in recent years, it has become a commonplace in educational psychology that knowledge is constructed by learners, rather than being simply transmitted to them by their teacher." (2000: 1) Thus it is found that a social constructive environment plays an indispensable role in facilitating translation teaching. In practice, teaching translation just means offering students the translation materials and let them seize the opportunity to share their translations and have a thorough discussion in any forms on them. In this process, students are comparing, sharing, arguing with each other, they all want to persuade others to believe that their own translations are better. By nature, it is obvious that in this way a social constructive atmosphere has been unconsciously established with teachers' guidance and instructions. To improve students' competence for selecting and evaluating translations is surely dependent on how active the students are and interactive the atmosphere is. The more they communicate, the better they will understand what a better translation is like, the faster they can improve their competence for selection and evaluation of translations.

### B. *Sharing students' opinions of decision-making process*

Translating, by any means, is a decision-making process which determines the quality of its outcome (Levy, 2000). It is these factors a translator consider in this process that ensures what translation will be produced. To what extent, for what reasons a translator choose this version instead of another is a full reflection of this process. To admit or not, any translator has his/her criteria and standards when they are going through the forest of these relevant factors. To understand a translator how to work means to know how he/she apply these criteria and standards to his/her practice. If each student shares one's details of the decision-making process with others, all together students who join this social interaction will surely gradually come a step closer to the perfect translation (if there were). Through this kind of socially constructive learning, students' evaluating and selecting competences will be accelerated effectively.

### C. *Adopting authentic translating task in teaching*

As Richard once said, "Translating may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos" (1953: 247). Therefore, no matter how perfect the theory is, it is impossible to cover all cases and problems translators may come across in reality. More often than not, some translators even think theories are useless in their practice due to their weak interpretive and instructional power. Knowing theories or not doesn't have any impact on their translating. Admittedly, no theory can solve all problems in translating, but to put it to an extreme like this is a little bit exaggerated and unjustified. The functions of translation theories are undeniable, the only matter is that their seeming uselessness is due to its own imperfection. They are not in fact totally mature, they are growing up like anything else. As the future practitioner, what students need to know is to experience and accumulate sufficient exceptions and sample cases. It is in this way that they will gradually become experienced and know how to deal with the problematic matters in their translating which they can't find the direct guidance from the theories they have learned. So the best way to facilitate students' competence development in translating is to adopt authentic translating tasks. Since the authentic tasks are all purpose-oriented, aiming to meet the realistic demand from the market, they must consist of all problems and difficulties in reality, which can serve as the live material for students to try, to observe, to understand what the real situation is and then finally form their own ways in dealing with those matters. Translation market is the most decisive touchstone for translations and furthermore, translators' competence. If we take a reverse viewpoint, from market to the classroom, the value of the authentic task can be seen

tremendously and clearly. Or in other words, the adoption of the authentic tasks in translation teaching is the most effective way by so far to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the classroom and the market.

## V. CONCLUSION

Translation teaching is implemented in a limited time span. So it is impossible to improve so many necessary components of translation competence at the same time. Against this background, it is very necessary to determine what the most important component is of these ingredients. Through careful analysis, we regard the transfer competence as the only one that can distinguish translation from other similar activities. So translation teaching should accordingly concentrate on this point. In order to improve the transfer competence, students should develop at least two or more translations in each case, and thus they can strengthen their evaluating and appreciating ability to increase the selective competence, knowing how to find out the better translations from those available. To this purpose, it is advisable to let students share their translations together to lay the foundation for discussion and appreciation, to share their decision-making experience and process to strengthen their know-how knowledge, and finally with the theories given by teachers, they achieve the improvement in their transfer competence. To facilitate the effectiveness of this constructive teaching and learning process, it is wise to offer students the opportunity to learn something about the translation theories as the preparatory work for though-provoking discussion and exchange. What is more important is that authentic translation tasks should be adopted so as students could gain the live experience and gradually know how to deal with practical problems they can't solve with what they have learned and experienced from textbooks and translation theories.

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