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Translator as researcher: perspectives on training and life-long professional improvement of translators

Senem Öner^{a*}

^a*Istanbul Arel University, Faculty of Science and Letters, İstanbul 34537, Turkey*

Abstract

This paper provides a teaching/learning framework to be applied specifically for helping translation students develop translation-oriented research competence. The results of the analysis of the in-class and out-of-class activities designed for observing the development of translation-oriented research competence are discussed with a special focus on the ways of providing students with the insights into the essential requirements of life-long professional improvement as translators.

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1. Introduction

Translation competence and the ways of developing it have been a controversial issue among translation scholars and translator trainers. A consensus on the definition of translation competence has not been reached, however there is an agreement that it consists of sub-competences such as linguistic, cultural, textual, subject, research, and transfer competence (Schäffner & Adab, 2000: ix) or such as communicative and textual competence, cultural competence, subject area competence, instrumental and professional competence, psycho-physiological or attitudinal competence, interpersonal competence and strategic competence (Kelly in Way, 2008: 91). The compartmentalization of translation competence illustrates the complexity of translation and hence the need to handle the challenging requirements of this complexity in translator training programs.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 212 860 04 80; fax: +90 212 860 04 81.

E-mail address: senemoner@arel.edu.tr

Treatment of translation in all its aspects and helping translation students become competent translators can be said to be the general aim of translator training programs. The realization of such an aim is not easy and requires clearly defining translation competence and its sub-competences, the ways of building and developing them and evaluating the products and performance of the students.

Dynamic nature of the translation industry adds further challenges for translator trainers. The working conditions of translators are changing due to social and technological developments and it is believed that “translation competence can no longer be defined in isolation but must be viewed in relation to the requirements of a rapidly developing information society” (Anderman & Rogers, 2000: 63). Hence the task of the translator trainers is getting complicated as well as that of the translators and reserving room for possible future challenges has become another requirement in translator training.

Taking departure from this requirement, this paper aims at providing a teaching/learning framework to be applied specifically for helping translation students develop research competence. Second part of the paper is focused on the definition and importance of research competence as a sub-competence of translation competence. In the third part, the analysis of the results of the in-class and out-of-class activities designed for observing the development of research competence is presented. The last part is devoted to the discussion on the results of the activities and suggestions concerning the ways of providing students with the insights into the essential requirements of life-long professional improvement.

2. Research Competence in the Context of Translation and Translator Training

Research competence in the context of translation, i.e. translation-oriented research competence is among the sub-competences of translation competence in general. Translation-oriented research competence is the ability to apply the required research knowledge and skills for translation purposes and enables the translator to act like a “competent researcher” who knows “what to research, where to research and how to research by using textual clues, his/her world knowledge and good judgment” (İnce & Bengi-Öner, 2009: 162).

No sub-competence is enough in isolation and the interaction between the sub-competences is crucial. Still, more stress should be laid on translation-oriented research competence which can be thought of as a complementary competence needed to cope with the extremely diversified requirements of translation in today’s and future’s world of communication. This is the link between the increasing importance of this specific competence and the ever changing social, cultural, economic and technological circumstances that directly and/or indirectly affect/change translational processes and the job of translators whose “mindset is an assemblage of everything that is worth communicating from one lingua-culture to another” (Neubert, 2000: 3).

Accordingly, focusing on this specific sub-competence might be significant in helping translation students become aware of the fact that they are required to be able to continuously adapt themselves to changing translation/communication situations and to carry out diversified processes involved therein. For this reason, it seems to be useful also to provide translation students with a core perspective from the very beginning of the training process: a perspective that the only unchangeable rule in the context of translation (activity and profession) is that nothing is unchangeable and that they will have to adapt themselves to change all throughout their careers as translators.

Specialization is the trend in the contemporary global world where “more and more experts are proud that they know more and more about less and less, their speciality is their expertise” as opposed to translators who are “actually supposed to have specialist knowledge about more and more” (3). In another study (Öner, 2013) on the question of specialization in translator training and the translator’s scope of expertise, I described the identity of the translator as a *changeful* one and argued that translator training programs are basically responsible for helping translation students develop a core specialization in fulfilling the changing requirements of various fields and sub-fields of specialization.

This is precisely the point where the problem of specialization in translator training and the special importance of translation-oriented research competence become related. For, this competence might be indispensable for the

aim of training translators competent to cope with the challenges to be posed by “endless jungle of areas and processes that crop up in ever-new ways in the job of the translator” (Neubert, 2000: 3).

3. Building and Developing Translation-Oriented Research Competence: A Preliminary Study

In what follows, the results of the in-class and out-of-class activities designed for observing the development of translation-oriented research competence of the students on the basis of the said relationship and the assumed complementary role of translation-oriented research competence are presented and discussed with a focus on the ways of providing translation students with the insights into the essential requirements of life-long professional improvement.

3.1. Profile of the Students and the Method

The framework proposed in this paper is based on a study piloted in the 2013 Spring Semester in a translation course offered to the second-year students at the Department of Translation and Interpreting at İstanbul Arel University. The study involved 15 students enrolled in the class. The mother tongue of all the participating students was Turkish and English was their first foreign language and they had previously taken courses on translation-oriented text analysis, linguistics, comparative syntax, comparative literature, media studies and anthropology of language.

The students were not unfamiliar with translation-oriented research requirements and techniques since they had been basically covered especially in courses on translation-oriented text analysis. However in the study the students were not assumed to have completed the process of developing the competence in question but they are regarded to be in the process of building it.

In order to find out whether the students have been developing translation-oriented research competence and the awareness thereof, two English source texts (ST) were selected to be translated into Turkish for the study which was planned to last for four weeks during which the class met once a week for 150 minutes each. In the first week, an online help manual (ST1) (Adobe.com) was given to the students and the distinctive features of the text were discussed in class. The students were asked to translate the text from English into Turkish and submit the translation in the following week with a report on the translation process. The translation of the text was indeed available on the internet but this information was not provided to the students and the students were expected to find it by themselves. Same procedure was followed for ST2 (“Grace, space, pace.”), an advertising slogan, in the following weeks. Last week of the study was devoted to the general discussion on the two translation activities.

3.2. Selection of the Source Texts, Briefs and Skopos

According to the categorization by Katharina Reiss, there are four text types: informative type for the communication of content, expressive type for the communication of artistically organized content, operative type for the communication of content with a persuasive character and mixed type (Reiss, 2000: 163-164). Viewed according to this categorization, ST1 is an instructive text of operative type and ST2 is a text of mixed type, being both operative and expressive. The source texts were given to the students with briefs. In the brief for ST1, the students were asked to translate the content of the webpage into Turkish to be published on the official website (in Turkish) of Adobe for the general audience who would like to use the Flash Player Program while in the brief for ST2, the students were asked to translate the Jaguar advertising slogan into Turkish to be used by the Jaguar Company in an advertising campaign in Turkey and the students were asked to determine the skopos of each translation on the basis of their analysis of the source texts and the briefs.

3.3. Evaluation Criteria (EC)

The three criteria determined specifically for the evaluation of the students' translation-oriented research competence are as follows:

EC1: Did the student research unknown vocabulary/terms/phrases by using monolingual dictionaries, parallel texts and other relevant sources in addition to bilingual dictionaries?

EC2: Did the student research known vocabulary/terms/phrases if necessary?

EC3: Did the student research the subject matter of the source text in addition to vocabulary/terms/phrases?

3.4. Evaluating the Results of the Activities

The number of the students who submitted both their translations and reports was 10 for ST1 and 10 for ST2. The students who submitted only the translations were excluded from the analysis. The research process reports were written either in Turkish or English and the Turkish ones were translated into English by the researcher. Table 1 and Table 2 below show the results of the analysis of the translations and research process reports.

Table 1. Results of the analysis of the research process reports for ST1

EC	Number of the students who fulfilled the EC	Number of the students who could not fulfil the EC
EC1	7	3
EC2	5	5
EC3	5	5

Table 2. Results of the analysis of the research process reports for ST2

EC	Number of the students who fulfilled the EC	Number of the students who could not fulfil the EC
EC1	9	1
EC2	5	5
EC3	8	2

The results presented in the tables above demonstrate that EC1 was fulfilled by the majority of the students for the two source texts. The evaluation criterion that ranked second in terms of fulfillment is EC3, followed by EC2 that ranked third.

The fulfillment of EC1 by the majority of the students shows that most of the students developed awareness of the importance of using additional sources and not limiting their vocabulary/term research to dictionaries, especially bilingual ones and put this awareness into practice. The following comment of one of the students who fulfilled EC1 with respect to ST1 is a revealing example of this awareness:

“Informative and operative texts function by means of common terms. As our source text was the ‘Help’ section of Adobe Flash Player, I first conducted research on the internet to find out what Flash Player is and what the function of Flash Player is. Then I came across the Turkish translation of the source text, but there were some parts that I did not find appropriate and I tried to make my translation decisions according to the common usages in the parallel texts on information technology.”

As can be seen in the above comment what shaped the decisions of the student concerning terms was the results to be obtained by means of parallel text research. This comment is also an example of the awareness of the need to research the subject matter of the text (function and use, in this context) which corresponds to EC2.

The following comment of another student who fulfilled EC1 with respect to ST2 is another example of the awareness concerning research on unknown vocabulary and the role of parallel texts:

“I found out that the word ‘space’ had been added to the slogan and the slogan consisted of ‘grace’ and ‘pace’ before. Bearing this in mind, I wanted to take a look at the slogans of other automobile brands and I examined the Turkish advertising slogans of other brands. I saw that the slogans were mostly short and effective. I started my translation in the light of all these information.”

EC2 was fulfilled by half of the students and hence was not fulfilled by another half. This shows that the awareness of the need to research known vocabulary in relation to the context and skopos of the translation was not at a desired level. The comments of two students who failed to fulfill EC2 with respect to ST1 are shown below:

Ex.1 *“Generally, the text was very easy. I didn’t have difficulty in translating the menu parts. We could find words that gave the Turkish meaning literally.”*

Ex.2 *“While translating the text, firstly I looked at the meanings of the words. I generally preferred the meanings related to computer because this is a computer program. I did not research the meanings related to other things.”*

The deficiency in research on known vocabulary seems to be resulted in certain translation errors in the translation of the students whose comments are given above. For instance, the student (in Ex. 1) translated //Corporate Solutions// as //İşletme Çözümleri// (Business Solutions) instead of //Kurumsal Çözümler// which has become the standard equivalent for //Corporate Solutions//. The student (in Ex. 2) translated //Was this helpful?// as //Yardımcı oluyor mu?// (“Is it helping”, when translated literally) without making research on the use of this sentence consisting of ‘known’ words in the information technology texts, especially in the help pages of websites. This example strikingly shows how deficient research affects translation and prevents the student from producing an operative text free of ambiguity. The students who made research on this sentence through parallel texts translated this question as either //Bu yararlı oldu mu?// or //Bu bilgi yararlı oldu mu?//.

The comments of two students who fulfilled EC2 with respect to ST1 display, on the other hand, a developed awareness of the need to research known vocabulary and a higher degree of accuracy concerning the translation of terms and field-specific phrases:

Ex.1 *“At first, I translated ‘Sign in’ as //Oturum aç// without thinking on it. However, when I searched it on Google the result was like this: 21.700.000 entries for ‘Oturum aç’, 138.000.000 entries for ‘Giriş’ and 18.800.000 entries for ‘Giriş yap’.*

Ex.2 *“Before translating ‘latest version of Flash Player’, I researched ‘son sürümü’ and ‘en son sürümü’ because computer programs are changing continuously. I found 190.000 entries for ‘son sürümü’ and 249.000 entries for ‘en son sürümü’ and I used ‘en son’.*

The significant point in the above comments is that both students made their translation decisions on the basis of their research on words or phrases they had already known. What is more, these students mentioned in their reports that they had found the existing Turkish translation but they felt the need to check further what they found or what they already knew in order to make their final decision.

As for EC3, the number of the students who fulfilled the criterion was slightly higher than those who did not. This shows that the awareness of the need to research the subject matter of the source text in addition to vocabulary/terms/phrases was close to the desired level as compared to the case related to EC2. The comment of a student who failed to fulfill EC3 with respect to ST1 is shown below:

“In the text there was a box that included an acronym as OS about which I did not have any information. At the end of my research, I found out that it is ‘operating system’ and I translated it as ‘işletim sistemi (operating system)’. I did not use an acronym because we use ‘işletim sistemi’ instead of ‘İS’ in Turkish frequently.”

In fact the translation error that existed in the translation of this student was a common one that appeared in most of the translations of ST1, i.e. most of the students translated the content of the said box into Turkish. However, one of the students who carried out further research on the ‘real operation’ of the Flash Player program found out that the box in question should not be translated into Turkish and should be left as it is because that part of the software did not support the Turkish language. The comment of the student is as follows:

“At first I translated the words in the box into Turkish. But then I tried to install the program and found that the words in the box remained in English. Then I researched the language options of the program and learnt that that part was not supported in Turkish. So I did not translate it into Turkish.”

This comment and the resulting translation decision is a highly important example of the desired research behavior/perspective hence competence in the context of translation. For, in this example, the student decided to do something more than terminology research through dictionaries and/or parallel texts. It should also be noted that this student was also one of those who found the existing Turkish translation on the internet. Despite this fact, rather than stopping the research process at that point, the student tried to install or ‘operate’ the program in order to be completely sure of the appropriateness of the translation decision in terms of achieving the skopos of the translation: to make it possible for the Turkish-speaking target audience to use the program.

The number of the students who fulfilled EC3 in the translation process pertaining to ST2 was high compared to the number of those who fulfilled the same criterion while translating ST1. The following comments of the students who fulfilled EC3 with respect to ST2 are revealing examples of the awareness of the need to make research on the subject matter, in this case the product in the advertising slogan:

Ex.1 *“When we looked at the slogan we could easily understand the meaning of each word. But the slogan is not only related to the meaning of the words. It's related to the history of Jaguar.”*

Ex.2 *“Before translating the slogan, I had to decide the way I should use in the translation process. The slogan consisted of only three words. But these were not only words but the summary of Jaguar's history, culture and features. Firstly, I started to research Jaguar's history on the internet.”*

Ex.3 *“Before starting to translate the slogan, I watched documentaries about jaguar (as an animal) and wondered whether there were common features between this animal and Jaguar as a car brand.”*

It is understood from the above comments that the students gave priority to researching the history and features of Jaguar (both as an animal and a car) over looking up the words in the dictionary at the beginning of their research process and that the research they conducted on the individual words in the slogan was influenced by the information they gathered from the sources on the history and features of the product. The following comments of two other students also exemplify this process:

Ex.4 *“Although the slogan was short, it was one of the most difficult texts we translated. It is easier to translate long texts but this one was a slogan consisting of three rhyming words. The use of ‘grace’, ‘space’ and ‘pace’ was not coincidence.”*

Ex.5 *“The words in the source text were selected successfully and used effectively. They attract the attention of the target audience. I had to choose that kind of words in order to create the same effect in Turkish. First I thought that this slogan was related to the brand's history and I researched the history of Jaguar. But I realized that the slogan was not related to the history of Jaguar. And I changed the way I researched. I found that in some motor vehicle magazines, the advertising slogans of luxury cars such as Jaguar were analyzed. In a magazine I found that the original version of this slogan was ‘Grace, Pace.’ The word ‘space’ was added to the slogan afterwards. I did not have difficulty in understanding the meaning of ‘grace’ and ‘pace’. But ‘space’ was the word that I found most difficult and researched most. It was difficult to translate it because although the meaning of the word was very clear, I could not understand its meaning in the slogan. After a very long research, I found out that the word ‘space’ was used for the comfort of the inside of the Jaguar cars and I translated ‘space’ as ‘konfor’.”*

Ex.6 *“I found out that the word grace reflects British style and luxury with XJ models, the word ‘space’ reflects design and also refers to E-type model which was first produced as 2-seat car and then changed to 4-seat, the word ‘pace’ is related to the powerful engines of Jaguars which were built from past to present. Also, the slogan was first used when the Jaguar won an International Car Race.”*

The above comments of the students who fulfilled EC3 with respect to ST2 illustrate that the awareness of the role subject matter research plays in making translation decisions appropriate for the skopos of the translation was close to the desired level. It was observed that rather than the dictionary meanings of the words, the research on the product details shaped the decisions of the students who strived to produce a Turkish slogan which is at the same time creative, catchy and faithful to the function of the source slogan.

4. Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations

The results of the present study carried out to find out whether the students have been developing translation-oriented research competence and the awareness thereof suggest that majority of the students have developed the competence in question and that this competence was reflected positively on the translation they produced, i.e. the translation product. The results also suggest that asking students to reflect on and report their translation, research and decision-making processes has the potential to contribute to the development of awareness of research competence and its role in terms of helping students explain/justify their translation decisions confidently.

It should be noted that among the participating students, there were also ones who could not produce a translation that achieved the translation skopos even though they fulfilled the evaluation criteria. In those cases the problem stemmed from deficiencies in other sub-competences of the general translation competence such as transfer and/or linguistic competence. This shows that research competence alone is not sufficient for the production of a translation that meets the requirements of the skopos for which the effective interaction of all the sub-competences is needed.

Nevertheless, since the study focused on research competence, the main aim was to try to observe the behavior of the trainee translators who are expected to become competent researchers in the context of translational activity. This was also the reason underlying the selection of the source texts which primarily required due research at lexical level. Even so, the lengthy reports of most of the students especially on the research process of ST2 which consisted of only three words evidence how extensive a research can get depending on text-specific research requirements.

On the basis of the above considerations, it is suggested that more room should be made for in-class and out-of class activities that aim at identifying, building and improving research competence in translation training courses. This would also require a reflection by the translator trainers on the selection of texts and design of activities that would contribute to the achievement of the said aim.

Special focus on translation-oriented research competence might be indispensable especially for preparing the students for the ever increasing number and type of specialization texts and all related translational processes and for the changing nature of translation-related activities in the face of changing social, cultural and technological circumstances. If translator training is considered as a process of enabling students to acquire a wide perspective as to both the existing and future requirements of the translation profession along with helping them develop translation competence, more focus on activities on translation-oriented research competence might help students gain a perspective that they have to improve their research knowledge and skills not only until graduation from the university but all throughout their professional lives and that they need this specific competence in order to become and remain as translators as researchers.

The present study has certain limitations: It involved a limited number of students (second year students) and text/text types. The model provided in this study would be applied to larger and more diversified groups of trainee translators with a higher number of texts and evaluation criteria. Comparative studies can also be conducted with a focus on the level of this specific competence between trainee translators and professional translators which would provide further insights into the ways of identifying the development of and/or building/improving translation-oriented research competence.

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