Teaching Translation from Spanish to English

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CHAPTER 3

CAN TRANSLATION BE TAUGHT?

Translation, unfortunately, is something you learn only by doing.
(William Weaver, translator of The Name of the Rose)

Much as I admire the work of William Weaver, my own experience denies his statement. Many professional translators, like Weaver, suggest that translating is an art that requires aptitude, practice, and general knowledge, and that the ability to translate is a gift that you either do or do not have. Lanna Castellano doubts whether a translator can be useful before the age of thirty and concludes that maturity is not reached until fifty (1988: 133). I was not trained as a translator, but my reading and research on translation and translation theory have made me a better translator. However, it has taken a very long time. If I had had a teacher to guide me and show how insights from communication theory, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and semiotics can illuminate the translation process, I might have matured as a translator more quickly. Granted that the linguistic competence and encyclopedic knowledge of undergraduate trainee translators is limited by their youth, translation programs can help to speed up their maturing process by providing them with mental maps so that they can recognize the priorities of any translation situation.

In Europe, at least half of the classes at most schools of translation and interpreting are "practical" translation classes. However, these classes should enrich translation competence in the wide sense. According to Cristina Nord, of the Heidelberg School of Translators,

The translation exercises develop and enrich not only translation competence in the narrow sense, i.e. transfer competence, but also, wherever necessary, other translation relevant competences, such as (a) linguistic competence in the native language (L1) and in the foreign language (L2) with regard to formal and semantic aspects of vocabulary and grammar, language varieties,

4. See also his translations of Italo Calvino and Primo Levi.
register and style, text-type conventions, etc., (b) cultural competence (e.g. studies about the target culture ranging from everyday life to social and political institutions), (c) factual competence in sometimes highly specialised fields (e.g. knowledge of matrimonial law, economic policies, balance of trade, information technology, etc.), and (d) technical competence for documentation and research (use of dictionaries, bibliographic methods, storage of information, etc.). (Nord, 1991: 146)

Translation programs can help students to improve their translating skills. The foundation of schools of translation around the world suggests that this principle is accepted by a wide body of opinion. However, the effectiveness of many translation programs may be questioned: “Existe, pues, a mi juicio, una insuficiencia de planteamientos pedagógicos, ya que, excepto algunos casos aislados . . . no existe una propuesta clara de los objetivos de aprendizaje, sus contenidos, los medios, la progresión, la evaluación” (Hurtado Alber, 1995: 53).

There is a need to define teaching objectives as a framework to structure and systematize translation programs more clearly. Too many translation classes rely on sight translation of a text in class (traducción a la vista), which is hardly more efficient as a learning process than is gaining experience through a work placement.

TRADITIONAL TRANSLATION EXERCISES AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

The traditional translation exercise as a part of secondary-school language classes has given teaching translation a bad reputation. The translating of fragments of non-authentic texts out of context to test foreign-language competence is both boring and unenlightening. Some of these fragments have become the basis of popular jokes. In English, "La plume de ma tante" is sometimes used to refer to something that is totally irrelevant. Los toreros muertos, a contemporary Spanish rock group, have composed a song made up of these fragments from Spanish textbooks that have passed into folklore, with lyrics such as "My tailor's rich and my mother's in the kitchen." The song might be considered a non-text because it seems to have no semantic coherence, and yet, as a semiotic entity, it expresses the frustrations of young people who have to go through an incomprehensible educational system that fills them with useless facts.

For hundreds of years, translation was the basis of language learning, and even the basis of most other fields of knowledge, because many medieval universities developed out of what were originally schools of translation. Right up to the first part of this century, “the Greats” (Greek, Latin, and philosophy) was considered the best degree for the brightest students at Oxford and Cambridge. “However, over the centuries translation became fossilized. It became less and less associated with the excitement of new discoveries, more and more with the tedium of book learning. What should have been a vital and challenging discipline had degenerated into a pointless routine exercise, a chore, a punishment” (Duff, 1989: 5).
In his classic *The Practical Study of Languages*, Sweet recommended a judicious use of translation into the native language and maintained that translation into the foreign language should be undertaken only if and when a thorough knowledge of the foreign language is already guaranteed—“translating into a partially known language being an impossible task . . . that can be accomplished only under restrictions which make it either an evasion or a failure” (Sweet, 1964: 3).

Developments in language teaching in the mid-twentieth century eliminated translation from the syllabus. The Direct Method was developed out of the American Army Specialized Training Program used in the Second World War. This method, based on Bloomfield's (1933) structuralism and Skinner's (1957) behaviourism, banned the native language from the classroom and proclaimed the predominance of oral language. Language laboratories were given a prominent role in the language class, and students were drilled using stimulus and response.

Cognitive-code language-learning methods began to appear at the beginning of the 1970s. These methods are based on transformational and generative grammar and gestalt and cognitive psychology. The cognitive trend in language learning replaced mechanical pattern drills with exercises that develop a conscious understanding and control of the structures of the foreign language. The learner is encouraged to use linguistic structures actively and creatively in a situation. Some cognitive methods have allowed the carefully dosed use of translation at advanced levels. The exception is the community language-learning method, which is based on oral translation and the learner's own communicative needs right from the beginning of the learning process (La Forge, 1979).

Functionalist language-learning methods developed out of the work of linguists such as M.A.K. Halliday (1973). Educators soon saw the advantages of teaching language in context and for a purpose. The functional-language teaching proposals made by Widdowson (1974) include translation, in particular for teaching English for special purposes, such as scientific English for university students.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) compiled a guide for teaching English using exercises based on different theoretical approaches. Translation exercises were included. Rivers (1972) called translation “the contrastive technique par excellence,” but at the same time she suggested translation exercises that were contextualized in such a way as to motivate the students.

The ideal of the Direct Method was never to put learners in a situation in which they were likely to make mistakes, because behaviourist psychology indicated that making mistakes only reinforced bad habits. From a cognitive point of view, mistakes are no longer considered to be always negative; rather, they are seen as a necessary part of the learning process:

*On ne saurait l'éviter parce qu'elle fait partie du processus normal d'apprentissage. En outre, elle constitue un facteur du progrès non négligeable et une excellente filière de formation pédagogique puisqu'elle permet à l'apprenant*
de vérifier la résistance des hypothèses qu’il forme sur le système de la langue
et d’en avancer d’autres. (Galisson, 1980: 56)

The Direct Method never really took hold in Spain, partly because there were not enough language teachers who could conduct a class in English without resorting to Spanish. In the last two decades or more, however, the predominance of communicative, functionalist language-teaching textbooks in Spain has, on the whole, driven old-style translation exercises out of the modern language class. Nevertheless, some teachers in Spain must still be using them, because traditional translation manuals are still being published.

A recent example of this approach is the Manual de traducción inversa español-ingles by José Merino and Patrick Sheerin (1989). The first seventy-five pages of exercises are dedicated to palabras básicas, mostly prepositions and adverbs (a, al, algo [de], algún, alguno, aún, todavía, ya, and so on). The words are presented in short sentences, with the Spanish on one page and the English on the other—for example,

1. Cuesta a cien pesetas la pieza.
1. It costs a hundred pesetas apiece.
3. ¿Te parece que vayamos a Roma de vacaciones?
3. What do you think of us going to Rome for holidays?

The next sixty pages are dedicated to puntos gramaticales: adjetivos, adverbios, artículos, condicional, estilo directo, indirecto, futuro, and so on—for example,

618. Si él tiene razón, ella está equivocada.
618. If he is right, she is wrong.
953. ¡Ojalá no sufras todo lo que yo he sufrido!
953. May you not suffer all [that] I have suffered!

It is hard to imagine how these exercises are going to help students to translate better or to communicate in English, either orally or by translating. Yet the manual then “progresses” to translating fragmentos literarios, including poems by such authors as Juan Ramón Jiménez. These texts have a dominant expressive function that would be difficult even for a native English speaker to translate. The only guide given to the student is “lea y traduzca.”

In Spanish secondary schools, Latin is still a compulsory subject in which fifteen-year-olds have to translate sentences out of context such as: Acies planitiem occupat. → The army in formation occupies the plain. (Which army? Where was the plain? When? Who cares?)

A NEW APPROACH TO TRANSLATION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASS

Recently, some communicative, functionalist language teachers (Duff, 1989; Galisson and Costa, 1976; Greilet, 1991; Lavault, 1985) have reconsidered using translation as an important resource for language learning, introducing translation by
imaginative and communicative preparatory exercises. Translating authentic texts for a purpose is a communicative activity. Indeed, it is more natural and necessary than are many of the activities invented for language learners. The pragmatic dimension of translation invites all kinds of discussions: there is no such thing as a perfect translation. It is not necessary for all of the work in class to be done alone and in writing; oral exercises can be prepared for pair, group, and class work. Depending on the students' needs and the particular contrasts between language pairs, the teacher can select material to illustrate aspects of language and structure with which the students have difficulties. By working through these difficulties in the A language, students learn to see the difference between rules and usage.

Alan Duff's *Translation* (1989) is a resource book for teachers who wish to use translation as a language-learning activity. It is aimed at students with a wide range of A languages, and the source material is all in English. The final step of most of the exercises is translation from B language to A language, but the main purpose of most of the work is to improve the foreign language—in this case, English.

*The Third Language*, also by Duff (1981), investigated the problems of all translators when translating into English (even when it is their A language). It is a very useful reference book, defining three qualities that are essential to translating: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility. Duff believes that these qualities are also essential in any language learning, and this is one of the reasons that he advocates the use of translation in the language class: "It trains the learner to search (flexibility) for the most appropriate words (accuracy) to convey what is meant (clarity). This combination of freedom and constraint allows the students to contribute their thoughts to a discussion which has a clear focus: the text" (Duff, 1989: 7). Duff's pre-translation exercises in English provide an interesting approach to improving the B language: expanding knowledge of vocabulary, register, word order, reference, linking, tense, mood and aspect, idioms, and varieties of language. The translation focus of these exercises makes them ideal material for language classes in a translator training program.

**Teaching Professional Translation**

A clear distinction must be made between teaching translation as part of a training course for professional translators and teaching translation to improve B-language performance. The aim of professional translation teachers is to have their students learn to translate (translation is an end in itself). The object of pedagogical translation is to use translation as a way to improve linguistic skills (translation is the means to an end). In theory, this distinction is widely accepted in most translation faculties in the West, although, in practice, many prose-translation classes do not go beyond the aims of pedagogical translation.

A further confusion seems to have arisen in recent years between teaching translation theory (theories about translation and related disciplines), teaching
methodology (understood as translation "strategies" such as transposition, modification, and compensation, which are in fact a taxonomy of results rather than processes), and teaching translating (criteria for selecting texts, how to approach a text, progression, class techniques, and organization of a teaching module so that students understand the why as well as the how) (Hurtado Albir, 1994a). This confusion about aims and a real concern to provide a structure for the translation class mean that translation teachers may end up either teaching translation theory or lists of taxonomical translation strategies.

The translation-teaching methodology proposed in this book is based on learner-centred objectives defined as a function of the skills needed by translators: ideal translator communicative competence. Translation theory (the study of the process [translating] and the product [translations]) is used to define translator communicative competence: extralinguistic (pragmatic) knowledge and documentation skills; linguistic competence in both languages; reading skills in the SL and writing skills in the TL; skill in switching codes, registers, and languages; and awareness of interference at all levels.

The task of the translator trainer is to organize, structure, and present the content of the course so as to achieve the learner-centred objectives. Ideal translator competence is, of course, an ideal and cannot be reached in a four-year degree program. The organization, structuring, and presentation of each teacher's program will depend on the levels of student-translator competence, the general socio-historical context, and the goals of the class. Directionality is certainly an important parameter that should be taken into account when preparing a translation program. If the goal is not BL → AL but AL → BL—that is, if the direction has been changed—this should affect the teaching methodology. So far, however, little attention has been paid to this question. The two most common reactions in the professional prose-translation class have been either to teach pedagogical translation, or to present the students with tasks that are completely beyond their capabilities.