CHAPTER 4
TEACHING PROFESSIONAL PROSE TRANSLATION

Despite the importance of prose translation, it has generally been ignored by translation theory. Nor has much attention been paid to developing a specific teaching methodology, although prose translation is included in all of the European schools of translation. Contemporary theories give the impression that directionality is not important—and perhaps it is not, from a strictly theoretical point of view. A professional translation into the B language should meet the requirements of the client as well as does a translation into the A language (the client being a real person who wants a specific job done—for example, an English-language menu for a restaurateur in Spain); thus, the translator will have to work within the same parameters—semiotic, pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, and lexical—and the translation process will have to pass through the same stages.

The theoretical model may be the same, but putting it into practice will be different. Some stages in the process will be easier for one translator than for the other, and vice versa. Experience has shown that native speakers of English with no training or experience in translation are unlikely to produce better Spanish-English translations than are well-trained Spanish translation graduates, for they make different mistakes and do not necessarily better preserve the function of the translation.

One goal of the European Community has been to encourage student exchanges between European countries. The Erasmus Programme, which includes grants for undergraduate exchanges within the Community, has made it possible for a great number of students to study abroad for a year. The development of student exchanges between schools of translation has meant that students in a Spanish-English translation class in Spain are often not homogeneously Spanish AL speakers; there may be quite a high percentage of English AL speakers. Therefore, the class may be inversa for some and directa for others. This situation allows teachers to analyze more clearly the effect of directionality, the practical differences, and the “mistakes” made by the different groups.

During the academic year 1991–92, one of the second-year (introductory) prose classes at the School of Translators in Barcelona included a large group of
exchange students (most of them British). Depending on the function of the text, the English AL students’ difficulties in understanding the SLT were not compensated for by their greater skill in writing in the TL. A full understanding of the SLT is essential in translation. Eugene Nida (1992) insists that most mistakes in translation are due to misunderstanding the SLT rather than to limited linguistic competence in the TL. The Spanish AL students did not expect to find the comprehension of SLTs as difficult as they did; they had assumed that this first part of the translation process would be easy in the prose translation class. The exchange students had such serious problems understanding SLTs that their misunderstanding often interfered with the functionality of the translation.

For example, before translating a newspaper article entitled “Un hombre providencial,” by Haro Tecglen (El País, 24 Nov. 1991), all of the students in this second-year class were given a discourse-analysis questionnaire as a pre-translation exercise. The text was about Butros Ghali, the newly elected Secretary General of the United Nations. In fact, the text was heavily ironic and its purpose was to identify Butros Ghali as providential for the United States and no one else. None of the exchange students recognized the irony, and they were convinced that Tecglen thought that Butros Ghali was the best man for the United Nations. As the English AL students did not recognize the irony, they were not able to transmit this function. In some cases, their translations were in danger of becoming non-texts, as they tried to fit the words of the text to their concept of what the text was about. (The specific difficulties of this text will be discussed in chapter 7.)

The results of the questionnaire were so unexpected that the same exercise was given to other students from the centre (see table 4.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aware of irony</th>
<th>Unaware of irony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish AL</td>
<td>Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year English B class</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-year English B class</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-year English B class</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-year French B class</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The experience of having such a high percentage of exchange students in the class certainly highlights the practical differences. Directa teachers have had similar experiences. In my opinion, although these heterogeneous classes present difficulties and force teachers to adapt their teaching methodology to this new situation, there are advantages to be gained. The presence of English-language and -culture
experts other than the teacher is a valuable resource. Activities should be organized to facilitate the interchange of knowledge and experience between the locals and the visitors within the classroom, as well as in their leisure time. The presence of English students also redresses the imbalance between *inversa* (artificial) and *directa* (real) translation classes.

The aim of this book is to establish the theoretical and methodological basis for structuring a professional prose-translation class. The students are learning to develop translator-transfer competence between Spanish and English. If all of the students possessed ideal linguistic and cultural competence in both languages, there would be no need to establish different programs for *directa* and *inversa*. The reality is, of course, different. Any teacher, like any translator, has to start with “Who does what when where why how for whom what for with what effect?” (quoted in Nord, 1991: 36).^5^

To answer these questions, the translation teacher has to work from a theoretical and methodological framework to delimit difficulties and establish progression for a particular context (place, time, students, work market). This is the order followed in the next three parts of this book: theoretical framework, methodological framework, and understanding principles and learning skills.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework (part 2) is divided into three chapters based on the different uses of the word *translation*: translation (the theory or abstract notion), translating (the process), and a translation (the text) (Bell, 1991).

**Translation (Theory)**

The theoretical approach is based on the principle that there is no perfect theory and that all theories, like all grammars, “leak” (Sapir, 1921). The aim is not to argue linguistic theory but to present tools that will aid in the development of translation skills, bearing in mind that the value of the tools depends on the validity of the theory. The section begins with a brief summary of the historical development from prescriptive to descriptive theories of translation and the relationship between the old rules about what made a “good” translation and recent descriptions of text functions. Taking into consideration the functions of prose translation, a communicative model of translation theory is considered the most adequate for teaching purposes. Recent publications that have expanded the concept of communicative

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^5^ The New Rhetoric developed the “Wh- questions” in the twentieth century, but they can be traced back to the second century B.C., when the Stoic Hermagoras of Temnos coined the formula “Quis quid quando ubi cur ad modum quibus ad nimiculis,” which was framed in a hexameter verse by Matthew of Vendome in 1170 (“Quis quid ubi quibus auxili cur quomodo quando?”).
translation make it possible to claim that the model chosen fulfills the four basic requirements of a theory: empiricism, determinism, parsimony, and generality.

**Translating (Process)**

Insights from consecutive and simultaneous interpreting and the cognitive sciences provide the basis for the description of the translation process. The École Supérieure d’Interprètes et de Traducteurs de Paris’s three-stage model (comprehension → deverb-alization → reformulation) is adapted to include discourse analysis categories, the creative role of the reader, and the importance of the *skopos*, or purpose of the translation. The stages are shown to be cascaded, a continual movement of top-down ↔ bottom-up, macrostructures ↔ microstructures.

**A Translation (Text)**

A Spanish text is analyzed to show the interdependence, text in context, of macrostructures and microstructures: pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, lexical, and formal. The consequences of this analysis for translating the text into English are then described, emphasizing the difference between standardized and non-standardized language. Finally, the same text is judged from the semiotic (intertextual) dimension of translation.

**Methodological Framework**

The methodological framework (part 3) is explored to define the contents and objectives of the prose-translation class. The methodology described is based on the definition of learner-centred objectives. Part 3 is divided into four chapters and begins with the goal of teaching translating: ideal translator communicative competence. The starting point, student-translator communicative competence and the teaching context, is then described. When general and specific objectives have been defined, the question of achieving objectives is discussed.

**Ideal Translator Communicative Competence**

The theoretical framework—in particular, the knowledge and skills needed at each stage of the translation process—provides the information needed to define ideal translator communicative competence. From this, we can deduce the general objectives of any translation program.

**Student Translator Communicative Competence**

Teaching translation into the foreign language is constrained by the limits of the students’ translator competence. The description of this competence gives the starting point of the learning process and makes it possible to define the objectives of the prose-translation class.
THE TEACHING CONTEXT

The demands of the market and professional opportunities have to be taken into consideration in limiting the objectives. Students' motivation and expectations are another decisive factor.

ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

General learning principles have to be defined: inductive and deductive learning, the cycle of inquiry, and the dynamics of the classroom. Translation strategies are defined as putting into practice the theoretical principles that allow correct development of the translation process. These principles are used to delimit translation difficulties and establish an ordered and rational learning progression. The students learn to use these strategies through a variety of activities, in a range of discourse fields. Wherever possible, the activities and fields chosen are directly related to the employment opportunities available to prose translators.

UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPLES AND LEARNING SKILLS

Part 4 of this book applies the theoretical, methodological, and contextual conclusions reached in parts 2 and 3 to selecting and organizing the content of teaching translation from Spanish to English. The content is divided into five chapters: “Words in Context,” “Sentences in Context,” “Deverbalization,” “Restricted Codes and Transcoding,” and “Cohesion and Coherence.” The twenty-nine teaching units in these chapters are prefaced by objectives, tasks, and commentaries for the teacher and include forty-eight task sheets that show how the material is presented to students.