CHAPTER 9

STUDENT TRANSLATOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The constraints of translating into the foreign language are obviously important when considering student-translator communicative competence. The current trend in translation theory is to regard translating into the foreign language as unsatisfactory and artificial. This is made explicit in UNESCO’s 1976 “Recommendations on the Legal Protection of Translators and Translations”: “A translator should, as far as possible, translate into his, or her, mother tongue or into a language of which he or she has a mastery equal to that of his or her mother tongue” (quoted in Picken, 1989: 245).

The assumption that direct translation is the only viable professional option is particularly dominant in English-speaking countries. The Institute of Linguists’ diploma in translation tests only translation into the candidate’s mother tongue or language of habitual use; “above all, never ask a translator to translate from his/her own language” (Keith, 1989: 163).

However, translation from and into both classical and modern languages played a central role in European education right up to the first part of this century. Learning Latin and Greek was the basis of the sixteenth-century educational reform. The future Queen Elizabeth I was made to translate from English into Latin verses in the style of Virgil. Very little distinction was made between translating into or out of the foreign language—so much so that, even today, modern-language graduates have problems finding an English equivalent for the Spanish traducción directa or traducción inversa; they are not accustomed to talking about prose translation but just translation.

Furthermore, most translation training programs today include inversa. It is a popular subject with students because they learn so much and know that most translators have to translate at some point in their careers into their B language, particularly if their B language is English.

As was explained in the introduction, I have not adopted the term “service translation” (Newmark, 1988: 52) because it suggests an extremely limited scope for
translating into the foreign language. Nevertheless, it is indeed true that many professionals only do service translations when working into the foreign language. On the other hand, we could compare *inversa* to Cinderella, the stepdaughter who was obliged to do the dirty work and yet outshone her stepsisters at the ball.  

The constraints of teaching translation from Spanish to English in undergraduate degree programs in Spain are provided by the limitations in the students' "ideal bilingual competence" and by their youth. Lanna Castellano suggests that a translator does not mature until the age of fifty (!):  

> Our profession is based on knowledge and experience. It has the longest apprenticeship of any profession. Not until thirty do you start to be useful as a translator, not until fifty do you start to be in your prime. The first stage of the career pyramid—the apprentice stage—is the time we devote to *investing in ourselves* by acquiring knowledge and experience of life. Let me propose a life path: grandparents of different nationalities, a good school education in which you learn to read, write, spell, construe and love your own language. Then roam the world, make friends, see life. Go back to education, but to take a technical or commercial degree. Spend the rest of your twenties and your early thirties in the countries whose languages you speak, working in industry or commerce but not directly in languages. Never marry into your own nationality. Have your children. Then back to a postgraduate translation course. A staff job as a translator, and then go freelance. By which time you are forty and ready to begin. (Castellano, 1988: 133)

"Get Rich—But Slow" was the title of Castellano's paper at the Second ITI Conference. Not everybody has the patience—or the opportunity—to follow the life path she suggests, and a good undergraduate translation course can provide some shortcuts and speed up the maturing process somewhat.

**STUDENT TRANSLATOR GRATAMATICAL COMPETENCE**

A profile of the average Spanish second-year student at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona starting to translate into the foreign language is as follows. A few students may be nearly bilingual in Spanish and English (parents of different nationalities, residents in English-speaking countries), but, of course, the majority are not. The majority are intelligent and hard-working. They tend to have a passion for languages and are, by nature, full of curiosity. Few of them imagine that they are

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19. Frequently, the Spanish students' *inversa* translations are functionally more effective than the English students' *directa* translations of the same text. See questionnaire on *Un hombre providencial* in the introduction.

20. The entrance requirements for English as a B language in the School of Translators were the highest of all centres in the four universities in the Barcelona University District in 1991.
going to get rich—quickly or slowly—but they do hope to find a career that they will enjoy.

**Knowledge of the SL Rules**

These students have some vocabulary, collocation, and idiomatic limitations due to their youth and lack of experience. However, they know more about the graphic, morphological, and syntactic rules of Spanish than do British students about English. This is due to the analytical nature of Spanish classes in secondary schools. They can give you the tercera persona singular del preterito pluscuamperfecto del subjuntivo of any verb and label correctly any type of complemento circunstancial. English classes for British secondary students tend to concentrate on language in use rather than language analysis.

**Knowledge of the TL Rules**

Spanish students’ knowledge of the rules of the TL has changed over the last decade. Fifteen years ago, the grammar approach to English-language teaching still dominated in Spanish secondary schools. In the last decade, communicative, functional teaching methods have taken over entirely, and students enter translator training with hardly any metalinguistic vocabulary in English. This means that first-year language-teaching programs should adapt to the times.

Previously, the first-year language teacher could enjoy the pleasant task of activating passive language skills with students who had little experience of participating in communicative situations in English. Today, students have been taught to “communicate” at school and to talk to English speakers in Spain and abroad. Therefore, the first-year language teacher is obliged to concentrate on the more formal aspects of the language. To a certain extent, the prose-translation class can contribute to this “perfecting” of the foreign language by developing accuracy and clarity (Duff, 1989: 7).

**Student Translator Sociolinguistic Competence**

**SL Utterances in Situational Context**

Given the analytical nature of their Spanish-language classes at secondary school, the students need practice in SL in use when the situational context transcends

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21. In Catalonia, the bilingual (Catalan and Spanish) background of the students causes interference between the two A languages.

22. There has been much concern in the United Kingdom about English-language standards in British schools. The Prince of Wales has made it the object of one of his campaigns. The problem in the United States seems to be even more serious.
everyday social situations, journalism, textbooks, and certain areas of literature, and training to recognize register, pragmatic purpose, and intertextuality in different text types. Perhaps their greatest limitation, due to youth and lack of experience and reading, is their knowledge of the world—of general sociohistorical contexts—that would allow them to interpret the SLT. Building up their encyclopedic knowledge within the fields that are most likely to be useful for them professionally is certainly part of the translation class.

**TL Utterances in Situational Context**

In the TL, their competence is much more limited, particularly their ability to produce utterances appropriately and their knowledge of text types.

**Student Translator Discourse Competence**

**Discourse Coherence in SLTs**

On the whole, Spanish secondary education does not give much practice in combining form and content to produce coherent spoken or written SLTs in different genres. Some individual teachers may ask for summaries and essays, but in general the course content, in all subjects, is so packed that there is little time to learn to write. Some students begin translator training with little idea of structuring a text, from the point of view of either coherence or cohesion.

**Discourse Coherence in TLTs**

The students' limitations in the SL are all the more evident in the TL. However, it is a satisfying area to work on because much progress can be made in a relatively short time. Cohesive norms in English are well defined and can be learned. The choice of which text types to work on is essential to the prose translation class; obviously, not all types are appropriate.

**Student Translator Transfer Competence**

This involves the mastery of strategies that may be used to improve communication or to compensate for communication breakdowns. These breakdowns may be caused by limiting factors in actual communication or by insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communication. The students have already had a year of translation into their A language, so they have developed certain strategies, procedures, or techniques. In the beginning, they beg for técnicas de traducción, as if there were a few simple techniques that can make translating easy. However, they must first discover and internalize the principles that lead to correct development of the translation process. In theory, these principles are not complicated, and once assimilated they seem just common sense, but, in fact, much expe-
rience is required if they are to be fully apprehended and put into practice. One of
the goals of the translation class is to delimit these principles so that the students
can fully apprehend them through personal experience and practice.

WHAT TRANSFER COMPETENCE IS NOT

When the first comparative studies of languages were formulated (see Vinay and
Darbelnet, 1958; Malblanc, 1961), it was assumed by some that translator transfer
competence had been defined. As Vinay and Darbelnet's famous book was subtitled
*Méthode de traduction*, it was assumed that the comparative description provided a
method for teaching translation.

However, as Hurtado Albir (1990b) has pointed out, this method was insufficient
theoretically and pedagogically. The theoretical basis was weak for three main
reasons. First, the comparisons were based on products, rather than on process. Sec-

ond, the comparisons were made using isolated examples out of context. Third, the
comparison fixed equivalences in a one-to-one relationship that did not take into
account fuzzy sets of language, polysemy, and ambiguity. Pedagogically, compara-
tive lists, even supposing they were pragmatically based using notional-functional
principles, could lead, in the classroom, only to learning lists by heart. It would be
impossible to list all possible equivalences for all possible contexts in the real and
fictional worlds. Comparative studies provide the teacher with material for organiz-
ing the content of a class, but not for teaching it.

One outcome of the comparative method has been the development of *strat-
egies, techniques, or procedures* to explain the structural differences between compa-

rative equivalences. The problem is that they are not really strategies, but
descriptions of results or products. If students have learned discourse analysis as a
way of translating and have to translate *¡Jesús!* in a context in which someone has
just sneezed, they do not need to know that they are applying the technique of
modulation when they write, “Bless you!” However, these strategies have been
adopted by certain Spanish authors (García Yebra, 1983; Vázquez Ayora, 1977), and
some translation teachers use these taxonomies of descriptive strategies as a basis
for teaching translation.

Brinton et al. (1981) do not use such taxonomies as a basis for their course, but
they include an appendix, “Hints on Handling, Some Useful Techniques,” which
comprises eight topics: proper names, rephrasing, omissions, insertions, transpo-
a list of eighteen “translation procedures: transference; naturalization; culture
equivalent; functional equivalent; descriptive equivalent; synonymy; through
translation; shifts or transpositions; modulation; recognized translation; transla-
tion label; compensation; componential analysis; reduction and expansion; para-
phrase; other procedures; couplets; and notes, additions, and glosses.
Of course, comparative studies can help. One of the basic translation principles is the difference between standardized and nonstandardized language. There are areas of language use that are completely standardized. For example, \textit{nivel de vida} is a standardized expression in economics and must always be translated as \textit{standard of living}. \textit{Calidad de vida} is not a standardized expression and may be translated as "quality of life," "the way people live," "the cultural aspect of life," "leisure time," and so on, depending on the context. Comparative lists can help us with standardized language. In the \textit{Collins Bilingual Dictionary}, the entry for \textit{nivel} includes \textit{nivel de vida}, while the entry for \textit{calidad} does not include \textit{calidad de vida}. Unfortunately, dictionaries cannot solve even all the problems of standardized language. Furthermore, even standardized language is not fixed for all eternity, but changes and evolves over time.