TRAINING TRANSLATORS IN SOUTH AFRICA: FIRST GLOBAL QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article questions current philosophies and practices in translator training in South Africa against the background of the international debate on translator training. It puts up for discussion the notion of a competent translator as the basis for departure in a discussion on translator training. The context within which translator training takes place is discussed, with specific reference to the South African context. The choice for a particular theory of teaching and learning, as well as assessment in translator training receives attention. The article puts forward various research questions that should be addressed in order to enhance translator training.

Key words: Translator training; socio-constructivism; cognitive approach, translation studies; higher education.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Common wisdom in translation studies has it that students learn to translate by translating, i.e. by trial and error. Common wisdom further has it that lecturers in translation studies know how students learn, as well as what to teach and how to teach. Common wisdom also holds that the lecturer is the centre of the learning process, especially as far as practical translations are concerned. Lecturers would listen to or read through students' translations patiently and do corrections by using their pre-prepared translations as standard. Common wisdom holds that what is to be assessed is the product of translation and therefore the focus is on marking for errors and deducting marks accordingly. Common wisdom further holds that lecturers know what the needs of both students and the market/society is when it comes to translation. Common wisdom also holds that translation is a cognitive process, resulting in lecturers focussing on the intellectual competence of students. Lastly, common wisdom holds that translation theory is relevant to and adequate for translation practice.

Currently, more recent common wisdom is challenging established common wisdom. Over the past 10 to 15 years, a plethora of publications have emerged, challenging the conventional wisdom on translator training. In this paper, I shall follow this trend, questioning conventional wisdom, and even questioning my own views. The aim of this questioning is to rethink the whole process of translator training in the South-African and African context in the light of the most recent global developments in translator training.

I am stressing the context because I deem it a principle of education that it should be contextually relevant. I contend that much of the philosophy, pedagogy, and even learning material in translator training in South Africa are based on Western academic notions of translation. The challenge, to my mind, is to contextualise translator training while maintaining the link with international trends. In order to do so, translator trainers need to take cognisance of all aspects of the South African and African context and not merely assume that European problems and solutions apply to the South African and African context, though I do not claim that they automatically do not apply.

In the South-African context, translation and translation studies have expanded since the adoption of the South-African Constitution, which caters for 11 official languages and various others that has to be promoted. Except for a few established courses at institutions of higher education, most training institutions have been scrambling since 1994 to compile courses and to put into place administrative systems to support these courses. However, the time has arrived to ask questions about quality assurance in this field. It is not only abroad that the relevance of translator training is being questioned (Chesterman & Wagner 2002). Discussions with language practitioners in South Africa often lead in the same direction, government posts for translators can sometimes not be filled because of a lack of qualified translators, and the quality of translated texts is often questionable. Furthermore, the market is asking: "Why can't your students translate once they have completed a course in translation at your University?"

Against the backdrop of this exposition, my aim is to provide an overview of the current global state of affairs regarding translator training by a literature overview on the topic. The literature overview will not cover all aspects of translator training, but will focus briefly on the main philosophies and approaches. I shall then bring my understanding of global issues in translator training to bear on my understanding of the South African context in which I operate. This article is explorative in nature. Its aim is to initiate a discussion between the most recent developments in translator training and the South African situation, as far as translator training at institutions of higher education is concerned. It also aims at putting up for discussion an agenda for research on translator training in South Africa.

The methodology I shall follow in this paper is that of a literature study to determine current trends in translator training. I shall endeavour to engage critically with the literature with the aim of mapping out a research program which should contribute to the knowledge base of translator training in the South African context. It should be clear that the aim of the paper is not to arrive at any clear answers, but rather to appropriate the questions that the context requires, to formulate these questions as clearly as possible, and to start a process rather than finishing it.

From these questions should flow data-based research to inform the theory and practice of translation (Kussmaul 1995:5)

2. DETERMINING THE FIELDS OF INTEREST

For anyone involved in scientific discourse, it should be obvious that any field of research is too large to handle in one chunk. It is, therefore, logical that one determines the specific field interest for a particular study. This entails selecting from an overview of the subject those areas relevant for your particular interest. In this paper, I shall only deal with translator training, not the whole field of translation studies. Reading through the material on the topic led me to discern the following topics that are relevant to translator training. It should be obvious that this discernment is based on an intellectual valuation of what the literature presents on this topic. The choice of topics itself can and should be questioned, i.e. why these and not others? To my mind, these topics would afford me the opportunity to discuss the basic values and approaches that could inform translation studies. These basic questions should not be neglected in favour of more practical nuts and bolts issues in translator training but should form the basis on which nuts and bolts issues are discussed.

The topics are:
• a view of what it entails to be a translator;
• a view of the context within which training takes place
• a view of the philosophy of teaching and learning; and
• a view on assessment.

3. A VIEW ON WHAT IT ENTAILS TO BE A TRANSLATOR

The theories of learning and curriculum design state that one should start at the end (Biggs 2002:25-29). In other words, one first determines the expected outcome of any teaching and learning process and then structures the process in order to meet the outcomes. It thus follows logically that the first step in training translators should be to determine what a translator is. What constitutes a competent translator? What are the areas of knowledge and the competencies that a professional translator needs in the South African context.

The literature shows that views on these questions have changed during the past decade or more. The mere change in terminology from translation training to translator training indicates this shift, which entails that the personality, competence, and values of the translator is the focus of attention in training (Kiraly 2000). The focus in teaching is now not so much on the product, but on the process (Kiraly 1995:11), although one cannot avoid focussing on the quality of the product.

Research has shown that translation is a process in which a translator constantly has to make choices within a social environment. Thus the translator self, as a professional person, has become the focus of research and training. Trainers do not ask only what a good translation looks like, but rather what the characteristics of a good, competent translator are. This brings into play not only linguistic competence, but also social, psychological, financial, managerial, cultural, and professional competence (Robinson 2003).

A special focus on the translator's environment accompanies the abovementioned focus on the translator. In this shift, translation is not viewed solely as an inter-linguistic endeavour, but an intercultural endeavour taking place within a social setting. This social setting includes everything from the translator's psychological make-up to possible boredom to tax laws, negotiations with clients, running a business, networking, looking for information, etc. It also relates to larger social issues such as power struggles between languages and cultures, ethics, and the role that translators play as agents of communication. The current literature on translator training thus suggests an ecological or holistic model for translator training. According to this model, translators need to be viewed in an ecological perspective, functioning as parts of a whole in society and relating to the whole of society. Their training has to equip them with the competence to function as such.

In the South African context, I suggest we ask the following questions:

- What does being a translator in South Africa and Africa entail? Does it differ from the rest of the world and if so, how?
- How do translators' views on this topic relate to the views of the market and/or the public? Do we have any idea of how the public view translations or receive translations?
- What are the professional demands on translators in South Africa?
- How does the South African context, e.g. lack of infrastructure in some areas, large distances, poverty, and the large number of official languages influence translation as a profession and how should training accommodate this?
- What are the choices translators have to make in the South African context as far as culture and ideology are concerned?
- Can we train translators to make better choices? If so, how?
- Do we need to enhance the professional self-image of translators in South Africa and if so, how?

4.   A VIEW OF THE CONTEXT IN WHICH TRAINING TAKES PLACE

The literature makes it clear that training should be related to the context in which it takes place (Kelly 2005:1). In South Africa, one has to explore this context by means of empirical research to determine what the needs are. This does not imply that the context is the only determiner of training, but it recognises that one cannot train without taking cognisance of the context. The context in which translator training takes place entails at least three aspects, namely, the student's needs, the market's needs, and the society's needs. Research indicates that lecturers do not necessarily know what students' needs are, what the levels of their knowledge are, and what they expect to learn from courses in translation studies (Li 1999).

Furthermore, the literature points to the important fact that training should be aligned to the market needs (Li 1999, Kelly 2005:52). For instance, in Hong Kong, the lack of a clear definition of commercial translation, that is, what the subject area is and how it is to be viewed, led to students not knowing what to expect from their courses (Li 1999:195). Clients and employers could also not determine the nature of the qualification or the level of competence associated with it. Apart from other implications, this indicates that courses should consciously be aligned with students' needs. The point is that lecturers, students, and the market have particular expectations concerning translators. If these expectations are not clarified, they may lead to inefficient training. For instance, there would be little use in spending 25% of teaching time on training literary translators if 95% of translation work in South Africa is done in other fields. The question thus is: Do we know who makes most use of translators in South Africa?

Do we know where translators work and what knowledge/skills they need to have to be able to fit into those working places? It is usually argued that the industry knows what it wants, but the problem is that its needs change swiftly. This means that the tertiary institution does not always know what it has to provide. Li (2005:1), for instance, offers figures to prove that technical and business translation accounts for the biggest number of translations in Hong Kong but that these fields do not necessarily receive the most attention. I contend that the training of translators in the South African context should reconsider its alignment with the needs of the market. Furthermore, I contend that this can only be done by means of empirical research. In other words, we need to have empirical data from the market and our graduandi as to the nature of the profession in South Africa. This should, in part, guide the training of translators.

Lastly, the needs of the society in which translations function should be incorporated in translator training. This is evident from the work of descriptive theorists, who argue that translations fulfil a particular role in the literary – or other – system in the target culture (Toury 1995). Translations function in a target culture in which specific expectations or norms exist regarding the translated corpus. Very little empirical research, however, seems to have been done to compile information on this topic, especially in the South African context. In South Africa, we need to find out by means of empirical research what the perceptions of society are on translation. Do all sectors of society hold the same views on translation? For instance, would someone in a rural area hold the same views on translation as a businessperson in a large city?

How does the function of a translated text influence the target reader's views on translation? Would someone in a poor suburb prefer a not-so-perfect translation of a municipal letter to reading the letter in a second or third language? And precisely how far would the tolerance go regarding translations? Put differently, when does communication break down because of poor translation quality?

This allows one to formulate the following questions for future research:

- What are South African students' needs when they enrol for courses in translation studies?
- In which sectors of the market in South Africa are the most translators needed and what are the comparative percentages between the sectors that utilise translators?
- What is the need of society for translation? In the South African context, are the needs the same as globally? Are the needs the same amongst various cultural and/or language groups? In a context which is known for its differentiation between rich and poor, are the needs the same amongst economically distinct groups.
- How do the semi-literate people in society influence society's perceptions of translation?
- How does the function of a translation influence its expected quality? What, for instance, are the differences in expectations between pharmaceutical information and the general communication by a municipality with its constituency?

5.   A PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Once one has a clear indication of what it entails to be a translator and what the context of training is, one can start focussing on teaching and learning and curricula (Holljen 2000:42). The literature indicates that deciding on a philosophical stance from which to approach teaching and learning plays a decisive role in determining other choices in pedagogy and didactics. Currently, three main schools exist.

They are the traditional school, which is identified by its classroom-centred, teacher-centred, product-centred, and knowledge-centred approach (Kiraly 2000). In the literature, this school is mentioned mainly in a negative sense to indicate how training should not be done. The literature guesses at the prevalence of this philosophy in translation classrooms around the world. It is also not clear what the situation at South-African training institutions are in this regard.

The second approach, the cognitive or process approach, is interested in finding out what is going on in the translator's mind (Lee-Janhke 2005; Kiraly 2000). It views translation as a cognitive, problem-solving process (Kussmaul 1995:9). It takes as its point of departure the notion that translation is a cognitive activity occurring in the translator's brain. Therefore, translation should be studied as such and taught as such. The cognitive approach to translation teaching would thus mainly do empirical research, e.g. Talk-aloud Protocols, to determine what the process of translation entails – in order better to understand how to train translators. For a full discussion on methods of Talk-Aloud-Protocols, see Kussmaul (1995:10). Put simply, scholars working within the cognitive approach are interested in what is going on in a translator's mind when she translates? They are interested in the thought processes of a competent translator. They would like to know how these skills compare with those of a novice translator.

From the empirical research, scholars working in this field would deduce the desirable mental competence for translators and teach these from a cognitive perspective. The most important implication for translation training is that translation is viewed as a process, not a product (Li 1999). Kussmaul (1995:1) focuses his approach on the difference between procedural and factual knowledge. According to him, translator training should focus on knowledge about the process, not the product. In this school, one does not train a translator to produce a good product, but to engage in an effective process. It also implies that one does not assess the product, but the process, to which I shall again refer in section 6. Typical to this approach would then be to teach students how to recognise translation problems (Kussmaul 1995:8). Translation problems are issues in a text that would pose problems to all translators and do not relate to a lack of competence, but to the nature of the relationship between the source language and target language.

Kussmaul (1995:24) is in favour of a bottom-up process in translation teaching. According to him, it has been found that inductive, bottom-up learning achieves better results. He therefore favours decision-making based on macro- and micro-strategies (Kussmaul 1995:32) where the decisions are taken at the micro-level with the macro-level acting as a guide to help the translator make choices where necessary.

Kussmaul focuses strongly on interpretation and understanding: For him, translation means putting into words what you understand. In this same vein, Kelly (2005:29) quotes Pym who defines translation competence as the ability to generate a target-text series of more than one viable term for a source text and the ability to select one option with justified confidence

The third approach, the socio-constructivist school, takes as point of departure the assumption that students construct their own knowledge from the social situation in which they operate, or in interaction with the social situation in which they operate. This approach differs radically from the traditional teacher-centred approach in that the teacher is redefined as a facilitator who discovers new knowledge with students while facilitating their discovery processes. The important value that this school contributes to translation training is that training should resemble, if not take place, in real situations (Holljen 2000:47). Learning only takes place in real, complex circumstances. Says Kelly (2005:119): "Professional realism is a pre-requisite for teaching translators."

Kelly uses the term reflective action (Kelly 2005; Kiraly 2000) in her subtitle. Kiraly (2000:32) also devotes a section to it, indicating that he views reflection as a tool for learning. This means that learners should be conscious of the translation problem, be able to contextualise the problem in reality. They should have their learning experiences embedded in reality, and learning activities should be relevant to the existing knowledge in a learner (Kiraly 2000:32). This ability to reflect on one's own work seems to be a competence of critical importance in translators.

The advantage of the socio-constructivist approach is that it should be able to bridge the gap between theory and practice in translation studies. One of the issues that is raised by the socio-constructivist school, and which needs clarification, is whether training for translators should focus on skill/competence or on knowledge and what the relationship between these two notions should be in a training programme. Kiraly (1995:13) is in favour of training for competence. In translator training, especially at a university level, the implications of this has to be explored and is currently being hotly debated, amongst others in the European Union's efforts to foster an M.A. degree in Translation. One needs a theoretical model within which to ground a teaching approach that focuses on both theory and practice.

Kiraly (2000:5) orders his pedagogy into an approach, a design, and a procedure (see also Gonzáles Davies 2004:11-22). This means that one first decides on a philosophical approach pertaining to learning as such, such as cognitive theory or socio-constructivism. Deciding on the approach is obviously the first step because it is the most fundamental decision that needs to be taken.

The next step, design, entails a "method analysis" (Kiraly 2000:5) in which various decisions on roles, i.e. the role of the lecturer and the role of the student, and objectives for the module are made. The design level mediates between the philosophy, as the most abstract level, and the procedures, as the most concrete level. Procedures entail the practical implementation of the philosophy in the classroom, by means of the decisions made at design level. Procedures pertain to the "how do I teach/how does a student learn" of the pedagogy.

A variety of scholars has written with other foci, but most of them can be located in either one of these or a combination of two or all of these schools. Gonzáles Davies (2004) has, for instance, written an interesting book on devising exercises to practice particular competencies that are needed by translators. Her aim is to foster exercises that relates to the competences need in real translation work. Holljen (2000:48) defines the aim of translation training as follows: to give reasons for and justify choices, to understand rules that govern translation, to create in students a tool to function as a frame of reference against which they can assess the process of translation. She favours a practice-oriented approach, once again focussing on practising in real-life situations. This approach is much less philosophical, but clearly shows philosophical influence from the cognitive, process-oriented approach. Kelly (2005:33) does not offer a model for cognitive processes – she limits her concept of competence to that of intended learning outcomes, which has its philosophical roots in social constructivism. Gile (1995:362) favours project learning, also a constructivist point of departure. It seems clear that translator training needs to remain in dialogue with various philosophies of science, as well as with various approaches to higher education studies.

The question that needs to be answered is to what extent these pedagogies and didactics are applicable to South African conditions? Once again, I contend that it is necessary at least to ascertain what the requirements of South African conditions are in contrast to European conditions. For instance, how, if at all, does the marginality of segments of the South African society impact on pedagogy? How would the geography of South Africa and the "African worldview" influence pedagogy? These are only samples of issues of context that should be addressed. Once this has been determined, one can decide on how to handle the curricula to be maximally contextual, while still operating within the ambit of the global society.

This leads to the following questions to be answered in the South African context:

- How do these pedagogical approaches relate to one another? Could one be eclectic?
- Do we have empirical evidence to favour one pedagogy or didactic to another?

- Can we prove that certain types of teaching enhance learning for learners in the South African context?
- Can we plot the learning process in apprentice translators?
- How can we enhance learning in apprentice translators?
- How does one address the issue of levels of expertise amongst translators, especially in the South African context? (see Gile 1995:2). Does one need to have only one level of qualification, i.e. the SATI-accredited level, or would it benefit translators and society to have more levels, e.g. the Australian system of accreditation on three levels?
- How does one teach skills and attitudes (Kelly 2005:64)? The literature seems to indicate that translator training has put too much emphasis on knowledge and too little on skill, attitude, and competence. How should curricula be changed to redress this situation? How does one go about bridging the gap between theory and practice that is prevalent in translation studies throughout the world?

6. A VIEW ON ASSESSMENT

Because assessment guides learning, it should be obvious that assessment is intricately related to at least the teaching and learning philosophy one adheres to, but also to one's view on the nature of translation and the context within which one operates. Much has been written on assessment through the years and this article will not review the literature. It will rather focus on assessment as important within the whole debate on translator training, because of its link to teaching and learning philosophies, quality control, the relationship between academic training and the market, the translator's self-image, etc. One could also say, in terms of Kiraly's trilogy (2000:32) that assessment is based on an approach, a design, and procedures.

Does one assess the product or the process? This is an approach question with its roots in philosophy, but it also holds implications for procedures, once the philosophical issues have been decided. It is clear that a decision on a particular philosophy of learning would hold immense implications for translator evaluation. Current views favour assessing the process and not the project, and it provides ingenious examples of doing precisely that (Li 1999:197). However, there are enough opposition voices in this regard to ask for a continual consideration of this matter.

The psychological facet of learning has also received much attention lately and this is extremely relevant for assessment. By taking a basically negative stance on assessment, by marking negatively, one does not enhance self-confidence, a relaxed atmosphere, and a positive professional self-concept with the student.

Assessment also relates to the ever-present question about quality control. This is made worse by the fact that most translation training is done at tertiary institutions with specific frameworks for assessment. It also leads to the possibility that someone can "pass" academically, but not have the translational competence to work in the field. This issue is brought up by various scholars, amongst others Li (1999), who advocates criterion-referenced assessment rather than norm-referenced assessment. The aforementioned focuses on particular criteria in the process, not on the whole of the product (Kelly 2005:139-141). In other words, one does not assess the translation as a whole, but one marks only in terms of the criteria set beforehand. This way of assessment, which is intimately connected to a particular philosophy of learning, also holds the advantage that, when marking according to particular criteria, one does not discourage students, one does not assess above the ability of students, and one uses practical assignments and their assessment to reinforce particular strategies that were taught in theory. It has, however, the negative possibility of fragmentising the translation process in the mind of the student.

Kussmaul (1995:128) distinguishes between the foreign language teacher's view and the professional translator's view. The former will focus on the correct use of language and grammar. The latter focuses on the communicative function of the word (Kussmaul 1995:128) and on the translation process functioning in a particular setting. Kussmaul (1995:130) uses Pym's distinction between binary and non-binary errors. He prefers the latter: determining an error in terms of the effect on the target reader and not merely on a linguistic comparison between two languages (binary errors).

Moving to more practical choices, one of the options one has to consider is realistic exams, i.e. not writing but with a computer, not with one or two reference works but with all reference a translator will normally use, etc. If one's philosophy of learning is socio-constructivist, one needs the assessments too to be as close to reality as possible. If not, adequate learning has not yet taken place and one is assessing irrelevant knowledge.

Addressing another practical issue, Gile (1995:8) argues that it is by no means clear that formal training is necessarily better than in-house training. Especially in the South-African context, one has to consider the possibility of augmenting in-house training by university training over a longer term, which would hold the advantage of mentoring over time. These types of decisions are intricately related to the context of training, which strengthens the argument for a comprehensive approach that incorporates the context.

On the procedure level, the literature points to a plethora of issues on which opinions differ widely. For instance, assessment pertains to the following questions:

- Should practical translation courses be assessed academically or professionally?
- What options are there for bridging the gap between theory and practice?
- How can assessment be adopted to fit a particular teaching and learning philosophy?
- How does one rate the appropriateness of assignments, e.g. choice of texts, level of difficulty?
- How does one rate errors?
- How does one rate and reward error-free translations/portions of a translation.

7.   CONCLUSION

I have provided an overview of current trends in the literature on translator training. I followed a hermeneutic approach, interpreting the literature against the backdrop of the South-African language practice situation. I have provided questions that, to my mind, need empirical research in the South-African context.

It should have become clear from the article that my views on the South-African context are not related to any existing research, seeing that no such research exists. It is rather grounded in personal observation, discussions with colleagues, and interaction with other language practitioners. It is also based on a growing realisation world-wide that universal answers do not solve particular local, contextually determined problems. Rather than implying an unscientific way of working, this observation strengthens the main contention of my argument: Translator training in South-Africa is in need of empirical research in the various facets indicated above. This empirical research would enable translator teachers to relate their teaching to reality, to close the gap between theory and practice, and to contextualise translator training for the benefit of the community in which it functions.

8.   BIBLIOGRAPHY

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