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## Assessing Student Performance In Translation Courses And Interconnectivity To Translation Industry

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### ABSTRACT

Assessment in its different forms and functions constitutes an essential part in every teaching and learning process. The purpose of this paper is to offer a framework of reflection for this important part of the translator training process and propose appropriate assessment techniques that could be integrated in translation classes aiming to train professional translators. For this purpose, the paper questions some general trends in assessment in training context and also tries to lay the foundations for an assessment procedure that is oriented toward the practice of translation and the concept of professionalization. The overall aim of the article is to provide a broad overview of the concept of assessment in translator training programmes and help translator trainers adopt the most appropriate assessment mechanisms for their own courses.

**Key Words:** Translation, Student, Performance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of translator performance assessment is of great importance both in translation industry and in translator training process, despite the fact that it is "under-researched and under-discussed" (Hatim and Mason, 1997: 197). The particular question is closely related to the question of translation quality assessment in translation industry and the translator's profession where there seems to be no overall consensus on the criteria that define a translation as "acceptable". In the present article, some general trends of assessment methods in translator training will be examined by moving on to discuss some innovative procedures that are suggested to improve assessment practice in translator training programmes as well as the main criteria to take into account in the design stage of the assessment procedure.

## 2. TRADITIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROCESS IN TRANSLATION CLASSES

One of the subjects of debate has been the role examinations should play in the translator training curriculum. Snell-Hornby (1991) refers to the various functions examinations can fulfil such as motivation, basic competence testing in entrance examinations, progress monitoring in term tests and proficiency certification in final examinations. In this context, correction of papers is based on error counting and the degree of deviation of translation from the "perfect" predefined version.

### 2.1. Three Types of Assessment

Kelly (2005) distinguishes between three forms of assessment: summative, formative and initial diagnosis or needs analysis. Summative assessment involves assigning a task to students at the end of the learning process and marking it in order to decide whether the student has reached the required level to pass the module or receive his diploma. Formative assessment involves any marking or correcting that provides feedback to students on their learning progress. The two forms of assessment do not exclude one another in the sense that formal examinations in the form of summative assessment can have a formative function as well, if returned to students with comments aiming to help them improve their learning progress. Another important type of assessment is initial diagnosis or needs analysis that involves instrument design to diagnose the students' initial level at the beginning of a module

that will help teachers select learning activities that go hand in hand with their level and learning needs. Initial assessment can take a variety of forms such as class discussions on students' motivation and expectations, short question and answer questions, translation exercises or questionnaires.

## 2.2. The Translation Examination Paper as Subject of Critique

The traditional process of student performance assessment usually takes the form of a translation examination paper where students are asked to translate an unknown text with the use of dictionaries within a predefined period of time in an examination environment under the supervision of the examiners. This type of exams has been the subject of critique from various perspectives that could be summarized as follows (Kelly, 2005: 132):

- ✓ it does not relate to professional translation context such as prior text-type and subject area, possibility to conduct research, time deadline, authentic translation environment etc.
- ✓ it attempts to assess at once all subcompetences that make up the translator's overall competence
- ✓ unclear or non-existent criteria regarding text selection to be translated
- ✓ the error-based grading system does not take into account the positive aspects of students' performance
- ✓ the relevant grading and passing-failing system lacks objectivity and uniformity
- ✓ the texts to be translated at exams are not accompanied by a translation brief regarding the general context of the task
- ✓ it does not meet the objectives or the expected outcomes defined by the translation course

## 3. DESIGNING STUDENT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

### 3.1. Criteria for Devising Assessment Methods

In the design stage of the student assessment procedure, we could examine some important parameters that will help us evaluate students' progress in the most efficient manner such as:

#### Setting Clear Overall Aims Of The Course

Successful assessment can be undertaken only when the aims of instruction are clear to the teacher and are clarified to students as well. According to Farahzad (1991), the overall objective of a translation course is to train students translate various text types in various communicative situations and some of the basic aims that could be areas of focus in designing student assessment methods are:

- ✓ Introducing students to the theory and practice of translation
- ✓ Familiarizing students with the diverse forms that meaning can take in different communicative situations
- ✓ Acquainting students with translation tools that could use in translation tasks
- ✓ Cultivating students' s "cognitive" ability so that they can assess the quality of a translation in terms of adequacy, accuracy, style and naturalness

#### The Element Of Realism

Designing instruments and procedures that will assess the skills students have acquired at the end of a translation course is one of the main challenges in organizing and implementing the particular course. The basic issue is to define and deliver the most professionally - oriented quality standards when awarding academic qualifications to future translators. Thus, the element of realism in assessment methods becomes of vital importance so that students be assessed on the same basis as they would as professionals in the translation industry. It is vital that some common standards of student evaluation be defined jointly by translation teachers and professional associations and employers that would be highly based on the required skills related to the professional environment of translation.

One of the main issues related to the element of realism concerns the nature of the source text assigned to students to translate. It is recommended that the source text bear characteristics such as: authentic material so that students feel they work under real, professional circumstances, b. providing basic information about the text such as the author, title and date of publication, c. it is suggested that the assigned text be not taught to students in classroom but it should belong to the text-types that students have been taught during the course, d. the assigned text should meet students' competence level taking into account the distinction between beginners' and advanced stage of studies so that the degree of difficulty of texts is in accordance with student level of studies.

### 3.2. Making Translation Exams Realistic: Suggestions

The question that arises next is how we could improve the assessment tasks and make them more realistic and more conducive in the learning process. Kelly (2005) makes a series of suggestions that could improve the “examination conditions” and make them more realistic, drawn from practice and experience such as:

- ✓ There should be a broad availability of resources for translation tasks that could reflect the professional translation environment. This means that resources should not be limited to the use of dictionaries, but could normally involve access to computers and to internet resources.
- ✓ Translation exams could not be limited to translation assignment but could involve other tasks as well such as pre-translation tasks, comparing the original to the translated text or commenting either on their own or other students’ translations.
- ✓ The examination text could be announced to students some time before the examination so that students have the appropriate time to conduct research before the examination starts. Some of the key information regarding the examination text teachers could provide concerns text type, subject area and some basic vocabulary. Students could be also assessed for the preparation phase as part of the examination process.
- ✓ Allocation time for the translation task completion should be realistic and in accordance with the type of text to be translated.
- ✓ Also, a clear translation brief including clear instructions on the assigned translation task could accompany the source text so that students can contextualize the assigned task. Instructions must definitely be brief and unambiguous.
- ✓ The assessment criteria of the translated product should be notified to students right from the start and should be specific so that they are aware of the grading system that could not be based on an overall assessment of the quality of the translation but it should cover various aspects of translating.
- ✓ The test items should be designed on the basis of differences between the source and the target text that are supposed to cause difficulties in the translating process in various levels such as the lexical, syntactic and the cultural.

### 3.3. The Structure of Translation Examinations

As far as the examination structure is concerned, it could contain both limited-responses and free-response techniques, the former allowing teachers to assess some specifically delicate points in translation and the latter to assess the overall student’s capacity to treat a text as a piece of discourse.

Some of the criteria for the selection of limited-response items in translation tasks are: a. text authenticity of the source text, b. the source text level corresponding to students’ linguistic competence of both languages, c. shortness of the source text so that the examiner tests a single item per time. Farahzad (1991) distinguishes the limited-response items in three types: a. multiple-choice questions on theoretical issues and their application to the practice of translation, b. error-identification where students are asked to identify and handle translation errors and c. selecting target language equivalents for words of the source language text.

The limited-response item types could take a variety of forms such as: a. comparing the source language text with a target language translation and identifying errors in terms of grammar, meaning, vocabulary e.t.c., b. comparing the source language text with two alternative translations and deciding about the most appropriate in terms of the quality evaluation criteria discussed in class and c. suggesting target language equivalents for source language words and collocations based on research in monolingual dictionaries.

The controlled free-response item types, on the other hand, could take the following form: a. source text translation as a coherent whole rather than translating a set of disconnected sentences, b. a source language sentence comprising words or collocations requiring research conduct in order to render their exact meaning in the target language, c. a source language text comprising words or phrases with specific dictionary labels in the source language. Since labels serve as guides for the selection of words in translation, the examination test assesses students’ sensitivity to the language both in the source and in the target language version they produce.

As far as the basic criteria for assessing the test examination and the quality of the translated text are concerned, the main features that are suggested to be checked are: a. accuracy that verifies whether the target text conveys the exact information and the message in the source text. Newmark (1988: 6a) defines accuracy as: “the ability to reproduce the greatest possible degree of the meaning of the original”. The recipient of the translated text must not

be confused by the translator who must avoid translating in a way that precision of the original author is rendered clumsy and confused, b. the purpose of the source text and whether the target text fulfills it.

b. Vermeer (Reiss and Vermeer, 1984) focuses on the Skopos (purpose) of the translation in order for the translator to produce a functionally satisfactory result. The purpose of the source text and the extent to which the target text fulfills it constitutes a basic criterion for the quality assessment of the translation examination.

c. naturalness, since a good translation is the one that reads naturally, meaning that it must fit the receptor language and culture and the context of the particular message and, finally,

d. style which means that the translated text must incorporate certain elements of style that provide the emotional tone of the discourse, otherwise, the style is lost and the translation is characterized as inadequate.

Grading system could be based on the following criteria : it is not translation as a product that is evaluated but the level of student learning, b. assessing translation errors in each translation is a highly complicated procedure with ambiguous results, c. there is not the concept of the “perfect” translation upon which to base the assessment process, d. there can be no objective numerical values in grading since every translation decision taken by students involves a high degree of subjectivity, e. emphasis should be on what students have learned, and not on what they have done wrong.

Taking all the above factors into account, the grading system could be shaped as follows: A. Excellent, when the student has managed to identify all the differences and has proposed appropriate solutions in all or almost all cases, b. B. Very Good, when the student has identified almost all the differences and in these cases he has managed to handle them efficiently and C. Good, when the student has identified most of the differences and has been able to propose appropriate solutions in a limited number of cases.

### 3.4. The Person to Assess Students’ Progress

Another point that raises questions in the assessment process concerns the person who is responsible for carrying out assessment. Traditionally, it is the translation teacher or an examination board assigned to carry out the assessment process. Alternatively, other forms of assessment are self-assessment, peer assessment and assessment by professional experts.

Self-assessment is carried out by students themselves who are asked to evaluate their own work and progress. This is actually a very important skill to acquire especially for those trainees they would like to become free-lance translators. The following questions addressed to students could facilitate the self-assessment method: have you encountered any difficulties in doing the translation and which ones? What solutions would you suggest and do you find satisfying? The answers to these questions could be given to teachers either in written or in oral form in work group meetings where students would have the chance to propose solutions to other students’ translation difficulties.

Another assessment method is peer-assessment which is carried out by students belonging to the same group with the student whose work is evaluated. This method provides the opportunity to students of the same group either to receive comments from their fellow students or to comment on other students. This is also an opportunity for students to develop their communicative and social skills by exchanging comments and justifying verbally their decisions.

Finally, the figure of assessment by external examiners exists in some university institutions. It is frequent to invite professional translators from outside the training institutions to provide feedback on students’ translations so that students get acquainted with professional assessment criteria of their work. This type of assessment can be highly motivating since it offers trainees the opportunity to compare academic with professional assessment criteria of translation quality.

A final form of assessment is called “user assessment” where the quality of the translation is assessment by potential readers of the target text who will be asked to submit a written report of students’ translation.

### 3.5. The Distinction Between Individual and Group Assessment

A variation of the traditional individual assessment is group assessment that definitely bears certain difficulties, the most important of which is criteria for grading students’ progress. In particular, it is frequent to give to all students of the same group the same grade, although there are certain differences between individuals in effort and learning level. Gibbs (1995) provides some alternatives instead of giving the same collective grade to all members of the same team such as: a. asking of each team member to write to a diary and comment on his participation to group effort that could modulate his final grade, b. ask the team leader to submit a collective report and evaluate the

participation of each team member to the task and the functioning of the team and c. provide to each group a numerical value multiplied by the number of members and asking the team leader to share out the points among group members and, finally, submit the results of grading accompanied by a justification of their decision to the teacher.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The process aiming to assess students' progress and skills that they have mastered by the end of a translation course is one of the main considerations in devising and implementing such a course. People involved in the translator training process have to be aware of the danger of awarding academic qualifications to trainees who have not managed to develop or enhance their translation skills. Hence, it is the translator trainers' responsibility to ensure and apply the most professionally based quality standards when awarding qualifications to trainees and the assessment process certainly plays a main role toward this purpose.

In the present article some practical issues in designing and implementing students' progress at the end of a translation course have been discussed. To be more specific, after making the distinction between different types of assessment forms we have moved on to describe the main points of critique of the traditional translation examination structure. Then, we have discussed basic parameters to take into account in the design stage of the assessment procedure, such as criteria for selecting the exams material, the structure of exams, the persons to assess students' progress and the grading system structure.

The main point is that the assessment methods should definitely align with the objectives or intended outcomes of the translation course and, most importantly, make them more realistic by carrying out a series of activities and tasks in "examination conditions".

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