Planning for success. Proactive behaviour in teaching translation skills to Master’s students

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Abstract

The paper is concerned with an epistemologically ever more diverse field – translations studies – more specifically, with quality teaching as assured by the teacher’s proactive behaviour (stepping beyond stereotyped dichotomies such as reactive-proactive). The research was carried out on two sample groups: Master’s students in legal translation programme and Master’s students in the field of theoretical and applied linguistics. In the former case, translation skills are at the core of the make-up of the competence-based curriculum, whereas in the latter case, they belong to the category of transversal competences. The main variables taken into account are: students’ profile (motivation, knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, prior learning experience, collective and individual expectations) and setting (macro-social level: international education market, the Lisbon strategy – towards the knowledge-based dynamic society, European social cohesion and mobility; meso-institutional level: type of learning environment, performance criteria and standards; programme objectives and related resources; micro-individual level – students’ actively seeking knowledge acquisition and skills development in formal and non-formal contexts). The research outputs are identified to lines of action as part of a flexible comprehensive framework or checklist encompassing both commonalities and specificities in teaching translation skills to different target audiences.

1. Setting the scene

It is commonplace that teaching methodologies in the 21st century are student-centred and that quality training programmes underpin competence-based curricula, recognizing learning outcomes deriving from the academic context and the workplace alike.

In this line of approach, the paper is premised by the idea that quality is in the eye of the stakeholder. First of all, quality is in the eye of the students as direct participants and beneficiaries, acquiring meaningful knowledge and transferable skills, experiencing quality. Secondly, it is in the eye of the teacher/trainer as an indicator of
professional development through capitalisation of expertise and reflective action. Thirdly, quality is in the eye of
the institution as education provider bearing public accountability; last, but not least, in the eye of the external
environment as meeting socio-economic needs and interests. Students, teachers and other stakeholders have
perceptions of quality, which should converge both cognitively (quality as a co-construct) and experientially
(collective well-being).

We agree with Stake (2001: 4), who taking a constructivist stance, launches a number of rhetorical questions:
“If quality is not so much to be discovered in the program itself but to be understood in terms of experiences of
participants and constituents, then we need models and theories of stakeholding. Whose program is it? Who
counts?” Things need to be perceived (and evaluated) not in vitro but in vivo.

In the same climate of opinion, Cohen et al. (2004) warn practitioners against the danger of seeing teaching as
mere transfer of knowledge and pleads for meaningful learning through cooperation:
Teaching risks becoming a delivery system, a given rather than a negotiated activity. Somewhere buried in the
whole picture there are people, not robots. Many teachers, having come into the profession with high ideals, find
that these soon evaporate; teaching becomes simply a job, an occupation not a vocation. Education becomes a
commodity like any other. This is a terrible loss. (Cohen, 2004:16)

2. Research scope

The sample groups include 1st year Master’s students in English and French Languages. European Legal
Translation and Terminology (4 groups, group size: 20 trainees) and 2nd year Master’s students in Theoretical
and Applied English Language Studies (4 groups, group size: 20 trainees). In the former case, translation skills
are core skills - they are developed through a number of different courses, seminars and workshops - besides
Translation theory and practice - and pertain to specialized (legal) translation; in the latter case, they are
transversal skills, developed during one-semester course and seminar (total number of teaching hours: 28).
It is noteworthy that the study was conducted with eight target groups during four consecutive academic years

3. Value and limitation of the study

The research underpins an integrated approach since workable solutions in planning for success cannot disregard
contributing factors, and students’ expectations and active involvement correlate with the internal and external
environments shaping them, understood in terms of discourses, practices, marketability/employability (more and
more scholars advocate strategic, holistic and proactive development as a set of orientations for all types of
educational programmes, higher education included – notably, Macdonald and Wisdom, 2002; Marzano and
Brown, 2009).

It is what Danielson (2007: 26 -ff) equally points out to when interrelating the four domains of teaching
responsibility and their components:
• planning and preparation: demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogical skills; demonstrating
  awareness of students’ profile; establishing realistic objectives/learning outcomes; identifying available
  resources; designing a coherent procedure; setting students’ assessment modes;
• the classroom environment: characterised by establishing rapport and mutual respect; by a culture of learning;
  by management strategies with respect to classroom procedure, student behaviour and logistics;
• instruction: the process is shaped by patterns of interaction; delivery methods; promoting students’
  engagement in learning – we add, at the metacognitive level; using assessment in instruction – we favour
  alternative assessment at this stage; showing flexibility and responsiveness;
• professional duties: reflective approach; maintaining accurate records, i.e. being well documented; vertical and
  horizontal communication with the professional community and the community at large; professional
development; showing professionalism. Although the last two items may seem overlapping, they are defined from a reversed perspective: inward looking vs. outward looking.

The research is not intended to be all-inclusive, basically due to the in-depth approach and to length constraints. It focuses on students as the direct beneficiaries (stakeholders); the other stakeholders need to be addressed separately in order to place the same amount of importance and to derive insights contributing to the holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

4. Research objectives and outcomes

The research objectives run as follows:
- to accurately identify students’ expectations in point of translation career building and personal growth;
- to develop a flexible framework of reference for teaching translation skills to Master’s students, irrespective of the status of translation skills in the curriculum;
- to feature proactive behaviour in teaching/learning translation skills with Master’s students for sustainable development.

5. Research methodology

We adopted a mixed research methodology, i.e. both quantitative and qualitative. At the beginning of the course, the students were administered a questionnaire allowing for Yes/No answers and for opinion statement. The data interpretation process envisaged the detection of powerful commonalities (in subsidiary, specificities) to feed the framework of reference for teaching translation skills and to foster success.

In what follows, we shall provide the questionnaire and the data interpretation. As far as data interpretation is concerned, reference will be made to the eight sample groups individually and/or collectively as relevant.

5.1. Questionnaire

Tick the right answer and/or justify it.

1. Do you translate on a regular basis either as an in-house translator and/or a freelance? Please specify.
   □ Yes.  □ No.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master’s programme</th>
<th>Sample group and academic year</th>
<th>Percentage of students undertaking regular translation work</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2 – 2009-2010</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Average value: 36.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3 – 2010-2011</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 4 – 2011-2012</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies</td>
<td>Group 5 – 2008-2009</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 6 – 2009-2010</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Average value: 8.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 7 – 2010-2011</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 8 – 2011-2012</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data interpretation: the Master’s students in English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology have already marketed their translation skills at different rates due to the fact that they benefited
from initial training holding a Bachelor’s degree in Translation - Interpretation, which also indicates the
dynamics of the local and regional translation market.
2. If so, what kind of translation do you perform?
☐ legal  ☐ business  ☐ medical  ☐ literary  ☐ other – please specify.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master’s programme</th>
<th>Sample group and academic year</th>
<th>Translation type and percentage of students undertaking it</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology</td>
<td>Group 1 2008-2009</td>
<td>Legal 80%  Business 20%  Other-vocative texts (manuals) 0%</td>
<td>Legal translation as sworn authorized translators (in collaboration with Notary Public Offices and local translation agencies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2 2009-2010</td>
<td>Legal 75%  Business Average value: 77.08%  Other-vocative texts Average value: 22.92%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3 2010-2011</td>
<td>Legal 70%  Business 30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 4 2011-2012</td>
<td>Legal 83.33%  Business 16.66%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies</td>
<td>Group 5 2008-2009</td>
<td>Legal 66.66%  Business 33.33%  Other-vocative texts (manuals) 0%</td>
<td>Legal translation as sworn authorized translators (in collaboration with Notary Public Offices and local translation agencies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 6 2009-2010</td>
<td>Legal 100%  Business Average value: 41.66%  Other-vocative texts Average value: 33.33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 7 2010-2011</td>
<td>Legal 0%  Business 100%  Other-vocative texts Average value: 25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 8 2011-2012</td>
<td>Legal 0%  Business 0%  Other-vocative texts 100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data interpretation: the Romanian (specialized) translation market employs people which do not have a background in translation. The principle of equal opportunities applies in the sense that graduates in Philology are also entitled to be authorized as translators by the Ministry of Justice. Nonetheless, we strongly believe in the division of labour, i.e. in authorizing only graduates from accredited translation programmes (coming in a variety of shapes and sizes: Bachelor’s, Master’s, continuing education).

3. To your mind, what is the most difficult aspect of translation?
☐ syntactic choices  ☐ terminology  ☐ cultural differences

Justify your choice: 

Data interpretation: exclusively, all the eight sample groups related the difficulties in translation to terminology, arguing that there is scarcity of reliable sources (specialised Romanian-English or English-Romanian dictionaries, glossaries, electronic databases) or that there is parallel terminology (the last reason was provided only by the Master’s students in English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology – average value: 11.25%).

4. Do you think that the translator should fly solo?
☐ Yes.  ☐ No.

Justify your choice: 

Data interpretation: Almost all the students agreed that translation is “one-man show” (95%). The reasons comprise: experience in performing translation as freelance and other people’s unwillingness to collaborate.
students in *English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology* and 1 in *Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies* answered No, simply explaining that they needed help.

5. If not, whom should s/he collaborate with?
Mention at least 2 different categories: .................................................................

Data interpretation: the only category that the 4 students mentioned was: more experienced translators.

6. What are the resources that you employ/will you employ when translating specialized texts?
Mention at least 2 different categories: .................................................................

Data interpretation: the majority of the students referred to specialized dictionaries (100%) and to glossaries (83.75%). Some of the students mentioned previous translations in the field (16.25%).

7. With reference to the above mentioned categories, how reliable are they?
☐ highly reliable  ☐ reliable  ☐ not reliable

Justify your answer: ........................................................................................................

Data interpretation: Specialised dictionaries and glossaries were labelled “highly reliable”, whereas previous translations cast a shadow of doubt among students (“reliable”). The justification lies in all the cases in the degree of equivalence of terminology.

8. Rank the following criteria in translation quality assurance:
- grammatical accuracy
  - highly important  ☐ important  ☐ not important
- lexical equivalence
  - highly important  ☐ important  ☐ not important
- referential accuracy (facts and figures)
  - highly important  ☐ important  ☐ not important
- cultural equivalence
  - highly important  ☐ important  ☐ not important
- layout specifications
  - highly important  ☐ important  ☐ not important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master’s programme</th>
<th>Grammatical accuracy</th>
<th>Lexical equivalence</th>
<th>Referential accuracy</th>
<th>Cultural equivalence</th>
<th>Layout specifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology</td>
<td>important</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
<td>highly important</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>highly important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies</td>
<td>highly important</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>highly important</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>highly important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data interpretation: students belonging to both Master’s programmes see meaning distortion to be caused by grammatical, lexical and referential errors, whereas they might understand cultural equivalence as a strategy of domestication. Admittedly, they will favour culture-bound items transfer in translation.
9. If you accept to be commissioned a translation, which of these factors weigh most heavily?
☐ deadline ☐ text complexity ☐ text length ☐ fees ☐ available resources
Data interpretation: the Master’s students in English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology indicated: “fees” (70%) and “text complexity” (30%). The Master’s students in Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies opted for “fees” (80%) and “deadline” (20%).

10. Do you think that successful translation may be enhanced by mastery of re-usable strategies?
☐ Yes. ☐ No.
Justify your choice……………………………………………………………………………………………………
Data interpretation: all the students believe in the usefulness of a handful of successful strategies in the form of what students identify with “directions” (40%) and “instructions” (30%).

5.2. Overall data interpretation

The students’ global input allows us to profile their expectations in point of translation training (from a democratic perspective, i.e. by detecting commonalities):
• students are likely to value both theoretical and experiential/work-based learning, formal and non-formal learning outcomes;
• students acknowledge the status of (specialised) translation, but are biased with respect to the importance of the factors impacting on translation quality - they underrate electronic resources such as databases and discard networking in translation to the benefit of the translator’s enhanced visibility, on subjective grounds;
• students need to be equipped with objective criteria against which to assess translation difficulty (from a process-oriented perspective) as well as translation quality (from a product-oriented perspective, both internally, i.e. the translator’s evaluation, and externally, i.e. fitness for purpose/meeting the client’s specifications).
• students favour descriptive rather than prescriptive approaches to translation.

6. Planning for success as informed decision-making

It is our firm belief that if teachers do not plan for success, teaching practice is not likely to result in any.
Specific reference is made to Theory and practice of translation - the course and seminar are included in the 1st year curriculum of the Master’s programme English and French Languages. European Legal Translation and Terminology, and in the 2nd year curriculum of the Master’s programme: Theoretical and Applied English Language Studies.

Well documented (see the overall data interpretation) and inspired by Berry’s model of teacher trainer (2008: 3), we put forward a statement of policy, articulating needs and securing the achievement of the intended goals:
• accessing, identifying and building on (prospective) students’ prior learning experience and skills in the field of translation;
• enabling students to be actively engaged in testing working hypotheses and exploring meaningful practice so as to derive insights;
• introducing a reflective approach to learning as ingrained routine;
• enhancing students to take responsibility of their own learning progress so as to be able to further prioritise;
• exploring with students the translation-related frames through which they see the world (encyclopedic knowledge) and the nexus of social relationships;
• enabling students to conceptualise translation as an interdisciplinary landscape;
• raising students’ awareness of the context-embedded nature of translation;
• responding sensitively to (prospective) students’ needs, vested interests and (widespread) concerns.
Therefore, the implementation of this policy is growth-oriented, both professionally and personally, and it goes bidirectionally: not only students, but also the teacher will develop a sense of fulfillment and macro-social adequacy.

The teaching methodology comprises lecture (coming in small chunks), gapped lecture, case studies (provided by literature and acting as a springboard for critical discussion; based on work placement experience as a measure of success), alternative methods: portfolio and project work (supervised), research-based activities (students will be involved in research projects and participate in specialised translation research groups organized at the faculty level).

With respect to the assessment procedures, we shall use a combination of formal assessment (summative – written examination) – 40%, formative assessment (project work) – 30%, peer assessment – 15% and self-assessment – 15%.

7. Towards sustainable practice

Seeking to derive not only explicit, but also research-driven generalisable guidelines of proactive behaviour in teaching translation skills to Master’s students (be they core skills or transversal in nature), we conclude that assumption hunting (in Brandenburg’s terms, 2008: 160 ff) foster the teacher’s (and eventually, the institutional) capacity for change as much as it reinforces natural(ised) ways of teaching.

References


