Quality in translator/interpreter training: Can quality be taught?

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Resumen

La demanda en productos de calidad (las traducciones o los servicios de interpretación prestados), en procesos de calidad (desde el contacto inicial con el cliente hasta la entrega del producto final) y en profesionales de calidad (provistos de los conocimientos y competencias necesarias) está aumentando a un ritmo creciente. Esta demanda surge de un mercado que se caracteriza por encargos voluminosos a plazos cortos realizados a base de tecnologías cada vez más sofisticadas. Al mismo tiempo, las instituciones dedicadas a la formación de traductores e intérpretes están reorganizando sus planes de estudio con el fin de adaptarlos mejor a las necesidades del mercado y preparar unos profesionales de calidad. Pasan por ciclos de autoevaluación, invitan a asesores de fuera y exigen una docencia con sello de excelencia. ¿Pero cómo consigue uno desarrollar este mismo sentido de calidad entre sus alumnos? ¿Cómo preparar a los estudiantes para que produzcan traducciones de calidad, presten servicios de interpretación de calidad, y, de igual importancia, que sean capaces de definir lo que es calidad, que la reconozcan o puedan identificar su falta, y que puedan examinar su propio trabajo y el de sus compañeros según criterios de calidad? En este trabajo presentaremos varios caminos hacia estas metas que nos hemos propuesto (a través de destrezas lingüísticas y competencias profesionales, pasando por productos y procesos, y basándonos en teorías y metodologías aplicadas). Los distintos enfoques se verán ilustrados mediante ejemplos concretos. Esperamos que estos párrafos contribuyan a aclarar algunos conceptos relacionados con la enseñanza de la calidad o, mejor dicho, con el fomento del sentido de calidad entre los alumnos.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the concept of quality has moved center-stage in many fields of business, from manufacturing companies to service industries, from family businesses to multinational corporations, from specialized food stuffs to tailor-made solutions. This development has gone hand in hand with the increasing use and reliance on technology, the considerably stiffer competition...
among an ever larger pool of providers, and the rising demands on organizational and logistical skills in order to deliver more faster. In terms of the translation/interpreting industry, these changes have lead to a growing demand for specialized translations, computer-aided work processes, and additional loops of quality control.

2. Quality defined

Quality in translation respectively interpreting or the lack thereof may be easy to detect - if not unanimously - even for non-specialists, yet undoubtedly harder to define or categorize into a generally accepted set of criteria. If we want to put quality into a wider context, beyond the impressionistic judgment all too easily pronounced at times, we have to distinguish among three core factors: producer, process, and product.

The producer of a target language text or discourse, a professional translator/interpreter, must provide quality. This quality depends on a set of skills he or she possesses or acquires over time: linguistic skills, cultural knowledge, translational skills, and professional competence. Linguistic skills include grammatical, lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical skills both in the source language and the target language. Cultural skills comprise all factual and procedural knowledge about the source and target cultures. Translational skills are usually acquired during an academic program and then further developed through professional experience and refer to the ability to transpose the source language message into the appropriate target language message according to the client’s order specifications. Professional competence, finally, encompasses an array of skills from soft skills to use of technology to commercial intelligence. All these factors must be taken into consideration when trying to evaluate the human resource factor in translation/interpreting quality.

The process of translating or interpreting, in turn, should provide quality along two parallel lines: the external or business process and the internal or translation process per se. The former process
encompasses all steps taken from the first contact client-translator/interpreter, the negotiations of conditions/advising of the client, the placement of the order/signing of the contract, the communication during the fulfilment of the contract, the product delivery, the debriefing. The latter process, for optimum quality closely embedded in the former, could be described as including a task analysis, preparation of the work environment including assembly of necessary resources, draft translation/discourse etc., revision, and post-delivery debriefing.

The product of translation or interpreting, the rendering of a source text or discourse in the target language, lends itself most easily to an assessment of quality. The quality of a translation is measured not only by the fulfilment of client's specifications, its functionality, and linguistic correctness but also its timely delivery, formal adequacy and consistency. The quality of an interpretation as an immediate and oral rendering of information in the target language or both ways is characterized by its completeness, comprehensibility and timely delivery.

The differences between quality requirements of translation and interpreting, product and process, have been described by various scholars. According to Wilss (1996), a quality translation has to be linguistically correct, culturally appropriate, functionally effective, and referentially complete. The corresponding process of translation that should lead to a quality product includes the steps of task specification, task environmental analysis, knowledge application, text production, and evaluation. These steps constitute the technical framework of the translation process that can be embedded in any kind of business situation, be it freelance, employed, individual or team translation.

For interpreting, Pöchhacker (2002) suggests the following descriptors of a quality interpreting performance: accurate, adequate, equivalent, and successful. These denominators reflect the need for informational, contextual, functional, and interactional quality. On the other hand, the different steps of the interpreting process that can be analyzed for quality assessment
are described by Kalina (2002) as pre-process, peri-process, in-
process, and post-process. These stages reflect the embeddedness
of the interpreting process in the macro-environment of
client/user of the interpreting service and emphasize the close
relationship between quality input and quality output, desirable in
translation, essential in interpreting quality.

3. Quality measured

After reviewing some of the elements that characterize quality
producers, quality processes and quality products, let us turn to
the evaluation of quality. Evaluation of any kind needs to be
carried out with clearly defined contents, roles, objectives, and
standards against which a performance can be measured. Building
on Larose's (1998) model, we have to define the object of
evaluation (i.e., process, product producer or any aspect thereof),
nominate an evaluator, (i.e., the client, the supervisor, the
accreditation agency etc.), set parameters (i.e., standards,
benchmarks, criteria), and determine the method (i.e., sampling,
cross-sectional, full review...).

The first decision will probably concern the object of evaluation.
Commonly, the product of translation and, to a lesser degree,
interpreting, is under scrutiny as in Translation Quality
Assessment (cf. House, 1997). Even so, opinions diverge as to the
aspects to be assessed such as function, form, equivalence etc.
Products are but the results of processes so that a closer look at
the external and internal translation or interpreting process may
be worth considering. Finally, if the producer is chosen as the
object of evaluation, the question of how to assess his or her skills
other than through the products delivered remains open.

The most important element for external validity and reliability,
however, lies within the choice of parameters and standards.
These standards are unfortunately still lacking in the field of
translation and interpreting. The only existing norms, DIN 2345
and ISO-9004-2 refer strictly to the contractual and technical part
of translation, and the planned European Norm has yet to be
negotiated. For the time being, thus, every institution, company, agency has to establish its proper system of evaluation.

4. Quality in the translation classroom

If we want to introduce quality into the classroom, we will need to ask our students to define, recognize and produce quality. In their current circumstances, as students of translation and interpreting, their teachers will initially define quality for them. In their later professional lives, clients, users, or supervisors will define quality. However, in order to become self-reliant professionals, students will have to learn to define quality themselves, as producers, as translators and interpreters. Kiraly (2000), who supports a social-constructivist approach to translator training, emphasizes this need to train professionals, not just language experts.

On their way to becoming professional translators or interpreters, students have traditionally been evaluated based on the quality of their products only, the translation of a text or the interpreting of a discourse. More recently, with the advent of formative evaluation and process-oriented learning, both the learning process and the working process have received some attention. In light of the demand for quality processes, students and teachers will have to negotiate the different steps in the process of a translation task and work on ways to improve at each level.

After having decided the who and what of quality assessment, the question of how this can be achieved needs to be clarified. Norms, as mentioned before, have not yet any impact on the translation market. A contract or internal regulation of a company may in their professional lives determine, for example, the number of admissible errors per X number of words. Many times, however, the how of quality assessment will be an implicit requirement without explicit guidelines. In the classroom, a clear set of criteria, again to be negotiated between students and teachers, will help students develop a framework within which to place their work for the purpose of quality control.
The next step, recognizing quality when they see it (or hear it), is closely connected to the previous point of how to measure quality. If students are to recognize quality, they need to base that recognition on some previous experience and/or measure it against a clear set of criteria. This process can be developed by analyzing (source texts and) translations/discourses, comparing different translations, and by reflecting on the process itself.

Finally, after trying to define and, subsequently, recognize quality, students will be asked to produce quality. This quality, be it in translation or interpreting, will again have to be predetermined in its content and form. Criteria like equivalence or fidelity, target-likeness, or correctness will have to be laid out. In the process of translating or interpreting, students will have to apply these criteria, use their linguistic and translational knowledge and skills, and develop their potential for critical thinking, decision-making, and use of strategies. Group work will considerably foster that process.

5. Objectives and methods

In the translation classroom, as in any field, the mere teaching of content has given way to a joint development of knowledge and skills, language and competence. For the purpose of this paper, language here implies linguistic knowledge and skills, including textual, cultural, and translational skills. Competence, on the other hand, refers to the soft skills or professional attributes that are required in the workplace of today, including team-spirit, technology command, flexibility etc. All these skills and resources can be developed in the classroom and will have to be included in any quality-oriented curriculum.

In the language or translational domain, we can distinguish between linguistic, cultural, textual, transfer and research skills. These skills could be enhanced through peer-review activities (working on the linguistic correctness and adequacy of a translation with an analytic, reflective, and productive component), the analysis of parallel texts (for the textual, cultural...
and functional component), reformulation exercises (to stimulate textual, rhetorical, and analytical skills), summary or shuttle exercises (to improve synthesizing, transfer, and textual skills), as well as internet research and electronic communication (to enhance terminology, strategy, and technology skills).

In the competence or professional domain, students are expected to develop a set of skills that combine general work-place requirements with field-specific demands. Sim (2000) suggests the P.A.L.M. model (planning, administration, leadership, management) as desirable implementational skills for translation students, Pöchhacker (2002) reports on previous research that lists such attributes as objectivity, reliability, politeness and flexibility as desired professional qualities for interpreters, and the Universidad Europea de Madrid has launched a Strategic Competence Plan (UEM, 2003) that lists both general and field-specific skills to be fostered among students. Among the activities and environments conducive to the development of these skills are simulation exercises like translation briefs, internship positions combined with academic tutoring, group work settings, exercises aimed at developing autonomy in the student such as self-evaluation, and technology-aided tasks.

Apart from the above mentioned distinction between the language and competence domains, quality can also be developed along process - product lines. Even though it may sometimes be hard to clearly separate the two in the actual exercise set-up (since tasks or sub-tasks are by definition process-oriented), it seems worth directing students' attention both to the process of translation and to the last step within this process, the evaluation of the final product.

In the process approach, students will begin at the point of task specification (cf. Wilss, 1996) which can be analyzed and documented with the help of a translation brief (e.g., Fraser, 2000). The second step will be the one of text analysis which can be supported through text typological exercises, detection of theme-rheme structures, content analysis along the five "WH"
questions of journalism, or a thorough terminological treatment. Next, the research component of the translation process can be covered through information search and evaluation of sources. Following that, the so-called knowledge application stage (Wilss, 1996) lends itself especially well to group work, be it in class, online or in another format. What can be called the central task, text production, can be enhanced through summary-writing in the target language or by creating variants of the target text by changing individual elements of the task specification. The last step in the process, evaluation and, if need be, revision can be improved through the joint establishing of criteria and elaboration of checklists.

In the product approach, students will critically examine the final product with a view to the fulfilment of previously established quality criteria. If we require the product to be linguistically correct, culturally appropriate, functionally effective and referentially complete, we can again make use of several pedagogical structures. Evaluation in the form of peer review can improve the linguistic correction of a text combined with a learning experience for both students involved. The use of parallel texts, that is usually employed in an early stage of the translation process, can be helpful in the assessment of the final product as well. Feedback ideally from individuals without translational bias can help estimate the functional effectiveness of a translation. Finally, the verification of referential completeness needs to be carried out through a step-by-step comparison of source text and target text.

6. Theories and methodologies

Translator and interpreter training that aims at developing a sense of quality among students obviously has to be based on solid theory on one hand and tried and true methodology on the other. In this particular case, teachers and trainers can draw on three important fields: translation and interpreting, evaluation, and education. Each field has a different history, different goals and different paradigms but each can provide a valuable contribution.
to improving the quality of student performance and the development of quality as a concept among students.

On the assumption that most readers will be most familiar with translation and/or interpreting theory, this field will be covered most cursorily, almost limited to name-dropping and a mention of the reference section. For those who may be wondering why this section is suddenly emerging towards the end of this paper, whereas the overview of theories usually precedes any further discussions, let it just be said that the purpose of the paper was an eminently practical one and this section is designed to demonstrate how the previously developed lines of argumentation can be based on current theory.

Translation theory and quality in translation and interpreting for pedagogical purposes have been dealt with widely in recent publications. Kalina (2002) offers a comprehensive table for evaluating the quality of interpreters' output. Lauscher (2000) emphasizes the need for looking at process quality and the differences among quality requirements according to the individual translation case. House (1997) makes a case for distinguishing between the objectifiable linguistic component of quality and the social subjective one, arguing in favor of the former. Gile (1995) dedicates one chapter to quality, which he bases on the concept of communication, including teaching suggestions and examples. Wilss (1996) introduces goal setting as an important concept in teaching translation which lends itself to using when talking about quality as a goal. Kiraly (2000) advocates a social constructivist view in teaching where quality is negotiated based on the real world criteria measured by the time it takes to edit a translation until it meets the required standards.

Evaluation theory has some important concepts to offer as well with a view to fine-tuning students' understanding of quality in translation and interpreting. Starting out with needs analysis, which can be linked to task specification and task environmental analysis (cf. Wilss, 1996) helps students approach the task in a well-planned way. Different types of evaluation, holistic and
analytic, formative and summative, quantitative and qualitative, allow to zoom in on discrete elements or give an overall judgment, to judge the process or the product, to quantify problems and solutions or to describe contexts and connections. Error analysis, especially in the comparative sense, has long been used in translator training. Self-assessment, finally, is the most promising tool if we want to nurture a sense of quality, introspection, and self-reliant future professionals.

Education theory has evolved considerably over the past decades and now encompasses a wealth of approaches, strategies, and research findings that can be applied to the pursuit of quality. Philosophically, social constructivism, embraced by Kiraly (2000) for translator training, empowers the individual and contributes to forming independent and self-reliant future professionals that strive for quality and recognize it when presented with it. The so-called learner-centeredness with its focus on persons and their abilities rather than content knowledge reflects the current interest in competence and skills, much better warrants of quality than pure knowledge. Learning styles take account of individual differences and can guide students in discovering and working on their strengths and weaknesses, translator or interpreter, project manager or team translator, free-lance producer or employed terminology harmonizer. Only in a learning style compatible work environment can top quality be achieved. Collaborative learning prepares students for future team assignments and promotes consensus as to what quality means. Reflective learning helps students examine their own progress and relationship to quality. The ultimate goal would be the construction of a sense of self-efficacy with a view to resources, skills, and quality work. Motivation, however, one of the all-time ingredients of successful teaching, is probably one of the best stimuli for quality performance or the production of quality work.

These three spheres of theory, translation/interpreting, evaluation, and education coincide in laying the foundations for translator training with quality in mind. They give rise to a variety of methods, approaches and practices that have in common their
emphasis on the person, on the skills, and on the quality. In conclusion I would like to enumerate and briefly describe some pedagogical instruments that have been borrowed from other fields but can and are being successfully applied in translator and interpreter training.

Portfolios, though time consuming, serve the purpose of demonstrating process and hopefully progress and provide students with the chance to improve the quality of their work. Continuing evaluation, of which portfolios can be a part, is a way of contributing to the development of students’ sense of progress and quality. Questionnaires, diaries (cf. Fox, 2000), or think aloud protocols can be effective instruments in guiding students in their effort to recognize, develop, and produce quality and promoting self-directed learning. Evaluation of and comments on source texts, various translations, or different sources of information especially in a group-work setting develop the critical eye necessary for recognizing quality. Task-based instruction, finally, the staple method of any advanced translation or interpreting class, can aid the achievement of quality with clear specifications and detailed feed-back and joint debriefing.

7. Conclusion

Let us now return to the initial question that prompted this rather lengthy paper: Can quality be taught? It would seem presumptuous to want to respond with an unconditional affirmation. However, it can be argued based on the material presented above that quality can be developed. It can be developed by raising students’ awareness of the concept of quality and its manifestations, by encouraging reflection among students on the nature of quality and their own relationship to it, by fostering collaboration among students to define, produce and evaluate jointly quality in translation and interpreting, by providing or creating a set of clear criteria that can be consulted when navigating the maze of quality, and by sharpening the analytical comparative sense that allows students to examine, compare, and decide on quality in all its forms. The teacher as the
facilitator cannot instil quality but they can provide the grounds for quality to emerge.

References


