

Training students for quality: ideas and methods

Daniel Gile

Université Lyon 2

Resumen

En el mercado de la traducción, que se rige en gran medida por las consideraciones comerciales, no siempre se anima a los traductores a que ofrezcan la máxima calidad en su trabajo. Los buenos entornos de formación, en los que los traductores carecen de limitaciones comerciales, brindan a los estudiantes la oportunidad de desarrollar sus habilidades y su orgullo profesional. Si los formadores adoptan un enfoque que se centre en potenciar dichas cualidades, de cara también al mercado de trabajo, los futuros licenciados podrán contribuir a una completa mejora en cuestiones de calidad. Esta ponencia sugiere que lo más acertado es formar a los traductores con la intención de que ofrezcan el máximo de calidad posible, incluso si la coyuntura del mercado no es demasiado propicia para ello. Asimismo, cita una serie de requisitos esenciales para alcanzar dicho objetivo y recomienda el enfoque y métodos adecuados. En concreto, sostiene que una mínima base metodológica resulta más eficaz que la enseñanza de conceptos teóricos abstractos, que la introspección de los alumnos y los debates en clase les animan a dar lo mejor de sí y que un enfoque orientado al proceso de traducción les ayuda a aceptar críticas de una manera constructiva. Durante la ponencia se aportarán ejemplos prácticos.

1. The dilemma

One fundamental question for academic translator and interpreter training programs is how high to set their sights for graduation requirements. For obvious reasons, this issue is partly associated with "economic" considerations, both in the narrow sense of income from tuition fees or subsidies and in the wider sense of academic viability in terms of budget - as a rule, the budget an academic program can hope for is directly related to the number of its enrolled students. In many cases, this forces translator training units to lower their entrance standards in order to be able to recruit enough students, including students from overseas who are a source of considerable income but do not necessarily have the required linguistic mastery of the local language. While acknowledging the relevance of this economic issue, I will not attempt to address it here, and will focus on more conceptual issues. As should become clear further down, suggestions made here are compatible with economic strategies which might include recruitment of students with a still insufficient linguistic foundation.

When determining the level of proficiency expected at graduation from students in a translator training program, the following considerations come to mind:

1. A high level of proficiency is desirable insofar as it can be expected to contribute both to the profession and to the reputation of the program. However, if it is set too high, some less brilliant students who could nevertheless do acceptable translation

work in the marketplace may be left behind. In high-level conference interpreter training programs, some students who fail their exams eventually work as interpreters and turn out to be good professionals, perhaps after taking more time than other students to reach the required level. One is left wondering whether many other students could not have done equally well if they had been lucky enough to find their way into the market, and whether their failure to graduate did not deprive them of the possibility of realizing their true potential due to overly ambitious objectives set by the program.

2. In many cases, market conditions do not require a very high level of proficiency and/or do not allow the production of maximum quality translations, a fact which is widely known among practicing translators and which is also recognized among academic translator trainers. The most commonly cited reasons are time pressure, the lack of proper documentation and the poor quality of source texts combined with the two other factors. Some employers speak about the “waste” associated with “over-engineering”, training people to do things they will never be able to do anyway because of practical constraints. In the background, one might find the fear that such well-trained translators might be too demanding in terms of pay and other requirements.

Would it not be better, then, to just train students to fulfill market requirements, rather than aim higher? This option entails two drawbacks:

3. If the sights are set too low, there may be a loss of opportunity for talented students to unfold their full potential.

4. Letting market conditions determine fully the level of translation in the field is not an attractive prospect, as it is likely to drive the general level of translation quality down for commercial reasons linked to competition rather than to the true value of translation to businesses. It is in the interest of translators in general, and perhaps in the interest of society at large, that translation quality be good.

2. A position of principle

It is argued here that in the sheltered environment of training programs, where there is no risk of harming a client by taking a wrong decision, or of losing a job or a client, students should be encouraged and helped to unfold their full potential with high standards as regards the translation process (the analysis of the source text, acquisition of complementary information, problem-solving strategies) even if the final product (produced for the classroom) is not at the same quality level. The rationale proposed to justify this position is the following:

1. Helping students to go as far as they can in developing their skills is likely to help them get a job where high standards are required if they have the necessary talent and knowledge.

2. Helping students go as far as they can with an appropriate attitude on the part of their instructors (see further down) can help them feel better about themselves in most cases, and contribute to their overall development.

3. Helping students unfold their potential is likely to help them feel better about the translation process, and thus support indirectly the image of translation, and ultimately translation standards, even if they do not become translators themselves.

The ideological attractiveness of items 2 and 3 is not the reason for their inclusion here. They are mentioned primarily for pragmatic reasons, insofar as investigators have noted that higher quality seems to be associated with positive emotional involvement in the translation process (see Jääskeläinen 1996; Fraser 2000).

4. Fostering high standards in translation may help improve market standards and the general position of translators in the labor market and in society. High requirements and the action of AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, which was set up to promote high quality in conference interpreting (and the interests of top-level conference interpreters), have done a lot to protect the status and working conditions of interpreters in markets where AIIC is strong – there is a striking contrast with markets where it is not.

The analysis and decision-making involved in good translation are particularly welcome for students in the humanities, where they do not necessarily have many opportunities to hone analytical and decision-making skills of the type involved in translation.

However, in order to limit the risks associated with high standards, whenever possible, it seems desirable to implement a system whereby the *approach and methods* of high-level translation are taught without requiring every student to achieve the highest proficiency level in order to obtain some kind of degree or certificate. One way of achieving this without undermining the very objective of training for high quality is to decouple the academic certificate from professional qualification and establish various levels of professional certification. In Australia, such professional certification at 5 levels is tested and validated by NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. At the University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia, there is a master's program in English-Japanese translation and interpreting. When I visited the program, in the mid-1990s, most students were interested in improving their Japanese and obtaining an M.A., but did not intend to become translators or interpreters. Those who did would sit the NAATI examinations. Others would not, but would graduate with an MA which could help them find other types of employment.

One other way to decouple the teaching of good methods from high-level achievement requirements is to focus on good translation *approach and methods* - what could be called *High Added Value Translation (HAVT)* - from an early undergraduate stage on, when the students' linguistic skills and knowledge may still be weak, and admit the

best among them to intensive, specialized graduate courses for professional certification. This approach may appear counter-intuitive, as mastery of the languages is the foundation upon which translation is built, and common sense would suggest that no elaborate work in translation methods can be done before a good linguistic foundation is secured. This in particular has been the philosophy of prestigious translation and interpreting schools such as ESIT in Paris. However, it has been my experience over 25 years that with careful selection and/or preparation of the materials used (the level and type of difficulty of source texts must be calibrated against the potential of the relevant student group), the approach and methods of HAVT can be taught to students whose mastery of the foreign language is still weak and obtain good overall results in terms of:

- comprehension of the process and of what professionalism entails in translation
- stimulation and practice in analytical reading and in independent decision-making
- the students' level of interest towards translation as an intellectual activity.

Such training in HAVT approach and methods is not enough to enable most students to produce high level professional translations (which require good analytical and editorial skills, as well as some creativity), but they do acquire a solid basis upon which to build and develop further if they wish to do so. Those who are interested enough can go on and specialize at higher-level programs, and some manage to find their way into the translation market and acquire the missing skills on their own. In my Japanese-into-French translation classes for third-year undergraduate students, most of the non-Japanese students had only had two years of Japanese and practically no knowledge or experience of technical fields. Their mastery of the source language and their thematic knowledge were clearly insufficient for them to process successfully such texts as they would have to deal with in the labor market, but texts selected in popular science and popular technology publications were within their reach and allowed training in all fundamental steps of analysis, complementary information acquisition and problem-solving involved in professional translation.

Features of HAVT and principles for HAVT training are explicated further down.

3. Requirements

In order to implement this approach, a few basic conditions must be met:

3.1 Qualified trainers

If a translation program is to offer training in HAVT, one critical requirement is that its staff include qualified translators as instructors. Ideally, at least a few active professional translators should be involved, so as to ensure both contact with the market and credibility. In professional translator training courses, this is not a problem,

but in many modern languages departments where translation is taught, most if not all translation classes are conducted by language specialists. Understandably, their basic approach is that of translation as language-enhancement technique. This is inadequate, and partly incompatible with training for professional translation, as is stressed time and again in the literature. It is important that such language specialists be open-minded and willing to learn and implement a new approach. Obtaining this is not always easy, and may require much diplomacy and some persuasion from heads of department or course leaders. When this is not achieved, students find themselves in the frustrating situation of being submitted to different and partly contradictory standards from their instructors.

3.2 Motivated students

In order to implement successfully HAVT training, it is also necessary to have a body of motivated students, who are eager to succeed and willing to make some efforts. The students' motivation is sometimes a given from the time of recruitment, in particular in the case of high-level professional translator training programs. In other environments, including many modern language departments, students may not be interested in translation as such initially. In order for HAVT training to achieve the best results, it is important for instructors to generate (and maintain) motivation through an appropriate teaching approach. Such an approach should help students view themselves as intelligent and responsible translators through the instructors' attitude and through tools which empower them as such. More specifically, attempts should be made to:

3.2.1 Empower students as analysts and decision makers

High-added-value translators analyze source texts and take decisions. Students who are encouraged to do the same can be expected to gain better awareness of the intellectual nature of the type of translation they are taught and of the added value they can contribute to their future clients through the way they process the source text. Such awareness is likely to help foster professionalism later, even if erosion sets in under market pressure.

The opportunity arises in particular when source texts are ambiguous or erroneous. For instance, in a book about the human brain (for reasons which should be easily understood, references of the authentic texts where these editorially weak extracts were found are not given here), one paragraph starts with the sentence "The human brain weighs about three pounds or 1300 grams." Actually, three pounds do not correspond to 1300 grams. It is interesting to draw the attention of students to this fact, engage in a discussion about the possible reasons for the lack of equivalence between the two measurements and discuss the various possibilities for dealing with the associated dilemma.

In another text, the author says "Science is the group of subjects that is in some sense engaged in the search for and application of natural laws". Is science a "group of

subjects"? Can "subjects" be engaged in the search for something? The students' attention was drawn to the clumsy wording, and they were encouraged to think about factors that may make authors produce such sentences, to try to make sense out of this particular sentence through analysis and to write a clearer target text, which would add real value in terms of communication between the author and his readers.

In a third text, the author writes that "A variable is some property of an event in the world that has been measured." This statement is incorrect. Will students realize it is? If so, what will they do about it, depending on their views about who they are serving by translating the sentence?

A fourth text includes a sentence about the results of water pollution: "Water consumers later complained of symptoms including brain damage, memory loss as well as mouth, stomach and skin disorders." Brain damage is obviously not a symptom. What will students write to translate the sentence to deal with this inconsistency?

Instructors should devote time and attention in class to the processing of the relevant segments, always asking students to suggest solutions, listening to them respectfully, and discussing the pros and cons of their suggestions.

3.2.2 Make students accountable for their decisions

While decision making is essential for HAVT, it is just as important that it be done conscientiously. Students need to be made accountable for their actions and decisions, that is, proper analysis of the source text, proper treatment of translation problems, including acquisition of complementary information to help solve comprehension and reformulation difficulties, and proper checking of the fidelity and editorial acceptability of their target text. One good tool for such purposes is Integrated Problem and Decision Reporting – IPDR; another is a conceptual framework to orient them (see further down).

3.2.3 Avoid being too prescriptive with respect to the translation product during the method-acquisition phase

In the process-oriented paradigm advocated here (see Gile 1995), translator training can be viewed as consisting of two phases. During the first, trainees learn an appropriate approach to translation and basic translation methods and strategies. During the second, they practice and hone the skills acquired during the first phase, learn complementary techniques and acquire more knowledge, both thematic and linguistic. It is suggested here that during the first phase, instructors should focus on the process, not the product. They should avoid passing strongly negative judgment on poor translations handed in by students or suggesting to students systematically what they consider the best translations. They should study carefully the students' implementation of the approach and methods taught to them, commend them on appropriate strategies even if the product is not perfect, and highlight weaknesses in

their approach even if these result in no errors in the target text. Two advantages can be expected from this:

- Firstly, it allows even students whose linguistic skills and/or extralinguistic knowledge are not good enough to write perfect products to practice and enjoy an intelligent and responsible translation process. If instructors adopt the more traditional approach and focus on the product, the return of efforts is less visible to students, and motivation may suffer (see for instance a student's account in Enns-Connolly 1986, cited in Kiraly 1995: 7-8).
- Secondly, it allows focusing on the process, rather than having the students' attention scattered, due to the large number of distinct methodological skills and bits of linguistic and thematic information they need to acquire over the training period.

Clearly, the process-oriented approach will gradually have to be replaced with a product-oriented approach, so that students may boost their knowledge of language, terminology and the relevant techniques and themes, without which they cannot provide good products to their customers when in the labor market. When HAVT is taught at undergraduate level, perhaps to 2nd and 3rd year students, with carefully selected source texts, passing marks can be given to those who demonstrate understanding and appropriate implementation of the approach and methods even if their target texts are not quite good enough for professional use. The cut-off point may be set at the time - perhaps the end of the 2nd year, or at B.A. level - when training for a professional career starts. Those students who show interest and have demonstrated a sufficient ability can then be admitted to more intensive training with product-oriented assessment. They may need methodological reminders from time to time, but basically, they will have acquired a solid foundation and a positive professional attitude, and should be able to progress faster than students with a scholastic, language-transcoding based translation background.

3.3 Appropriate teaching tools

Tools to implement the approach as described above include carefully selected source texts (with the appropriate degree of difficulty), access to relevant documentation sources (in particular Internet), and a conceptual guiding framework, perhaps in the form of theoretical concepts and models and of explicit rules for the conscious part of the translation process. One such guiding framework is presented in Gile 1995. It includes *inter alia* a communication model to explain the role of translation and of translators as actors in a communication situation who work for other actors, a model of the informational content of non-literary sentences, which highlights the existence in such sentences of information neither chosen by the author nor necessarily useful for effective and efficient transmission of the message to intended readers, and justifies a certain margin of freedom in fidelity strategies; it also includes a sequential model representation of key steps in translation (figure 1), which highlights several principles, in particular the following:

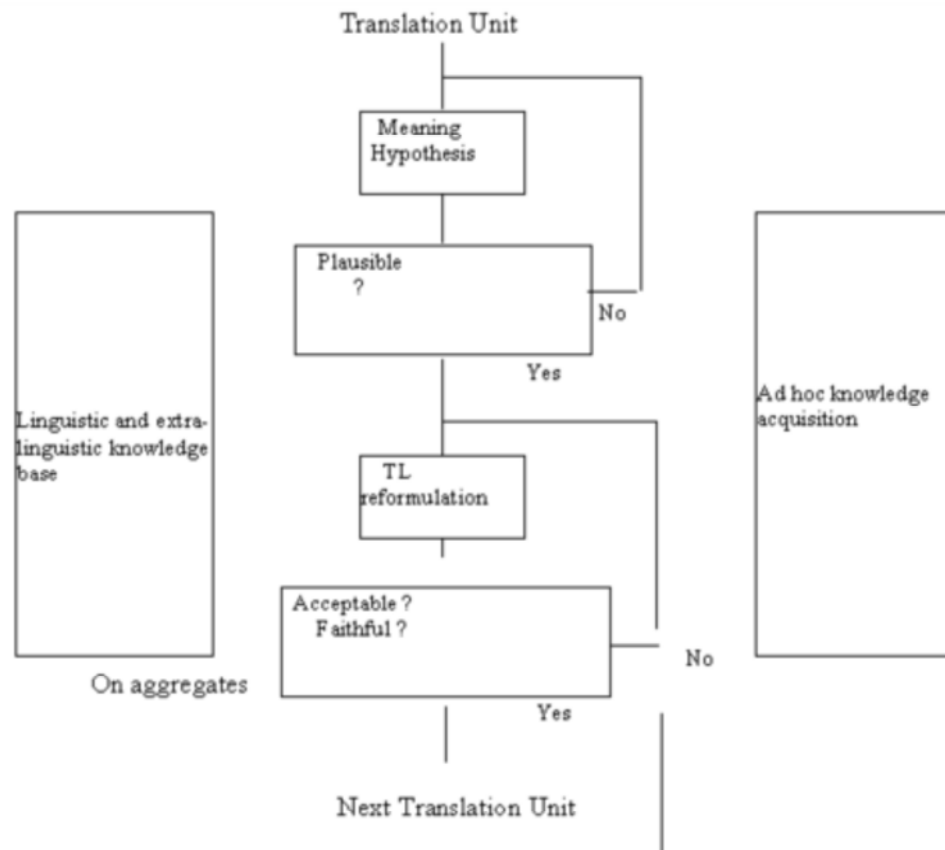


Figure 1 : A sequential model of translation for training purposes

1. Ideally, for every segment of the source text, an analytical reading phase precedes its reformulation. Reformulation starts only when comprehension is good enough. In the actual practice of experienced translators, this is not necessarily the case, as parallel processing and backwards steps also come in, but in early skills acquisition, the evidence suggests that separating comprehension from reformulation helps avoid meaning errors and infelicities due to interference between the source language and target language.

2. One's spontaneous comprehension of a source-text segment should always be checked for plausibility, and one's spontaneous reformulation of said segment should always be checked both for linguistic and editorial acceptability and for fidelity. In the classroom, these tests have proved invaluable not only in that that they seem to improve effectively the quality of the students' product, but also because they place students in the position of decision makers who carry responsibility towards their clients.

3. In every step of the translation, existing knowledge is used and further knowledge may be sought to solve problems, both for comprehension and for reformulation. Highlighting this fact prepares students to accept the idea that ad hoc knowledge acquisition is an integral part of translation and may require specific principles and techniques as well. Such principles and techniques are also explained in the book, though they are partly out-of-date and have been updated in Gile 2005. This model serves as a reference, in particular to identify weaknesses in the students' approach which result in infelicities and errors.

Finally, an important teaching tool is Integrated Problem and Decision Reporting (IPDR). The idea is to require students who hand in translation assignments to report in writing, in a fairly detailed way, every problem encountered, step taken to solve it and decision made. IPDR encourages students to think about their translation process, increases their awareness and highlights the intellectual, responsible nature of HAVT, and forces them to do more serious work, in particular in their acquisition of further information to solve translation problems. If read regularly and commented upon by instructors, IPDRs also show students that they are being paid attention to as thinking human beings whose thought are worthy of attention, which can be expected to lead to good results in terms of motivation. The IPDR concept is discussed more in depth and its application is illustrated with examples in Gile 2004.

4. Conclusion

The approach presented here is given in the form of suggestions. It is difficult to make strong claims about it until solid evidence is collected from the field and analyzed critically. Anecdotal data from the classroom, in particular comments from students as well as their IPDRs, suggest that indeed, this approach induces favorable reactions in terms of process and attitudes. In particular, students taught along the lines advocated in this paper tend to stop making avoidable meaning errors and to learn to make their own decisions faster than students taught with more traditional methods. However, this cannot be taken as conclusive proof: results may be due to specific interactions between the method, the students and the instructor's personality rather than to the method as such.

In the context of this conference, the main question is whether and to what extent such good results, if shown to be real, carry over to the marketplace. Do they produce better beginning translators? If so, in what way are they better? Are there indirect benefits of such an approach through the attitude of former language students who join the labor market in positions not related to translation? Research, through questionnaires/interviews and observation of beginners at work, may provide some answers, but even if effects are difficult to detect, in view of the low cost and low risk associated with this approach, it seems sensible to give it a try wherever the institutional environment and the instructors' personality make it possible.

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