



IS TRANSLATION TEACHABLE AND HOW CAN WE TEACH IT?

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Abstract

Ever since the first social structures emerged and human beings—who knows, may be even our cave-dwelling ancestors!—started to communicate socially or emotionally with members of their own species from other societies who had devised different codes of communication i.e. those who used different languages, they realized that there was a strong need for a mediator to facilitate this process, without which every such attempt would be like "talking to a brick wall." That was how translation as one of the earliest aids in international relations came into existence. As the scope of these relations broadened, people felt a need for experts with mastery of two or more languages who were actually the 'signifiers' of the former need in society. An attempt to meet this need was made when the wheels of the first educational centers were set in motion to satisfy the increasing demand of society for experts in different fields, including translation. Since then there has always been a controversy over the issue of teachability of translation.

Keywords: existing teaching methods, translation theories, predictability level, neuroinguistics, semantics, sociolinguistics, language, culture-specific terms.

Is translation teachable at all? If yes, to what extent? It is crystal clear that no one can answer this question off the cuff, and we need to first define what the real nature of translation is. Is it a science, a craft, or an art? It's only then that one can decide whether it is something to be taught in the classroom like any other field of study and with the same existing teaching methods. Focusing on this issue is beneficial in that many problems regarding teaching translation arise from the fact that a great number of experienced and skilled autodidacts in the field who have been asked to educate beginner translators believe that translation is learned by experience and personal intuition and can by no means be taught in the classroom. Many of them also believe that translation theories are all of no use. On the opposite extreme are people who argue that translation is or can become an exact science like any other. There are still others



who try to avoid the extremes and think of translation as something in-between. These debates usually leave students in confusion and bewilderment which results in their lack of motivation, interest and trust in the curriculum.

Some people argue that translation is a science. The most salient characteristics of a science are precision and predictability. We can call something a science only if it has scientific rules that work all the time. In fact, scientific rules are so fixed and precise that they are not called rules anymore, but laws. For example, compounding two units of hydrogen and one unit of oxygen will always give us water or steam, or ice, depending on the temperature. It is worth noting that some sciences, particularly those dealing with the humanities, do not achieve a 100-percent predictability level, and any theory in those fields must stand up to strict, recurring tests to be considered valid .

Translation uses scientific data, mainly taken from different branches of linguistics (like neuroinguistics, semantics, sociolinguistics, etc). It has also been recently combined with computer science, giving birth to machine translation and computer-aided translation. But translation in itself is not a science.

Although translators use scientific data and theories, they do it in a way that gives free hand to individual taste, bias, imagination, and temperament. There are sometimes several solutions for dealing with a particular translation problem, and a creative translator may find a new solution on the spot. Translation problems may be similar, but it is impossible to devise a scientific equation that would work in the same way, every time, for each problem in all languages due to the inescapable differences among languages as well as their cultural contexts throughout the world.

Translation, according to Newmark is "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text." So, another major obstacle to having a comprehensive translation theory is that of getting a deep insight to what "meaning" is, something which is still a matter of debate in the humanities.

To sum up this part, let us examine the purpose and nature of translation theory. According to Newmark : "What translation theory does is, first to identify and define a translation problem; second, to indicate all the factors that have to be taken into account in solving the problem; third, to list all the possible translation procedures; finally, to recommend the most suitable translation procedure, plus the appropriate translation."

Still, there are many others who believe that translation is an art. Translation has a lot in common with arts as well as sciences. It sometimes becomes highly dependent on the



idiosyncrasies and intuition of the translator. Like composers and painters, translators often find their own moods and personalities reflected in their work. The major factor that prevents translation from being considered an art is that, unlike translators who have to solve a range of different problems, the defining factor of an artist's work is esthetics.

Categorizing translation breeds some fuzziness since the field has traits in common with both science and art. Therefore, we must choose the category that is most congruent, or at least most convenient and workable. That category is craft. In a similar vein, Newmark describes translation as: "a craft consisting of the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language."

Up to now we found that translation is mostly a craft. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a craft is "a skill or a technique"; if we are to teach translation we should try to teach it as a craft is taught, taking into account the merits and nature of translation, the proficiency of students in both source and target languages. and the objectives of the translation course itself.

So much for the nature of translation; now let us examine the possible teaching techniques applicable to translation classes. As the name suggests, the core of the grammar-translation method of teaching is grammar. Although this method of teaching is seldom used nowadays, some parts of it are still popular with some teachers "especially for evaluating advanced students or in specialized tests for translators or overseas final exams of courses where translation is still part of the curriculum" . Whatever the role of translation in today's teaching and testing methods, it is important to make a distinction between teaching translation and teaching language.

Teaching translation to students who are learning the target language at the same time necessitates taking into account two major issues: first of all, we should be aware of the fact that learning how to cope with translation-related problems is not exactly the same as learning the language itself, although they go hand-in-hand. There are many difficulties such as translation of figurative language, culture-specific terms, translation of sacred texts, and other text types with regards to their functions, which fall in the categories to be taught as translation-related issues. Second, it is vital to decide which language teaching method is better to be used along with the method adopted for teaching translation as a craft.



According to Pienemann's teachability hypothesis in applied linguistics, there are two sides in learning a language: one refers to the developmental sequence for certain aspects of language that takes place regardless of the learner, or the method of learning; the second dimension, the variational sequence, refers to the variation in language acquisition based on the relationship between the learners and their situations. The developmental sequence is practically controlled by the nature of our common language acquisition device. The variational sequence is based on learner variables such as the extent to which the learners are integrated into the target culture.

In teaching translation, one has to take into account these two factors because they are closely related to both translation and language. Actually we can say that the LAD (language acquisition device) is important in translation in that it is effective in the process of learning the language itself. The second set of factors, i.e., those which constitute the basis of the variational sequence, are important in teaching translation due to the fact that they are all intertwined with language and thus with translation. Being familiar with the target language culture is the best example of these factors.

So, in order to be successful in teaching translation, instructors should be able to merge the language teaching techniques they may deem best for their students with those of teaching translation. The techniques adopted for teaching translation should be chosen with attention to both sides of the nature of translation: first its objective and theoretical principles and second the subjective part which is mainly related to the student's intuition and creativity.

The first noteworthy conclusion we can draw from this paper is that translation is teachable because, on the one hand, it is a craft and consequently teachable as are other crafts; on the other hand, it is closely related to teaching language itself, although it is vital to make a distinction between the two. Another important point is that those engaged in teaching translation to students who are learning the target language along with translation should be aware that they are teaching two different things at the same time and that they should use a congruent eclectic method applicable to both. Believing that translation is a teachable craft they should help their students get an insight into the nature of translation and recognize that it is vital for them to pay attention to translation theories while honing their translation and language skills. They should also be aware that ignoring the above-mentioned points leads to students' confusion, lack of motivation, and loss of interest in the curriculum.



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