

Translation in university foreign-language curricula as transferable generic learning. Challenges for pedagogy and research

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Since the 1990s, the study of translation at university level has expanded exponentially, both in terms of translator-training programs and as a component of foreign-language curricula. This paper concentrates on the latter. Moving from an analysis of tensions between narrowly philological approaches on the one hand and narrow vocationalism on the other, it proposes a translation pedagogy assumed to mitigate such tensions. At its core is an understanding of translation as transferable generic learning, i.e. as an activity that provides access to a range of widely applicable skills and attributes. After a brief contextualization of these learning outcomes, the suggested approach is discussed in terms of the challenges it poses to both implementation and empirical study. Finally, an agenda for future research is put forward.

Keywords: foreign-language learning, translation pedagogy, transferable generic skills, vocationality, skills transferability

Introduction

As is often the case with complex domains, translation has been frequently described in terms of something other than itself, mostly by means of metaphorical images (St. André 2010). The image of translation discussed here is that of a “transferable and generic type of learning”. Why yet another translation construct? The answer is that this particular construct may constitute a possible route via which some tensions in translation pedagogy in university foreign-language curricula can be addressed and possibly reconciled.

In academic language education, translation has long featured as a language-teaching and language-testing tool in many countries. Under the influence of different paradigm shifts in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (FLT/L), it has known alternate fortunes ranging from absolute

primacy (with the Grammar Translation Method) to utter rejection (with the advent of monolingual and communicative approaches in the 1970s), to a gradual reappraisal since the 1980s. Overall, it has never really disappeared from the academic context and, at the same time, it has never been espoused wholeheartedly either. In recent years, translation has gained a more central position in current thinking on FLT/L. Especially since the turn of the century, an unprecedented body of scholarly work has cast new light on the benefits translation can bring to the enhancement of linguistic, metalinguistic, communicative and intercultural skills, along the continuum from lower to advanced levels (Witte et al. 2009, Cook 2010). Underpinning this resurgence of interest has been its reconceptualization in terms of: 1) a natural mechanism of L2 learning, to be exploited consciously and profitably (Hentschel 2009); 2) a language ability in its own right (Balboni 2008); and 3) an authentic communicative activity, increasingly useful in today's multicultural societies (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe 2001).

As a result of this reappraisal and the increasing demand for language mediation, translation teaching in university foreign-language education has grown exponentially. Yet, despite the significant theoretical and methodological advances in the field, actual practice bears witness to what seems to be widespread disorientation and arbitrariness. This is the case, for instance, in the Italian academic context, where some scholars have highlighted a tendency to rely heavily on language-focused activities, even when translation is conceived of as a skill in its own right, with problems and strategies being tackled randomly as they arise, without targeted didactics (Di Sabato 2007, Mazzotta 2007). At the opposite pole, the growing demand for professionally relevant higher education has resulted in much pedagogical translation metamorphosing into downright vocational training, with the most common offerings being introductory workshops to professional translation (Lombardi and Peverati 2008) and projects organized around authentic commissions (Peverati 2009), where focus is placed on various aspects of the profession, from project management, to computer-aided translation tools, to job-hunting skills.

These initiatives can enrich classroom activities in many ways. Yet they are likely to conceal a number of weaknesses that may undermine their appropriateness and utility. In a nutshell, due to real-life quality requirements, they often turn out to be over-challenging with respect to both language and translation skills, thus negatively impacting on the overall learning experience and its output. Also, they tend to offer very dense syllabi, to the detriment of proper input assimilation. Moreover, these syllabi risk being offered in a curricular void, with no other course supporting them, unlike what happens in translation and interpreting institutions. Finally, these initiatives tend to fuel unrealistic expectations. Despite the fact that they are often presented as offering “*minimal* basic competencies useful to operate in the translation

market” (Brusasco et al. 2011: unpaginated, emphasis and translation mine), students might believe that what they are receiving is a sufficient toolkit to enter the translation profession. And although it is stressed that students must be encouraged to get further training if they wish to work as translators, such steps are not always easy to monitor.

In short, the issue with translation in foreign-language curricula can be described in terms of a polarization between narrowly philological and academic approaches on the one hand, and narrowly vocational impulses on the other. In my doctoral research, I have focused on the analysis of this dichotomy, trying to identify ways around the attendant tensions. In this paper I will focus on the vocational end of the polarization, presenting an alternative view of a professionally relevant translation pedagogy: profession-based translation training rests on the idea of translation as a preeminently professional skill, what translators do for a living in the language services industry. This is, however, a narrow and partial understanding, which leads to teaching approaches whose import for foreign-language students might be somewhat limited. A possible alternative may rest on the idea of translation as a transferable and generic type of learning. Central to this idea is an understanding of translation as a language activity that, among other things, gives access to a range of skills whose currency is wide in a variety of professional settings beyond specific language industry job niches. These skills are here referred to as “transferable generic skills” (Peverati 2013).

Translation in foreign-language curricula as transferable generic learning

Defining transferable generic skills (henceforth TGS) is not straightforward, due to the conceptual and terminological ambiguity still surrounding these learning outcomes. In recent literature on the subject, some consensus exists on at least three features. These skills are believed to be: 1) a varied set of abilities and dispositions, inherent in all education at a certain level and not exclusive to any discipline (Villa Sánchez et al. 2008); 2) relevant in multiple life spheres, like employment, social participation, lifelong learning (OECD 2005); and 3) applicable to many situations and contexts (European Commission 2004). Since their rise to prominence in higher education worldwide in the 1990s, several inventories of these skills have been devised, both at the level of single academic institutions and of international organizations like the EU and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Typical examples cluster around key human activities such as communication, working with others, gathering and processing information, critical thinking, and problem-solving. They also include personal attributes like creativity and intellectual rigor, as well as

values like ethical understanding and tolerance of others' opinions (Hager 2006).

The idea of translation as transferable generic learning draws on an interesting intuition by Kelly (2005, 2007), who has identified one-to-one correspondences between the skill categories in her model of translation competence and the generic competences drawn up as the aim of all undergraduate and postgraduate courses within the European project "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe" (González and Wagenaar 2003). In Kelly's view, the uniquely wide access that translation offers to generic competence areas while developing subject-specific knowledge and skills makes this discipline a broadly applicable type of learning, and this is something that can serve translation and interpreting graduates well in terms of enhanced employability. It is my contention that Kelly's claim applies even better to graduates of foreign-language programs, who are not primarily trained to become professional translators and consequently might benefit more from the widely applicable learning that derives from translation education rather than from the restricted know-how developed in vocational translator training. Further, typical generic skills like those mentioned above are highly valued by employers as indicators of mature and adaptable individuals. As such, they may prove more useful in gaining and retaining jobs, or moving between them, than those acquired in strictly vocational translation modules. Finally, since these skills are believed to enable individuals to participate effectively in and across multiple fields beyond those related to employment (e.g. education, lifelong learning, social participation, private life), they may be considered learning objectives whose significance involves a person's holistic development. A translation pedagogy that explicitly integrates such skills may help mitigate the tension between academic and vocational impulses in foreign-language education, promoting an approach that caters for both the cultivation of the individual pursued by classical humanism and the professionalizing agenda underpinning much current higher education (Kearns 2008).

Based on this assumption, I have become interested in a mode of translation pedagogy in foreign-language curricula that integrates TGS and fosters learning transfer, and for the purposes of my doctoral studies I have been working on possible ways of empirically investigating it. Some aspects of this teaching approach, however, have presented a number of challenges for both implementation and empirical study, which point to areas where there is more to investigate. In what follows, I discuss the main challenges encountered, along with implications for future research.

Some stumbling blocks along the way

When planning my research project, I initially relied on Kelly's (2005: 34) claim that translation offers access to TGS in a way that "is difficult to find in other academic fields". I therefore considered analyzing the role played by communicative translation activities in the development of these skills in language students. I thought of the classic experiment design where a group of students take part in translation activities, a control group does not, a pre-post test on a selection of TGS is administered, and the two groups' performances are compared. But this research design soon posed some difficulties. First of all, it is known from the literature that TGS are inherent in all academic study regardless of the discipline. So it would be difficult to establish a causal link between translation-related learning and enhanced performance in TGS, because students could develop these skills in other courses or even outside formal education. It is true that this external variable does not really represent a threat to the internal validity of the study as long as it is the same for both groups. Nevertheless, other more fundamental factors impinge on this type of experiment.

One of these factors is certainly the selection of the TGS to be tested. As my co-supervisor rightly observed, "we don't really know which transferable skills and attitudes will be enhanced by translation education more than by any other language activity or discipline, and it would be risky to suppose that we did" (Pym, personal communication, September 2012). Equally problematic is the fact that we do not know what the TGS involved in translation activities in foreign-language education look like at all. As mentioned above, my assumption of translation as transferable and generic learning rests on Kelly's identification of substantial convergence between her model of translation competence and the generic competences devised within the Tuning Project. It must be pointed out, however, that Kelly's claim concerns the skill-set the author identifies as being the desirable outcome of a typical *translator-training* program. It may well be the case that the generic competences trained and developed through translation education as part of a broader foreign-language program are of a different nature, despite the commonalities between the two fields.

More problems with experiment design emerged in connection with TGS assessment, as any experiment aimed to test the actual development of TGS as a result of a certain pedagogical intervention needs to rely on clearly defined measurement criteria, an area that is still largely under scrutiny at present. While some skills may lend themselves relatively well to being measured (e.g. information retrieval), others much less so, because they are non-determinate and volatile, in the sense that it is difficult to specify fully what it means to be skillful in, say, working autonomously (Knight and Page 2007). Further, as Hager (2006: 34) points out, TGS are widely believed to be discrete entities

that can be recognized singly but, while it is sometimes useful in developing our understanding of these skills to consider them individually, in practice they tend to “overlap and interweave like the threads in a carpet”. Hager gives the example of teamwork, which almost always features in TGS lists as a single item, whereas in practice it is the interplay of negotiation, communication, self-critical abilities, problem-solving, etc. This intrinsic holism of TGS is likely to make assessment a challenging task, as it may be hard to isolate single skill components from the holistic bundle in which they tend to occur. Hager (2006: 29-30) also specifies that most TGS are often difficult to articulate in language, both by the performer and the person assessing the performance, as they amount to “non-transparent or tacit types of learning”. This means that traditional assessment procedures, based for example on descriptors and levels of performance, may be inappropriate.

Another obstacle that I encountered concerns the fact that TGS acquisition should be thought of in terms of an ongoing developmental process, rather than as a “quick, one-off learning event” (Hager 2006: 24). This means that—provided we devise a valid measuring tool—it may be hard to detect any significant development over the short timeframe that is generally allotted to university courses or controlled experiments, unless one opts for a longitudinal study, but this was not among the options at my disposal.

In light of these difficulties, I turned my attention elsewhere. I went back to Kelly’s claim that the skills practiced in translation are no doubt specific to the act of translating but—at the same time—can be subsumed under different categories of generic competences. She interprets this feature in terms of the “wide applicability of translation skills to other fields, that is their transferability” (2007: 34). In other words, we can assume that, say, the information retrieval and processing skills that are deployed in translation are not exclusive to this domain and can be transferred to other domains as well, academic, professional and social. I found this assumption fascinating and also central to the wider debate on the role of translation in foreign-language education. So I started thinking about possible ways of testing the transfer of translation-related TGS to other contexts. This opened up the Pandora’s box of learning transfer, an extremely vast issue in Educational Psychology that is just as complex and contested as it is considered central to the whole enterprise of education.

The claim that generic skills are transferable has stirred much debate on the grounds that these skills, although by definition at work across the broad range of university studies, necessarily configure to disciplinary contents and contexts of application, and can therefore be somewhat different in different contexts. On this account, several detractors (e.g. Hyland and Johnson 1998, Bolton and Hyland 2003) have deemed it fallacious to suggest that these skills can be *at the same time* applicable across knowledge domains or social settings. To further substantiate their criticism, they have insisted on the long-

standing record of failures characterizing transfer research. Among the few who have challenged these criticisms, Hinchliffe (2002: 200-201) points out that the problem lies in the type of transfer aimed at. What detractors may have in mind when stressing the unlikelihood of transfer for TGS is what he terms “direct transfer”, i.e. the literal application of the same techniques and knowledge units across domains, as is the case with word-processing or arithmetic skills. In his view, this kind of transfer is implausible in the more opaque field of generic skills and attributes, as these can hardly be reduced to sets of fixed procedures or rules to be mechanically lifted from one context and replicated intact in a different one. The only possibility for transfer he sees is through “situational awareness” (2006: 96-97), which enables one to understand the precise nature of the situation at hand and adapt one’s acquired knowledge and skills to its specificities.

Hinchliffe’s argument captures the spirit of much recent transfer research, which has moved past rigidly conceived notions of transfer as static “replication” of knowledge and skills across contexts (Hager and Hodkinson 2009) to embrace more dynamic views and investigate the mechanisms whereby people rely on and generalize from prior learning when faced with new situations. One point of agreement across these studies has been to reframe transfer in terms of a generative transformation and adaptation of existing knowledge, which in turn produces new knowledge or contributes to performance in other situations (Hatano and Greeno 1999, Bransford and Schwartz 1999, Carraher and Schliemann 2002).

These views offer some margin for reconsidering the assumption of generic skills transferability in less skeptical terms. Yet they do not make the pedagogical or research task any easier. As pointed out by Brent (2011), detecting evidence of generic skills that have been transformed or used as a platform for further learning constitutes a considerable challenge. Also, understanding how higher-order generalization works and what knowledge has the most potential to transform and aid learning in the widest range of contexts is no easy task either.

In light of the issues discussed so far, the following section provides an outline of the research agenda that is deemed necessary in order to bring forward the research project undertaken, still largely work in progress, as well as to pave the way for the implementation of the teaching approach theorized at the outset of the study.

Implications for future research

In order to support the implementation of a TGS-oriented translation pedagogy in foreign-language curricula as well as its empirical investigation it is essential to achieve as deep an understanding as possible of the TGS that can be realistically assumed to emerge from translation activities in tertiary

foreign-language education, thus obtaining a clearly articulated profile to be used for curriculum and syllabus design. The majority of existing TGS inventories contain a varying number of abilities and attributes that are described, if at all, at a high level of abstraction, with vague umbrella terms such as decision-making or communication. Further, as pointed out by Chanock (2003), they appear to ignore the peculiarities of each field of study, adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. As such, they hardly ever amount to useful operational reference tools for pedagogy or research. In recent years, the awareness of these weaknesses, coupled with a growing consensus that TGS are significantly shaped by disciplinary knowledge (Hager 2006, Jones 2009), has prompted scholars to direct their research efforts towards the definition of TGS repertoires that are specific and meaningful to single academic subjects (e.g. Male 2010 for Engineering, Jackson and Chapman 2012 for Business Studies). To my knowledge, no such efforts have been made in any systematic way in the field of Translation Studies or by advocates of translation in FLT/L.

Another area where more research is needed concerns teaching methodology. This is not necessarily to be intended as the development of ready-to-use syllabi but rather as an anthology of guiding principles and activity frameworks that can orient a translation pedagogy explicitly incorporating the identified TGS, in ways that will inevitably be interpreted according to context-specific features. Work on this aspect can avail of the contributions on teaching and learning processes supporting TGS development in general (Kember 2009). Equally significant is a thorough reflection on the complex issue of assessment. The belief is widely held (Hughes and Barrie 2010) that explicit assessment is one of the key determinants of the implementation and effectiveness of any TGS-oriented pedagogy, as it promotes full commitment to these learning outcomes from all the stakeholders involved, as opposed to purely declarative compliance. Considering the complex nature of the learning outcomes discussed here, their assessment is unlikely to be amenable to conventional procedures. This implies the need to acquire new knowledge in the field and to explore appropriate methodologies. Some work has been carried out on the subject (e.g. Knight and Page 2007, Villa Sánchez and Poblete Ruiz 2011), which can orient future research efforts on translation-related TGS.

One final area where further investigation—as well as experimentation—is needed is transfer of learning. In recent years, this field has witnessed an unprecedented resurgence of interest and research, with increasing attention being directed to the mechanisms and contextual conditions fostering transfer (Engle 2012, Goldstone and Day 2012). A possible way forward towards the investigation of generic skills transferability would thus be to devise a possible pedagogical agenda that calls attention to what is already known from the ample literature on transferability-friendly teaching and try to experiment with it.

Conclusion

The idea of a translation pedagogy in foreign-language curricula that valorizes widely applicable skills instead of narrowly vocational know-how is certainly intriguing but fraught with intellectual challenges, mainly linked to the still limited knowledge of some key issues, which call for substantial further research. This article counts as an interim report on a project that is still largely work in progress, focused on a developing area that still needs to move forward. Out of intellectual honesty, it must be pointed out that, at present, little progress has been made in the pursuance of the steps suggested above, mainly because the issues in need of further investigation appear a rather daunting prospect if tackled by a single person. These are probably best addressed by a team of researchers, comprised of different stakeholders such as experts in translation in FLT/L, Translation Studies scholars, language teachers, as well as learning specialists, curriculum developers, and materials writers.

The present time appears to be particularly favorable for this kind of research synergies. Among the factors that seem to augur well are surely the current flowering of attention to learning transfer as well as the general climate for a revival of translation in foreign-language education, a climate in which the transferable dimension of translation skills in terms of TGS might arouse the intellectual curiosity of other scholars and researchers. Another factor that bodes well is the very recent interest in TGS shown by FLT/L publishers (e.g. Macmillan) and organizations (e.g. IATEFL), which are increasingly reaching out to the teaching community and supporting it with concrete resources for both instructional activities and professional development. The emphasis is invariably on the idea that foreign-language learners should be placed in a position to develop more than L2 knowledge and skills in a narrow sense; they should also be involved in a learning process that, through language, fosters the development of abilities transferable across their current and future academic, professional and social lives.

The heightened emphasis on these pedagogical goals in FLT/L and the work that is being carried out towards their attainment may provide a fruitful environment for similarly oriented research in the neighboring field of translation education.

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