The Traditional Vs. The Modern Translation Classroom: A Need For New Directions In The UAE Undergraduate Translation Programs

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Abstract

Any proposal for a modern way of teaching translation should be discussed against the background of traditional translation training in general. By comparing the traditional translation classroom against the parameters of a modern one, the study sheds light on how prepared students are to meet the challenges of the translation industry in the UAE. The study also draws pedagogical implications on focal issues related to translation teaching and program development in UAE universities in light of the requirements of the QF Emirates. A need for a major shift in the paradigms of translation teaching and assessment practices becomes inevitable for the success of academic translation programs. This paper argues for new directions to be adopted in the undergraduate translation programs offered by UAE universities.

Keywords: translation classroom; translation teaching; assessment; QF Emirates

1. Introduction

The world has witnessed the boom of revolutions in information and communication technology during the last two decades. In many ways, this has had a great influence on many professions including translation and teaching. Nations striving to keep abreast of the rapid strides of the global age are continuously investing in both innovations in teaching and translation movements. A pioneer in all endeavors that aim to firmly cement the pillars of civilization, UAE initiated many successful translation projects like Tarjem and Kalima. It not only institutionalized

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Translation by corporate providers of training but also focused on academic domains. Hence, translation courses and degrees on both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels are being offered by several UAE universities. The translation curriculum has been integrated within the major of either English Language Literature or Linguistics in universities like The University of Sharjah and Abu Dhabi University. However, other universities like The American University of Sharjah, The United Arab Emirates University, and more recently, The Canadian University of Dubai and The American University of Dubai have launched full-fledged programs and established translation departments dedicated to offering tertiary translation training. This breakthrough in the UAE’s translation education was brought about by the importance of addressing the need for qualified translators working with the Arabic-English pair. However, now that there are more programs in the UAE for students to consider the translation profession, can we guarantee having more qualified graduates for the challenging translation profession? Have the market demands of the UAE context found their way into translation teaching practices? Are translation students in UAE universities taught to acquire the translation qualifications that meet the market needs?

In its strive to bridge the gap between qualifications and the market needs for the purpose of contributing to the prosperity and growth of the UAE, the United Arab Emirates Commission on Academic Accreditation launched in 2012 The Emirates Qualifications Framework Handbook (QF, 2012). The QF specifies the criteria for both accrediting qualifications and accrediting public and private sector organizations delivering qualifications. Its five ‘strands’ framework identify learning outcome statements for ten levels of qualifications. The strands are: knowledge, skill, and aspects of competence, comprising three sub-strands: autonomy and responsibility, self-development, and role in context. Devised to promote lifelong learning as a means of fulfilling learners’ potential, the QF Emirates empowers the transformation of traditional learning settings to vibrant modern learning environments that meet the demands of today’s global UAE; all in aspiration of offering “world class qualifications for world class workforce” (QF Summary, 2012). Hence, UAE qualifications can be recognized and valued as they stand to be compared against acclaimed foreign qualifications. With this paramount significance of the QF in mind, and as UAE universities endeavor to map programs to the QF standards, I have come to recognize serious flaws in the current translation classroom among which are two significant areas:

1. Translation teaching methods
2. Assessment practices in translation teaching

Translation theory and practice enjoy a rich plethora of research. On the other hand, the dynamics of the translation classroom and translation teaching itself are under-researched and more specifically so in the context of UAE. This adds to the significance of this paper which although reflective and analytical in nature, its aim is to pave the way for future empirical studies by deliberating on important directions in translation teaching and learning and exploring the important variables and factors pertaining to the success and failure of university translation programs in the UAE.

1.1 The translation classroom: an overview

Research in translation training has recognized the existence of two types of classroom activities involving translation. Both Willigen-Sinemus (1988) and Stewart (2008), classify translation in the classroom according to the teaching method for which it serves which includes the following two types of classrooms:

a) Translation for the purpose of language-learning used according to Pym (1992) “as a didactic means in foreign language teaching” (p.73). It is termed as “school translation” (Gile, 1995, p.22) and as “pedagogical translation” (Stewart, 2008). According to (Alsheikh, 2011) who conducted a study to investigate United Arab Emirates College Students’ beliefs and views on translation, this type of translation that emerged from the Grammar-Translation Method practices is still widespread in UAE schools.

b) Translation for the purpose of Translation-learning. This type of translation, termed by Stewart (2008) as “professionally-oriented” translation or “vocational translation”, is used to prepare trainees for the translation market. (Willigen-Sinemus, 1988) states that students in this type of translation classroom “already have a high standard of proficiency in target and source language” (p.472). This type of translation is one that is congruent to the standards stipulated by the QF. However, does it exist in today’s UAE tertiary translation classroom?

To answer the above question, I have to resort to my humble experience as a translation instructor who since
2007 taught at English language programs offered at three UAE universities, namely, Ajman University of Science and Technology, Sharjah University, and Abu Dhabi University. I am also LinkedIn to a network of university translation instructors in the UAE. Hence, I have come to realize the existence of a third type of translation classroom in UAE universities. This type of translation is a merge of the above mentioned types. Translation courses are offered to fulfill the requirements of a degree in English Language and/or Literature. Students, enrolled with a minimum score of 5 IELTS lack a high standard of proficiency in the foreign language which is English. They also show lack of proficiency but to a lower extent in their own mother tongue which is Arabic (Al-Hadithy, 2014). Therefore, the UAE translation-learning classroom does not have the parameters of the second type of translation classroom defined above as it does not have a substantial existence in the UAE tertiary-level context, especially so at the undergraduate level. What exists is a translation-learning classroom that is embedded in the pedagogical setting of second-language learning. Due to the lack of foreign language proficiency, linguistic trans-coding dominates this type of translation activity and meeting the market needs becomes a derailed objective.

Consequently, if we were to evaluate the current performance of UAE university-trained translators, we would have to be confined to look at their level of language proficiency in both source and target languages. What about the multidisciplinary nature of translation? Many studies on translator education point out that today’s translation training programs should go above and beyond improving students’ linguistic-cultural skills. University-trained translators should be equipped with IT skills, documentation, desktop publishing skills, problem-solving, and marketing skills (Kiraly, 1995, 2000; Process of the Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation [PACTE], 2000; Mackenzie, 2004; and Tan, 2008). (Olvera-Lobo et al. (2005) postulate that to meet the requirements of a demanding professional translation market, it is expected of would-be professionals “to have a broad knowledge of the subject matter of the text, to use a large number of computer tools proficiently, and to be versatile in the sense that they can master all elements in the translation process” (p.132). This only means that current UAE university translation programs are in dire need of a transformation to bridge the gap between competencies acquired by its translator trainees and those that define today’s demanding translation profession. The existing third type of the UAE translation classroom needs to acquire the characteristics of a professionally-oriented translation classroom yet maintain focus on acquiring a solid linguistic competence. To cater for such metamorphosis represents a formidable challenge as curricula, syllabi, teaching methods, assessment, textbooks, and even translation course enrolment criteria have to be revamped.

2. From the traditional to the modern translation classroom: moving towards meeting the QF

The traditional translation classroom has been vehemently criticized as being teacher-centered, uncreative, rigid, and out of date (Kiraly, 1995, 2000; Colina, 2003; Stewart, 2008). (Colina, 2003) states critically that the traditional translation practitioner is burdened with the ‘Atlas Complex’- one who “carries over his/her shoulder the full responsibility for all that goes on in the classroom” (p.52). Transmission of knowledge characterizes the traditional translation classroom. The learner passively absorbs the passed on knowledge rather than becomes actively engaged in the learning process. Translation equivalent strategies are made available should students make a faulty translation which gives the impression that the teacher’s answer key to the translation task is the only correct answer (Colina, 2003, p.52). Learner’s autonomy and self-confidence are sapped by this focus on the translation product rather than the translation process. To be more precise, traditional translation teaching and learning is centered on and excessively concerned with the accuracy of the translation product. (Zhong, 2002) stresses on the profound implications this has for the teaching of translation. Not undermining the importance of translation accuracy, Zhong however, warns against its pitfalls should it be a dominant discourse in the translation classroom. As students are trained to be ‘accurate language facilitators’ rather than ‘thinking translators’, the ‘non-thinking’ teaching environment shackles them to follow blindly a set of standards and criterions (p.579). (Kiraly, 2000) laments that the traditional teacher-centered and exercise ridden classroom alone “cannot equip translators-in-training with the wide range of professional and interpersonal skills, knowledge and competence they will need to meet the requirements of an increasingly demanding language mediation market” (p.193).

To transform the conventional translation classroom, translation educators need to step outside their comfort-zone teaching style depicted by the unfruitful “read and translate” instruction method. (See Gonzalez Davies, 2004).
In fact, this traditional method is centered more on the mechanical directive of “read and translate [accurately]”. (Zhong, 2002) argues for transcending the discourse of accuracy in the teaching of translation highlighting that:

Because [translation] involves selective interpretations and representations of meanings, we as educators must not disguise translation with a discourse of accuracy but rather should reveal its biased nature. Because translation is not an entirely natural, innocent, fair, accurate or objective process, we as educators must not be bothered about turning students into inhuman, selfless, accurate and objective translation machines with mechanical precision. (p.579)

Zhong (2002) vehemently stresses that “we as educators must not dis-empower [students] by depriving them of their subjectivities and their right to think independently” (p.579). In a nutshell, a modern translation classroom should create opportunities to boost students’ creative potential and imagination rather than brainwash its learners with the elusive and deceptive criteria of accuracy and objectivity. The key to achieving this transformation is by reorienting both translation teaching and learning away from deeming the translator a mere facilitator in the process of communication. For the modern translation classroom, the objective of the translator is to be a conscious interpreter who uses “intellectual discretion, to make ethical and technical decisions, to seek information, to reconstruct and manipulate knowledge” (Zhong, 2002, p.579). In this way translation teaching integrates higher-order thinking and charges its learners with interpretive and intellectual boosting capacities.

Both learner and instructor must relearn their roles in the modern translation classroom. The learner should be “weaned away from thinking in terms of equivalent vocabulary items towards thinking holistically in terms of creating coherent texts”. (Snell-Hornby, 1992, as cited in Stewart, 2008). The translation educator, on the other hand, should be more career-centered in their teaching. The modern translation classroom is not only learner-centered but learner empowering as it boosts the learner’s autonomy with life-long learning skills. It charges learners with enough self-confidence to work independently from their instructors. The modern translation classroom develops translation students’ ability to think for themselves, function collaboratively within a team, and think responsibly to be able to self-assess the strengths and weaknesses of their own performance. With such skills generated and high-order thinking activated, the would-be translators develop lifelong learning skills that help them continue progressing and learning even after they graduate. Hence, the modern translation classroom develops in students learning outcomes that align with those of the QF Emirates as not only knowledge and skill are sought after but a whole set of higher-order competences that result from the effective use of knowledge and skill in professional and vocational settings.

3. Rethinking assessment in translation teaching

As a practitioner and a professional translator I have come to notice that assessment practices in UAE undergraduate translation programs are still constrained by the traditional translation classroom methods of teaching. As discussed in section 2, such methods fail to prepare translation trainees for the challenges of the translation profession. When asked about their experience, many UAE internship students would express their frustration and disappointment seeing that what they were trained and assessed for within the university translation classroom barely relate to the requirements of the market needs and more importantly to how professional translators are evaluated. This very missing link is in dire need of empirical research.

Since QF places great emphasis on life-long learning, it is important to highlight its relation to effective assessment in translation training. A significant critic of assessment practices in higher education, (Boad, 2000) sees that assessment acts “need both to meet the specific and immediate goals of a course as well as establishing a basis for students to undertake their own assessment activities in the future” (p.151). This double duty is at the core of Boud’s concept of sustainable assessment, which he defines as one which “encompasses the knowledge, skills and predispositions required to underpin lifelong learning activities” (Boud, 2000, p.151). He calls for a major shift in the assessment paradigm stating that it should be moved “from the exclusive domain of assessors into the hands of learners” (p.151). Boud expounds that sustainable assessment not only meets students’ present needs but does so without compromising their ability to meet their own future learning needs. This means that sustainable assessment equips students with the ability to contribute to their own learning and that of others. “As part of being lifelong learners they will be effective lifelong assessors engaging in sustainable assessment” (Boud, 2000, p.152). University translation programs, like any other programs in higher education, need not only to equip students with
knowledge and skills but with the competences that prepare them for the rest of their lives as contributing members in a learning society.

Influenced by (Boud, 2000) attempt to rethink assessment, I believe it is time to rethink assessment in translation teaching by adopting sustainable assessment in the design of the translation program’s course syllabi. If it is confident, independent, creative, thinking translators that we want to produce into the UAE society, sustainable assessment needs to be adopted. This concept strongly complements (Zhong, 2002) call to transcend the discourse of accuracy in the teaching and learning of translation. (See section 2). One way to promote sustainable assessment is “to examine that aspect of assessment that is directly linked with learning, that is, the area of formative assessment” (Boud, 2000, p.154). According to Sadler (1998) formative assessment is “assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning” (p.77). It includes classroom interactions and structured classroom activities, questioning, and feedback that help students close learning gaps (Sadler, 1989). This means that students become more actively involved in their own learning. In relation to translation pedagogy, formative assessment has long been overshadowed by summative assessment. The students’ translation performance is judged against imposed criteria for achieving translation equivalence. With minimal student discussion and a one-sided class interaction, the traditional translation practitioner becomes the notorious ‘Sage on the Stage’ - a guru of do’s and don’ts.

In their deliberations on assessment in translation studies, (Melis and Albir, 2001) emphasize the fact that research in assessing translation training has been overly neglected, and thus they submit thorough proposals for empirical research in this area. The suggestions they outline for the development of assessment procedures and instruments in relation to the three assessment functions: diagnostic, summative, and formative highlight the importance of a learner-centered approach to assessment and reflect a framework of assessment that incorporates high-order thinking and life-long learning. In terms of formative assessment, they recommend “Teacher’s observation records, student’s documentation (linguistic and extralinguistic) records, student self-assessment records, translation diaries (in which the student keeps a record of the problems encountered, errors, documentation sources used, time invested, global evaluation of results)” (Melis & Albir, 2001, p.285) To this list, I would add the use of online discussion boards to create a forum of real-time formative feedback. To create these discussion boards, I am using BlackBoard - a course learning management system - where each group works on a timed translation practice and posts it on the discussion board to peer reviewed by the other groups. Next, the groups use the feedback to edit their translations. After the feedback loop is closed and formative assessment is used for learning, the class ends with more than one acceptable translation version of the original which leads to another interesting class discussion. Another formative assessment idea is to group students in 4-5 blogs using BlackBoard and have them post their own created translations. The blogs allow for more peer interaction as students communicate their thoughts, make suggestions, and give and get immediate feedback.

In light of all the formative assessment techniques mentioned above, both teaching and learning can become more flexible and effective as teacher and learner are more able to observe learning difficulties, find their causes, and reach solutions. As a facilitator of learning, the translation practitioner should not only adopt quality formative assessment practices but should embed formative assessment thinking into all aspects of translation teaching and thus make learning sustainable. Hence, student translator competence is remodelled by this new goal; one which aims to enable students to develop their lifelong learning skills that equip them to become professional translators ready for the ever changing market.

4. The quest for translator competence

As this paper adopts the concept of sustainable translation assessment, it is important to ask what translation competence is being assessed. What are the elements defining translation competence? How is it acquired and what levels does it comprise of? All these questions are very common in the translation teaching literature. However, the concept remains without an explicit and definite definition. What can clearly be observed in the literature is a shift from confining translation competence to merely linguistic and cultural competences. With the growing demand to meet the expectations of the professional market, current scholarly work on translation competence tends to break it into several interrelated sub-competences. (Tan, 2008) points out that in the majority of cases, the concept is simply
used as a blanket term to “cap over many different sub-competences, and scholars have generally […] avoided its exact definition and turned to focus on discussions about the training of this and that sub-competence.”(p.598) For Mackenzie (2004) translation competence expands beyond linguistic-cultural skills to include more vocationally-oriented skills like marketing, management, IT, and interpersonal skills (pp.32-33). Another interesting model of sub-competences is that of the PACTE research group (see PACTE, 2000). Made up of six inter-connected vital sub-competences, this translation competence includes: communicative; extra-linguistic; instrumental-professional; psycho-physiological; transfer and strategic sub-competences (PACTE, 2000). However, the group emphasize on the vital role of the “transfer competence” of the translator as it integrates all the other sub-competences. (PACTE, 2000, 103)

Tan (2008) highlights that although scholars have not reached a consensus over the definition of translation competence, it is still important to properly define it as this holds the key to solving the basic problems of translation teaching (p.598). Hence, Tan holds that a definition of translation competence should still comprise of sub-competences, yet the focus should be “person-oriented” seeing that it is “the ‘whole person’ […] equipped or empowered that can translate, and not the various ‘competences’ that can translate” (Tan, 2008, p. 599). He thus gears his definition attempts away from those of translation competence proper, which he equates with “the transfer competence”. Instead, Tan proposes a definition of “translator competence” stating that it is “Competence that comprises all the fundamental sub-competences one possesses in order for one to be qualified as a translator/translation specialist” (p.599). Tan’s fundamental sub-competences integrate to create a “whole-person” in the translation student as they include: cognitive competence, communicative competence in the relevant language pairs on the linguistic level, communicative competence in the relevant language pairs on the pragmatic level, transfer competence, technological competence, and instrumental competence. The whole-person translator competence concept is inspired by the whole-person education which aims to make students “well-rounded”. Tan (2008) makes this clear by stating the “translation students develop cognitively, intellectually, technologically, psychologically, and physiologically. During the various stages of their tertiary translation education, they grow as translators/translation specialists in their cognitive competence, bilingual communicative competence, transfer competence, instrumental competence and other competences” (p.604)

Tan posits that tertiary level translation teaching is not just training but rather training and education. Based on this proposition, the whole-person translator education model Tan proposes adopts a holistic approach which works towards making students adaptable as they are trained and educated to “gain generative problem-solving abilities, using definite resources to handle infinite new situations” (Tan, 2008, p.59). In this sense, the concept of the whole-person translation education is not only holistic, but it is also sustainable as it is a life-long process that continues even after the student graduates. Based on such realization, one more dynamic competence needs to be added to Tan’s translator competence profile. This has to be the life-long learning competence. However, this competence cannot be considered as another sub-competence to be added to the above mentioned list. It is the central competence that not only integrates all the sub-competences but allows them to be restructured to meet the demands of each level in the learning process. Hence, the translator competence is open to constant development and improvement. In this way, the Whole-person sustainable translator competence aligns with the QF competence sub-strands of autonomy and responsibility, role in context, and self-development; leading to improved student achievement whether within the tertiary context or that of the professional world. See figure 1 which depicts Tan’s whole person translator sub-competences in light of both a holistic and sustainable framework.
5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the need for new directions in the UAE undergraduate translation programs. Deliberations on learner-centered approaches to translation teaching and learning emerge from a comparison between the traditional translation classroom and the modern translation classroom. This paper calls for a shift from the dominant teacher-centered approach in teaching translation to a more learner-centered approach which fosters the translation student’s subjective, interpretive and intellectual power. Guided by the directions of QF Emirates, translation qualifications and degrees should revamp the learning outcomes of tertiary translation programs to be congruent with the desired levels of knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to meet the market needs. By adopting a framework of sustainable assessment and designing syllabi with learning outcomes that builds students’ Whole-person sustainable translator competence, today’s translation programs will not be far away from bridging the gap between university trained translators and professional translators.

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