Lawrence Venuti’s Teaching Translation. Programs, Courses, Pedagogies appears at a time when interest in discussing strategies for teaching translation seems to be at an all-time high. Panels on teaching translation at recent American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) conferences are always very well-attended and have led to online forums for participants to share information such as syllabi for courses on translation. Interest in this topic is also revealed by the fact that the call for papers for the anthology attracted 164 proposals from twenty-four countries. Thus, Teaching Translation is a timely attempt to address this hunger for information, with twenty-six chapters that provide an overview of the state and practice of translation programs, courses, and pedagogies today. This is a vast topic, but the scope of the book is somewhat narrowed by imposing a number of beneficial constraints: the book focuses on written translation (not interpretation), into English, primarily in the United States. On the other hand, there is no limitation as to the types of texts under consideration (while the majority of the translation examples stem from literary translation, the call for papers requested “descriptions of courses and pedagogies for teaching the translation into English of humanistic, pragmatic, and technical texts”). In addition, the inclusion of five chapters that focus on translation studies outside of the United States (Canada, Northern Ireland, and Spain) widens an already extensive playing field for reasons that are not readily apparent.

Venuti’s “Introduction” sets the stage with a brief history of translation studies in foreign language, creative writing, and comparative literature departments. It addresses three “institutional antinomies” that present challenges for translation studies in the United States, claiming that: (a) too many translation programs and courses are staffed by faculty members who neither translate nor conduct research in translation; (b) the decision by faculty members to dedicate themselves to any form of translation practice and/or research “continues to be tantamount to jeopardizing one’s academic career”1; and (c) the model of translation that is taught is too often instrumental rather than interpretive. Venuti does not provide any statistical or anecdotal evidence to support his claim that these issues are threatening the establishment of the field of translation studies in the United States, nor does he delve any further into the first two. He does dedicate the remainder of the introduction to the third issue, arguing in favor of a hermeneutic model of translation, where “translation is understood as an interpretive act that varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text according to the intelligibilities and interests of the translating culture.”2 Thus, the book’s overarching assumption is that translation is too
often taught as if there were only one correct translation of a text, which the teacher imposes, often through a “chalk and talk” type of class dynamic. Instead, Venuti argues, students should understand that no text is available in an unmediated form, and “the interpretation offered by a translation can vary with clients and institutions, disciplinary debates and cultural developments.” The twenty-six chapters that follow suggest pedagogies and assignments that have been successful at fostering that understanding. They also serve as a reminder that there are, thankfully, translation programs in the United States that do not suffer from Venuti’s three antinomies.

The book is divided into four parts: Certificate and Degree Programs; Teaching Translation Practices; Studying Translation Theory, History, and Practice; and Resources. The Resources section of the book stands alone, with a too-brief survey of translation pedagogies, a review of textbooks, and a thorough bibliography. The divisions between the other three sections are, as Venuti acknowledges, largely artificial since any discussion of translation programs (Part I) entails some discussion of classes (Parts II and III), and translation practice (Part II) and translation history and theory (Part III) are inextricably intertwined. For this reason, readers who are in search of information about any one of these topics would be well advised not to limit their reading to that particular section of the book.

The chapters that comprise Part I, Certificate and Degree Programs, seem to have been chosen to afford one representative example from different institutional types offering different translation credentials. Thus, the five chapters present: an undergraduate certificate in translation studies, a graduate certificate in translation studies, an MA in translation, an MFA in literary translation, and a Ph.D. program in translation studies. The chapters in this rather forced representative sample may at times feel like a check-list of program requirements such as one might find in a college catalog, but of course, any thorough description of a program of studies also necessitates plenty of information about specific courses and assignments. Bill Johnston and Paul Losensky, for example, provide a host of very useful examples of specific readings, assignments, and assessment criteria as well as details about the ways in which their translation workshops are structured.

Parts II (Teaching Translation Practices) and III (Studying Translation Theory, History, and Practice) give tangible form to the book’s interpretive approach to translation, emphasizing the idea that translation should not be taught “as the reproduction of a source invariant which then becomes the absolute standard by which student work is evaluated.” Thus, many of the assignments that are presented in the nineteen chapters at the core of the anthology are designed to help students understand that the translator’s task is to make translation decisions based on his or her hermeneutic goals and concepts of equivalence as well as the perceived function of the text and the needs of the intended audience. In general, as Michael D. Hubert puts it, students must comprehend that “although there are many possible valid interpretations of a single text, not all translations are equally valid.”

Many of the authors suggest ways in which students can be encouraged to develop a sense of responsibility for their translation choices, which they are required to justify in workshops or through journals, process papers, or translator forewords. Other
assignments help empower students to get beyond the straightjacket of a search for direct word-for-word correspondence, encouraging them to understand that being loyal to the spirit of the original may require textual shifts because of linguistic imperatives and conventions, cultural norms, the intended audience’s needs, etc. One common technique is to ask students to analyze the interpretative acts found in a variety of published translations of the same text (see especially Sean Cotter). Students are also asked to produce multiple translations of the same text in different styles or for different audiences. For example, Markus Nornes asks students to “translate” the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet from English into various other styles of English, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney requires two translations of the same original, one of which brings the source author to the reader while the other brings the reader to the source author. Several authors present students with examples of poorly executed real-world translations and ask them to analyze how and why these translations were unsuccessful and to suggest improvements.

Some of the more noteworthy classroom activities encourage students to understand the nature of translation as an interpretive act before they even begin translating. This includes reminding students that the fact that there are varied valid translations of the same text is unsurprising when we consider the fact that people may have very different interpretations of the same material within a single language (for example, Ben Van Wyke asks students to watch a video of two Supreme Court justices who have opposing interpretations of the US Constitution) or even outside of language (Peter Filkins has students analyze “different” pieces of music, before revealing that they have been listening to multiple interpretations of the same score).

Information literacy is also emphasized in many of these chapters, ranging from the proper use of dictionaries, the assessment of various online translation resources, and the need to find appropriate parallel texts to inform one’s translation (see especially Brian James Baer). Finally, some authors have found ways to help students begin to experience what it means to be a translation professional. This might entail shadowing professional translators or interpreters, completing real-world translation projects, writing reviews of recently published translations, attending or even presenting at the annual ALTA conference, preparing manuscripts for submission to a particular journal, or fulfilling internships in the field.

While the types of information included in these chapters is compelling, my primary questions about the text as a whole correspond to its goals, selection of materials, and intended audience. The “Introduction” to Teaching Translation mentions a number of goals, including both (a) improving the teaching of translation practice through the presentation of exemplary models and (b) figuring out how to best measure that improvement. While it is true that many of these examples of stellar teaching practices may lead to improved teaching, the book does not provide any meaningful guidance toward assessing or measuring that improvement within the profession.

As for the selection of materials: Teaching Translation makes a valiant effort to address a variety of the issues that are resonating in this burgeoning field in an expansive way, but the choice of topics that are emphasized is sometimes surprising, especially in the section on Studying Theory, History, and Practice. That section includes chapters that focus on issues we might expect, such as methods for teaching
literature in translation or issues of self-translation or questions of human rights and ethics in translation, but it also addresses some issues whose inclusion is unexpected (e.g., why a chapter on “Folklore in Translation” but not gender in translation or the translation of humor or retranslation, to name just a few possibilities?). In addition, it might have been helpful for the anthology to address more fully some of those thorny questions with which teachers of translation most often seem to struggle. For example: how to structure a class in which student proficiency in the second language ranges from native to basic reading knowledge, effective methods of error correction, or the dynamics of larger group translation projects.

Lastly, the question of readership: the back cover suggests that “Teaching Translation will be relevant for all those working and teaching in the areas of translation and translation studies.” While the information about the current state of translation studies in the United States today will be of interest to many translators, there are times when this anthology seems both too general and too particular. Rather than affording any methods for comparison between the 350 translation programs that exist in the world today (that number comes from the European Society for Translation Studies and is certainly too low) or an overview or assessment of courses and pedagogies, readers are provided with snapshots—often very compelling snapshots—but snapshots all the same of particular programs or courses that are meant to suggest the current state of translation studies in the United States (and three other countries). For this reason, readers should understand that, while this book includes pertinent information about teaching translation, it is not intended as a how-to guide. Nevertheless, readers who are hoping for hands-on information—including reading lists, ideas for potential assignments, and assessment techniques—will find a myriad of gems sprinkled throughout the book, while the diversity of the programs, courses, and pedagogies that are presented may inspire greater creativity in developing successful translation courses and programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTES

1 Venuti, Teaching Translation, 4.
2 Ibid., 8.
3 Ibid., 11.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 56.