

Applying Translation Theory in Teaching

María Calzada Pérez

Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana, Spain

ABSTRACT

A basic premise of this article is that the institutional teaching of translation studies has evolved in the past decades partly due to a growing connection between theory and teaching practice. The present article focuses on how seven proponents of various translation theories teach in classrooms, on why theory is important for the teaching of the profession, and on the nature of theory. This discussion leads to a fundamental concern for the training of future translators for professional work. It is argued that translation trainees should be exposed to a variety of approaches to translation which are inspired by and connect to different theoretical schools so that students are in this way taught to be flexible in their approach to texts and will also learn theory in practical application.

KEYWORDS: ideology in translation studies, translation pedagogy.

Introduction

The “success story” (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990:xi) of institutional training of translators and interpreters is indisputable.¹ In the 1970s, there were only 49 translation training centres in the world. In the 1980s, the figure grew to 108. This was boosted to over 250 programmes of translation and interpreting in the 1990s (Figures from Caminade and Pym (1998:280-285)).

In the past decades, however, there have been critical voices - such as House (1981:7-8) and Hurtado Albir (1999:10) - who have warned against the lack of a systematic pedagogical framework and who, like Juliane House, have depicted the typical translation learning setting in bleak terms:

The teacher of the course ... passes out a text (the reason for the selection of this text is usually not explained ...). This text is full of traps, which means that the teachers do not set out to train students in the complex and difficult art of translation, but to snare at them and lead them into error. The text is then prepared ... for the following sessions and the whole group goes through the text sentence by sentence, with each sentence being read by a different student. The instructor asks for alternative translation solutions, corrects the suggested version and finally presents the sentence in its final “correct” form ... This procedure is naturally very frustrating for the students. (House 1981:7-8)

Undoubtedly, there are still major didactic gaps that need filling but, with Baker, I claim that translation teaching “has experienced a tremendous [quantitative and qualitative] growth in the past few decades and this trend seems to exceed all expectations in the new millennium” (2001:5). One important reason for this, I believe, is the integration of theory and practice by translation teachers.

This integration is, however, often put into question by those who defend a dichotomy between the theory and the teaching practice of translation (e.g. Mayoral 2002). Therefore this article examines how theory and translation teaching are intertwined with special reference to seven schools in Translation Studies. The article briefly discusses advantages of this

intertwinement and it concludes with an examination of theory as such, and a proposal for deliberate and practical translation assignments based on a variety of theoretical approaches in translation classes.

The ideals of translation teaching

Since we cannot attend all classes in today's translation teaching centres, an analysis of the integration of theory and practice in courses must be done by a review of how translation is claimed to be taught ideally in classrooms. Such an examination of pedagogics is relevant, since ideals are declarations of intention by being explicit about what individual translation teachers want to teach their students. It goes without saying that reality calls for adjustments, but the intention is still there.

Contrary to House's harsh depiction of translation classes in the 1980s in which there were no explanations and only traps, much current literature suggests that teachers have (finally) found - convincing or unconvincing - 'explanations' in theoretical developments in Translation Studies. With Vidal Claramonte (1998:61), I would argue that looking into the parallelisms of theories and didactics is a revealing exercise, and I shall therefore devote the following, brief section to it. But before we embark on this exploration, I wish to emphasise two things. Firstly, I intend to illustrate rather than attempt to be exhaustive: I will not review every single theory and every single teaching method under the sun. I will only provide some examples to support my contention that there is a strong connection between theory and the methods in translator training. Secondly, I am fully aware that the account that follows classifies scholars in distinct, independent categories. However, reality is more complex, so I use the categories only for the sake of clarity. Nevertheless, the picture which emerges will suffice to bolster my claim that today's translation teaching methods and theories go hand in hand and that there are convincing or unconvincing reasons (but reasons nonetheless) for today's syllabi in various teaching environments. Further work may therefore be profitably devoted to refining the nuances and tie up loose ends.

The seven trends

Many researchers - such as Hermans (1995), Munday (2001), and Venuti (2000) - have discussed theories and have provided their 're-writings' of Translation Studies. It may be argued that in a way, these 're-writings' emerge from a meta-linguistic descriptive impulse which shows that Descriptive Translation Studies research tools are present at all levels in Translation Studies. I have also proposed my own 're-writing' elsewhere (Calzada Pérez 2002). Drawing on my previous 're-writing' (2002), I here intend to concentrate on what I see as seven important trends in Translation Studies, each with a different focus:

- A focus on (mostly 'discrete' units of) languages (e.g. Jakobson 2000, as well as Vinay and Darbelnet 1977)
- A focus on the communicative nature of texts (e.g. Neubert and Shreve 1992; House 1981, 1997; and Hatim and Mason 1990, 1997)
- A focus on communicative aims through texts (e.g. Reiß 1989; Vermeer 1989; and Nord, 1997)
- A focus on the link between translation and target cultures (e.g. Even-Zohar 1990 ; Toury 1995; and Lefevere 1985)

- A focus on the ‘new translation ethics’ (e.g. Bassnett and Lefevere 1990; Venuti 1995; and postcolonialists)
- A focus on the translator as a rational and emotional being (e.g. Seleskovitch 1976; Krings 1987; Gutt 1991, 2000)
- A focus on translation corpora (e.g. Baker 1996; Kenny 2001; and Laviosa 2002)

Like Hermans, I admit that my own ‘re-writing’:

... is therefore partial, in more senses than one: it is incomplete and it is prejudiced ... Of course we all know that there is a certain bias in every statement and that no account is neutral, but it is just as well to be reminded (Hermans 1995:9).

However, this is the ‘re-writing’ which I find most illuminating for the classification of theoretical work. Since all ‘re-writings’ are partial and none neutral, I propose to use this as the starting point for an illustration of parallels between theory and practice although, as already mentioned, I intend to illustrate rather than explicate exhaustively the seven trends listed above by referring to one prominent representative of each trend. This will suffice to document strong links between theory and the translation training practice.

The emphasis in teaching

My examination of the literature on translator training indicates that teaching is being performed from (at least) seven different vantage points which correspond to the above seven trends. Teaching depends on the main focus of the teachers’ theoretical bias. I believe that teachers should even make this bias clear to their students so that the students are fully aware of the teacher’s aims and goals in classroom practice.

Along these lines, some pedagogues **focus on discrete linguistic units** - preferably below sentence level - on contrastive or comparative practices, and on translation procedures (in the Vinay and Darbelnet tradition). Rosell Ibern (1996) is a representative of this trend. She is a trained translator who teaches students to work from German into Spanish. Her contrastive position is described by Mayoral as follows:

One has to go back to East German scholars to find such a clear ascription to these [contrastive] theoretical views. (My translation.)

[Hace falta remontarse a los teóricos de la Alemania Oriental para encontrar descripciones tan claras a estas posiciones teóricas [contrastivas]] (Mayoral (1999:93)

Rosell Ibern’s handbook, *Traducción Alemán-Español* (1996), is straightforward and deals with differences between the German and Spanish languages. According to Rosell Ibern, translation involves a difference, an indisputable loss. This is why teachers must improve students’ abilities to tackle these differences. In order to do this, students have to learn about typographical features in the source and target language, false friends, reference markers, semantic incoherence, and lexical divergences. The syntactical and structural gaps that Rosell Ibern focuses on include the gerund, the passive voice, relative clauses, word order, and syntactical ambiguity. She also discusses idioms and metaphorical language. Her book concludes with what the author terms “stylistic features” related to register, conciseness, and the avoidance of redundancy and pedantic language usage.

Other teachers place the **text** in the centre of the **communicative act of translating**. New handbooks drawing on scholars such as Neubert and Shreve (1992), Hatim and Mason (1990), and House (1997) are constantly being published. Nowadays, they typically incorporate Halliday's grammatical proposals and go beyond discrete units of language below sentence level. Hatim and Mason (1997) is a good example of this kind of teaching: being both theorists and teachers, the authors devote a chapter to translation didactics and pose the following key question: "On what basis could the selection, grading and presentation of materials for the training of translators be made more effective?" (Hatim and Mason 1997:179)

Their answer is to use their own traditional notions of text, genre, and discourse, then to include new concepts such as "evaluativeness" and "statism" vs "dynamism". That is, source texts may be more or less subjective ("evaluativeness") and they may conform to social norms to a greater ("statism") or lesser ("dynamism") degree.

In sum, they approach the teaching of translation with the conviction that different source-text types - that is, instruction, exposition, and argumentation - pose different challenges to translators and that the training of future translators is to be organised around text typologies (Hatim and Mason 1990). Teachers are to start courses with instructional texts, those which 'tell' recipients in the target-language culture what to do. Legal texts are particularly useful for classroom translation practice because:

texts of this particular type have conventionally developed a more or less finite set of structure formats that are highly formulaic ... The various instructional forms are thus 'routines' which the translator either knows or simply does not know. But, if not known, these formats and terminologies are learnable with remarkable ease, since what is involved is essentially a finite set of conventional formats and a finite list of conventional vocabulary. (Hatim and Mason 1997:189-190)

Instructional texts would tend to require 'literal' translation. At the second learning stage, **exposition** - which just presents a topic with little evaluativeness - would be commented on and translated in class. Translation of **exposition** could vary in terms of the proximity to the source text. At a third stage, argumentative documents (that put forward theses with high degrees of evaluativeness) are to be presented to students who may often compose very dynamic renderings.

Other teachers prefer to arrange their classes around the *Skopostheorie*. Elena García (1990; 1994; 2001) clearly favours Reiß and Nord's theoretical position. She therefore organises her translation classes from German to Spanish according to two major parameters: microstructure and macrostructure. Together with a study of semantic features (text content, topic, and meaning structure) and form (morpho-syntax, vocabulary, and style - verbal as well as non-verbal), she requires students to address the functionalist question: Who says what through which channel to whom with what effect? (Elena García 1990:24). The answer to this question clarifies clients' needs before the translation process and therefore determines which translation strategies students are to use. Contrary to Hatim and Mason (1997), who tie source-text types to translational behaviour, Elena García advises students to analyse the translational macro-textual settings and to study clients' needs before they decide how to render a specific source text into another language and culture. In order to do so, she exposes students to three different texts: articles from newspapers, advertisements, and literature.

Descriptive Translation Studies has inspired some teaching methods, although the prescriptive nature of training has discouraged many a teacher from following the indications given by Gideon Toury (1984) amongst others. At that time, Toury observed, translation teachers had taught students about textual typologies, about how to identify relevant hierarchical linguistic features, and about how to convey the total meaning of a source text. In short, teachers aimed at making students “optimal translators” (Toury 1984:189). He disagreed with this approach and opted for training “native translators”. Native translators are self-made professionals who rely on three innate qualities: bilingualism, interlinguistic ability, and transfer capability. As they gain more experience, native translators will, in a slow socialising process, learn to identify the social norms of governing translational settings and to avoid sanctions if they do not adhere by these social norms. Toury is quite explicit:

I would put it in more extreme terms still: in my opinion, the intervention caused by the commencement of a course of more or less formal teaching can be justified only to the extent that it leads to the attainment of the “natural” results (that is, to the establishment of an advanced “native translator”) in a quicker and more efficient way. It can hardly be justified if it leads to the attainment of a different goal (that is, to the establishment of another type of translator), or if it makes the same goal more difficult to attain; in the first case, because there is gross deviation from the socio-cultural norms of the society which he is supposed to serve, and in the second - because it is a waste of time and good money. (Toury 1984:193)

In Toury’s view, translation students at university should meet with as many different translational situations as possible in order to get familiar with the governing norms and sanctions (Toury 1984:191). In this way, “native translators” also learn a range of “shortcuts” (Toury 1984:192) or strategic solutions when they meet with particular problems. These solutions are usually not open to “optimal translators” since they have to get everything ‘right’. On the other hand, these shortcuts must be described by theorists so that students can learn about them. And, unlike in the teaching methods discussed so far, specialisation is not recommended at the first stages of training.

Post-structuralism and deconstruction are among the theoretical approaches that advocate a ‘**new kind of ethics**’ among some translation teachers. Vidal Claramonte (1998) reports on proposals that discourage students from searching for a ‘true’ and ‘equivalent’ translation. These proposals aim to raise awareness of the fundamental (ideological) role of translation and translators in society, and they warn teachers against accepting prescriptive recipes for teaching. Poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches prefer a post-modern teacher who - in Arrojo’s words - “opposes any kind of authoritarian homogenization” instead of an ‘authoritarian’ teacher (Arrojo 1996 as quoted in Vidal Claramonte 1998:64). Poststructuralist didactics focus on the social repercussions of the exchange in translation - that is, on cultural issues - while they try to combat the students’ passivity.

Translation theory has also placed great importance upon the **cognitive and emotional aspects** of the translation process. Introspective studies, such as those undertaken by Seleskovitch (e.g. 1976) and Krings (e.g. 1987) pioneered work into the translator’s mind. Drawing on the Skopostheorie, text linguistics, and psycholinguistics, Kußmaul (1995) applies these theoretical problems to his teaching environment (from English into German). Amongst many other things, Kußmaul reminds us that there is a general view that students of translation have “weak personalities”. If this impression is correct, then they are not dynamic and adventurous, but rather they keep to themselves in front of their PCs. Kußmaul wonders whether this could have anything to do with teaching:

It may very well be that when our students embark on a translation training course, they are quite self-confident young people, but in the course of their studies they lose their self-confidence as a result of the criticism of their teachers. (Kußmaul 1995:32)

Kußmaul argues that students are to be taught not only to translate but also to translate in a confident manner (1995:33). This may be done by means of theoretical studies. On the one hand, textual analysis sheds light on the most frequent errors committed by translation students such as interference, sloppy dictionary usage, incomplete paraphrasing, etc. The researcher is to identify mistakes (symptomatology), search for the causes (diagnosis), and propose solutions for future translating practice (therapy). On the other hand, successful translation processes are equally informative and Think Aloud Protocols may be of great help to teachers. Kußmaul (1995) delves into detailed explanation of the usefulness of such protocols for teachers and students. I will not expound further on his multifaceted findings, although I find them relevant for the teaching of the profession.

Finally, **Corpus-based Translation Studies**, under the theoretical guidance of e.g. Baker (1995), Kenny (2001), and Laviosa (2002), is arousing interest in the teaching community. So much so that, in 2002, a volume especially devoted to this topic appeared with the title of *Corpora in Translator Education*. Prior to this, a co-editor of that volume, Federico Zanettin, had explained how he used corpora in Italian-English classes for the translation of source-text expressions such as *podio* (Zanettin 1998). Moreover, he also argues that comparable corpora reinforce what he terms the “serendipity process” (Zanettin 1998:6), in which students looking for a solution to a specific translational problem, may by chance, find equivalents for other source-text terms or excerpts. Corpus-based Translation Studies theory can thus be used for designing practical translation workshops.

I hope that this schematic descriptive account shows that there are clear parallels between Translation Studies theory and current practices of translator training. Undoubtedly, all teachers have implemented their preferred theories with their students. The questions that remain are a) why teachers may have resorted to theory, and, b) what is theory. The answers lead to my suggestions about teaching translation.

Why theory?

Many dichotomies have brought about a polarisation of Translation Studies: process vs. product, literal vs. free, cultural studies vs. linguistically-oriented approaches, and so on and so forth. One of these - in my view - futile dichotomies situates translation theory in opposition to training practice. Yet prominent scholars and teachers such as Hurtado Albir perceive a gap between Translation Studies theory and the practice of teaching:

Translation is basically a ‘know how’ discipline. It requires operative knowledge and, as with any kind of operative knowledge, this is acquired mainly through practice. The translator need not be a theoretician: he is not necessarily a scholar nor a linguist. (My translation)

[La traducción es básicamente ‘un saber cómo’: un conocimiento operativo y como todo conocimiento operativo se adquiere fundamentalmente por la práctica; el traductor no necesita ser un teórico, y no es necesariamente un traductólogo ni lingüista.] (Hurtado Albir 1996:151)

The previous section discussed some of the links between theoretical and pedagogical approaches. These connections have been explained from three main different standpoints. Firstly, there are academics who believe that theory helps in practical translation work. Reiß

(originally 1992, as cited in Díaz Fouces 1999:16-17), for instance, argues that theory is necessary on at least two accounts, namely for the practical tasks of a) revision, and, b), criticism of translation. Secondly, some teachers such as Snel Trampus claim that theory may be used: “[W]hile working towards an ‘open minded’ general coordination of all translation classes in order to facilitate students in developing self-confidence” (Snel Trampus 2002:38). And, finally, scholars as different as Hatim (2001:7) and Venuti (2000:26) argue that theory helps to raise awareness amongst students and encourages them to make conscious decisions, and to explain these decisions to other students participating in the translating process. Venuti (2000:33-34) compares translators to cooks. Cooks may be able to prepare wonderful dishes without any theoretical knowledge. But when they research the origins and usages of (multicultural) foods, cooks stop reproducing learnt knowledge and instead start creating personal menus. Hence, there are three potential reasons for introducing theory in translation classes. There is yet another, in my view, even more powerful reason that will be clear once we answer the final question in this article: what is theory?

What is theory?

In my view, Theo Hermans is one of the sharpest theoreticians in Translation Studies. Hermans has always been involved in Translation Studies theory and he has recently become particularly concerned with the need for a greater self-reflection in the discipline. His argument goes as follows: Translation Studies aims at exploring “[t]he ways in which translation is both practised and theorized in individual cultures” (Hermans 2002a:13). But neither practice nor theories exist on their own. They are interdependent on one another. So much so that, in Hermans’ words, “we necessarily translate according to our concept of translation, and into our concept of translation” (2002a:16). Therefore, Hermans (2002a:16) warns about neat separations between the object of study (i.e. “translation”) and Translation Studies at the meta-level (that is our descriptions of translation). To quote him: “the ‘anterior text’ to which a translation refers is never simply the source text, even though that is the claim which translations commonly make. It is at best an image of it” (Hermans 2002a:13). This image is never neutral but largely determined by our theory of translation, which - for its part - is nothing but a way of “translating translation” (Hermans 2002a:16). Translation Studies is trapped by this inescapable “aporia” (2002b) as he terms it in the title. There is a need to reflect upon this.

Theory and translator training

Hermans is clear about it:

Translating is not an innate skill, it has to be learned and negotiated, both cognitively and normatively. Translating always takes place in the context of certain historical conceptions of what constitutes translation. (2002a:14)

Van den Broeck is also revealing when he discusses Holmes’s map of Translation Studies (comprising Theoretical Translation Studies, Descriptive Translation Studies, and Applied Translation Studies) in his own words. Theoretical Translation Studies concerns the “possible relationships between target texts and their sources, and is supposed to account for potential types of matching”; Descriptive Translation Studies “relates to existing translations and the types or modes of relationship realized by them”; Applied Translation Studies (including

translator training) “deal[s] with required or ‘wished’ relationships”. (Van den Broeck 1998:42)

All teachers of translation are in effect basing their individual teaching on one or more theoretical concepts of translations. These are either possible or at least existing relationships between target texts and their own sources and these relationships allow would-be translators to produce what we consider the ‘required’ or ‘desired’ translations in the environment our students are going to work and live in. As Pym (2003:489) explains, teachers of translation would do well to teach students to “generate a series of more than one viable target text...for a pertinent source text...” plus “the ability to select only one viable TT [target text] from this series, quickly and with justified confidence”. This, of course, entails not only teaching students a wide array of specific translational strategies but also teaching them to produce a variety of translations based on different theories of translation. The students can then select the translation they regard most appropriate at a particular time and place and under given circumstances. Indeed, in order to do this successfully, students will need to be proficient in (a wide spectrum of) specific translating strategies and in complex decision-taking processes. By using a variety of strategies for translation derived from different translation theories in classes, translator trainers will also teach translation theory in a more or less overt way and in a more or less conscious manner. It does not matter whether a translation theory is useful or not. It is a matter of the inevitability of teaching theory when we teach how to translate according to different theoretical angles.

All seven teaching methods referred to above focus on specific concept(s) of translation (e.g. related to contrastive linguistics, or the communicative nature of texts). Even though I have not discussed this, the coursework for each method seems to be arranged as efficiently and effectively as possible to teach students to be able to produce specific types of translations (based on the specific concepts of translation taught). Indeed students may master the (concepts and practices of) translation strategies they have been trained in. Teachers of translation are probably supporting certain (contrastive, communicative, or functionalist) translations to a greater extent than other ‘ethical’ concepts. It probably holds good that many current courses aim at conveying the widest types of translations proffered on the labour market and that teachers of translation may therefore provide trainees with the best tools for professional work in today’s globalized world. But I think this methodology is in a way also crippling since it concentrates on specific concepts only (while disregarding other viable options) and since it tends to present these (specific, biased, and partial) concepts as the only possible approach to the task of translating. In effect, this makes it hard for students to gain access to a wider pool of translation theories from which they can eventually choose their preferred practices and methods (e.g. canonical, subversive, and conciliatory). I also think this is one reason why different translators are unable to understand each other. They often see translation from a specific and narrow standpoint and are not trained to accept other possibilities. So when they eventually venture into new circles with other views and expectations about translation, they may feel at a loss and unable show flexibility of mind. This would also explain why dichotomies emerge and proliferate. The inability to face “the other” may lead to opposing, belligerent stances.

Hence I believe there is another potential answer to Hatim and Mason’s (1997:179) searching question:

[O]n what basis could the selection, grading and presentation of materials for the training of translators be made more effective? (Hatim and Mason 1997:179)

My answer to Hatim and Mason's question is descriptive and critical at once. It consists in exposing students to as many theories of translation as possible. This would entail organizing the coursework not around certain contrastive fundamentals or communicative principles or functionalist strategies, etc. Instead, the first structuring parameters of our courses could actually be the main theoretical focuses in Western translation tradition (to start off with) and with non-Western traditions for advanced students. Students may later on decide on their own on the specific translation concepts and practices they want to implement in particular situations.

Conclusion: a tentative syllabus

I finish this article with a tentative syllabus of a beginners' translation course between English and Spanish with a sample of the practical tasks to be used to implement the above seven theories in practical translation work in class.

Unit 1: Focus on languages (e.g. Translating the table of contents of a computing manual such as *Extensatm 610 / Scholar Series Notebook Computers: User's Guide*. Taiwan: Texas Instruments)

Unit 2: Focus on the communicative nature of texts (e.g. Translating an excerpt from Bennett, Alan. 1988. *Talking Heads*. London: BBC)

Unit 3: Focus on communicative aims through texts (e.g. Translating any European Parliament speech)

Unit 4: Focus on the link between translation and target culture (Comparing original and various translations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1987).

Unit 5: Focus on the 'new translation ethics' (Cannibalistic translation of *Goldilocks*. See for instance following bibliographical references:

Goldilocks and the Three Bears. 1978. Loughborough: Ladybird Books.

Garner, James Finn. 1994. *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*. New York: Macmillan. 39-42)

Unit 6: Focus on the translator as a rational and emotional being (Using TAPs when translating an excerpt of e.g. Thoreau, Henry David. 1995. *Walden: An Annotated Edition*. Foreword and Notes by Walter Harding. Boston: Houghton Mifflin)

Unit 7: Focus on translation corpora (Using corpora to translate Lewin, Roger. 1992. *Complexity. Life at the Edge of Chaos*. New York: Collier Books).²

In sum, if we want our translation students to be empowered with greater doses of visibility, we, as teachers, should provide them with as many approaches and views as possible to make them flexible in decision-making processes in a real-life professional career. The best way of doing so is to introduce a large number of theories and their preferred views on translation to students by using them and making them visible in the classroom.

Author's address
calzada@trad.uji.es

Notes

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² I will not expound on this syllabus but I will be most willing to discuss it via e-mail with anyone interested.

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