The “Making of” a Translator – A Functional Approach to Translator Training

Michał Kornacki, University of Łódź

Abstract

The “making of” a translator is not a straightforward task. It requires the teacher to be very thorough and extra aware of current changes in the translation market. Actual first-hand experience or market research can be of paramount importance in this regard. It is the teacher who should spot the first signs of such changes in translation trends and requirements set by outsources before new translators. They should try to answer these issues by adopting new training techniques and altering their courses so that their graduates can enter the market feeling that they do not fall behind the rest of the translation community in terms of practical and theoretical background, but even go ahead of them in certain areas.

This paper tries to name certain key areas that should be introduced or restructured in a standard translation course both for the benefit of translation students and course attractiveness to new translators. Both translation theory and practice will be covered, with focus set primarily on the latter, in an attempt to propose a coherent model of a modern written translation course that would benefit graduates willing to enter the world of professional translation.

Keywords

Translator training, CAT tools, subtitling, terminology management

1. Introduction

One common mistake in teaching translation to students is to focus either on translation theory or translation practice. On one hand, this issue stems from the fact that many universities and other higher education institutions continue with their translation courses, dominated by the theoretical component, even after traditional 5-year MA studies were divided into 3-year BA and 2-year MA studies. On the other hand, new, specialised courses focus primarily on practical aspects of translation, lacking academic content. While such division is positive, as suggested by Pym (2011: 481), since it allows BA graduates to enter the local market, start working and then to continue their education by attending specialised translation courses (MA or post-graduate studies), it should be remembered that a balance between practice and theory should be maintained (see Kizewater, this volume). Tabakowska, who has been advocating the need to develop full translation courses since early 1990s, further reinforces this notion (1992: 15). This paper attempts to provide general outline of what components a proper translation course should include and how they can benefit students. The list of components listed in the paper will be based on
personal experience of working in a translation agency and choosing most vital skills (also most frequently performed services) for future written translator. Consequently, the paper will not cover the interpreting studies, focusing instead on such key areas as text editing, computer-aided translation (CAT), subtitling, terminology management, quoting translation and general good practices in written translation.

The key areas listed above have been selected based on first-hand experience with graduates / new translators who want to enter the market. Such individuals do not have their own set of customers yet; therefore, in most cases they start their career by working for translation agencies. It is a fact that competition is high, therefore expectations towards new translators are high as well. Good text editing skills are a must. Knowing how to operate CAT tools and working knowledge in subtitling are considerable assets for any translator and knowing how to quote a translation cannot be overvalued. Finally, good practices facilitate collaboration with a customer (an individual client or a translation agency).

The remarks and insights presented in the chapter come from a translation trainer with over 7 years experience as a project manager in one of translation agencies in Lodz and are based on personal experience and that of other active project managers and professional translators, as well as fellow academics working in the field of translation.

2. Theoretical approach

There is a difference between knowing a language and knowing how to translate. The actual process called translation is the sum of those two. They are inseparable. Yet, translation classes should be focused on developing theoretical and practical background for translation, instead of developing language skills. The practical aspects of a translation course will be discussed in the next section. This one will focus on an approach to translation theory and its importance in translation studies.

Quite often students disregard theory in favour of practical aspects of translation. While tutors should remember about the distinction between academic and vocational translation courses, students’ preferences should be taken into account. In this division, an academic course is to be understood as a regular course for philology students at university level. A vocational course, on the other hand, should be understood as a proper post-graduate vocational translation course, aimed for people who are interested in freelancing.

While academic courses should include a significant amount of translation theory since it “encourages students to reflect on what they do and how they do it” (Piotrowska 1992: 1-2), vocational studies often follow a bit different path and combine theory and practice, thus attracting the attention of students who otherwise might be disinterested in purely academic approach. Seeing how successful such an approach is at a vocational level, it is worth considering applying it to a greater extent also on an academic level. In this variant, it is up to the tutor to provide such
translation challenges that would to initiate discussion on certain theoretical issues, like translation norms (as listed by Toury 1995: 53-69) and methods and techniques of translation. This should be followed by theoretical background for identifying the main characteristics of a text, analysing its linguistics and extra-linguistic features, potential terminology issues, the target audience, editing considerations, proofreading methods. Newmark (2003: 5) reinforces this attitude by saying that theoretical knowledge, when applied properly, can have tremendous influence on the translator training process. It is worth making students aware of the fact that the actual translation process is the total of employing a number of skills, or competencies, as listed by PACTE (2003, 2005).

The main purpose of teaching translation is to turn students into potential translators. One way of doing so is to answer their needs and tune course content to their expectations, adding the required theoretical component where possible in order to assure success. Wrenn (2009) comments:

Perhaps the difficulty in making the transition from theory to practice arises, at least in part, from a failure of the [trainer] to integrate both theory and practice into the same course in the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to the student. Such integration helps students to more closely associate the practical value of learning theoretical concepts.

Any course shorftalls in this respect will make students confused and simply disinterested in the course. Kizewater (this volume) suggests that “[p]rimarily theoretical classes may also involve practical translation tasks, but it seems that introducing practice into theoretical considerations is less frequent than mentioning theory while translating”. Apart from the obvious fact that practical classes are more interesting to students, such a distinction also suggests that it is easier and more efficient to discuss theory with the use of actual examples (practical classes) rather than out-of-context, artificial examples to illustrate a theoretical approach (theoretical classes).

3. Practical skills
As was mentioned before, practical approach to translation is crucial in translator training since it provides the student with immediate practical knowledge on handling different everyday translation problems. Current market conditions (in Poland) force students to acquire such skills during translation courses or translation agency internships lest they will not be considered efficient (translation agencies in Poland have a large pool of potential translator candidates to choose from and they pick those who do not require additional training). The following sections discuss several key areas of practical translator development.
3.1. Text editing and pre-processing

One of the first skills that are vital for a future translator is text editing. While it could be argued that most young people are computer literate today, it does not necessarily mean that they know how to process a document in order to fulfil certain visual requirements. One of the reasons behind this fact may be that our society transfers from personal computers and laptops to an evermore-mobile environment, using tablets and mobile phones, where visual editing is frequently painstaking and secondary to conveying the message.

Such an attitude does not apply to translators who need to produce translations which are not only accurate but which “look” professional as well. It should be remembered that translation is an art, but most of all it is business and standard business notions, like marketing, do apply here as well. In this context, marketing means to produce a target text that looks the same or virtually the same as the original document (there are exceptions, of course). It is worth noting that in many cases translation will be used “as is”, i.e. as an end product. Therefore, if a translated document is formatted as the source text (ST), the customer is more likely to turn back to the translator with another order since no additional work needs to be done and he is, therefore, fully satisfied with the result.

If the layout of the final document is flawed, on the other hand, the translator has to bear in mind that it could arouse suspicion regarding the quality of translation. The lack of layout coherence frequently leads to the assumption that the final translation misses content, or is flawed grammatically or stylistically.

Students should be made aware of this fact as soon as possible so that they may hone their word-processing skills in advance. Even though computer-aided translation tools do receive more and more recognition, a word processor is still the main translation tool for many translators in Poland. If we take into consideration that a significant number of translation projects involves translation from non-editable content (JPGs, PDFs, CDRs, and other graphical files), knowledge how to process the source and use word processors to maximum effect becomes vital.

The problem is that in the 21st century virtually all students of translation use computers and mobile devices and such skills are taken for granted. This, in turn results in university graduates not knowing how to handle different file formats, how to process them, and what possible editing problems may occur during pre-processing, translation and post-processing.

In this regard, a translation course with elements of editing and technical aspects of handling different types of documents proves to be tremendously beneficial for students who otherwise would have to learn it “the hard way” during their first professional assignments. It is worth noting here that due to broad competition on the translation market, the first few assignment often turn out to be crucial for one’s future translational career. Translation agencies have a wide choice of candidates and
they tend to recruit those students and graduates who know the basics of the trade and require little or no additional training whatsoever. Therefore, having good editing skills is a vital asset for any student.

3.2. Computer-aided translation (CAT) tools

As was mentioned before, computer aided translation tools do receive more recognition. According to Bogucki (2009: 52), computer translation tools can be classified as:

a. word-processor (like MS Word or LibreOffice Write), used for typing and elaborate text editing;

b. electronic dictionaries and glossaries of specialist terminology;

c. translation memory (TM) based tools.

CAT tools, as discussed in this section, fall into the category of TM-based tools.

In fact, the development of computers, machine translation and technology in general results in much greater accuracy and, at the same time, flexibility of this kind of specialised software. The main asset of any CAT tool is its translation memory. All previous translations, stored segment by segment (most often sentence by sentence since a segment is a basic unit in translation memory) in a single file, are readily available to the translator as auto-suggestions of translation, as provided by the parent/client software (CAT tool). In this way, translation not only speeds up, but greater grammatical, stylistic and terminological cohesion of the output is assured.

Therefore, it is recommended that any comprehensive translation course should include CAT elements due to the fact that anyone thinking about professional freelancing career will have to use them eventually.

There are a number of options on the market to choose from at the moment. Many companies, like SDL or Kilgray, offer academic programmes to educational institutions, hence at least one such tool should be incorporated in the translation curriculum. Contrary to what many people may think, this is not always the case. Not all software producers offer such programmes, and even if they do, the software has to be paid for anyway (albeit with a discount). Considering the fact that an institution needs to provide software for 1-2 computer labs (a minimum, around 40-50 workstations), the total cost may be too much to bear.

There are, however, solutions which are free for academic use, the only downside being their share of the market and lack of 100% compatibility with leading market software like SLD Trados.

Students should be taught how to set up the programme and operate it, how to handle different types of projects, how to quote translations, how to import/export translation memories, how to proofread a translation and how to clean it before sending back to a customer.

Moreover, students should be advised how to use an aligning tool (or its equivalent) in order to create translation memories out of bilingual document pairs.
(old translations). This is the most vital skill as it allows the professional to correlate source and target translation files in order to produce a new translation memory or add those segments to an existing memory containing similar data. Considering the fact that many translators purchase their CAT tool some time after they started their professional career, such knowledge may be extremely useful for it will enable them to use their older translations for new projects.

Another important area of expertise in relation to the CAT tools is the ability to work in a cloud environment using server solutions. It is becoming common for translation agencies to set up a server CAT environment in which all translation memories are hosted on their internal servers and for translators to share them. In this mode of operation the translator does not have to buy his/her own CAT licence. Instead, the licence is shared by the agency for a limited period of time. It is extremely beneficial in situations where a translation project is too big to be handled by one professional in a reasonable time and teamwork is required. By sharing licences and a single translation memory amongst a group of freelancers the translation speed can be improved while assuring consistency in style and terminology, which stems from the fact that all members of the project contribute to the same translation memory, thus sharing, reusing and cross-checking their translations.

Working in such an environment is essentially the same as working as an individual, yet some changes do apply, frequently introduced by the ordering party. Therefore it is vital to show students the teamwork aspect of CAT use and how to handle it both technically and in terms of professional-translation agency-professional cooperation.

As a result, students who complete such a course should be able to operate a given CAT tool and use it for individual and team projects. They should know how to quote translations and develop good practices of translation with the use of CAT tools. Most importantly, they should learn how to judge which documents should be approached with CAT tools and which should not. Trivial as it may seem, determining which types of documents justify the use of specialised software is of paramount importance in everyday work of a translator.

3.3. Subtitling

Subtitling is a very specialised area of translation that concerns translation of movies, TV shows and other video content which is then provided in the form of subtitles. They are meant for the deaf and the hard of hearing (HoH), for people whose lower proficiency level in a given language demands additional support, and for those who do not speak language of the video.

In a typical subtitling course students should be made aware that while general translation is more flexible, subtitling demands that we closely adhere to certain laws. It is especially crucial since successful subtitles must convey meaning in the most
efficient way. Short, easy to follow sentences should be used, with constant attention paid to their length, as they are displayed on screen and thus should not take our attention away from the video itself. “Long sentences might have to be split over several subtitles and short sentences combined to avoid telegraphic style” (J. Diaz-Cintas and A. Remael 2014: 88).

In the case of subtitling, the main goal of the course is to make students forget the urge to translate the entire content and focus on keeping it simple (York 2007: 225). When watching a movie, a person has to divide his/her attention between the movie image, sound (does not apply to the deaf and the HoH) and subtitles themselves. While it can be argued that subtitles can improve understanding of spoken language in the case of those people who do know at least a bit of the source language, in general it can be safely assumed that subtitles slow the perception of video content. The issue becomes more prominent when subtitles have been prepared in an unprofessional way, with long, complex sentences. In such a case, the audience has to devote more effort to reading what is being said, losing some of the visual content in the process. It is vital that this problem is signalised to students who, being proficient in both languages, may not see the issue immediately. The best way to tackle the problem is to use positive and negative examples, which are based on language and terminology that should be challenging to them as well, e.g. subtitles for a medical movie series. This way students will appreciate good practices over bad ones, especially when backed up by theory.

Once the primary issue is covered, students should learn practical aspects of subtitling, including:

a) different approaches to subtitles for various types of video content;
b) subtitling based on official script/subtitles for the deaf and the HoH;
c) subtitling based on video content, when no script or official subtitles are provided;
d) subtitling for the Internet video content, e.g. Youtube;
e) other instances of subtitling, as required by the local market;

3.3.1. Subtitles for various types of video content

Subtitles will differ depending on the video content to be subtitled. Form and style will differ in the case of an adventure movie, a medical TV series or a wild life documentary, for example. It is yet another aspect of subtitling that students should be made familiar with. Experience has paramount importance here as there are no universal guidelines that may be applied to each market. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to provide insights based on local market experience, i.e. preferences and expectations of customers, content-specific guidelines for subtitling, as well as market competition and rates.
3.3.2. Subtitling based on official script/subtitles for the deaf and the HoH

Many subtitling projects include reworking subtitles in one language into subtitles in another language. Even though it may look like a straightforward job to an average student, herein lays a trap for the inexperienced. If a customer provides full source material, i.e. video, script and subtitles, everything is fine. Yet, it is not always the case. Many translators do fall into a trap when they agree to translate subtitles with no access to either full script or the original video itself. Results are mediocre at best and unacceptable at worst.

Subtitling is a process which requires full immersion in the original content is required. If there is no access to the source video, the translator sees only half a picture and the results cannot be good due to lack of context. Students should be advised that accepting jobs with only half source material might turn out to yield poor results.

3.3.3. Subtitling based on video content with no script or official subtitles provided

Many subtitling jobs involve subtitling video content with no script or official subtitles provided. Frequently they originate from private parties. If a translator is lucky, he/she can pick jobs. If not, sometimes there is no other choice.

Subtitling a movie with no script or official subtitles provided requires very good proficiency in the source language, as well as broad cultural awareness that may turn out to be crucial for successful completion of the task. What is more, the process itself can be painfully slow, depending on the language of the original.

Just as was suggested in the previous section, when the translator does not have full source data, there is a high risk of error. Therefore, it is best to practice such scenarios with students in-class so they know what to expect and what to avoid when they are asked to perform such a task.

3.3.4. Subtitling for the Internet video content

Broad access to the Internet and greater data upload/download speeds mean that people have better access to video content. Popularity of video platforms like YouTube or Vimeo demands new solutions in terms of translation of their content. Therefore, both systems offer subtitling editors (Video Editor, Amara) that can be used to create and add subtitles or captions to a given video. Subtitling is a very important feature in the case of online video as it allows a broader audience to access given content.

What is more, many companies use YouTube and Vimeo for advertising purposes and as efficient video streaming source for their websites. It is quite common that translators are asked to prepare subtitles for such video and publish them at the same time. Hence, first-hand experience in creating and adding subtitles
to online video will prove, sooner rather than later, very handy to any student who wishes to enter the translation market.

3.3.5. Other instances of subtitling, as required by local market

Depending on the local market, subtitling may take on various aspects. For many students, tutors are the only source of information regarding translation trends on the local market. It is up to them to be aware of general tendencies and introduce them to individual translation programme.

3.4. Terminology management

There is no translation without terminology management. It does not matter whether translation concerns art, technology, medicine or simply general news. Each one requires proper terminology to be used. It cannot be denied that learning how to obtain and use terminology is vital for any future translator.

Therefore, devoting a part of a translation course to creating and managing term bases is very important. In some cases, it is possible to combine terminology management with CAT tools (term bases, corpora, external dictionaries [e.g. Multiterm, EuroTermBank], access to machine translation solutions [e.g. GoogleMT]) and instruct students on their application and the possibilities they offer. Yet even when there is no access to CAT tools, the use of dictionaries (traditional and electronic bi- and monolingual, online) as well as online resources (translation message boards, portals, etc.) should be covered in class. The role of Web browsing skills should not be underestimated here. It is vital to understand how search engines like Google or Bing work and how to mine them for terminology. What is more, search engines can be used as the fastest and easiest way to verify whether a given term or phrase was used correctly in translation, either by checking the frequency of its use in context in the target language or by consulting professional sources on the Internet.

Translation students tend to use only traditional or online dictionaries and it is vital to make them aware of other sources of terminology and their application, SDL Multiterm, Language Terminal, and CAT termbase components in general. It is especially important to make them develop a habit of double checking new terminology in various sources and then checking the appropriateness of its application. Only then can we expect that new terminology have been used correctly. Developing such skills in students early on greatly decreases chance for major errors when they begin their commercial career.
3.5. Quoting / Pricing

Quoting/pricing translations is another area that tends to be left out in translation courses. It should be remembered that translation courses should be also vocational, not only academic. If students learn how to translate, how to use software but they do not learn how to work with their customers, how to quote translations, they are at a disadvantage.

Therefore, it is vital to make students aware of the current financial condition of the market, show them sample rates for various types of translation jobs and give hints on how to enter the market and negotiate their first contracts. Such insights, as shared by tutors who know the market first hand, are priceless.

Moreover, students should be made aware of how to use some of their editing and CAT tools skills in order to quote a translation. Depending on the source text format and available software, a translator can use the word count tool in a word processor, an OCR system to read non-editable text or simply use a CAT tool to do the count automatically. Yet even then, one has to know how to convert numerical results of such counts into actual translation rates, depending on whether the basis for quotation is the number of words or characters with spaces.

Again, such knowledge will make the transition from a student to a fully-fledged translator easier.

3.6. Good practices in translation

Even though “good practices” in translation may sound a cliché phrase to many, there is actually something in it. Many translators would claim that whatever is best for the buyer is best for the provider. Such a statement proves to be true in the long run, but it does not give much information to translation students. Therefore, at least some best practices should be named for their benefit.

The first item on the list of good practices should be to translate primarily into our native language due to output quality. Omar Jabak (2009) claims that this stems from the fact that

“(…) the translators’ first language is naturally acquired in a culture and environment where the first language is naturally acquired and practiced. On the other hand, their second language is, for the most part, learned, rather than acquired, later on in the course of their life. As a result, the linguistic and cultural knowledge of their second language is always in progress and never complete.”

---

1 The most popular forms of quoting translations in Poland are: per word in source/target text and per standard page in source/target (standard page equals 1125/1500/1600/1800 characters with spaces, as set with an individual customer).
The next best practice to be mentioned would be to edit and proofread your translation carefully. Even though most translation companies do have their own editors and proofreaders, translators who do their own proofreading carefully do receive more recognition.

The third item should be deadlines. Obvious as it may seem, always meet your deadlines. It is worth noting that quite often translation deadlines set within fixed time frames. Therefore course activities should include this time component so as to make sure that students understand consequences of not meeting the deadline. Time frames in which translators work cannot be extended without the buyer’s consent.

Always keep up with current events, language and trends (Sherwin 2006). That is the fourth best practice to be mentioned here. Everything changes, develops and the translator’s job is to be updated in all areas of life. Again, this statement may sound idealistic, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning to translation students.

Lastly, always keep clear record of your work, clients and pending jobs. Good work organisation assures smooth workflow and meeting the established deadlines.

Examples provided above should not be treated as a closed list. Instead, they can be used as starting points for in-class discussion on good practices and their influence on daily work. Again, tutors should share their personal experience on the matter so that students get a complete picture on the problems translators face each day.

4. Conclusions
Translator training is not an easy and straightforward process. Rapid market development forces academics to reorganize their courses in order to adapt their content to current business conditions. It is even more so due to increasing competition, both from freelancers and technology (automated translation systems), which require students to enter the market with a certain amount of practical knowledge that would maximise their chances of getting their first paid assignments. Peñalver (2014: 102) quotes a 2004 study in the Spanish translation industry which concluded that “financial translation is the second most demanded type of translation after legal and technical translation”. Therefore, it lies with the translator trainer to recognise current market demands and adjust the course accordingly.

The variety of courses and different approaches of academics to those courses make it impossible to provide one universal guideline on how to reorganize written translation curriculum. Some basic notions can be named, though.

Course reorganisation should start from the teachers themselves. First of all, think practically. Students will benefit from theory, but it is more important to show them practical issues that they will face when entering the professional market (quoting, editing, CAT tools).

Never disregard seemingly trivial issues. Certain notions, like keeping deadlines, may seem obvious to a professional, but they are not as clear for students. Use class
activities to show students that sending translation over late does have negative consequences.

Moreover, make your course more flexible. Always monitor current market trends and modify your course accordingly. Some course elements may get outdated quite soon and will turn out to be a waste of time. If there is a new tendency on the market, research it and incorporate into the course.

Finally, always ask students what their expectations are. It may bring insights that not only will make the course more interesting to students, but also more complete content-wise.

The profession of a translator can still be referred to as a combination of a language artist and a craftsman, but the focus slowly shifts to the latter. Today success in the field is measured not only in the pure quality of translation but in the amount of good quality translations produced in a given period of time.

In order to achieve that, modern translators have to be proficient in the use of computers on a daily work basis and the only option to achieve that before they enter the market is to cover hard (computer literacy, advanced editing techniques, use of CAT tools) and soft (translation theory, translation pricing, client-translator business relationship) skills. The only way to develop those is to either participate in a fully-fledged translation course set up to modern standards of translation teaching or develop them as you go. For obvious reasons the former is more preferable and in the case of the latter it may turn out to be too late for a fresh graduate to learn on his/her own mistakes when the translation market is filled with people boasting the skill in question already.

References

Kilray, Donald: A Social Costructivist Approach to Translator Education: Empowerment from Theory to Practice. Manchester/Northampton. 2000, p. 49