

TRANSLATION EDUCATION IN A MODERN-LANGUAGE FACULTY
RECEPTION AND SUITABILITY OF A PROFESSION-BASED WORKSHOP
GROUNDED IN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

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Summary

This study sets out to investigate the reception and suitability of a profession-based workshop modeled on Kiraly's (2000) method and offered within a course of Translation Theory and Practice in a modern-language faculty at postgraduate level. It compares responsive and resistant students and tries to analyze the patterns of resistance to the particular classroom activity and didactic methodology in relation to student profiles and learning styles, possibly integrating into the analysis also considerations about institutional factors. The findings are hoped to provide direction for a balanced course design in the field of professional translation for postgraduate language students.

Keywords

Modern-language faculties, translation education, professionally oriented training, social constructivist teaching, individual and collective learning styles, personal profiles, institutional factors, educational orientation and culture.

Research problem

In recent years, the academic world has responded to the ever increasing demand for linguistic and cultural mediation services with an unprecedented proliferation of training opportunities in translation (cf. Schäffner and Adab 2000: vii; Colina 2003: 1; Nord 2005: 209), also in contexts not primarily geared towards Translation Studies or translator training, like modern-language faculties. In these settings, translation has traditionally been taught as a language teaching, learning, and testing device, with a predominantly philological and contrastive approach. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, under the influence of Communicative Language Teaching, it was strongly criticized and rejected altogether as counter-productive to the acquisition process (Malmkjær 1998: 4; Colina 2002: 2). Around the mid-'90s, it was revalued in view of recent developments in Translation Studies, conceptualizing this practice as essentially an act of communication (cf. the functionalist approach). The advocates of translation teaching in language curricula suggested that this activity could indeed be profitable if focus were placed on its communicative dimension and on aspects that characterize

professional practice (Fraser 1996; Sewell 1996). They also believed that this approach could eventually provide valuable transferable and vocational skills (Klein-Braley 1996). This stance has gained prominence as more and more language teachers have become aware of the professional relevance translation can have for their students as well (Ulrych 2005: 4). Although translation has continued being taught for language purposes, this awareness has led to the setting up of special courses within the existing curricula, presenting this practice as a skill in its own right and the main learning objective, with a view to developing job-oriented skills.

A similar situation applies to the Faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Literatures at the Catholic University of Brescia, Italy. Here translation has always been and is still largely taught for language acquisition and consolidation purposes. Since the academic year 2006-2007, however, the English Department has offered a specific two-semester course of Translation Theory and Practice for post-graduate students, with the general aim of teaching translation as the main learning outcome, and more specifically as (1) a situated act of communication, (2) a field of study and research, (3) a professional activity. Besides a module on translation history and theory and a longer one on communicative/functionalist translation exercises, the course also offers a profession-based workshop organized around the collaborative undertaking of a real translation task, along the lines of the methodology suggested by Kiraly (2000). This course design is meant to offer, within the limited time available, a balanced combination of education and training, with an openly declared introductory spirit. In particular, the professionalizing workshop, with its authentic, hands-on, and scaffolded activity, is meant to familiarize students with some behaviors and procedures that characterize professional practice and that can therefore prove empowering for a quality application of their translation skills on the local language industry.

The latter instructional format, designed for and applied in T&I institutions or in specific translation programs, has been adopted in our academic environment on the presupposition that it is suitable and acceptable also in a modern-language faculty for the attainment of the envisaged didactic goal. Yet, since it represents an absolute novelty and since we believe that didactic methods should not be applied uncritically, we tested our assumption through an exploratory and evaluative pilot study carried out during the first edition of the above mentioned workshop. On the one hand, it aimed at assessing its effectiveness for the development of a professional approach to translation. On the other, it meant to gather information on its appropriateness in our context and its

impact on students. The findings related to these last aspects were indeed interesting and encouraging but, due to the research methods we used, we believe that they couldn't provide but a superficial and partial picture of the subject under investigation. We thus resolved to further research it, focusing more deeply on resistance to the new method in relation to the students' profiles and learning styles, and also incorporating data about institutional factors, such as predominant educational culture, academic tradition, pedagogical mission, etc, intended as aspects that could help further explain the logics of resistance. We moved from the claim that, although we believe in social constructivist pedagogy and profession-based translation training as envisaged by Kiraly's model, these elements should not be expected to be universally suitable and invariably well experienced by all subjects in all settings, independently of student personal profiles, individual learning styles, approaches to learning/studying, as well as institutional factors.

By pursuing this type of research we do not intend to advocate completely tailored and individualized instruction. Yet, just as it is pointless to consider fine-tuning contents and methods to each individual students or to predominant educational traditions, it is equally misguided to imagine that a single one-size-fits-all approach can meet the needs of every student or work effectively in all academic settings. We therefore claim that the goal is a balanced didactic offering which addresses the heterogeneity of styles and profiles and takes into account also institutional aspects and academic traditions. Our study sets out to identify what the "ingredients" of this balance could be for an optimal professional translation teaching in a modern-language faculty at postgraduate level.

Literature review

Of primary importance for our research is the literature on professionally oriented translation education and in particular the contributions that suggest the incorporation of real-life activities into the classroom, in the form of authentic translation assignments (cf. Gouadec 1994; Lavault 1998; Kiraly 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005; González Davies 2004; Speciale 2004; Schopp 2006). Another fundamental body of theories for our study is represented by social constructivist and humanistic pedagogical principles. In Translation Studies, they have been adopted by scholars like Kiraly and González

Davies (see above). A related area where they boast a longstanding tradition is however foreign language teaching (cf. Stevick 1996; Williams and Burden 1997). Essential background knowledge is also given by works addressing translation education in modern-language faculties (cf. Sewell and Higgins 1996; Malmkjær 1998). Paramount sources and theoretical core of the whole study are works on individual and collective learning styles, teaching/learning processes and approaches in higher education, as well as academic educational orientations (cf. Biggs, 1987; Kolb 1984; Jensen 1995a, 1995b; Crozier 1997; Cannon and Newble 2000; Biggs 2003 to name but a few). Finally, absolutely necessary reference material for our methodological approach is given by literature on educational research, in particular on correlational designs (cf. Creswell 2002; Opie 2004; Mertens 2005).

Research questions and hypotheses

Our research sets out to address the following research questions:

1. What aspects of student personal profiles positively correlate with resistance to the described instructional model in a modern-language faculty?
2. What aspects of individual learning styles and approach to learning positively correlate with resistance to the described instructional model in a modern-language faculty?
3. Do institutional factors (educational orientation, pedagogical mission, offered curricula, etc.) predict resistance to the described instructional model in our setting?

The study aims at testing the following tentative hypotheses:

1. The students who show resistance to the described instructional model are those with a negative attitude towards non-conventional translation teaching – in particular social constructivist approaches, scaffolded work, proleptic feedback, collaborative translating, and authentic tasks – without previous professional experience in translation, without future plans in professional translation.
2. The students who show resistance to the described instructional model coincide with Kolb's (1984) abstract-reflective, or assimilator type, or Jensen's (1995a) field-independent, independent, conceptual, analytical-reflective learners, featuring a predominant solitary learning style.

3. There is a correlation between institution's educational orientation, pedagogical mission, offered curricula, etc. and resistance to the proposed instructional format.

Research methodology

The profession-based workshop will be offered during the break between Fall and Spring semester (February) as an intensive and concentrated 20-hour module. During the first semester, students will be administered a learning style test and a questionnaire aimed at gathering data about their personal profile. After the workshop, another questionnaire will be given or alternatively interviews will be carried out with a view to collecting in-depth information about the impact of the proposed activity and teaching methodology on students. Resistant and responsive students will be identified. Dropouts or students who decide not to participate will also be taken into consideration. A correlation will be drawn between their attitude towards the course and aspects of their profile or learning style. This analysis will be integrated with data about institutional factors.

Research material

The subjects of this study will be students of the Faculty of Language Sciences and Foreign Literatures at the Catholic University of Brescia (Italy) in their first and second year of postgraduate studies (i.e. fourth and fifth year of academic education). They will have studied English for a minimum of eight years and will have had translation modules for language acquisition/consolidation purposes during the whole three-year undergraduate program.

The text used for the profession-based workshop will be an authentic translation assignment. It will most probably be a text from the tourist sector, because of the longstanding collaboration between the faculty and the Center for Tourism Studies operating within the same institution and offering also translation services for the local market. The translation will be into English.

Expected results and benefits

This study is expected to offer insights into the logics of resistance to the suggested instructional model for the teaching of professional translation to postgraduate language students. The acquired knowledge is hoped to provide direction for the refinement of this method towards the design of a balanced didactic offering, both in terms of course delivery and classroom activities, capable of addressing the plurality of profiles and learning styles, and thus enhancing students' knowledge and retention. The study is also expected to gather data about our institution in terms of educational culture, orientation and mission, with a view to informing considerations about the suitability of the suggested instructional model in our specific environment.

Transfer of results

This study is expected to lead to a doctoral thesis. We also hope to publish the results in form of articles in Translation Studies journals, such as *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, *The Translator*, *Meta* or *Target*.

Work schedule

Academic year 2007-2008: background reading and study of literature on learning styles, approaches to learning, theories of learning. Study of research methodologies for correlational investigations. Refinement of research hypotheses. Definition of research methodology. Study of institutional factors.

January 2009: administration of learning style test and personal profile questionnaire to the students of the course in Translation Theory and Practice.

February 2009: implementation of profession-based workshop.

March 2009: administration of questionnaire on course reception.

March – December 2009: Analysis and interpretation of data. Writing of the thesis.

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