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## Translation Quality Assessment: A Perspective on Pedagogy

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### Abstract

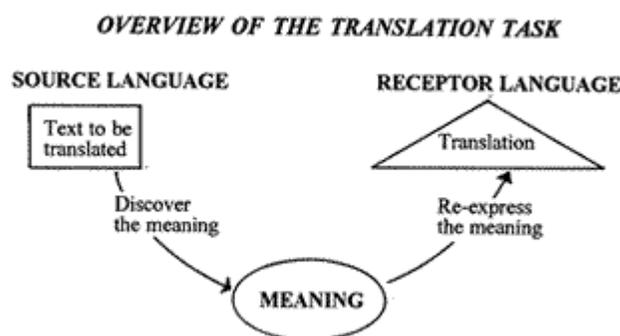
Assessing the quality of translation in the classroom, whether done through testing or regular exercises, is a fundamental issue in the field of translation. One of the most problematic issues in teaching translation is appraising the students' knowledge of translation skills and their competency in translation. Many academics, though competent in teaching translation, find it difficult to objectively assess students' performance in translation simply because they lack didactic or pedagogical knowledge. Competency and the pedagogical knowledge of translation should always be top priorities for professional academics. One of the objectives of this paper is to identify whether or not academic faculty, particularly those who teach translation, possess the means of objectively assessing students' language competency and knowledge of their translation skills. Would testing students and assessing their translations be an ideal method of making judgment about their language proficiency and their knowledge of translation skills? What kind of knowledge academic faculty should possess before they go into the classroom? How can academic faculty guarantee that their methods of assessment are good enough to warrant qualified translators and interpreters? Is there a way where academic faculty members enhance students' translation experience and make their assessment of students' work more valuable and inspiring? These issues, among other related topics, will be explored along with some recommendations for further studies.

*Keywords:* Translation Quality, Assessment, Pedagogy, Students and faculty Competency

## Introduction

Assessment is a concept that involves evaluating a person's performance, be it academic or non-academic. It attempts to classify the work with respect to its merit. In translation, for example, evaluating students' performance is one of the most perplexing tasks, simply because it sometimes involves dogmatic or obdurate assessment. That is, if a particular translated text is acceptable for one professional translator, it does not mean that other professional translators agree with such assessment. The reason is often attributed to different standards or criteria teachers of translation use. The fact that most translation courses are taught by non-professional academic teachers of translation adds salt to injury. Translation courses are currently being taught by linguists, literary critics, journalists, language specialists, etc. While there is no objection to such scholars to teach translation courses, the fact that they have not gone through practical, theoretical and professional training in the field of translation and interpretation is a serious problem. Assessment criteria or evaluation standards differ from one discipline to another, and lack of pedagogical standards or criteria of a specific discipline (i.e. translation) will definitely impact the learning outcome. The same applies for testing. Teachers of translation should possess the pedagogical means and methods of testing students of translation to determine if their translation communicates the meaning of the source text accurately, clearly and naturally (i.e. natural feel of the source text) as Larson (1998) demonstrates in the diagram below.

Diagram (1): Translation Task Overview



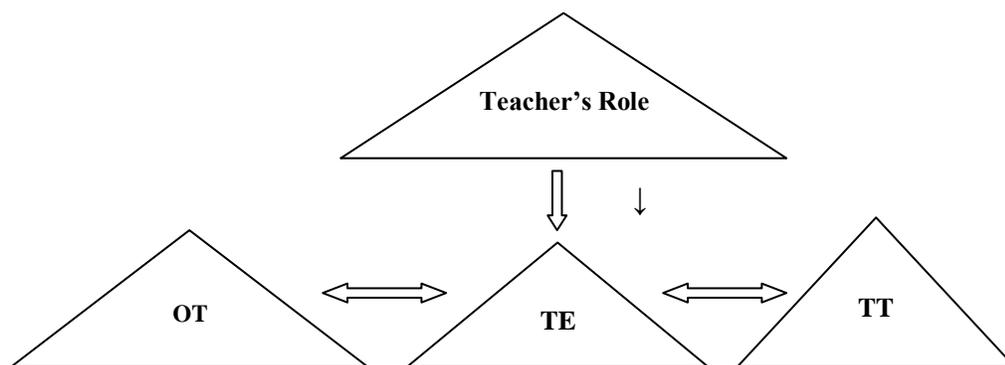
One cannot imagine a medical doctor diagnosing a case and performing surgery on a patient without going through schooling or professional training. One cannot also imagine that a medical doctor prescribes medication without diagnosing the disease or the illness. It all comes in one package. For a medical doctor, theory is vital, as it equips him or her with the tools and principles, not only to enable him or her to do the job, but also to avoid problems when they arise and provide solutions. The same thing applies to translation teachers. One may reflect on what Larson (1991: 1) conjectures that good translation theory is based on knowledge acquired from practice. However, good practice is based on carefully worked-out theory.

## Process of Assessment

There are three areas involved in the assessment process. There is the original text, the translated text, and the translator's role. Assessment of translation always depends on the teacher's performance. The problem arises here only when there is a difference between students' performance and teachers' expectations. Both have different assumptions about how the task should be done. This gap between students of translation and teachers reviewing the work

raises many questions about teachers' approaches to translation assessment. Here is manifestation of the assessment process:

Diagram (2): Process of Assessment  
(OT → Original Text TE → Teachers' Expectations TT → Translated Text)



It is worth mentioning here that teaching translation is one thing, but grading or assessing students' performance (i.e. exam, project, essay, or paper) is another. One of the tight spot of assessing students of translation is quantifying their performance by putting a grade. Of course teachers of translation would like to see their students perform well, simply because they feel good about it. However, if students do not do well on their work, they feel frustrated and perplexed as to the reasons why their students have not done well. At this stage, teachers may question themselves whether or not they have used well defined objective standards and processes when examining students' work. At times they may wonder if their assessment was based on personal preference. Of course this is not an ideal world and unfortunately many things come into play. However, in the final analysis, as Plotkin (2004) puts it, how can one determine the quality of the finished translation?

While one can understand that students can develop a fear of taking an exam, an area we are all familiar with, one area teachers of translation should account for is whether they have re-assessed the objectives of the whole course. I believe it is very helpful that teachers of translation re-evaluate what they are doing in the classroom, particularly if students work quality is poor. After all, students' poor performance could be attributed to the fact that course objectives are not objectives. It is only through re-evaluation of course objectives teachers of translation can understand and explain the defects in students' translations. For more on these issues, please see Goff-Kfour (2002).

### Types of Assessment

Based on the University of Michigan (2007) classification, types of assessment can be pre-test, objective assessment, subjective assessment, interactive assessment, practice exams, participation, and other kinds of assessment. In this paper, I would like to focus on five types of

assessment, simply because they are relevant to assessing translation students in the classroom. The other types that are left out are relevant to freshmen students.

### ***Objective Assessment***

Despite the fact that objective assessment identifies students' levels of translation skills, their interest and aptitude to work, it is discouraged among teachers of translation, simply because it does not measure whether or not student have acquired the tools and skills to be good translators and/or interpreters. Objective assessment involves multiple choice questions, true and false, and short answers. Although objective assessment can help students bring to mind the facts, answering such questions relies heavily on guessing and speculation.

### ***Subjective Assessment***

In this type of assessment, teachers should introduce short or long essay exams in which they can measure students' grasp and understanding of translation concepts. Examples of this form of assessment include, but not limited to, definition of translation terms, matching exercises, short answers, filling blanks, etc.

### ***Interactive Assessment***

Here, teachers of translation are encouraged to use this form of assessment more frequently. It simply involves performing certain tasks, i.e. translating short texts in class, revising the translation, pointing out to text ambiguities and ill-structured sentences. It may also involve text coherence and cohesion. Interactive assessment can stimulate students by allowing them to think on their own; it also allows them to monitor their own progress and development. This form of assessment can teach and test students at all levels. One very significant advantage of using this type of assessment is that it allows students to make their own decisions about where to search, how to get the appropriate term, and what to look for.

### ***Common Exams***

These kinds of exams are popular among college and university teachers. They involve practice exams (i.e. homework assignments, practice exercises, simulating real exams). Students of translation find practice exercises useful, simply because they give them an idea about what real exams will be about. Teachers should draw the connection between practice exercises and real exams (i.e. quizzes, midterm and final exams, essays, etc.)

### ***Peer Review Assessment***

In this form of assessment, students are asked to review each other's work. Every so and often, they are asked to grade their classmates' translations and make positive or negative comments on the translation. This kind of assessment can sometimes be a source of pride for the students as they feel they are responsible for their actions.

This approach does not only allow students to learn from other students' work, but also to boost their self confidence.

### ***Class Participation***

Class participation can be as important as any other form of assessment. It involves answering reflective questions about a certain lesson or homework assignment, taking part in a weekly class discussion, and exchanging views about students' projects and presentations. Class participation facilitates students' engagement in classroom arguments and discussions. It helps them improve their communication skills. After all, translation involves not only reading and writing, but also speaking in the case of interpreting.

One thing teachers have to be aware of is that class participation should be encouraged and be made as part of the overall course grade. It helps students to come to class and get involved in its various arguments and discussions.

### **Other Types of Assessment**

Teachers of translation must understand that assessing translation is different from assessing other disciplines, simply because translation is a profession, and students who graduate will be subjected to all kinds of tests before they are hired. Such forms of assessment are relevant mainly to translators or interpreters.

### ***Holistic Assessment***

Holistic assessment refers to the process where overall students' performance is measured against a set of standards. Such assessment includes translation theory, tools and skills. Questions that may arise here include whether or not students have a good grasp of the translation theory. It also includes students' understanding of the translation tools and skills used in translation. The holistic form of assessment can be measured through theoretical questions about the course, definitions, filling spaces, matching, etc. How often teachers assess students holistically is a question that needs to be investigated, as not many teachers of translation use this form of assessment. Opponents may argue that teaching translation mainly focuses on practice, and theoretical concepts may not add a whole a lot to the students' understanding of the translation process. However, and by the same token, one may ask whether or not a driver who knows the technical and mechanical aspects of the care is tantamount to another who only knows how to drive. I believe there is a disparity between the two drivers as one knows what he or she is doing, whereas the other has no clue. It can be logically concluded here that teachers who have didactic or pedagogical knowledge of translation assessment are far more competent than those who lack it.

### ***Targeted Assessment***

Targeted assessment involves examining certain aspects of the course. While the theoretical concepts of translation are fundamental, emphasis should also be placed on assessing group or individual assignments, portfolios, students' presentations, their research papers, etc. Targeted

assessment allows teachers to observe students' oral, writing and research skills. Sometimes, it is very difficult for teachers to see how students are progressing, simply because they may have no recollection of students' performance in previous work. This requires teachers to keep a record of students' performance in these areas. In order for the assessment process to be fair, tasks have to be interesting and attractive. They should incite students to do the work. Only those inspiring kinds of activities would be a true reflection of students' performance and progress across the years.

One may argue that teachers should use one form assessment or another. However, using both forms will definitely guarantee authentic assessment. Reliance on one form of assessment may put teachers and students at a disadvantage. It is only logical then to assume that students' performance relies heavily on teachers' knowledge of teaching strategies and methods of testing.

### **Flexibility of Testing and System of Teaching**

While motivation is very pivotal to students success, it should be noted that a more flexible and creative teaching system is badly needed. I believe that assessment methods have to be measured against attuned curriculum, teaching and testing methodologies. One area that needs to be emphasized is that teachers should acclimatize students to a communicative form of testing. As clarified by Boddy and Langham (2000), a communicative approach to testing is intended to provide the tester with knowledge and information about the testee's ability to perform in the target language in certain context-specific tasks. Tests, therefore, need to be context-specific. If, for example, the objective is to test students to determine whether their work performance is adequate to pass a course, the tasks included in the test should

be a fair reflection of the type of tasks they will be required to perform as part of the course itself. As Weir (1990:12) points out, inauthentic tasks may interfere with the measurement of the construct which we seek. "Tests of communicative language and translation ability should be as direct as possible (attempt to reflect the 'real life' situation) and the tasks students have to perform should involve realistic discourse processing". Weir advocates the use of genuine texts and that care should be taken with regard to task length and processing in real time.

No matter what methods teachers of translation use, the effect of using such methods, according to Schmidt & McCutcheon (1994: 118), lasts forever on the students' learning experience, their attitudes, and teachers' enthusiasm. However, customary testing is still fundamental in assessing translation and students who are exposed to frequent tests may perform better in their course. Performing well in the course may not always be attributed to the frequent tests students are subjected to, but to the fact tests have educational values, and when they are didactically thought out; they can be very useful and helping exercises toward good achievements.

One may recall from past experiences that students who failed the exam may insist on taking it again simply because they feel they understood the teacher's strategy of assessment. They may also feel that they got acquainted with the testing procedure and feel they will do much better. However, the fact to the matter is that testing creates some kind of understanding between student and teacher; it also enables the student to understand what is significant or not significant in the teacher's mind. Such understanding sends a signal to the students about the kind of knowledge the teacher is seeking.

Sometimes students' performance can be assessed by other individuals, i.e. chair of department and exam moderator for the sake of ensuring quality. If they see that tests were thought out and manifest teachers' understanding of testing strategy, they continue to be followed. However, if they realize that tests were not thought out and do not reflect the teacher's efficiency in preparing the test, they will be replaced. Teachers in such circumstances will be asked to reexamine their syllabi and make sure that they meet course goals and requirements and students' background and expectations. The objective behind this is that teachers who possess the knowledge of effective testing, and request the highest quality from students will definitely raise the level of student's performance. This, I believe, is very significant for employability purposes and the institution's high quality standards.

At a different level, institutions request that teachers should be efficient in preparing the test, and the test should conform to the course goals and objectives. Some institutions request that faculty members should submit copies of midterm and final exams, just to see if students have reached the course objectives. These two exams can indicate whether or not teachers have planned their course goals and their tests are good enough to measure such goals. Teachers should also know the meaning of assessment, test validity, evaluation, and reliability, as these terms are key elements in measuring students' performance.

### **Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge**

I want to assume here that all teachers of translation from other disciplines (i.e. linguistics, literature, journalism, law, etc.) believe that the content of pedagogical knowledge of translation is vital. However, I wonder how many of them possess such knowledge! This is a question for pondering! According to Shulman (1987), knowledge on subject matter is vital if teachers need to help students relate one idea to another. He states:

To teach all students according to today's standards, teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly so they can help students create useful cognitive maps, relate one idea to another, and address misconceptions. Teachers need to see how ideas connect across fields and to everyday life. This kind of understanding provides a foundation for pedagogical content knowledge that enables teachers to make ideas accessible to others

According to Shulman (1986, 1992), teachers need to be acquainted with two types of knowledge: (a) content, or sometimes he calls it *deep knowledge of the subject itself*, i.e. translation, linguistics, English, philosophy, etc., and (b) knowledge of the curricular development. Shulman believes that content knowledge includes the *structure of knowledge*, which encompasses here theories, principles, and concepts of a specific discipline. Paramount to this is content knowledge that deals with the teaching process, including the most useful forms of representing and communicating content and how students can best learn the specific concepts and topics of a subject.

Grossman (cited in Ornstein, Thomas, & Lasley, 2000, p. 508), flatly asserts that if teachers, particularly those who just start the profession, are to be successful, they must be acquainted with the issues of pedagogical content or knowledge as well as general pedagogy or generic teaching principles.

As for assessment, Glatthorn (1990) believes that teachers need to think about testing and evaluation as an extension to instruction, not as separate from the instructional process. According to Glatthorn, assessment encompasses examining students' understanding and misunderstanding during interactive teaching as well as examining students' understanding at the

end of a course. Assessment also deals with reviewing one's own performance and making whatever changes deemed necessary for different circumstances.

### Conclusion

Whether or not we assess students' work based on a valid theory, which measures the degree of accuracy of the work translated with respect to the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic functions of the source language text, it all depends on the validity assumption instilled in the assessor's mind. In most if not all probabilities, one can assume that the assessor has a set of criteria in which he can measure the efficiency and accuracy of the translation. If such criteria include awareness and understanding of pedagogical knowledge, then an objective and accurate assessment of students work will be guaranteed. However, if the criteria used for assessing students' work lack pedagogical knowledge and based on random and arbitrary assessment, then a skewed and subjective assessment will prevail.

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