

## The Teaching of Translation at the University Level: Constraints and Aspirations

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to address the situation of translation learning and teaching at the university level with special reference to its teaching in the universities of the Arab World/ countries. It is worth pointing that the paper is a kind of reflection touching upon certain aspects of translation learning and teaching with specific focus on the three dimensions/ aspects being the learner, the teacher and the teaching material(s).

**Keywords:** aspirations, constraints, university level, teacher, learner, teaching, learning

**Aim of the Paper**

This paper aims at shedding light on the fact that although translation courses are offered in a large number of the Arab Universities, yet translation teaching is still associated with a number of problems and/ or constraints. The issue as a whole is related to the three points being the core issue of this paper; they are the teacher, the learner, and the teaching material(s). The paper, thus, is an attempt to bring to the notice of the people concerned the nature and the situation of translation teaching at the university level. Clearly, the paper is an attempt to address those constraints and aspirations with special reference to the three points mentioned. Such points are considered, as far as this paper is concerned, the bases for discussing and improving the teaching of translation at the university level.

**Introduction**

Giving a definition to translation is debatable among the people concerned with translation. Bell (1995) has surveyed this and depending on this survey, it has been gathered that some people consider translation as a science while others view it as an art. Bell (1995: 5), however, defines translation as " the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalencies."

With reference to whether it is an art or a science, the view advocated by those who regard translation as an art rests on the assumption that it requires the translator to display his/ her ability to use all the skills and artistic qualities that he/ she has acquired from knowledge and practical experience. On the other hand, those who advocate it as a science state that it is so because it needs the translator to show his/ her skills in expressing how certain aspects of a scientific nature are related to translation and translating. In brief, it creates understanding among people of different socio-linguistic backgrounds. Wardhaugh (1990) supports this idea clarifying that language and society enjoys an inevitable relationship.

**Translation at the University Level**

It is of importance to point out that this paper focuses on translation within the confines of the two languages, Arabic and English. In other words, it deals with translation teaching and learning as a bilingual learning activity requiring the knowledge of two tongues. This is based on the fact that translation is a very important component of any language learning program particularly in the universities of the Arab countries. The main function of translation is to convey the context of two codes, Arabic and English, here, between two parties know as the sender and the receiver, due to the fact that it is the gateway for understanding others, their cultures, and civilization (Deeb: 2005, and Mouton:2005). It is for this that the need for teaching translation arises, especially at the university level. Moreover, it is one of the ideal means for understanding others' cultures, apart from its function as a means for understanding sciences, arts and other things and by translation, people can share such things. In the views of Dulay et al (1981), Ellis (1985), Wardhaugh (1990), Dingwancy and Maier (1996), cultures can be understood by means of translation. And this is one of the main reasons why a number of translation departments and centers have been established in different Arab universities. Therefore, and in the light of such importance, it is pertinent to state that translation has witnessed a very great attention at the university level, and thus, has moved from being a course in a department of English to occupy departments for translation. This view is shared by many people such as Newmark (1981), Newmark (1995), Fawcett (1997), AlGhussain (2003). Thus, it

is necessary, of an educational point of view that for translation to be taught and learnt successfully, it must be made a course of interest for its learners.

Virtually, the aim of teaching translation at the university level is to introduce students to translation theory and train them how to translate from one language to another; here Arabic to English and vice versa. However, in certain cases this teaching and training may not give its full fruition for certain reasons. Yet, the general remark that can be stated here is that a good number of translation teachers, who are supposed to teach and train students to translate, are sometimes not well qualified as they have different backgrounds such as literature, linguistics, and so on. In other words, due to the shortage of specialist trained teachers, such institutions assign teachers to teach translation just because such teachers have interest in translation. This is what is shared by Amer (2010), who has experienced this in the University of Gaza where teachers teach it without being trained. In addition to the attention paid to the teacher and the teaching materials, the objectives of the translation courses that are taught in such institutions should be revised. This is supported by Machida (2011), whose concern is that the objectives of teaching translation must be clear, which would make the teaching material well received and learnt by the learners. Al-Sakr (2010: 3) found out that “the present translation courses at Hodeidah University do not meet the requirements of the course design in terms of at least course objectives and course content.”

Due to the lack of training translation teachers, the lack of proper teaching textbooks and/or materials, and the lack of a clear approach and/or method, translation teachers, usually resort to giving texts according to their interest and choice. Thus, the teaching of translation becomes mostly teacher-oriented giving less attention to students' needs and interests. Thus, students may end up with the belief that this is all that they can get from learning translation, but not the real art of translating. Moindjie (2006: 59) ascertains that translation has gone further than linguistics pointing that “translation has gone further as a unifying communicative factor of lingual, cultural diversity, and academic knowledge.” This is, according to Moindjie (2006) crosses all borders, and ages.

### **The Need for this Research**

The need for writing this paper is to highlight the constraints that usually stand in the way of translation teaching and learning and the aspirations that can lead to finding solutions to such constraints. It must be clarified here that translation teaching can be like teaching any other course in the way that there are three dimensions, and these dimensions are the learner, the teacher and the teaching material(s). Thus, the three dimensions are of great importance in making the whole process of handling such a course go as expected. It must also be added that the three dimensions are interrelated in the sense that they must all go hand in hand in the proper manner that is planned by the educational institution offering such a course/ courses. This is due to the fact that if any of the three dimensions goes wrong at a certain stage, the other two are to be affected. Translation teachers, above all, can make translation teaching a wonder if well qualified and trained.

Since the constraints are mainly linguistic ones in the sense that learners can face problems with vocabulary items, grammar structures, semantic, pragmatic, stylistic problems and things of that sort, these constraints can be overcome by means of a well-prepared course/ courses and well qualified and trained teachers. Such constraints are represented by the differences between two languages which are the core work of learning and teaching translation in the way that they can make a real art or the opposite. These lexical, syntactic, semantic, stylistic, pragmatic and possibly discourse points or aspects may differ from one language to another. They are, in a

sense, the mechanisms that can enable the learner to tackle the text and reproduce the required form of the translated text or part of a text in an acceptable fashion.

### **Sources of Difficulty in Teaching Translation**

It is not the items that learners put, but how such learners put those items in the positions required by the translated text. This view is shared by Brumfit (1986), Bialystock (1987), Menacere (1992) and Decure (1993). At another level, the complexity that the majority of translation learners encounter can largely be attributed to the disparity among languages in terms of the positions occupied by such items in the sentences of different languages. In this regard, it is stated that the reasons for disparity among languages in relation to the lexical and grammatical devices are that they vary considerably in their distribution in a sentence and also their syntactic forms. According to Zaki (1996), European languages share common linguistic origins which would leave a greater span of difficulty between different languages as Arabic and English especially if we get into very specific types of translation such as religious and literary ones due to the fact that languages differ in a number of areas. This is on one hand, and on the other hand, the lexical mechanisms are another difficulty facing learners. Because both grammatical and lexical tools differ from one language to another, certain degrees of misunderstanding and confusion are created for the learner translator. Another source of difficulty created in the face of the learner translator is the translation and also formation of relative clauses (Zagood, 2012). As-Safi (1996) also points to the different constraints that stand in the way of learner translators such as the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic ones. Shaheen (1991: 26) clarifies that "In the Arab World, the problem of designing adequate translation courses" continues to remain as it is. However, he adds, "There have been a few attempts at designing undergraduate translation syllabuses at Arab universities, the prevailing characteristic of which is subjectivity."

### **How to Establish Translation Teaching**

Practically speaking and with the framework of the suggestion of Menacere (1992:19), who states that to establish the translation as a skill, "learners must be introduced to certain language treatment mechanisms which can start with certain language items as prepositions and adverbials." He further says that for Arab-speaking learners, teachers should not even start with presenting such learners with texts to translate. Learners should, rather, be oriented to this via a different approach which is the four language skills. He reiterates that foreign language learners should be better introduced to translation through the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. This technique is a very useful translation technique between any other two languages, apart from English and Arabic (Snell-Hornby, 2002 and Colina, 2003).

As a variation of this suggested technique, it is additionally proposed that Arabic texts can also be supplied as translation materials which will be a successful asset as far as translation is concerned. Newmark (1985) suggest that teachers can start with simple sentences to be followed by compound and then complex sentences. It is also ideal that teachers can draw their learners' attention to the connectives and how they are used in the two languages (Newmark: 1985). This will help learner translators attempt simple texts in any of the types of texts mentioned above. Their translation skills and abilities will develop step by step, and this, according to Menacere (1992), is a very practical technique.

It is obligatory that translation teachers are to be well equipped with a number of skills and abilities. Among such skills and abilities are familiarity with the text type, and textual cohesion and coherence, and knowledge of the pragmatic and semiotic differences between the two languages.

### **Stages of Tackling the Text to be Translated**

Menacere (1992) views translation as a science and this is why he states that it should be handled in a scientific manner. Thus, he contends that it should be tackled in three-phase processes which are input, transition and output. In the first phase, the receptive skills are involved for information gathering. In the second phase, the transition phase, the collected information is organized representing the first draft of the discourse.

As far as the language produced at these two phases is concerned, it is sophisticated and unorganized. At such phases, the lexical, grammatical and the cohesive devices are employed for the purpose of producing contextualized discourse. At the final phase, the output phase, the final version of translation is produced in which a unified coherent and contextualized discourse is the final output. Likewise, Newmark (1995) supports this view regarding the phases of translation, which are, in his opinion, the three fundamental assets for teachers and learners.

Further, Macau (2003:134) concludes saying that as translation is “eminently communicative and real, any translation task could and should be constituted by many different activities concerning the different skills.” Similarly, Porcaru (2007) confirms that for teachers to engage learners deeply in a translation task, the four language skills can be involved.

### **Suggested Techniques**

The ideal technique for tackling the translation problems can be understood in how the information in a text is presented so that such information can be processed accordingly. The type and range of lexical and grammatical items used in a text determine how learners are to process such texts according to the nature of the topic addressed as there are different types of topics such as literary, scientific, commercial and technical topics. Additionally, there are emotive and figurative ones.

To start with, teachers can ideally start with simple factual topics. Menacere (1992: 19) adhere to this confirming that “the factual language is the type most appropriate in the early stages, for the language is concrete, simple and the teacher can systematically control the language practice.” It is worth pointing here that the discourse of the factual language can be descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative or instructive depending on the writer's aims.

It is suggested by Amer (2010:5) that in order for translation teaching to give its expected fruition, teachers should “select the translation text that meets the objectives”, and use a step-by-step method. In such steps, “certain aspects such as the lexical, syntactic, stylistic and semantic level of difficulty” can be dealt with. Regarding the length of the topic, the text can be divided into segments and given to students as they are divided into groups.

### **The Role of the Translation Teacher**

According to Harmer (2008), different roles can be played by the teacher depending on the learning situation so he/ she can be a facilitator, a controller, a tutor, a participant, a resource person, an assessor, an organizer, an observer, a performer, and a teaching aid. In relation to translation teachers, they have to exert great efforts by means of training learners get aware of the nature of translation and more competent in the discourse types that are related to the

translation business. This, undoubtedly, would move the learner translator from the easy to the difficult, from the simple to the complex and from the unknown to the known.

Another task of the teacher is giving priority to training learners get more competent in the translation discourse types. The teacher is also to get learner translators adapted to any new technique that the teacher introduces. This is due to the fact that in certain circumstances, learners get on well with certain methods and/ or techniques, and in some other circumstances they do not. To this, Bossano (1985: 19) thinks that “learners studying translation usually accept the most familiar, well established and friendlier methods and/ or techniques. At the same time, they reject the unfamiliar, non-democratic methods and/ or techniques that are associated with anxiety.” Menacere (1992) concludes that there is no one way to teach translation, but the possibilities and indications are endless.

Translation teachers are also required to be aware of terminological resources such as monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, specialized dictionaries, access to international data processing nets and they should also be well aware of a wide range of texts on translation theory and practice.

Most importantly, translation teachers are required to be aware of the grammatical equivalence of the two languages in such a way that each language has its own grammar structure(s), which usually differ from one to the other, and hence, cause translation problems. Such teachers are required to be well aware of the fact that when there is a lack of a certain device in one of the languages, it is definite there is a problem for learners. Such devices, according to Baker (1992) can be in the form of number, tense, voice, person and gender. Conclusively, translation teachers are required to be well aware of a diversity of teaching techniques, and they also have to be eclectic in using whatever techniques that suit their learners’ needs and the teaching situations.

### **The Role of the Student**

In the view of Amer (2010: 6) the student has a major role to play in the teaching of translation. In addition to the interest that he/ she should have in learning translation and translating, he/ she should have sound knowledge of the reading and writing skills that are the means for translation. They should have adequate learning of the theories, procedures and strategies of translation in addition to initiative, creativity, honesty, accuracy, patience and dedication.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***Recommendations for the Teachers of Translation***

- Translation teachers have to be fully aware of the different discourse types that are dealt with in translation.
- Translation teachers have to make use of all possible ways so as to make translation a very accessible task for their learners. Clearly speaking, there is a number of techniques for getting this achieved. They should make learners aware of the fact that language is a means of communication among nations and people through which different aspects of social and behavioral nature can be communicated.
- Teachers have to get learners more and more familiar with the religious and cultural background of the translated texts.
- Teachers have to be well prepared and trained in how to get their learners gradually progress from the easy to the difficult, from the simple to the complex and from the familiar to the unfamiliar.
- Teachers should have the spirit of teamwork so as to do the job with satisfaction.



- Teachers should keep away from using the teacher-centered teaching and use the learner-centered teaching.
- Teachers should use methods and/ or techniques that foster responsibility and independence.
- Teachers should foster creativity and encourage cooperation through small group techniques.
- Teachers, from time to time, should use texts that have been translated before to make students compare such translated texts with their translation of such texts.
- Teachers should try their best make their students feel that they are translating professionally which will make them have a real feeling of the job.
- Teachers should instill within their learners that understanding the different discourse types is one of the golden gates for getting into practical translation. Clearly teachers are urged to remind their learners, from time to time, of these discourse types being factual, cultural, religious, political, figurative, emotive and imaginary.
- To facilitate translation learning more, teachers can assign certain parts of a text to different groups in the class, and after the groups attempt translating these parts, the teacher discusses the different attempted translations with the whole class so that a final draft is produced for final review with the whole class. In such a way, the teacher facilitates learning the language and also enables learners of the craft of translating.

#### ***Recommendations for Institutions Centers and Departments of Translation***

- There should be clear strategies and/ or techniques to be used appropriately according to the discourse type of the text.
- If teachers are overloaded with teaching loads, their institutions can help in preparing brief manuals on how to do the job.
- All the points or levels of contrast between the source and the target language starting with the word level up to the pragmatic and sociolinguistic level are to be dealt with well. This is due to the fact that similarities can be a help and differences can be a hindrance so what is known as the positive transfer of L1 (Arabic here) represented by similarities can help such learners deal well with the similar areas in L2, whereas negative transfer represented by differences can hinder such learners when translating.
- Translation courses must be taught by bilingual instructors.
- Translation teaching should be planned in a way to allow classifying problems into their linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical components, and such problems should not be left to the intuitive solutions of isolated problems by individual teachers.
- It is preferable that descriptive texts are to be used for beginning learners, after which they gradually move to the expository, narrative, argumentative texts and so on.

#### ***Recommendations for the Learners***

- Learners studying translation are required to have a good mastery of the vocabulary and grammar of both Arabic and English. This is due to the fact that when translating, they deal with the grammar of the two languages.
- At the stylistic level, such learners are supposed to have a certain degree of competence in the stylistics of both Arabic and English being two important components to be considered when translating.
- Students of translation should be taught and/ or trained to translate texts of gradable degrees in the way that the length should go gradually from short, quite longer, longer until they get to full texts. Such texts should cover a variety of subject areas such as religion, literature, media,

science, education, politics and so on, which are set in any type of text structure such as expository, narrative, persuasive, informative, descriptive, and newspaper articles.

- Students should develop dictionary skills as a gradual step to be followed by other steps.
- Students should be taught and/ or trained to have self-dependence in using contextual prompts to infer meanings and shades of meanings of what they translate.

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