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The Role of the Student in the Literary Translation Classroom: A Pedagogical Approach Towards a New Learning Perspective

Alba Fernández-Alonso
University of Burgos, Spain

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Abstract

Despite the full involvement of students in their learning process, the translation classroom still faces challenges associated with the implementation of traditional teaching schemes. Ideally, students should be invited to reflect and exchange perspectives that help them internalize the different stages that take place during the stages of the translation process. Among these, intuition and deduction come into play and lead to the creation of a habit through induction that allows the students to face the translation problems arising from the text in a satisfactory manner, thus contributing to the development of their translation competence.

This proposal is designed within a framework of active learning in which students stop being spectators in the classroom to become the protagonist of their own learning process by being continuously exposed to situations that demand higher-order intellectual operations. The methodology employed in class will take place in three different stages: comprehension of the source text, interlingual translation and an individual assessment of the target text. This three-fold learning strategy favors an active attitude in students and compels them to perform activities effectively. We believe that this proposal will help us achieve our main objective, which is to help our students delve into the complexities and problems associated with the field of literary translation while fostering the foundations of collaborative learning in

the classroom.

Keywords: Literary translation, pedagogy, collaborative learning, translation errors

Introduction

A plethora of authors (Holz-Mänttari, 1984; Krings, 1986; Kiraly, 1995; Robinson, 1997) has unequivocally pointed out that today's translation pedagogical approach still matches up with the traditional learning schemes, mainly based on lectures and masterly presentations (Ladmiral, 1977; House, 2017). The undeniable and irrefutable judgment of the expert teacher, whose job was mainly to check the students' translations without providing further feedback, still fails to spark discussion that explains why a version is more appropriate than another.

To enhance a pedagogical basis, it is imperative to place translation students in the center of their learning path by providing them with the necessary tools to become protagonists of their own learning process. Challenging traditional teaching and learning models attests to the need to relocate students, authorize their perspective and advocate "the revision of dominant arrangements of power and participation in student voice work" (Cook-Shater, 2007, p. 390).

Theoretical Framework

The first step towards this goal is providing students with a solid and substantial basis that sets them at the hub of their learning process "where learners are encouraged to take charge of their motivations, and thus develop autonomy as learners" (Hadar & Hotam, 2012, p. 200). For this purpose, the students and the teacher should be aware beforehand that, cognitively speaking, two processes occur when we translate. On the one hand, there is a series of unconscious processes (also called subliminal) that arise from intuition, from the sheer instinct of what a word or phrase might mean — a process that corresponds to the so-called *instinct* or *abductive reasoning*. Once the translator starts to translate the words and phrases in context traveling from one language to another by spotting the differences and similarities between the words, phrases and structures, a phase that matches with *experience* or *induction* arises. With the passage of time and through practice, this induction phase will allow the student to adopt specific solutions for particular problems that happen to be repeated frequently. By practicing, the translator will finally develop a pattern that will solve these reiterated problems unconsciously, giving rise to what is technically called *deduction* or *habit*.

There is a close link between these conscious and unconscious processes in the translator's mind regarding how the latter can become

conscious once the translator has assimilated them thanks to the experience gained with practice. These processes have direct implications for the pedagogical approach in the translation classroom, as the translation itself is conceived as a problem-solving task. A fundamental part of the teacher's role is to guide the students in the identification of the translation problems that might be spotted intuitively or consciously. To enable the students to both consciously and verbally describe those problems found in the translation process, they are provided with a theoretical framework that allows an easier classification of these problems. In this study, Albir's (2001) taxonomy of translation errors has been taken as the referential framework, among which we find linguistic, extralinguistic, instrumental, and pragmatic problems.

As this author suggests, translation problems are closely linked to translation errors. Bearing in mind this connection, the students are provided with a summarized list of the most common translation errors described by Delisle et al. in 1999. According to these authors, translation errors are any fault in the target text (from now on TT) resulting in either from ignorance, misinterpretation of a segment in the source text (hereinafter ST), the inadequate application of translation principles, rules or procedures or disregard for professional practice and usage. These methodological errors can lead to the following translation errors (Delisle et al., 1999):

- **Incorrect meaning:** when a sense is attributed to a word or segment in the ST that it does not have in the context in which it appears.
- **Misinterpretation:** information loss or distortion caused by misunderstanding the text, or lack of cultural knowledge, resulting in a word or segment in the ST being given an entirely erroneous sense from that intended by the author.
- **Nonsense:** misinterpretation of the sense of a word or statement in the ST, or methodological error that leads to an illogical formulation in TT.
- **Addition:** introduction of superfluous information or stylistic effect absent in the ST (not to be confused with explicitation, which is justified, nor with compensation).
- **Omission:** failure to render a necessary element of information.
- **Over-translation:** unjustified explicitation of some elements in the ST that should remain implicit in the TT.
- **Under-translation:** omission in the TT of any compensation, amplification or explicitation required to obtain an idiomatic translation that conforms to the presumed sense of the ST.

Once we have described and explained these translation errors and illustrated them by providing examples, the students can start to share their

views on why a given case can constitute a problem and suggest possible solutions. At this moment, the student, the budding translator, realizes that there is not only a correct option but an array of possibilities that can likewise be accepted as long as they are adequately grounded. This is how we can prevent this “inductive” reasoning (and somehow “corrupted”) so frequently observed in the translation classroom when teachers, instead of providing a reasonable answer that justifies why a translation option is more appropriate than another, answer that a translation “sounds better”. Hence, it is imperative to get rid of the formula “it sounds better” –of this intuitive sounding– to the extent possible, otherwise we will come to an impasse, as what sounds better to the teacher might not be the same as what sounds better to the student. If teachers fail to do so, a rational debate will never occur between the parts, thus leaving the student with the only option of accepting the teacher’s judgment as to the sole correct version.

Only a reflective and conscious attitude towards the translation problems will allow the student’s translation competence to be developed and consolidated. Likewise, when the students are able to manage their own learning process in an autonomously, a feeling of self-confidence and self-esteem will be instilled in them, skills that will undoubtedly be reflected in the way they negotiate prospective translation projects when showing the clients how much effort it takes to be remunerated for a quality translation job.

Implementation of the Pedagogical Approach. En>Es Translation of a Selection of Humorous Short Stories from “The Best of Simple” (1961) by Langston Hughes

With regard to the situational context of this study, this research was carried out on the subject Translation Strategies from English into Spanish, in the fourth year of the Degree in Spanish Language and Literature at the University of Burgos. The group was made up of eleven students, of whom five had Spanish as their mother tongue, four English, one Italian and another German. It shall be pointed out that for all the students this subject implied a first contact with the translation practice in all cases. Besides, the fact that the target language, *id est* Spanish, is not the mother tongue of half of them contributes to the development of an enriching multicultural classroom on the one hand but, on the other, implies a lack of awareness of the necessary linguistic tools needed to translate. Given the circumstances and to overcome this difficulty and compensate for the classroom’s heterogeneity, the students were set in groups of two and three to tackle this project. By doing so, the bases of collaborative learning (Dillembourg et al. 1996) were implemented, involving a renewal of the traditional roles associated with the teacher and the students and a different model to conceive the teaching-learning process where team work is emphasized. The students are made responsible not only of their

own work but also of their partners’.

The working plan followed in the classroom guided the students to pose questions about the translation process that would help them to enhance their translation competence throughout the three main translation phases that make up our study’s method:

- **Comprehension of the source text** both linguistically and on historical, cultural and social grounds, analysis of the author’s aim, his whys, and wherefores.
- **English into Spanish translation**, which goes beyond the translation practice and, given the humorous undertones of the ST, will lead to show the students Leo Hickey’s (1998) approach on the translation of humor.
- **Individual assessment of the target text** with the teacher, discussion and justification of decisions taken by the student.

During the comprehension of the source text, we paid special attention to highlighting the historical context and the aesthetics of the authors. As stated above, the students translated a selection of short stories of the volume *Simple Stories* by Langston Hughes, published in 1961, which had not been translated nor published in Spanish. Before tackling the texts, the students steeped themselves in the historical Harlem of the twenties where the literary and cultural movement Harlem Renaissance flourished, a period in which Langston Hughes outstood as one of its primary contributors. Except for the three North American students whose first language was English, none of the rest had heard about this cultural and literary movement that so positively contributed to placing black artists where they deserved to belong, in the social stratum that the long history of slavery and oppression arising from white supremacy had succeeded in removing. For this purpose, the students were given a couple of readings to get familiar with the historical and cultural context, together with a presentation of the author’s life and literary aesthetics. The introductory readings were the following:

- Harper, Donna Sullivan (1996). *Not So Simple: The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes*. University of Missouri Press.
- Garner, Thurmon and Carolyn Calloway-Thomas (1999). "Langston Hughes' Message for the Black Masses" *Communication Quarterly* 39(2), pp. 164-77.

Once the students had understood and internalized the author’s intention and aesthetics together with the situational context, they were given the go-ahead to start translating, a task that would run more smoothly with the cultural background. However, before starting solving in groups, they were given some instructions regarding the tricky task of translating humor together

with a set of guidelines that would help them keep the ST's humorous tone in the TT. With this in mind, they were provided with a theoretical framework based on the pragmatics of humor by Hickey (1998), which, as stated by Chiaro (2010), highlights the difficulty of the translation of humor –“Verbal humor travels badly [...] As it crosses geographic boundaries humor has to come to terms with linguistic and cultural elements, which are often only typical of the source culture from which it was produced thereby losing its power to amuse in the new location” (p. 1).

The translation approach suggested by Chiaro (2010) to adapt humorous texts that depend on cultural or linguistic factors in the source language is grounded in the perlocutionary act and the pragmalinguistic analysis of the text is based on the notion of speech act developed by Austin in 1962. Austin described a perlocutionary act as “what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring or even, say, surprising or misleading” (p. 109). In other words, a perlocutionary act is a speech act viewed at the level of its consequences, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise affecting the listener by, for example, making them laugh. This is contrasted with locutionary and illocutionary acts, which are levels of description rather than classifications of speech acts. Unlike the notion of illocutionary act, which describes the linguistic function of an utterance, a perlocutionary effect is in some sense external to the performance. It may be thought of, in a sense, as the effect of the illocutionary act *via* the locutionary act. Therefore, the effect on the hearer or reader is emphasized when examining perlocutionary acts.

When the students ask themselves about the effect or reaction on the reader and the linguistic means employed for that purpose, they will be on the right path to tackle a text and pursue its same effect in the target language. Hickey's (1998) approach invited students to reflect beyond the basic and simple questions “what does the text say?”, “what does the text do?” and, most importantly, “what effect does the text cause on the reader and what tools have made this possible?”

When starting to translate, if the students believed that a semantic or grammatical equivalent caused the same effect in the target language, a literal translation could be considered, as long as it was functional. In such a case, this word-for-word translation should be able to convey the same perlocutionary outcome to the target reader, that is to say, have the same effect. If, on the contrary, the students deemed that a literal translation was not suitable for this intended purpose, they would need to start analyzing the text in detail and find all the pragmatic and linguistic elements intrinsic in the humorous passage in order to spot others that can be functionally equivalent in the ST.

Hickey's (1998) contention implies that as the ST is capable of

producing or likely to produce or stimulate one or more analogically related perlocutionary effects on its original readers, any TT elocutionary should be capable of producing analogous perlocutionary effects on its readers. The use of the adjective *analogous* rather than *similar* suggests that, as not all ST readers or their contexts are the same, TT readers might likewise be quite different and situated in different contexts.

About the translatability of humorous texts, Hickey (1998) states that a word-for-word translation that results from functional is hardly ever possible in the following kinds of texts:

- Texts that depend on typically non-linguistic cultural factors.
- Texts that depend on the grammar of a language.
- Texts that depend on idioms and/or fixed expressions.
- Texts that depend on puns or paronomasia.

When encountering texts that meet the criteria mentioned above –as in the case of the humorous short stories of the assignment– students are faced with Hickey’s (1998) protocols of perlocutionary equivalence that they can resort to: *recontextualisation, marking and exegesis*.

In the words of the author, *recontextualisation* is a radical approach to the translation of a particular text which consists of totally or partially abandoning the literal, propositional or locutionary level, while maintaining the illocutionary act as far as possible and focusing strongly on the perlocutionary effect, directly or accurately reproducing it.

With regard to *marking*, Hickey (1998) believes that a target text is somehow marked in the sense that it may carry a kind of notice or signal along its lines. At some level, the reader is bound to read the TT in a way that differs from the way in which the original text is read by, for example, making adjustments, adapting references or terms that are not automatically recognized. By resorting to this protocol, the translator respects the linguistic and cultural resources of the source text and is bound to fall into the use of calques or loan translations. In the case of humor, the translator usually supports the translation by adding an explanatory footnote in the form of a translator’s note where the joke or humorous term is explained. This strategy destroys the intrinsic immediacy and spontaneity of humor as the translator must explain the joke in detail.

The last protocol is called *exegesis* and is a mixture of the two former ones. In other words, the translator chooses to keep the reality of the source text in the target one but introduces short explanations that could help the TT reader to understand the reality’s significance. In the case of the translation of humor, Hickey (1998) deems the protocol of *recontextualisation* the best option, as he believes it is the only strategy that allows the reader to avoid any possible oddity or anomaly in the TT and, above all, maintains the strength of

the perlocutionary act in both languages. Moreover, Hickey (1998) provides a method that diminishes the importance of semantic equivalence, of vital importance in other translation types, such as for example, legal or economic. The focus is here put on the pragmatic side of the text, and this is precisely the approach we would like to convey to our students in this pedagogical study.

Once we had provided the principal notions of Hickey's (1998) approach and supported the protocols the students would have to resort to when translating their short stories, they were given a basic roadmap for the whole process. First, they needed to analyze the TT as a perlocutionary act. Secondly, they were asked to extract and analyze the text's effect had on the reader, in this case why it made them laugh or why they found it particularly funny. Then, we asked them to assess if a word-for-word functional translation—something that happens very sporadically—could be possible. If this was the case, students were given the go-ahead to proceed with the translation. However, if this was not possible, students could resort to the protocols above-mentioned and choose the one that caused the more analogous effects on the TT. As Hickey (1998) recommended, *recontextualization* would be the preferred protocol to turn to.

To reach this goal, the students were encouraged to work in groups and were given copies of a template where they were asked to state whether they found humorous structures or terms difficult to translate into Spanish. Once the students had handed in their translations with the templates, we observed that in more than 90% of the cases, the students resorted to the recontextualization protocol to provide functional translations in the target language by keeping the strength of the perlocutionary act. In fact, out of the 22 templates, 17 chose recontextualization and provided correct and functional translations.

Conclusion

The results arising from this study evidence that Hickey's (1998) pragmatic approach to the translation of humor is a functional course of action in the translation classroom that, from a pedagogical perspective, should be more frequently put into practice due to its theoretical easiness for the inexperienced students and its capacity to make them reflect on the exercise of translation.

Furthermore, its implementation enabled the students to boost their translation competence by becoming aware of the many decisions that have to be taken when translating. Besides, this practice also allowed them to exchange both linguistic and cultural knowledge sharing their task with partners with different mother tongues and, consequently, different ways to understand texts. In addition, by working together they experienced the benefits of collaborative learning while reaching a specific learning outcome.

Besides, this practice was as an eye-opening experience that showed students how professional translators are not mere communicators but also cultural mediators that successfully convey humor from one language to another and, above all, grant people the possibility of the wonderful privilege of laughing.

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