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ABSTRACT

West Germany's university system requires that translation be taught as part of the English second language curriculum. One faculty member feels that using translation as a teaching and testing tool has these disadvantages. Translation (1) encourages thinking in one language and transferring to another, with accompanying interference; (2) deprives teacher and learner of the benefit of working within a single language; (3) gives false credence to the idea that there is a perfect one-to-one correspondence between languages; and (4) does not facilitate achievement of generally accepted aims such as spoken language emphasis, controlled introduction and mastery of graded structures and lexicon, situationalized language, communicative language use, learner-centered instruction, and seeing different world views. Grading translations is also difficult and contains some pitfalls. Careful text selection is seen as critical to good translation instruction, and can be guided by a few simple considerations. Several classroom techniques have been found to be successful, including: oral translation drills; random selected translation of parts of a text; translation of short, varied passages rather than one long passage; group translation work; and work on common translation problems. (MSE)

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Making

The Best of a Bad Job:

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The teaching and testing of translation

Paper presented at the 22nd International Conference of IATEFL/TESOL
11-14 April, 1988, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

What I want to imply by my title is that I see the teaching of translation in the context in which I work, a university English department nominally engaged in teacher training, as an imposed task. We find ourselves having to teach something inappropriate and attempt to modify it so as to bring it closer to the generally accepted aims and objectives of foreign language teaching at this level. Perhaps I should also make it quite clear at the outset that we are not so foolish or extreme as to reject translation as an impossible or unnecessary activity. But translation is an art, best practiced by those who have an excellent command of both languages concerned and best taught in specialised institutions, or at least on specialised courses. As a supplementary skill it is no bad thing if teachers can translate. It is also excellent if teachers can play a musical instrument, read a map, act, paint, make pots, use a word processor or drive a car. But it would be extreme to have a statutory qualifying examination for future teachers of English in music, map-reading, acting, painting, pottery, the use of computers or driving. It is possible to regret that time and ingenuity have to be invested in juggling with an activity imposed by the Ministry that would probably not feature in a programme of studies devised by enlightened, practically minded, applied linguists.

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It follows from what I have just said that this will be a practical and not a theoretical paper. I shall describe the situation in my own university and report on how we attempt to teach and test translation there. And I choose this method of presentation in the hope and belief that our situation and experience is not unique. I shall be reporting on a particular example assuming that it is representative : if my basic assumption is correct, I expect you at various points to be able to identify with the general underlying problems and find some relevance in the remarks made.

As I have indicated, I teach in a North German university and my students are, nominally, prospective teachers. (I say "nominally" because in the last few years virtually none of them have obtained teaching positions: there are none available). It is also necessary for those of you who do not know the German academic scene to explain that both staff and students in the German university accept that university studies should be, above all else, wissenschaftlich i.e. scientific .(I should warn you that in the remarks to follow I shall almost certainly fail to give an unprejudiced account, though I shall try).

In the context of language learning this means that a concern with practical language ability is seen as not truly academic. In the days before we were frightened that our Department might be closed down because of anticipated falling student enrolment and shortage of funds, attempts to offer courses to improve a student's command of English were met with the reply:

"This is a university, not a language school. Students have spent 12 years or so learning English . If their English is poor, they must arrange to take remedial language lessons outside the university. It is not our professional concern. Here, school

pupils become university students - and they must begin to study Anglistik - English Studies. This is an academic subject including history, social studies and literature (but please use the term "Texts"). It is not our job to teach them language. And they must study scientifically. They must learn to use the resources of the library, to produce and work with bibliographies, to write according to academic norms, basing all statements on a careful and thorough review of existing scholarly work. Expressions of personal opinion are of doubtful importance and scientifically suspect. They must come to learn that a personal response to Sillitoe or William Golding (or even hopelessly unscientific William Shakespeare - he never identified his sources) is not enough: they must learn to work with the secondary literature. In their written work they must master the MLA conventions. Footnotes, the correct, properly underlined citation of works used, and a full bibliography of books ('consulted' of course, not read) are matters of primary concern." Students over the years have characterised studying English at the university differently: "The university," various students have said, "is a place where you forget the English you learnt at school. Studying English at university level means reading and talking about English books in German".

Although, let me remind you, the students I am talking about enroll to study to become teachers of English, the teaching of English in schools (how to cope with a class of 30 at quarter to eight on a Monday morning in Winter) has rarely been a professional concern in my not untypical German university. "English" (Anglistik) is seen as a university subject in its own right to be studied in the approved, traditional fashion: first you master your subject, then you learn how to teach it. It is

known what studying Anglistik means. Questioning that tradition, re-examining the fundamental whys and wherefores of teaching and learning is not normal. And translation has always been employed in language learning; it needs no justification. (This seems to be the reasoning, though no-one in authority feels called upon to articulate the assumed justification). It is symptomatic of the unexamined, reactionary assumptions about language learning that a qualification in Latin has been recently re-introduced by the Ministry (1988) as a necessary qualification for the study of English.

A final note of explanation to those not knowing the German university system is to point out that universities in Germany are all state universities. Decisions come from above. The Government can and does issue edicts about educational matters without having to consult any university body. Academic freedom exists; the government cannot decide directly how and what academics teach. But a government body runs the examination system and effectively determines the syllabus. For a few years the translation paper was removed from the final examination; but it has been reinstated by the Ministry. And that is why we now teach and test translation - not on a basis of didactic and pedagogical conviction. (The frustration underlying the wording of the title of this paper should now be clear).

It is not, of course, suprising that translation has traditionally been seen as part of language learning. Confronted with an unknown language, with signs in shops and public buildings or the spoken language for example, it is normal to wonder or ask: "What does it mean?" "I wonder what she is saying?" "How do you say so-and-so?" It is normal, but it is unfortunate - because this initial need to understand and to

express what one wishes does not suggest the most effective way of learning to understand and to express ones meanings. Teaching based on such naive impulses - the wish to translate or have translated - ignores many of the insights that have been gained over the last thirty years or so into language teaching and learning. (It also removes the inward struggle to understand which can be so positive in language learning - it removes productive pressure). One modest attempt of this paper is to attempt to apply some of these insights to the teaching and examining of translation.

Some of the main disadvantages of translation as a teaching and testing tool in an EFL situation are easy to list:

1. It encourages thinking within one language which is then transferred into another, with accompanying interference.
2. It deprives teacher and learner of the opportunity to benefit from the accruing advantages of working within one language instead of between two.
3. It gives false credence to the naive view that there is such a thing as perfect one-to-one equivalence between languages.
4. It does not make easy the achievement of such generally accepted aims as:
 - a) Emphasis on spoken language;
 - b) Attention to the controlled introduction and mastery of selected and graded structures;
 - c) Attention to the controlled introduction and mastery of selected and graded lexical items;
 - d) The use of situationalized, contextualized language;
 - e) Communicative language use;
 - f) Learner-centred language learning.

g) It also seems to be a fact that different languages do not only compell us to see the world differently (the Whorf hypothesis) but that different languages select different aspects of reality in a given context as being relevant. So that even if a text is translated adequately in terms of lexis ,register and grammar it still may not sound English if information is included that, in the target language sounds redundant or, in context, bizarre.(See Afterword 2 below).

h) To these reasons , one can add another of a rather different kind: the general question of the learner's as opposed to the teacher's perception of studying. Students need to be realistic. In our university, courses on translation are well attended (I will not say enthusiastically). We have, usually, attendance figures of 50, 60 or 70 (at least at the beginning of the term). But courses on literature often have attendences of as few as 5 or 6. Sometimes such courses have to be cancelled because there are no registrations at all.(For educational reasons I am glad to say we do not have a system of compulsory attendance). Nor have these attendance figures much to do with the popularity, unpopularity, effectiveness or ineffectiveness of members of staff. Large numbers of students go to translation courses (however they are taught) simply because they are seen as having obvious and immediate relevance as preparation for final examinations. Students can even become rather impatient with their teachers who complain that they do not approve of the translation courses. It is by no means easy to get students to accept methods of work which would, one believes, enable them to perform better in examinations but which they cannot immediately perceive as relevant. Sometimes as I try to explain why spending time on translation really is not the most effective way of improving command of a language I seem to

read on my students' faces a look which could mean: "How very interesting.But are you, or are you not going to give us a text to translate and then mark it so we can see where we are? Whatever you say, we have to take the examination - not you". In truth ,the lecturer has to be very vigilant not to find him/herself unwittingly turned into a crammer - ingeniously training students to get the better of the examination system. Professional pride and moderate idealism, the examination system notwithstanding, seem to be the surest guards against this happening.

Marking, assessment of texts - examinations

Experience shows that complicated marking systems do not work. In practice we have found that:

1. One marks with a scale of 0.5, 1 and 2 for a) a minor error, b) a more serious error c) 2 for a gross error. These can be lexical, grammatical or stylistic errors. Markers should not worry over much about the classification of errors - the important thing is to be consistent and to see that all one is doing is building up a rough indication of the standard of the translation under consideration in comparison with others. It is illusory to think that any real consistency is available between texts for translation. Each text is likely to produce different translation problems. At best one can strive for some kind of continuity by having team marking with one member of each team present over two consecutive years. Copies should be kept not only of texts set but of sample marked texts and grades awarded. (This may seem an obvious suggestion , but it needs insitutionalising. In our university, at least, it is not done. And one of the underlying reasons is that the examination scripts are the property of the

examination department and should not, legally, be copied without a) their permission b) the permission of the candidate.)

In addition to team, consensus assessment one should not forget to mark good passages. It is far too easy to fall into the habit of annotating only what is wrong - a practice which a few moments reflection show to be avoidably negative. It is up to the examiners to discuss marked scripts and come to an agreement about what constitutes a good/poor translation. The mistakes quotient and the plus quotient should only be used as guides and the temptation to say "X mistakes = a credit, pass, failure ...and so on" should be resisted. It is also our experience that when marking large numbers of scripts it is both quicker and productive of more consistent assessment to mark in pairs and correct all sentence 1's, then all 2's etc. instead of marking script by whole script.

Suggestions for the improvement of the teaching (and testing) of translation

Selection of texts for translation

It is clear that the selection of texts to be translated is critical. In choosing a text one is also choosing the translation problems that teacher and student will have to face. Regretably we have been able to come up with nothing more sophisticated than the following: (See Afterword 1 below.)

1. Limitation of the length of the text.
2. A decision that texts shall be genuine German texts i.e. not themselves translations.
3. A decision that we will not require our students to translate literary texts, on the simple assumption that these are likely to be too difficult, however interesting.
4. A decision that we will avoid using articles from certain magazines and newspapers since we have discovered that their language and style are too often idiosyncratic and difficult to translate.
5. A decision to try to find texts whose imagined English versions students might reasonably be expected to have encountered in the course of their studies. (! This bizarre formulation follows from the fact that translation-as-test examines proficiency in the target language by presenting the candidate with a text in another language).
6. A decision to require all examination texts to be first translated by a German colleague to ensure by this rule of thumb

method that we do not unwittingly choose a text with hidden translation difficulties.

Teaching procedures

Here, the main task is to find alternatives to translating round the class. The following have been found moderately successful.

1. Oral Translation Drills.

These are not intended to be simultaneous translation exercises. Starting from the fact that what our translation-as-test examinations are trying to discover is how good the student's command of English is, oral translation drills attempt to give practice in producing a specific English phrase, expression, structure etc. giving a German cue.

It is very clear that such bi-lingual drills would have to be used very sparingly. I'm convinced that they could be used to help students to master particular detailed problems of translation. But it is obvious, too, that they are too mechanical to produce much more than necessary basic reflexes - as in the early days of learning to drive, practising changing from second to third gear, or practising inserting and deleting letters, words and paragraphs with a word processor.

2. Random selected translation of parts of a text.

Having been so often struck by the fact that asking students to translate whole (unending) texts, and then finding that there was not really time to deal with the myriad problems thrown up, it seemed a logical step to give complete texts (for contextual reasons) but to require students only to translate selected words, phrases or sentences.

3. Translation of short, varied (preferably complete) passages rather than one, complete (but long) text.

This seems such an obvious thing to do: varied passages will throw up various problems and the shortness of the task means that justice can be done to the translation problems contained in it. After all, each authentic text is a sample of the written language concerned and, within commonsense limits, each sample is as potentially representative as the next. You don't need to drain the body to take a blood test - a few millilitres will do.

4. Group work

Getting groups of 4, 5 or 6 students to work on a joint translation (to be submitted, if need be, for correction) works well. A lot of learning can be achieved in the joint student discussion that takes place producing a text to be handed in.

5. Typical, regularly occurring translation problems

Working from lists of anticipated errors is dull and soul-destroying. A way round the problem, perhaps, is to devise explicit contrastive analysis exercises where, based on a selection of authentic texts (in both languages) students can, for example, make their own discoveries about different tense usage

distribution in the languages concerned. The completeness of the text is important. Paragraphs taken from longer texts leave too many cohesive traces of having been decontextualised.

Final remark

In concluding, it has to be said that it should not to be expected that any stimulating insights into language use and learning are likely to be gained in the misconceived practice of teaching and testing translation to assess a learner's command of the target language. At best one can realistically accept the task as inescapable, attempt to state and then teach the issues it raises as logically, systematically, effectively and as interestingly as possible - and in this way, make the best of a bad job.

Afterword 1

As the result of delivering an earlier version of this paper at the IATEFL conference held in Edinburgh in April, 1988, I came to hear of the Adam and Eve programme developed by the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. (Adam and Eve stands for Automated Document Analysis and Manipulation and Extensible Variety of Exercises.)

The University of Osnabrück has placed an order for the French, English and German versions, and with the last two it is hoped that the analysis they can carry out will enable us to make less unsophisticated choice of texts for examination translation based up until now on intuition and a simple word count. ("Texts for translation shall be not more than x hundred words long".)

Afterword 2

As an example of a translated text that contains no grammatical errors but sounds distinctly un-English I quote a few lines from a text translated from German into English. The translation was done as a draft/master translation by an American colleagues and

the English author of this paper for use in correcting a text set in a final examination with open-ended time and access to bilingual dictionaries and other works of reference. The German student examination candidates had to complete the translation in five hours using only a recommended monolingual dictionary.

From Die Zeit, No 23 1.6.1984 Experiences in Song

1. " Anyone who sees the singer U.M. standing around in the foyer after one of her concerts and would like very much to talk to her has to take into account that she simply won't react.

2. It is not so much the physical exhaustion that makes her appear so distracted. 3 it is more the sudden feeling of emptiness after the great effort that gives her the appearance of not being there.

4. As nice as it might be to be able to give oneself and one's personal experience to an audience for two hours, it is very difficult to pull oneself together afterwards and put up once again the walls dividing one's inner from one's outer self, the walls one has just been working so hard to break down."

A passage from Alan Duff, The Third Language : Recurrent problems of translation into English (Oxford: Pergammon, 1981 p xi) has a speculation relevant to this passage:

"...why is it that translation, no matter how competent, often sounds like a "foreign" language. it is with writing that translation begins. Whatever goes on in the writer's head must go on in the translator's head as well. The writer and the translator share the same thoughts, although they express them in different languages..."

The problem of teaching and testing translation in the situation which I have described is that we are saying to our students in effect: "I want to see if you can write English correctly, so to

find out if you can I'll give you a text in a different language and see if you can re-write it in English as if it were written in English in the first place. (It reminds me of a device for enlarging drawings that I had when I was a child. The device consisted of several pieces of wood hinged together so that they looked in profile like the Forth Bridge. At one end there was a pencil, at the other there was a steel pin. To draw an enlarged copy of the picture you wished to reproduce meant making the steel pin trace the original by manipulating the remote pencil. It was a very clumsy device and one could neither trace accurately nor use the pencil to its best advantage: the function of each interfered with the other and concentrating on the original which was being copied meant one could not concentrate on the appearance of the new translated drawing appearing under the pencil.

It has become increasingly clear to me that teaching of any kind is at least (and perhaps essentially) a matter of revealing to the students their preconceptions of what it means to study (English) and then negotiating with them how best to do it. It is a sad fact (as I have mentioned earlier in this paper) that our translation courses are heavily attended since they are perceived by the students as being directly relevant to the examinations they have to write. If translation-as-test were removed from the examination, students would stop attending such courses immediately and could explore more direct, effective and stimulating ways of improving their command of English.

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18.11.1988