

Creating a group profile through error analysis in advanced L2 translation training

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ABSTRACT

Error analysis and product assessment are increasingly viewed as reductive procedures in translation pedagogy. In the current paper, a case is made for 'rehabilitating' error analysis, especially in advanced L2 translation teaching. Attention is drawn to its usefulness in creating a group profile for L2 translation trainees, particularly as regards the scope it offers for showing how aspects of linguistic transfer frequently considered marginal, when taken individually, are, on the contrary, significant if viewed cumulatively. In the course of the article it is suggested that error analysis can be used dynamically to show that apparently sporadic and 'low level' aspects of transfer are among the most frequent problems, and that they consistently interlock with 'higher-level' textual and contextual (if not cultural) considerations. Far from encouraging a transmissionist stance on the part of the L1 teachers normally responsible for L2 translation courses, error analysis can be used to empower L2 students. One way in which this can be done is through a focus on technologies that address the issues emerging from the analysis. This should make students increasingly independent of the intuitive, internalized knowledge of their trainers, both in the short term and in the course of their professional careers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The following considerations emerge from an error analysis of work produced by a class of advanced translation trainees in a vocational course in the Italian-

English language pair with L2 directionality. The title is prompted by data emerging from five small learner corpora, each consisting of translation assignments handed in over the first semester of an L2 translation course in the final year of a Master in translation, run jointly by the ISIT in Milan and l'Université Marc Bloch in Strasbourg. The work, while quite frequently effective, was not consistently so. Dealing with these issues on an occurrence-by-occurrence basis has obvious benefits, but it also has drawbacks. Taken individually, many 'errors' can appear too marginal to use as material with the group, or so slight they appear as default errors in L2 translation training, with the result that they are frequently not pursued as an issue in overall translation quality. This prompted systematic error analysis of a sample of representative target texts in the second language to establish common areas where students underperformed and to factor them into group teaching.

The very term "error assessment" would seem to fly in the face of recent appeals for "reorientation from the product to the process of learning" (Zhong 2006: 158). It is likely that it evokes "a traditional system of assessment based on the end product and on the accurate/adequate construction of equivalence" and as such one that is opposed to "an alternative system centred around the learner; i.e. how he/she performed in a process of learning" (Zhong 2006: 168). One way in which Zhong shifts the focus to the learning process is by illustrating the usefulness of assessing students' ability to plan a translation and to realise that plan in the TT. However, in the case of advanced L2 translation students in a vocational context, there is probably a default plan already in place, one that includes working as near as possible to very tight lexico-grammatical tolerances. In the vocational context, there may well be less scope for making trainees feel they will translate more accurately by encouraging them to write about their prospective translations. Surely in such situations one risks steering very close to the situation described by Schopp (2006: 175):

[...] the didactic approach – which is only appropriate at the level of foreign language learning – of accepting as many of the students solutions as possible [...] can be fatal, because it leads to the target text not meeting the expectations and conventions for texts in that genre that are prevalent in the target culture and the client will not get the best possible text for his or her purposes. This in turn strengthens the common impression that translations are qualitatively inferior texts.

At the risk of standing out as excessively utilitarian against the current process assessment orientation, the following paper considers ways in which error assessment can help create a group profile, and how this can be used to maximize time and resources, empower trainee L2 students, and encourage the L1 teachers normally involved in L2 translation (Pokorn 2009) to rely less on internalized and intuitive knowledge and a top-down, transmissionist orientation to translation pedagogy.

1.2 THE ISSUE OF L2 TRANSLATION TRAINING

There is growing recognition within the academic community of the place of L2 directionality within translation pedagogy and the profession. Pokorn (2009):

189-90) provides an admirable summary of the literature that challenges “traditional theoretical assumptions”. She sees this shift as “a logical response to the actual situation in translation markets in many countries and linguistic communities where translation into the B language is expected and demanded” (Pokorn 2009: 190). Italy would appear to be no exception to this trend. The evidence suggests that the tourist sector is one where L2 translators are quite frequently involved. Admittedly the demand may be created by L1 translators’ reluctance to work for the low rates that characterize this market. Whatever the specific underlying reason, it betokens a shortfall that L2 translators are regularly called on to fill. Taylor (1998: 298) has pointed out that they frequently do so, though with mixed results: at one extreme, translations are marked by what he calls “howlers”; at the other they fail to achieve a sufficiently reader-oriented target text. Students’ expectations also mirror this situation. They were asked to complete a questionnaire divided into four sections: “expectations”, “learning outcomes”, “cultural issues”, “the course in context”. 88% indicated they considered L2 translation an important skill for their professional futures. Given their attitude to this directionality and their ambition to undertake L2 translation, for whatever market reasons, it would appear that reducing error tolerance is a reasonable teaching brief.

2. METHOD

2.1 THE STUDENT SAMPLE

The course that provided the data is a declaredly vocational one. Part of that training consists in 4 semesters of L2 translation in this language pair, totalling 192 hours. The data was supplied by students who had completed 96 hours and had acquired competence in domain selection of information and market-oriented, computer-related skills. They were adept at sourcing their translations, using model texts and parallel material from online sources; they were practiced at tracing terms in online dictionaries, glossaries and data banks.

2.2 ST MATERIAL SELECTION CRITERIA

Within the confines of a semester-long course it was not feasible to arrange a commission, even though it must be said that there is no totally convincing reason for basing a translation course on a commissioned translation. Schopp (2006: 179), who refers to commissions as “the problem child in translation didactics”, observes “from a sociological translation perspective, there are significant problems with the introduction of authentic commissions into a training course” (2006: 173). Consequently the choice fell on a “didactic commission” (Schopp 2006: 176). Taylor’s eyewitness account suggests that L2 translators are likely to work in the domain of tourism, and this partly determined the choice of source texts. The selection of teaching material differs from Campbell’s (1998), which is a sample of journalistic texts. However, the likelihood of L2 students being commissioned to translate journalism is low. I would

echo Klein-Braley and Franklin's (1998: 60) view of such texts' unsuitability for another language pair: "practically no-one transfers German texts about England into English for money". The choice also meets Wetherby's (1998: 25) requirement that realistic texts should be used that "provide a good motivation for teaching and learning". It is a moot point whether the financial rewards are sufficient motivation, but, in theory, the selection of such texts is motivating, in that it works as a yardstick for the kinds of competence required to translate effectively. As such, I believe the ST material corresponds to Schopp's (2006: 178) recommendation that "the exercises don't have to be genuine (authentic), but they must be realistic and plausible".

Taking a cue from these observations, the domain was narrowed down to descriptions of museums and exhibitions, an area where L2 translators frequently work, and where one is often struck by the imbalance between graphics and linguistics; the uneven quality of the translation contrasting with the overall gloss of the leaflet it appears in. The second criterion was that texts contain typical linguistic and contextual challenges and not exclusively technical or terminological ones; the third was avoidance of extracts. Schäffner (1998: 124) points out that in much L2 translation teaching, especially when it is oriented to language acquisition, extracts are widely used; this prevents students encountering the kind of texts that hypothetical real-life clients might commission. The texts chosen were never de-contextualized. Co-text was always readily accessible and had to be taken into account. A final criterion was that, anyway, translation trainees appear to enjoy working on texts with a certain amount of cultural cachet, a response that Wilkinson (2005) has observed working with Finnish students involved in L2 translations of similar material.

2.3 ERROR ANALYSIS CRITERIA

The error analysis criteria are based on Mona Baker's (1992) influential model of overlapping areas of equivalence: word-level, above word-level, textual and pragmatic. This paradigm was chosen, firstly, because it is a consolidated teaching model, familiar to both trainers and trainees; secondly, because it breaks down texts into component levels; lastly because it sees these levels as interlocking, ultimately fostering a holistic attitude to the text. Nevertheless, the model is applied with Baker's (1992: 5) proviso that "it is virtually impossible to say where the concerns of one area end and those of another begin" well in mind.

No attempt has been made to grade the errors in terms of 'seriousness'. As suggested above, apparently slight mistakes may be cumulatively quite significant, while a "glaring" error may be only a rare oversight. The percentages are based on the frequency of certain types of non-equivalence across 3 sets of short assignments from 18 students and two from 9 students. In the interests of brevity, the two most frequent sources for each level of equivalence area are analysed.

The final strut in the method was supplied by findings from questionnaires handed in by students (see section 2.1). Wherever relevant in the analysis, find-

ings from the error analysis will be compared with questionnaire answers that shed light on the significance of the data, especially in terms of the learning curve experienced by the students themselves.

Teaching methods did not remain static during the case study. As the error analysis proceeded and the big picture began to emerge, the emphasis of lessons changed, and where possible, new instruments were introduced, though it did not always prove possible to exploit them to the full in the time frame. Details of such adjustments are also included in the analysis.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 GRAMMATICAL EQUIVALENCE

In exactly half the sample, grammatical equivalence had the highest score.

GRAMMATICAL EQUIVALENCE					
TT	GE %	+FREQUENT	%	2ND + FREQUENT	%
TT1	25.9	prepositions	18.52	aspect	7.4
TT2	34.9	determiners	15.66	prepositions	7.23
TT3	25.0	prepositions	6.7	agreement	3.0
				aspect	3.0
				tense	3.0
TT4	33.3	prepositions	16.67	determiners	13.33
TT5	26.3	determiners	11.41	prepositions	3.8

Table 1: Main sources of loss of grammatical equivalence:

The data suggests that one aspect of grammar that trainers of advanced students in this language pair might find it fruitful to work on is high frequency functional words like prepositions and determiners. A frequent source of non-equivalence is the Italian preposition “di”, which, among other things, covers location, affiliation, or category and not just possession. This is frequently handled unconvincingly. Otherwise, these students appear to work effectively in what Baker (1992: 85) refers to as the grammatical “straitjacket”; something they themselves appear to be aware of. In the questionnaire, 66% indicated grammar acquisition as their lowest priority; the remaining 33% indicated it as their second lowest priority. The comparison of their expectations with these findings indicates the extent to which such errors are perceived as grammatically insignificant. Taken individually, they do appear to be minor slips, and students can feel that dwelling on them is nit-picking; but their effect is cumulative, and the longer the task, the more likely it is to become nit-infested.

3.2 WORD-LEVEL EQUIVALENCE

In the other 50% of the total sample, word-level equivalence is the principal area of non-equivalence.

WORD LEVEL EQUIVALENCE					
TT	WLE %	+FREQUENT	%	2ND + FREQUENT	%
TT1	29.63	sense relations	16.67	propositional meaning	9.26
TT2	33.7	word class	10.84	sense relations	6.20
				connotation	6.20
TT3	26.7	false cognates	11.67	sense relations	6.7
TT4	33.3	conventional metaphors	23.3	propositional meaning	10.0
TT5	42.9	propositional meaning	11.96	sense relations	8.7
				false cognates	8.7

Table 2: Main sources of loss of word level equivalence

Sense relations are a significant cause of this and are repeatedly attributable to an SL superordinate requiring a more specific hyponym in the TL. For example, in the first translation set, the problem centred on the transfer of the lexical item “*sede di un museo*”. Inappropriate hyponyms were the source of non-equivalence here (typical examples being “head office”, “headquarters”, “seat”). This is an aspect of sense relations that Taylor (1998: 50-51) identifies as frequently problematic in translation in this pairing.

The second most frequent form of non-equivalence was propositional meaning. Numbers, a frequent blind spot for language students, were a major cause. Another was explication. For example, “the *history* of Augustine’s Africa” is introduced by one student to explicate the prepositional phrase “L’Africa di Agostino”, more appropriately explicated by “Africa at the time of Agostino”. The universal of explication appears to be a recurrent source of non-equivalence in L2 translation.

An important source of word-level non-equivalence are proper names like “Monte Bianco” and “Cervino”, commonly referred to in English as “Mont Blanc” and “Matterhorn”, respectively. This cultural preference eluded many students and indicates an overlap with an area of cultural awareness that needs to be developed.

In this study conventional metaphors have been treated as a lexical problem rather than one of pragmatic equivalence; this is largely because their status as dead metaphors means they have become fully lexicalized and are not generally perceived as metaphors at all (see Semino 2008; Knowles & Moon 2006; Kövecses 2002). This emerged as the principal area of word level non-equivalence just once, in the case of the fossilized metaphors “spunto” and “percorso”. “Percorso” falls into the category Taylor defines as a general word, and identifying the equivalent hyponym was problematic, so this also overlapped with sense relations. In the case of “spunto”, although it was easier for students to cope with the pragmatics (“the inspiration for”, “the starting-point”, “the idea behind”), not all of them did so; some for example resorted to the universal of omission (see Hatim & Munday 2004: 7).

In this overview of word-level non-equivalence, word class is viewed as a lexical issue, rather than a grammatical one, on the grounds that students substituted the gerund for the regular noun, which is possible, though marked and infrequent for this kind of text, where the informative function is predominant. Non-cognates, rather predictably, accounted for most other examples of non word-level equivalence.

This data can be measured against information from the questionnaire. When requested to rank their learning priorities at the beginning of the course, the bias was towards terminology, with 55% ranking it their first priority and 28.8% putting it second; 27% of the sample regarded lexis as the priority, while 38.8% ranked it second. However, in the learning outcomes section answers suggested a review of priorities. Terminology was now ranked by 33.3% as the most useful competency; 50% ranked figurative language (in the form of conventional metaphors) as the most important focus, while 44.4% ranked connotation the third most important focus. This would appear to indicate growing recognition of the key problems posed, even in semi-specialised domains, by highly conventional lexis from the common word stock.

3.3 ABOVE WORD LEVEL EQUIVALENCE

The table below is very clear about the source of lost equivalence at this level.

ABOVE WORD LEVEL EQUIVALENCE					
TT	ABWLE %	+FREQUENT	%	2ND + FREQUENT	%
TT1	18.5	collocations	12.9	dependent prepositions	3.7
TT2	10.8	collocations	9.8	compounds	1.2
TT3	13.3	collocations	13.0		
TT4	10.0	collocations	10.0		
TT5	10.8	collocations	7.6	dependent prepositions	3.26

Table 3: Main sources of loss of above-word-level equivalence

In each of the five translation sets, collocation was the major source of errors, with conventional ST collocations (Sinclair 2004: 23) being translated with marked combinations in the TT. The second highest cause of non-equivalence was dependent prepositions, viewed in terms of their relationship to a lexical item. Once more, this is the kind of error that taken singly appears marginal, though its cumulative impact can be considerable. The other second highest cause of non-equivalence was compounds. Though students have largely mastered these dense nominal strings, they can still handle them unconvincingly, with confusion over headword, classifier and epithet order, and inaccuracy over the determiner for good measure. Here, too, a considerable shift in awareness emerged. From a survey conducted after their first two assignments, it emerged none of the students were familiar with online corpora or with concordancers from previous L1 or L2 translation training; both technologies, as the very dense literature suggests (see Zanettin & Bernardini 2000; Hunston 2002: 123-127;

Zanettin *et al.* 2003; Olohan 2004), that can be particularly helpful in dealing with aspects of equivalence at word level and above. Lesson time was accordingly devoted to introducing these instruments, especially to exploring their usefulness in problem areas like collocation, connotation, colligation, semantic prosody, as well as fossilized metaphors. The response to their usefulness in the learning outcomes section of the questionnaire was, on the whole, positive with 33.3% finding them very useful and 50% of them regarding these tools as quite useful. When asked to specify useful applications of corpora, 83.3% singled out collocation as the main benefit, while 61% indicated phraseology (see Hunston 2002: 137), which might be considered a closely related aspect. The answers were similar concerning the main benefits of concordancers. 72.2% found the concordancer was most effective in handling collocation, while 33.3% indicated phraseology and connotation as the second most useful application. When questioned about perceived drawbacks, responses were more or less evenly distributed: 27.7% felt both instruments required advanced language skills to use properly; 27% indicated that both required more special training in the use of search syntaxes; 22.2% and 33.3% respectively deemed that they did not sufficiently improve the quality of their translations to justify the time required to use them, though presumably this attitude might be changed by addressing the previously mentioned drawbacks. Indeed, the response was a 100% in favour of corpora and concordancer instruction, even within the limitations of the 24 hours allotted for the course. This suggests that with the awareness of the challenges posed by lexis and collocation, students are fast to respond to technology that can help address those problems, if only it can be incorporated into the course systematically enough for students to fully benefit from it. It also suggests that advanced students would benefit from being introduced to these instruments earlier in their two-year course, though this is an issue that entails decisions at the macro level of syllabus design (see Kelly 2005).

3.4 TEXTUAL EQUIVALENCE

TEXTUAL EQUIVALENCE					
TT	TE	+FREQUENT	%	2ND + FREQUENT	%
TT1	16.6	cohesion	16.67	register	5.9
TT2	20.4	cohesion	10.84	register	9.6
TT3	35.00	cohesion	20	information flow	8.33
TT4	23.3	register	20	cohesion	3.3
TT5	19.5	cohesion	9.78	register	5.9

Table 4: Main sources of loss of textual equivalence

The main area of textual non-equivalence was cohesion, in 4/5 of the translation sets, while it was the second cause in 1/5 of the sample. In a high percentage of cases this was due once more to the translation universal of explication, which took the form of repetition, leading to an unnaturally stilted form of cohesion, especially for such short texts. At the level of anaphoric reference

there was still wide use of demonstrative deixis (“the first one”, “the second one”) rather than forms like “former” and “latter”. Another example of ineffective cohesion was the inappropriate use of redundant coordinating conjunctions, particularly preceding a second verb for the same subject, which normally appears in a non-finite form in English. Subordinating conjunctions also encouraged inappropriate explication. A good example was the way in which causative conjunctions or temporal conjunctions are introduced, while adversative conjunctions were repeatedly used to translate the conjunction “se” (when the meaning is closer to “if it is true that”), which distorts the way the information is linked and presented.

The next cause of textual non-equivalence was register (Baker 1992: 16; Taylor 1998: 78-80). Generally loss of equivalence occurred because students opted to use the imperative, for example, “visit”, “explore”. Alternatively, they chose to directly address the visitor, combining this register either with deontic, permission-giving modality (“you can”) or the certainty epistemic modality (“you will”), thus changing the text function from informative to vocative and introducing an interactional element absent in the original. One cause of lost equivalence was attributable to the fact that the register was uneven across the text, with students failing to adequately maintain the tenor they had initially opted for throughout the text. When questioned as to why they had chosen this kind of modification, students explained it was a strategy to deal with the conventional metaphor “percorso” (see above), also frequent in other texts. The metaphor was not found in the corresponding word class in their source corpus, but they noticed that imperative verbs like “explore” and “visit” were used extensively. It emerged that they had sourced their translations by referring to official UK and US museum websites. Fairclough (2001: 52, 179; 1995: 130-166) has written extensively on “synthetic personalization” in official texts and the related phenomenon of marketization of institutional texts in the Anglo-American cultural context. Both these tendencies may account for the register of the corresponding texts in the target culture. However, this choice of register was ineffective textually because it was difficult to sustain, and also culturally, as this was a text pertaining to an exhibition organized by the Church, not usually associated with hard sell. This suggests students could profit from greater awareness of the cultural appropriateness of register.

The remaining main source of textual non-equivalence, information flow, is mainly due to the universal of simplification or extreme standardization: a common strategy is to simplify complex sentences by a rule of thumb strategy known as “spezzare la frase” (introduce a sentence break). This may eliminate the scope for grammatical and syntactical errors, but it leads to distortions at the level of theme/rheme distribution, with a consequent loss of emphasis on the right information.

The questionnaire revealed this was consistently regarded as a low priority. 55% saw it as the least important focus, while 15% saw it as the second least important. In the section on cultural issues in translation, 17.2 % saw it as the least challenging aspect of translation within this kind of discourse. This is an example of how low-level, lexico-grammatical decisions as regards cohesion are

implicated in higher-level issues like the socio-cultural values at play in a given context (see Hatim 1997: xiii).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article grew out of the desire to define reasons for lingering dissatisfactions with the progress made by advanced students in an L2 translation course. The findings reviewed here suggests (a) that it is useful to collect data and form a collective profile that enables trainers to focus on key issues involving the majority of students; (b) that error analysis is likely to reveal that many of the problems are low-level ones, whose real effect is likely to be felt cumulatively and at higher levels in the model; (c) that when the issues emerging from the error analysis profile are factored into the lesson plans and shape the overall direction of the course, students respond to them more constructively than when they are corrected on a personal basis; (d) that students are responsive to new technology and online resources that can help them deal with areas that they had hitherto regarded as less problematical; moreover, that as they are conversant with other online resources, they are quick to see the potential in new ones, and equally quick to spot what needs to be done to make them more effective tools in their hands.

Far from embodying a traditional, summative, transmissionist approach to translation pedagogy, the data can be seen as empowering students, by making them aware of common pitfalls and indicating means to avoid them, as well as explaining the implications of overlooking them at higher interlocking levels in a text. In a recent case study of L2 translation teaching situations and practices, Pokorn (2009) notes that native speaker teachers of L2 translation rely heavily on internalised intuitive understanding and also try to coax similar levels of intuitive understanding from their students. There is no doubt that the kind of layered linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge provided by native speakers is useful. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily durable. If, for example, error analysis suggests that lexis is a significant area of non-equivalence in a group, it would appear appropriate to concentrate one's efforts not on drawing on internalised intuitive understanding, but on showing students another tool which will ultimately make them more independent of the transmissionist model, increasingly within the short term time frame of the course itself and ultimately in the long term perspective of their careers.

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