

**THE ACADEMIC TRAINING OF TRANSLATORS :  
A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

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**1/ INTRODUCTION**

According to Nida evidence of format translation dates from the third millenium B.C. when the Sargon of Assyria delighted in having his exploits proclaimed in the many languages of his empire (1964: 11). However, if one looks at the state of translation teaching at present, one would find that statements such as the ones below still prevail:

Although translation has been practised for thousands of years and there have always been schools for translators and interpreters, which with greater or lesser success, have trained their students for the work of translation, there is still no systematic method of teaching translation (Reiss, 1976 : 329).

If one realizes the outstanding importance of translation teaching in all curricula for future professional translators, it is at first sight surprising that the problems of translation teaching efficiency have thus far played only a secondary role in the framework of empirical pedagogical research. It is, therefore, no wonder that the development of learner group specific, text-typologically differentiated methods of translation teaching is still in its infancy (wilss, 1976 : 118)

The reason that translation teaching has remained very slow is probably due to various variables involved in this discipline. To list but a few, one can mention the language combinations, the specific-group learner, the necessary duration of the training, the objectives of the training and most importantly a satisfactory answer to the question of measurability of translational competence.

Formal academic training of translators is not a new idea. Different methods were practised in the old schools in the training of the Egyptian drogman, the Greek hermeus and the Latin interpres. Among the well known schools established around the middle ages are Baghdad and Toledo. Nevertheless not much is known on their pro-

grammes or teaching methods. Even in modern times, at least in the sixties, not much is known about the teaching methods applied by the European Universities as Monuiri reports:

Depuis moins de vingt ans les Universités de Genève, Turin, Vienne, Paris, Louvain, Heidelberg, Mayence ont leurs instituts d'interprètes... mais ces organismes enseignent la pratique des langues et la traduction comme activités pratiques sans qu'il soit jamais sorti de leur enseignement ni une théorie de la traduction, ni une étude des problèmes au moins que poserait cette théorie (1963:10).

However, since the last decade translation turned into more professionalisation, consequently more literature on translation teaching has emerged. Ideas have largely shifted from whether translation should be left to artists and natural bilinguals into curricular design and teaching methodology. Translation has become a large-scale activity in this world of ever increasing language contacts. The growing demand for highly skilled translators called for more academic training. The reason behind this is not only the increasing amount of information to be disseminated and technology to be transferred around the globe, but also the setting up of international and regional organisations where, without the constant involvement of qualified interpreters and translators, no work progress can be achieved. To fill these needs, more translation pedagogists became involved in designing curricula to train professional translators to answer the increasing need. The literature on translating teaching at the beginning of its upsurge, emerged in forms of recommendations and orientations by translators from their own individual experiences to answer immediate needs. Later the discipline became more influenced by various linguistic theories. The literature on translation teaching appeared mostly in translator's journals such as *Babel*, *Meta*, *L'Antenne*, le journal des traducteurs; language journals and periodicals such as the *English Language Teaching Journal* and the incorporated *Linguist*. Some of the material was edited in books such as:

1. **L'enseignement de l'interprétation et de la traduction : de la théorie à la pédagogie**, 1981 edited by Delisle, J. Ottawa. The book contains major works on the teaching of translation and interpretation realised between 1971 and 1981 in Canada.

2. **La traduction: de la théorie à la didactique**, 1984 edited by Ballard, M. Université de Lille.

Some papers were directly communicated to participants in conferences held by the F.I.T. (Federation Internationale des Traducteurs; International Federation of translators). On the 8th Congress of the F.I.T. held in Montreal in 1977 six papers were presented.

Given the fact that translation teaching is still in its infancy, it is not surprising to find that arguments which surround the discipline are almost contradictory. The main issues which are argued over and over included the following:

1. The desirability or legitimacy of formal academic training of translators: some writers argue that a formal academic training is the only way to form a translator. Others argue that translating competence cannot be effectively taught; it is an inborn quality, therefore translators are born not made.
2. Requirements of the trainees and the procedures for their admission to a translation course. Some pedagogists insist on the personal qualities of the prospective trainees. Others give admission to their candidates on the basis of tests.
3. The qualification and qualities required of translation teachers; their training, experience and competence.
4. The content of the teaching programme. There are considerable differences in opinion with regard to the selection of the teaching material. Among the most controversial subjects are the teaching of translation theories, the history of translation and linguistics.
5. The practical training; whether it should be conducted in workshops or in an institution.

The increasing amount of material published in the last few years reflects some genuine feeling of concern shared by many translation pedagogists to develop a solid and sophisticated pedagogical framework to cater for this discipline.

## 2/ THE ACADEMIC TRAINING OF TRANSLATORS

One generation of translators tend to relegate the good works of a translator to his or her inborn qualities or natural circumstances. If, for instance, a bilingual by birth is exposed to translation, he/ she will be the one to do the job at its best, since he/she not only had a long practice of the two languages, but also a direct contact of the two cultures. Similarly it was also claimed that persons who stayed for a long time abroad and acquired a good deal of practice in their foreign language can become outstanding translators. Nida seems to agree on this principle. Having given an account of this type of translator he concludes:

Having met these men and many others who have become outstanding translators and interpreters, I have been forced to conclude that in a sense translators are not made, they are born (1979:214).

This type of statement may lead one to believe that a formal training of translators is pointless, since inborn qualities cannot be trained. This is certainly the case in Pillely's opinion as he points out:

It is almost impossible for anyone to interpret simultaneously if he learned his language at a school or university rather than being bilingual by birth or accident of upbringing (1962:70).

Consequently, one can arrive at the conclusion that if an institution wishes to recruit translators, then it should advertise for applicants with these qualities. However, many would claim that there is an element of contradiction in Nida's statement, considering that a decade earlier he published his famous book, « Towards a Science of Translation».

However, Healey rejects this simplistic view that all natural bilinguals are translators as he states:

All natural bilinguals are not translators, nor do they even think in terms of translation from one language to another, but rather in terms of different but equally available dialects (1978:54)

Healey's argument is that one can become a successful translator without necessarily being a bilingual, but to achieve this end one must undergo formal training. However, formal training has not been a condition for some to pursue their careers as professional translators (Schmit, 1966; Citroen, 1966, Cramer, 1973; Weber, 1984). These professional translators claim that they never had a direct training to exercise their profession, nor have they ever felt the need for it. They had access to the profession as a result of various circumstances. Some of them were educated as Linguists and Later developed the skills required for translating. Others were diplomats and their professional experience endowed them with extraordinarily linguistic skills. All in all, as Schmitt put it, they were self-taught.

Although these professional translators have managed to exercise their profession without proper training, nevertheless, when they came to assess their self-learning, they realised that it had its short-coming. Thus Cramer, commenting on his background, acknowledged that most of the preparation for his career was acquired « on-the-job» which he felt was an extremely « primitive» foundation for entry into what purports to be a profession. Further, the exercise of the profession without training can slow the learning process, it can cause the building of bad habits or pitfalls in translated material; as Schmitt explains:

The person who has learnt one or several languages solely through practice is generally inclined to believe that fluency alone guarantees excellence in translation. Unaware of grammatical and syntactic pitfalls, he or

she will blithely step where angels fear to tread and produce translations which, although quite understandable, nevertheless condone and spread the use of barbarisms, seleticisms, anglicisms and the whole gamut of current isms... (1966:124).

The conclusion that these two professional translators reached after a lengthy experience is that a formal academic training is recommended.

It will come as no surprise to the reader that I am of the opinion that translation and interpretation must be taught and taught properly (Weber1984:2).

The necessity of training academically professional translators was largely defended by professionals and educators alike. Citroen, for instance, states that training at a qualified school will provide the student translators and interpreter in a few years time with the basic information they need in the pursuit of their profession (1966:40). Similarly, Gravier also thinks that an academic training for future professional translators is indispensable:

Et je me disais alors qu'une éducation professionnelle était indispensable pour les interprètes, qu'ils travaillent en cabine (interprétation simultanée) ou sans aucun appareillage (Interprétation consécutive). En revanche je me demandais parfois s'il était bien nécessaire de prendre autant de soin de futures traducteurs. Un spécialiste d'anglais ou d'allemand bien formé n'était-il pas capable du jour au lendemain de devenir un bon traducteur? Je dus constater par la suite qu'une telle préparation à la profession de traducteur était dans la plupart des cas tout à fait indispensable (1976:201).

The training, according to Gravier, will enable the students to handle their foreign language with great efficiency and possibly think within this language. This will develop student's ability to identify and assimilate idiomatic uses of that language in a given situation. The learners will also be trained to work under pressure with speed and accuracy, and be able to switch from one topic to another.

In the seventies translation began to gain some recognition as a legitimate profession. The tendency that translating is a gift or an art and therefore cannot be communicated is gradually dying out. According to Citroen, translators of the old generation held this view for fear of being overshadowed by the people entering from the university and for this reason they may have been opposed to formal training (1966:140). However, the situation is changing. The fact that there are a number of universities which train translators, the emergence of material suggesting teaching programmes such as « how to teach translation » (Reiss, 1976) and « A college curriculum for the training of translators and interpreters in the U.S.A. » (Horn, 1966), have led to the negative view that translation cannot be gradually abandoned. The general consensus is in

favour of training. This was largely expressed by a number of professional translators in a article published in *Meta*. The article consists of a questionnaire set up by the editor of *Meta* and sent to eleven professional translators requesting their opinions on the training of their future colleagues. The chief question was: « une certaine formation professionnelle est-elle necessaire au traducteur? » Among the range of answers given were: « indispensable », « requisite », « utile », « necessaire ».

The academic training of professional translators was recommended for two reasons:

1. Access to the profession in a institution.
2. Dissemination of information and transfer of technology.

The need for translation was felt in the aftermath of World War I and further increased in World War II. The establishment of the United Nation Organization, the birth of regional organizations such as the EEC (European Economic Community) and the OAU (Organization of African Unity) meant that a large amount of translation needed to be done. Applicants for admission to either of these institutions are vigorously scrutinised. For instance, candidates for the United Nations were selected mainly among graduates for the University of Geneva (Citroen, 1966: 141). The course offered for translators and interpreters by the school of Modern Languages at Bath University is specially designed to prepare graduates for careers as professional linguists in International Organizations, i.e inter-governmental organizations, The European Community and the like (Coveney, 1971:21). Translators who work for the OAU are mainly graduates from the Universities of Cairo and Algiers. In the USA access to the profession is open almost exclusively to candidates with University degree and graduate training at a recognised school (Weber, 1984:54).

Undoubtedly, the translator's task in an international organization is very delicate. Incompetence and mediocrity are not tolerated. Translators cannot rely on their intuition to execute their job. Therefore training in this respect is only legitimate. Jordan justifies training in this sense by pointing out that the aims of translation teaching should be to show the students that translating requires great power of concentration, lively awareness, disciplined thought and a flair of invention, to help them to cultivate these qualities and to teach careful reading and correct coherent writing in at least two languages, and that the University is the best place for such training (1979:2).

As regards the transfer of technology in the USA for instance, Tinley Jr. reports that the American people never felt the need for language skills or translation because they always enjoyed technological equality or superiority over other nations. However, this traditional attitude was shaken by World War II. It was further jolted by the launching of Sputnik. Consequently the Translator Training Committee of the American Translators Association developed a set of guidelines between 1970 and 1972 for two years under-

graduate training programme. The programme was designed to train undergraduates capable of translating from at least one foreign language into English. In the content of teaching programme priority was given to science and technology (1977:246). At the time, many wouldn't argue that the Americans had failed to keep up with Soviet scientific and technical literature. Consequently the Joint Publication Research Service of the US Government was commissioned to translate several Soviet journals «cover to cover». Furthermore the US Air Force intensified efforts to translate technical Russian into English by computer (Harris, 1983:6).

The idea of setting up courses to train translators for the transfer of science and technology is not a novel one. Rifaat Tahtawi on his return from France, where he studied science and humanities, founded a translation school in Cairo in 1935 where Arabic, French and English were taught. The aim was to introduce French technology and administrative methods (Harris, 1983:10). The Regional Language Centre in South East Asia according to Harris (1983) was set up to train translation teachers for the Countries of the area, namely Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The project was designed to equip these countries with qualified translators who would translate the new technology of the developed world. This justifies his statement:

It follows in general that in Third World regions where there is a shortage of well-qualified technical translators and that includes most of the Third World. And above all the diffusion of new technology from an elite to the masses, requires the setting up of professional translator training programmes (1983:9)

The M.A. course in translation/ interpretation in Kuwait has similar purposes, namely to train translators who would be able to handle scientific and technical material (Kharma, 1984).

Training translators to answer the increasing need of technology transfer was called for by various scholars (Citroen, 1955; Dinjeart, 1985).

### 3/ SELECTION PROCEDURES OF PROSPECTIVE TRAINEES

The necessity of formal training of professional translators raises a number of questions. Some of these are what is the ideal candidate to be trained? Are there any particular criteria or qualities that the trainee should have? What is the educational standard required of the trainee in the selection procedure?

To deal with these issues and set forth basic criteria in the selection of the translator-trainees, translation pedagogists insist on two conditions which are relatively different but complementary. The psychological and the educational. These can be interpreted roughly as follows:

**Psychological** : the mental readiness of the trainee; personality, intelligence, creativity, aptitude to assimilate quickly, etc.

**Educational** : the standard of education of the trainee; general and specific. The former refers to general knowledge (also known as culture generale), the latter to language aptitude.

Given the fact that translation is a complex activity involving code-switching as well as a major responsibility in the transmission of ideas, which demands a considerable power of concentration, there is a large emphasis on the psychological predisposition of the trainee as Michelet explains:

Pour la traduction, comme pour tous les metiers difficiles, elle ne donne des résultats que sur la base de certaines qualités innées, et de certaines autres acquises dans les premières années de l'éveil de l'esprit. Les qualités sont évidemment l'intelligence ou plus exactement la faculté d'appréhension, une souplesse de l'esprit, une certaine intuition et cette aptitude à s'exprimer de façon claire, logique et correcte que l'on appelle un bon style (1958:166).

M. Gravier, who was the Head of « l'Ecole Supérieure d'Interpretes et de Traducteurs de l'Université de la Sorbonne », does not seem to allow much room for mediocrity in the selection of his trainees:

Quels sont les dons que l'on devrait deceler chez un futur traducteur? D'abord il faut qu'il soit intelligent, qu'il possède une grande rectitude logique et beaucoup de sens psychologique, qu'il ne s'enferme pas en lui-même et sache suivre le raisonnement d'autrui (1976:209).

Weber also referred to the trainee's ability to convey other people's thoughts. He states that they should be able to do so with their sense of creativity:

Although they never express their own ideas in their own work, future translators must be exceptionally creative in their native language in order to be able to convey the message contained in the original text in the most accurate and understandable, yet elegant, way possible (1984:4).

Although the ability to express other people's ideas is what is expected of a translator, aren't all the other psychological criteria such as intelligence and comprehension

ability necessary for the undertaking of any profession? Furthermore, how can these mental predispositions be measured?

On the other hand, the professional translators consulted by the Editor of Meta think that aptitudes such as: « de la souplesse », « l'objectivité », « une certaine mémoire », « de l'imagination », de la curiosité », « du tact », « le sens critique », « du pragmatisme », ought to be developed in the course of the training.

As regards language aptitude, translation pedagogists are more specific. Gravier opts for a test-selection-procedure. The test consists of identifying the students' standards of their native and foreign languages. In the USA, according to Horn, it is sufficient for a student who graduates from a secondary school with an «A» or «B» in their native language and at least one foreign language to gain admission to a translation course (1966:147). On the other hand, Weber puts the emphasis on the native language as he explains:

It would be fair to say that only students who receive straight «A» in their native language courses can aspire the degree of perfection needed by a translator (1984:4).

Admission of candidates to translation courses was the topic of a major study conducted by Jacqueline Bosse-Andrieu (1981). The study is a comparison of conditions of admission of candidates to the European and Canadian schools. Her findings indicate that there is no uniformity in the conditions of admission set forth by these schools. In Belgium, for instance, no test is required for admission to the «Institut supérieur de l'Etat de Traduction et d'Interprétation de Bruxelles». The only requirement is a degree which enables a student to register with a university. Nevertheless, the selection process takes place during the course of training. On the other hand, admission to «L'Ecole de Traduction et d'Interprétation de Genève» is subject to a test. Admission to «L'Université Concordia de Montreal» and «L'Université du Québec à trois Rivières» is open to any student who can register with a University. Other universities, such as «L'Université Laurentienne de Sudbury» and «L'Université de Montréal» select only students who obtained an average of 60% in French and English in their final year of secondary school (1981:165).

All in all, there are not only disparities in selection procedures but also in standard requirements. Some universities take graduates from secondary schools. Others take them only after they have completed their undergraduate studies. In the former instance, the argument is that the trainees should be prepared for their careers as early as possible. The training should concentrate on this objective. Consequently language studies, translation studies and general studies should go hand in hand. The three should be complementary to one another (Weber, 1984). In the latter, translation courses are not language courses (Gravier, 1976; Coveny, 1971).

A further examination of the two cases would reveal that courses for secondary school graduates last usually four years. The length of time is justifiable to shape the students' training. In the second case courses are in the order of one to two years. It might be argued that the length of time is not sufficient to conduct a specialized training programme.

#### 4 - APTITUDES FOR TEACHERS

Writers have emphasized on many aspects of translation teaching directly to the trainees and the teaching programmes, but excluded their views on the teachers' aptitudes. Very few of them have dealt with this topic. They claim that translation should be taught by people who exercised the profession (Gravier, 1976; Weber, 1984).

According to Gravier, translation teachers are recruited on the basis of their experience as professional translators in international organizations (1976: 209). Similarly, Weber claims that « only the very experienced translators can instruct students » (1984:6). This seems rather ideal and simplistic too. It is not known how many professional translators would be prepared to give up their positions to take up teaching. This problem is appreciated by Keiser who points out that « there are quite a number of schools pretending to train translators and interpreters where there is not one conference interpreter among the faculty, and where most if not all the teachers have never been in an international conference » (1978:13). On the other hand, Wilss is rather specific in defining the competence required of a translation teacher:

1. a comprehensive transfer competence.
2. an awareness of source language/ target language surface divergencies.
3. an interest in translation teaching problems.
4. the ability to adapt learning theories to the field of translation teaching.
5. the ability to develop translational achievement tests for controlling the translational learning progress (Wilss, 1982:183).

#### CONCLUSION

Globally, the scientific training of translators and Interpreters is gaining wide recognition and awareness. The long-time held traditional view that translators are born and only those endowed with inborn qualities can undertake translation work, is gradually abandoned to make way for more scientifico-linguistic based programmes. The staff of

the Institute of Translation and Interpretation of the University of Algiers have undertaken a comprehensive review of the four year training curriculum. In addition to language reinforcement, translation methodology, comparative stylistics in the first two years; two more credits have been introduced; computing and communication science. The aim is to adapt the syllabus to the new technological requirements.

The proceedings of the E.S.I.T conference in June 1996<sup>(1)</sup> confirm the scientific awareness as they are set to prepare professional translators for the year 2000. Papers such as «terminologie et traduction» and «quels outils pour le traducteur?», which would probably examine the usefulness of computing as a vital component of the training to catch up with the new scientific requirements, are revealing of the necessity of some pedagogists to set translator-training on scientific basis.

(1) This paper was prepared for publication in may 1996. The ESIT (Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes-Traducteurs de la Sorbonne Nouvelle) is to take place on the 6,7, and 8 June 1996.

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