

## The Impact of Culture on Translation in ESP Context

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### **Abstract:** (

The English language is a global force that has gained an undeniable prevalent status. With the increasing necessity to use English for all aspects of people's everyday lives, a new approach emerged known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As a distinctive discipline, ESP emphasises learners with specific functional purposes, i.e., ESP appeared as a focal point for applying English to various scopes such as Science and Technology. As ESP in Algeria has increasingly gained recognition during the last few years, some Algerian educational establishments are incorporating ESP, including the University of Tlemcen –Department of Biology. In this department, students are supposed to translate scientific articles from English to French and vice versa without being aware of the impact of culture on language transfer, first from Arabic to French and then to English.

**Keywords:** ESP; EST; L1; Translation; Cultural Awareness;

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The English language has achieved global status. Many countries give English a specific role in their communities. Some of these countries, particularly in post-colonial contexts, give English the status of an official language (e.g. Nigeria, Singapore etc.). Other countries assign a priority role to English, where it is taught as a second or a foreign language. Graddol (1996) indicates that a quarter of the world's population is fluent or competent in English, and no other language in the world today can catch the growing spread of the English language.

Therefore, the global power of the English language is related to the historical, political, cultural, socio-economic and technological dominance of England and the United States. Other languages throughout history, such as Greek, Arabic, Spanish, and many others, have held similar positions as world languages of commerce and scholarship.

World English can be argued to be shaped through linguistic imperialism, where the spread of English is viewed as language imposition (Philipson, 1992). However, learning English can also be seen as an investment. The technological revolution in today's digital world and how people use the Internet have made English a global medium of communication. The revolution in communication extends cultural interaction between people beyond their local speech communities (Warschauer, 1999). Three-quarters of the world's emails are currently in English, and 90% of the materials on the Internet are in English (Crystal, 2003).

Resistance to English cannot stop the spread of the English language simply because alternative solutions such as translation are expensive and impractical. Many countries thus believe that learning another language is a source of development. Choosing a foreign language to be taught in schools depends on what people would gain from this investment. For example, in 1996, Algeria, a former French colony, replaced French with English as the dominant foreign language in schools reflecting the demand for English as a

key development. The degree of L2 learning reflects the degree of investment (Norton, 1995).

The bilingual standpoint enables L2 learners to contribute different aspects from their L1 to the English language, leading to the use of English as a *lingua franca*. The requirement of such a worldwide lingua franca is due to the spread of globalisation and the need for individuals to communicate and interact in different contexts. The necessity to use English in various disciplines, a new approach emerged, known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

## **2. Definition of English for Specific Purposes**

The importance of English has expanded the field of teaching. Hence, it became a paramount necessity to apply English in all educational systems, especially the university level. Consequently, there was a great demand for English language courses designed to meet the needs and shortcomings of various universities. Majors (social sciences, biology, medicine, etc.), as Basturkmen (2006:18), claims that: "in ESP, language is learned, not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education to smooth the path to linguistic efficiency in academic, professional or workplace environments". This goal-oriented approach is achieved via teaching a particular type of English known as English for Specific Purposes or, for short (ESP).

It is not an easy task to produce a straightforward definition of ESP, but many investigators attempted to draw up several comprehensive definitions relevant to the ESP context. For Hutchison and Waters (1987:19): "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning."

The notion of ESP was clearly defined by Hyland (2002:385) as below: "ESP's distinctive approach to language teaching is based on the identification of the specific language features, discourse practices and communicative skills of target situation, also on teaching practices that recognise the particular subject-matter needs and expertise of the learner." It

means that language is used to achieve specific functional purposes; hence, the most crucial aspect of language is not the language itself but communication.

### **3. Cultural Awareness in ESP Classrooms through Translation**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, English has become the *lingua franca* for medical research, which gave birth to a new approach in ELT, **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**. The ESP approach originated to fulfil the demand of many learners worldwide who needed to learn English to access science, technology and economical resources.

For most of its history, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been dominated by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and by the subspecialty English for Science and Technology (EST) (Swales, 1988). EAP continues to dominate internationally (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1993). EAP and ESP are now called International Scientific English (ISE). If English is seen as ISE, it forms part of science and is an integral part of "becoming a scientist" nowadays (Wood, 2001).

When starting preparation for teaching an ESP course, the first question is usually: What do students need to do with English? Which of the skills do they need to master, and how well? Which genres do they need to master for comprehension or production purposes? (Dudley-Evans 2001: 131). Starting from the basic rules, ESP looks at learners' needs and refutes the idea historically present in the field that ESP is essentially "Acultural" (Bower, 1992). While language and culture are generally intimately linked, English for Specific Purposes has typically been seen as "Acultural".

However, English learning does not merely mean memorising the grammatical formations and accumulating lexical items. The inseparability of the language and cultures makes the English learning process acknowledge and accepting toward the English cultural features and elements. This paper attempts to show how cultural awareness can influence translation techniques within ESP classrooms among Algerian learners.

The research was conducted in Biology Department in 2008 on the learners' needs and aimed at determining the language skills necessary for their studies and future careers. The English language Not to spread British or American social and cultural values but as a natural link within multi-cultural, multi-lingual societies as a vehicle for international communication, as a global carrier wave for news, information, entertainment and administration, and as the language in which (had) taken place the genesis of the second industrial and scientific revolution. (Attributed to Strevens (1977:89) in Master and Brighton 1998: vii). Graduate students at the University of Tlemcen within the Department of Biology usually recur to translation to understand written documents concerning their different fields of study since they are expected to use recent articles and attend international conferences. (Haddam, 2008)

The study reveals that translation is among their top priorities since they are expected to translate scientific articles from French to English and attend international conferences. However, abandoning the native tongue is too stressful for many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language. Translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity, and flexibility (Ross, 2000:61).

Therefore, the use of the mother tongue and translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills. Some learners need to be able to relate lexis and structures in the target language to equivalents in their mother tongue. It also allows them to compare similarities and contrast differences. Some learners need the security of the mother tongue when learning a target language. Despite the resistance to translation amongst certain teachers, it is now crucial among ESP learners. Usually, learners of English for a specific purpose rely most on translation.

It can help the biology students to understand the ambiguity and meaning of words since the exact meaning is not always immediately perceived, even to the L2 learners who 'know' the word. Research conducted in this department shows that the impact of English/Arabic (and French) translation supports the thesis that the need for translation is on the

rise. Furthermore, as Wallraff (2000:2) put it, "We monolingual English speakers may never be able to communicate fluently with everyone everywhere...we may well need help from something other than English". In other words, translation seems to be the solution.

Wiersema (2003:4) reports that...because of the current trend of globalisation, the translator no longer has the absolute need always to find a translation of a term in the target language if this could make the target-language text lose credibility. These translations contribute to a better and more correct understanding of the source culture. He concludes, "In our globalised world, translation is the key to understanding and learning foreign cultures... and that globalisation decreases the element of foreignness in translation" (p. 6).

This interference between Arabic and French in translating scientific articles written in English leads to mistranslation since postgraduate students in the biology department include translation as a core component. In most translation classes, the "read and translate" strategy (Davies, 2004) is the most common event. Most translation courses are taught by teachers majoring in TEFL and with minimal knowledge of translation theories. Davies (2004) suggests that the "read and translate" directive to teach translation is obsolete and unproductive... in teaching a foreign language (p.3). Several authors and researchers in the field have written about the role of translation theories; Davies is one of them.

### **3.1 Davies' Description of Translation Theories**

Besides teaching the theories, the translation practices that took place were based on Davies' (2004) description of a student and learning-centred context that focuses on collaborative study and exploration of the translation process with the teacher acting as a guide. In this research, the students practised translating in groups and consulted with one another within the groups while the teacher was available to exchange views among the groups. It was done to maintain the student-centred context mentioned above. The texts chosen for translation practice in the classes reflected the

points highlighted by the theories.

Teaching cultural theories to undergraduate students in the experimental group, raising cultural awareness of cultural references. In the text, helping them transfer these references to the target language was done in the class, as Davies (2004) suggested, since cultural immersion may take longer to achieve than linguistic competence (p.86).

Davies, citing Duff (1981), suggests that a course that includes explicit teaching should be designed at two levels:

- 1) The pedagogical, where the teacher makes sure that a wide range of cultural issues will be dealt with in an organised and graded way, and
- 2) The professional, where the students are made aware of the issue of subjectivity and of the different strategies they can use to transfer cultural references (p.86)

It can be included that:

- Raising students' awareness of the importance of context to understand the associations behind a cultural reference should be emphasised in the class (p.94)
- Exploring different translations of the exact text
- Exploring degrees of intersections between languages and how cultural bridges may be built and differences highlighted, not eliminated, should be brought to their attention.
- Reflecting on the danger of literal translation should also be emphasised
- Showing students examples of mistranslations and what has gone wrong, and why
- Awareness-raising: the students receive a brief text with cultural references as an assignment to be discussed during the session
- In orientation activities; the students write a draft translation of a chosen extract and underline the problems directly related to cultural references

- In pairs in groups, students deverbalise and interpret the meaning of the mistranslation and then back-translated to agree on the probable original message and the reasons for the mistranslation (syntactic, lexical, cultural, etc.) and rewrite

correctly. This way, students can be aware of interferences that can help them not to fall into the same traps.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

It is generally accepted that language transfer or cross-linguistic influence does occur. However, it is a far more complex phenomenon than hitherto believed (Benson 2002:68). Transfer can be positive and facilitative, where the two languages are identical, or negative when there are significant differences between them. A transfer may occur at all levels: phonology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. Raising learners' consciousness can be valuable: teachers can explicitly point out differences between L1 and L2. For this purpose, translation may be helpful because it can be interactive, learner-centred, promotes learners' autonomy, and uses authentic materials (Mahmoud, 2006:30). With ESP learners, we have used several beneficial activities for their linguistic development. Post-reading activities allow students to review, summarise, and react to reading material through small or large-group discussions.

It also sheds light on the positive effects of incorporating teaching cultural translation theories on translation quality in our universities in general and in ESP classrooms in particular. The most beneficial activity has been the back-translation class activity. Selected texts for re-translation should not be too long, too linguistically complex, or too distant from the student's knowledge. Students in pairs translated different short passages from L2 into L1. Then pairs exchanged translations, and different pairs translated the peers' passages into L2. Finally, the double translations of L2 → L1 → L2 were examined and compared with the original texts. The



ultimate analysis of re-translated texts by students and teachers' feedback allows for improving learners' awareness of vocabulary, grammar, style, and language transfer.

Most educational policymakers, as well as curriculum and textbook designers, were supportive of the move. They believe that students in their different areas of specialisation need a different recipe of English to meet their academic and professional needs. Students should acquire the particular terminology, register and jargon characteristic of their respective field of study.

To this end, Sysoyev (2001) argues that with the spread of the student-centred approach and the continued increase of international contacts in various spheres, much attention has been paid to the design of ESP courses that can prepare students for professional communication (p.4). Advances in the scientific, technological, economic, and cultural fields occur in world-leading industrial countries, some of which are in the non-English speaking hemisphere, such as China, Japan, Germany, France, Morocco, and Algeria. Regarding the effect of globalisation on today's translation, Wiersema (2003) reports that...because of the current trend of globalisation, the translator no longer has the absolute need always to find a translation of a term in the target language if this could make the target-language text lose credibility. These translations contribute to a better and more correct understanding of the source culture (p.4). He concludes, "in our globalised world, translation is the key to understanding and learning foreign cultures... and that globalisation decreases the element of foreignness in translation" (p. 6).

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