Abstract

Translators need good reading skills, but first-year translation students often demonstrate only basic reading literacy which often results in inaccurate interpretation of the source text and a divergent message in the target text, often strongly influenced by the prevailing opinion in the target culture and/or by the translator’s personal opinion. We tested first-year and third-year students in their reading literacy in the source language (English), their ability to summarize what they read and to translate the text into the target language (Slovenian). The results show that the freshmen’s basic reading skills are satisfactory, but more advanced reading skills, such as interpretative and creative reading, present problems, which result in deficient summaries in the target language. In addition, the students’ creative reading is negatively affected by insufficient general knowledge and, surprisingly, their (or their culture’s) ideological point of view. The ability of the third-year students to understand and re-write a text in the target language was much improved, but the ideological influence was still there, especially in the parts of the text that were difficult, or close to the students’ personal experience.

1. Introduction

Good reading skills are very important for translators since it is impossible to successfully transfer a text from one language to another unless one reads it thoroughly in the source language (SL). If the translator fails to read the text
thoroughly or fails to understand it properly, readers of the translation may receive an impression that is quite different from the impression received by the readers of the source text (ST). Target text (TT) readers will not be aware of those changes since they do not have access to the ST, but depend completely on the reading and interpretation skills of translators as “privileged readers” of the SL text. “Unlike the ordinary ST and TT reader, the translator reads in order to produce, decodes in order to re-encode” (Hatim & Mason 1990: 224). There is, however, no evidence that reading as a part of the translation process differs from reading for other purposes (Shreve et al. 1993: 35).

In our teaching work, we noticed that students of translation lack reading skills when they enter the university after successfully graduating from upper-secondary school, and therefore we decided to investigate the problem.

As students choose to study translation, it might be expected that their attitude towards language and reading is positive, and that they have proven highly literate in primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, when correcting students’ attempts to understand and rewrite English texts in their mother tongue, whether as summaries or (in the second year and above) as translations, we have noticed indications of deficient reading skills. One such indication is students’ over-reliance on monolingual and especially bilingual dictionaries for looking up single words and phrases as they appear in the text, instead of reading the text as a whole and relying on their personal judgement to determine the meaning of the sentences from the context and from their knowledge of the topic.

Pečjak (1993: 56-60) divides reading comprehension into three levels. On the “basic” level, the reader reads and understands individual words, but this does not by itself enable understanding of the whole text. On the second level, the so-called “interpretative” comprehension, the reader is able to understand the core of the text and the relations between its parts, and to draw conclusions about how the events and points of view are interlinked. The highest, “creative” level of comprehension is the ability to recreate the text in another form, or to summarize it. The weaknesses in reading skills shown by the students lie above all in their inability to see and understand the text as a whole, which in turn influences their choices on the microtextual level.

The aim of the study was therefore to find out whether a systematic investigation of our students’ work would bear out the impression of deficient reading skills formed from anecdotal evidence. However, there also emerged an intriguing ideologica dimension of the problem.

The texts we used for testing reading literacy in the first year inadvertently contained political issues. Interestingly, it turned out that the students regularly left out information from their rewritten text (summary or translation) that was in disagreement with the prevailing public opinion or ideology.

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1 In Slovenian education system, a gimnazija or upper-secondary school (henceforth referred to as secondary school) is a school for students between the ages of 15 to 19. After finishing gimnazija one must pass an obligatory exam, the matura, to have one’s education formally recognised and become eligible to enrol at colleges and universities.
Hatim and Mason (1997: 218) define ideology as “a body of assumptions which reflects the beliefs and interests of an individual, a group of individuals, a social institution, etc., and which ultimately finds expression in language.” Accordingly, “prejudices, stereotypes or prevalent negative stories about the Others in everyday conversations, news reports, political and corporate reports or educational materials [...] private and public text and talk, express [...] ‘underlying’ social cognitions of many in-group members” (Van Dijk 1996: 15-16).

In the translation process the translator tries to grasp the author’s ideas and then convey them in the target language (TL). When SL texts contain references to ideological notions, the translator may interpret them according to his/her ideological orientation and in the process of translating or summarizing, consciously or unknowingly, may make ideological choices. As the processors of the text, translators filter the text world of the ST through their worldview/ideology, “feeding their own knowledge and beliefs into the processing of the text” (Hatim & Mason 1997:, 147), thus preventing the author’s personal ideology or his/her culture’s ideology from being transferred intact to the TL readers.

Admittedly, translation itself is an ideological activity as the translator always acts in a social context and is part of that context (Hatim & Mason 1997). Confronted with the possibility to either ‘foreignize’ or ‘domesticate’ the translation – preserving the foreign values of the source text culture or assimilating them for the target language readers, respectively – the translator inevitably makes an ideological choice, thus disrupting or reinforcing dominant cultural codes. (Venuti 1995). “Ideology can influence the translator’s style and choice of words that will, consequently, shape the receivers’ worldviews” (Al-Mohannadi 2008: 529). Therefore, it seems of utmost importance for students of translation, as future translators, to be aware of this problem and to learn how to approach it responsibly and objectively, avoiding the possible ideological bias.

2. Method

We ran the study over three academic years (2007-2010). In the first year, we tested reading literacy with an exercise already familiar to the students, who were all students on the BA programme of Interlingual Communication at the University of Ljubljana, taking a class called Interlingual Communication from English into Slovene. Under this programme, first-year students do not yet translate; instead, the first year is dedicated to acquiring skills such as reading and understanding texts in English, and rewriting those texts in Slovene. The course is divided in two parts: the first part of the semester is spent summarizing English and Slovene texts in the same language; in the second part, they start to rewrite English texts in Slovene and vice versa.

In our test, students had to read an English-language text, answer a questionnaire about it, and write a 90-word summary in Slovene. The students did not use dictionaries or any other translation tools. The test was taken,
anonymously, by 62 first-year students. For purposes of quantitative analysis, four test scores were discarded because the students came from secondary schools abroad, which strongly affected their performance in Slovene. These papers were, however, included in the qualitative analysis.

The text they worked with was “Small islands’ migration drama” (Bailey 2006), dealing with the problem of illegal immigrants from Africa landing on the Spanish island of Tenerife in small boats, and how this affects the inhabitants of the island as well as the tourists. The text was chosen randomly, not because of the political issues it contained. In the questionnaire students were asked to provide answers that showed their ability to find and connect facts and their understanding of parts of the text on the micro-textual level, and to summarize the gist of the text in one sentence. This part of the test was not graded at all.

When assessing the summaries, our focus was on categories where students’ reading literacy was most obvious; namely summarizing the gist of the text (retaining those facts that are crucial for the informative value of the text, avoiding additions of facts that are not present in the ST); interpretative comprehension (logical structuring of text elements, use of extratextual and general knowledge); connecting of individual sections of the text and comprehension of the text as a whole. Each summary was then assigned a score on a scale from 5 to 10 according to the grading criteria we usually use in this subject (passing grades are 6 or above).

Because of the surprising influence of ideology on reading and rewriting, in 2008, we started a follow-up study on third-year students which ran two years, i.e. until 2010. About 95 students participated, some of whom had also taken part in the first-year study. This time, we intentionally chose a text that dealt with immigration, namely, with the success of first- and second-generation immigrants in school. Students filled in a questionnaire about their views on the integration of immigrants, as well as some questions about the text which tested their comprehension. They summarized the text twice (in one sentence and in 100 words), and then translated this same text. The questionnaire and the summaries were written in class, and the students did not use any translation tools. The translation was done as homework, they had about two weeks to do it, they were allowed any translation tool they could think of, and the translations were marked later on, according to the usual criteria used for marking of translation homework.

The results were then analyzed for each part of the task individually. We studied their opinions on the topic, and their lexical solutions and/or mistakes in the summaries and translations. Afterwards, we compared both sets of results to see whether their opinion on the matter in any way influenced their performance as rewriters. Any observations on grammar, syntax, style etc. were excluded from the study. We concentrated only on the lexical meaning of the words and expressions used.

The one-sentence summaries were assessed as to whether they reflected the balance of the information provided in the ST. The 100-word summaries were analyzed for their correlation with the students’ expressed opinions about (1) whether the responsibility for the integration of the immigrants lies primarily
with the immigrants themselves or with the hosts, (2) historical facts about former Yugoslavia, and (3) children and teenagers in school environment, and compared with what they wrote in the questionnaire.

In the translation analysis, we chose a few points in the text where the majority of lexical shifts occurred. Then we categorized those shifts according to their ideological bias.

3. Findings
3.1 Interpretative comprehension of the text

Interpretative comprehension of the text was measured by the questionnaire answers as well as by the summaries, and the results were the same in both cases: what was left out in the individual answers was not present in the summary either.

3.1.1 Accuracy in fact reproduction: omissions, additions

In the first year, accuracy in fact reproduction was clearly affected by the students’ extra-textual interests and knowledge. Many of the factual mistakes found in the summaries seem to result from a lack of general knowledge about society and politics. One such group of mistakes stemmed from ignorance as to what role the EU plays with regard to illegal immigration. If they mentioned the EU at all, they wrote about it very vaguely, saying that “it ought to help”, or repeating the locals’ statement as quoted in the article that “we are all Europeans now” without explaining why that should matter and what the EU was supposed to do. Some participants were not clear about the geographical location of Tenerife or even Spain (one student wrote that the Africans were landing on American islands, after sailing across the Atlantic for ten days). Most students mentioned the Canary Islands, but only one student mentioned Tenerife, the place the article is about. Many students claimed that the problem is that the island is too small for so many people, though no such claim is made in the text.

Many of the changes we found amount to what we call the “solidarity blind spot”. They changed the informativeness of the TT by omitting those parts of the ST that could trigger a positive reaction to the immigrants and an understanding of their difficult situation in the reader. The majority of the students thus emphasized the economic reasons for the immigrants’ arrival, while only a few mentioned war and violence in their home countries. Much space was devoted to how they got there, and to suspicions that they looked too healthy to have come all the way in small boats, whereas only a few mentioned that many people arrived ill, dying or dead. The same trend can be seen in their descriptions of the reactions of the locals and tourists.

In the ST ignorance, fear, and irritation were mentioned, but also compassion, which was not mentioned in the large majority of the summaries. The students’ interpretations of the text evince an ideological bias that possibly reflects public
attitudes to foreigners and immigration in the contemporary Slovene and society.

Additions of information not found in the ST similarly tended to make the problem of illegal immigration appear a more serious issue for the local community than the text warranted. One student claimed that the boats started coming “five years ago”, which was not mentioned in the text; another wrote that refugees had always come to the island, but recently, their numbers increased. One student also claimed that the locals were paying higher taxes because of the refugees, while the article stated only that they feared higher taxes in the future.

3.1.2 Ability to connect the data and to draw conclusions

The summaries and questionnaire answers show that the students are able to connect the data if they stand close together in the text, but have problems finding and connecting data that are scattered around the text. Also, when the data seem to be too peculiar for their experience with the world, they tend to be left out or changed to something more in line with the students’ expectations. Nobody mentioned, for example, that the locals suspected the central (Spanish) authorities of secretly supporting immigration in order to obtain cheap labour, which was one of the theories quoted in the article. Cheap workers got a mention in the summaries only as one of the reasons for the locals’ lacking enthusiasm about immigrants.

3.2 Ability to rewrite the text creatively

The students’ ability to rewrite the text in a creative manner, the third and highest level of reading comprehension, was tested by means of summaries of the English text written in Slovene.

As we have already mentioned, summaries in many cases show the same weaknesses we found in the answers to the questions. Much of the reading seems to have taken place only on the basic level, from one word or expression to another. Students were less successful in connecting different parts of the text. The few students who mentioned the reaction of the tourists at all, for example, only mentioned the two elements that stood close together in the text (curiosity, ignorance to what was happening), while a third kind of reaction mentioned elsewhere in the text (desire to help) only appears in three summaries. Other information scattered around the text receives the same treatment.

That students tend to read on the basic level is also clear from the fact that they frequently fall into translating word by word instead of summarizing (even though they are generally discouraged from translating in the first year, and specifically told not to do so in the instructions for summaries). The directly translated parts of the text not only stand out from the rest in terms of style, but
also waste valuable space that could be used to convey more information within the 100-word limit.

4. The follow-up experiment

The results of the first-year experiment indicated that public and students’ personal opinion strongly influences the way they read, interpret, and rewrite the ST in the TL. This is problematic since the target audience depends on the translator’s interpretation of the text, and can receive a message that is quite different from the original if this influence on professional translators is as strong as it proved with the fledgling translators in our study. Therefore, we decided to follow up the experiment when the participants of the first experiment were in the third and final year of their BA course. We did so by using another text on immigration – this time on how immigrant children from different countries do at schools in different host countries (Economist 2008). The article clearly implied that the school system in each individual country has a significant influence on the success of the immigrant children. Again, students had to answer a questionnaire, this time more directly eliciting their personal views on the subject (“What in your opinion affects the success of first- and second-generation immigrants in school?”), and to summarize the text in one sentence and in 90 words (in the TL). This time, they also had to translate the ST into the TL. By that time the participants had been working with texts for over two years, reading, writing, rewriting, and eventually translating them.

The results showed that the students had learned the rules and conventions of the text type, that their general knowledge had grown, and also that their reading and rewriting skills had improved. This time, the only noteworthy changes in information content between the STs and the summaries were those that carried some ideological charge, and even then, the influence of the public/official/personal opinions was weaker.

4.1 Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to elicit the students’ opinions on the topic of integration of immigrants into the host society. Public and official opinion on the subject in Slovenia, as expressed in discussion forums on the Internet, in letters to the editor, in the mass media, in statements by different politicians and, last but not least, in legislation is, generally, that the responsibility for integration lies primarily with the immigrants, and that the host society is not under any obligation to help them. There has only very recently been a shift in the official attitude towards the issue, since in 2011 free language courses for the newcomers started, and the children are also entitled to extra help in school.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the majority of our students think that the responsibility for the successful integration of immigrants into the host society lies solely or primarily with the immigrants.
Apart from this overall opinion on the topic of the text, we also surveyed their opinions and/or knowledge about certain points made in the ST.

The first of those points was the counter-intuitive finding that, according to a study reported in the text, the countries with many immigrants actually did slightly better. A majority of the students reproduced this fact, while some opted for a neutral solution (they reported an influence, not whether it was positive or negative), and a small minority reported a meaning completely opposite to what the article said.

The second point was a claim in the ST that the Soviet Union fell apart before Yugoslavia. While the students believe the opposite was the case, and commented on this in the classroom, in the questionnaire they either repeated the controversial claim as it was written in the article, or (most often) avoided mentioning it altogether. Only three adapted the statement to their general knowledge, while four became completely confused (saying, for example, “the Soviet children went to school for a shorter time” and similar). In this case, then, their conviction did not influence their answers to any great extent.

The last two questions related to the parts of the text that had to do with their experience as students and/or children, and some answers as well as re-written texts show that inter-student solidarity affects their reading of the source-text, as will be shown below.

4.2 Summaries

A little over a third of the short summaries were adequate, but the remaining students wrote either an incomplete summary or no summary at all – and the missing data were precisely the data that conflicted with the expressed opinions of the students.
The summaries varied in where they placed the responsibility for immigrant children’s success in school: solely with the school system, solely with the immigrant and their family, or with both, while five students summarized the text without mentioning the question at all. The way the topic was presented in the summary depended on the personal opinion of the individual writers to various degrees. The group that thought that immigrants were solely responsible for their success expressed this view in their summaries as well, by omitting the information on the influence of the school system. In the other three groups (the majority of the participants), the personal view of the writer had less or no influence on what was included in the summary, or, in one interesting case, a negative influence: this student personally thought the responsibility lay entirely with the immigrants, while in the summary, the whole responsibility was placed on the school system.

Table 2: Opinion expressed in questionnaire

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>mostly immigrants</th>
<th>mostly hosts</th>
<th>both equally</th>
<th>no opinion</th>
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<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mostly hosts</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>both</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>no opinion</td>
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</table>

4.3.3 Translations

The study of the translations concentrated on seven points in the text shown by a preliminary analysis to pose the biggest challenges in terms of ideology and lexical meaning. These points were ideologically charged with regard either to immigrant-host relations, or, interestingly, child-adult relations. We analyzed 12 different cases where these issues come to the fore, and where the most lexical shifts could be found in the translations. The results show some students still produce translations that sometimes agree more with the personal or majority opinion in the target culture than they agree with the STs, although the situation is much better than it is at the beginning of their training. Nearly half the participants produced translations which reproduced the contents of the ST.
without any lexical shifts (whether ideologically or otherwise motivated). The other half, too, seldom lets ST information simply disappear from the TT as complete beginners do.

But even though the information does not disappear, it is often expressed in a way that supports whatever the public or the official opinion about the subject is – sometimes even contrary to the opinion of the translator. There were, however, a few critical points in the text where the official/majority opinion and/or the personal opinion of the translators came to the front. This happened especially if a) the opinion they held was very strong (in our study especially in the parts of the text that dealt with children-adult relations); or b) in the parts of the text that they found technically difficult, whether on the lexical, syntactical, morphological or stylistic level.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that the reading literacy of the first-year students often stops at the basic level of comprehension of different words, phrases or sentences. Students tend to overlook connections between pieces of information that do not appear close together in the text. This frequently results in omissions that change the message of the text. The lack of reading literacy on the interpretative and re-creative level was demonstrated in the answers to the questionnaire as well as the summaries themselves. The answers were often incomplete, and the summaries incoherent, while the gaps were filled with unimportant details or invented additions.

Some of the problems revealed by the test cannot be put down to deficiencies in reading literacy isolated from other skills. First, the test revealed a considerable lack of general knowledge among the participants. The chosen text was of a very general nature and did not require any special knowledge, but many still failed to interpret it adequately because of ignorance of simple geographical facts or of everyday political reality in Europe and Africa. Second, an unexpected finding was the clear ideological bias in the selection of information.

The results of the follow-up study, however, show that even after only three years of experience, the general knowledge had improved, and the influence of personal or public opinion weakened. Most of the time students, and later translators, will probably be able to produce translations that do not differ very much from their ST lexically and ideologically. Still, there remain a few critical points in the text where the translator is particularly vulnerable to the influence of the target ideology and personal opinion: this is when the personal opinion is very strong, or when the text is perceived by the translator as very difficult. Therefore, it is important for the translators to be aware of their own opinions and of those of their culture while they translate, and to check throughout the process of translation that the TT really says what the ST does, and not what the target reader/commissioner/culture wants to hear, nor the personal opinions of the translator.
## Reading literacy test for first-year students of translation/interlingual communication

### General information
1. Sex: M F
2. Age (in years):
3. Name of the secondary school you attended:
4. Secondary school final exam (matura) score:
5. Attitude towards reading:
   a) Do you like reading? (one answer only)
      Yes
      No
      Only if I have to
      I prefer other media (tv, movies, the internet)
      Other
   b) I usually read
      Fiction
      Non-fiction and reference literature
      Newspapers, magazines
      Various texts on the internet
      Other
   c) How often do you read (how many times a week and for how long)?
      Read the article *Small Islands’ migration drama*, answer the questions below and summarize the text in Slovene (the summary should not exceed 90 words).

### Questions
1. Write what the article is about in one sentence.
2. What are “pateras” and “cayucos”?
3. Why doesn’t everybody believe that the refugees really come in boats?
4. Why are they coming?
5. What is the local population’s opinion on the arrival of the refugees?
6. What is the tourists’ reaction to the events?
7. How is the EU involved in the whole affair?

### List of tasks and questions in the questionnaire for third-year students:
1. Summarize the text in one sentence.
2. What do you think influences how first- and second-generation immigrants do at school?
3. Describe how the PISA study is carried out.
4. What are the differences between the immigrants’ success in school in relation to their host country?
5. What, in the author’s opinion, is the reason for different success of former Soviet Union children and former Yugoslav children?
6. What is the relation between the number of immigrants in a country and the country’s success in the PISA study?
7. Write a 100-word summary of the text in Slovene.
References


