Translation studies as academic education

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Abstract

People with the same linguistic competence and background show different translation abilities and performances if subjected to different types of translation education. The paper reports on a study conducted to test this hypothesis. In the study, 20 subjects (the experimental group) were selected homogenously in terms of their general English skills, their educational background, and their familiarity with the practice of translation. They were given a pre-test so as to be evaluated on their language and translational skills, in the four domains of cognition, production, naturalness, and translation techniques. The subjects attended a course during which they became familiar with the basics of translation. A post-test (post-test 1) was administered to the subjects to check their improvement. The results showed that their performance had improved. A new test was administrated, with new (unseen) texts and the results again showed an increase in performance (post-test 2). This final test was given to a new group of subjects (control group) selected using the same criteria as the experimental group. The subjects who had taken a brief translation course (the experimental group) stood head and shoulders above the second (control) group.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Translation is practiced with different levels of performance. The reason for these differences is obvious: the degree of linguistic competence differs in people due to their particular experience of language. Two people with identical language experience (e.g. bilingual twins) may show different translation performances. In such cases, there might be several factors involved, e.g. the level of interest in translation, the mental capacity of different individuals and their inherent linguistic abilities. One aspect, however, has frequently been overlooked in considering differences in translation performance between individuals and that is the role of "academic translation education". The hypothesis examined here is that people with the same linguistic competence and background show different translation abilities and performances if subjected to different types of translation education. A translator is someone who, apart from knowing the target and source language, is aware of the particulars and subtleties of translation. A translator should know the techniques and strategies of translation and be aware of the nature and type of the translation task s/he is carrying out. Knowledge of the purpose and mastery of the subject matter are also essential. Translation education means gaining insight into the nature of languages and cultures and also the knowledge of the proper skills, strategies and techniques to transcode one language into another in the most appropriate way; this is not possible unless one is academically (or through professional experience) educated to be a translator. In this study, it is assumed that translation is more than an intrinsic talent: it can be taught; the improvement in translation performance is directly related to the amount of education and practice one gets; and, finally, this improvement is measurable. The authors do not have the intention to deny the fact that, being an art (as well as an academic subject), translation requires a certain amount of talent, but that applies to half of the definition of translation and its nature as an academic discipline should be a central point of attention.

1.2 Translator training

What skills are needed to enhance translating abilities? And how can one became a good translator? Extensive reading of different translations of different kinds of texts should be taken as the first step because, as Razmjou (2004) states, translating requires active knowledge, while analyzing and evaluating different translations requires passive knowledge. She adds that receptive skills should be developed before the productive ones; i.e. by reinforcing their passive knowledge, students will eventually improve their active knowledge. Receptive skills improve the students' language intuition and make them ready for actual translating. Razmjou (2004) lists other issues that translation students should be informed of: a) the different genres in the source and target languages: genres implicitly transfer culture-specific aspects of a language; b) reading recently published articles and journals on theoretical and practical aspects of translation; c) writing skills: the ability to write fluently and

correctly in both languages; d) language intuition; e) culture, customs, and special settings of the source and target language speakers; f) reference materials (dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the Internet) and learning how to use them; g) the syntax, discourse and various figures of speech of the languages involved; and finally a systematic treatment of translation education.

1.3 Academic training of translators

Academic training should deal with writing skills or cultural sensitivity. Students should carry out much translation homework. The homework should then be analyzed and discussed. Students' errors should be taken seriously and dealt with as collaborative translation revision during class. Translation students should work on the subject field(s) that they have background knowledge of and should develop their knowledge of the specialised domain in which they aim to translate professionally. It is also recommended that the translation be from a foreign language into the student's mother tongue, since professional translators usually translate into their native languages.

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

2.1.1 The "experimental group"

Individuals with no or few comprehension problems in English (upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English) were selected as appropriate subjects for this study. They were all university students from B.A./B.S. programmes with little or no experience in translation. This body formed the experimental group who attended the translation course. They were given a translation test at the beginning of the course and two at the end, to check the rate of improvement in their translation skills.

2.1.2 The "control group"

A second body of 20 subjects was selected, applying the same selection criteria used for the experimental group; the only difference was that this group did not attend the course, but was given the translation test only as control, in order to compare results.

2.2 Test battery

The tests, namely pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2, consisted of a group of texts purposely selected in order to test the subjects on a variety of genres and registers and to see the type of strategies the subjects would adopt when faced with problems that were patent in the genres represented by the chosen texts.

2.3 Procedure

2.3.1 The homogeneity test

The "Oxford Proficiency Test" (O.P.T.) was administered for the purpose of determining homogeneity. It consists of two parts: a "listening test" and a "grammar test" each with 100 multiple-choice questions. Each part of the test takes 30 minutes, totaling 60 minutes, and the maximum score is 200, but 125 to 145 was considered as the acceptable range to make the subjects eligible to take part in the experiment. This range equals 5 to 6 on the IELTS score.

2.3.2 Pre-test

The pre-test consisted of 8 texts of different levels of difficulty, register and styles. Each text presented different problems and therefore different translation strategies to adopt. The texts were chosen so as to be in accordance with the linguistic competence of the subjects.

2.3.3 Content of teaching

The teaching for the experimental group mainly revolved around the most frequent techniques and strategies in translation (cf. Fahrazad 2005, Leonardi 2000, Kenny 1998, Mahmoodzadeh 2004, Manafi Anari 2001, Mollanazar 2003, Sarhadi 2005) so as to raise the awareness of the subjects to translation as a skill with its own technical subtleties and intricacies. Teaching was focused on the following aspects: a) proper use of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries; b) collocation; referential, connotative, and pragmatic meaning; literal versus idiomatic meanings; c) syntactic differences between Persian and English; d) extra-linguistic elements such as time, place, and culture; e) concepts of style, register, and different textual genres; f) theories related to equivalence in translation; g) overt versus covert translation; over-translation and under-translation.

The subjects were also given home assignments to have further practice out of class.

2.3.4 Evaluation procedure

The translations in all the tests were examined and assessed based on an adaptation of the model proposed by Farahzad (1992) in relation to the four domains of "cognition", "production", "naturalness", and "translation techniques". The aspects which were checked in the evaluation of the translation tests are as follows:

1. Cognition:
   a) lexical accuracy in terms of correct recognition of the meaning and function of lexical items

b) syntactic accuracy in terms of correct recognition of structures and tenses and their function
c) the number of illegitimate omissions due to lack of recognition.

2. Production:
   a) lexical accuracy in terms of appropriate choice of equivalents for a lexical item, considering meaning and function
   b) syntactic accuracy, in terms of appropriate rendering of tenses and grammatical structures.

3. Naturalness:
   a) appropriate use of cohesion and coherence
   b) appreciation and application of register and style
   c) the feeling of originality in terms of considerations for Persian fragmentation, socio-cultural elements, time of translation and degree of differentiation (all, if necessary).

4. Translation techniques:
   a) appropriate use of the required type of translation (literal/word-for-word, and free)
   b) appropriate use of shifts and adjustments.

Marking was based on a range of 1 to 5, in which each number would represent, respectively, "very weak", "weak", "acceptable", "good", and "very good".

Table 1 shows the results obtained for one of the subjects.

Texts	Cognition	Production	Naturalness	Translation techniques	Row total
One	2 of 5	2 of 5	3 of 5	1 of 5	8 of 5
Three	4	3	2	2	11
Five	3	3	4	3	13
Seven	4	3	2	4	13
Colum total	20 of 40=50%	18 = 45%	19 = 47.5%	17 = 42.5%	74.160=46.25%

Table 1. The results of pre-test of one of the subjects

The results of all the tests were examined so as to establish comparisons on a longitudinal basis:

1. Each column was compared to see how much progress each subject made in the different four domains.
2. Each row was compared to see how much progress each subject made in different types of texts.

3. The total of all columns for all subjects from the pre-test was compared to the corresponding total in post-test 1 to find out the overall progress of all subjects in different domains.
4. The total of all rows for all subjects from the pre-test was compared to the corresponding total in post-test 1 to find out the overall progress of all subjects in different types of texts.
5. The total of all columns and all rows was compared in both tests for each subject to check total individual progress.
6. The overall total (the total of all columns and all rows) was compared in both tests to check total overall progress.

2.4 Post-test 1

At the end of the course, which comprised twenty two-hour sessions (on over two and a half months), a second test was given to the subjects. The test was in fact the same as the pre-test to which the subjects were exposed at the beginning of the course. The aim of this test was essentially to check the advancement of the subjects in translation performance.

2.5 The results

Table 2 shows how the results in the pre-test compare with those in post-test 1: it reveals the rate of students' improvement in translation in the last row.

In order to simplify the analysis of results we found it better to compare the maximum and minimum scores for each domain and the related rate of improvement (Table 3).

The results are quite convincing in supporting the initial hypothesis. The subjects' improvement in the two domains of cognition and production of English texts were those that changed the least (average = 10%); this is probably due to the the fact that a period of over two months of education with the purpose of teaching translation can not result in drastic changes in language competence as such. The highest scores are associated with improvement in translation techniques (average = 26.25%) and the second highest with improvement in naturalness (average = 17.75%). This is logical, as the focus of the translation course was on basic techniques used in translation. The score for naturalness is understandably lower compared to that for translation techniques because the subjects could not be expected to instantly gain mastery of the culture and subtleties of a foreign language.

2.6 Post-test 2

The previous experiment, however convincing, may raise the question that the texts used in both pre- and post-tests were one and the same, which may have negatively affected the results. Therefore, another test needed to be performed in order to support the results of post-test 1, as doubt could be cast on the

Domain	SUBJECTS																				Average
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	
Cog. 1	20	32	30	28	27	20	26	30	28	18	30	27	20	26	31	19	28	21	30	28	25.95
Cog. 2	24	33	33	32	34	24	30	34	30	30	32	34	25	30	33	24	30	30	34	32	30.4
Prod. 1	18	32	26	26	23	21	26	32	30	20	25	24	21	25	32	18	30	20	32	25	25.3
Prod. 2	28	33	28	31	27	24	32	36	34	30	28	28	22	32	35	26	34	30	36	32	30.3
Nat. 1	19	26	22	27	19	17	18	28	22	17	22	19	17	18	26	18	22	17	28	27	21.45
Nat. 2	23	27	24	34	25	24	24	36	30	26	24	25	24	24	30	22	30	24	32	34	27.1
T.T. 1	17	19	20	19	14	17	18	24	22	18	20	16	17	18	20	17	22	18	24	21	19.05
T.T. 2	26	27	25	32	26	25	28	34	32	26	25	26	25	28	27	25	32	26	34	32	28.05
Pre-test total per person	74	109	98	100	83	75	88	114	102	73	97	86	75	87	109	72	102	76	114	101	
Post-test 1 total per person	101	120	110	129	112	97	114	140	126	112	109	113	96	114	125	97	126	110	136	130	
Pre-test total % per person	46.25	68.18	61.25	62.5	51.88	46.88	55	71.25	63.75	46.63	60.63	53.75	46.88	54.38	68.13	45	63.75	47.5	71.25	63.13	
Post-test 1 % total per person	63.13	75	68.75	80.63	70	60.63	71.25	87.5	78.75	70	68.13	70.63	60	71.25	78.13	60.63	78.75	68.75	85	81.25	
Rate of improv. % per person	16.88	6.78	7.15	18.13	18.12	13.75	16.25	16.25	15	24.37	7.5	16.88	13.12	16.87	10	15.63	15	21.25	13.75	18.12	

Table 2. The results of pre-test and post-test 1

Max. & Min.	pre-test	Post-test 1	Improvement by number	Rate of improvement (%)
Min. Cog.	18 of 40	24 of 40	6	15%
Max. Cog.	32	34	2	5%
Min. Prod.	18	22	4	10%
Max. Prod.	32	36	4	10%
Min. Nat.	17	22	5	12.5%
Max. Nat.	28	36	8	20%
Min. T.T.	14	25	11	27.5%
Max. T.T.	24	34	10	25%
Min. Total	72 of 160	96 of 160	24	15%
Max. Total	114	140	26	16.25%

Table 3. Maximum and minimum scores for each domain

reliability of these results. The third test employed previously unseen source texts. This test was given to both the experimental and control groups, and was named "post-test 2" and "control test" respectively. The results (Table 4) and the average for each domain were obtained in the same manner as for pre-test and post-test 1.

Domain	SUBJECTS																				Average
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	
Cog.	24	33	30	32	32	24	30	36	30	30	32	32	26	30	30	28	30	28	30	30	29.85
Prod.	30	30	30	32	30	24	30	26	32	32	32	28	24	32	34	27	32	30	32	38	30.25
Nat.	25	30	30	30	28	28	28	38	30	26	30	28	28	28	30	25	30	30	34	34	29.5
T.T.	30	27	28	32	28	25	28	36	34	26	28	28	26	27	28	25	32	32	34	32	29.3
Total	109	120	118	126	118	101	116	146	126	114	122	116	104	117	122	105	124	120	130	124	
Rates %	68.13	75	73.75	76.75	73.75	63.13	72.5	91.25	78.75	71.25	76.25	72.5	65	73.13	76.25	65.63	77.5	75	81.25	77.5	

Table 4. The results of post-test 2

This time, in order to simplify the analysis of results, the comparison carried out is based on the average of all the 20 subjects on pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 (Table 5). Although there is a slight decrease for Cognition (2%) in post-test 2 – which could be explained by the fact that subjects had totally new texts to translate – the results can still seem to provide evidence that the subjects who were taught translation improved their overall translation skills.

Domain	Average 20 Subjects		
	Pre-test	Post-test 1	Post-test 2
Cog.	25.95 of 40	30.4 of 40	29.85 of 40
Prod.	25.3	30.3	30.25
N.T.	21.45	27.1	29.5
T.T	19.5	28.05	29.3
Total	96.2 of 160	115.85	118.9

Table 5. The results of pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2

2.7 Control test

As there is a slight possibility that the subjects who attended the course could have done well in post-test 2 without getting any training in the field of translation, another group of 20 students were chosen through O.P.T. and the same post-test 2 was given to them. Table 6 shows the results.

In comparing the results for post-test 2 (Table 4) and those for the control test (Table 6), it is clear that the subjects who were exposed to the translation course performed better in translation-related skills.

Domain	SUBJECTS																				Average
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	
Cog.	20	20	17	23	26	29	21	18	25	22	19	19	20	21	19	21	17	18	20	20	20.8
Prod.	20	20	20	21	24	25	22	18	25	20	21	18	18	18	20	20	2	21	28	19	21
Nat.	20	18	17	20	20	22	20	17	20	19	21	18	18	21	20	18	19	19	24	22	19.7
T.T.	18	18	18	20	19	20	21	18	21	19	18	17	17	20	17	18	19	22	20	21	19

Table 6. The results of Control test

3. Conclusion

In this experiment the aim was to examine the role of formal education in translation performance. The attention was fixed only on general aspects of translation. Therefore, the criteria for evaluating performance were the four broad domains of "cognition", "production", "naturalness", and "translation techniques". Four tests were administrated: Pre-test and post-test 1 (based on the same source texts), post-test 2 (with new source texts), and a control test (with the same texts as in post-test 2 but new group of subjects). The results were satisfactory. Almost all the subjects showed improvement in almost all the domains tested. The subjects clearly showed improvement in both post-tests and also showed superiority in their translation skills compared to the subjects in the control group.

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