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Challenges in Teaching Literary Translation to Undergraduate Students

1. Introduction

In October 2017, Google released Google Pixel Buds, a set of earphones, which, when paired with the right handset and software, are able to simultaneously translate spoken language into the ear of the listener.¹ The Google Translate application is increasingly being used both for private and professional applications, and the results obtained with the use of this machine translation service are surprisingly good. Considering this situation in the translation market, the task of translation trainers becomes today even more challenging, as they not only have to help their students to acquire translation competence, but also to encourage them to understand the importance of the human factor in the translation process, to motivate them and to stimulate their creativity. The challenges include the design of the course, the choice of course materials and activities to be carried out by students. Since no ready-made solutions are provided to translation trainers in this regard for each specific language, the teachers must solve the problems by applying a scientific approach

¹ <https://www.blog.google/products/pixel/pixel-buds/>, visited on October 15, 2017.

involving self-reflection and self-improvement. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of the action research methodology for translator trainers and to present the examples of class activities carried out as part of a literary translation course.

2. Literary translation as an academic course

The course described in this paper, involving translation of literary texts, is taught to undergraduate students of English Philology during their third year of studies. The idea underlying the course might bring up a range of questions, and some of them are apparent even to a person not professionally related to literary translation or translator education, starting with the ever-present dilemma: Is translation an art or a craft? And as a consequence: can it be taught at all? It is not without reason that some translation departments accept only students showing certain predispositions towards literary translation, which is verified, for example, on the basis of a portfolio of completed translations² or the results of an entry test.³ What can pose another type of problem is the general level of the students' education, both as regards their literary background and language skills. A question of a slightly different origin, nevertheless of equal importance, is the issue of preparing students for the labour market, as it seems easier to prepare students to work as commercial or specialised translators than to prepare them to work as literary translators. It should not be forgotten that literary translation plays a relatively minor role within the broadly understood language industry and the translation of literature represents a small share of the entire volume of translated texts, remaining undervalued in comparison to translation of commercial or technical texts [Woodsworth 2002: 129]. At the same time, students must comply with all requirements related to university education, and complete not only practical courses or translation workshops, but also attend other courses which are not always entirely consistent with their expectations, which, in fact are very diverse, since at the undergraduate level students of English Philology are often unsure about their plans for the future.

² <<http://www.unesco.uj.edu.pl/dydaktyka/podyplomowe-studia-dla-tlumaczy-literatury>>, visited on June 15, 2017.

³ <https://ug.edu.pl/33602/translatoryka_-_przeklad_literacki>, visited on September 05, 2017.

Another issue might be related to the formal background of translator trainers, who are often professional translators themselves, but who have not necessarily been educated as translation teachers. They rely on their personal experience, remembering their own learning path. Although professional experience as a translator is usually considered the essential prerequisite to achieve success as a translator trainer (Kelly 2005: 55), the lack of a formal background means that such a teacher must put a lot of effort into the proper design of the course to follow the university regulations.

The official name of the course in question is Translation 3, which means the third course in translation, typically covering translation of literary texts, preceded by a general translation course and a specialised course where students have an opportunity to work with business and legal texts. Translation 3 is offered in the fifth semester of undergraduate studies and is conducted in groups of about 14 students. They have at their disposal a computer lab, with laptops for each student, and typically work online, with activities provided by the teacher via the Moodle e-learning platform. The course ends with an examination. The syllabus and materials are prepared by the teachers themselves, who can follow several approaches that have emerged along with the development of Translation Studies as an academic discipline.

3. Approaches to translation training

The first of those approaches is related to the belief that there is no substitute for practical experience, which provides the foundation for the traditional way of translator training [Kelly 2005: 11; Robinson 2005: 1]. This basically means that in order to learn how to translate, one must translate. This teacher-centred approach assumes that the final target text gets corrected by the teacher, and the students learn from their mistakes. However, this method is not very rewarding for students, who seem to receive only negative feedback, which may be discouraging. Some other approaches to teaching translation, with particular focus on the translation of literary texts that should be mentioned here, include process-centred translation training or the social constructivist approach [Gile 1995; Kiraly 2000], where the focus is not on the final text but on the translation process. The empowerment of students, where translation trainees create knowledge themselves through participation in interpersonal and

intersubjective interaction [Kiraly 2000:4] is claimed to be particularly appropriate for the introductory stages of translation training, as it ensures a faster process in comparison to product orientation [Kelly 2005: 14]. Another approach available for a translator trainer is the concept of translation workshops, modelled upon creative writing workshops and described by Washbourne [2013], where translation is produced in a collaborative process, with the classroom as a community of practice. Literary translation can be also seen as a means to attain other objectives, such as creative problem-solving [González Davies and Scott-Tennent 2005], or students' personal development through exposure to literature, not only as translators, but also as writers [Leach 2015; Sedarat 2017]. Translation tasks, including translation of literature, can be also perceived as conducive to language learning, since it develops three qualities essential to all language learning: flexibility, accuracy and clarity [Duff 1989: 7]. Moreover, it is claimed that one of the most important conditions for learning a foreign language is the opportunity to play with the language, to test and explore its limits, with poetry as the medium in which this can be achieved [Maley and Duff 1989: 9]. Teaching translation results in sensitisation to the most important issues in language – to what is said and “unsaid” in the text, to the metonymic nature of grammar or the relation between image and the word, which is best exemplified in literary texts [Tabakowska 2014: 3-4]. Translation can also be taught by putting emphasis on independent and reflective work of students, who actively participate in the acquisition of knowledge and experience with the application of the action research methodology [Piotrowska 2012, 2013]. All of these points of view on translation pedagogy are oriented towards the benefit of translation trainees. Nevertheless, since, in an academic setting, the teacher as the translation trainer plays an equally important role in the acquisition of translation competence, this study will take the perspective of research into translator trainers' self-improvement.

4. Translator trainers and the research action methodology

Self-reflection and a drive towards self-improvement are features typically ascribed both to professional translators and teachers, who see the process of professional development as continuous and ongoing, and deliberate on practice as the essential condition of expertise [Wallace 1998: 4; Albin 2014: 29]. Translation trainers, since they are usually translators

themselves, are persons oriented towards constant improvement of the results of their work and always ready to learn. Their self-reflective attitude can be structured and organized with the use of an approach that originated in pedagogy and is known as action research, “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention” to address practitioners’ own issues, [Cohen, Manion *et al.* 2011: 345]. Since action research combines diagnosis, action and reflection, it is a perfect tool to be used in professional development. As mentioned in the previous section, the application of action research in translation studies is not a novelty, as it has been described in various studies, typically with the focus on student empowerment or translator development through self-reflective research [Piotrowska 2012, 2013]. However, in this study, the focus is on action research used in translation pedagogy as a means for the trainer’s self-improvement and enhancement of the translation course design.

5. Application of action research by a translation trainer – study design

Action research methodology, believed to be one of the most effective ways to solve professional problems in pedagogy [Wallace 1998: 1], is based on planning, acting, observing and reflecting, all of which is done in a careful, systematic and rigorous manner. It is a “straightforward cycle of: identifying a problem, planning an intervention, implementing the intervention” and “evaluating the outcome” [Cohen, Manion *et al.* 2011: 361]. What is also important, it builds on professional development and it is cyclical and participatory in nature, which means that the participant (or participants) in its process are also researchers. It should be remembered that action research is “not concerned with abstract problems, its main objective lies in solving concrete problems that affect real people” [Cravo and Neves 2007:94]. Particular importance of action research in education has been observed, e.g. by Gabrys-Barker, who claims that “teachers who think of themselves as continuously developing learners become more successful and in the long run can avoid the well-known ‘burn-out’ stage in their career” [2011: 9]. In the case described in this study, the researcher/participant is the translator trainer, who aims at developing and improving the course of literary translation for undergraduate students, therefore the stages of the process include: (I)

Planning: designing a translation course and selecting teaching materials, (II) Acting: running the translation course with students, (III) Observation: monitoring and recording, (IV) Evaluation and reflection: drawing conclusions and implementing necessary changes.

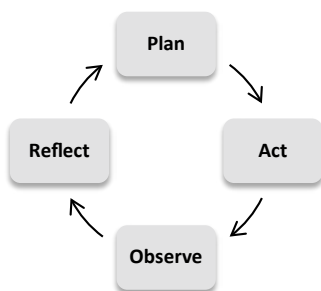


Fig. 1 Action research cycle [adapted from Expansive Education Network]

5.1. Stage I: Planning

The stage of designing the translation course is of the utmost importance, especially at the undergraduate level, as the first translation-related experience “can have a powerful impact on students’ initial translation competence, which will continue to develop as a result of further training and experience” [Chodkiewicz 2014]. The course is planned on the basis of course aims and objectives, including learning outcomes to be achieved at the university level. While establishing the course objectives, especially ones that are formulated in terms of learning outcomes, the focus should be not only on the student’s profile and the teacher’s expertise, but also on the sociocultural and institutional context in which the course is to be offered [Kelly 2005: 22].

The aim of the course under discussion is to develop competence in translating literary (non-specialist) texts, appropriate for the level of knowledge and skills at the third year of undergraduate studies, and to practice the skills of using translator’s tools (dictionaries, literary criticism, encyclopaedias, etc.).⁴ It is worth noting at this point that competence, according to the European Qualifications Framework (2008), is

⁴ Syllabus for the Translation 3 Course at the Pedagogical University of Cracow.

understood here as “the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development” and involves the notions of autonomy and responsibility, while skills stand for “the ability to use knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems” (*ibid*). With reference to the latest translation competence framework (EMT 2017), this curriculum assumes that students will acquire the skills listed in the domain of translation, e.g. “to analyse a source document, identify potential textual and cognitive difficulties and assess the strategies and resources needed for appropriate reformulation in line with communicative needs” as well as “to check, review and/or revise their own work and that of others according to standard or work-specific quality objectives” (EMT 2017: 8) and, therefore, the class activities focus on acquisition of those skills, to provide students with guided practice, while actual translation tasks are completed individually by students at home.

As regards the learning outcomes of the course, according to the European Qualification Framework they are divided into the areas of knowledge, skills and social competences and reasonably specified as small steps to be acquired, e.g. “knowledge of text editing principles for texts written in Polish and English,” “ability to create correct complex sentences in Polish and English”, or “the ability to choose appropriate equivalents depending on the context and genre features of the text”⁵, and not as an unreachable goal: to learn the skill of translating literary texts. Importantly, the course also aims at developing such skills as effective teamwork or awareness of the responsibility to preserve cultural heritage, which might not directly pertain to translation competence, yet clearly refer to a collaborative approach to translation, where the learner is seen as a resource [Kiraly 2000: 60]. The choice of source materials to be translated by students reflects the wide range of literary texts and the course syllabus lists song lyrics, comics, fairy tales, legends, short stories, novels (fragments), poetry and dramas (fragments). The selection of source texts marks the final stage of the process planning stage.

5.2. Stage II: Acting

The next step, acting, includes the actual activities done in the classroom, where students are presented with a range of texts to be translated (songs,

⁵ *Ibid*.

comics, short stories, novels, poems) and a variety of tasks (including individual work, pair work, team work, proofreading, comparison, analysis). As regards specific texts, it seems advisable to start with songs, as the students are often familiar with their content, rhythm, intended target audience and the overall context, which greatly facilitates the translation process. While translating songs, students are given the choice, first of all, of the particular song, and secondly, the translation strategy. By giving them a choice at the very beginning, the teacher makes the students aware of the importance of the decision-making process for translators. Such an emphasis on development of autonomous thinking processes and consequences arising from individual decisions is a required step in the path towards creative translation [Piotrowska 2007: 80]. It brings good results and attracts students' interest, when they are confronted with a novelty, e.g. a freshly released song by Adele, or a hit song recently played at a concert in Poland. As regards the choice of the strategy, students can translate the text to obtain a "sing-able version" or treat song lyrics as a poetic work and translate it as poetry, playing with words. Songs seem to provide a good starting point for creative translation, as they involve many senses, when students can listen to the sound of the lyrics and often watch a video clip. Consequently, while experiencing the work more sensorily, they may become more involved in the task of creation. This is consistent with the proposals put forward by Kelly Washbourne [2013: 57-58], who encourages the use of sound libraries or presenting students with illustrations of paintings contemporary with the work of a given writer.

Comics provide another type of texts boosting creativity in students by involving multiple senses. This multi-sensory aspect of comics is hidden in drawings accompanying the text layer and sounds that (although indirectly) can play an important role in understanding the text. Students will clearly see the need to use onomatopoeic words, reading aloud the text and their own translation, trying to compare the auditory quality of their translation (for instance, whether Polish *mlask* should be rendered by English *smack* or *slurp* in a specific picture).

When it comes to fragments of short stories or novels to be translated, students are asked to read the entire text before starting their actual translation work. The course discussed here included fragments of two novels, i.e. *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. One of the reasons for choosing these particular titles

was to give students a chance to become acquainted at least with the film versions of the novels. As regards *Atonement*, it can provide a perfect opportunity for making the students aware of the notion of a “translation unit”, understood as the text in its entirety plus the contexts of source text creation [Tabakowska 2014], especially when the students learn that the first version of the title was *An atonement*, and the difference between the versions with and without an article can be properly understood only after reading and analysing the entire novel. As regards the choice of poetry, students were presented with two works by W.H. Auden, in view of the fact that Auden’s texts served as examples in the course of Introduction to Translation Studies with the same group of students a year before, ensuring the continuum of theoretical and practical education in their translator training. In the translation of poems, the teacher employed the technique proposed by Washbourne [2013: 56], i.e. offering students multiple versions of translations of the same text. As Washbourne claims [*ibid*], highly accomplished translations can intimidate and demotivate students. Instead, multiple versions of particularly illustrative or troublesome passages can be used as a demonstration of interpretive strategies for different audiences. Students can voice a preference for specific model translation options (also for their own translation) and defend their choices.

5.3. Stage III: Observation and monitoring

The next step in the process is monitoring, which involves observation (qualitative) methods and non-observation (quantitative) methods, such as questionnaires [Wallace 1998: 38-39]. This is actually the mainstay of the action research approach, enabling teachers “to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events, as they actually occur rather than as we think they occur” [Burns 1999: 80]. As regards the quantitative methods, students can be asked to complete a short survey related to their preferences concerning the mode of working in the classroom and type of classroom activities. The results of a study conducted with a group of translation students (Kodura 2018: 88) show that although translation is considered by most students as an intimate activity, they are able to focus on translation in a classroom setting and they particularly value the opportunity to compare class assignments with other students, although they feel uncomfortable when the teacher reads their translation assignment in the classroom. As for qualitative methods, the tools applied

by the translation trainer include field notes with overall instant self-evaluation of a lesson unit and notes on particular aspects of class work, such as problematic issues, common errors and timing problems.

According to observations recorded by the trainer, students work more efficiently with a limited choice of activities, e.g. too many songs or poems to choose from resulted in the students' inability to make a decision and start translation. Interestingly, translation activities into English were preferred by students – they seemed to feel more secure when writing in English. Students had problems with proofreading exercises and did not respond actively to such tasks, as they did not feel competent enough to correct translations produced by their classmates. On the other hand, they were very active with exercises involving comparison of translations produced by their peers, where they were encouraged to apply their knowledge learnt in the course of Introduction to Translation Studies. Some very important observations for the course design included the fact that students needed more time to prepare individual tasks. This particularly pertains to novels, which the trainees had not managed to read before translation activities, although the reading list had been provided in advance. Finally, the fifteen-week course proved too short to cover translation of any drama.

5.4. Stage IV: Evaluation and reflection

As regards evaluation and revision steps, i.e. implementation of changes and improvements, the conclusions resulting from in-class observation permitted to estimate more feasible timing for each translation task carried out in the classroom. The research helped to streamline classroom activities, by introducing more pair/team work for analysing and evaluating specific translations. As a result of class observations, the focus of the course slightly shifted from individual work to more extensive examination of students' texts in class in the form of group feedback practice during teacher-guided discussion, as postulated, for example, by Pietrzak [2014], to provide support in order to help novice translators develop required competence. This group activity, where students can present their own evaluation and comments, taking over the role of the teacher or the client, is a practical response to the call for student empowerment postulated by Kiraly [2000].

On the other hand, the effective use of the workshop concept for boosting students' creativity encouraged the teacher to implement more solutions proposed by Kelly Washbourne [2013], e.g. introducing the activity of "voting" for the best translation (i.e. evaluation from the reader's perspective), as this is a task that can be easily prepared via the e-learning platform. The reluctance of students to proofread texts produced by their peers motivated the teacher to prepare proofreading tasks whose objective was to highlight specific translation problems without intimidating students. The proofreading activities were introduced gradually, first as a structured exercise, e.g. the proofreading of texts resulting from merging translations submitted by different students, thus ensuring students' anonymity, or providing the students with 2-3 versions of translations of the same source text, with different deficiencies in the target texts, thus helping to focus on the problem and not on the performance of an individual translator. Later in the course, students were encouraged to work in pairs before submitting their final version of the target text, prepared at home, and to proofread each other's translations as part of the in-class activity. Students were provided beforehand with a list of revision parameters, organized into four groups: problems of meaning transfer, problems of content, problems of language and style and problems of physical presentation [according to Mossop 2001: 99 as cited in Pietrzak 2014] and were asked to assess the proofread translation on this basis, gaining autonomy in the reviser's role.

In terms of the general course organization, in view of a failure to even start the translation of drama, it was decided that drama translation should be removed from the syllabus and used as an additional (perhaps individual) project or should be covered in an advanced course, as part of the MA programme. All of the conclusions derived from carrying out the research cycle were transformed into practical solutions applied in a subsequent cycle, i.e. the translation course taught in the subsequent academic year.

6. Cyclical nature of the research

Action research as a methodological approach to self-reflective teaching leads to constant improvement, with regard to not only the entire cycle, understood as a one-semester course, but also to individual lesson units and to more extensive research projects based on the course. A reflective and self-evaluating attitude towards course design and teaching helps the

translation trainer to begin each subsequent course with an awareness of possible difficulties, increased understanding of students' expectations and his or her own improved teaching competence. Translation training, regardless of the students' level, can be beneficial for both the trainer and the trainees, in many aspects. In this context, the particular role of students' participation must be emphasized, where students are not the object of the research, but also the resource, thus contributing to the improvement of the community gathering translation practitioners and researchers. It is in this environment, where the key concepts: valuation of others in the process, cultural awareness and diversity, multiplicity of examples, models and tasks, can lead to development of sensitivity, both in students and in the teacher.

7. Conclusion

Starting their work in the academic setting, translator trainers, who might be professional translators without a formal background as translation teachers, face the difficult task of designing and running a translation course for translators-to-be. Activities of this type must be particularly well thought out and prepared based on the experience of practitioners and research findings, both in translation studies and in pedagogy and the current situation in the translation market. The aim of this paper was to show one of the possible paths leading to self-development and constant improvement of a translator trainer for the benefit of both sides participating in the process of acquiring translation competence, the trainer and the trainees, using available resources and skills and requiring as little – or as much – as a systematic, analytical and critical reflection upon pedagogical practice.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how to approach literary translation as a university course and how to design the curriculum to overcome the difficulties emerging in practice for the benefit of both sides of the translation competence acquisition process, i.e. the trainer and the trainees. The analysis presented in the paper is based on the observations conducted during a one-semester course of literary translation taught at the Pedagogical University of Cracow to undergraduate students of English Philology. The author suggests designing the translation

training course using action research methodology, in a continuous cycle of practice, reflection and improvement.

Key words: translator training, action research, literary translation

STRESZCZENIE

Wyzwania pedagogiczne w nauczaniu przekładu literackiego na poziomie licencjackim

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje problemy i wyzwania związane z nauczaniem przekładu literackiego na poziomie akademickim oraz przedstawia przykładowy program kursu oferowanego w ramach jednego semestru studiów licencjackich na filologii angielskiej Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie. Zaproponowane rozwiązania, opracowane na podstawie prowadzonego kursu, mogą pomóc obydwu stronom procesu kształcenia: studentom przekładu i nauczycielowi, w rozwijaniu kompetencji zawodowych. Można to osiągnąć poprzez zastosowanie metodologii *action research*, opartej na cyklach działania, autorefleksji i doskonalenia.

Słowa kluczowe: kształcenie tłumaczy, metodologia *action research*, tłumaczenie literackie