

Training translators – ten recurrent naiveties

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More people than ever are being trained as translators. So more people than ever think they know how to train translators. Or do they? Here we take ten ideas that are frequent in the field. All ten can be questioned.

1. Training has to be in universities

Translation used to be a vocational skill, for the polytechnics or on-the-job training. Across the world, the polytechnics became universities, so translation has become a thing to be taught in universities. That is why we have an excess of conferences, theories and publications, all in the name of a new academic discipline. In Spain we have not just degrees in Translation and Interpreting, but whole faculties, lots of them.

What's wrong with that? Well, many translators are still trained on-the-job; others learn a great deal from practicums; some are trained at postgraduate level (having done a first degree in something else), and still others are professionals who constantly retrain, taking a series of short-term courses. There is a whole range of possible training situations, some in universities, a lot outside universities, and an increasing number involve practitioners training practitioners, with universities charging fees for their stamp of approval.

In sum, a lot of good training is happening outside or on the fringes of universities, where it has always been.

2. Training has to cover everything translators do

If you think translators need a full academic degree in translation, then you have to fill up three, or four, or even five years with things those trainees need to learn. This is how we get models of “translation competence” that include reading skills, writing skills, computer skills, terminology management, DTP, accountancy, interpreting of various kinds, a plethora of electronic tools, translation theory, area studies, and a lot more. Translators have to master a very wide range of skills these days. So trainees need many years of classrooms to learn all those things.

No way. Translators have always mastered a wide range of skills. But they do not all need all the skills all the time. We tend to develop competence when we require it. Perhaps a client wants us to use a particular translation memory. Perhaps we see a market opening in work in a particular field. Perhaps we fall in love with a new

language (or a person who speaks the language). The meanderings of life enable us to pick up skills along the way.

People who want to teach students everything in a full degree program are trying to pre-ordain a professional life. It would be enough to train students to learn and adapt. Then let them live.

3. People should be trained to be just translators

If training has to cover everything, trainees are going to be complete professionals, the “real translators”, and the rest will be semi-professionals. This is the way some training institutions would like to see the market professionalized. Only those who are correctly trained will be allowed to translate officially. They will be very well paid; their work will be of the highest quality. Professional paradise will materialize in a matter of years.

If only. The post-industrial labour market is full of phrases like “flexibility” and “life-long learning”. People move from one job to the next, and translators are no different. Translation is typically done from home while the kids are young. Or it is a springboard to something more lucrative in public relations or marketing. Etcetera. So why train everyone to be complete professionals?

Better, we suggest, to teach communication skills that can be adapted to many tasks.

4. There is one huge job market for translators

Is there a developed labour market for professional translators? Easy to check. Just keep a track of how many full-time jobs are advertised for translators. In most countries you will soon start to wonder why anyone would want to be trained for a field with so few openings.

In the more post-industrial economies, we tend to find a very fragmented job market. At one end there is growing deprofessionalisation, associated with mediocre language skills and small jobs. Somewhere in the middle there would be an aging sector of full-time professionals, the people some trainers imagine they should be producing. And at the other end there is a range of relatively well-paid jobs associated with translation and technology, often called localization.

Similar fragmentation can be seen in the field of interpreting. We have become aware of how precarious employment is in public service interpreting. We know that interpreting situations involve a lot more than conferences. True, there seems to be no new high-tech segment here, but conference interpreters have been overpaid for a long time.

Consequences? First, our training programs have to aim at one or two segments, not at the ideal “professional translator”. Second, training should enable trainees to move from one segment to another.

5. Trainees should all work into the same language

A similar illusion is that our trainee groups should be homogeneous, usually with the same linguistic background. It is as if they all sprang from the one womb and were all headed for the same nirvana.

Far better, we suggest, to have groups of mixed linguistic background. In our Masters course in Tarragona, we have a limit of eight students with mother-tongue English and eight with mother-tongue Spanish. When they do group work, they effectively teach each other their respective language skills.

An associated myth is that people should only translate into their mother tongue. The global asymmetries in translation flows (lots from English, not much into it) have created substantial demands for translation into second-tongue English. Our quaint maxims are changing accordingly.

If we undo these twin illusions, we get rid of directionality as a basis for our programmes. The one group of trainees, of mixed linguistic background, should be trained to work both ways.

6. Translation is not language learning

It took some generations to liberate us from the idea that translation exercises only serve as checks on language acquirement. One generation has now believed that translation is something entirely different from language learning. It should be taught in a different institution; translation should not be in the language class, apparently. A revisionist stream now argues that translators actually require a special kind of language training, so a translation school can now offer courses in things like “English for Translators”. This fits in with the ideologies of English for Special Purposes. It also accrues more power to the academic institutions that embrace the idea. But it is not the right answer.

Good language skills are not enough to make a good translator (in whichever segment), but they are necessary. That much is easy. The real question is where those skills come from. Trainees can spend years in classrooms trying to learn languages. But it is far more efficient and human for our students to be going on exchange programmes, travelling, working abroad, falling in love, or otherwise living in all their languages.

Language learning must be part of the training process. But it certainly need not be restricted to university classrooms.

7. You translate then you interpret

Everyone seems to think that spoken interpreting is harder than written translation. So all the curricula make students do the written before the spoken.

This is cause for some despair. In order to break with initial literalism, all students should begin by doing spoken translations, in authentic situations of some kind. At all stages, oral work helps counter word-dependence. And in the professional world, the oral and the written are rarely entirely separate anyway.

8. Technology has changed nothing

The Canadian translator and trainer Brian Mossop argues that “if you can’t translate with a pen and paper, then you can’t translate”. True enough. No amount of new technology will make up for the basics. But this does not mean that technology has brought about no basic changes.

For many years one of the main problems of professional translating was locating adequate information. Our major efforts were put into generating possible renditions. With web searches generating excessive information, our major efforts are now put into eliminating possible renditions. That is a very fundamental change.

Consequence: Mossop is right, but students do have to work on computers with Internet connections, at least.

9. Technology is helping us

At the other extreme, we find courses that teach nothing but translation technology. This especially concerns translation memories, terminology management and content management. These courses are successful because they help trainees move into the high-tech sector, and that is a good thing.

We should not, however, confuse those tools with the basic translation process. And we should certainly not see them as simple enhancements.

The recent translation technologies are mostly based on assumptions that translation is phrase-replacement process. They distance the translator from senders and receivers; they privilege consistency rather than communication; they turn the world into databases.

It took translation theory some thirty years to break with models of translation as phrase replacement. It took a whole generation to see translation as an active communication process. Now the technologies want us to throw all that away (“For translators it’s back to basics”, quips the localization guru Bert Esselink).

Train people to work not just with technology, but against it as well.

10. Theories should help trainees

Commonly heard: Translation theories are abstruse and useless; only professionals know the realities of translation; trainees thus need the professional skills, not the academic theories.

This is true enough. But there is something wrong with the idea that theories should be there to help people learn how to be translators. If professional skills are enough, why complain about the theories at all?

A lot of theorizing is just there to protect academic fiefdoms. It helps gain institutional power. Every professional guru soon develops specific terms and catchphrases. That kind of power is not a bad thing. With it, changes in the profession can eventually lead

to changes in institutional training programmes. Without it, we would be back to medieval apprenticeships.

No, do not expect theories to be of direct use to trainees. Theories can have disastrous effects, if and when they replace experimentation with credos. Far better, we propose, to use professional knowledge to help develop better theories. Only thus might we effectively question the numerous naiveties that haunt our training programs.

Envoi

Putting it all together. Let people do first degrees in whatever they like. Let them learn languages from the road. Then offer a range of courses aimed at specific skills, specific market segments. Mix trainee groups so that students learn from students. Work in groups and from orality. Teach people to think around technologies. And turn to theories when they help you question institutional power, as we might have done here.