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STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAMMES AND TRANSLATOR TRAINING: THREE ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

The importance of student exchange programmes is mostly overlooked in the planning and discussion of translator training. However, application of a few basic economic principles shows that these programmes present quite radical possibilities for rationalising current teaching practices. In particular, when exchange programmes are seen as a mode of international trade, as a distribution of resources and as a general relation of intellectual production, serious questions must be raised about the ideal cost-effectiveness, specialisation, student coverage rate, socialisation and professionalisation of the training process.

This article has its origins in the minor discovery that the best way to teach the handful of foreign students at the back of my prose translation class was to bring them out of the shadows, separate them, and make them work in small groups with local students. I found not only that they learnt without much help but also that, as native informants, they were doing a lot of my teaching for me.

If exchange programmes can work so well, why are they not more extensively integrated into translator training? And why is there so little discussion about an aspect that could account for as much as 25% of the total activity of translation schools (since almost everyone agrees that, in a four-year programme, students should ideally spend at least one year abroad)? Finding no real answers to these questions, my initial energy-saving interest was diverted into a pilot sample of 60 or so questionnaires completed in early 1992 by foreign students at the translation schools of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Las Palmas in the Canary Islands (Spain), as well as by students from these universities who had returned from abroad. I wanted to find out what was going on. In the analysis of this sample (forthcoming) and in subsequent discussions with several programme coordinators, I found two conflicting ways in which exchange programmes are conceptualised. On the one hand, a 'liberal' model stress-

es the non-institutional aspects of the student's stay abroad and tends to describe integration in social rather than academic terms, referring to what happens outside the classroom. On the other, a more interventionist approach associates exchange programmes with examinable academic criteria and tends to view integration in terms of making sure that students complete much the same studies abroad as at home. I concluded that any move towards a policy of interventionist academic integration should be subject to at least three broad conditions: a) that the institutions also be able to promote the social integration of foreign students, b) that financial aids be used to encourage exchanges that would otherwise be impossible, and c) that the form and content of translation classes should be adapted to the presence of foreign students. If these conditions could not be met, then students are best sent away to have a good time, according to liberal or even libertine ideals, without any interventionist control or restrictions, and probably without any money.

In the present article I propose to continue this line of thought into the consideration of three economic principles inspired by my initial energy-saving discovery and, indeed, by the very term "exchange". Although these principles are not entirely metaphorical, my purpose is not to suggest that everything can be reduced to economics. I am more interested in stirring up some serious thought about what should be done when foreign students are actually in front of you, or at least at the back of the class getting ready to leave. Let's see if very basic economics can address their fleeting presence.

Exchanges should be limited by cost-effectiveness

The apparently simple hypothesis that there should be as many exchanges as possible is rather like unrestricted free trade. Although generally justifiable on the basis of positive assessments by students themselves (in more than a hundred questionnaires analysed so far, I have not seen one wholly negative evaluation of a stay abroad), this principle does not say to what end exchange might be better than non-exchange, nor what could happen in the autarky of non-exchange (or are we just saying that exchange is better than sleeping?). These are important points, since the absence of any specific criteria would leave us simply repeating the traditional principle of the *Wanderjahr*, the year spent travelling so as not to be at home. It is all very well to say that bodies should move, but what content should they be filled with at home or abroad? Exactly what is to be traded?

We could presume that students mature faster and learn foreign discursive and cultural values better when abroad. But does it automatically follow that students should forget about their home countries and become the mature discursive and cultural foreigners they are supposed to learn about? Obviously, the principle of unrestricted free trade only applies in the times and places when the specific contents or skills concerned - maturity and discursive competence - fulfil three basic conditions: a) they are available for improvement (an initial demand has been created by preliminary learning), b) they need to be improved (the basic levels are inadequate to the final demand, namely the translator's professional competence), and c) the move from basic to final demand requires more effort at home than abroad (it is more cost-effective to send students away). In the case of other skills - mother-tongue technical writing or the use of translation conventions solely operative in the home culture - it would presumably be more cost-effective not to go abroad. The hypothesis of unrestricted exchange thus calls for thought about what contents the programme is supposed to develop. One must be able to state why home-institution teaching cannot produce these contents more efficiently than can be done through exchange programmes.

Although there must be general agreement about basic forms such as years of study and semester organisation, the contents developed abroad should generally *not* be the same as the contents taught at home. Despite Europeanist ideologies justifying all kinds of economic convergence, despite fanatic fears about losing various national identities, there is general agreement that the development of exchange programmes should not make all translation schools the same. After all, if they were the same there would be little reason for any academic exchange. The programmes should instead stimulate the development of different but complementary courses in the various institutions involved. More simply, in accordance with the basic law of comparative costs in international trade (Ricardo 1817), an optimal level of exchange should produce specialisation rather than homogenisation.

One might thus agree that "there should be as many exchanges as possible" only in situations where the comparative costs are asymmetric and teaching programmes are able to benefit from the resulting specialisation.

This principle has several quite radical consequences. First, it means that any standardisation on national and international levels should be accompanied by specialisation in those contents that can be produced with relative efficiency and

for which there is a demand abroad. Rather than have all translation schools teach the same things, we should be looking for ways in which they can individually trade with the demands of the schools with which they have exchange programmes. Second, with respect to the actual classroom situation, there is no reason why teaching practices should cater primarily to the initial demands of home students and only then to foreign students. Specialisation does not mean digging deeper into the hole you have already made (the Las Palmas translation school spent some years teaching the phonetic transcription of Canarian Spanish, a skill rarely required of translators). Specialisation means doing what you can trade (Las Palmas could probably sell courses on north-south relations much better than Canarian phonetics).

Exchange programmes can cut overall teaching costs

If comparative-cost analysis can locate when, where and with respect to which contents exchange programmes should be developed, it follows that all students entering that frame should go away on exchange programmes, without exception.

The only real objection to this principle is shortage of funds, since there are certain transport costs involved. Yet there are several reasons why this is not a substantial objection. First, money seems not to be the prime problem facing exchange students, who complain with greater frequency about marginalisation and a general lack of organisation (Pym, forthcoming). Second, much financial aid for exchange programmes can come from sources (Erasmus and otherwise) external to those directly affecting teaching costs. Third, the current level of official aid is largely symbolic, which means that very few of the students who do go away could not have done so without official financial assistance. And fourth, as we have seen, basic economics suggests that an exchange programme should be coupled with rational specialisation, which should bring about substantial savings. Obviously, if these savings can be greater than the transport costs, there is no strictly economic reason why all students should not be involved. Let us attempt a few calculations.

The most obvious benefits of rational specialisation should be in the area studies that are supposed to give students general introductions to vast bodies of specialised knowledge. The current results range from very good (say, an introduction to comparative legal systems) to quite ridiculous (at Las Palmas the

"scientific-technical block" was for two years a series of lectures on how to use a computer, in the entire absence of computers). When these courses are given by external teachers they become notoriously expensive and difficult to coordinate with the training of translators as such. For these reasons, considerable quantitative and qualitative savings could ensue from having each school specialise in just one or two cost-effective areas and leaving questions of range and choice to the moment when students decide where to go abroad.

A further field for savings is basic language teaching. At the time of my research the initial first-cycle demand for foreign-language learning in Spanish translation schools was generally supplied through 6 class-hours a week in the first year and 3 hours in the second year, rising to 9 and 6 hours for the second foreign language. This is good news for the university employment of language teachers, but not so good for those who believe there is a difference between efficient learning and osmosis. Indeed, it is anathema to idealists who, like Christiane Nord (1990: 11-12), believe that language learning has no real place in a translation school. However, if the goal of these language classes were restricted to establishing initial demand (the student's interest and capacity to learn elsewhere) and the rest were left to extensive exchange programmes integrated with independent activities (language laboratory work, self-teaching computer sessions, dossier research and a certain degree of outside practical training), the total 24 first-cycle hours (6+3+9+6) could be reduced by at least a third, doing away with perhaps one teacher per group of about 30 students, thus producing a saving of some 2.5 million pesetas a year (the gross salary of a "profesor asociado"), which means about 83,000 pesetas per student, enough for two return charter flights between the Canary Islands and Britain. The figures might be disputed (they refer to early 1992). But there can be no doubt that considerable savings could result from a rational reduction of class hours for language teaching. Further, since the flights can be covered by external funding, the internal savings could become available for a greater professionalisation of the way exchange programmes are organised.

Let us try another calculation. At the moment, translation classes in Spain come in two flavours: version ("directa") going into the student's mother tongue, and prose ("inversa") going into a foreign language. But if 50% of the students in these classes have the same mother language (for instance, Spanish) and the rest have native competence in the foreign language (say, English), then it would

be strictly impossible to say which class was version and which was prose, since there would be no mother-language priority. There would be no reason for not going in both directions in the one class, thus potentially getting rid of one whole subject. The possible material savings would have to be calculated by taking into account specific class sizes, the actual percentage of foreign students and the fact that not all foreign students have native competence in English (see Pym 1992). But there could also be considerable organisational and administrative savings. Looking at cases like the third-year groups at Las Palmas for whom French and German are the first foreign languages, one finds official lists of only five local students in each group, coupled with five or so exchange students in the French class and three or four Germans making occasional guest-star appearances in the German class (these are actual figures for 1991-92). Given such sizes, there is no real excuse for distinguishing between prose and version, and every reason to reduce the organisational and administrative costs arising from this distinction. One could be teaching translation all through.

In all these fields - area studies, language classes and translation classes -, the intelligent use of exchange programmes should enable not only a reduction of material costs but also qualitative benefits through a general simplification and clearer orientation of teaching activities. These benefits should outweigh the transport costs associated with exchange programmes and could easily cover additional expenses like the (minimal) language classes needed by foreigners.

If substantial savings can be made on these levels, considerable time and money should be invested in the rationalisation and improvement of extensive exchange programmes.

Exchange programmes should socialise relations of production

Exactly where should investments be made? The most obvious answers come from analysis of the problems encountered. According to my questionnaires, students' main difficulties concern a general lack of organisation (25%) and problems of social integration (19%). A brief look at these points might indicate what kind of general changes could be sought.

First, although most of the problems with integration stem from the social limitations of Spanish (non-)campuses, many of them are also due to combinations of studies abroad with relative autarky at home. In some British models, all home students are obliged to go away for a whole year (the third or fourth) and the in-

coming students are parked in special classes for foreigners (mostly English language and things like British politics and culture, often drawn-out rehashes of highly commercial summer courses). This model certainly incorporates the above principles of cost-effectiveness, specialisation and total coverage. But it does so merely to encourage the formation of foreign-student ghettos. It does nothing to extend the principle of exchange into the area of intercultural socialisation.

The solution here is to have exchanges for about half of the students at any given moment in the second cycle, since if everyone went away at the same time no one would be left for integration. Because of similar mathematics, there can be no strict preference as to whether the first or second foreign language should be the first to be exchanged.

Similarly in order to counter ghettos, the economic ideal of 50% could also be a sociological ideal for the internal organisation of translation classes. When local and foreign students work together in pairs or small groups engaged in translating in both directions within a given module, they effectively teach each other as mutual native informants, allowing the teacher to act as an occasional referee (Pym 1993: 112-113). In this way, exchange programmes can enable knowledge to be produced through relations that are socialised in the sense that they are primarily horizontal (student to student) rather than vertical (teacher to students). As a rule of thumb, this change in orientation should be possible whenever the visible presence of foreign students is between 30% and 50%.

What does this mean for the traditionally vertical relations based on institutional hierarchies? Any answer should pay close attention to the way exchange programmes are sometimes run.

A certain lack of organisation must be attributed to internal rather than external causes. To cite an unfortunately true example, when my students at Las Palmas complained that they had been sent to Wolverhampton a month before the beginning of a semester and then had to leave in the middle of a semester, the person responsible for the programme explained it was impossible to coordinate Wolverhampton's semester system (two a year) with our term system (three a year). This would be quite understandable had I not been teaching in semesters (two a year), the same as at Wolverhampton. Was I the only one? When I checked with my Director, the Gordian knot was admirably cut: "Everyone can do what they like" (except the students sent abroad?). In this admittedly extreme case, the disorganisation was not so much between systems as within one particu-

lar hierarchy.

Such examples are repeated on numerous levels, from the trivial to the profound. Different institutions have different concepts of teaching, different market demands, and often different notions of what translation is. Taken together, such divergences would suggest that certain difficulties encountered in exchange programmes ensue from culturally specific ideologies and modes of organisation. Yet exchange programmes themselves can be a way of overcoming the excessive institutionalisation of such specificities. When I first started work at Las Palmas in 1989, visitors who came to set up bilateral contacts were entertained for days before they could discuss business. Or again, I remember seeing the translation school's Foundation Director and Assistant Director leave together for Brussels to present Erasmus application forms needed to send three students to Mons. When I suggested a fax or courier might have been cheaper I was told, "What counts is personal contact". In the insular sociopolitical climate of the Canaries, this is very true. It is something that foreigners have to learn. But the subsequent development of exchange programmes has significantly altered the institution's initial norms. Visitors are now received in a reasonably business-like way; frequent trips are seen as a bane; the fax works overtime; and students are indeed sent abroad at the beginning of foreign semesters. Students are not the only ones to learn from exchange programmes. Institutions themselves also learn. This point is worth making not just in order to praise the improvements at Las Palmas but also because the general experience could well be repeated in the many new translation schools being set up in Spain and, eventually, in central and eastern Europe.

Do the above examples mean that local hierarchical relations are in any way challenged by new intercultural relations offered by exchange programmes? I have no firm hypotheses on this point. But I suspect research should analyse the practical problems encountered by the people actually organising the exchange programmes, generally 'link' teachers trying to do this on top of all their other responsibilities.

The use of link teachers is mildly unfair, since it creates unpaid work. It also creates a certain arbitrary authority, particularly as regards the selection of students for exchange programmes. At Las Palmas, in the absence of strict selection criteria, two limit-situations were possible. On the one hand, I once met with the case of a bad student being selected because she was bad and had to improve her

skills in order to pass exams. At the other extreme, good students were selected because they were good, in many cases because of previous family-financed stays abroad. Blind repetition of the latter extreme could mean that the best or socially privileged students would constantly be re-selected, with decidedly elitist consequences. In such situations the link-teachers' pragmatic selection criteria may be humane enough, but they have little to do with any objective approach conjugating academic standards with the aim of helping students who would not otherwise be helped. Academic standards are mostly an endemic issue; each institution already has its hierarchical way of determining them; the link-teacher's decisions are relatively non-problematic on this level. But when such endemic criteria are combined with the more intercultural criteria of exchange programmes - sociability, interest in and capacity for the particular exchange, and perhaps the need to offset elitism - a minor blank space is created in which rules are difficult to formulate. In many cases the best students probably do not need the exchange; the worst will probably not benefit from them. Hierarchical endemic criteria are thus challenged. So how should the selection be made?

Link teachers are entitled to some reward for their unpaid work. Selecting exchange students could perversely become such a reward, at least to the extent that it involves relatively unregulated hierarchical power. But it more usually presents a series of dilemmas for which no firm institutional solutions have been offered. Such loose reliance on link teachers can only lead to perplexity. A better solution would be to have non-teaching professionals organise and control exchange programmes, developing and applying their own exclusively intercultural criteria. They can be paid either through special grants or by using part of the savings outlined above. However, the best general solution would be to have all students go on exchanges, thus removing the unregulated selection process on which blank spaces and arbitrary authority can be based.

Conclusion

The above discussion has used the general example of student exchanges as experienced at Las Palmas. This is not due to any hidden ulterior motive (my discontent with certain transitory situations is anything but hidden). It is simply because the problems were close to me, enabling me to draw out implications and possible solutions much better than would be the case with abstract examples. Similarly, I have not addressed cases where exchange programmes are combined

with on-the-job experience, *des stages en entreprise*, quite simply because I have had no direct experience of such arrangements.

I nevertheless hope readers will appreciate that I have dealt with particular examples in order to develop some general ideas pertinent to any translator-training programme. Most practically, exchanges can be extremely useful to the extent that they speed up whatever additional foreign-language acquisition is needed at this level (and it is, hopefully, little). At the same time they provide students with in-depth first-hand cultural knowledge that they might otherwise never gain, or at least, only gain with difficulty. In search of general principles underlying these practical benefits, I have outlined ways in which exchange programmes can be considered as a mode of international trade, as a distribution of resources and as a relation of production. These considerations have led to several ideals in terms of which exchanges could efficiently assist in the training of translators. I have argued that the contents of the programmes should be determined by relative cost-effectiveness, that the development of programmes should thus require the specialisation of translation schools, that all students should spend periods abroad at a rate approaching 50% at any given time, that the social and pedagogical goals of these programmes should be the integration of foreign students and the socialisation of the training process, aided by the employment of professional organisers. But these are not laws. They are simply ideas put forward in order to stimulate research and experimentation in a field whose potential benefits have so far been grossly ignored.

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