



FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AT TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES: WRITTEN MEDIATION ACTIVITIES.

POP, M[irela] - C[ristina]

Abstract: Starting from the distinction between technical translation vs. written mediation, the paper advances a set of written mediation activities that can be used in foreign language teaching for engineering students during both initiation and specialization levels in the specialized training stage. The paper outlines the role of written mediation activities in specialized communication in foreign language teaching at technical universities.

Key words: foreign languages, teaching, mediation, activities

1. INTRODUCTION

Technical translation is a type of specialized translation usually taught at master's degree levels in translator-training institutions. In this paper we shall refer to technical translation as "written mediation" from the perspective of foreign language teaching in higher technical education. Consequently, the purpose of written mediation is to facilitate students' comprehension of technical texts, students' acquisition of specialized vocabulary in their field of study (e.g. mechanics, civil engineering, automation and computing, electronics, etc.), and students' ability to establish correct equivalences between foreign language and mother tongue terms.

Starting from the premise that the objectives of teaching technical translation in translator-training institutions are different from those of teaching written mediation in foreign language courses at technical universities, we aim to describe the types of written mediation activities that are applicable to foreign language teaching in higher technical education.

Translation as a foreign language teaching method has been used as a traditional teaching method of the type "grammar/translation" for a long time. However, it was excluded in the direct method and in the active method (i.e. audio-oral and audio-visual methods) between 1900 and 1960, only to be gradually reintroduced in the functional approach in the '70s and in the communicative approach between 1980 and 2000 (cf. Lavault, 1998: 15-19). The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR, 2001: 87) reconsiders the role of translation in foreign language teaching but is rather limited in scope as it only enumerates some written mediation activities that apply to general communication. The present paper is therefore an attempt at providing a description of written mediation activities teachers can use at the two component levels of the specialized training stage identified for foreign language teaching in technical universities, namely, the initiation stage of specialized communication and the stage of specialized communication (cf. Pop & Tănase-Robescu, 2009, 2010).

The ideas put forward in this paper are the outcome of our experience in teaching French as a foreign language as well as both general and specialized translation courses in higher technical education. Moreover, our experience as a textbook writer, an author of numerous articles in the field of translation and a curricula designer has been of great help in this regard.

As further research, we intend to describe mediation strategies in foreign language teaching at technical universities.

2. TECHNICAL TRANSLATION IN TRANSLATORS-TRAINING VS. WRITTEN MEDIATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AT TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES

2.1 Technical translation vs. written mediation

"Technical translation" refers to the translation of technical texts that comprise aspects relating to general technology, applied technology and industrial interface (Bédard, in Marquant, 2005: 130). According to H. Marquant (idem), aspects relating to general technology, such as mechanics, hydraulics, electronics and power engineering, include common technical values (e.g. force, mass, movement, etc.), while those relating to applied technology refer to a specific application domains (e.g. paper manufacturing, software development, electronic chip manufacturing, etc.).

The term "written mediation" was coined by CEFR (2001: 43) and is understood as a form of written communication mediation in foreign language teaching: "Mediating language activities – (re)processing an existing text – occupy an important place in the normal linguistic functioning of our societies" because "learners are also enabled to mediate, through interpretation and translation, between speakers of the two languages concerned who cannot communicate directly". This is the meaning of "written mediation" as shall be used in the present paper. In contrast, "technical translation" belongs to the training methodology for professional translators.

2.2 Training for technical translators vs. specialized training stage in foreign languages for engineering students

Training technical translators has a professional objective and is centred on students' acquisition of translation competences by training completion and on their successful labour market integration after graduation. As such, the corresponding methodology is based on the simulation of the types of activities performed by a professional translator and is divided into six stages: preparatory activities, simulation activities, pedagogical stages, certification, professional integration and employment stages (Marquant, 2005: 132).

On the other hand, training future engineers in the field of foreign languages has a communicational objective and is centred on acquiring "communicative language competences" (CEFR, 2001: 9) necessary for both general and specialized communication. CEFR (2001: 87) enumerates several types of written mediation activities that can be used in foreign language teaching, such as: exact translation (e.g. translation of contracts, of legal and scientific texts, etc.), literary translation (translation of novels, drama, poetry, libretti, etc.), summarising gist (newspapers and magazine articles, etc.), and paraphrasing (specialised texts for lay people, etc.).

As shall be shown in the next section, written mediation activities specific to technical fields of study can be designed for the specialized training stage within the three stage linguistic training of engineering students identified in our previous research (Pop & Tănase-Robescu, 2009: 328).

3. FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE TECHNICAL FIELD: TYPES OF WRITTEN MEDIATION ACTIVITIES

In our opinion, written mediation activities differ according to the level of the linguistic training stage: initiation level or specialization level.

3.1 Written mediation activities for specialized linguistic training: the initiation level

This level aims at the initiation of students into specialized communication based on assimilation of terminology and structures specific to the general technical discourse. Teachers can use technical texts taken from semi-specialized magazines. Text selection should take into account the following: the field of study/interest (e.g. mechanical constructions, electronics etc.); the popularity and actuality of the topic (e.g. description of car classes, functioning of plasma TV sets etc.); the difficulty level of the text and the students' language level. "Authentic texts-in-situation" (Nord, 1991: 148) can also be used at this level, e.g. operating instructions for different types of devices and machinery, technical brochures, catalogues containing technical descriptions, etc.

Teachers can engage students in the following activities:

b) Reading comprehension:

- Identification of specialised field (e.g. mechanical engineering) and of subfield (e.g. mechanical constructions);
- Identification of terminology and of discourse structures;
- Identification of transcoded elements (numbers, percentages, data, specific institution names etc.) and of culture-specific items (if needed);
- Identification of linguistic metaphorical expressions and of stylistic aspects (if needed);
- Interpretation of graphical and visual elements (drawings, schemes, tables, graphs, pictures)

b) Paraphrasing:

- Summarising the text on paragraphs;
- Extraction of essential information in the text using one sentence only or using key words;
- Paraphrasing sentences that raise terminological, stylistic or contextual problems in the foreign language;
- Paraphrasing sentences in the target language;
- Noting possibilities, equivalences.

Text comprehension activities can be organized according to the Translation-Oriented Text Analysis model put forth by C. Nord (1991). Paraphrasing activities can be carried out both in the foreign language and in the mother tongue. Foreign language paraphrasing aims at assessing students' comprehension of the technical vocabulary and of the overall meaning of the text, while mother tongue paraphrasing aims at avoiding word-for-word translation and interferences. These activities are meant to prepare students before the actual translation. The teacher has a guiding role in order to facilitate comprehension by means of leading questions, explanations, visual elements, etc.

3.2 Written mediation activities for specialized linguistic training: the specialization level

This level aims to develop students' mastery of technical vocabulary and specialized discourse structures. Consequently, the difficulty level of texts will be higher compared to the initiation level. The texts will be selected from publications that target a professional audience (field specialists or researchers).

The corresponding activities can be grouped into two categories:

- a) Planning: developing background knowledge in a field previously selected together with students; brainstorming;

b) Documentation: consultation of dictionaries, glossaries, additional documents; creating term entries in the field of the selected subject matter;

c) Translation: establishing translation equivalences; translation of the whole text or of a paragraph; choosing the most appropriate translation variant as a result of brainstorming;

d) Evaluation: checking the congruence of two versions; checking the consistency of usage.

The activities at this level are meant to provide a practical way for engineering students to acquire research, documentation, translation and evaluation abilities that would make them autonomous - the ultimate desideratum in a learner-centred education system.

4. CONCLUSION

The ideas presented above result in the following conclusions:

The objectives set for training technical translators are different from those set for training future engineers in foreign languages (i.e. professional objectives vs. communicational objectives). Written mediation activities are perceived as a communicational objective centred on acquiring "communicative language competences" and can thus be placed within the stage of specialized training of engineering students.

Our research outlines the various types of written mediation activities that can be used in foreign language teaching at technical universities. As explained in the previous section, these activities should be classified according to students' level of specialized communication (i.e. initiation level and specialization level) and arranged in order of difficulty to ensure students' smooth progression from simple to more difficult. The types of activities identified for the first level of specialized communication (i.e. reading-comprehension and paraphrasing) are preparatory activities, while those for the second level (i.e. planning, documentation, translation and evaluation) are thought to enhance student autonomy in performing work-related tasks and should therefore be targeted at students with a more advanced language level.

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