



## Night-Owls and Larks: Shedding Light on Cultural Competence in Translator Training

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### Abstract

*Translator training is viewed as highly practical. However, future translators are also trained through theoretical approaches and with a strong focus on the acquisition of a set of competences which will make their future as professionals uncomplicated. One of these competences includes cultural knowledge. Cultural competence is a fundamental skill of communication in a multicultural world, revealing itself paramount in the understanding of any type of text the translator has to deal with. Therefore, developing and consolidating this competence should be a major concern when training future translators. The aim of this article is to shed light on the acquisition, use and practice of cultural competence. Based on the Task-based learning teaching (TBLT) methodology and taking into account the different learning styles of our students, several text types and genres were analysed in the English language course of a master's degree in Translation in Portugal, namely through literary texts and the language of headlines. We shall then present some diagnosed and identified problems students felt during hands-on work focusing on this competence, convey some examples that have been worked upon and finally give recommendations on how to overcome this constraint in both learning and teaching perspectives.*

**Keywords:** *Translator training, cultural competence, TBLT, English language course, learning styles;*

### 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades translator training has been based on models which highlight competences and subcompetences. This has been observed in many translator training programmes, which identify the translation competence model as componential and thus divide it in several subcompetences, such as language knowledge, extralinguistic knowledge, transfer competence, documentation skills, or intercultural knowledge [1] [2] [3].

The literature is quite clear when expressing the need to introduce these skills in translator training curricula [1] [2] [3], however no definite subject is suggested for the case. In fact, this kind of training can be achieved through several different subjects, but from our experience we are led to believe that language classes as well as translation practice classes are the adequate context for this kind of specificity.

Translation and language learning clearly complement each other and currently translators are viewed as cultural mediators. In order to achieve this, it is relevant to promote cultural knowledge among future translators since this will facilitate their future as professionals.

The objectives of this article are to provide an overview of the issues regarding the term 'cultural competence' as well as to address how this competence can be practised and acquired in a specific higher education context. This will be done through examples of exercises promoted in an English L2 class.

We are aware that the debate on cultural knowledge acquisition is not new, however empirical accounts of how this competence can be developed are scarce. This proposal is therefore an insight into how this can be introduced and is promoted in actual practice in a master's degree in translation in Portugal.

English language classes are mainly oriented by the task-based learning teaching (TBLT) approach. Being a variant of Communicative language teaching (CLT) method, it "bases work cycles around the preparation for, doing of, and reflective analysis of tasks that reflect real-life needs and skills" [5]. As such, the tasks assigned to students try to follow this major guideline, so that students can relate to what they are doing and find real applicability in the area of translation.

### 2. A place for cultural competence in translator training

It is largely recognised that translators cannot master all fields of knowledge and that their training regarding cultural acquisition is, in fact, a lifelong process. However, translator training institutions assume a role in this issue and include this kind of teaching and learning in their curricula based on

the premise that it is part of a fundamental professional competence, clearly linked to the practical aspect of this degree.

According to Tomozeiu, Koskinen and D'Arcangelo, future translators "need to develop professional awareness and curiosity" towards culture, first their own, and then the other [2]. As such, students' awareness of their own culture should be high and the same applies to other cultures. This in a world where the term culture in itself has changed and has no borders anymore, since there are local cultures, regional cultures, national cultures, international cultures, global cultures and even workplace cultures.

Translation competence includes several other subcompetences which have been established by different authors along time. What all of these proposals have in common is the reference to the cultural subcompetence and knowledge, although it can be termed differently. Hurtado Albir calls it 'extralinguistic knowledge' [1], Kelly [4] refers to it as 'cultural and intercultural competence', Xiangdong mentions 'intercultural competence' [3] and Shreve [6] names it 'cultural knowledge'. Regardless of the term used, all agree that this competence is about the knowledge of the source and target cultures, including specialised subject domains and this is the definition we use as a premise for this article.

The idea of cultural knowledge and difference in translation has been widely discussed since ever, although no theory has been attached to it until quite recently, when translator training became an issue in the discipline of translation studies [7]. In the past, literal translators were criticised for not being able to spot differences or decide to ignore them for the sake of the authority invested in the source texts.

Initially, main concerns have been words grounded in one culture which are viewed as impossible to translate, due to their strong culture-pound character. Contrarily, translators realised that this impossibility could be overcome by resorting to translation strategies like paraphrasing, explicitation, amplification, adaptation, or equivalence among many others. As such, all words can be translated and the apparent gap between what looks impossible and is feasible is overcome in translator training through the implementation of tasks towards the establishment of a professional translation competence which comprises a series of subcompetences, already mentioned. Sole practical experience and intuition are not enough anymore. The multicultural nature of the current translator market demands more.

Students can be encouraged to consider different sources to obtain cultural knowledge and most of them can eventually happen outside the school environment. This is the case of watching foreign films, the news, reading foreign authors, travelling or going on student exchanges, all of them useful and effective ways of contributing to the increase of one's cultural knowledge. However, this kind of acquisition must be also endorsed by the translator training institution.

It appears to be difficult to separate cultural competences from others, this is probably the reason why some authors claim that whatever the format institutions decide on, this needs to be introduced "explicitly" in the translator training degrees and it has been suggested that language classes are the appropriate place for this initiation [2]. Additionally, Kelly states that this should be done through task-based activities, since they promote a broader acquisition of different cultural backgrounds and contexts.

Indeed, it appears difficult to separate cultural competence from others within translator training, this is why how to teach and address this issue becomes a pressing question.

### **3. Hands on work: activities and results**

The English language course syllabus of the master's degree in Translation focuses on the development of the four linguistic skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening, even though reading acquires a stronger emphasis for the specific purposes of the course. Therefore, reading practice was mainly supported by the compilation of material taken from a coursebook [8] and from other various sources such as the online or print press, and other reference grammar and vocabulary works. This material selection intends to provide the students with a closer look to the reality they will most probably face as future translators. The tasks assigned to students throughout the course encompass the major goal of enhancing students' awareness of the importance of a good command of languages in translation. Students should master all these skills so that they are able to interpret the text in a holistic way and therefore be able to translate a text more accurately. Nonetheless, all these skills are meaningless without cultural knowledge that texts unavoidably require. Not only do the students need to have a good command of the language – grammar, lexis – but they also have to understand the intertextual and cultural references that a text conveys. All in all, the topic areas covered, and more

specifically reading subjects, were grounded on a major concern: to enhance the students' cultural knowledge and awareness.

The two practical examples we present here aim to diagnose and overcome problems as regards the cultural knowledge of students, in addition to foster classroom dynamics and to encourage students to learn in an autonomous way through inductive reasoning and practice. The first example is set on literary texts and the second explores headline play.

1. Students are given the task of reading three texts, from different age periods (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) set in Britain. Students had to find in the texts words or phrases that demanded cultural knowledge for their interpretation, as well as find and explain culture-specific items and the ones which were shared with their own culture but with different associations. This, of course, required some knowledge of the British culture which students were assumed to have as students of the English language and culture in their bachelor's degree. The texts chosen intend to be thought-provocative and enlightening/informative, as the texts convey social critique and cultural differences. The short excerpts analysed are filled with cultural references which are important to grab so that the whole message is understood. Most of the students struggle with this activity as they realise their lack of cultural knowledge, even though after some research and guidance by the teacher students are able to get the purpose of the texts. Critical thinking together with group or pair discussion is therefore stimulated and students do really become aware of the long way they still have to go to overcome this weakness.
2. Throughout the course lexical notions, techniques of cohesion and coherence, text types, genres are practiced and reflected on, but we shall only focus on one specific example: headline play and intertextual references in English headlines, namely puns. Examples as: "PRESIDENT AIMS TO SNUFF OUT TEEN TOBACCO USE" or "GORILLA PEN APES JUNGLE'S CHALLENGE", "are presented and explored. In a first stage, working in pairs, students are given the parts of the headlines all mixed up, having then to find the adequate missing part. After that, they are asked to identify the puns and explain them. However, this task of finding double meanings, even with the help of dictionaries, reveals difficult, but after getting it, students realise how important a good domain of not only languages but also cultural competence is in the area of translation.

#### 4. Conclusions

The problems that are every year diagnosed and worked upon during English language classes are complemented with practical exercises during English translation practice. Teachers of both subjects work together in order to better diagnose needs and solve difficulties felt by first year master students. When translating simpler, shorter texts, students still make mistakes like not immediately getting the meaning of night-owls and larks when they are asked to translate a journalistic text, thus choosing the animals over the people who like to get up early or late. The examples provided here represent just a small part of the work developed with students, but nonetheless highlight the paramount importance of enhancing the cultural competence of students if we aim to prepare more informed and better equipped students for their career as future translators.

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