Translating, Interpreting, Mediating:
The CEFR and Advanced-level Language Learning in the Digital Age

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Abstract

What place should translation (and other 'mediation' activities such as interpreting) have in university-level language study? What can the Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) contribute to our understanding of the features of successful language learning and the possible role of translation in its broader sense? How can web-based tools and resources be used to support effective and engaging translation activities for advanced-level language learners?

This paper will consider how developments in theories of language learning and teaching, combined with the increasing globalisation of university study and language learning, contributed to the decline in the use of translation in university-level language courses. It will outline the arguments and evidence that underpin the re-assessment of translation's place in language learning that is now taking place (Cook, 2010; Aden and Weissmann (eds), 2012; Pym, Malmkjær and Gutiérrez-Colón Plana, 2013).

The influential role played by the CEFR, launched in 2001, with its explicit recognition of mediation as one of the range of skills (in addition to the traditional 'four skills' of speaking and listening, reading and writing) to be acquired by language learners, will be considered and the view it presents of the language learner as a future language user in the making, a social agent, living, working or studying in a multilingual and multicultural context – and with access to all the resources of the web (Rosen (ed), 2009; Byram, 2013).

The final part of this paper will review the ways in which translation can find a place in action-oriented communicative language learning (Puren, 1995 and 2012) and provide examples of activities, tasks and projects that make use of tools and resources available on-line.

1. Introduction

This paper has arisen from research and reflection linked to work on current projects in the institution where I teach on modules in French language and in translation and interpreting at undergraduate level and postgraduate level. My aim here is: to consider the re-evaluation of the role of translation in the language classroom that is now taking place, the support that the approach to language-learning underpinning the CEFR provides for the inclusion of translating, interpreting and mediating activities in language learning and ways in which on-line tools and resources can support the inclusion of translating, interpreting and mediating activities for communicative language use.

2. Translation in language learning and teaching past and present

The entry for 'Foreign language teaching' in the second (2009) edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* opens with a forceful statement regarding the place of translation in language-learning:

> Despite the widespread popular assumption that translation should play a major and necessary part in the study of a foreign language, recent theories of language teaching and learning have at best ignored the role of translation and at worst vilified it. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards almost all influential theoretical works on language teaching have assumed without argument that a new language (L2) should be taught without reference to the student's first language (L1).' (Cook, 2009:112)

In this entry, and in a subsequent book, *Translation in Language Teaching* (2010), Cook looks back over the past hundred years to uncover the origins and development of current attitudes to translation in language teaching and considers the evidence and arguments for and against the use of translation. He examines the influence of second language acquisition theories, of the rise of English as a global language and of trends in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. He argues that the reasons behind 'exclusively monolingual language teaching' are 'more commercial and political than scientific', that it is 'supported only by selective evidence and shaky reasoning' and that 'it

disregards learner and teacher needs' whereas translation has an important role to play in language learning: 'it develops both language awareness and use, […] is pedagogically effective and educationally desirable, and […] answers student needs in the contemporary globalized and multicultural world' (2010: 155).

Cook's analysis may focus particularly on language teaching in schools but similar developments have taken place at university level: as the communicative approach has gained ground, initially in language courses for non-specialist language learners but also in language classes for students on modern language degrees, translation activities may feature very little in classroom learning and are often confined to advanced-level translation classes or modules in the final year of study.

A recent report for the European Commission,*Translation and language learning: The role of translation in the teaching of languages in the European Union* (2013), has gathered evidence from more than a thousand respondents - teachers and other language experts - in all sectors of mainstream education (primary, secondary and university) in seven EU member states and a number of comparison countries. It presents a similar analysis of 'historical debates over translation and language learning' and also concludes that general approaches to language learning developed over the past century are 'more a collection of opinions and feelings than an organized body of knowledge' and often adopt 'a very narrow view of what kinds of translation exercise it might be possible to devise for use in the language classroom' (2013: 13-14)

It is striking that, while Cook builds his case in favour of translation in language teaching on evidence and arguments from a wide range of sources, he makes no reference to the Council of Europe's Framework of Reference for Languages, launched in 2001, despite the fact that it provides strong support for his case at various levels: political, social, educational and pedagogical.

3. Translating, interpreting and mediating in the CECR

The CEFR has been hugely influential over the past decade in shaping language policy and approaches to language learning, teaching and assessment, not only within Europe but also across the world (Byram and Parmenter, 2012). It provides a clear statement of the need to promote language learning in the interests of improving mobility, international communication, respect for identity and cultural diversity, better access to information, personal interaction, working relations and mutual understanding (2001: 5). Most importantly, for a consideration of the role of translation, interpreting and mediating in language learning, the CECR also draws attention to the fact that the learner of a second or foreign language and culture is not learning another language and culture in isolation from 'his or her mother tongue and the associated culture'.

> The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences. Learners are also enabled to mediate, through interpretation and translation, between speakers of the two languages concerned who cannot communicate directly. (2001: 43)

The CEFR goes on to consider in some detail the potential range of mediating activities and strategies in various domains – educational, occupational, public and personal (2001: 87-88). The examples of written mediation activities include summarising and paraphrasing and also translating legal, technical and scientific material and literary translation. Oral mediation activities include informal interpretation activities that arise when dealing with foreign visitors or travelling abroad but also simultaneous interpretation (conferences, meetings, formal speeches, etc.) and consecutive interpretation (speeches of welcome, guided tours, etc). This description of mediation, therefore, includes activities engaged in by professional interpreters and translators. As De Florio-Hansen observes, 'The shift is considerable: translation and interpretation are no longer seen as instruments for learning and assessing language performance, but they are considered as objectives in their own right' (2013).

The place accorded to translation and interpreting in the CEFR seems to have received little attention – in the UK at least. Perhaps this arises from a tendency, when referring to the CEFR, to identify it chiefly with the scales of competences and descriptors for productive and receptive skills. Language teachers have become very familiar with these; perhaps the lack of equivalent scales and descriptors for mediation skills has contributed to a lack of awareness of the wider perspective the CEFR provides.

It is notable that the situation seems rather different in German-speaking countries in Europe, where the *Profile deutsch* (Glaboniat et al., 2005), based on the CEFR, provides 'can do' statements for

translating, interpreting and mediating as well as for the four traditional skills. Teachers of translation at university level in France and Germany, familiar with the *Profile deutsch*, have drawn attention to the scope this offers for a re-evaluation of translation as a learning activity at advanced level. De Florio-Hansen (2013) argues that the CEFR's inclusion of mediating skills creates opportunities for drawing on insights and approaches developed in translator training and translation studies. Weissman suggests that the CEFR opens up the way for a more imaginative approach to translation in university-level language courses in France, moving away from the traditional focus on exercises such as *thème* and *version* (translation from and into the L1) (2013: 321).

4. Translation activities, tasks and projects: using web-based tools and resources

The general view of language use and learning adopted in the CEFR is that of an action-oriented approach in which language learners and users are viewed as 'social agents' (2001: 9). Such an approach is influenced by socio-cognitive and constructivist theories of learning which emphasise the social dimension of the learning process: learners acquire skills, knowledge and understanding alongside - and helped by - others (Puren, 2009: 156; Rosen, 2009: 9). Task-based learning and project work and the use of tools and collaborative environments offered by Web 2.0 are characteristic features of this approach (Rosen, 2009: 8).

The range of language activities and tasks involving translating, interpreting and mediating is wide: Cook (2010), Puren (2012), Weissmann (2013) and De Florio-Hansen (2013) all provide lists of types of mediating activities and detailed examples. In *Multiple Voices in the Translation Classroom: Activities, tasks and projects* (2004), Gonzalez-Davies describes a wide range of activities, tasks and projects appropriate to both translator training and language learning at university level. Furthermore, a translation stage can readily be incorporated into a task or a communicative frame given to an existing translation activity (Puren, 2012; Cook, 2010). The *Thinking Translation* course books, developed by Hervey and Higgins for undergraduate and postgraduate students, emphasise the importance of the assignment brief. The tasks and activities provide details of the context, purpose and intended users and thus present translation as a task with a communicative purpose.

Web-based tools and resources provide the opportunity to make the link between classroom and professional practice. Consulting on-line sources to verify contextual information, using on-line dictionaries and term bases to explore the range of meanings attached to a term or expression, analyzing the results of on-line searches from search engines to check on context or appropriate collocations; discussing parallel texts available on line, explanations presented in translator forums or output from machine translation; building glossaries and DIY corpora… In these and other ways web-based tools and resources make it possible for learners to engage with translation as a 'complex multi-skill communicative activity' in a collaborative setting.

5. Conclusions

The European Commission report, *Translation and language learning*, proposes a number of general conclusions concerning the relation between translation and language learning (2013: 135). Firstly, it affirms that translation is 'a communicative activity that can enhance the learning of an L2'. It also concludes that it can be used flexibly as a complement to other teaching approaches at different levels: 'as scaffolding in initial L2 learning and as a complex multi-skill communicative activity at higher levels' (135). Where translation is used for advanced-level students, research indicates very positive effects 'because translation as a complex activity is associated with high degrees of student involvement and satisfaction'.

In response to the three questions posed at the outset, therefore, the following observations can be made:

- Translating, interpreting and mediating are valid communicative activities that can complement or be integrated into other language-learning activities and tasks;
- The CEFR's emphasis on the learner as a social agent in a plurilingual and pluricultural environment encourages teachers and students to view translating, interpreting and mediating as worthwhile skills for language users and learners;
- Web-based tools and resources offer a valuable means of developing engaging translation activities for advanced-level language learners that support a collaborative approach to learning.

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