Using Social Network Content to Teach Ethical Aspects of Translation and Interpreting

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Abstract

A university degree in translation and interpreting involves gaining not only profound theoretical knowledge and a broad set of professional competences, but also an awareness of professional ethics. This paper discusses ways of involving university students of translation and interpreting in the study of professional ethics through a special course.

The proposed course has been designed around the Russian Language Professional's Code of Ethics*, which was developed by a group of translation and interpreting service providers, freelance translators and interpreters and is endorsed by the Union of Translators of Russia. The Code is widely promoted on social networks where language professionals discuss real-life situations and practices. The following guiding principles for improving student involvement are identified: (1) associating learning about ethical norms with doing practical tasks; (2) translating texts on professional ethics and discussing them in class; and (3) discussing actual translation and interpreting case studies taken from online discussions, such as specialized Facebook public groups.*

The paper discusses the design of this course and the experience of delivering it at Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University and Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia in collaboration with the company T-Service and the members of the Expert Committee on the Russian Language Professional's Code of Ethics*. The purpose of the proposed course is to establish a common understanding of the standards of professional behavior expected by clients and professionals within the translation industry. The students will be able to apply their skills, make judgments, and reach informed decisions in accordance with the Code's provisions.*

Keywords: translator and interpreter training, translator and interpreter ethics, the Language Professional's Code of Ethics, teaching translation and interpreting in a university, social network

There is no doubt that aspects of professional ethics are now an essential element of translators' and interpreters' training. Some universities already include such courses in their bachelor's and master's curricula. However, analysis of the content and structure of these courses illustrates that ethical questions are neglected, with greater emphasis being placed on etiquette and legal issues. At most universities in the Russian Federation, ethics in translation and interpreting is rarely a full course: these questions are touched upon and discussed (if at all) in Translation Theory and Practice classes. Therefore, teaching students about ethics in interpreting and translating is a new challenge for universities.

The Russian *Language Professional's Code of Ethics* could be the answer. It outlines social rules and sets the standards of ethical conduct for interpreters and translators where these are not provided by the law.

Codes of conduct (sometimes also called codes of professional ethics) have been developed by most national and international translation and interpreting associations: firstly, to help regulate interactions between translators and translation users; and secondly, to help members to do their jobs according to sound and consistent ethical principles.

The purpose of a code of conduct is usually to establish a common understanding of the standards of behavior expected from the members of a professional body. Professionals are able to make judgments, apply their skills and reach informed decisions in situations where the general public cannot, because they have not received the relevant training.

The development of the Russian *Language Professional's Code of Ethics* was initiated in 2012 and completed in 2016 by a group of translation and interpreting service providers, freelance translators and interpreters. The Code is also endorsed by the Union of Translators of Russia. This means that the particular features of interpreting were thoroughly discussed from different standpoints and that

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new definitions were set forth for all parties involved in translation. This means that the particular features of translation and interpreting were thoroughly discussed from different standpoints and that new definitions were set forth for all parties involved in the industry.[1] This Code is widely promoted on social networks where language professionals discuss real-life situations and practices.

For would-be interpreters and translators to be properly prepared to enter the real-world labor market, familiarity with the *Language Professional's Code of Ethics* is of fundamental importance. Students have to understand why it is both essential and beneficial to comply with the Code's regulations. What is more, students need to be engaged in discussions of the *Language Professional's Code of Ethics* to help them form their own opinions, which is crucial since interpreters and translators have to stand up for their beliefs.

At the same time, in reality, academics teaching interpreting and translating regularly have to face the fact that students who have no experience in the field are unable to fully comprehend the ethical requirements of their future career. Most of them find the provisions of the Code obscure and abstruse due to their lack of experience.

A range of guidelines for studying the Code of Ethics at bachelor's and master's level could solve this problem. We have developed a specialized course that is delivered at Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University and Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia in collaboration with T-Service and the members of the Expert Committee on the Russian *Language Professional's Code of Ethics.*

Firstly, it is necessary to bridge students' acquisition of ethical standards with their personal experience. In our opinion, this bridge is provided by the translation they do themselves. Students are given articles or extracts on translation/interpreting ethics (e.g. [2], [3]) to translate at home. Students translate the text in small groups. Having arranged the translations into a single text and edited it, the students are asked to prepare a review of the article and write their own mini-essays on the questions raised in the article after doing some online research. Examples of such questions are: "Can a translator distort meaning for a political purpose?", "Can a translator omit certain details for the sake of their client's interests?", "What should a translator do if the opinions stated contradict their political views?" After analyzing the students' essays, the professor chooses certain questions to discuss in a class where all the solutions put forward can be examined and assessed.

Another promising approach is to set tasks that involve a comparative analysis of codes of ethics in professional translation and interpreting associations based in different countries. Students may be asked to divide themselves into small groups (3–5 people) and choose an international professional association's code of ethics which they might find interesting to compare with the Russian one. Finally, students might give a presentation in class in which they identify which provisions are universal and which are unique to particular codes of ethics, leading to further discussion.

It is also recommended that students be invited to discuss real-life case studies of ethical quandaries in interpreting and translating. Such cases may be found on the website *translation-ethics.ru*, in the Practice section, which describes certain ethical problems that arise in the process of interpreting and translating and contains solutions proposed by experts based on the *Language Professional's Code of Ethics.*[2] Similar case-based discussions can be found in the *TranslatorsCodex* group on Facebook, to which many practicing interpreters and translators contribute questions, answers, and links to relevant provisions from the Code (these can be used as a framework in a dispute, e.g. between a language professional and a client).

This case study model has three stages. In the first stage, the students examine the case study and discuss it in small groups. Each group may be assigned the same case study, or different examples may be given to different groups. In the second stage, the groups come up with their solutions. Each group must collectively decide how an interpreter or a translator should manage the situation in question. After discussing the scenario, the groups present the case study using slides or other creative media, then formulate their solutions. The first two stages rely on the students' ability to work independently. In the third stage, students from each group describe the case study, share their view and understanding of it, and present their solutions. Additionally, the students are expected to defend their proposed solutions against criticism from the teacher and their fellow students. The solutions may be rectified and modified in the process. At that point, the teacher introduces the students to the solutions proposed by experts on the *Language Professional's Code of Ethics* website.[1]

Case study exercises like this may take various forms. As an example, we shall discuss a scenario which was posted on the aforementioned website and the format of the individual and team practice organized among students at the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, St. Petersburg, in the academic year 2016–2017.

The interpreting case study used was as follows: "A conflict arises between parties and they attempt to involve the interpreter. One party directly addresses the interpreter, saying 'Can't *you* see he's wrong?', expecting the interpreter to confirm. Or they might say to the interpreter 'What do *you* think?' What should an interpreter do under these circumstances?" Thirty-one people (third and fourth year students) participated in the exercise. The participants were asked to develop and justify individual solutions to the problem. Analyzing the solutions proposed by the students and their justifications provided us with the key findings for this paper and allowed us to draw a conclusion.

All the participants (100%) said that the interpreter should remain neutral. A large portion of the student body (45%) believed the interpreter should refuse explicitly and politely, telling the parties that it is "none of their business" (as an interpreter), since their function is to communicate and not to judge.

A smaller portion of the student body (21%) suggested that the interpreter should give a non-specific, neutral and concise reply and avoid siding with any of the parties: "Respond in the most appropriate and general manner without changing the direction of the conversation", "Give a vague answer", etc.

Some students (14%) suggested that the interpreter could remain silent: "Shrug it off politely, with a smile", "Give no response to such provocation", etc.

We found the solutions aimed at restoring peace and harmony (suggested by 10% of students) to be particularly interesting: "The interpreter should ask the parties to calm down and to leave them (the interpreter) out of the dispute, explaining that the conflict is directly interfering with the interpreter's ability to work."

Two students suggested saying that the interpreter had no opinion and that their job was "to interpret, not to think." One participant said, "If one side insists on a reply, the interpreter should gently support their direct employer but try to defuse the conflict by means of language."

The group discussed the students' solutions and evaluated how appropriate they were and how well they complied with the current Code of Ethics. The students were then shown the experts' solution.

Based on the experience of teaching ethical aspects of translation and interpreting, the following guiding principles for improving student involvement have been identified:

1) associating learning about ethical norms with doing practical tasks;

2) translating texts on professional ethics and discussing them in class;

3) discussing real translation and interpreting case studies taken from online discussions, such as specialized Facebook public groups.

In conclusion, studying professional ethics is a significant aspect of interpreter and translator training at university. It allows students to learn more about their future profession, form a responsible attitude toward it, and thus develop their competence. Furthermore, experience shows that including discussions of this subject in the learning process tends to help students to realize their creative potential, increase their motivation to study, and prepare them better for their future careers.

References

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