

Language Acquisition and Translator Training

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the differences and convergences between language acquisition and translator training. The differences will be observed from the competences acquired in both classes, the methodology, and the history of the approaches used by both. The convergences will be seen from the shift of focus in teaching, the use of context, the teaching of reading and writing, the use of dictionaries, and the use of Task-Based Approaches. These differences and convergences are expected to give better ideas on how to teach both language and translation.

Keywords:

Acquisition, Translator, Training

1. Introduction

Language acquisition and translator training involve one thing in common, which is a language. Most people used to (or perhaps still) believe that translation was just part of learning a language. According to Cronin (2005:249), “translation was used to teach language and punish deviance.” However, now translation has developed to become an independent field of studies, and a translator training has its own methodologies which are different from those of language acquisition. Further in this paper, I will discuss about the fundamental differences and convergences between translator training methodologies and those of language acquisition.

2. The Differences

The first fundamental difference, according to me, lies in what students of language acquisition and participants of a translator training learn in class. Those in a language acquisition class learn about all skills of the language they are trying to master. In other words, they still have to improve their language skills. The lower their level, the more effort they have to do to improve the skills. The skills refer to reading including vocabulary enrichment, listening, speaking, and writing. According to Cherrington (2000:635), foreign language teaching aims to bring about various degrees of proficiency in spoken and/or written language.” Hence, in a language acquisition class, they focus mostly on language competence.

On the other hand, those in a translator training should learn more than a language or linguistic competence. It is stated in the article entitled *A Professional Approach to Translator Training (PATT)* (Lobo *et al*, 2007:519) that “This does not mean that language competence has become less important but, on the contrary, it is only one facet of the competences they need to acquire.” Thus, language or linguistic competence is just one of many competences the participants in a translator training need to learn, and they should be good already at the source and target languages before learning to do translation.

Moreover, in articles written by Vienne (1998) entitled *Teaching What They Didn't Learn as Language Students* and by Ulrych (2005) entitled *Training Translators: Programmes, Curricula, Practices*, they both quoted the idea of what competences a translator must have. They both cited Roberts (1984; cited in Delisle 1992:42) that “translational competence consists of five components: linguistic competence, translation competence, methodological competence, disciplinary competence, and technical competence.” Thus, besides the ability to understand and master the source language and the target language, they should have the ability to comprehend the meaning of the source text and to express the same message in the target text naturally. This is what translation competence is about. Moreover, for methodological and disciplinary competences, they should be able to do research on a particular subject and select appropriate terminology based on some basic disciplines, such as economics, politics, law, etc (Vienne, 1998:111). Finally, having technical competence means having the ability to use

aids to translation, such as word processors, databases, dictaphones, etc (Vienne, 1998:111). Therefore, according to Vienne, we can conclude that “translation is much more than a question of language, and this it is something that language students should be aware of”. In other words, the first fundamental difference between language acquisition and translator training is what students learn in class. The former one emphasizes more on the language or linguistic competence, while the latter one focuses not only on language competence but also on other competences as mentioned before.

The second difference is in learning a language we do not need any theories, whereas to train people to be professional translators having both theory and practice is necessary. In a language acquisition class, students are mostly given exercises and practice to enhance their skills. Sometimes they learn about the grammar of the language, which is about the structure and the rules of the language, and which is not exactly the theory of learning a language, and the grammar is usually blended into practice and exercises to be taught in class because of the use of communicative approaches nowadays. In a translator training, however, despite some debates occurring whether a translator training requires theory or not, I believe a good translation pedagogy consists of both theory and practice. Why is it so? According to Cronin (2005:250), the problem with the teaching of translation is not only as a practical problem but also as a theoretical problem. Furthermore, he mentions the following statements.

....translation pedagogy needed a theory not only because teaching itself is a worthy object of theoretical speculation but because good theory makes for more effective teaching. A translation pedagogy without a theoretical basis will be a blind pedagogy. (2005:250)

From the quotation above we can see how important theory is besides practice in the pedagogy of translation since doing translation requires not only linguistic or language competence (which requires a lot of practice in class) but also other competences and skills (one of them is analytical skills which need theory). Moreover, theory makes teaching more effective; even those who will teach a language require theory of how to teach well, but the students who learn the language do not need to learn theory.

In addition, translators need to be equipped with theories, and according to Ulrych (2005:14) there are two basic kinds of theoretical knowledge which must be possessed by translators. The first one is an operative or procedural kind of knowledge which helps them to translate well, and the second one is declarative or factual knowledge “which shapes and models their procedural activity and sets their skills and expertise within a systematic framework” (Ulrych, 2005:14; citing Bell 1991; Round 1998; Schäffner & Adab 2000). By having these two kinds of theoretical knowledge, translators may be able to overcome problems in doing translation in whatever fields or subjects without the need to learn the fields in depth. Gouadec (2007:337) also supports the teaching of both theory and practice in a translator training. He states that “Translator training should combine methodology and theory on the one hand and practical experience on the other, in a teaching/learning process based on hands-on experience and guidance.” Therefore, it is not enough just to teach the participants of a translator training to do translation practice. The teaching of theory will broaden their horizon about ways to do better translation and make them more confident in solving translation problems. After all, as it is stated by Ulrych (2005:15) that “Despite Neubert’s conviction that “practice without theory is blind”, it is just the same way as “theory without practice is empty” (1989:11).”

The third difference I think is related to the history of approaches used in class. The language acquisition has a long history to move through grammar translation and audiolingual methods to communicative language teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Instruction (TBI) (Willis, 2004:4). It started with Grammar-Translation Method from the mid-nineteenth century and continued with Naturalistic methods (Reform Movement, Direct Method) and with Structuralist/Behaviourist methods (audio-visual and audiolingua methods), and the latest one is communicative approach applied since the twentieth century (Cherrington, 2000:635). From communicative language teaching (CLT), then Task-Based Instruction (TBI) evolved as a branch of CLT in the 1980s (Willis, 2004:8).

On the other hand, since the movement of Translation Studies just began in the 1960s, the institutional translator training is a phenomenon which began in

the mid twentieth century (Kelly, 2005:8). Moreover, Cronin (2005:253) states that “In the area of teaching Kiraly (1995) is right to express indignant surprise that as late as the mid-nineties the communicative revolution seemed to have passed translation teaching by.” This means translation pedagogy develops much later than language acquisition pedagogy, and the teaching of translation has been considered slow both in movement and in its adoption of new approaches. Despite its recent development, there have been some major approaches to translator training. According to Kelly (2005:11-17), the earliest approach was teacher-centred transmissionist which was not exactly teaching translation. Kelly states that “this approach to training was essentially apedagogical” (2005:11), and it happened for centuries until the mid twentieth century. Then, it continued with Toward Profession-Based Learner-Centred approaches by Nord (1988/1991), Process-centred approaches by Gile (1995), Cognitive and psycholinguistic research applied to training by Kiraly and others (1995), the situational approach by Vienne and Gouadec (1994 & 2000), and Task-based approaches by Hurtado and González Davies (1999 & 2003). Language acquisition has experienced some paradigm shifts in its methods of teaching for more than a century, while translation pedagogy has developed only within two decades. Their approaches were quite different in the beginning, but in the recent years of their development they have the same approach: Task-Based Approaches which will be discussed further in the convergences.

3. The Convergences

In spite of the differences of the methodologies of language acquisition from those of a translator training, the teaching of both are “historically and conceptually linked through their common goal of communication” according to Cherrington (2000:635). By applying the communication approach, the focus of language acquisition teaching has shifted from grammar (form) to lexis (meaning). It is confirmed by Willis (2004:9) in the following statement.

Both Widdowson (1983) in his definition of communicative competence and Hunston and Francis (2000) view language as a series of lexically based patterns rather than as created by the application of a system of abstract rules. (Willis, 2004:9)

Based on the statement above, we can see that by focusing on communicative competence the teaching of language acquisition no longer emphasizes only on the structure of a language (a system of abstract rules). It emphasizes more on ‘a series of lexically based patterns’ or meaning. Furthermore, it is also stated that “Language form is best learned when the learners’ attention is on meaning” (Prabhu 1982, cited in Brumfit 1984, 234; taken from Willis 2000:8). In other words, the focus on meaning has been more successful in language teaching than the focus on form.

Similarly, the focus of translation method has shifted since the second half of the twentieth century from ‘word-for-word’ (about forms) method to ‘sense-for-sense’ (about meanings) method. It is stated by Munday (2001:21) that “This word-for-word method proved to be unsuccessful and had to be revised using the second, sense-for-sense method.” The failure of word-for-word method to accomplish good translation has caused the change of the method into sense-for-sense. Munday in his book makes an analogy of word-for-word vs. sense-for-sense with form vs. content. Thus, the teaching of both language acquisition and translator training also has shifted its focus from form to meaning.

Now that the emphasis is on the meaning for the teaching of both language acquisition and translator training, we have to include context. Willis (2000:8) states that “learners need a lot of comprehensive input, that is, exposure to the foreign language being used in a variety of contexts, both spoken and written.” By having contexts, language learners can learn better since they will understand what they learn. For example, while teaching students simple past tense, we should give a context, such as describing our experience in the past or talking about the history of our nation. That way, the students will understand the use of simple past tense in the ‘real world.’

In teaching translation, we also cannot exclude context so that we will have good comprehension of the text and understand the message to be rendered in the target language. Vienne (2000:95) states that “Thus, the aim of this initial exercise is to make the students aware that translation has to do with *context* in the first instance, and that they have to concentrate carefully on that *first*.” Context, according to the previous statement, is the first thing we need to pay attention to

before translating a text, and we should make the students aware of it. For instance, when we translate a business contract, we should know to whom and for what we are translating it. That way, we shall be able to choose the appropriate register of the language and understand which terms to use.

Another convergence in teaching both language and translation is by applying the skills of reading and writing. In a language class, all reading skills are necessary to improve students' comprehension and enrich their vocabulary of the target language. In a translator training, reading skills, such as the use of dictionaries, finding the main idea, inference, restatement, developing critical comprehension, and recognizing the purpose and the tone of a text, help to do analysis of the source text. If a translator understands the source text well, it will be a lot easier to transfer the message to the target text. For writing skills, language learners need them to produce something actively in the target language, such as making a poem, writing a prose, composing an essay, etc. They are trained to express their opinion in writing in the target language. In translator training, writing skills are very much needed for the translators to write correctly and naturally in the target language. Therefore, reading and writing skills are very important to be taught in a language acquisition class and in a translator training.

In my opinion, another convergence is the use of dictionaries in both kinds of classes. In a language acquisition class, the lower the level, the more the students tend to use bilingual dictionaries, but we must encourage them to use monolingual dictionaries as they make some progress with their language skills so that they will get the correct understanding of the target language. The same thing occurs in a translator training. The novice translators tend to work with bilingual dictionaries. As they become more experienced, they will often use monolingual dictionaries. We need to encourage the participants of a translator training to use monolingual dictionaries from the very beginning so that they will get used to it and have better comprehension of the source text.

According to Kussmaul (1995:24-25), there are some dangers in the use of bilingual dictionaries. First is general bilingual dictionaries are not expected to have technical linguistic meanings of a word. Thus, it will be hard to use them when we are doing specialized translation. The second danger is bilingual

dictionaries will discourage the translators, especially the novice ones, to do further research and analysis of the text since they provide immediate equivalents which may be incorrect or irrelevant with the text which is being translated. The following statements support this idea.

By their very nature they (bilingual dictionaries) immediately present us with target language equivalences (cf. Chapter 5, section 5.1). If we use them for translation purposes, the phase of abstraction, where we detach ourselves from the wording of a text, is completely suppressed, and the possibilities of finding adequate translations for specific contexts by using our own imagination are very much reduced. (Kussmaul, 1995:24)

Hence, the use of bilingual dictionaries will not be ideal since it will keep translators away from finding the relation of the words to the text. It will decrease the imagination of translators to come up with suitable equivalents from the text analysis inasmuch as those dictionaries give instant answers or a short cut which is not necessarily the right one. The third danger is information given in bilingual dictionaries could be misleading (Kussmaul, 1995:25) because most of them are rarely equipped with enough contexts or examples. Due to these dangers, the use of bilingual dictionaries should be discouraged, and the use of monolingual dictionaries must be encouraged. The following statement supports the idea.

In translation teaching, at least when translating from the foreign language into the mother tongue, the use of monolingual dictionaries should be strongly recommended (ch. Chapter 5). (Kussmaul, 1995:24)

Hence, I believe monolingual dictionaries are better than bilingual dictionaries for people who learn a language and those who do translation since most monolingual dictionaries are well equipped with adequate contexts and examples.

Another convergence is the use of Task-Based Approaches in both language acquisition and translator training. Kelly (2005:16) mentions that “In recent years, **task-based learning**, which has for some time been applied to foreign language learning and teaching, has been applied to translator training....”

These approaches give a chance for the language learners and novice translators to do the tasks just like in the real world; in other words, they are given

authentic materials or simulation of the real world as their tasks to improve their skills.

One thing that task-based approaches for language acquisition and translator training have in common is in the cognitive processes offered by Willis (1996a). The first cognitive process mentioned by Willis is listing. In doing this, the language learners can be asked to work individually or in group to do brainstorming of fact finding (Willis, 2004:22), while the participants of a translator training can be asked to also do fact finding about the text they are going to translate, and it is as part of text analysis. The second one is ordering and sorting. The students of language acquisition can be asked to make the right order of a story, while in the translator training the participants can be asked to sort some terms out from a text to be discussed first before translating them and the text. The third is comparing and contrasting. Language learners can be asked to point the similarities and differences of the two pictures given to them. Meanwhile, the translation trainees can be asked to compare two target texts from the same source text so that they will be able to understand that the result of translation can be different although coming from the same source text depending on the purpose of the translation.

The fourth one is problem solving. A language acquisition class can be given a task to have a group or class discussion on how to solve pollution problems in their city, for instance. In the translator training, most activities are usually about solving problems to find the most suitable and natural equivalents. The participants should be given a chance to speak their mind whether they might or might not come up with better equivalents and to give explanation of their choices of the equivalents. The fifth one is sharing personal experience. A language acquisition class can be given a task to have a story telling either individually or in group about their personal experience, or they can write about their personal experience on a piece of paper related to the lesson being learned in class. In the translator training, sharing personal experience can be in a form of sharing problems in doing translation for every participant. They can also share the ways they have found to solve translation problems.

The last one is creative tasks and projects. According to Willis (2004:22), the language learners can be asked to do creative writing, recording a news report or interview, or carrying out and reporting a survey. For the participants of a translator training, they can be given a project of translation, and they are divided into groups of translators, editors, and proofreaders with one person in charge as a translation project manager. They are given a deadline to finish the project, a reward for doing a good job, and a punishment for doing a bad job, such as asking them to revise the result again. In spite of having different kinds of tasks in a language acquisition class and in a translator training, all the cognitive processes could be well implemented in both.

Moreover, a typical task cycle used in Task-Based Approaches can be used well in both a language acquisition class and a translator training. A typical task cycle consists of a pretask phase, the task itself, and a posttask phase (Willis, 2004:37). In a pretask phase, teachers in a language acquisition class set up a relevant topic, explain the task, and clarify the intended outcome (Willis, 2004:37). In a translator training, the teacher together with the participants analyzes a text to be translated. The analysis is usually to find out about the purpose and the intended audience of the translation and to comprehend the source text.

In the phase of the task itself, the language learners “on their own, or in pairs or groups, work toward the task outcome” (Willis, 2004:37). Meanwhile, in this phase the participants of a translator training start doing the translation either in group or individually. They are allowed to have discussion with their classmates and to use any resources available to complete the translation. In a post-task phase, the students of a language acquisition class do “drafting, finalizing, and presenting the outcome or finished product to others” (Willis, 2004:37). In the translator training, the participants should present their translation result to the class to be discussed together and do revision of their work based on the feedback from the trainer and their classmates.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, methodologies of language acquisition and those of translator training have some fundamental differences. The first difference is about the competences taught in class. The language acquisition class mostly focuses on language or linguistic competence, while the translator training emphasizes not only on language/linguistic competence but also on translation competence, methodological competence, disciplinary competence, and technical competence. The second difference is that language acquisition is taught through practice only, whereas the teaching in the translator training requires both theory and practice. The third difference lies in the history of the method development and the approaches used in a language acquisition class and in a translator training.

Besides the differences, there are convergences between the methodologies of language acquisition and those of translator training. The first convergence is related to the shift of focus in both. The shift has occurred from form to meaning. The second convergence is about the use of context to teach language and translation. The third is about the teaching of reading and writing skills in both classes which can enhance comprehension and improve proficiency. The fourth is about the use of appropriate dictionaries. Both classes should be encouraged to use monolingual dictionaries more than bilingual ones. The fifth convergence is related to the use of Task-Based Approaches in a language acquisition class and in a translator training. These approaches could work well in both.

The fundamental differences and convergences mentioned in this paper are not necessarily the only differences and convergences. I believe there are still other differences and convergences between language acquisition and translator training. Therefore, further research is required to explore more differences and convergences in order to have more proper and better ways to teach both language and translation.

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