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Towards the acquisition of strategic competence in translator training: stepping into the translator trainees' shoes (II)

Hacia la adquisición de la competencia estratégica en la formación de traductores: en los zapatos del traductor en formación (II)

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Abstract: Unravelling the complex process of acquiring Translator Competence (TC) is a considerable challenge. Whilst TC has been considered fundamental to translator training, research, and training have often been limited to theoretical reflections, without including empirical input. In this proposal, we will try to fill a gap in the empirical studies that have been performed to date on TC and the analysis of its acquisition in real teaching practice. We offer the reader an in-depth review of key issues for the training of translators before presenting the empirical study. In the first part, we place the reader in the context in which the study is framed, dealing with basic concepts such as TC. This paper summarizes essential ideas before exploring the question of TC acquisition, and particularly into strategic competence (SC). In the second part, we describe the quantitative and qualitative methodology of the empirical study. The longitudinal study, presented, includes a group of 37 subjects, allowing greater depth in the analysis of the processes of the acquisition of SC. Finally, we present our conclusions. Our results shed light on key issues for the development of theory and practice to facilitate advances in the training of translators.

Keywords: Translator training, Empirical approach, Translator competence, Strategic competence, Longitudinal study

Resumen: Desenmarañar el complejo proceso de la adquisición de la competencia traductora (CT) es un desafío considerable. Si bien la CT resulta fundamental para la formación de traductores, la investigación y la formación a menudo se han limitado a reflexiones teóricas, sin incluir estudios empíricos. Con nuestra propuesta intentamos llenar un vacío en lo que

respecta a los estudios empíricos que se han realizado hasta la fecha sobre CT y el análisis de su adquisición en la práctica docente real. Ofrecemos al lector una revisión en profundidad de cuestiones claves para la formación de traductores antes de adentrarse en el estudio empírico. En la primera parte, situamos al lector en el contexto en el que se enmarca el estudio, tratando conceptos básicos como la CT. Nuestra propuesta resume las ideas esenciales para profundizar en la cuestión de la adquisición de la CT y, en particular, en la competencia estratégica (CE). En la segunda parte, describimos la metodología del estudio empírico de carácter cuantitativo y cualitativo. El estudio longitudinal presentado comprende un grupo de 37 sujetos, lo que permite un análisis en mayor profundidad de los procesos de adquisición de la competencia estratégica. Finalmente, presentamos las conclusiones. Con nuestra propuesta, esperamos arrojar luz sobre temas clave para el desarrollo de la teoría y la práctica en la formación de traductores.

Palabras clave: Formación de traductores, Aproximación empírica, Competencia traductora, Competencia estratégica, Estudio longitudinal

INTRODUCTION

Translator training is booming all over the world, with a growing demand for translators in all fields and imaginable language combinations (European Commission, 2018; Way, 2020; Guerberof Arenas, 2020). New undergraduate and graduate programs are constantly being created (Kelly, 2017; Massey et al., 2019; Hong and Galán-Mañas, 2022). Spain has been a leading country in the development of translator training and translation pedagogy (Way, 2022, p. 87): some of the best-known TC models (Hurtado, 2001[2011], 2017; Kelly, 2002, 2005, 2007) emerged there.

The concept of competence is key in the context advocated by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and, also in the discipline of translation, where the study of competences preceded the EHEA (Gregorio Cano, 2014). In fact, the study of competences has been one of the methodological aspects that has most concerned TI scholars (García Izquierdo, 2012, p. 29). The general research objective of the study presented here is to observe and analyse the repercussions of an undergraduate translation degree course in the development of TC. Using empirical methods that combine quantitative and qualitative analysis, relying on a longitudinal study of 37 students, the research focuses on the development of SC and, particularly the students' capacity to identify translation problems (Muñoz Martín, 2014, p. 9). In line with Kiraly (2013, p. 222) and Massey and Brändli (2016, p. 177), we believe small-scale qualitative case studies are a viable tool to help us understand better how TC grows (Kiraly and Massey, 2019).

This research is the continuation of a larger-scale study (with more than 1,000 subjects from 5 Spanish TI Schools) previously presented in Gregorio Cano (2018, 2020). Our objective is to discover whether the Translation and Interpreting Degree (TID) enhances the development of TC and, particularly, of SC. Furthermore, four hypotheses were formulated in order to be tested against the students' answers: (1) TI students about to finalize their degree are capable of recognizing more translation problems than TI students beginning their degree, (2) TI students about to complete their degree are able to recognize and differentiate between different translation problems better than TI students beginning their degree; (3) the capacity for abstraction of TI students when identifying translation problems is greater on completing their TID than at the beginning; and, (4) the richness of the metalanguage used by the TI students evolves from the beginning of their TID until they complete their TID.

There have been many definitions of translation from different perspectives that have been formulated over the years: those that focus on translation as an activity between languages, others as a process, those that affect the textual aspect, etc. In our research, translation is conceived as an activity whose backbone is problem-solving:

Translation is an intelligent activity, requiring creative problem-solving in novel textual, social, and cultural conditions. As we have seen, this intelligent activity is sometimes very conscious; most of the time it is subconscious, "beneath" our conscious awareness. It is no less intelligent when we are not aware of it — no less creative, and no less analytical. This is not a "mystical" model of translation. The sublimated intelligence that makes it possible for us to translate rapidly, reliably, and enjoyably is the product of learning — which is to say, of experience stored in memory in ways that enable its effective recall and flexible and versatile use. (Robinson, 1997[2003], p. 50)

Translation requires the development of a specific competence, which leads trainees towards expertise, identifies the translator, and distinguishes him/her from the non-translator: translation competence. This competence is consciously and unconsciously developed thanks to many factors, (Hurtado, 2015; Kiraly et al., 2018, p. 21), such as the training received in TI studies, a premise that is the starting point for the empirical research presented here.

1. TRANSLATOR COMPETENCE

The term "translator competence" began to be used in the mid-1980s, and many authors have alluded to it. The terminological disparity in English to refer to the concept of TC is evident: translational [translatory] competence (Wilss, 1976[1982]), translation competence (Toury, 1984; Nord, 1991[2005];

Hewson and Martin, 1991; Neubert and Shreve, 1992; Campbell, 1998; Vienne, 2000; PACTE, 2000, 2008, 2011; González-Davies and Scott-Tennent, 2005), translational skill (Lowe, 1987), translator competence (Bell, 1991; Kiraly, 1995, 2000, 2013; Kelly, 2000, 2005; Risku et al., 2010; Hansen, 2013), translational competence (Pym, 1992; Neubert, 1994), components of translation expertise (Gile, 1995[2009]), translator abilities (Hatim and Mason, 1997). However, despite the diversity of denominations, there is a certain consensus regarding what the concept encompasses, in terms of its content, but not in terms of its acquisition (Marco, 2004; Hurtado, 2001[2011]; Kiraly, 2013).

Throughout this research, TC is defined as "the set of abilities, skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to translate, for which it is essential to develop the ability to recognize translation problems and the strategies to solve these problems" (Gregorio Cano, 2014). TC development should form a fundamental part of translator education programs (Kiraly et al., 2018, p. 21). TC is broken down into a series of components (sub-competences or competences) that are interrelated, which may overlap and develop at different speeds for different trainees (Way, 2022, p. 88), where SC acts as the backbone of TC (Kelly, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007; PACTE, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2007).

1.1. *Strategic competence*

After an exhaustive review of translation competence models (for an overview see Göpferich 2019), in this proposal the models taken as reference are PACTE (1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2007) and Kelly (1999, 2002, 2005, 2007) because they are, in our opinion, the most complete. They include the strategic component as a regulatory agent of the other competences that come into play in the translation process. Throughout the review of TC models, despite the terminological variety, various authors include SC among the components of TC, namely: strategic competence (PACTE, 1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2007; Kelly, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007; Göpferich, 2007, 2009), transfer competence (Hewson and Martin, 1991; Hansen, 1997; Neubert, 2000; González-Davies, 2004), translation competence (Neubert, 2000), strategic transfer competence (Katan, 2008), problem-solving ability (Presas, 1996, 1998, 2008), or problem-solving competence (Herold, 2010).

For this research, Kelly's (2002) definition of SC is adopted, namely: "[that which] comprises all the procedures that are applied to the organization and performance of work, to the identification and solving of problems, and self-assessment and revision" (Kelly, 2002, p. 15).

The strategic sub-competence (Hurtado, 2001[2011], pp. 396-397) encompasses operational knowledge to guarantee the effectiveness of the

translation process and solve the problems encountered in its development. Moreover, according to Hurtado (2001[2011], p. 397), SC is the most important as it has a regulating and compensatory role for the rest of the sub-competences, which interact when translating and establishes hierarchical relationships between them. Therefore, the strategic sub-competence has to remedy the possible deficiencies of the hierarchical relationships between the other sub-competences and also serves to solve (translation) problems.

For our empirical study, the raising of awareness of students in order to recognize translation problems will be taken as a way of acknowledging the development of SC (Roiss and Zimmermann, 2010, p. 303).

2. MOVING A STEP FORWARD: FROM A THEORETICAL TO AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH

This research is framed within the discipline of translation and interpreting studies¹, and more specifically within translation pedagogy.

2.1 *Study design*

The empirical research presented is not experimental in nature, as we work with facts of direct experience that are not manipulated in order to describe and analyse the impact of the TI program from the University of Granada on the development of SC and, in particular, on students' ability to identify translation problems through an empirical study. Therefore, our design aims to identify, analyse, and describe trends based on the students' responses.

The instrument² used to gather data for the research study (Gregorio Cano, 2020) was designed to be completed on paper and consisted of two parts. In the first part, the focus was on sociodemographic data and the second part included a pre-translation task (García Izquierdo, 2000, 2012; Elena, 2011; Roiss, 2006a, 2006b) with open questions related to it where the students were asked to include 5 translation problems they might have identified (La Rocca, 2007).

In line with Grotjahn (1987, pp. 59-60) and Sierra (1998, pp. 33-37) the principal characteristics of the research presented here are the following:

- The study is non-experimental, and the instrument is completed in an uncontrolled and unmanipulated situation. There is no control of the subjects' experiences so as not to condition their responses. The research design identifies, describes, and

¹ This research was framed within the research project R&D funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, under the direction, as lead researcher, of Dr. Kelly.

² The instrument is available at <http://bitly.ws/yJRx>

analyses tendencies of an educational reality as experienced by the subjects, who are students.

- The data are quantitative and qualitative. The mixed research method³ is due to the nature of the research object itself. Thus, in this study a combination of quantitative and qualitative data was chosen, where the latter reinforce the meaning of the purely quantitative data.
- The data analysis performed is interpretative and statistical. The TID students are the protagonists of the research. It is through their perceptions and experiences that the research objectives are fulfilled. The importance of the statistical-interpretative combination is due to the intention of substantiating the description of the educational reality through the protagonists themselves. Hence, the qualitative data are of vital relevance because they facilitate the interpretation of the object of study, expressed in the students' own words.
- The temporal scope of the empirical study has a double approach: a series of sectional data, referring to a unique moment in time (Gregorio Cano, 2020) and the longitudinal study, presented, which follows the progress of a group of students (García Ferrando, 2005, p. 180; Sierra, 1998, p. 179).

The possibility of studying the same group of students in the longitudinal study has allowed us to formulate a series of hypotheses (one general and four specific) in order to facilitate the research process and to reach more concrete conclusions.

The general hypothesis of our longitudinal study was that training in TS enhances the development of TC and particularly of SC. The four specific hypotheses were:

1. TI students about to finalize their degree are capable of recognizing more translation problems than TI students beginning their degree.
2. The TI students about to complete their degree are able to recognize and differentiate between different translation problems better than TI students beginning their degree.
3. The capacity for abstraction of TI students when identifying translation problems is greater on completing their TID than at the beginning.

³ Neither of the data recovery techniques is better than the other, there are, however, techniques which better suit the needs of different research studies.

4. The richness of the metalanguage used by the TI students evolves from the beginning of their TID until they complete their TID.

2.2. *Mapping the participants' profile of the sample*

The inclusion criteria for the participants respond to our objectives, which is why the sample consists of first-year students that had just started their TI studies and fourth-year students who were about to graduate (4th year) at the School of Translation and Interpreting at University of Granada in Spain.

The students' responses show that the majority of our sample (37 students)⁴ tend to access the TID directly after secondary education, as in the macro-study (Gregorio Cano, 2020). Therefore, their average age ranges from 17 to 20, although there is one student in the longitudinal study who was between 21 and 24 at access. The fourth-year research subjects are within age ranges of four more years.

The sample shows a majority of women (73%) compared to 27% who are men.

None of the subjects had a prior degree before studying the TID, as expected, given their age range. Nor does the only subject aged between 21 and 24 in the first-year group (and between 25 and 28 in fourth-year) hold a prior degree.

Our longitudinal study covers three of the four B languages offered in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI) at the University of Granada, as none of the students in Arabic completed our instrument in both the first and fourth years.

Several students changed their C language during their TID studies. In other words, they started studying one language combination and changed to another by changing their C language. For example, in the first-year, their C language was French, a language they had studied for between six and nine years and for which they stated that they had an intermediate linguistic and cultural competence. In the fourth-year, however, their C language was German, for which they considered that, after three to five years of study, they had an elementary cultural and linguistic level.

It is also interesting to see that some students neglected their C language, possibly due to the curriculum design, as the students must follow 4 compulsory levels of C language in the first and second years, C language area studies in second year and, finally, two C-A translation courses on the

⁴ In order to see the individual and detailed profiles of the sample, see Gregorio Cano (2018).

third and fourth-year of the degree. Once students have completed these credits, they are not obliged to take any other courses for their C language. This reduces the time invested in their C languages, which may be why some of the students' perceptions of their C language linguistic and/or cultural competence levels do not go beyond elementary or intermediate, depending on the case.

Having reviewed the students' profiles, it seems that their perceptions of the different levels (native speaker, advanced, intermediate, beginner or inexistent) depends on the demands of each student. There is no clear tendency concerning how the working languages are acquired. The students' profiles show that the most common perception of their B language in the first-year is an intermediate level, although many of the subjects have spent less than one month in their B language country(ies). Furthermore, we also find that when the students' C language is English, the perception of their linguistic and cultural levels is higher than for other C languages. This may be due to the wider offer of French and English as foreign languages in secondary education in Spain.

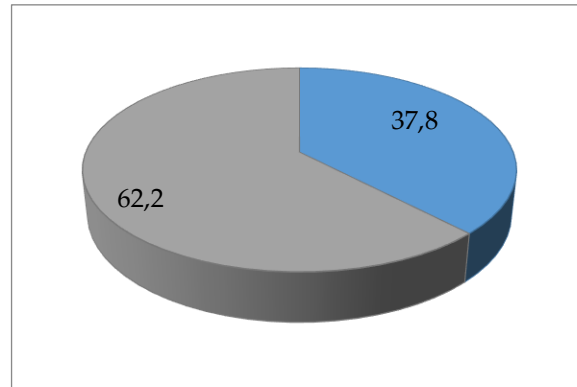
One of the subjects in our longitudinal study stated that she was a native speaker of her B language (German), a profile which is increasingly less common in first-year students.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents, the quantitative results of our study, depending on the hypothesis.

3.1. *Hypothesis 1*

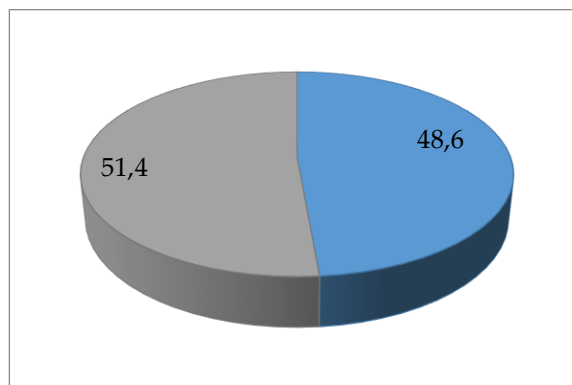
TI students about to complete their degree are capable of recognizing more translation problems than TI students beginning their degree. The results of our longitudinal study refute this hypothesis (only 37.8% of the students' show a positive evolution between the first and fourth years).



Graphic 1. Results for hypothesis 1
Source. Elaborated by the author

3.2. Hypothesis 2

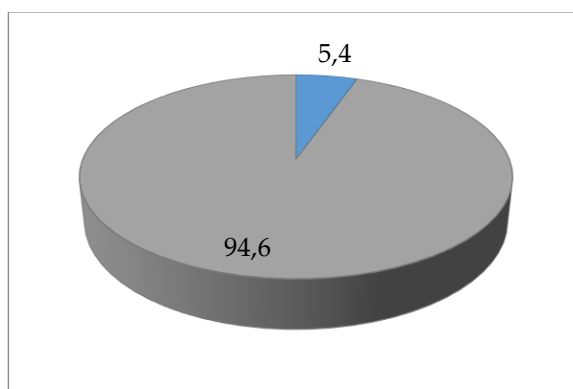
TI students about to complete their degree are able to recognize and differentiate between different translation problems better than TI students beginning their degree. Our results neither refute nor confirm this hypothesis, as the percentage of students who show an evolution (48.6%) barely varies from the percentage of those who don't (51.4%). In general, the students who progress over the four years of the TID in recognizing more translation problems are those who also learn how to recognize and differentiate between different types of translation problems (14 cases).



Graphic 2. Results for hypothesis 2
Source. Elaborated by the author

3.3. Hypothesis 3

The capacity for abstraction of TI students when identifying translation problems is greater on completing their TID than at the beginning. Our third hypothesis is also refuted, based on the results of our longitudinal study (only 5.4% of the subjects show a positive evolution in this regard between the first and fourth years).

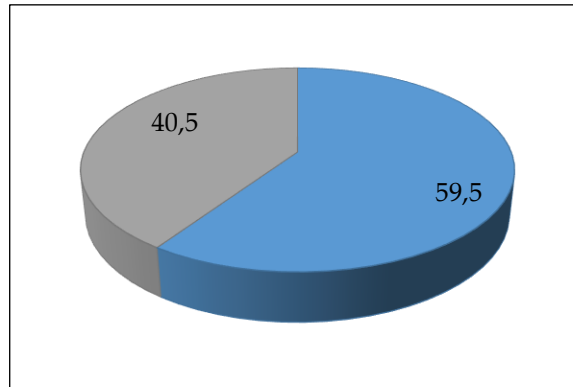


Graphic 3. Results for hypothesis 3

Source. Elaborated by the author

3.4. Hypothesis 4

The richness of the metalanguage used by the TI students evolves from the beginning of their TID until they complete their TID. This is the only one of the four hypotheses to be confirmed, where 59.5% of the subjects show a positive evolution in the richness of their metalanguage (Gregorio Cano, 2017).



Graphic 4. Results for hypothesis 4
Source. Elaborated by the author

4. DISCUSSION

The data and results in this proposal are extracted from the students' replies to the questionnaire and the pre-translation task they were set. Therefore, there might be some bias in the answers provided due to the specificities of the students' profiles. The general hypothesis for our longitudinal study, training in TS enhances the development of TC and, particularly, of SC", was not confirmed. In fact, of the 37 students in our longitudinal study, only two positively evolved from the first to the fourth year in the four parameters established to measure the development of SC through their ability to identify translation problems.

Only the fourth specific hypotheses have been confirmed, as explained below.

In the longitudinal study, the majority of the students (23) showed no progress in identifying more translation problems between their first and fourth years, whereas, whilst 14 did.

In regard to the types of translation problems identified, 19 students showed no progress, compared to the 18 students who did.

The level of abstraction when identifying translation problems in the responses given between the first and fourth-year progressed in only 2 of the 37 subjects in the longitudinal study.

In reference to the metalanguage used to describe the different translation problems in the pre-translation text analysis (Gregorio Cano,

2020), 22 subjects responded that they had a better grasp of it, as compared to 15 subjects who said that there had been no progress since their first year.

In the parameters studied in order to identify the factors that enhance the development of SC, no highly significant tendency was detected for any of the four parameters studied.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the implementation of new undergraduate degree courses and the EHEA in Spanish universities, pedagogy and training the trainers have become increasingly relevant. We believe that the investment in research on training is vital both to improve the quality of the training received by the students and for the lecturers (Király et al., 2018; Massey, 2019; Way, 2020; Horcas, 2023) responsible for training future translators, reviewers, international commercial agents, teachers/lecturers, cultural mediators, project managers, etc. The importance of competence-based translator training is essential, and many authors have researched the components of translator competence (Wilss, 1976[1982]; Nord, 1991[2005]; Pym, 1992; Gile, 1995[2009]; PACTE, 2001a, 2001b; Kelly, 2000, 2005) and the agents that intervene in its development. Despite the variety of research available on TC, it is still a challenging object of study due to the complexity involved in verifying how it is developed as a product of the training received after completing a university degree. Thus, our research helps to fill the vacuum that exists on the process of developing TC.

The description of TC is key in translator training, it is a central concept in the development of the different activities and learning objectives in the training programs for future translators. For all of the above, the definition of TC, as well as the identification of the factors that intervene in its development, are of the utmost importance.

Because Translation Pedagogy is a very applied, hands-on discipline, it is still quite scarce in the development of research projects on the training of future translators, interpreters, and intercultural mediators.

The macro-study (Gregorio Cano, 2020) and longitudinal study results show no patterns for the development of SC. In fact, it appears that the greater or lesser development of this competence depends more on *ad hoc* individual characteristics that may be related to (individual) learning styles, than on the (plural) teaching approaches (Király et al., 2018; Massey, 2019; Way, 2020; Horcas, 2023) which dominate the TID, as the longitudinal study of a group of students trained in one faculty (School of Translation and Interpreting, University of Granada) and who share similar profiles demonstrates.

This leads us to ask ourselves whether the TID significantly affects the development of SC, and if so, it is necessary to discover which factors do have the greatest impact. Our results indicate possible causes for the lack of common tendencies amongst the students of the same TID faculty: (1) the lack of consensus about the teaching-learning process for identifying translation problems in university translator training in the TI School where the research was carried out; and, (2) within TS as a discipline, the lack of consensus when defining TC and how it should be measured.

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