
Bibliogr.

1. Translating and interpreting — Study and teaching.

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TRANSLATION SYLLABUS
AND CLASSROOM PROCEDURE
(FOR LARGE GROUPS):
SAVOIR-FAIRE OR SAVOIR?

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INTRODUCTORY

It is a fact that the Translation course calls for, and cannot be viable without, constructive classroom interaction. It is also a fact that this condition fails to obtain in our increasingly overcrowded classes. No wonder, then, that the larger part of the class have the quiet to do as they wait for the teacher's version (can any student in a large--30 plus--class be allowed to contribute more than a word in a one-hour session, if more than one voice is to be heard?), nor is it any wonder that the teacher should complain that the objectives set are never met (can a teacher afford to allow more than one suggestion per segment of text, if «progress» is to be made?) No wonder, again, that the few translators and interpreters existing in countries where this is the case are by and large self-instructed individuals who have developed their skills outside the Translation classroom. Yet, the syllabuses continue to be designed and the methodologies adopted without any consideration of the number for which they are designed and adopted. Should not we, in the wake of such constraints, reconsider the class-size? Or, failing that--a most likely prospect in a context of serious financial, hence space and staffing, constraints--, should not we reconsider our syllabuses, revise our objectives and develop new methodologies of teaching Translation and new strategies of handling large Translation classes? The present paper proposes to address those questions and to suggest a classroom procedure that should help us
deal with large classes and that is geared toward developing savoir-faire rather than imparting savoir. The main components of the procedure to be developed are: course-description revisited; breakup of sessions and course-focus; group management and individual needs.

1. Course-Description Revisited:

I have been teaching English and Translation (Arabic-into-English and English-into-Arabic) for over fifteen years and cannot remember having ever come across a Translation syllabus that refers to the number of students for which the course is intended and the objectives set, let alone one that provides for an adjustment of the course to an unusually large—say 30-plus—Translation class. (The figure 30 I am using here is indicative of what I consider a limit «workable/ manageable» class size, if at least 50% of the group are to stand a chance of getting a two-minute time slot each to say something in a one-hour session; 15 is ideal.) In my view, instead of saying «get the students to learn/ develop a grasp of/ handle...»), course-descriptions should say «get a group of up to 30 students to learn... etc». The course-description will thus be as much binding to the teacher who instructs and handles the group as to the administration services who divide the student-body at each instruction level into groups; or, at least, it will call attention, in case of a group-size beyond that figure, to the need to adjust the description, objectives and methodology accordingly. (I point out, in passing here, that the «workability/ feasibility» of a course-description, particularly in Translation, does depend also on the goodwill and understanding of the administration not only in the distribution of the student-body concerned into groups (group-size), but also in such practical matters as the allocation of rooms and the timing of the sessions (it is impossible, for instance, to «train» students in translation skills in an amphitheatre).) Since, as the situation stands, it seems that we will be more and more called upon to serve big groups, I will propose a focused course-description (for First- and Second-Year Translation), an adapted breakdown of sessions and an adjusted class management procedure intended to
ensure some form of constructive interaction and cooperative learning in a large group.

We have said earlier on that it seems most likely that we are going to have to deal with large classes; the course-description should, therefore, be made in such a way as to provide for such a situation. The central question is: How can the course ensure development of savoir-faire despite the number constraints? The first element of the answer is: focus. A focused Translation course-description should, to my mind, be specific about the objectives and the methodology as adjusted to an oversized group and to the number of sessions reckoned. In view of this, I would suggest the following description for First- and Second-Year English students: «To get a group of about 30 students to develop the skills of handling a variety of text-types (literary, scientific and technical), to develop a feel for differences of language purposes as studied in Reading and Writing (description/narration/argumentation) and to collectively process the information obtained therefrom for the production of an «acceptable» text in translation. The training should equip the student for the production of a «readable», grammatically-correct, neatly-written version of a ten-to fifteen-line, jargon-free text.»

To this umbrella-heading, it would help to add the following indicative distribution for the first sessions, together with a few tips and reminders. «The first six sessions will familiarize the students with translation-focused strategies of reading, comprehension and analysis of at least three different types of texts (two sessions per text, on average) with a view to their translation. The discussion will involve such aspects of a text as type, context, tone, mood, structure, tense, language function and register. For further illustration of any of these aspects, examples will be sought in excerpts offering enough context, and not in isolated, decontextualized chunks of text. It is important to avoid proposing, throughout the course, any «artificial» texts such as those made up to illustrate a particular language item or stylistic feature. It is also important that a necessary arching be laid between the Translation course and such other components of the curriculum as Reading and Writing (around such aspects as language functions, strategies of reading and requirements of writing), as well
as the Literature subjects (around such aspects as context, style, register and common figurative devices).»

2. Breakdown of Sessions and Course-Focus:

The course intended for a 30-plus Translation class can only be modest when it comes to the number of texts to be proposed and translated collectively. The average time allotted for the course is one hour a week; the total number of sessions is about 25 a year (Tunisian programme/ Tunisian academic year). A one-page text takes on average two sessions, whatever the instruction level, when at least two versions are to be heard for each segment of text, when the mistakes and errors are to be properly corrected and when a common version is to be negotiated. If two tests are given in the year and that each is followed upon by a correction session (with the common errors and mistakes written on the board and corrected) and by a session for the development of a negotiated version, then we are left with barely time enough for the treatment of nine texts all in all. Teachers who do more than nine texts can only be proceeding by dictation or sharing the course with the «clever few»; and, while it seems to them they are making «progress», they are in fact basically indulging in their guru-game.

The translation course should be intended to ensure training rather than teaching. The latter two terms (training/ teaching) I am pressing into service in the particular context of the present paper to point out a fundamental distinction, as I see it, between two types of approach and practice. By «training», I mean a procedure of getting the learners to develop the skills of «interrogating» SL through practice, through trial and error, and of producing TL through practice, through trial and error (with the teacher supervising and directing the collaborative venture toward the development of a negotiated version). By «teaching», I mean a more orthodox knowledge-imparting, instructive procedure such as tends to obtain in History and subjects commonly considered to be of a factual or theoretical nature. In brief, by «training», I mean initiation into savoir-faire, a collaborative, participatory experience; by «teaching», I mean imparting savoir, a mostly receptive experience.
In view of the objectives outlined above and of the distinction made, I would propose the following breakdown of sessions:

- **GETTING TO KNOW THE TEXT**: Three sessions for the presentation, reading, analysis and discussion of 3 short SL texts (fully referenced and constituting unity of meaning), representing the three major types--literary/scientific/technical--, with a view to determining type, context, tone, mood, structure, tense, language function and register (since the students are at the same time starting their Reading, Writing and Literature courses, it should not be difficult to make cross-references and elicit inter-subject transfer of knowledge);

- **PRODUCING A NEGOTIATED VERSION**: Three sessions for collaborative production of a translation of the three texts, based on contributions by the students (these have now had the first text with them for three weeks and have had the major difficulties eased for them in the course of the «GETTING-TO-KNOW-THE-TEXT» stage);

- **ASSIGNING HOMEWORK**: The sessions remaining (apart from the classroom tests, their correction and the remedial session following from each) would involve the setting of texts in advance, random collection of scripts and production of a negotiated version. (See detailed practical procedure under «Equipping in Savoir-Faire», further down.)

    One major factor of motivation/demotion in this respect, is the choice and preparation of the text proposed as homework. I have noticed, as I am sure many of you--not only teachers, but also students--have, that there are times when the texts proposed in the year give the impression that they have been dealt with in a rather expedient manner at the selection and preparation phase. Sometimes, because of difficulty with the photocopy service or because of unpreparedness, a text is picked a minute before the lesson from a colleague's shelf and thrust at the students, and, there, both the teacher and the students are in for a rough ride. One needs only to consider a class wrestling with a Faulkner or al-Jaahidh product to imagine the Sisyphean and at once grotesque experience they are in for. At other
times, a text done the year before is reproposed, again for reasons of unpreparedness, and, there, the «doped veterans» miraculously take the lead and engage in a process of quoting from memory, or--to use a modernism--«cloning» ready-made equivalents. At other times still, the English text proposed, entrusted to the secretaries for typing (these, in general, have little or no knowledge of English), is so full of errors that the teacher him/herself can barely decipher it.

It should go without saying that liking or not liking a given text, that is the reader's sympathy or antipathy--or, shall we say, the «likeability» of a text in terms of pith and its «comeliness» in terms of package, or the opposite--is the major motivator or demotivator when it comes to interest in doing homework and involvement in class work. You may talk to me of my favourite subject; but you will have to count without my interest in case of poor delivery or a bad package. And you may speak to me of world-shaking ideas; but I will be none the wiser if your sentences just skid over my dome. And you may take all your time correcting a text plagued with typing errors; but, for all your goodwill, you will only be putting me off it (not to speak of the risk of fossilization attendant upon such a situation).

3. Group Management and Individual Needs:

A Translation course in a 30-plus class tends to exclude more than to involve. We know by experience that certain classes live on a dialogue between a teacher who asks and one or two students who are there to answer for the others, acting as if they were spokesmen for an electorate they represented. For many, this is not much of a problem: the one or two participant representatives are happy, the electorate are happy, and the teacher, who has tired of flogging dead horses, is often led--after trying and tiring--to live with the reality that the «horse won't drink». Yet, there will always remain with some of us, teachers, a nagging concern that the horse must drink (after all, the course-description assumes that the entire pack of horses drink). This concern has been voiced by many teachers and experts addressing the issue of participation in large classes. In Forum (October 1994; p. 7), Balla Konaré writes: «What happens all too often in large classes... is
that activity is dominated by a small minority of the best students». He warns: «The frustration of the weaker students causes them to opt out of more and more ... activities.» He then comments: «The teacher may be aware that many students are not participating, but may feel that it is their fault, on the grounds that «you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.» How, then, can we make the horse drink?

To ensure student participation in my very large Translation classes, I have had to devise strategies of class management that accommodated the natural drive to dominate among the most outspoken students (these are not necessarily the best ones; some of them I have dubbed «learner-translator snipers», those who make their presence felt by shooting a word from time to time to show they have learnt the dictionary by heart) and that involved the silent majority. It is these strategies--some of which I am sure have also been contrived by fellow-teachers determined to make it work despite the constraints--that I would like to expand on and share with you. (I must also say at this point, however, that an additional objective I set my training programme--though I am fully aware that my primary objective is not to «produce» translators--is to screen my class for promising/ budding/ potential future translators whom I assign a full magazine/ newspaper article, a lecture script or a short story for analysis, commentary, discussion and translation outside the set hours, a sort of research project.)

- «PROPOSING TEXTS IN ADVANCE»: A text that is proposed two weeks in advance begs to be attended to. The time-period given makes it possible for the student to work on the text and propose a version for correction and, ideally, to get it back for informed use when the time comes for classroom consideration of the text in question. Even the otherwise silent student who has submitted a paper and received it will be encouraged to participate, since the corrected copy is there to spare him/her the embarrassment resulting from blunders. On the other hand, the batch of copies corrected every week will yield a number of common errors and mistakes that cannot suffer to remain uncorrected until regular testing or final exam time. Every new session will thus begin by the teacher writing on the board the harvest of the week (of common and recurrent
errors and mistakes) and eliciting class corrections. This task has never taken me more than ten minutes per session, but it has spared me hours of having to correct the same errors or mistakes twice.

- **QUOTING THE GOOD**: A text proposed in advance is informative to the teacher who elicits written work and corrects it in a timely manner. Since the teacher, too, translates the text, the copies submitted to him/her provide a non-negligible mine of readings, interpretations, alternatives and matter for fun. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that I have often found myself reconsidering my own reading, interpretation or version of some part of a text, and revising it after some insight I gathered from a student’s script. Nor need this learning from the learner be concealed: I have tried a wide range of incentives to fuel the motivation of my students and boost their self-confidence; but so far nothing has outdone my quoting a good translation produced by a student and saying: «Mr./Ms. so-and-so has proposed this. I couldn’t have come up with a better version. All rights reserved!»

- **READINESS TO BE PERSUADED TO THE CONTRARY**: For many teachers, this would probably better be mildly rephrased as «readiness to consider a different version». We all know that it is not easy to admit, on the part of a teacher, that your reading of a certain language product is wrong—or, let us say, that what you have read and proposed as meaning this may also be read as meaning that--; but we also all know that, with time or with a change in point of view, something might prove to allow for a reading differing from the one you thought was, and/or proposed as, the only possible reading. To guard against any exaggeratedly authoritarian or doggedly «rejectionist» tendency and to put to positive use both «right» and «erroneous» readings and interpretations, our firmness as teachers should be tempered with tolerance. The pedagogy and policy of justification of a claim should apply to both teacher and learner. I have often found myself, in the fifteen years of my teaching career so far, in situations where a categorical «no» would simply not dismiss a nagging doubt that a student’s apparently «unorthodox» or «far-fetched» reading might be not that far from the plausible. And I learnt to say, after the discussion had proved my own reading closer
to the implausible or my hasty «no» unfounded, that I should have thought or should think (we should have thought or should think) about that particular point twice. We are, as teachers—and teachers of Translation in particular—, also readers and interpreters, and though we come to the text with a better equipment than that available to our students, we come to the text, like them, with our preconceptions and idiosyncrasies.

- «GETTING THE HORSE TO DRINK»: Getting the silent majority to contribute written and oral work is not only pedagogical; it is also of psychological and intellectual benefit. Doing the quiet is an attitude that only gets reinforced when left undisturbed. One way of eliciting written work is to proceed by random, but systematic, collecting of scripts; these may range from a single paragraph to the full text proposed for consideration. When a paper submitted is found to have been simply garbled, the student concerned is duly warned and marked out for submission of an «acceptable» paper the following week. When the paper submitted is marred by avoidable errors and mistakes, it is returned without a grade, and the student is required to rewrite it (in which case the grade is obtained after careful and satisfactory rewriting, and it rewards the improved version). A way of eliciting oral participation is to involve the weaker or more silent students in tasks of putting together the elements of an improved version or alternative. Thus, when a student or two have suggested a version and that the latter has received elements of improvement, the weaker or more silent student is required to give the version incorporating the elements of improvement. Some teachers tend to believe that the silent majority resent being disturbed; the truth is they resent neglect even more.

4. Equipping in Savoir-Faire:

Translation teachers often complain that students tend to look upon the translation task as the matching of lexical items. The situation is such in large classes that one should not be surprised at this state of
affairs. First, the risk of unmanageability of a large class tends to make the teacher give in more easily to crowd pressure, to cruise through the course and to quickly have done with time-consuming consideration of «detail» and examination of «alternatives», as well as with awkward-designed or undesigned-class silence. Second, that same pressure and the time constraints tend to make it hardly possible to have more than an exchange of shots, with students claiming attention, or their right to be involved, and with those I have dubbed «learner-translator snipers» busy rivalling in shooting isolated language items at the rest of the class, an exercise that is, for some, mostly a display of how far they have gone in learning the dictionary by heart or a tactic to test the teacher's word-count. No wonder, therefore, that at exam-time, faced with a word whose equivalent in the target language they do not know, most students feel frustrated and act as if their lives depended upon it. Third, the perniciousness of the oversized class situation is that it weighs so much down on the teacher that the most dictation-resistant among us are led, consciously or unconsciously, to opt out of training in savoir-faire in favour of imparting savoir. Clearly, the situation hardly allows for effective training and can hardly foster adequate equipping of our graduates for a possible career in translation (one of the rare underfurnished/understaffed sectors in many countries around the world).

If we cannot have a real discussion of a number of suggestions upon which to base a negotiated version, how can we train our students in such skills as awareness of text type, feel for language function and sensitivity to register? To counter the «sniper» tendency and ensure that a group of 30-plus are involved in the Translation course and that they gather the basic skills required for «acceptable» translating, it may help to proceed as follows:

- **STEP ONE**: Split the class in groups of three to four students and set each group a task. Each of the groups will have a different «spokesman» for each new session. The tasks of the first session will involve for each different group an aspect of the analysis-phase: presenting the text type; presenting the context; presenting the dominant language function; presenting tense; presenting register; commenting on main features of structure;
commenting on main grammar points from a comparative perspective. (I have used «presenting» and «commenting» and not «analysis» and «examination» to show that the analysis and study activities need not be classroom activities. Indeed, when texts are given two weeks in advance, the sub-groups formed and briefed as to their tasks may work on the text in the library, for instance, and come to class to present their findings and comment on the feature assigned.)

- **STEP TWO**: When these aspects have been presented and discussed in the analysis-session of consideration of the new text, the same groups, who have received the text two weeks in advance and negotiated a version, may be asked in the synthesis-session to contribute their version of any segment of the text. The procedure does not, of course, rule out contribution of various suggestions for the same segment of text and contribution, by the same group, of versions for more than one segment. Nor does it relieve the individual students from the duty of having the full text done in writing and ready for any random collection.

- **STEP THREE**: The proposed version of each segment is written on the board by a volunteer or the «spokesman» for a group, amended (if necessary) and, then, accepted as a «negotiated class-version».

- **STEP FOUR**: The «negotiated class-version» of the entire text thus obtained is read aloud and the resulting TL is further compared with SL with a view to highlighting any differences of significance, to appreciating the extent to which mood, tone and register have been preserved and to noting the methods and techniques adopted for their rendering. Follow-up questions to ask at this stage would be: Is there matter for laughter in TL as there is in SL? Is TL as moving as SL? Is TL as factual/ neutral/ compelling as SL? Vnat «acrobatic tricks» have been made to preserve such or such a feature? Which parts of the text have been most difficult to translate and why? How do you like this text/type of text? Any authors/books/topics you know and who/which you would like we try our hand at translating?
CONCLUSION:

Translation is, to borrow a phrase from Barthes and adapt it to our purposes, «zero-degree» teaching; it is, to coin a new term, «n-degree» training. And training can only be participatory. The problem facing the teacher of Translation in large classes, however, is that of ensuring interaction in a context that is hardly congenial for it. Faced with such a situation, some teachers opt out of the participatory model altogether and take on the role of dispenser of processed «knowledge»; others content themselves with a sham class involvement practice that tends to turn the course into an exchange of shooting of individual lexical items more than a forum for discussion and negotiation of genuine contribution; others still learn to cope by serving a minority of particularly motivated students, bidding the silent majority farewell. The reconsideration of the syllabus presented above sets the teacher clear objectives based on a participatory approach (despite the constraints). The breakdown of sessions proposed presents the phases of a practice geared to the requirement of constructive interaction. The four-step procedure suggested presents the strategies of whole-class involvement in a process of training in savoir-faire. This methodology I have tried and is one that seems to work. If, in spite of that, the horse cannot be made to drink, then the case may well be that either the water is not drinkable at all or that the horse is fasting, in which case abstinence from drinking on the part of the horse, and refraining from «force-watering» the horse on our part, would be the right thing to do.
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