An appraisal of the teaching of translation in Palestinian Universities

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Introduction

The teaching of translation at Palestinian universities has never been controlled by a unified outlook or strategy. As other courses, the methodology is left to the teacher to follow based on his background. The course outline is probably managed by the department of English. The question is whether the teaching of translation at the undergraduate level requires introducing theory and practice or is it only practice based on contrastive analysis the aim of which is to develop the linguistic ability of the students. Some programs offer two courses; others offer one course in translation. It is beyond expectation to assume that such courses are designed to give professional training to graduate professional translators. Many professional translators have English literature background rather than linguistics or applied linguistics background. This brings about the question of whether a translator needs to know the theory of translation or it is enough to be qualified by the high competence in both languages (English and Arabic).

This paper has been designed to look into the course outline given in different places of Palestinian universities to check the objectives of teaching translation. It will also look into samples of tests given in different universities to check the compliance of tests with the course objectives. It is hoped that the results of the analysis will expose the matches and mismatches among various translation courses taught in Palestinian universities besides the orientation of such courses as to whether they are geared to be based on developing linguistic ability or in offering professional training in translation.

Literature review

Published literature on translation problems talk about different aspects of such problems and ways suggested to deal with them. Emery (2000) in his paper "Introduction to translation theory and contrastive textology in Arab university translation classes", found that in almost all courses the rationale is seldom made explicit. In a survey, Bahumaid (1995) found (with one exception) no set of clearly defined objectives of the translation course in the course description/outline. The claimed objectives are a) linguistic and b) vocational. The latter one is included in very few courses. Sewell (1996) in a survey of translation in the BA degree of French found that in 19 out of 21 programs, courses are taught

to improve language proficiency. Actually, improving linguistic proficiency normally leads to a better chance of employment as a translator. Some people believe that translation courses could be more directed to developing professional translation skills (Critchley et.al. 1996), while others believe that teaching translation courses is neither realistic no relevant to the work of a professional translator.

Some people think that such courses need principled theoretical background which is not found in the courses taught at the Arab universities. The question is what theory to teach and how to teach it? In a traditional translation class, the teacher usually hands out students a 300-400 word passage to translate, followed by a lot of exhortations with plenty of *dos and don'ts.*

Scholars writing in the modern linguistic era failed to come up with single all-encompassing theory. Arrojo (1998) suggests that the quest for such a theory from an essentialist perspective is ultimately doomed to failure. To add to this gloomy picture, Arab students labor under additional handicap because reference works are mostly in European languages which show high level of theoretical complexity.

Critchley et.al (1996) noticed that many of students who picked up theoretical knowledge failed to apply this knowledge in solving real translation problems. For example, the uncontextualized *Ali kicked the bucket* was difficult to translate into Arabic from a formal or a cultural perspective leading to think that such examples are not helpful in marrying theory with practice.

Emery (2000) talks about the translations theory in terms of *meaning and equivalence*. The basic premise of the theory is that language is about meaning and translation is about equivalence of meaning. Meaning can be subdivided into *contextual, pragmatic, cultural connotative and semiotic.* Students should give examples from both languages (L1 &L2 cultures).

Abdel-Hafiz (2000) investigates the problems encountered in the translation of English journalistic texts into Standard Arabic. He found that the most common problems in journalistic translation are attributed to: (a) the inappropriate selection of the equivalent TL word or

expression, (b) the inability to observe the syntactic and stylistic differences between the SL and the TL and (c) the translated text may contain violations of some TL rules.

The first of the problems found to be *equivalence* which entails *formal equivalence* seeking to capture the form of the SL expression, *functional equivalence* seeking to capture the function of the expression and finally *ideational* seeking to convey the communicative sense of the SL expression independently of function and form. Usually it is easier to resort to the formal equivalent rather than functional or ideational.

Examples of wrong equivalence: translating *principals* to mean (مباديء) rather than رؤساء and *relaxed* translated as ودود instead of يتسم بالهدوء , *late president* translated as الرئيس السابق instead of الرئيس المتوفي

Talking about problems and solutions in teaching translation, Gerding-Salas (2000) says that consequences of wrong translations can be catastrophic-especially if done by laypersons. Mistakes made may be irreparable, like the translator in a hospital for a patient who needed face surgery told the doctor the patient needed breast surgery. Therefore, such mistakes can be a matter of life or death. Hence the importance of training translators, not only in the acquisition and command of languages and translation strategies and procedures, but also in specific knowledge areas and, what is equally important, in professional ethics.

Among other problems is reading and comprehension ability in the source language. Overcoming this problem, a translator is faced with linguistic untranslatability problems (cognates, calques, and aphorisms), and cultural untranslatability (idioms, proverbs, jokes and puns). We quite often run into those painful "not found" terms, for which not even the best dictionary can provide us with an accurate meaning. Gerding-Salas says "one of the greatest virtues of a good translator is the ability to find the nearest common sense interpretation of the "not found element" within its context."

Newmark (1995) identifies the following essential characteristics of a good translator:

- Reading comprehension ability in a foreign languages
- Knowledge of the subject
- Sensitivity to language (L1 and L2)
- Competence to write the target language dexterously, clearly, economically and resourcefully.

New approaches to translation talk about translation theory that is required for teachers of translation. Such approach is called "translatology "in Canada, and "Translation studies in Belgium. However, it is generally known that "translation is something you learn by doing not by talking about translation"

The following are some steps suggested for teaching translation:

1. Selection of material
2. Browsing through the text
3. Students should read the whole text twice
4. The second reading must be "deep reading" finding out problem items in translation
5. Dividing text into segments given to groups of students
6. Discussions and finally the teacher gets students to agree on a translation

In chapter four of his book *Translation Theories and their application to teaching English/Arabic*, Shaheen (2000) discusses the results of a questionnaire of 21 items given to 30 Syrian post graduate students at British universities. All of them had translation courses in their undergraduate programs. The questionnaire was designed to measure the satisfaction of those students with the translation programs in Syrian universities. The answers were mostly reflecting the dissatisfaction with translation teaching they experienced. Problems were noticed in the following areas:

1. Lack of vocabulary, idioms and appropriate register
2. Application of theory and finding the exact equivalence
3. Large number in class hampered good teaching methods
4. Low standard of English was main obstacle
5. Inadequacy of teachers' qualifications
6. Lack of suitable textbooks
7. Examinations were inadequate
8. Lack of variety of subjects for translation
9. Students were against having already translated texts in exams

When asked about the qualities of good translation teacher, they said:

1. Good command of both English and Arabic
2. Good cultural background
3. Acquainted with the theory of translation

4. Use variety of texts

It has been noticed from the given review that translation problems need careful consideration from teachers and educators at the level of materials, methodology of teaching and qualifications of teachers. Most prominent points noticed from literature are:
1. the cultural aspect being crucially important in the translation attempts,
2. the knowledge of cultural differences is central to the qualification of teachers,
3. practice in translation is more productive than knowing the theory without practice,
4. a class of high competency in both target languages is more able in delivering acceptable translation than a class of low level in language competency,
5. materials must be carefully selected to cover various aspects of discourse to provide learners with expertise in style and jargon suitable for the translation topic,
6. the amount of practice is also very important to give learners confidence in their abilities.

The study

Hypotheses
Given this background, it is hypothesized that:
- translation courses at Palestinian universities do not meet the objectives of graduating professional translators.
- students face problems in cultural differences and consequently use translation courses to improve linguistic competency rather than improve translation skills.

Instruments of study
To investigate the above mentioned hypotheses, the following instruments were used:
1. A questionnaire was designed to test the degree of satisfaction of students taking translation courses at the undergraduate level at Al-Najah University and at Hebron University. The questionnaire[1] included 16 items divided into three groups. 94 students

participated in answering the questionnaire. They were all senior students in the BA programs, 44 from Al-Najah University and 50 students from Hebron University.

2. looking at the outline of translation courses and the types of translation exams to see if they match or mismatch the claims of the course outline.
3. looking at the qualification of teachers involved in teaching translation and their view about translation teaching.

1. The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to see if the translation students were satisfied or not with the material and the translation courses they studied. It was also hoped to see whether they think those courses gave them the skill they needed to take translation jobs.

The items included in the questionnaire were divided into: teaching materials, methodology of teaching, students' attitudes and qualification of teachers.

Discussion of results

1. Items related to the teaching materials:

These items in this part of the questionnaire include aspects like matching materials to course objectives, motivating materials, skills in materials, and number of translation courses in the program.

- (item #1)The content of the course is good enough to help me become a skilled translator.

41.5% of respondents agree with the statement, while 56.4% of respondents, making up the majority, disagree with the statement. This means that teachers should revise the contents of the courses to include the skills needed to meet the expectations of the students. The same result was found in Syrian universities (Shaheen 2000). As it seems, there is no perfect selection of materials to the satisfaction of students. The teacher should be able to make up for the missing skills in the ready-made materials.

- (item #4) The instructional materials are selected in a way that meets the objectives of the course.

50.1% were found to be in agreement of the statement, while 36.2% were found to disagree with the statement. 13.8% did not know if the

materials met the objectives of the course or not. The majority then, find the materials relatively meet the objectives of the course. This means that the materials may meet the objectives of the course but may not have the necessary skills needed for graduating a translator. It could be then, a problem with the teacher who may not be able to adapt the materials to the skills required and consequently students will end up complaining.

- (item #5) The course is very interesting and motivating for the students to develop an interest in translation.

52.1% agree with the statement, while 37.3% disagree with the statement. 10.6% were not sure of the answer. Therefore, nearly half the sample was found to think that the materials were interesting and motivating. The other half were either in disagreement or not sure of the answer. It is difficult to tell what makes the course interesting. It could be the material or the teacher whose style and skill may create interest and motivation for translation.

- (item #6) The course develops students' translation skill.

63.8% think that the course develops the translation skill; while 28.7%, which is close to the third of the sample think otherwise. The outcome is of course must be some achievement in developing some translation skills. However, this result does not seem to be overwhelming. In fact only 18.1% strongly agree with the statement.

- (item #8) I am satisfied with the number of translation courses offered in my Dept.

21.2% only agree or strongly agree with the statement; while 71.3% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. The disagreement is so overwhelming to show dissatisfaction with the number of translation courses. If we add this observation to the aforementioned points of dissatisfaction about the kind of materials and their impact on developing the skill or motivation, we may conclude that the trend is oriented towards more dissatisfaction than satisfaction in relation to the materials in terms of quality and quantity.

The conclusion here is that students are not satisfied with the number of translation courses. There is also dissatisfaction about the selection of materials in relation to type and appeal to motivate learners.

2. Items related to the methodology of teaching

The points in this section include efficiency of methods, planning of teaching activities, depending on translation theory, sufficient teaching time.

- (item #2) The methods adopted in teaching the course are efficient in handling the course and really help the students.

42.6% agree with the statement; while 51% disagree with the statement. This means that the method is not acceptable. Some agree with the method but it is difficult to know if a good method for someone is a bad one for another.

- (item #3) Course activities are very well planned to help students to become good translator.

45.7 % agree with the statement, while 43.7% disagree with the statement. Here the students are divided almost evenly on this issue. Therefore, the idea could be vague or respondents don't know what was meant by the statement.

- (item #7) The criteria adopted in teaching translation courses depend on translation theory.

37.2% agree with the statement with a tendency towards agree (25.5%) more than strongly agree (12.8%). 16% disagree with the statement, however a relatively high   percentage (35.1%) were not sure of what to say as to agree or not to agree. This result shows obviously the uncertainty of students about whether theory was there or not there in teaching translation. Even though teachers claim in the course outline that theory is included in teaching, but it seems that students don't have this feeling about this claim. And this result meets the thesis of this paper in the sense that translation is taught in our universities to give practice in equivalence and comparative structures in L1 and L2 regardless of what theory says.

- (item #15) I think the time allocated for the translation class is sufficient.

55.4% agree with the statement, while 36.1% disagree with the statement showing a tendency towards agreement more than disagreement. 8.5% were not sure of the answer. Even the agreement leans towards agree more than strongly agree. Most of university students in other studies complain about time as not being enough for training or practice.

Usually**,** a three-credit course meets three hours a week over 14 weeks in the semester. Over the period of four years, there are two courses in translation which obviously are not enough for graduating a skilled translator.

It could be concluded that students have no certainty about being taught translation theory, which supports the hypothesis of the study. There is no satisfaction in relation to the teaching activities or the method of teaching.

3. Items related to students' attitudes towards translation courses

- (item #10) Students show more positive attitudes towards translation courses than other courses offered at the Dept.

54.2% agree with the statement; while 31.9% disagree with the statement and 13.8d% have no opinion. There is nearly equal division between the two views with a slightly higher percentage on the side of agreement believing that the attitude towards the translation course is more positive than it is towards other courses. In case of successful undertaking of the course, it could be seen as more interesting than other courses because it handles language problems that may help improve the competency of the learner.

- (item #11) The cultural difference between Arabic and English make it impossible to master it with the number of the offered courses.

62.8% agree with the statement, while 26.6% disagree with the statement and 10.6% have no opinion. This is very clear indication that students realize the culture problem without which translation from one language to the other is difficult. The number of courses is not enough to show the culture difference between the two languages. Culture is very crucial in developing the ability of transferring a concept from one language into the other. Sometimes cultural based expression have no equivalents and impossible to translate.

- (item #12) Translation courses enable me to better understand the culture of the target language.

76.6% agree with the statement; while 14.9% disagree and 8.5% have no opinion. This indicates clearly that translation helps in understanding

culture; but there is no enough number of courses to provide understanding of cultural differences.

- (item #14) I think the examination system in translation sessions is adequate.
 58.5% agree with the statement; 22.3% disagree with the statement. 19.2% were not sure of the answer. The direction goes towards more agreement with the examination system than with disagreement. Probably, the exams are designed in ways to go inline with the teaching methods. This may lead to the conclusion of satisfaction in this regard regardless of theory of translation which most of students did not admit as satisfied with.
 (item #16) The translation course acquaints with the tools of the trade and the rules of professional conduct.
50% agree with the statement; while 23.4% disagree with the statement, and 26.6% were not sure of the answer. It looks like respondents are divided between agreement and disagreement and those who didn't know the answer. Knowing the rules of the trade may only be introduced by the teacher who would direct his students to whatever seems to be inline with his claims.

- (item #13) Translation improves the English language skills better than other courses.
69.1% agree with this statement; 20.2% disagree and 10.7% were not sure of the answer. The direction is obviously going to the direction of agreement with the idea of seeing translation as a tool for improving language skills. This is not the purpose of teaching translation. Or, at least, improving language skills could be side issue not main issue as seen in this case. This conclusion goes inline with the agreement of students in not finding teaching translation as a means of providing them with the skills of professional translator based on the theory of translation, but rather a means of improving language skills.

The conclusion here is obvious support for the study hypothesis in relation to the agreement of students on using translation for improving language skills rather than translation skills. There is also agreement on seeing benefit from translation in improving cultural understanding. Students also agree to seeing difficulty in translation due to cultural

differences between the two languages, which also supports the hypothesis of the study.

Part two of the questionnaire
For summing up results, in such open ended questions, the only way is to summarize some common points raised by the respondents. Because there is no plan to draw a comparison between different students at different universities, the common concerns across all respondents from both Al-Najah University and Hebron University will be presented following each question.

1. What are some of the difficulties facing you in this course of translation?
The most common points raised in this question are: lack of vocabularies, cultural problems, difficult idiomatic expressions, insufficient time and courses, boring classes, and qualification of teachers.

2. What are the benefits you have gained from this course?
The main benefits found for most of respondents are: increasing vocabulary, improving English, contrastive differences between English and Arabic, more awareness of cultural differences, knowing about theories of translation, and improve translation skills.

3. What do you think the translation class should do?
Many of the students did not know what to say. Others found the following: need more translation courses, make materials more interesting, need more about culture, need different choices of texts and prepare students to the market.

4. Are there disadvantages of translation teaching at your university? If yes, what are they?
This **is** very much like question one which talks about difficulties this one talks about disadvantages. The points given here are critical of: hard materials, some only care about exams not about materials, depending only on class work, qualifications of instructors, boring teaching methods and lack of training for the market.

5. What subjects do you consider suitable to be translated in the class? (e.g., press reports, literary texts, general, etc.)

Almost all of them thought that all kinds of topics were needed including literary texts, or daily language texts seen in newspapers or periodicals in various areas and fields.

6. What are the obstacles, in your opinion, to good translation teaching?

This question is another way of asking about disadvantages or difficulties. The answers here must be repetition of what was said before like: no good materials, culture problems, no qualified teachers, insufficient time and training and big number of students in class which gives less chance for participation.

7. Aside from the mentioned in the questionnaire, suggest any points for the improvement of teaching translation courses.

This question is like recommendations from students to improve teaching translation. Therefore, as expected, they suggested improving the points raised in the criticism of courses like: decreasing number in classes, increase translation courses, emphasize culture, improve methods and introduce oral translation and interpretation.

Part three: Teachers' qualifications in translation, course outline and exams

Surveying translation teachers at Hebron University and al-Najah University, it has been noticed that all teachers at Al-Najah University have no degrees or training in translation; while at Hebron University two out of five have degrees in translation. At Birzeit University, there are teachers with degrees in translation and other teachers without such degrees. However, teaching translation goes on with or without degrees. At Al-Najah University, they even have an MA degree in translation taught by professors in applied linguistics or linguistic areas. This has been reflected in the results of the questionnaire and the open ended questions.

As for the claims of teachers in the course outline and matching these claims to the kinds of questions given in the exams, it has been

noticed that the questions do not show clear indication of the theory in translation. The students view was in line with this observation regarding teaching methodology, qualification of instructor, and materials chosen for practice.

Conclusion

This paper has looked into the status of teaching translation at the Palestinian universities. The problems in teaching translation at these universities are similar to problems seen in other Arab universities. A major point of concern is how much knowledge of translation theory is required for qualifying teachers, and how much of that knowledge is needed to be taught to students. Results show that teachers claim they base their teaching on theory, but students are not sure if theory was important. The other point of concern is the issue of culture which is viewed as crucial for both students and teachers to bring the translation process into success. The number of translation courses, the crowded classes, the selection of materials are also points of concern showing dissatisfaction of students about translation courses.

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Responses of 94 students from Hebron University and Al-Najah University

The question	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Sum
1. The content of the course is good enough to help me become a skilled translator	2.1%	30.9%	10.6%	39.4%	17%	100%
2. The methods adopted in teaching the course are efficient and really help students	6.4%	33%	9.6%	32.9%	18.1%	100%
3. Course activities are very well planned to help students to become good translators	9.6%	31.9%	13.8%	30.9%	13.8%	100%
4. The instructional materials is selected in a way that meets the objectives of the course	13.8%	36.2%	13.8%	27.7%	8.5%	100%
5. The course is very interesting and motivating for the students to develop an interest in translation	10.6%	32.9%	19.2%	19.2%	18.1%	100%
6. The course develops students' translation skill	7.5%	45.7%	18.1%	18.1%	10.6%	100%

7. The criteria adopted in teaching translation courses depend on translation theory	35.1%	25.5%	12.8%	16%		100 %
8. I am satisfied with the number of translation courses offered in my Dept.	7.5%	12.7%	8.5%	20.2%	51.1%	100 %
9. I feel that my instructors are qualified and competent enough to teach the translation course	11.7%	43.6%	20.2%	14.9%	9.6%	100 %
10. Students show more positive attitudes towards translation courses than other courses offered at the Dept.	13.8%	29.8%	24.5%	11.7%	20.2%	100 %
11. The cultural difference between Arabic and English make it impossible to master it with the number of the offered courses	10.6%	39.4%	23.4%	23.4%	3.2%	100 %
12. Translation courses enable me to better understand the culture of the target language.	8.5%	45.7%	30.9%	9.6%	5.3%	100 %
13. Translation improves the English language skills better than	10.7%	37.2%	31.9%	10.6%	9.6%	100 %

other courses					
14. I think the examination system in translation sessions is adequate	19.2%	45.7%	12.8%	15.9%	6.4%	100 %
15. I think the time allocated for the translation class is sufficient	8.5%	36.2%	19.2%	24.4%	11.7%	100 %
16. The translation course acquaints me with the tools of the trade and the rules of professional conduct	26.6%	33%	17%	19.1%	4.3%	100 %