

Chapter 13

Assessing Translation Students' Reflective and Autonomous Learning

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ABSTRACT

As an essential soft skill in life-long learning, reflective and autonomous learning has been an integral part of many translator training programs today. However, how it could be assessed systematically and what factors might influence its acquisition is still much under-researched. To help bridge this gap, this chapter aims at reporting the findings of an empirical study, which used diary, think-aloud and small-group discussion as reflective learning methods to investigate translation students' reflective learning. It first provides an overview of relevant theory and then reports how students' reflective levels were assessed and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Based on the empirical findings, it discusses the factors influencing the success of a reflection-encouraging learning environment, followed by a provisional model of translation students' reflective and autonomous learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the professional landscape developing rapidly, translation students must meet the changing requirements of translation markets. To facilitate students' professional development beyond their immediate training setting and in the long run, concepts such as lifelong learning and learner autonomy have been upheld and integrated in translator training through a variety of pedagogical strategies to help students develop problem-solving and other transferrable skills (Washbourne, 2014). Amongst them is reflective thinking, which is regarded as essential for professional development (Moon, 1999).

Over the years, and most notably since the 1990s, with the incorporation of contemporary learning theories, translator training has been through a major pedagogical shift, from teacher-centered, translation-focused approaches to more learner-centered, process-oriented ones (Kelly, 2005). The latter often upholds reflective learning activities, ranging widely from group learning to individual learning.

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Group-based activities are usually justified on the benefits of learning through peer interaction, such as group discussion and collaborative translation projects (e.g. Chen, 2010; Kiraly, 2000, 2003, 2005). Individual-based learning activities, such as learning diary (Fox, 2000; Orlando, 2011), think-aloud techniques (Wakabayashi, 2003) and portfolio (Galán-Mañas, 2016; Johnson, 2003), usually stress how self-assessment and self-awareness help students improve translation quality and their learning skills. Some scholars have proposed a combination of both group and individual learning activities to accommodate a wider range of learning needs and styles (González Davies, 2004; Kelly, 2005).

However, although reflective learning has been integrated into many translator training programs, there is no sufficient empirical research into students' experience with reflection-promoting approaches. It is also unclear how translation students reflect, how their reflective ability can be assessed, and whether reflective learning is conducive to their translation skills and, as a result, translation quality.

This chapter will report on the results of an empirical study specifically designed to investigate students' perception of three selected reflective learning environments, namely, diary, think-aloud (TA), and small-group discussion (SGD), through both quantitative and qualitative methods aiming at understanding students' reflection, how it can be assessed, and the factors influencing their reflective and autonomous learning.

KEY CONCEPTS

Autonomy

Since the shift in translation pedagogy, it can be said that learner autonomy has become “a key concept” in translator training. Helping students develop autonomous learning skills has been regarded as essential for students to conduct more complex translation projects (Kelly, 2005), and, ultimately, ensure that they have the ability to continue to learn after leaving the training program (Kiraly, 2000).

One frequently cited definition of autonomy is perhaps the one given by Holec (1981, p.3), “the ability to take charge of one's own learning.” This means to take responsibility for all the decisions concerning learning. Holec's definition of learner autonomy focuses on empowering a learner to assume responsibilities traditionally taken by the teacher and also on the management and organisation of individual learning process (Benson, 2001; Little, 1991). This is similar to the “empowering technique” suggested by Kiraly (2003, pp.78-84) for a translation course, in which students are invited by the teacher to identify learning goals and contents and participate in the assessment of learning.

However, as Benson (2001) points out, Holec's definition does not make the cognitive constructs involved in learner autonomy explicit. Little (1991, p.4) argues that learner autonomy is not merely about the organisation and management of the learning process but “a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action.” Based on this definition, autonomy is not merely about making decisions about one's learning process, but also involves critical reflection (Candy, 1988). It is, therefore, “fundamental to autonomous learning that the learner should develop a capacity to reflect critically on the learning process, evaluate his progress, and if necessary make adjustments to his learning strategies” (Little, 1991, p.52).

The problem is that students cannot be assumed to be able to reflect critically. Helping students learn how to reflect critically should thus be an essential component of any teaching/learning method that promotes autonomy (Little, 1991, p.52).

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