

Chapter 1

Competition and Collaboration in Translation Education: The Motivational Impact of Translation Contests

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the results of a pilot study that explored the use of contests in translation pedagogy, proposing methods for designing classroom and extracurricular contests. Three translation contests (two in-class and one extracurricular) were conducted for undergraduate students at United Arab Emirates University. Student questionnaires were used to examine the potential role of contests in translator education and, in particular, the positive and negative effects of competition on students' motivation. The use of group work was also examined as a method of minimizing the potential negative effects of competition, as described in the literature. The study indicates that contests can be useful in stimulating student motivation, especially on the basic levels of education. On the other hand, it is suggested that, while group work is seen as effective and desirable by most students, there are caveats to be considered when planning and implementing this type of activity.

INTRODUCTION

Educational contests, competitions, and “olympiads” are a common educational tool in various disciplines. Usually employed as an extracurricular activity, they have proved effective in many fields of study, especially in science and technology (informatics, mathematics, programming, physics, and chemistry), the law, engineering, mass communication, political science, and the performing

arts (Verhoeff, 1997; Illston et al., 2013; Anderson, 2006; Chung, 2003; Taylor, 2004; Gillespie, 2006). In language-related disciplines, one finds speech and debate competitions, and spelling bees (Maguire, 2006; Colbert, 1995). Studies point to various advantages of competitions, including increased learner motivation in a less stressful setting than the classroom, expanding the students' knowledge and intellectual curiosity beyond the curriculum, and simulating (thus preparing stu-

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dents for) professional environments (Verhoeff, 1997; Long, 1989; Taylor, 2004; Chung, 2003; Maguire, 2006; Colbert, 1995).

Little attention, however, has been given to contests in translation pedagogy. While there has been a significant growth in recent years in the methods proposed for testing and evaluating translation students and organizing class activities, the potential of translation contests as an educational method remains unexplored.¹ This could be due, in our opinion, to the difficulty of adapting the learning outcomes of translation education, and the specific skills which it targets, to a contest format. Most of the types of competition currently applied in education focus on skills that require performing skills, or are so limited in scope as to lend themselves to the straightforward methods of evaluation required in contests.

This paper describes and discusses the findings of a pilot project whose aim was to design and test a contest format applicable in translation education. The project had two goals: 1. testing the value and methods of integrating contests into translation education, 2. investigating the contentious issue of competitiveness in education.

COMPETITION IN EDUCATION: AN ONGOING DEBATE

The value of competition in the classroom has been the subject of heated debate in research on education over the last three decades. Proponents of “cooperative learning,” an approach that has become a major force in pedagogical research since the 1980s, condemn competition as undermining self-esteem, marginalizing social skills, creating negative feelings among students, and shifting the focus of the educational process from personal development to a struggle for grades and the teacher’s approval (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 1974, 1989, 1999; Kohn, 1986/1992). Cooperation, on the other hand, is argued to enhance students’ interpersonal skills and self-

esteem, and to promote a positive attitude about the topic of study, as well as the instructor. In contrast with “individualistic” and “competitive” learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1974, 1999), collaborative learning is argued to be more productive, not only in the affective, but also in the cognitive domain.² For example, Wentzel argues that cooperation is “instrumental in the acquisition of knowledge and the development of cognitive abilities” (1991, p. 1). According to Kohn (1986/1992), 65 studies he examined demonstrated that cooperation leads to higher levels of achievement than competition, while 36 studies did not indicate any statistical difference. A study conducted by Johnson and Johnson (1982) also shows that collaboration is more effective in promoting achievement than other interaction patterns in the classroom.

The shift toward a collaborative classroom has made a tangible impact on translation pedagogy. In *A Social Constructivist Approach to Translator Education*, Kiraly criticizes the conventional (and thus far dominant) method of “translation skills instruction”, based on “transmissionist educational views,” in which the teacher is “the fountain of knowledge” (2000, p. 22), that is the sole dispenser of a pre-determined and agreed-upon body of knowledge. Instead, he proposes a collaborative classroom, where the teacher will be mainly a “guide, assistant, mentor, and facilitator”, whose function consists in creating an environment where “learning activities will be marked by proactive students working in collaboration with each other and the teacher” (2000, p. 23). Consequently, Kiraly stresses the need for “moving away from a transmissionist, objectivist-based teaching approach towards a collaborative approach to learning” (2003, p. 20). Davies recommends an educational approach drawing on “humanistic teaching,” “the communicative approach,” “cooperative learning,” and “social constructionism” (2004a, p. 14); she outlines various strategies of translator education, based mainly on team work, that could help, she argues, create a learning environment where “cooperation takes over from

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