

Chapter 17

An Empirical Study of Students' Views on Theoretical Subjects: The Role of Theory in Translation Degrees at Spanish Universities

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ABSTRACT

Translator and interpreter study programmes are characterised by their practice-oriented nature; in fact, students seem to have a somewhat reticent attitude towards Translation Theory in part due to their perception of the respective modules as less important because they are relegated to a subsidiary position within the course programme. The authors have carried out a research project aimed at investigating the views of students regarding the subject of Translation Theory. The main objective of this project is to identify areas of improvement in the design and teaching methodology in order to provide more dynamic teaching and reinforce the links between the theoretical and practical dimensions of the discipline. The results obtained in this study provide new and unexpected insights into students' conception of translation and translation theory and into the teaching improvements required to make this subject more interesting and valuable in the education and training of translators-to-be.

INTRODUCTION

It was not until the 90s that Spanish universities began to offer degrees in translation as such. Until then, the diploma courses offered by some *Escuelas de Traductores e Intérpretes* that existed in Spain had focused on the more applied aspects

of translation. Even today, the practice-oriented conception of translation degree programmes often implies that theoretical modules, such as Translation Theory, are relegated to a secondary, even marginal, position within the study programmes as a whole. Perhaps as a result of that, students tend to adopt a rather reticent attitude towards

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modules in Translation Theory, questioning the role and contribution of such modules to their training as translators. On the other hand, taking into account the never-ending debate about the relevance of theory for the practice of translation and, thus, for the training of translators-to-be, students' lack of interest in theoretical subjects and their reluctance towards translation theory should not come as much of a surprise.

As lecturers responsible for the teaching of theoretical subjects both at undergraduate and postgraduate level at our university, but also as teachers of specialised translation and as professional translators, we are firmly convinced of the benefits of the study of translation theory in the education and training of translators. Therefore, within the Group for Teaching Innovation in Translation Theory at the University Jaume I, in Castellón (Spain), we have carried out a research project aimed at investigating the views of students at four Spanish universities regarding the subject of Translation Theory¹. Most of the students were undergraduates but we also included some who were following postgraduate studies. Although the general aims of the project cover a wider scope, in this contribution the focus lies on methodological issues, such as the skills and competences to be acquired, the typology of activities, the type of assessment, and the methodological approach applied to the teaching of theoretical aspects of translation. Based on the input obtained from students, in this work we aim to identify areas in need of improvement in the design and teaching methodology of theoretical modules, in order to change students' attitudes towards the subject by making them aware of its relevance for their training as translators and interpreters. Furthermore, this contribution is intended to provide some key guidelines for more dynamic teaching and to reinforce the link between the theoretical and the practical dimensions of the discipline.

THE DISPUTED ROLE OF TRANSLATION THEORY

Theoretical reflection on translation has played a crucial role in the consolidation of Translation Studies (TS) as an independent discipline and in its institutionalisation, since it has allowed the practice of translation to be analysed in a systematic manner. However, over half a century since Translation Studies emerged as an academic discipline, the interconnection between translation theory and the actual activity of translation has still not been fully accepted in the professional, academic or training contexts. Conflicting standpoints are found, ranging from the most categorical rejection of any contribution of translation theory to the practice of translation, which comes above all from the world of professional translation:

Interestingly, criticism against TS has come not from society at large, which is largely unaware of its existence, but from translators and interpreters, who expect it to help solve their problems or at least help improve Translation methods and express disappointment in this respect. (Gile, 2010, p. 251)

to those who defend the value of the theoretical dimension as a means to improve the quality of translation and to obtain greater socio-professional recognition of translators and interpreters:

What many of us think of as a 'profession' is unlikely to achieve genuine professional status without some interaction with a discipline that provides it with a coherent framework, a sense of continuity and some insight into where it's going. We do not expect lawyers, for instance, to shun academia and theory and follow their innate sense of what is right and wrong. We accept law as a profession precisely because it is not (or not

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