

Trainees' Translation Competence from the Supervisor's Perspective and Implications for the Translator Training Program: the case of a University in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study surveying the supervisor's evaluation of trainees' translation competence. The survey was conducted by interviewing five translation managers and editors from agencies and companies, where students of Translation Studies of the College of Foreign Languages, Hue University (Vietnam) spent four weeks doing their practicum. Data was analyzed under the headings of the areas of competence proposed in the European Master's in Translation (EMT) competence framework (2017). The results indicate that the supervisors were rather satisfied with the trainees' competence in the areas of language and culture, especially in the English language. They were concerned about the trainees' understanding of certain topics of translation and some ways of expressions in the mother tongue which they believed to be "westernized" in terms of sentence structure. The supervisors also expected the trainees would be prepared with more skills to exploit the available technology and strategies to work with clients in the translation industry. The supervisors' evaluation suggests considerations and improvements in the training program at the College of Foreign Languages, Hue University (HUCFL), including teaching contents and skill as well as facilities for the classroom practice. The study findings are also valuable for other institutions offering similar training programs in Vietnam.

Keywords: Translator trainees, translator training, translation competence, EMT

Introduction

Translation competence, a set of essential knowledge and skills that a translator needs to acquire to become professional in the industry, has been the research interest of many scholars, translation trainers and employers, and thus it has become a crucial part of many translation training programs at the higher education levels. Rothe-Neves (2007) stated that translation competence is a crucial quality of a good translator. The translation competence is, in this sense, a system of criteria to assess the quality of a translator's work. For its importance in the course of training translators, translation competence has been investigated by several scholars since 1970s (EMT, 2017; PACTE, 2003; Presas, 1996; Pym, 1992; Rothe-Neves, 2007; Wilss, 1976) and many models of translation competence with various foci have been introduced, accordingly. For example, Campbell's (1991) model of translation competence, which is based on the theory of bilingualism, is applied to teaching translation from first language to second language. Göpferich's (2011) *TransComp* model is pedagogy-focused. In light of this model, "[t]he translator's performance is thus influenced by their familiarity with the translation specifications and professional norms, but also on their perception of self and the roles they adopt as well as their awareness of the translator's social responsibility" (Marczak & Krajka, 2019, p.22). The PACTE (2003) translation competence model places emphasis on the competences and qualities necessary for translators to perform professionally. The EMT (2017) translation competence framework aims at the learning outcomes of translator students that meet the career requirements.

These translation competence models have been adopted in several studies that looked into the acquisition of knowledge and skills for professional translators. However, research into the impacts of translation competence that translators were prepared at the training institutions on their actual work has been understudied. Very few studies have tapped into how the training programs meet the supervisors' expectations from the industry. The most recent study explored the Lithuanian employers' expectations of trained translators' abilities and skills and concluded that trainees from translation programs should be prepared with both translation skills and transferable skills (Horbačasienė, Kasperavičienė & Petronienė, 2017). In China, Mu and Yang (2012) investigated the training of translation talents and suggested that the training programs should be market-oriented and the syllabi designed to meet the requirements of the profession. These studies indicated that more research into the relation between the training and the industry should be carried out. This is the motivation for the present study to be conducted to explore how much translation competence has influenced the novice translators' work from a practical angle of view, that is, the supervisors' evaluation.

In Vietnam, translation competence started to capture the attention of education program designers, especially in the programs of foreign language studies, since early 2000s. Several studies looked into different aspects of translation competence, but none of these has followed a particular model of translation competence. Tran and La (2017) investigated the ability to manipulate the language repertoire of the translator trainees, especially their use of Sino-Vietnamese in translation. At the textual level, Le (2011) studied the translation of different types of texts and recommended ways of selecting texts and analyzing the functions of texts in the teaching and learning translation. In general, these studies focus on the teaching of translation, yet there has been a paucity of research into translation competence associated with the practical skills and strategies in the industry. This present study is, therefore, an attempt to fill the research gap. It aims at the supervisors' evaluation of the translator trainees' competence through their work during the practicum. In particular, it explores the supervisors' satisfaction of the translator trainees' performance at the translation service companies, as well as the translator trainees' strengths and weaknesses during their practicum. The study will thereby discuss the implications for the translator training program.

Theoretical Background

The context of translator training in Vietnam

Translation Studies has been a key major at the undergraduate level at colleges and universities offering courses in foreign languages in Vietnam. Around 60 institutions in Vietnam have offered Translation Studies in their programs (Nguyen, Nguyen & Le, 2016). Nonetheless, Pham (2016) argued that despite its existence for a long time, the teaching of translation did not follow any model of teaching, making it very dependent on the experience of the course instructors. Most of these instructors were trained in the fields of Applied Linguistics or Language Education rather than in Translation Studies (Nguyen, Nguyen & Le, 2016), and thus they have little practical experience in the translation industry. They also pointed out that the course contents were topic-based rather than skill-based. Similarly, Pham and Phu (2013) surveyed graduates-to-be at the Open University in Ho Chi Minh City and found that most students were not confident to start their job in the translation industry for they were not well-prepared with knowledge and skills. However, this study did not point out which particular area of knowledge and skills the students lacked.

Most of other investigations in the field of Translations Studies in Vietnam have tapped into aspects of the training programs so far (e.g., Pham & To, 2007; Le, 2011). Therefore, even when they evaluated the outcomes of the training, they only looked at the issues from the perspectives of the course providers and recipients.

At the College of Foreign Languages, Hue University (HUCFL), where the present study was carried out, Translation Studies has been part of the training program leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the English Language. Within the first two years, students are prepared with language skills as in any program of English as a Foreign Language. In the next two years, they can choose to specialize in Translation Studies among many options. Although it is not claimed that the program aims at training professional translators, most of the graduate students work in the translation industry as professionals or freelancers. For this reason, the EMT framework, which was introduced by a group of experts of the European Master's in Translation project, is appropriate to use as a conceptual framework to explore how much the training program at HUCFL satisfies the supervisors' expectations.

The EMT Translation Competence Framework

The translation competence has been researched worldwide for decades. Many models of translation competence have been developed and introduced, and thus, translation competence has been defined in various ways. Yet the main thrust of translation competence is that it comprises knowledge and skills essential for a translator to work professionally. It is a macro system of inter-related sub-competences (Schäffner & Adab, 2000). Willis (1976), argued that translation competence is both receptive and productive. It is receptive in the sense that translator needs to be able to decode the source text before translation is carried out. The productive aspect is shown in the translator's ability to encode the message in the target language.

The EMT competence framework is a system of translation competence that "aims to consolidate and enhance the employability of graduates of Master's degrees in translation throughout Europe" (EMT, 2017, p. 3). This framework has been a reference for both academic training and industry, that is, for both training and evaluating professional translators. It comprises competence, skills and knowledge necessary for translators to perform in their career practice. The EMT framework covers five areas of competence as visualized in the following figure:

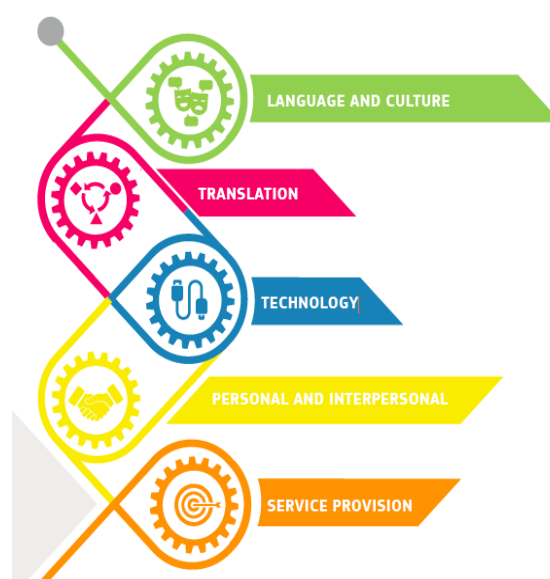


Figure 1: The EMT translation competence framework

Each area of competence comprises a series of skills and strategies necessary for the process of training professional translators and a set of criteria for learning outcomes. This framework has been considered the most successful so far to the extent that it is compatible to the professional translators' needs (Esfandiari, Shokrpour, & Rahimi, 2019). However, since the framework aims at training translators at the Master's degree level, it is not entirely applicable to translator training in Vietnam. Therefore, these areas of competence are simplified as follows:

The language and culture competence includes the basic language knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar and idioms, as well as the transcultural, cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge and communicative skills in the working languages. This area of competence, according to the EMT group, lays the groundwork for the development of other competences.

The translation competence is composed of "the strategic, methodological and thematic competences that come into play before, during and following the transfer phase per se – from document analysis to final quality control procedures" (EMT, 2017, p.7).

The technology competence refers to the ability to use and apply the technological tools to the translation work, especially the ability to use the CAT tools and machine translation.

The personal and interpersonal competence is related to the skills such as time management and teamwork that ensure the adaptability and employability for the translator.

The service provision competence refers to the skills to offer and handle translation work to meet the demands of the client.

These competences “should be considered as complementary and equally important in providing the translation service, which is the ultimate goal of the translation process” (EMT, 2017, p. 5).

Methodology

Research Design and Participants

The present study is a qualitative research which relies on the data obtained from interviews with five translation managers and editors (hereafter shortened as “supervisors”). These participants whose companies have accepted students of Translation Studies at University Hue as translator trainees for practicum were formally trained to be translators and they have more than five years working as managers and editors for translation companies in Hue, Vietnam.

Instrument and Procedure

Interview was used to collect data. The interviews were semi-structured and questions were designed based on the areas of competence introduced in the EMT framework. Each interview last around half an hour. Participants were invited arranged for interviews via emails with the information sheet attached to explain the purpose of the research and what they would be required to do. At the actual meeting, each interviewee was asked for the permission of tape-recording.

Before the interviewer asked any question, the interviewee said: “I am [name]. I volunteer to participate in this study and agree to have the interview to be recorded for the research purposes.” When the interview was completed, the interviewer let the interviewee listen to the recorded file before signing a consent form.

The completed interviews were then transcribed. The participants were coded and numbered from 1 to 5, indicated as [P.01 – P.05] to assure the confidentiality when they are reported in the paper.

Data analysis

As the present study utilizes the EMT translation competence model (2017) as the conceptual framework, the findings will be arranged under the headings of the competence areas proposed in the model. The discussion of supervisor’s satisfaction and expectations of the translator trainees as well as the trainees’ strengths and weaknesses will be incorporated in each areas of competence.

Findings and Discussion

Language and Culture Competence

Most of the interviewed supervisors (four out of five) were satisfied with the performance of the translator trainees. They have a common opinion that students trained at HUCFL meet their companies’ recruitment requirements. The trainees proved to have a good command of language and good skills at handling language issues such as translating, transforming and annotating. One of these supervisors said:

I have offered five of your students to do their practicum at my company. These trainees are good at text comprehension and skillful at translating texts and using appropriate translation strategies. They produce precise translation texts [P.01].

This comment suggests that the trainees have been well prepared with language and culture competence. The plausible explanation lies in the contents of the courses offered at HUCFL. Most courses aim at the students’ mastery of language. The texts for translation in practice courses are organized in themes and topics. In each lesson, there are various activities to help students build their topic-related vocabulary. For theoretical courses, students are provided with knowledge about translation strategies and techniques. These knowledge and skills may have prepared the trainees with a rather solid

ground to deal with issues associated with the competence area of language and culture when they work in the industry.

However, the supervisor [P.01] added that two of the trainees were rather awkward when they worked with governmental or legal documents. They showed little understanding of the governmental or official style of language. They had a tendency to express Vietnamese in a western style, indicating a deficiency of mother tongue development while their mastery of the English language may be at a high level of proficiency:

Their expression does not sound natural in Vietnamese. This is, I believe, due to the influence of the second language on the use of first language. This might be common among learners of foreign languages, but it is unacceptable with professional translators [P.01].

This comment reflects a reality of the translator training program at HUCFL, and perhaps, in Vietnamese universities offering similar courses. The training program at HUCFL, as mentioned, is designed for the study towards the degree in the English language. Courses in developing skills of English takes more proportion in the curriculum, while there is only one course of Vietnamese. This asymmetry partly results in the unbalance in the trainees' language performance.

The supervisor who was not pleased with the performance of the trainees remarked:

Translator trainees do not have a good command of formal language in Vietnamese. Some English source texts written in formal style have been translated into Vietnamese "ordinary life" language, devaluing the formality of the text [P.04].

The formal language in Vietnamese that the supervisor [P.04] mentioned is specified as Sino-Vietnamese in the opinion of another supervisor who recommended including this lexical category in the training program:

The Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary has played an important role in Vietnamese texts because it is not so geographically varied as the pure Vietnamese, so it is both formal and general in meaning. For this reason, the trainees need to be well prepared with this set of vocabulary to use it more effectively. In my agency, there are many texts of religious, political, historical and military topics, and the language of these texts is not only field-specific, but also formal. I find that the trainees have not been very successful in translating these texts [P.05].

This recommendation is worthy of consideration. It comes from the reality of a translation agency in particular and the demands of the translation market in general. Moreover, the evaluation of the supervisors about trainees' language and culture competence has reflected the teaching of translation at HUCFL. Although the discipline requires bilingual development, the training program places more emphasis on building students' skills of their foreign language and culture.

Translation Competence

The comment of the supervisor [P.01] above also implies that the translator trainees have good translation competence to the extent that they satisfactorily used the sensible translation strategies in their translation work. Another supervisor who did not show any sign of satisfaction was still positive about the competence of the trainees working at his company:

Two of our translator trainees are from HUCFL. They are hard-working and studious. They have not committed serious errors in their translated texts. Nonetheless, they are good at certain topics and seem to know very little about others [P.03].

This supervisor's remark about the trainees' knowledge of topics is related to the translation competence. In this regard, two others supervisors have similar points of view. They opined that the students as translator trainees at their companies knew only the "trendy" contemporary topics such as K-pop, fashion, technology, economics and the likes, while they considerably lacked understanding about politics, diplomacy and arts. This shows an asymmetry in building and developing topic-related vocabulary and understanding during students' training and self-studies. The deficiency also comes from the resources for studies. As translation teachers often choose extracts from newspapers to make the texts fresh and their contents up-to-date, they do not have a variety of topics for certain reasons. First, the resources about technology and economics are more readily available than resources of other topics. These include free easy-to-access resources such as *The Business Insider*, *The Vietnam Economic Times*, etc. Moreover, to attract the students to involve in the class, teachers have the tendency to choose topics related to contemporary interests. This explains why the supervisors commented that

the trainees were good at topics of K-pop and fashion. This way of topic selection for translation practice in classes is the reason behind their embarrassment in handling and transferring the language of governmental documents as supervisor [P.01] commented above.

These opinions suggest that considerations for changes and improvements should be made in the translator training program regarding translation topics. Providing practice texts with various topics helps to build trainees' vocabulary and understanding of many fields, including specialized ones, hence their language and culture competence and translation competence.

Technology Competence

Technology skills have empowered the new generation of translators (Pym, 2011) and they have been recognized as expected skills that translators in the 21st century must acquire to meet the market demand (Alcina, Soler & Granell, 2007). This is consonant with a response in the survey. From the standpoint of a translation business manager, participant [P.03] opined:

In this digital era, the emergence of machine translation requires translators to be more than those who transfer meanings between languages. Translator trainees need to acquire many skills to meet the demands of the job market, including the skill of content writing and copywriting, as well as the ability to use translation software effectively. The trainees at my company do not have any problems with computer skills but they seem to have no idea of machine translation [P.03].

This is a worthwhile opinion for the trainers although content writing or copywriting is not included in training program. The HUCFL courses focus on the English language and culture, leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English, and the courses in Translation Studies only constitute a narrower specialization. However, it is necessary to prepare trainees the technology skills for future professional translation environment.

Personal and Interpersonal Competence

The information from the interviews shows a dichotomy in the employers' evaluation of trainees' personal and interpersonal competence: The state-owned agencies considered trainees from HUCFL to be not only competent in the English language use but also dynamic and adaptable in work practice. Meanwhile, private translation companies complained that trainees were poor at taking care of and interacting with clients. In terms of trainees' dynamism and adaptability, one employer remarked:

We have a variety of texts of different topics and styles, but the translator trainees from HUCFL are quick at adapting themselves to the working atmosphere at our agency. They are also time efficient [P.02].

It is arguable that the training program at HUCFL has assisted the trainees to satisfy certain aspects of this competence. Classroom activities that encourage students to work in pairs and in groups have familiarized students with teamwork. The strictness in deadlines for assignments has also contributed to forming their time management and punctuality. Nonetheless, a supervisor from a private company commented:

Despite their language proficiency, translator trainees from HUCFL proved to know little about the translation industry and the market demands. They do not have the skill of negotiating with clients [P.03].

This comment is, on the one hand, highly demanding, because it is very hard for a novice to be skillful at customer care service overnight. These skills could be acquired at school, but only sharpened through practice and experience. On the other hand, the idea is worthy of consideration in the design of the syllabus and classroom activities. The training program may not necessarily reflect all realities but it should be close to the industry expectations.

Service Provision Competence

As the areas of competence in translation competence are interrelated, the personal and interpersonal skills affect the service provision competence. Evaluating the trainees' adaptability to the working environment, the supervisor [P.03] thought they did not meet the market requirements.

The trainees need a period of time to adapt to the translation market and form the style of working in the service-providing environment. They have been bookish and inflexible [P.03].

This comment is somehow different from that of supervisor [P.02] above. The difference in supervisors' evaluations is due to the differences in the functions and purposes of their workplaces. The state-own agencies follow a pre-determined set of administrative regulations. Trainees doing their practicum in these organizations have little difficulty adapting to the workplace if they comply with the rules. Private translation companies, however, serves the public and the staff is essentially flexible to meet customers' demands. They must have skills and strategies to take good care of clients and build up the public image of the company. These skills and strategies might not have been anticipated and included in their training. Nonetheless, the feedback is of significant values for the trainers in their strategy-planning in the long run to bring the university training closer to industry.

Implications and Conclusion

The information from the interviews with managers and editors from translation agencies and companies has implications for the translator training at HUCFL in particular and other institutions offering similar training programs in general.

Regarding the language and culture competence, it is essential to strive for the symmetry between the two languages. Instead of innately using the mother tongue in the translation work, the translator trainees need to acquire the competence in the first language through formal classroom activities. Topics for translation should be verified. Once the languages are at the command of the trainees, their deficiency in translation competence, specifically the understanding of different topics and style may be easily remedied.

The findings also suggest that the institutional investment into facilities should be considered. In particular, high-quality copyrighted software related to machine translation should be utilized for the training program. To this end, machine translation should be given an appropriate proportion in the program and the teaching staff that has expertise should be considered and recruited.

As far as the personal and interpersonal competence and the service provision competence are concerned, the practicum time itself gives the trainees the opportunities to develop these areas of competence. The problem lies in the collaboration between the academic trainers and the industry. The trainers should make it clear what they expect the industry to assist them in preparing their trainees for the employment.

In general, the supervisors at the translation agencies and companies surveyed in this study were fairly satisfied with the translator trainees from HUCFL. They have pointed out the strength and weakness of the trainees in the career practice, which makes valuable suggestions for the training program. These include the balance of language competence between mother tongue and working foreign language, the variety of topics and language styles for translation classroom practice, the technology skills that assist the translation and the strategies for efficiency in workplaces.

This study has contributed an angle at how a translator training program meets the industry demands and expectations from the perspective of employers. The survey, albeit small scale, was valuable to the extent that it was carefully conducted and it used a reliable conceptual framework for data analysis. Therefore, findings are applicable not only to the institution at the research site, but also to other institutions offering similar training programs.

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