Becoming a Translator

An accelerated course

Douglas Robinson

ROUTLEDGE

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she read every chapter, some several times over, suggested new points to stress, invented exercises or helped me adapt ones that she had used in her own teacher education classrooms, and generally engaged me in a bracing and heady dialogue out on the leading edges of pedagogical insight.

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Introduction

> The present-day rapid development of science and technology, as well as the continuous growth of cultural, economic, and political relations between nations, have confronted humanity with exceptional difficulties in the assimilation of useful and necessary information. No way has yet been found to solve the problems in overcoming language barriers and of accelerated assimilation of scientific and technological achievements by either the traditional or modern methods of teaching. A new approach to the process of teaching and learning is, therefore, required if the world is to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.
>
> Georgi Lozanov, *Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy* (1971)

The study of translation and the training of professional translators is without question an integral part of the explosion of both intercultural relations and the transmission of scientific and technological knowledge; the need for a new approach to the process of teaching and learning is certainly felt in translator and interpreter training programs around the world as well. How best to bring student translators up to speed, in the literal sense of helping them to learn and to translate rapidly and effectively? How best to get them both to retain the linguistic and cultural knowledge and to master the learning and translation skills they will need to be effective professionals?

At present the prevailing pedagogical assumptions in translator training programs are (1) that there is no substitute for practical experience – to learn how to translate one must translate, translate, translate – and (2) that there is no way to accelerate that process without damaging students' ability to detect errors in their own work. Faster is generally better in the professional world, where faster translators – provided that they continue to translate accurately – earn more money; but it is generally not considered better in the pedagogical world, where faster learners are thought to be necessarily careless, sloppy, or superficial.

This book is grounded in a simultaneous acceptance of assumption (1) *and* rejection of assumption (2). There is no substitute for practical experience, and translator training programs should continue to provide their students with as much of it as they can. But there are ways of accelerating that process that do not simply foster bad work habits.

The methodological shift involved is from a pedagogy that places primary emphasis on conscious analysis to a pedagogy that balances conscious analysis with subliminal discovery and assimilation. The more consciously, analytically, rationally, logically, systematically a subject is presented to students, and the more consciously and analytically they are expected to process the materials presented, the more slowly those materials are internalized.

And this is often a good thing. Professional translators need to be able to slow down to examine a problematic word or phrase or syntactic structure or cultural assumption painstakingly, with full analytical awareness of the problem and its possible solutions. Slow analysis is also a powerful source of new knowledge. Without the kinds of problems that slow the translation process down to a snail's pace, the translator would quickly fall into a rut.

The premise of this book is, however, that in the professional world slow, painstaking, analytical learning is the exception rather than the rule – and should be in the academic world of translator training as well. All humans learn better, faster, more effectively, more naturally, and more enjoyably through rapid and holistic subliminal channels. Conscious, analytical learning is a useful *check* on more efficient learning channels; it is not, or at least it should not be, the only or even main channel through which material is presented.

This book, therefore, is set up to shuttle between the two extremes of subliminal or unconscious learning, the "natural" way

people learn outside of class, and conscious, analytical learning, the "artificial" way people are traditionally taught in class. As teaching methods move away from traditional analytical modes, learning speeds up and becomes more enjoyable and more effective; as it approaches the subliminal extreme, students learn enormous quantities of material at up to ten times the speed of traditional methods while hardly even noticing that they're learning anything. Because learning is unconscious, it seems they haven't learned anything; to their surprise, however, they can perform complicated tasks much more rapidly and confidently and accurately than they ever believed possible.

Effective as these subliminal methods are, however, they are also somewhat mindless, in the sense of involving very little critical reflection, metathinking, testing of material against experience or reason. Translators need to be able to process linguistic materials quickly and efficiently; but they also need to be able to recognize problem areas and to slow down to solve them in complex analytical ways. The main reason for integrating conscious with subliminal teaching methods is that learners need to be able to test and challenge the materials and patterns that they sublimate so quickly and effectively. Translators need to be able to shuttle back and forth between rapid subliminal translating and slow, painstaking critical analysis – which means not only that they should be trained to do both, but that their training should embody the shuttle movement between the two, subliminal-becoming-analytical, analytical-becoming-subliminal. Translators need to be able not only to perform both subliminal speed-translating and conscious analytical problem-solving, but also to shift from one to the other when the situation requires it (and also to recognize when the situation does require it).

Hence the rather strange look of some of the chapters, and especially the exercises at the end of the chapters. Teachers and students accustomed to traditional analytical pedagogies will probably shy away at first from critical perspectives and hands-on exercises designed to develop subliminal skills. And this critical caution is a good thing: it is part of the shuttle movement from subliminal to conscious processing. The topics for discussion that precede the exercises at the end of every chapter are in fact designed to foster just this sort of critical skepticism about the claims made in the chapter. Students should be given a chance both to experience the power of subliminal learning and translating and to question the nature and

impact of what they are experiencing. Subliminal functioning without critical self-awareness quickly becomes mind-numbing mechanical routine; analytical critiques without rich playful experience quickly become inert scholasticism.

The primary course for which this textbook is intended is the introduction to the theory and practice of translation. Such introductory courses are designed to give undergraduate (and, in some cases, graduate) students an overall view of what translators do and how translation is studied. To these ends the book is full of practical details regarding the professional activities of translators, and in Chapters 6–10 it offers ways of integrating a whole series of theoretical perspectives on translation, from psychological theories in Chapter 6 through terminological theories in Chapter 7, linguistic theories in Chapter 8, and social theories in Chapter 9 to cultural theories in Chapter 10.

In addition, however, the exercises are designed not only to teach *about* translation but to help students translate better as well; and the book might also be used as supplementary material in practical translation seminars. Since the book is not written for a specific language combination, the teacher will have to do some work to adapt the exercises to the specific language combination in which the students are working; while suggestions are given on how this might be done, it would be impossible to anticipate the specific needs of individual students in countries around the world. If this requires more active and creative input from teachers, it also allows teachers more latitude to adapt the book's exercises to their students' needs. A teacher's guide at the end of the book provides some additional suggestions for adapting these exercises to individual classrooms.

Since most translators traditionally (myself included) were not trained for the job, and many still undergo no formal training even today, I have also set up the book for self-study. Readers not currently enrolled in, or employed to teach in, translator training programs can benefit from the book by reading the chapters and doing the exercises that do not require group work. Many of the exercises designed for group work can easily be adapted for individuals. The main thing is *doing* the exercises and not just thinking about them. Thought experiments work only when they are truly experiments and not just reflection upon what this or that experiment might be like.

Chapter 1

External knowledge: the user's view

THESIS: Translation can be perceived from the outside, from the client's or other user's point of view, or from the inside, from the translator's point of view; and while this book takes the translator's perspective, it is useful to begin with a sense of what our clients and users need and why.

Internal and external knowledge

Translation is different things for different groups of people. For people who are not translators, it is primarily a text; for people who are, it is primarily an activity. Or, as Anthony Pym (1993: 131, 149–50) puts it, translation is a text from the perspective of "external knowledge," but an activity (aiming at the production of a text) from the perspective of "internal knowledge."

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
A translator thinks and talks about translation from inside the process, knowing how it's done, possessing a practical real-world sense of the problems involved, some solutions to those problems, and the limitations on those solutions (the translator knows, for example, that no translation will ever be a perfectly reliable guide to the original).	A non-translator (especially a monolingual reader in the target language who directly or indirectly pays for the translation – a client, a book-buyer) thinks and talks about translation from outside the process, not knowing how it's done but knowing, as Samuel Johnson once said of the non-carpenter, a well-made cabinet when s/he sees one.

From the translator's internal perspective, the activity is most important: the process of becoming a translator, receiving and handling requests to do specific translations, doing research, networking, translating words, phrases, and registers, editing the translation, delivering the finished text to the employer or client, billing the client for work completed, getting paid. The text is an important part of that process, of course – even, perhaps, the most important part – but it is never the whole thing.

From the non-translator's external perspective, the text as product or commodity is most important. And while this book is primarily concerned with (and certainly written from and for) the translator's internal knowledge, and thus with the activity of translating – it is, after all, a textbook for student translators – it will be useful to project an external perspective briefly here in Chapter 1, if only to distinguish it clearly from the more translator-oriented approach of the rest of the book. A great deal of thinking and teaching about translation in the past has been controlled by what is essentially external knowledge, text-oriented approaches that one might have thought of greater interest to non-translators than translators – so much, in fact, that these external perspectives have in many ways come to dominate the field.

Ironically enough, traditional approaches to translation based on the non-translating user's need for a certain kind of text have only tended to focus on one of the user's needs: reliability (often called "equivalence" or "fidelity"). A fully user-oriented approach to translation would recognize that *timeliness* and *cost* are equally important factors. Let us consider these three aspects of translation as perceived from the outside – translation users' desire to have a text translated *reliably*, *rapidly*, and *cheaply* – in turn.

Reliability

Translation users need to be able to rely on translation. They need to be able to use the translation as a reliable basis for action, in the sense that if they take action on the belief that the translation gives them the kind of information they need about the original, that action will not fail *because* of the translation. And they need to be able to trust the translator to act in reliable ways, delivering reliable translations by deadlines, getting whatever help is needed to meet those deadlines,