Teaching Translation Skills to Large Groups:
A New Departure in Language Teaching or An Unwelcome Return to the Lecture Theatre?

When I was asked to devise a translation course to be taught to final year students of French, I enthusiastically agreed. When I was then told that this course had to be taught to the whole of the final year as a single group, I was less than delighted. In fact, I protested that it could not be done. A couple of weeks after this request had been put to me, I attended an international conference on translation. I canvassed opinion at this conference, confident in the knowledge that my horror at the notion of teaching translation skills to a group of over one hundred students would find support in eminent quarters. I was right. However, this additional weight to my argument did not actually solve my problem. I still found myself having to devise a programme of classes to be taught in the lecture theatre. A colleague had suggested we use the then new Hervey and Higgins *Thinking Translation* (1991) coursebook. After reading this coursebook, I was inspired to take up the challenge and devised a methodology which I thought the students might manage to assimilate in a series of lectures. The methodology is based on the Hervey and Higgins approach, though it is a modified and, in parts, simplified version of the one described in their coursebook. This revised methodology is presented to students over six lectures, which include a « workshop » session in the lecture theatre. The course has been running for three years, and though I still feel that teaching translation skills in a lecture theatre is essentially bad practice, I have to admit that a « better than nothing » course such as the one I am about to describe has met with interest and approval from a suprisingly large number of guinea-pig students who were subjected to this experiment, and seems to have been more successful than I would ever have imagined possible.

The reason why I feel it appropriate to discuss this approach to language teaching in an open forum will be evident to all those who have experienced the unwelcome changes in teaching conditions in our universities over recent years. In a nutshell, the number of students starting courses in languages and related studies has increased by 31%

and the number of full-time centrally funded staff by 9.5% over the past five years (Universities' Statistical Record 1994). This kind of pressure means a drop in standards or an increase in staff hours devoted to language teaching. The emphasis being given to research output means the latter is a dangerous option, so while this situation persists, we have to compromise. Large group teaching for supplementary language classes may be one possible solution we could consider, but only if we can be reasonably sure of not precipitating an unacceptable decline in standards.

An Approach to Teaching Translation Skills in the Lecture Theatre

The students were asked to buy (either individually or in small groups) the coursebook *Thinking Translation* from which some texts were used in the course of the lecture programme. As the authors of this work will recognise, the application of the method outlined below differs in many aspects from their own and the teacher's manual was not used at all. They are not responsible in any degree for the flaws which doubtless exist in the programme; the basic approach to translation methodology, however, is the same. Though the course described below does not purport to cover the field of translation theory, it does draw on this body of academic research insofar as « Translation theory's main concern is to determine appropriate translation methods for the widest possible range of texts or text-categories. Further, it provides a framework of principles, restricted rules and hints for translating texts and criticizing translations, a background for problem-solving » (Newmark 1981: 19).

Stage One — Understand your source text

The purpose of the introductory lecture was to present students with a simple method of defining, from a translator's point of view, the nature of a foreign language text. This involves filling in a grid table which requires them to consider the form in which the text is presented (either oral, visual, or written or a mixture of these forms). It then requires the student to decide what the purpose of the text might be. Is the text being presented in order simply to impart facts? Is it designed to persuade you, the audience/reader, to think or act in a certain manner? Or, does the piece clearly fall in to the literary category, as in the case of the novel or the poem? Of course, some texts fall into more than one category, a fact which itself will encourage the student to analyse the purpose and function of a text more closely. This second set of variables can, of course, be determined by the lecturer and include whichever categories s/he wishes to cover in the course (medical, legal, religious etc). In the course described below texts which could easily be classified as literary, technical or persuasive were chosen to illustrate the approach. Finally, when the first two columns of the grid have been filled in, the student describes the specific text according to its « text-type », such as political speech, transcript of a laboratory demonstration, user's manual, print advertisement, poem, or whatever.

The following grid demonstrates this method. The vertical columns indicate whether a text is presented in oral, written, or in a visual form, or indeed in a mixture of these forms. The horizontal variables relate to the purpose of the text. Here the student should decide whether the main purpose of the text is to impart facts (empirical), whether it is a fictional literary work, or whether it is a non-fictional work which does not seek merely to inform but rather expresses opinions/interpretations of facts (persuasive). It is obviously very easy to find texts which fall into several categories, but my own experience suggests that the principles of text analysis for translation purposes are more clearly conveyed by simplifying the process at the outset. Some illustrations of how to define the purpose of a text-type are given, such as a slide presentation of an accepted medical technique where visual images are being supported by an oral presentation. If the same subject is being presented by a pharmaceutical company which supplies equipment for this technique which has not yet been adopted by the medical establishment where the presentation is taking place, the text category would alter from empirical, which implies impartiality, to persuasive where a subjective viewpoint and a commerial interest may nuance the presentation.

Text Form ü ü *Text category*	ORAL	VISUAL	WRITTEN	
EMPIRICAL	scientific slide presentation	presentation	scientific slide user's manual	technical
PERSUASIVE	political speech poster/advert		poster/advert	
LITERARY	stage play		novel	

Once the foreign language text had been defined in this manner, the students were then shown why it is useful to categorise texts. To do this, a number of different text types were employed to show how all oral texts which cannot rely on written, visual or image support, have certain features in common. The over-riding feature is their transitory quality, the fact that the salient points of the piece have to be communicated in a way which does not require the audience to go back over previous information or to have access to the previous information. It was hoped that the importance of being able to identify the crucial bits of information in a speech would then dawn on the student who had not previously had the experience of close text analysis. If s/he cannot recognise the salient points in a speech then of course s/he cannot know what priority to attach to the elements which make up a text. S/he needs to be able to understand how elements such as repetitions or reiterations can be crucial to the communication of the central message of a speech, particularly where s/he might have been tempted to drop a repetition in translation because it looks unwieldy on paper. The role of the structure of a speech, the introduction of themes, the reiteration of themes or key points can all be explained simply in terms of the form of text.

Likewise, the category into which the text falls — empirical, persuasive or literary/artistic — carries certain instrinsic features. The category of the text can determine what priority the translator must afford to certain elements in the text. Precise description of facts or techniques is of paramount importance in an empirical text which describes a medical procedure. By contrast such priority does not have to be attributed to the factual content of a magazine advertisement targeted at the readership in a way which uses « facts » as examples of a characteristic or a quality of the product, and as such are interchangeable with other examples. The category of a text likewise affects the priority accorded to stylistics. The manner in which a medical procedure is described is not primarily determined by the emotional or psychological effect it might have on the reader or listener. Of course the reverse is true in the case of a persuasive text, and can also be true in the case of a literary text but only where the translator believes his/her primary responsibility lies in recreating the text in accordance with the perceived requirements of the target audience (Newmark cites Nabokov's translation of Pushkin as an example of a translator operating from the alternative point of view where faithfulness to the intention of the author is considered to be of even greater importance).

The economic, social and political demands put upon a translator become clear to the student as s/he considers where her/his primary responsibility lies in the translation of a given text. Should the translator accord a higher priority to creating an equivalent effect in the target language than to communicating faithfully the exact example given by the author? Is « equivalent effect » more important than empirical precision, where a translator feels impelled to make a choice? A simplified description of the approach a translator adopts towards different text categories, and the general practices these approaches entail (such as the use of subject specialists, data bases, intertextual research) was explained before the final level of general, pre-translation analysis was attempted.

The analysis of a specific text-type does not make such extensive use of general guidelines as the number of types is far greater then the number of forms or categories. The skill involved in analysing specific text-types develops with experience, and so it was necessary to select text-types from my own experience as a translator and as a subject specialist to describe the general characteristics of just a few text-types. For example, a political speech delivered by de Gaulle in the 1960s demonstrated the feature of political salience and of understanding the importance of the political context of the original presentation of the speech. This was a context the students had covered in a core lecture course and so they were all capable of drawing on some subject specialism in commenting on the text. The text demonstrated the use of rhetorical devices, the simulated spontaneity of the prepared speech, the use of specific registers and tones which are so widely-used in a given text-type as to have become a text tradition, and how tone and register can be used to create a relationship between speaker and audience. The purpose of drawing students' attention to the features inherent in a specific text-type at this point, was to put them in a position to consider what kind of research a translator might find it useful to embark upon before getting down to the real business of translating the text.

Stage Two — Research strategies

Despite the difficulty of trying to give students an interactive role in the lecture theatre, a discussion on the theme of research strategies was attempted at this point. The main points to be discussed such as « cultural context of target audience » « style and tradition in political speech-making » were written on an OHP transparency to give a structure to the discussion. It prompted some sensible responses, such as « I'd want to know what Churchill's speeches sounded like to see if I need to adjust the tone ». An argument then ensued as to whether one would wish to adapt a speech by de Gaulle to suit a Churchillian audience. This brought out the problem of targeting a translation, and led the students to conclude that they have to be told exactly whom they are translating for in order to decide what kind of tone they will endeavour to produce. Others noted that because they could not hear the speech they did not really know which points of information de Gaulle would have highlighted in the television and radio broadcast through intonation, rhythm and/or paralinguistic emphasis. As intonation is different in French and English, they rightly considered this a problem and decided they would see if a recording existed. They had decided by this point that where possible and relevant to the target translation, a literary or a persuasive oral text ought to be listened to before any research or close textual analysis was embarked upon, and contextual research carried out in those cases where the context in which the text was presented was not familiar to them.

Having established a method by which any text can be defined, and thus « accessed » by the student translator, they were given the task of examining de Gaulle's speech reproduced in the coursebook along with its translation before the following lecture.

Stage Three — Textual Analysis in a Lecture Theatre Workshop

« The translator requires a knowledge of literary and non-literary textual criticism, since he has to assess the quality of a text before he decides how to interpret and then translate it. » (Newmark 1981: 5) The need to understand what the text is saying and how it is operating provided the focus of the next stage in the programme.

The following speech, taken from the Hervey and Higgins coursebook, was used to illustrate how a translator learns to analyse text.

...Il y a quatre jours que les Allemands qui tenaient Paris ont capitulé devant les Français. Il y a quatre jours que Paris est libéré.

Une joie immense, une puissante fierté ont déferlé sur la Nation. Bien plus, le monde entier a tressailli quand il a su que Paris émergeait de l'abîme et que sa lumière allait, de nouveau, briller.

La France rend témoignage à tous ceux dont les services ont contribué à la victoire de Paris; au peuple parisien d'abord qui, dans le secret des âmes, n'a jamais, non jamais, accepté la défaite et l'humiliation; aux braves gens, hommes et femmes, qui ont longuement et activement mené ici la résistance à l'oppresseur avant d'aider à sa déroute; aux soldats de France qui l'ont battu et réduit sur place, guerriers venus d'Afrique après cent combats, vaillants combattants groupés à l'improviste dans les unités de l'intérieur; par-dessus tout et par-dessus tous, à ceux et celles qui ont donné leur vie pour la Patrie sur les champs de bataille ou aux poteaux d'exécution.

Mais la France rend également hommage aux braves et bonnes armées alliées et à leurs chefs dont l'offensive irrésistible a permis la libération de Paris et rend certaine celle de tout le territoire en écrasant avec nous la force allemande. (...)

The basic grid was applied and from this definition the features which we had established as being inherent to certain forms, categories and types of text were then identified in the speech. Students were getting used to the introduction of a more « classroom » like atmosphere into the lecture theatre by this point. They were asked to organise themselves into mini-groups of three, this being an ideal number in the physical surroundings of a lecture theatre and seems, from previous experience in the classroom, to be a « magic number » in eradicating passivity in classwork. The groups found examples of repetitions resulting from the transitory nature of the text, they found examples of cumulative effects running throughout the text, they noted the introduction, reintroduction and elaboration of themes, they identified the presence of discourse markers and other features, necessitated by the lack of visual signposts indicating where a new point was about to be broached, or when the speech was nearing its conclusion. They noted the absence of genre markers in the extract given in the coursebook, markers they knew would have been present in the original text (*Françaises*, *Français* and the like). Having looked at the cohesion and coherence of the text Hervey & Higgins 1991: 56 as a whole, they went on to analyse the text at the sentential and lexical level, seeking to identify the prosodic qualities of the length and rhythm of sentences, the use of alliteration or assonance, and were asked to consider what function each of these features was playing in communicating the essential message of the piece. When they had completed their analysis, they then went on to examine the published translation, which they felt fell far short of what they now believed to be the responsibilites of the translator. They were, however, cautioned about bearing in mind the date of the published translation and what primary objective the translators may have had in producing the published translation, which they considered too « literal ».

Stage Four — Translation Theory into Practice

Having shown so little mercy to fellow translators, the students now had the task of producing their own translations. For reasons of time, short self-contained texts had to be found by students working in groups of five or six and presented over the next two lectures by a spokesperson acting for the group. The general features of consumer-orientated texts were presented in a lecture.

The students were given a summary of the features of this type of written and visual text, as well as those attributed to the category (persuasive) and text-type (print advertising), in the form of a hand-out. Students were asked to find an advert, to discuss the features of the text and what research they would need to carry out (either contextual or intertextual), to look at the translation difficulties pertaining to the text-type and the actual text, and then to translate the written element of the text, and submit the original along with the translation prior to the following lecture, so that a transparency photocopy of the original and the translation could be produced. A problem arose as a result of this attempt at interactive lecturing. Because some had chosen to work in even smaller groups, the students submitted too many texts for the time originally allocated to presenting their work. Consequently some texts had to be dealt with very briefly through showing the OHP of the original text and asking the spokesperson of the group, still seated in lecture theatre, to explain the major difficulties the group had faced as translators of the text. It was important to show all the texts the students had prepared, however briefly. Other texts were presented more formally by a member (or, in the case of the less self-confident, members) of the group from the lectern. An element of course assessment can be introduced at this point as these presentations were submitted in written form (translation commentary + translation) prior to the lecture-workshop. I used them as one of the ways of identifying problems the students were having with the approach.

Stage Five — The Primacy of Meaning

The main difficulty encountered by the students was finding solutions which contained similar allusive/connotative/affective resonances to those present in the original. In general they were recognising the main translation difficulties, but thought that they could come up with a solution without moving too far away from the lexis of the original. The problem of literal translation has been amusingly illustrated by Basil Hatim and Ian Mason in their quotation from the 14th century Arab translator al-Safadi who complained that his predecessors would examine each Greek word as a separate unit and would proceed to seek « an equivalent term in Arabic and write it down. They then take the next word and do the same, and so on until the end of what they have to translate. » (Hatim & Mason 1990: 5). Students may feel reassured that at least they are not committing the follies of their professional forebears.

The concluding section of the course concentrated on identifying message or effect in texts, and presenting these phenomena as independent from lexis in the intermediary stage of translation between source language and target language. As we all know, this practice tends to make students nervous. They feel safer if their translations are close to the words and structures of the original. However, with a series of examples from legal texts, poetry, and advertising, demonstrating how weak and inaccurate « literal » translation can be, it was hoped that they were left feeling even more insecure in the practice of word for word translation than in the alternative practice of finding out what the text is about and then communicating that message in whatever words are most accurate and appropriate to the target-language audience in the target-language context.

The challenge of this course of lectures was to teach applied language skills in a forum where active participation by students is generally pretty minimal. It should be mentioned that some translation commentary classes are conducted in the course of the final year language programme, but that these classes have not been integrated into this lecture programme. A separate series of five lectures focusing on literary translation completes the provision of translation teaching in the final year. Pedagogically, the course of lectures discussed above had to be devised as a stand-alone means of preparing students for one question in the final year translation paper, and so the problem of student participation loomed large. The course itself does include some active participation, but the problem of speaking with students individually in the lecture theatre was not solved. The lecturer cannot physically speak with students seated in the middle of the lecture hall during the workshop sessions, and even if s/he had the luxury of being able to seat students in alternate rows, it would not be possible to speak with upwards of thirty mini-groups in the course of the sessions. Even so, the fact of speaking with individual groups did have the effect of making the atmosphere in the lecture theatre less formal. To ensure that access to personal supervision was granted to all students, a « surgery » was held during one afternoon some weeks before the exam where students could consult with the lecturer either individually or within a group.

Course examination

The test of the success of this programme came in the form of an initially large and unwieldy one-hour exam (part of a three-hour exam) at the end of the final year. Such was my trepidation that we hedged our bets in the first year of the exam by offering the students the option of translating a source text (50% of the mark) and providing comments on their own translation (50%). Alternatively, they could attempt a straight translation commentary along the lines outlined above, namely discuss the nature of the source text in an introductory paragraph, outline what kind of research needs to be done in order to become competent to attempt a translation, and comment on the success of the published translation in meeting the translation requirements of the source text. In practice the exam paper was too long. Not only were the students given the option of straight translation commentary or translation + commentary, but they also had to be given a choice of either a literary text or a non-literary text to comment on as the whole translation course had been made up of the translation methodology lectures outlined above, which used a selection of text-types (political speeches, newspaper articles and marketing texts), and a series of lectures on literary translation based on extracts from novels. In the event, and to my relief, the students showed that they were ready and able to take on the straight translation commentary option, in some cases producing encouragingly perceptive commentaries and examples of how the published translations could be effectively revised. The exam at the end of the second year of the course was modified to take account of this evidence. The translation + translation commentary option was dropped and they were required to write a translation commentary on either an extract from a novel and its translation (literary translation commentary) or a translation commentary of a non-literary text and its translation. This has solved the problem of presenting students with four source texts to read before they choose which question to answer.

Conclusions

Evidently, I find the approach adopted in this course to have some merit. However, I think it cannot be stressed too often that effective language teaching depends, among other highly influential factors such as motivation, upon the quality of contact between learner and teacher. For psychological and logistical reasons, the lecture theatre does not provide the optimum conditions in which a lecturer can communicate individually with students. It is clear that a lecturer needs to communicate with students in various ways, sometimes as a group, sometimes as individual learners, and it is equally clear that the lecture theatre does not provide the flexibility required to ensure that the right kind and therefore quality of contact is possible at all times. The level of student autonomy in the lecture theatre is low, except when mini-group activity can be interspersed between sessions of traditional lecturing.

What came as such a surprise to me in presenting this course was the degree to which the majority was prepared to participate at all in the context of a lecture, a context where the student's role is traditionally understood to be passive. However, conceptual questions relating to the methodology were rarely posed from the floor of the lecture theatre, the environment being considered too intimidating to allow for this kind of discussion. The Wednesday afternoon « surgeries », where students were invited to consult with the lecturer, compensated to some extent for this failing. The take-up of this service was not high in terms of numbers, but it was considered very valuable by those who did come along. In other words, the small-group tutorial still seems to be the ideal forum for the intellectual development of the individual student, just as my older, wiser colleagues have always said. This experiment in language teaching has highlighted once again that the old arguments against lecturing and the old arguments for small-group teaching are sound, but it has also shown that the scope for integrating these two modes of teaching is greater than some of us had realised.

References

Hervey,S. & Higgins,I. (1991) *Thinking Translation — A course in translation method: French to English* (Routledge)

Universities' Statistical Record (1994) *University Statistics 1993-94 volume 1 — Staff and Students* (Univerisites' Statistical Record)

Newmark, P. (1981) *Approaches to Translation* (Pergamon)

Hatim, B. & Mason, I (1990) *Discourse and the Translator* (Longman)

Claire H. Griffiths
University of Hull