

Towards a constructivist approach to translator education

Donald Kiraly

Universität Mainz. Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
An der Hochschule 2. D-76726 Germersheim. Germany
DCKiraly@aol.com

Data de recepció: 10/1/2000

1. Objectives and assumptions

Within the framework of a university-wide program for the improvement of teaching in higher education, a two-year research project (1995-1997) was undertaken at the School of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies at the University of Mainz (Germany) in Germersheim to investigate the implications of a constructivist educational epistemology for bringing innovation to curriculum and syllabus design, and to pedagogical procedures in translator education.

While contemporary translation theory has for years been moving away from conceptualizations of translation as a process of transferring meaning from one text to another, and toward the perspective that readers (and translators) *make* meaning as they interact with texts, transmissionist approaches to the training of translators still seem to predominate in many European training institutions. In the field of education, *transmission* describes an approach to teaching and learning where knowledge is seen as being transmitted from the instructor to the learner. The fundamental idea underlying this study was that there is a fundamental contradiction between, on the one hand, a view of translation as a hermeneutic process and, on the other hand, a view of teaching and learning as a knowledge transfer.

The focus of this project included: investigating the role of a constructivist versus an objectivist epistemology on the design and implementation of instruction; discovering trends in classroom interaction in teacher-centered and collaborative classes; and identifying difficulties that can emerge in collaborative learning environments as well as developing ways to overcome them.

The assumptions upon which the study was based are rooted in a *social constructivist* epistemology as exemplified by the writings of such eminent philosophers and educators as Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Richard Rorty. From this perspective, human beings have no access to objective truth, and thus individuals have no choice but to create or construct meanings and knowledge through participation in the interpersonal, inter-subjective interaction that Rorty has called the «conversation of mankind» (Rorty, 1979). In this view, while our personal meanings and understandings of the world can never be identical to those of any other individual due to the idiosyncratic nature of experience, language

serves as a common denominator of interpretation that makes it possible for communication to take place at all. As children become acculturated, they acquire and use language to make sense of the world through the sociolinguistic glasses of the communities they are in the process of joining.

Subsequent learning can thus be seen as a type of re-acculturation, as a process of becoming increasingly proficient at thinking, acting and communicating in ways that are shared by the particular communities of which we are striving to become members. Acquiring *translator competence* thus involves joining a number of new communities such as the group of educated users of several languages, those conversant in specialized technical fields, and proficient users of traditional tools and new technologies for professional interlingual communication purposes.

The implications of these epistemological premises for the translator education classroom are far-reaching. They include the need for a radical re-assessment of teachers' and students' roles in the classroom, a new perspective on the function and nature of testing, and a reorientation of both the goals and the pedagogical techniques of the educational program.

2. Research design

A *qualitative action research* design was chosen for this project on the basis of the same constructivist assumptions that underlie the proposed alternative approach to translation skills development. The design is based on qualitative educational research as proposed by Guba & Lincoln (1989), and borrows from the traditions of classroom and action research as well. Unlike an experimental method involving the testing of hypotheses, the qualitative action research approach begins with the observation of a problem, in this case the apparently de-motivating and counter-productive results of an objectivist epistemology as embodied in conventional instructional performances. The analysis of the problem against the background of the theoretical perspectives offered by research on constructivism outside of the translation domain led to tentative solutions to the problem, which in turn were implemented, observed, and analyzed. In the process, innovative solutions to local problems that might serve an exemplary role for other translation teachers emerged and were refined. From this type of research perspective, rather than looking for valid and reliable results (verifiable reflections of truth), the researcher attempts to come up with trustworthy and substantiated, but nonetheless subjective results.

In action research, teachers take on the role of researchers to investigate their own teaching environments. This was the approach taken in this project, with most of the classes observed also being taught by the researcher. Student assistants were brought in to collect verbal data and to provide students' perspectives to help interpret the observations. Triangulation was achieved through the collection of three different types of data: questionnaires filled out by the students, verbal data collected using tape recorders during classroom sessions, and direct observation (for example of non-verbal behavior) by the teacher and student assistants during classroom sessions. The classes chosen for observation were: a variety of conventional (frontal instruction) translation practice classes taught by various teachers in

different departments; a seventh-semester translation practice class taught by the researcher; a translation propaedeutic (introduction to translation studies) and a graduate seminar on translation teaching, also conducted by the researcher.

The observational data collected were analyzed in accordance with the principles of classroom research analysis proposed by Allwright & Bailey (1994). The researcher and the student assistants observed interaction in the conventional and experimental classes, and together interpreted those observations, drawing conclusions that could be implemented dynamically in subsequent classroom interaction. The classes chosen for observation were regular university offerings, and no attempt was made to undertake a random sampling of participants. However, permission was secured from all participating students to have the classes observed, verbal interaction recorded and the results disseminated.

Space limitations allow me to provide no more than a superficial discussion of the procedures and results. Interested readers may wish to consult my forthcoming book *Empowering the Translator* for more detailed information. Here I would like to mention briefly only those aspects related to the observed experimental translation practice classes.

Following initial observations of a selection of classes taught by different teachers with various language combinations, the researcher and the assistants identified characteristics of those classes that reflected the underlying objectivist epistemology. Then a tentative 'workshop' framework was developed for implementation in the researcher's experimental classes based on constructivist principles, including cognitive apprenticeship, collaboration and the incorporation of multiple perspectives in the learning situation. In the translation practice class, an actual translation commission was used as the basis for a collaborative group project, with all sub-tasks and pedagogical activities being embedded in that major project. We then observed: how students worked together collaboratively, where they had difficulties, what teacher and student roles in collaborative work seemed to be most conducive to learning, and which aspects of the learning situation needed to be optimized. We were also interested in questions related to the enhancement of student motivation and the quality of the group product, and the potential for reducing attrition over the course of the semester.

3. Methodological problems

The assessment of learning in the experimental classes proved to be a significant methodological problem that will have to be the subject of further research. Because of the tenuous trustworthiness of statistical analyses as seen from this qualitative research perspective, it was deemed inappropriate to make statistical comparisons between group and individual results. It was therefore difficult to determine the extent to which individuals were learning in the class as the result of collaborative work experiences. While, for example, the translation work completed by the experimental translation practice class as a whole was of a high professional quality, it was not possible to determine the extent to which any of the members of the class improved their translation skills as a result.

Another methodological problem is actually an external one, and that is the extent to which the qualitative approach to research utilized in this project can be accepted by other researchers working within a scientific (objectivist) paradigm. In particular, as qualitative research of this type seeks to achieve neither reliability nor validity, the two key features that lend credence to scientific experiments, how can the interpretive findings be considered of any value by *scientific* researchers? What is perhaps more important, in any event, is that, as more translation teachers begin to undertake qualitative classroom research, common principles and assumptions will ensure the establishment of a solid basis for a dialogue and the improvement of teaching.

4. Results

Our analyses of the collaborative experimental classes showed that students were highly motivated by the opportunity to assume responsibility for their own learning. Most of the small groups worked together very effectively, and the majority of students reported that they believed they had learned a great deal about translation and collaborative work over the course of the semester. The experimental classrooms were characterized particularly by a great deal of discussion and negotiation. The teacher's alternative role as an advisor and project coordinator was accepted immediately by the vast majority of the students. The product of the translation project consisted of two chapters in a coffee table book on the history, culture and economy of a small German region. Although the students translated the original German text into English, a foreign tongue for all of them, their final translation was considered excellent by the commissioner of the translation and was published without changes.

It became clear during this project that a constructivist approach does indeed lend itself to the education of translators. By recognizing the inherently personal and social nature of knowledge construction, and by negating the possibility of transferring objective knowledge from one mind to another, the approach inherently promotes a more equitable distribution of authority in the classroom and higher levels of motivation and active participation. It also encourages students to assume responsibility for their own learning.