

Linguistic competence vs. Translation competence: A pedagogic approach

Teodora Popescu

“1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia

Romania

teo_popescu@hotmail.com

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to address the issue of linguistic competence versus translation competence seen from a pedagogical perspective. I will start by reviewing the well-known distinction between competence and performance and their interrelatedness. Other dimensions will be added to linguistic competence, which together contribute to the process of language learning (either foreign or second): sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence and intercultural competence. In close connection with linguistic competence I will try to delineate the components of translation competence, by outlining similarities and differences between the two processes. Some elements of translation competence, apart from those that are also inherent to linguistic competence will be analysed and exemplified: monitoring competence, ICT competence and content-knowledge competence. From a pedagogic viewpoint, in order for the students to attain a certain degree of translation competence, their level of linguistic competence must be fairly well-developed (at least upper-intermediate, or B2 according to the Common European Framework of reference for languages); however, when learning how to translate, students have to be able to further enhance their linguistic competence. Therefore, I will also attempt at providing a basic teaching methodology involving the use of translation in EFL/ESL classes, so as to increase students' both competences.

Key words: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, intercultural competence, translation competence.

I. Introduction

The relationship between linguistic competence and translation competence has been sparsely addressed by various researchers, however, with differing standpoints. The use of translation in foreign language classes was discarded as a teaching technique, especially after the grammar-translation method had fallen into disuse, and the proponents of the communicative approach started to frown upon teachers' resorting to L1 in their courses. Translation was entirely left to some specialist courses in translation theory and practice, particularly in curricula destined for the formal training of translators and interpreters. Nevertheless, as Rodgers (1986: 4) pointed out, “Grammar Translation dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s, and in modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today.”

Our main tenet here is that by interspersing the foreign language class with translation tasks, students will enhance both their linguistic and linguistic competences. We also start from the assumption that in order for a translator from L1 into L2 to be successful, they need to master a relatively independent-user stage in their language learning. This paper attempts at identifying the constituent elements of both competences, and their interrelations. Further on, different teaching methodologies used for the development of both linguistic and translation competences. In the end, a possible model is presented and discussed.

II. Linguistic competence

For taxonomical reasons, I will employ the term “linguistic competence” in order to refer to a learner's “knowledge of and ability to use, the formal resources from which well-formed, meaningful messages may be assembled and formulated” (CEFR, 2001:109), as opposed to the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use and/or the meaning and language use that are dependent on the speaker, the addressee and other contextual features. It was Chomsky who first made a distinction between competence (the system of linguistic knowledge) and performance (the way the language system is used in communication):

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its (the speech community's) language

perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance (Chomsky, 1965:3).

The debate that ensued is well known to all scholars and students of linguistics. It was argued that it is not possible to study language in such a 'purified' environment', as pictured by Chomsky, resting on the premise that a language without being used is no longer a language. The controversy was likened by Cook (1996) to a war "waged as much in language teaching, in children's languages, or in computational linguistics, as it is in linguistics itself". Theoretical linguists, in particular, would welcome such a separate approach, while applied linguists are strongly opposed to the idea of learning a language as an abstract and isolated system. Other specialists scrutinised the issue from the perspective of teaching materials elaboration. According to Allen (1975:40), most language textbooks actually contain a limited number of completely abstract sentences or completely 'authentic' utterances. The majority of classroom materials are based on sentences that are at the meeting point of the two extremes.

It comes as no surprise that applied linguists would adopt a stance that favours second language instruction which aims at achieving native speakers' competence in a language. Undoubtedly, Chomsky's definition of language cannot be adopted as a language learning goal per se. It is not possible to teach students the abstract forms and rules of language and expect them to be able to use the language in real contexts in an appropriate manner. In Spolsky's (1972) words, linguistic competence "is not enough for practical or educational purposes; we are interested not just in the fact that someone knows a language but that he knows how to use it". Language instruction should assist the student in competently using language forms, which can only come with practice and exposure to real-life contexts. In this terrain of discontent, Hymes' concept of 'communicative competence' seemed to finally satisfy applied linguists. Stern (1992:73) points out Hymes' argument that besides linguistic competence, the native speaker possesses another rule system, according to which, he intuitively knows what is socially acceptable or unacceptable, and can adapt his language use according to the topic, situation and human relations at stake. By the same token, Widdowson (1989) comments that "Hymes proposed his concept of communicative competence in reaction to Chomsky, and it is customary to present it as an improvement in that it covers aspects of language other than the narrowly grammatical". The concept of communicative competence, was nevertheless conceived from a sociolinguist's perspective, and only starting with Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) did this approach enter the area of second/foreign language teaching and learning. According to them, communicative competence is made of the following categories:

- grammatical competence:
 - o phonology;
 - o vocabulary;
 - o syntax;
 - o semantics.
- discourse competence - sociocultural rules having to do with language use;
- sociolinguistic competence - rules of discourse such as cohesion and coherence,
- strategic competence - the ability "to compensate for breakdowns in communication" and "to enhance the rhetorical effect of utterances" (Canale 1983:339).

How to integrate these elements into language learning goals is yet another issue. Widdowson (1989:134) argues that "[a]s soon as you talk about competence as *ability*, or what people can actually *do* with their language, you get into all kinds of difficulty", since "there is *so much* you have to allow for in the way of individual differences, varying circumstances, attitude, and so on that specification becomes impossible". According to him, "grammar needs to be in its place", while at the same time allowing for "rightful claims of lexis", as the actual use of language may be more dependent on stocks of lexical items rather than the analysis of structures. In this, he seems to accept the idea that linguistic competence needs to be separated from language usage. Furthermore, Lyons (1996), departing from the premise that there exists a psychological difference between propositional (or declarative) knowledge ("knowing that something is or is not so") and performative (or procedural) knowledge ("knowing how to do something"), tries to investigate the type of knowledge that linguistic competence falls under. He tends to consider it as a sort of procedural knowledge, i.e. being able to do something without being able to pin down the underlying rules. According to him, it is not necessary for a language learner to consciously 'know' the language he internalises and to subsequently apply the rules, i.e. he does not need to possess meta-knowledge when actually using the language in real-life situations.

Another second language education standpoint is provided by Brown (1996:202), who constructs a developmental paradigm (a “virtuous spiral”, as she calls it), according to which a child first manifests competence consisting of fundamental constraints on the nature of human languages. Subsequently, the child’s perception of the language which he/she is exposed to (performance) starts to mould competence, and the process continues in the same manner, with more and more performance changing performance. She maintains that “just as performance modifies and restructures competence in the first language, so it modifies and restructures competence in the second language”. According to this statement, mother tongue acquisition and second language acquisition rest on the same principles, as competence is transferable language ability inherent in the human brain, working alike for first and second language.

An even more complex model for language education is advanced by Bachman (1990), through his hierarchical model of language competence, which is now divided into organisational competence and pragmatic competence. The former represents grammatical competence and textual competence; while pragmatic competence contains illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. These consist of the following categories:

- organisational competence:
 - o grammatical competence - “the knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology/graphology” (p. 87).
 - o textual competence - “the knowledge of the conventions for joining utterances together to form a text” (p. 88).
 - o illocutionary competence – the way we use words to do things, in terms of the speech acts theory (Austin 1962) and/or language functions (Halliday 1973, 1976)
- sociolinguistic competence – the ability “to perform language functions in ways that are appropriate to that context” (p. 94).

More or less concurrently with the model developed by Bachman, the EU ‘Book’ on language learning and teaching – The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was produced in order to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (CEFR, 2001:1). According to this manual, the communicative situations in which users and learners have to function entail the successful completion of certain tasks and activities. To this end, they “draw upon a number of competences developed in the course of their previous experience” (CEFR, 2001: 101). At the same time, “participation in communicative events (including, of course, those events specifically designed to promote language learning) results in the further development of the learner’s competences, for both immediate and long-term use” (CEFR, 2001: 101). As a matter of fact, all human competences play a part in the language user’s ability to communicate, and can in turn be considered as components of the communicative competence. Nevertheless, they may be categorized into competences more or less closely related to the linguistic competence. Here is the classification offered by the CEFR:

A. General competences

- Declarative knowledge (savoir)*
 - Knowledge of the world
 - Sociocultural knowledge
 - Intercultural awareness
- Skills and know-how (savoir-faire)*
 - Practical skills and know-how
 - Intercultural skills and know-how
- ‘Existential’ competence (savoir-être)*
- Ability to learn (savoir-apprendre)*
 - Language and communication awareness
 - General phonetic awareness and skills
 - Study skills
 - Heuristic skills

B. Communicative language competences

- Linguistic competences*
 - Lexical competence;
 - Grammatical competence;
 - Semantic competence;
 - Phonological competence;
 - Orthographic competence;

- Orthoepic competence.
- Sociolinguistic competence*
 - Politeness conventions
 - Expressions of folk wisdom
 - Register differences
- Pragmatic competences*
 - Discourse competence
 - Functional competence

III. Translation competence

Among the very few studies on translation competence development, mention should be made of Campbell's (1998) research based on applied linguistics methodologies. He explored translation competence of non-native speakers' translation from their mother tongue into English. His informants were native speakers of Arabic, studying translation and interpretation at an Australian university. Data analysis and interpretation led Campbell to design a three-layered model of translation competence:

- textual competence – the ability to produce TL texts with “structural features of formal, written English” (p. 73). Evaluation benchmarks are nominalizations, type/token ratios, word length, passives, prepositional phrases, etc.
- disposition – translators' behaviours in choosing different words when contracting TL texts.

The parameters he advances are:

- persistent vs capitulating;
- prudent vs risk-taking.

Combinations of the above categories will create four types of disposition:

- persistent and risk-taking;
- capitulating and risk-taking;
- persistent and prudent;
- capitulating and prudent.

- monitoring competence, consisting of two sub-categories:
 - self-awareness;
 - editing.
 -

However, this model overlooks the crucial issue of translation equivalence (grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, cultural, etc.). A second model is provided by Sofer (1998), who puts forward ten commandments for professional translators:

1. A thorough knowledge of both SL and TL;
2. A thorough “at-homeness” in both cultures.
3. Keeping up with changes in the language and being up-to-date in all of its nuances and neologisms.
4. Always translating from another language into one's native language.
5. Being able to translate in more than one area of knowledge.
6. Possessing ease of writing or speaking and the ability to articulate quickly and accurately, either orally or in writing.
7. Developing a good speed of translation.
8. Developing research skills, being able to retrieve reference sources needed in producing high quality translation.
9. Being familiar with the latest technological advances;
10. Being able to understand the type of potential one's language specialty has in a certain geographic area. (pp. 33-37)

If we analyse the two models, we would see most of the characteristics are pragmatically-oriented, and refer to personal skills that translators need to possess/develop. However, we should not overlook from among a translator's competence, the explicit ability to achieve equivalence at lexical, semantic, textual (discursive), pragmatic (see Mona Baker, 1992), cultural level (see David Katan, 1999).

I reiterate the idea that translation competence cannot be achieved unless a translator already possesses good knowledge of both SL and TL [by this meaning linguistic knowledge, on the one hand, as well as socio-linguistic, pragmatic and (inter-)cultural knowledge]. I would like to state that at the intersection of the two competences, we would find the above elements:

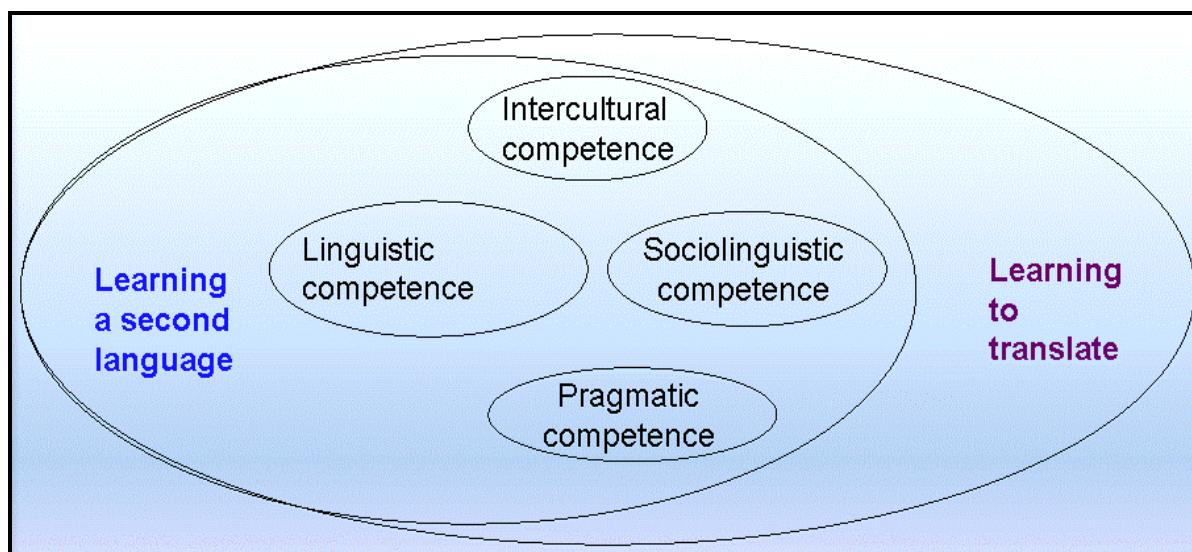


Fig. 1 Second language learning vs learning to translate

The other components of translation competence would be, in synthesis, content-knowledge competence (economics, finance, medicine, law, etc.), ICT competence (hardware, operating system environment, packages used: Windows, Trados, etc., the Internet); monitoring competence (awareness of the quality of translations made) and research competence (the ability to resort to bibliographic and lexicographic resources).

IV. Pedagogic implications

I suggest therefore that the translation theory and practice syllabus for language learners should include as course aims the development of translation competence which includes all the elements pertaining to language learning (linguistic competence – phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse; sociolinguistic competence; pragmatic competence and intercultural competence), as well as sub-competence pertaining to the translation profession proper (content-knowledge competence; ICT competence, Research competence and monitoring competence), as graphically represented in the figure below:

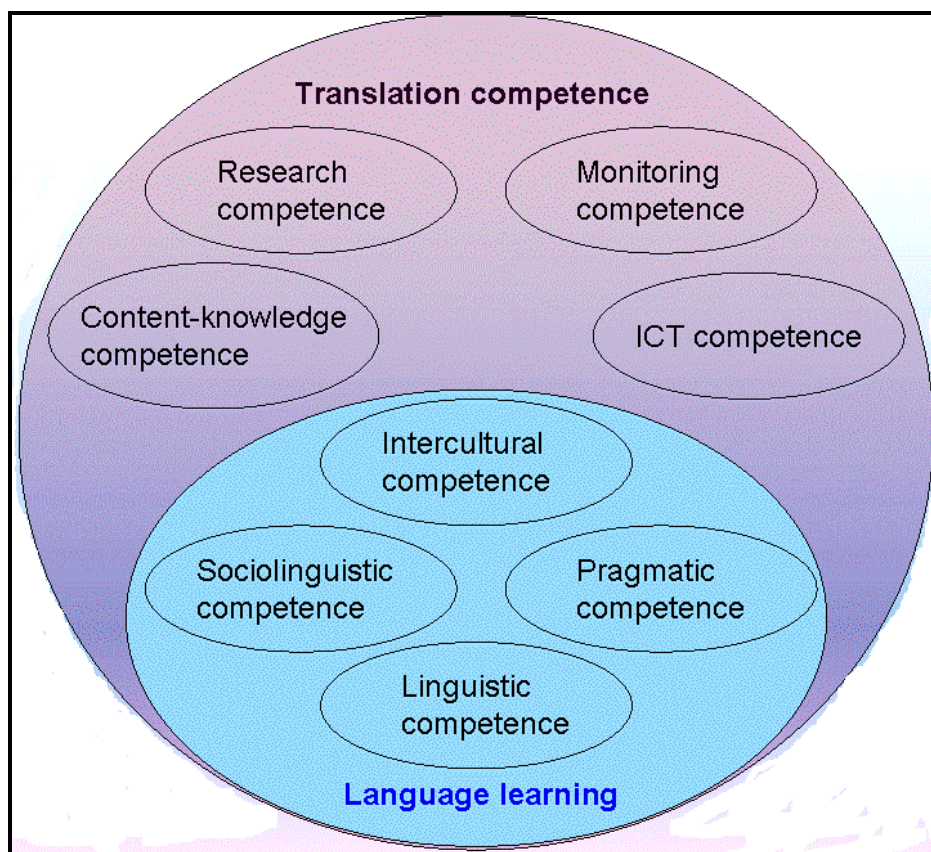


Fig. 2 Learning objectives for a translation course

Although there is relatively little research carried out in the field of teaching translation proper, as opposed to teaching a foreign/second language, there are references to the use of translation in different learning methodologies advocated by different stages in the history of foreign/second language learning. As previously mentioned, the Grammar Translation method was the one which made most use of translation in language instruction. It has numerous times come under attack, as it only concentrates on grammar and vocabulary structure and is very far from the real task of translation, being rather artificial. The typical exercise in this approach is “to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue” (Celce-Murcia, 1991), and its aim is to enforce “the vocabulary and grammar encountered in the current and earlier units” (Cook, 1998). Nevertheless, in recent years we have witnessed a revival of interest in using translation as a classroom technique. Translation was not encouraged by subsequent methodologies, such as the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method (where, according to Brookes, quoted in Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 58, there existed “practice in translation only as a literary exercise at an advanced level”), or Communicative Language Teaching. In the Humanistic paradigm (Community Language Learning (CLL) and Suggestopedia, teachers resort again to translation. In both methods, translation represents a sort of transition from the learner’s mother tongue to the target language, and through it, learners’ anxieties can be diminished.

Translation tasks may interspersed in the language class, and it is particularly important to choose authentic and relevant texts to be translated from and into the mother tongue, so as for the students to understand the real usefulness and efficiency of good translation skills

Conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate through this paper that the role and importance of translation need to be reassessed in the foreign/second language classroom. Alongside the language teaching/learning, we need to try and develop students’ translation competence as well. I have tried to decompose both linguistic competence and the associated sociolinguistic, pragmatic and intercultural competences, as well as give an inventory of elements that constitute the translation competence. It is argued that translation competence encompasses the linguistic one, therefore, all instructors who want to teach translation, need to pay heed first to students’ foundation competences.

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