ACADEMIC TEACHING IN TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING IN RUSSIA: STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND MARKET REALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to develop a framework for translator and interpreter competence in an ever-changing professional environment and provide recommendations to improve academic teaching in translation and interpreting in Russian universities in order to meet the needs of the language industry. To this end, the author discusses the results of three surveys carried out in 2017-2018. In the first survey, chief executives and vendor managers of major Russian translation companies share their experience of hiring university graduates. In the second survey, young professionals entering the Russian translation and interpreting market reflect on their university experience versus the expectations they had when enrolling in translation and interpreting programs. In the third survey, teachers of translation and interpreting from Russian universities reflect on existing academic programs in translation and interpreting.

Keywords: translation, interpreting, translator and interpreter training, language industry, translation theory, translation practice

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Modern Russian translation and interpreting market demand and supply

In recent years, any debate concerned with the developing language industry has inevitably involved a variety of issues of translator and interpreter education and training. The main topics under discussion relate to the competencies students acquire when translating into a foreign language (Beeby-Lonsdale, 1996), creation of a translation competence model (PACTE, 2003), comparative analysis of different programs of translator training (Pym & Torres-Symón, 2017), and exploration of class management skills in teaching conference interpreting (Setton & Dawrant, 2016), etc. Since there already exists a concise and elaborated competence framework, most questions of teaching translation in universities do not require discussion. This allows educators to equip their students "not only with a deep understanding of the processes involved but also with the ability to perform and provide a translation service in line with the highest professional and ethical standards" (EMT Competence Framework, 2017). The framework defines five main areas of competence which translation graduates need to acquire: language and culture, translation, technology, personal and interpersonal skills, and service provision.

Professional organizations and associations also contribute to a better understanding of translators and interpreters' competence framework (NAATI Certification prerequisites, 2018). They provide their members with a detailed description of skill levels which characterize translators' or interpreters' performance levels (ILR skill level descriptions, 2007). In addition, there are industry-based competency frameworks, for instance, the competence framework for community interpreting in the field of healthcare (NHS Scotland Competency Framework for Interpreting, 2010), as well as ISO standards describing the requirements for translation and interpreting services, general guidance concerning developing and managing translation projects, etc. All these documents serve as a reliable foundation for creating educational plans and developing teaching techniques applicable for the improvement of the efficiency of translation and interpreting teaching.

However, the Russian culture of academic teaching in translation and interpreting differs from the European experience. Russian universities offer both bachelor's and master's degrees in translation. Thus, students learn foreign languages

and acquire professional skills simultaneously. Significantly, students are engaged in both translation and interpreting studies, even at bachelor's level. All future specialists majoring in "Theory and Practice of Translation" must be able to perform both translation and interpreting at a professional level.

This idea is supported by an analysis of 160 vacancies in translation and interpreting published in 2017-2018 on the HeadHunter website, the largest recruiting hub on the Russian Internet. Special attention was paid to the functions and responsibilities stated by the employers. The bulk of companies wanting to employ a specialist in translation and interpreting agree on the scope of work a young employee should be engaged in. They are looking not for a translator or an interpreter but for a 'universal soldier' – a professional capable of translating written texts, performing both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting, editing texts, and carrying out post-editing of machine translation. It means that probably quite soon we are going to meet a new generation of Russian multi-specialists that will be able to perform different professional tasks in versatile combinations.

In addition to professional responsibilities, Russian employers expect their employees – both freelancers and in-house workers – to be able to manage the teams of language specialists, conduct negotiations via the phone or any other means of communication, to prepare presentations and reference materials, to compile marketing information sheets. Thus, a translator has to be a designer, marketing analyst, and mediator – all in one. Certain companies want a professional capable of organising and hosting different events, such as conferences, board meetings, round-table talks, and festivals, etc. They also want their employees to be experts in intercultural communication and assistants for foreign specialists in Russia.

Despite these demanding skills requirements, the translating and interpreting profession remains popular among Russian high school graduates. 265 Russian universities offer bachelor's programs in Linguistics (Vuzoteka, 2018), more than two-thirds of which offer translation and interpreting. In addition, 43 universities offer translation and interpreting programs as their major specialization. A simple Google search reveals about 50 universities which offer master's programs in Conference Interpreting, Literary Translation, and Professionally Oriented Translation, amongst

others. Thousands of young translators and interpreters enter the market every year. Despite this the Internet is filled with hundreds of job offers for good translators and interpreters, since most of today's Russian university translation and interpreting graduates do not meet their future employers' expectations. One possible reason is the lack of a unified and concise competence framework which could serve as a starting point for universities in designing an effective translation and interpreting curriculum. The only available standard document, which could be used for this purpose, is the Federal State Educational Standard. This standard contains a list of competences and skills which the future translator and interpreter needs to acquire. Unfortunately, most of the competences included in this list are either outdated or too vague and unspecific. There is still no National Occupation Standard to set out the competences and skills required from Russian translators and interpreters.

The primary purpose of this study is to suggest a framework for translator and interpreter competence which will comply with market demand and provide recommendations for improvements in the teaching of translation and interpreting in Russian universities.

Translator and Interpreter teaching: the employer's perspective

In order to help students choose their professional path, teachers of translation and interpreting need to be aware of employers' expectations In 2017, 23 major language sector companies, from six Russian cities – Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Ekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, and Omsk – were surveyed. The aim was to identify strengths and weaknesses among current university graduates. Respondents were also encouraged to share their own thoughts and ideas in the form of a free commentary. This proved to be very useful in providing a deeper insight into the problems. The results of the survey were published in 2017 (Malenova, 2017). Here I would like to share a brief outline in the context of two other surveys conducted in 2018. These will be described below.

The first group of questions concerned the most important skills and competencies for a language professional. Respondents were encouraged to give more than one answer. Thus, the percentage of answers exceeds 100%. The most popular answer (70% of respondents) was 'a high level of competence in the native language'.

The problem of native language competence amongst young people is not new. However, with respect to the language industry, it is a crucial matter since such people are expected to be a "linguistic gold standard", with ramifications for future generations. Potential employers (60% of respondents) also emphasize the importance of good foreign language competence. One interesting comment was that certain university graduates know the foreign language better than their native one. They tend to make fewer mistakes using a foreign language, especially in writing.

Expectations of employees' domain-related knowledge ranked third, as mentioned by 62% of the respondents. In their comments, the employers explained that they did not expect universities to teach students all possible terms and term combinations in all the domains of human activities. This would be an impossible task. They encouraged teachers to help students to develop the skill of effective information search, to elaborate their own algorithm of mastering an unknown domain while preparing for a translation process, and to be curious and inquisitive. The fourth most popular skill mentioned by respondents (45%) – the urge for constant improvements in skills – is closely connected with the previous one. The survey participants even suggested some ways of students' professional development, such as taking part in volunteer projects, or working as translators at minor events (university conferences and festivals), etc. Employers prefer to hire a translation and interpreting specialist who has had some working experience while at university, rather than choose a graduate without such an experience. In their comments, respondents said that they would prefer applicants who had tried their future profession and therefore had no naïve ideas about their future careers. As one of respondents mentioned, 'they should be prepared to find themselves not in a Hollywood blockbuster such as "The Interpreter" or "Arrival", but in a screen version of Kafka's novel'.

Some respondents (38%) said that an ability to work with CAT-tools was a definite advantage in their future employment. They also noted that today it is important not only to be an advanced user of one TM-program but also to be open to new challenges and to be ready to master any software used by the employer's company. Some employers were even ready to teach their future employees and provide them with additional professional training concerning not only technical aspects of their work but other tools and skills connected with their field of expertise. In

their free comments, respondents mentioned that 'quite often the graduates themselves understand that they need more training, so companies give them some clues and hints, show the right direction rather than teach'. This does not mean that universities should be satisfied with waiting for companies to train their graduates. On the contrary, they need to work in close contact with potential employers and provide their students with a firm foundation for their further professional career.

Finally, yet importantly, respondents mentioned such skills as 'vigour and enthusiasm' (30%), 'expertise and flexibility' (30%), and 'communicative skills' (26%). They said they would hire a person who is mentally alert, competent, and ready to learn. This 'ideal' employee should have undergone 'intensive language and translation and interpreting training', be able 'to translate well', and have a broad outlook.

The second group of questions dealt with certain disadvantages of universities' graduates applying for a job in the industry. Respondents were asked to share their overview of the current situation in translation and interpreting teaching and to specify the skill gaps they encountered while working with students or 'fresh' graduates. Respondents were free to give more than one answer and to leave their comments.

Analysis of responses to the questions from this group showed that most of them correlate with the responses brought forward above. The most common answer in this group of questions would deal with native language skills. More than 90% of the employers were not satisfied with the applicants' proficiency in their mother tongue. The bulk of the complaints of the sort were connected with the quality of writing: while performing translation tests, the applicants tend to make a lot of spelling, punctuation, stylistic, and grammar mistakes. Employers also mentioned that some translators did not even use automatic spelling and grammar checkers embedded into MS Word. It is also interesting that answers to the questions concerning the applicants' proficiency in foreign languages repeat an established pattern – only 65% of the respondents complained of poor knowledge of a foreign language.

The second popular skill gap mentioned by respondents (78%) is connected to the so-called 'soft skills'. Respondents said that most of their young employees were careless, forgetful, and not diligent enough: they could miss the deadline easily, ignored

their translation briefs, and were rude to the clients and to their direct supervisors. They also sometimes failed to spur conversations on the phone, could not work in a team, and seemed not to be motivated enough to upgrade their skills. In other words, when students graduate their universities they are not ready for the realities of their profession being a life-learning process.

In their free commentary, respondent shared their own ideas of the skills that need to be enhanced in the process of university training. They spoke of a serious lack of general knowledge. According to respondents, translation and interpreting teachers should pay more attention to culture and geography of both Russia and countries of the languages studied, cultivate in their students some respect for their future profession, and stimulate them to develop 'translator's thinking'. Potential employers also mentioned the need for teamwork skills and the ability to use them. Some of respondents were very sincere in their comments and even said they were repelled by the graduates' 'hypertrophic arrogance' accompanied by a 'hypotrophic knowledge'.

The results of this survey should make us think of the future of translation and interpreting training because the main task of universities is not only to equip their students with all necessary knowledge but also to teach them how to behave in a modern professional environment, how to find their place on professional market and be successful there.

Translation and interpreting teaching: Views from the inside and outside

In order to see a full picture of translation and interpreting teaching advantages and disadvantages, two new surveys were conducted in 2018 (Malenova, 2018). Their task was to understand how it is seen from the perspective of two other major stakeholders, i.e. university graduates working as translators and interpreters, and university teachers of translation and interpreting. The results of the survey were presented at the XI International Summer Translation School organized by the Union of Translators of Russia. Here I would like to elaborate on these results and to formulate some recommendations to improve academic teaching in translation and interpreting.

Both surveys in question were conducted simultaneously, although the respondents, as it was mentioned earlier, came from two different groups. Overall, there were 275

participants (232 graduates and 43 teachers) from Russia and all parts of the former Soviet Union, from Latvia to Kazakhstan. Most of the graduates who took part in the survey had vast experience in the field: 23% of respondents had been working in this industry for more than 10 years, 14% had been practising for more than 6 years. The majority of the survey participants were recent university graduates: 35% of them had been working in translation and interpreting for 2–5 years, while 28% did not have such experience because the length of their employment in the field was one year only. This statistics is very reassuring because it proves that these respondents have already learned about their profession at first hand. At the same time, most of them have only recently graduated from their universities, so they remember their training process very well.

Those who took part in the survey for translation and interpreting teachers can also be a reliable source of information because more than a half of them (54%) had been engaged in teaching for more than 10 years. Others were less experienced (37% had been teaching for 6–10 years, 7% had been doing that for 2–5 years and other 7% had only one year of practice). Nevertheless, their insight was very useful. It is very important to add that the respondents who took part in the survey as teachers proved to have a considerable amount of experience in translation and interpreting practice. 42% of them were constantly engaged in providing these services, 42% of respondents did it from time to time, 14% used to work as translators and interpreters in the past. Only 2% of respondents had never tried to work in this field of expertise. This means that teachers who took part in the survey were very well aware of the profession's peculiarities. Thus, a myth of a teacher who knows about translation only in theory is just a myth.

The surveys included questions regarding the practices of teaching translation and interpreting, academic disciplines taught in BA and MA programmes, and the respondents' reflections of their teaching and learning experience. The recurrent theme in the surveys concerned a balance of theory and practice in the programmes. Graduates and teachers (as the respondents from these two groups will be called in this research) were asked the same questions. This approach proved to be very instrumental regarding the purpose of the whole research. The idea was to make participants from both groups elaborate on the same issues and then analyze their answers in comparison.

The first question for the respondents from both groups was: 'How would you evaluate the practical use of your curriculum/curriculum, according to which you were taught?' As predicted, the answers given by teachers and graduates were sometimes directly opposite. Most teachers (65%) believed that their curricula were very useful and that future translation and interpreting specialists were prepared for their future work rather well, 15% called their programs extremely useful and claimed that teachers were able to provide future translators and interpreters with all knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in their future careers. Although 20% of colleagues had some doubt, they answered that their programs formed just a general overview of the profession. On the other hand, the majority of graduates (51%) said their university curricula provided them with a general overview of the profession, 5% of them even stated that their university experience proved to be useless. Nevertheless, 39% of respondents were quite satisfied with their university experience, and 15% claimed that all they knew about their profession they learned at their universities, which is very reassuring.

If we come to the question concerning the balance of theoretical and practical classes, this opposition between teachers and graduates becomes more extreme. While the bulk of teachers (61%) thought their programmes had an optimal balance of theoretical and practical disciplines, exactly the same amount of graduates (61%) were sure that they had too much theory they never applied in their actual practice. Some of the graduates tried to explain this fact saying that 'theory and practice did not coincide', 'I didn't feel any connection between theory and practice because there were no practical examples on theoretical classes, and in practical classes we were never reminded of any theory'. Answers to the question about the theoretical course in Translation Theory prove this pattern. Most of the teachers (58%) believed that their course in Translation Theory was practice-oriented and very useful for students. On the contrary, 60% of graduates were sure that the Translation Theory course they took as students was too theoretical and did not give them any sense of the profession. We can see the same picture when we analyze the responses to the question 'Are theoretical disciplines (Theory of Grammar, Lexicology, and Stylistics) useful in students' future careers?' 57% of teachers were sure that these courses would be very instrumental in their students' practice. However, the graduates' answers contradict this opinion. 56% of graduates claimed that these courses provided them with just a vague understanding

of what Linguistics was about, and proved to be useful only for the purpose of writing their Bachelor or Master thesis. Nevertheless, graduates admitted that this knowledge was not useless. It was not the theory they rejected, but rather the way it was presented by their teachers. Here are some comments of the graduates: 'I realized the need for theoretical disciplines after 7 years of real work experience', 'Theory is fine but it was delivered in such a boring way... I found only Lexicology and Stylistics quite interesting and useful', 'Phonetics Theory is hell', and 'These disciplines were taught in a terrible way. I had to study everything myself and some of these studies proved useful'.

These answers to the questions concerning the balance of theory and practice are of a diagnostic nature. They reflect the approach used in the Russian tradition of translation and interpreting teaching. Teachers prefer to load their students with theoretical knowledge while students act as passive listeners. As a result, students consider these classes boring and useless. The best way to learn something is not to listen to the lectures but to retrieve the knowledge yourself through facilitated learning, reading and discussion. If university teachers show the correlation between theory and practice and facilitate students to acquire rather than to consume knowledge, the results of the next survey will be different.

The survey included question concerning different aspects of translation and interpreting training that have always been a problem for many universities, such as teaching Russian for translators, the way the graduation thesis is composed and defended and the place of information technologies (IT) in the curricula. These issues still prove to be a sore point that is why the graduates evaluated their education quality in this respect as rather poor. Despite teachers' strong belief that their students got enough practical training in their native language (72%), graduates did not agree with this opinion. According to 60% of graduates, they only had a theoretical course in Russian Studies. Proficiency in the native language is extremely important for future translation and interpreting specialists, considering the fact that employers, as it can be seen from a previous section of this research, are very concerned with this aspect of students' professional training. Therefore, special attention should be given to approaches to teaching Russian as a first language in academic programs.

Another problematic issue is the graduation thesis which can be a useful tool in translator and interpreter teaching practice. Only 35% of graduates stated that writing and defending a graduation qualification paper (as it is referred to in Russian universities) provided them with useful experience and helped form a deeper understanding. Some added that their research topic predetermined the direction of their further professional development. Most graduates (65%) admitted that time spent on their graduation papers was wasted. 5% of the respondents did not even remember what their graduation paper was about. Teachers shared the same view: only 41% of them were convinced that the process of research might help form the necessary professional skills. Nevertheless, 40% of teachers believed that the research process, in general, helps students develop critical thinking and expertise in a narrow field of Linguistics.

Graduates' answers concerning the benefit of IT classes led to more conclusions. When ranking the subjects, many graduates considered IT in Linguistics (IT Technologies in Linguistics) useless. More than 30% of the respondents stated that they had never attended such a course. Another 30% stated that they had not acquired any useful information applicable to everyday practice. Considering the modern trends in the translating and interpreting industry, where the ability to use information technologies and professional software is a general requirement, these answers seem strange. That is why teachers were asked about the content of such courses in their universities. It turned out that only in 33% of cases students worked with CAT-tools and special software in the framework of IT course. 14% of teachers replied that they did not have such a course in their curricula, 17% said that this course was used to teach students how to use PCs and the simplest software. However, the worst thing is that 36% of colleagues had no idea concerning the content of this course. In this case, these are students who suffer from such an approach: they either never acquire information about CAT-tools, or have to study the same material in the framework of different courses. Graduates' answers also indicate that in some universities it is common to have two or even three theoretical subjects that are absolutely alike (for example, Introduction to Linguistics, General Aspects of Linguistics, History of Linguistics), and the same information (and even the same examples) is repeated by different teachers. On the one hand, as Russians say, repetition is the mother of skill. On the other hand, if this repetition does not contribute to the students' professional skills, it may be considered unnecessary.

Graduates were also asked to make two Top-10 lists, one including the 10 least useful disciplines they studied during their university studies and the other including Top-10 of the most useful classes that helped them in their further careers. The first list started with the 'Federal component' disciplines, which are included in each curriculum in the Russian Federation. They were Philosophy, History, Physical Education, and Principles of Personal and Social Safety. Graduates also mentioned some theoretical subjects, such as Grammar Theory, Phonetics Theory, General Linguistics, Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Statistics. They also sometimes mentioned very field-specific subjects, such as Valeology, Argumentology, Orthology and Cognitive Linguistics. Often, graduates admitted that the main problem was not in these disciplines themselves, but in the way they were taught. There were such comments as 'no teacher could tell what the essence of the subject was', 'in most cases these courses were delivered for the sake of delivering. On the other hand, there is good news. Most of the graduates who had worked in translation and interpreting sphere for more than 6 years admitted that all the knowledge acquired in the university was useful in some way. It is clear that there is no useless information when we are talking about a good professional. However, it is important to make students understand that.

The top-10 of useful subjects included practical classes such as Practical Course in Translation, Practical Course in a Foreign Language, Consecutive Interpretation, Simultaneous Interpretation, Grammar Practice, Translation Theory, Business English, Technical Translation, Phonetics and Military Translation. Graduates also complained that they would have preferred to have more practice. Some said that their interpreting course was too short. Others would like to have more classes in CAT-tools and translation technology. Universities also understand this need for additional practical training and provide their students with different types of internships. 32% of teachers mentioned internships in the university departments. In 65% of cases, students were offered internships in at different companies. 58% of teachers mentioned that their students often worked as volunteers at various international events. In 46% of cases, teachers invited translation and interpreting specialists who gave classes, delivered lectures, and organized workshops for future translators and interpreters. The total percentage of answers amounts to more than 100% because many universities combine these options to show their students different sides of their future profession.

Conclusion

A thorough analysis of the surveys conducted allows us to develop a framework for translator and interpreter competence that could be helpful for both teachers working at universities and students trying to build their careers in a dramatically developing language industry. The competence framework suggested includes the same areas of competence as EMT Competence Framework-2017. However, it encompasses certain knowledge and skills due to the peculiarities of demand and requirements of Russian translation and interpreting market.

1. Language and culture competence. Translation and interpreting profession is all about languages, their correct usage, the absence of mistakes, and following the language norm. It is important to convince students that they are nothing less than ambassadors of language and culture: people who define the future of their native language and the way it will be used. As the surveys show, it is extremely important to pay attention to developing proficiency not only in a foreign language but in Russian as well. Teachers should encourage their students to study Russian more and practice their speaking and writing skills. A special course in Russian for translators and interpreters could be a good way for acquiring the necessary level in this area of competence.

2. Translation and interpreting competence. As it was mentioned above, Russian reality requires students to be capable of rendering both translation and interpreting services. It is the main difference compared to the European approach, where translators and interpreters study separately. It is a hard task to bring up a professional with a high competence in these two areas just in four years. Thus, a good way to provide students with an opportunity to be successful in the future is proper career guidance. Young students often have quite a vague understanding of their future profession. Sometimes they enter the university just to obtain a diploma; sometimes they want to study foreign languages for their future career in another field, but they often tend to have an idealized image of their future profession. It is very important to tell them about all the pros and cons of it, to explain how they can find their place on the market. Starting with their first year at university, future professionals should learn about the skills vital to becoming successful in the field, about possibilities of extra learning and additional qualifications using online courses and platforms. It is also

important to organize mentoring for each student through their educational path, so they could achieve an advanced level of competence required of language industry professionals.

Effective theoretical classes could also equip students with the skills and knowledge encompassed by this competence. As the analysis of the surveys shows, both teachers and students are concerned with the content of theoretical courses. Thoughtless rote learning of definitions does not contribute to students' future careers. Theory is very important and it should be used to develop students' critical thinking, to help them understand the key aspects of translation and interpreting practice through the prism of theoretical patterns. Theory and practice must be interconnected; theoretical classes should be aimed at broadening the students' worldview and developing their abilities to use procedures of analysis and synthesis both in their research and in translation and interpreting practice.

3. Technology competence. With the rapid development of translation technology, it is important for the universities to be at the very edge of it. Universities must equip their students with skills and knowledge they can use to implement different translation technologies – CAT-tools, machine translation, and corpus-based tools – within the translation process. Traditional IT-classes are clearly not enough for future language professionals to be successful in the field. The survey participants support this idea and in the free comments emphasize their need in acquiring this competence. Considering the fact that major providers of language solutions for translators offer different academic programs for Russian universities, it is not a problem to include such a course into an academic curriculum.

4. Personal and interpersonal competence. Soft skills are as important as hard skills. It is vital to teach students how to communicate using their language skills. It is very important to discuss the issues of translation and interpreting ethics, rules of communication, business etiquette, etc. A very effective way of doing that is to organize business role-playing games, case studies of real-life situations which can emerge in the course of real work. Moreover, the translation and interpreting teacher should act as a role model. He or she could become a great example for the students, a professional

worthy of emulation. It this case, by our own example we may teach students how to organize their communication processes in a professional environment.

5. Service provision competence. For Russian universities, this competence is an extra mile to go. This competence "covers all the skills relating to the implementation of translation and, more generally, to language services in a professional context – from client awareness and negotiation through to project management and quality assurance" (EMT Competence Framework, 2017). It is clear that to be successful in the language industry, future professionals must be aware of current demands of the language industry, to comply with professional codes and standards, and take into consideration all stakeholders' requirements and expectations. Despite this, most Russian universities do not have any courses concerned with these issues. There is no doubt that students will benefit from this course a lot. It may become an excellent starting point for their successful professional careers and will help them to find their place in an ever-changing professional environment.

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