A case for holistic translation assessment

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This paper presents a linear study of assessment practices in the English translation section of the University of Helsinki. A qualitative methodology involving interviews and open-ended questionnaires was used to gather data in 1997, 2001 and 2008. Results suggest that a paradigm shift in Translation Studies has occurred during this period as exemplified by the generally accepted grading methods. Points-based error focused grading which was the norm has been replaced across the board by holistic grading methods. Further, the current translation instructors tend to see points-based grading systems as suspect while holistic grading tends to be seen to be more related to training future translators for real world tasks.

1   Introduction

In recent years, assessment has become an up and coming research topic within the field of translation studies. A number of studies on translation assessment theory (e.g. Newmark 1988; Gile 1995; Kussmaul 1995; Wilss 1996; House 1997; Bowker 2001; Melis & Albir 2001; Williams 2001; Garant & Garant 2001) provide models for evaluating translation performance. However, Beeby (2000: 187), Garant and Garant (2001) and McAlester (2000: 231), among others, point out that there have thus far been relatively few empirical studies related to assessment within university level translation programs. This paper is also situated within the theoretical framework of socio-cultural translation in which translation edu-

cation is the focus (Garant 2006; Garant & Walker 2008; Pym, Shlesinger & Jett-marová 2006; Tennent 2005; González Davies 2004). Further, it expounds on the statement that "the real world is actually handled by applied linguists" (Widdowson 2008: 16) and, more specifically, by translation instructors.

It should be noted that the focus of this article is on the assessment of student performance in translation practice courses, not on assessment in general, i.e. assessing translator competence, on which there is a tremendous amount of previous research. For the purposes of this paper, assessment will mean grading translation assignments and not assessing whole translation programs.

As McAlester (2000) states in his study of assessment of translations into a foreign language, it is naturally desirable that the methods used for assessment in translator education "should be reliable, valid, objective, and practical", but, as he goes on to state, "in actual fact, we find that methods vary considerably between one accredited body and another, between one university and another, even between different departments of the same university, indeed even between colleagues in the same department" (2000: 230–231). This is also true today. So, with all of this variation what common thread can be seen to tie these methods together?

A literature search on the topic produced only a few empirical studies that examined these varying methods. Waddington (2001) verified that the four different assessment methods used to evaluate 64 second-year translation students in Spain were valid based on **17-point** external criteria taken from 6 sources. According to his study, error analysis and holistic assessment methods yield the same results. However, the results may perhaps be questioned. Other studies on the topic include Stansfield, Scott and Kenyon (1992) which examined work-related tests of translation ability in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Campbell (1991) which analyzed how 38 Arabic-English translation test papers revealed translation processes using a **10-point** list for evaluation.

The small number of existing empirical studies in this area suggests a lack of research on testing and translation assessment in general. The idea behind the project was to begin to fill the gap in empirical research into translation teaching (Vehmas-Lehto 2008). The project itself is an empirical analysis which describes existing assessment practices from the participants' point of view and, as much as possible, with their voices (for a similar approach, see e.g. Poikela 1999). Another aim in gaining an understanding of assessment practices was to begin to study the backwash effect they may or may not have on the program, since several studies have suggested assessment may have either a positive or negative backwash effect on an educational program as a whole (Richards, Platt & Platt

1992: 3; Garant 1997a: 49, Garant 1997b: 3). This article reports on one main theme that emerged during those interviews: shift from points-based grading systems to holistic assessment.

2   Research methods

The setting for this study was the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Helsinki, Kouvola, where a series of interviews were conducted with members of the teaching staff in the English section of the department in 1997, 2001 and 2008. The data gathered in 2001 was part of a general quality assessment project in the Department of Translation Studies in Kouvola as a whole, which in turn was part of a large-scale evaluation of the quality of education in the University of Helsinki (Hietaranta 2001; Kukkonen 2001; University of Helsinki 2001). It was my goal to record and catalogue some of the vast experience of our colleagues for future translation teachers, since in the initial 2001 studies four out of the five interviewees had been teaching translation for over 30 years. In recent years, many of the long-term instructors of the department have retired and been replaced with new personnel. As a matter of consequence for this study, it should also be mentioned that entrance to the department is competitive, and studies suggest that, in general, the learners' proficiency in English as a second language (L2) upon admission is excellent (Garant & Immonen 2000: 266–267; Garant 2000). On the whole, this is a case study with a limited sample of interviews, due to which the results should not be generalized. However, this study does give a good picture of assessment practices in English Translation Studies at the University of Helsinki over the past 15 years. It is a unique contribution to science because it represents the first such linear study.

Teaching and learning are complex, enigmatic issues, and it is difficult to measure in-depth perceptions that relate to using quantitative methods. In several recent empirical studies on the aspects of education and educational cultures in Finland, such as Syrjäläinen (1990) and Poikela (1999), various qualitative research methods have been used successfully. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 349–382) state that qualitative methods, particularly the interview, allow for in-depth data collection, perhaps more so than other forms of data collection. Furthermore, since one purpose of this study was to give a voice to the often forgotten teachers, a qualitative interview approach was chosen.

The interviews were designed based on models for qualitative interviewing (Edge 1992; Rubin & Rubin 1995). Qualitative interviewing is a way to gain insight into events in which the researcher has not participated. It enables the

researcher to understand human experiences and brings new information at a level that quantitative surveys cannot reach. It is an intentional way of learning about people's feelings, thoughts and experiences (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 2). The researcher intentionally introduces a limited number of questions and asks the interviewee to explore these questions in depth. Qualitative interviewing helps explain how and why a particular culture is created, evolves and is maintained (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 2). If we consider an educational institution to be a miniature culture in its own right, then the use of qualitative interviewing to explore the educational culture is validated. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995: 5–10), qualitative interviewing can be used to answer questions about social and political phenomena and changes. Researchers can also use it as a tool to evaluate various projects and programs. It would stand to reason that qualitative interviewing can also be used to study educational phenomena such as the development and maintenance of a teaching approach or an educational program and the changes therein.

King (1983), Underhill (1989) and Edge (1992: 63), among others, promote a non-antagonistic approach to interviewing, which aims at creating a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. King (1983: 324), in his article on teacher development, mentions colleague interviews and suggests what he calls a 'counseling approach' based on psychological counseling. The interviews on which this article draws were designed based on these concepts. The interviews were semi-structured interviews, in which interview themes were supplemented with loosely worded, clarifying questions. Some interviewees preferred to talk freely, others required some prodding. An important consideration in this type of interview is to let participants converse in the style that is most natural for them. The semi-structured, or focused, interview format was chosen because, as Rubin and Rubin (1995: 15) suggest, the format allows the researcher to gather more specific, matching information from the interviewees. The critics of this approach suggest that the wording of the questions may guide the answers too much in a certain direction. However, by making sure that the clarifying questions were as neutral as possible with no evaluative words or phrases, this danger was brought to a minimum.

In the 2001 interviews, five informants were interviewed. Four out of the five informants had 30 to 35 years of experience teaching translation at the time of the interviews in 2001, due to which they will be referred to as long-term informants. One informant had been teaching translation for two years. By 2008, only one of the original long-term informants was still working, although even that informant will retire at the end of the 2009 academic year.

An interesting aspect of the data is that, in 1997, not all of the instructors were willing to participate while, in 2001 and 2008, all participated. My analysis of the phenomenon is that, in 1997, some of the instructors still did not fully accept the integration of Finnish language institutes into the university system. They saw themselves as teachers, not as researchers. This manifested itself in their unwillingness to participate in research projects. Research projects, in their minds, are associated with the university and teaching is associated with the language institutes. Language institutes, the forerunners of Translation Studies Departments, were integrated into the university system in 1980. This 'we don't do research' attitude among many long-term tenured faculty members in the translation departments of Finland put them on a collision course with their respective university administrations more than once. This topic is worth further exploration but will not be addressed in this article.

Since the 2001 study was part of a project to evaluate the quality of education in the University of Helsinki, the interviews were structured to provide extra information in that regard by gathering information on teaching trends (or the lack of trends) among translation teachers in Finland as well as by charting the teachers' experiences and concepts of teaching and learning. The general aim was to identify the strong and weak points of translation teaching in the department in question as well as to get the experienced practitioners' suggestions for improvements in the area. Previous self-assessment projects in other departments and other faculties were used as basic guidelines when designing the interviews and questionnaires (see e.g. Pirttilä-Backman; Järvenpää & Kallio 1997). The 2008 interviews were conducted solely to complete this linear study.

The aforementioned basic concepts became a list of interview themes and a set of loosely worded questions relating to those themes. Since this paper deals with testing and assessment, only the relevant sections of the data are included. Quotes will often be used to illustrate the themes that emerged from the interviews.

3   Results and analysis

The following sections describe the results from the interviews in 1997, 2001 and 2008 as regards the use of points-based grading systems versus holistic grading systems. Informants pointed out that, in the past, a number of courses in the English section were graded pass-fail, reflecting the bipolar attitude that one either did the work or they did not and that the quality of work was perhaps not so

much of an issue. In recent years, there has been a trend toward assigning grades to all courses. In fact, no course was graded pass-fail in spring 2009.

As assessment methods in general, grading methods were found to vary from teacher to teacher. However, informants in this study could be roughly divided into two groups according to the basis of their grading method. One group had a clear, explicit system whereby they assigned a certain number of points for mistakes. The other group consisted of teachers who did not use a point system. Their approach, which was not error-focused and points-based, will be called 'holistic'. Beeby (2000: 185) suggests that many experienced teachers rely on holistic assessment methods because of the seemingly reductionist, time-consuming nature of many marking criteria. McAlester (2000) came to a similar conclusion but goes as far as to say that "often the actual evaluation follows fairly rough guidelines based admittedly in the best cases on experience and common sense, but in the worst on mainly subjective impressions" (2000: 231). However, the reader must bear in mind that 'holistic' here does not mean 'unsystematic'. Rather, it refers to a systematic way in which the teacher arrives at an overall impression of the text as opposed to relying on a discrete points-based scale. The teachers in that group had each devised their own, systematic way of evaluating translations.

3.1 Points-based assessment

All informants stated that the points-based system derived from the time of the language institute. The system had been abolished some time ago, and teachers were allowed to design their own grading systems. A long-term informant's quote from 2001 sheds light on the subject:

> For many years we had a point system whereby translations were assessed in the final examinations and therefore they tended to be assessed in this way in the courses that led up to the final examinations. They were assessed according to a point system. I never, believe it or not, I never discovered who, what individual or what committee had actually concocted this system.

As part of this project, I attempted to find the origin of the points system that was used in the language institutes from 1971 to 1980. Unfortunately, as of the publication of this article, the exact origin of the points-based system is a mystery. One theory is that the system was somehow based on the Finnish matriculation test. This, however, is a matter of disagreement mainly because of the English proficiency of the average Finnish learner at the end of high school in the late 60s. At

that time, the level of English proficiency was nowhere near what it is now, and the matriculation tests did not have an extensive essay component from which to derive a points-based system that could be applied to translator training.

How did the points-based system work? One long-term informant stated:

> Yeah it's a nine point scale, in other words minor mistakes are one point, or it's mostly like typing errors and the like, and then there's two, and four and six and nine, nine is such that there's a whole, let's say a whole system is incorrect, let's say a crucial term is completely wrong and it messes up the text pretty badly [...] and that's nine points.

The statement illustrates how the points-based system operated. In the past, there was a rule that instructors must use this system of grading. This was done to provide clear objective grading criteria in order to make the system more transparent. Because it was the norm, everyone used the method. So, instructors were primarily trained to spot the errors in other people's texts.

By 2001, the points-based system had become a matter of disagreement. At that time, two informants said they use a points-based scale because they feel that it brings objectivity to an otherwise subjective situation. Their points-based system was based on the old nine-point scale, but they had modified it to suit their own purposes. So, the nine point system used from 1971 until 1980 was seen as flawed even by the long-term informants who regarded a points-based system as the best way to assess translations.

3.2 Holistic assessment

By 2008, no informant used the points-based system to assess the translations submitted by their students. Further, grading translations using a points-based system was seen by all of the informants as unscientific and unproductive for the training of translators. As one informant stated:

> The grading system used in the philology now is a strictly dictated point system where each mistake is assigned a certain number of points. This may teach something – but it does not teach students to translate.

The informant puts forward a typical anti-philology attitude that one sometimes finds in Translation Studies Departments. In addition, the informant sees an externally enforced grading system as being detrimental to the education process involved in training future translators. One major theme that emerged was that

a purely error-correction based pedagogy does not really teach students to translate.

Why did the translation teachers who were interviewed see holistic grading as the best way to train translators? This can be illustrated by the following quote:

> It is possible to see a good translation which has more mistakes in it than a bad translation. There could be minor errors – but overall – it is quite good. It is also possible for a translation to have no overt mistakes in it – yet still be quite bad – overall. This is why a point system does not work.

All of the informants stressed the importance of positive grading, in other words rewarding for good performance rather than punishing for poor performance. There was a general feeling among the informants that error-based assessment leads to error avoidance translation strategies. This means that learners in this type of environment tailor their translation to a particular teacher. They find out what the instructor marks wrong and avoid these mistakes. Informants suggested that in such an environment, people do not develop to their full potential as translators.

How exactly does holistic grading work?

> I assess each paragraph separately and I give a positive grade for each paragraph without resorting to any point system. I think as the years pass you kind of internalize and integrate all the sort of criteria that in the old days we used to try and specify and write down to help ourselves and to reach some sort of agreement on criteria.

The quote suggests that translations need to be broken down to the paragraph level, which, in turn, suggests that contemporary translation instructors tend to approach assessment at the discourse level and not at the sentence or word level. The quote also illustrates a general theme from all of the more recent interviews which emphasizes the need for positive reinforcement of the learners' translation skills. In addition, the concept that experience plays a part in assessment is also exemplified. Perhaps experienced translation teachers have internalized their grading criteria and see no need to agree explicitly on them.

Another informant stated:

> First of all, I look at the translation as a whole. I don't really believe in counting off all the mistakes because in a lot of cases something that a strict grammarian would say was wrong is OK in that particular context. So, it's got to be the whole thing.

Here again one can see that contemporary instructors approach assessment at the discourse level and that they seem to believe that focusing on errors tends to be counterproductive. There is also the emphasis on context and the move away from using translation as a way to focus on the student's grammatical mistakes. All in all, the main idea that emerged from the data was that the current teachers of translation preferred holistic assessment across the board.

4   Discussion and conclusions

The main finding of this study is that the data from the 1997 and 2001 interviews revealed almost polar opposites in attitudes towards grading methods. In 1997 and 2001, some informants had decided to carry on using, albeit with some adjustments, the grading system which they had been accustomed or, more accurately, forced to use in the past, while some had reacted against the old system by rejecting it completely. By 2008, the data clearly showed a consensus toward holistic grading. This finding is significant because it suggests that a pedagogical basis for training professional translators had emerged within the group studied.

The interview method proved to be highly successful in getting in-depth information about the views and attitudes of experienced teaching practitioners. By the time of the 2008 study, only one informant from the language institute days of the 1970s was still teaching. The rest of the informants had been teaching translation for 2 to 12 years. So, it can be said that, on average, the informants had enough experience of teaching translation to formulate educated opinions as to acceptable assessment practices.

The general trend toward holistic grading is a significant finding. That said, assessing translation courses and translator development is a complex activity. Although all of the informants classified their grading as holistic, the details of assessment and grading methods vary considerably. Even so, all of teacher informants had similar beliefs about the role of assessment in a translation course despite the variety of methods.

An interesting finding of the 2001 study was that assessment was seen strictly as a teaching tool by all but one of the informants. The division here was clear: the older, experienced teachers favored a teacher-centered view of assess-

ment, whereas the younger informants expressed more learner-centered views. In in-depth discussion of the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this short article, but one might speculate that it is at least in part the result of the educational background of the teachers themselves, the more experienced teachers being products of an educational system which was most likely based on teacher-centered concepts of learning (Aho 1997: 22–23). This reflects a paradigm shift in Translation Studies as a whole in the setting studied where Translation Studies has developed toward social-constructive methods.

Overall, this study showed that the more experienced informants who had started their teaching careers in the language institute seem to have a different view of translating as a profession than their younger colleagues in this particular educational culture. The 'old school' seems to regard the translator as a kind of 'technician', whereas the representative of the 'new school' seems to have a broader view of the translator as 'an expert in intercultural communication', reflecting the changing role of translators in a constantly changing world. It is a recurring theme in many of the 2001 and 2008 interviews, although not all of the data has been included here due to the space limitations of this article.

If teachers have different views on translating as an activity, an easy conclusion is that they also assess different things. Both of these perceptions may be considered useful, since they highlight different aspects of the profession. However, this brings us to the backwash effect of assessment mentioned in the introduction. As stated previously, the way courses are assessed affects what is taught, and, perhaps more importantly, what is learned (Harmer 1991: 3–7; Garant 1997a: 49). If all translation courses are assessed differently, the ultimate result may be an educational program in which students do their translations for a particular instructor, with that instructor's way of assessing as a yardstick for their work.

On the other hand, variation in testing practices may also encourage the learners to focus on long-term goals such as improving their translation skills rather than concentrating on the short-term goal of passing each instructor's test at the end of the semester. Future lawyers, medical doctors, teachers and translators are trained by universities for their respective professions. Different workplaces will have different means of evaluating their human resources. So, learners should be exposed to this in their university training. In this light, variation in assessment methods can be seen as a productive means to an end.

An often-stated opinion in the interviews was that students want to be told exactly what their mistakes are and what the 'right answers' are. Students were also considered to want grades numbered 1–5 with 1 being the worst and 5 being

the best. This was stated by some informants as a reason for using rigid grading systems and against using holistic assessment; this is acknowledged by research on learning concepts (e.g. Hakkarainen, Lonka & Lipponen 1999). The conclusion here is that these opinions give cause to educate the students in study skills and reflective skills, and portfolio assessment and process would be useful methods to achieve that goal. Two of the informants were using portfolio systems in which explicit number grades were not assigned to each separate translation. However, this type of assessment requires a certain amount of learner training, and student feedback suggests that some students dislike this.

The present project and the interviews that were conducted have been a springboard for new ideas. What exactly is this holistic assessment that the informants speak of? How is it done? What about inter-rater reliability, i.e. would two of the informants assess the same text the same way? Why? What about the backwash effect of the holistic grading? What methods are used to teach translation? Which of them are seen as most effective? The list goes on and on. Needless to say, these and other areas warrant future investigation.

As this study has shown, holistic assessment has become the norm in the department studied. How can we, then, ensure the "reliability, validity, objectivity and practicality" of assessment called for by McAlester (2000: 231)? Cookie-cutter style rigid standardization in grading and assessment is ultimately not desirable because teachers are individuals and, as such, are entitled to teach and assess in the manner most suitable for them. It would also be problematic because an imposed grading system would meet with resistance, unless it was clearly understood by all of the instructors who have different nationalities, educational backgrounds and varying attitudes towards teaching and learning (Aho 1997: 19). As Aho (1997: 18–20) suggests, changes in an educational culture must come from within, from critical reflection on existing practices. This study is a small step towards identifying what those existing practices are. With the will and commitment to the development of the educational program, the means of change can be found in cooperation and joint reflection among colleagues.

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