

Training Programs in Jordan and the Arab World: A Proposed Model for Quality Education in Translation

Some Shortcomings of Translation Training Programs

It can be said that translation training in Jordan and in most Arab countries is still in its infancy in spite of the increasing need for professional translators all over counties in the Middle East. A few Arab researchers have investigated the status of this neglected area of research .In Jordan, one of the earliest studies (Abulhaija,1989) rightly concluded that state Arab universities did not contribute much to prepare specialized translators. AL-Haq and Ahmed (1995) conducted an investigation to evaluate the extent to which texts translated by Saudi university students are communicatively acceptable and comprehensible. The findings of the study indicated a remarkably unsatisfactory performance in both translation and other language skills. Another investigation was made by Bahumaid (1995) who examined the overall goal of introducing translation at some Arab undergraduate programs. His findings were discouraging about the situation of translation, and for that reason, he offered some "suggested remedies" to deal with some serious problems.

Another relevant study by AL- Khanji (1998) investigated the nature of interaction between bilingual dictionaries and a translation task among Jordanian undergraduate students majoring in English. His findings showed that dictionaries in general hold little promise as a viable pedagogical tool in translation without adequate training in translation skills. Yousef (2004) dealt with the relevance of translation programs at Jordanian universities to market needs. His recommendations stressed the need for professionalism, adequate translator training and better translation curricula. A study (2009) by Thawabteh described a case study in the occupied Palestinian territories which meant to implement a project aiming at giving translator training a jump start. His investigation clearly indicated the emergence of a breakthrough in attempting to initiate translator training in spite of the fact that this area still lags behind.

Based on this short review of studies done on translation training in the Arab world, we notice that there is a lot that needs to be done in order to improve the translation situation in Jordan and elsewhere. The fact remains that in almost all Arab countries, except for a few professional translation programs such as that offered at the King Fahd school for translation in Tangier, Morocco, the qualification and the quality needed for good academic/non-academic training programs are still lacking (and lagging behind as well) in terms of both translation instructors and consequently well-trained students. Understanding the nature of the problems/drawbacks which surround this discipline could hopefully lead to a better vision to suggest some solutions for rectifying the situation. Below is a general description of these issues not necessarily presented according to an order of importance:

1. Translation Quality Assessment : candidates and Trainer Performance: To our knowledge, the evaluation of translator performance or proficiency is a serious problem facing the private and the public sectors as well as universities in Jordan either for government service, or for university academic admission of candidate students. No one can claim that any institution has got the proper testing tools for the selection of translators or candidate translators through a set of tests to measure performance in an objective method. In fact, it is quite difficult to get hold of locally recognized sets of testing standards which can provide some professional guidelines in this area for the selection of competent translators. Therefore, the definition of such a competent translator among providers of translation services is not easy to find except theoretically

Yousef (2004:258) rightly says that:

Until now, there is no national plan to regulate the translation activity. Publishers and/or translators select works to be translated according to the market needs, or the potential reader's interests. With the absence of such a plan, it is not quite clear to which specific areas the attention of prospective translators should be directed.

Therefore, as implied in the above quotation, there is no translation quality control at the national level. As a matter of fact, a graduate student who earned his B.A degree more than ten years ago, took some M.A graduate courses in translation, was recently asked by a bookshop in Amman to translate a Saudi novel into English .I had a chance to look at some sample pages of his translation. As I was reading just a few paragraphs,it was shocking for me to discover immediately how he was unfamiliar with certain aspects of the Saudi cultural features in the novel that were difficult to understand and consequently more difficult for him to translate into English, the target language of the translating. The low pay, of course, could be one of the reasons why he was selected, based on his high average in his B.A university degree and the graduate translation courses he took. I wonder if his translation of the novel will ever be published.

We will be discussing later in this study the translation trainer performance and qualifications, which are equally important in any training programs. We keep blaming students in not being qualified enough. It is worth finding out whether all transition trainers in our programs are highly qualified .No research to my knowledge dared to investigate this sensitive issue.

3. The cultural Problem: It goes without saying that translation is a bridge between cultures, and a competent translator is the one who can cross it easily back and forth. A lot has been written about the importance of the cultural dimension in translation and the challenging problems posed in this dimension. All translators including the professional ones, have come to realize that cultural differences in translating is the most serious problem they may face, a problem which may far exceed the linguistic dimension. An interesting analogy was made by Susan Bassenet-Mcquire (1980:14) to illustrate the interrelationships of language, culture and the translator:" in the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril." Another relevant illustration to many people further shows how misunderstanding of a symbolic value of objects or events in a certain culture may create serious problems in translation. According to Nida (1982:74):

One Bible translator in New Guinea was fully aware of the fact that sheep and lambs are either unknown or unappreciated in New Guinea, but pigs are highly valued. He therefore thought that perhaps one could render "sheep" by "pig" or "little pig". He had clearly overlooked the fact that sheep are regarded in the Bible as so-called "clean animals" while pigs are "unclean animals"; in fact, very much taboo. Speaking of Jesus as the "little pig" of God would certainly be a serious lapse in cultural congruence.

2. The Directionality problem: This problem, which is rarely addressed in institutionalized settings (e.g. universities) involves the issue of translating either from Arabic into the foreign language (English) or the opposite order. The common assumption is that translating into the first language is the natural way for translators, but not the other way. If translators work bidirectionally, i.e.

having adequate linguistic competence which enables them to work in both directions easily by serving the needs of the first and second language audience, then this will be an optimal situation in professional translation. However, we are all familiar with cases in which few translators are able to have a kind of symmetrical balance in two languages. The relevant question at this point with regard to translator training in Jordan and elsewhere is: What is needed more: a translation into or out of English? To our knowledge, there is no research done to answer such a question although for reasons having to do with national pride in the Arab countries, the assumption could be to encourage more translating into the national language as it is the case in many countries. An informal questionnaire conducted by the researcher given to 20 business companies in Amman asked the following question: which direction is mostly needed in your text type translation purposes/needs: into or out of English? The survey revealed through their feedback (only 17 companies cooperated with the researcher) that 65% percent of the responses needed translating into or directly composed in English, and the rest, i.e. 35% needed translating into Arabic in their correspondence with different regional and international firms outside Jordan. Naturally, it is difficult to generalize these findings through this small scale survey even though it may reflect some indication about the role of English in translating to the type of receivers of the translated texts. More research in the future in this area is hoped to shed more light on the situation.

4. Discoursal and Pragmatic Competence in : Novice translators as well as translator training programs in many places in the Middle East lack adequate training in discourse analysis. Even graduate courses in some Jordanian universities (including the University of Jordan) offer such courses without explicitly relating them to translation. We, therefore find a course in discourse analysis in one of the M.A translation programs at our universities taught from a linguistic point of view without specifying its contents for translation students in particular and courses such as this one were mainly offered for students majoring in linguistics to begin with, but some translation major students had to take that course? There is, therefore, a need to design a course in discourse analysis just for trainee translators. Campbell (1997:56) discussed this crucial point when translating into the second language by arguing that an essential component of "translation competence" is facility in the target language, especially at the level of text and discourse. The early work of Hatim and Mason (1990), in their classic book "Discourse and the Translator" is a good example of the need for courses carrying possibly the same title of the book in which trainees are taught different aspects of discourse such as the rhetorical purpose in texts, the attitudinal meanings in discourse, genres as conventionalized forms of language use, intended actions, and the standards of textuality, among other important discourse features. We will deal more also with the relevant field of pragmatics later on in this paper when we discuss the proposed model of translator training.

5. The confusion between Language Teaching and Translation Teaching;

It has been observed that almost all translator training programs in Jordan are offered by departments of English. The emphasis on such programs tends to be more directed at language skills than at translation proper skills. This state of affairs has created a real confusion among both teachers and students especially at the undergraduate level. Some would argue that translation should only be taught in specialized programs independent of an English department. Yarmouk University in Jordan was a pioneer in this direction when it has recently created the first B.A degree for undergraduate students majoring in translation at a state university. Unfortunately, a typical translation syllabus is usually crowded more with courses on linguistics and literature than with translation proper courses. The University of Jordan is a typical situation, as in many Arab universities, of academic institutions where foreign languages are taught without much attention given to specialized departments in translation at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. This could be attributed possibly to the power structure existing between learning foreign languages and learning/training in translation. Is learning foreign languages the only way to translator training? Or rather, can we really be qualified enough to translate if we possess a good command of foreign languages? Questions such as these must be addressed in order to identify the competency stage at which foreign language learners can start to be ready in translation training, i.e. the optimal time for starting to train candidates. Even though nobody will ignore the need for the highest levels of linguistic competence for students majoring in translation, still a variety of practical considerations must have prevented the establishment of translation proper departments independent of any other departments.

The five drawbacks in translation programs outlined above may not summarize or exhaust all problems involved in the subject. One may add other issues such as the kind of qualifications required of translation instructors and candidates, the amount of the theoretical input needed in training, the market needs for translators (general or vocational), the lack of technology-based resources, among other factors/issues that the paper will attempt to address below.