The Translation Brief:
A Tool from Professionals to Academics

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Abstract:

As researchers of translation, we have always been concerned with inserting theory into practice. In this paper, I will be concerned with the other way round; inserting practices of the profession in training. What is needed is an emphasis on what we should teach, namely real, profession-oriented translation, mainly in the form of classroom teaching.

Key words: Translation; Brief; Professional; Academic; Formation; Training; Teaching.

I. Introduction

As researchers of translation, we have always been concerned with inserting theory into practice. In this paper, I will be concerned with the other way round; inserting practices of the profession in training. Fraser (2000) uses the term 'academics learning from professionals'.

According to Fraser (2000), postgraduate translator training courses and a **more vocational emphasis in undergraduate translation** teaching have seen a mushrooming in the past few years in the UK. At the same time, empirical research in translation studies has developed to meet growing calls for theory to be based on '**actually occurring data**' Lorscher: (1992: 426).

In a step forward, Wills (1996: 2, 6, 194) in Fraser (2000: 51) exclaimed: *'what is the cash value of **academically based translator training**? What is needed is an emphasis on what we should teach, namely **real, profession-oriented translation**, mainly in the form of classroom teaching'?*

Ladmiral (1979: 40-41), from his part, stresses the distinction between translation as it is taught in university courses and translation in the real world: *'Le thème et la version définissent un type tout à fait particulier de traduction: la traduction comme exercice pédagogique on devra même opposer cette opération pédagogique à ce qu'on pourrait appeler la traduction proprement dite.* In this respect, Kiraly (1990: 6) contrasts professional translation with didactic translation.

II. The Translation Brief from a Professional Perspective

The Hablamos Juntos guide, as part of Hablamos Juntos 'More Than Words Toolkit Series' was set to develop the translation brief. It was based on the premise that producing translated materials that are useful to (limited English proficiency) LEP patients requires a detailed understanding of both the environment in which health information texts are used and the way this information is conveyed. This guide provides step-by-step instructions for developing a translation brief. Then, requesters can improve translation quality by learning to prepare translation brief.

It is suggested that the aim of translations should be the creation of texts that target language readers can understand and act upon in as the source audience responds to the source text .This meant source texts are more than mere linguistic units! How these units are used in a particular context, Culture-bound references and writing conventions

aligned with source-reader knowledge and expectations are all elements through which source texts convey meaning. This is a fundamental reason creating purpose.

1- Translation Brief: a practical definition

In the context of professional translation, the translation brief, also referred to as *translation instructions* (Nord, 1991b), '*is a set of instructions prepared by a requester that accompanies a translation assignment, thus enabling the requester to convey information about the source text, the specific communicative purpose and context in which the text is used, the intended uses of the translation and what it aims to accomplish'.* (Hablamos Juntos)

Thus, for professionals, the translation brief is *'a tool for specifying the assumptions embedded in the source text, checking feasibility of project for translation, providing translation guidance and establishing quality criteria'*. (Hablamos Juntos)

The translation brief is meant for two kinds of persons:
a- to translators who will be provided with project specifications and established quality criteria to assess the resulting translation product.
b- to requesters who will permit translators to create target language content that approximates the intended meaning of an original text in a way that target language readers can understand and use. Before that, the requesters become aware of key vocabulary, content or language convention issues and graphics that may need to be replaced. Thus requesters will participate in resolving these difficulties as well as take a greater role in directing and managing translation projects.

Thus, the primary purpose in preparing a translation brief before commissioning a translation is to identify any limitations or challenges that might arise from the translation process. (Hablamos Juntos)

2- The Translation Brief: why develop it?

According to the Hablamos Juntos group, the rising demand for health information is partly because consumers are taking a more active role in their health care. Thus, written information available in English, they added, can be a valuable communication tool if the patient is able to read and understand them.

Unlike other sectors, health care organizations are motivated by different mandates to translate health care materials that are vital. As such, most health translation projects have the basic goal of creating an equivalent target language form of existing materials.

Every language is a unique set of varying symbols of communication, expressing underlying cultural practices, values and beliefs. The conventions and text elements (title, tone, voice) for each language are dictated by cultural norms associated with the underlying communicative purpose.

Translators, thus, need to take into account grammar, writing conventions, and idioms that are particular to each language and at the same time **retain the intended meaning of the source text**. The translation process involves creating a new text in a target language whose objective is to communicate the same information or *'the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly with respect to meaning and secondly with respect to style'* (Nida, 1959, p. 19)in (Hablamos Juntos) . For example, United States English

source-text markers are determined by US culture, traditions and conventions while target-text markers are determined by the target culture in order to be meaningful to the readers.

In fact, translators can produce native-like quality translation texts that read as if they were originally produced in the target language. But this may require some **rewriting, adapting, restructuring or changing cultural references to meet target reader expectations**. This (reconstructing and rewriting) has, however, **an inherent risk** which is the potential to create a text **that departs from the intended meaning of the source text.** This is on the first hand.

On the second hand, translators can produce texts that are lexically equivalent to the source text, thus undermining the clarity of the intended message. Within these extremes, Hablamos Juntos group believes, is a fertile ground for reworking texts to convey intended meaning while only approximating the source text's actual words.

Ideally, translators should have subject matter expertise, highly developed knowledge of both languages to choose target language words that replicate the intended meaning in the target culture. This requires setting priorities to guide word/phrase selection and making critical judgments about how best to convey concepts.

Thus, the translation brief is a tool to guide translation decisions, thereby improving translation products and communication quality. **Translation brief can help translators produce better-quality translations by clarifying misconceptions that can result from analyzing a text at the word level, as well as describe how sections of the source text are used, its communicative purpose and the desired results (Colina, 2003; Nord, 1997)** in (Hablamos

Juntos). because even **a well-trained translator may fail to re-create intended meaning if he/she does not understand the context in which the source text is used** (Nord, C. 1991b) in (Hablamos Juntos).

3 - The Translation Brief: how to develop it?

There are four steps of creating translation briefs for health care texts summarized from (Hablamos Juntos). Over time, however, questions that are relevant to different text types will become clear, and decisions become adopted practices that will not need to be examined with each new project.

Step 1: Gather information about the **function, overall purpose and end use** of the source text. Five elements can be essential in this information gathering:
      1-Function (what is the intended purpose/use of the text?)
      2- Audience (who is the recipient of the source text?)
      3- Time of reception (when does the reader encounter the text?)
      4- Place of Reception (where does the reader encounter the text?
      5-Purpose (why was the source text written? Is there a desired reader response?)

Step 2: Evaluate the quality of the source text to decide whether to translate the text or not because poorly-written texts make poor starting points for translations. In fact, the evaluation described in step one provides the basis for a decision about the quality of a source text in step two. This can be facilitated by the following questions:
      1-Is the source text easy to read and understand?
      2-Is it accurate and current?

If the answer has been positive, the text will be suitable for translation; but if the answer has been negative, the translation of this text will result in a waste of resources.

Step 3: Compare and contrast the relevant aspects of the source and target audiences to identify implications for the target text, i.e. to identify any instances of **source culture bias** that will need to be replaced by target culture conventions, as well as **translation challenges** that will need to be overcome. The wider the differences, the more challenging it will be to create a target text that accomplishes the same communicative purpose. This comparison can be facilitated by the same questions as in step1 about both the source and the target texts.

1-Function (what is the intended purpose/use of the text? / will the target text be used in the same way?)

2- Audience (who is the recipient of the source text? / are the characteristics of the target audience similar or dissimilar to the source audience?)

3- Time of reception (when does the reader encounter the text? / will the target text be given in the same way and by whom?)

4- Place of Reception (where does the reader encounter the text? / will the target audience encounter the text in the same way?)

5-Purpose (why was the source text written? Is there a desired reader response? / why is it being translated? Is the desired target reader response the same as for the source audience?)

Step 4: Summarize for the translator **specific needs and special requirements**. Work with the translator to arrive at an agreement about substituting target language conventions where needed to produce a translation that reads like a native writer produced it.

Over time, develop a compendium of typical source culture bias common to your source texts will make preparing translation briefs easier. It should also be noted that adapting the translation brief to fit different needs is possible and in fact encouraged.

Thus in step 4, we try to finalize the instructions to produce a translation that best represents the original goals and intended purposes of the source text. It is important that requesters be very clear about **specific wording or content that must be retained, but also to note where the translator may use more target-relevant analogies or references.**

These steps, helped make a translation brief worksheet which can be used with different text types.

III. The Translation Brief from an Academic Perspective

According to Fraser (1996a), the field of *translation process analysis* is recent and combines two concerns: a more empirical concern and a more practice-oriented syllabus.

Introspection methods, such as think –aloud protocols (TAPs) or concurrent commentaries by translators on a particular translation task, were the only methodology that has been used to explore translation process (what translators do, what strategies they use etc…). Fraser's (1993, 1994) research area has centered on aspects of professional practice which can be incorporated into defining and developing translation competence in a university course.

He found that the brief given to translators was of considerable importance in determining the approach they took to do the job in terms of style, register, amplification and terminology. The brief included target language readers

existing knowledge of source language culture and their needs and expectations.

The Translation Brief: definition

'*by brief , I mean details of the readership, the purpose and the status of a translation (i.e. for information only or for publication, as a working document or as a legal text , with equivalent status to other language versions, and so on)'* (Fraser: 2000: 53). Translation brief is sometimes referred to as the translation assignment.

In a survey Fraser (2000: 53) conducted on this issue with professional translators, he observed *'the issues identified in the main part of this paper [the translation brief] represent what professional translators told me they most needed to do high-quality translations efficiently and confidently'*

In the TAP studies, the majority of the translators have commented on its importance in decision-making on style, register, how to deal with cultural concepts, amplification, and similar issues. However, Fraser found that *'while the translators relied on it [translation brief] as an important element in their decision making framework, they also complained that such information was not always forthcoming from clients or translation agencies / companies'* (Fraser: 2000: 53).

Thus, it was clear from TAP comments and the survey findings that a detailed brief made them more comfortable to do the job. However, not all translators are receiving this information. This does not deny the fact that there are translators who didn't ask for details of readership, purpose and status to translators. This might be due to:

1-The purpose and readership may be obvious for certain text types *'for certain text types, for example, the purpose and the readership may be obvious'* (Fraser:2000:54).

2- Some translators work for a small number of clients and this kind of information is already known to them.

3-Some translators are not given the information.

Fraser added that not only practicing professional translators need the translation brief to do a good job. This is equally relevant to translation students and translation teachers: *'I believe, and have argued widely, that students also benefit from being given a translation brief : it enables them to carry out pre- translation work on text type and the typical structure and characteristic vocabulary of modal TL texts as well as giving them a framework for evaluation of their translation'* (Fraser:2000: 54)

According to Fraser, this view is increasingly supported despite the fact that brief are still far from being assigned systematically in translation classes.

In the same respect, Klein-Braley (1996: 24-25) in Fraser (2000: 55) said *'we should work on translation materials for which a scenario can be developed: a text needed by a scientific client, for a specific purpose, and addressed to a specific audience'*.

Following with the theoretical support for the notion of briefing, we quote three researchers:

The first is Jääskelainen (1994) in Fraser (2000: 55) who said *'Future translators need to develop a set of criteria for deciding when to translate faithfully and when to rewrite the text'*. This decision is, of course, helped by the specifications given by to translation brief.

The second is Nord (1995) who focused on parallel texts as a model to produce a more purposeful translation. Nord (1995: 288) in (Fraser: 2000: 55) said:

'once the student have really grasped that they have to use parallel texts as modals to produce a text for a certain audience and to serve a particular purpose, they actually commit fewer linguistic errors than when they just try to transfer the words and grammatical structures of a source text into another language style'.

As to Vermeer (1989: 186), he described the role of the Skopos in (Fraser 2000) in this particular respect. The functional approach of translation is based on Skopos theory. Skopos is the Greek word for 'aim' or 'purpose'. The basic principle of Skopos theory is that the intended purpose of the target text determines the choice of method and strategy in the translation process which is in turn stated in the translation brief *'The target-text purpose is defined by the translation commission, or rather: translation brief'*. (Nord: 2006).

In professional settings, the brief is often not sufficiently explicit because commissioners are not translation experts and therefore they are not aware of the kind of information the translator needs to produce a text that fulfils the needs and expectations of the client and/or the prospective target-text audience.

To interpret the brief, the translator draws on information about the 'profile' of the target text and the client needs: In routine tasks from well-known clients, the translator relies on previous experience. In non standard or non routine tasks, however, clients have to be "educated" to provide all sorts of information or indications available.

For example in standard briefs, the translator may simply follow culture –specific norms for this kind of translation (like translating a set of operating instruction for a similar audience to achieve the same communicative function as that of the source text).

Functionalist approaches to translation draw on the following basic principles which are summarized from Nord (2006):

a- The purpose of the translation determines the choice of translation method and strategy. That is to say, one criteria to guide the choice of a given translation strategy is the communicative function for which the target text is needed.

b- The client or commissioner usually defines the purpose of the translation in the translation brief. In case the translation brief is not sufficiently explicit, the translator had to rely on previous experience and textual clues or ask clients about their intended purpose.

c- A functional translation means it 'works' for its receivers in a particular communicative situation in the way the sender wants it to work. As such, functionality is not an inherent but attributed to the text by the receiver, in the moment of reception. That is why it is very improbable that readers from different cultural environments will react to the same text in the same manner. A title reading ' Instructions for Use 'is an explicit indication that the sender wants this text to function as an instruction. Other types of markers of the intended purpose of a text might be text format, newspaper headline, imperatives in a recipe… These can only be interpreted correctly by a receiver who is familiar with the 'marker code' that is used.

In the light of the previously cited principles, critics reproach functionalism for producing *'mercenary experts, able to fight under the flag of any purpose able to pay them'* (Pym

1996: 338). Others say in a functionalist approach to translation, one **loses** sight of the source text.

Nord replied that this is in general theory because in practice, in fact, any translation takes place in specific situations set in specific cultures. She added that the text in its original form is the result of many variables and is interpreted and understood by any receiver in the light of variables of the new situation. In translation we try to produce a text that can be understood in the light of the new situation.

Thus, the relation between the original text and its translation varies ,according to people, from faithfulness meaning to communicativeness. This is due to text type or the receiving culture self-esteem.

According to Nord (2006), the responsibility that translators have toward their partners is what she calls **'loyalty'**. The **loyalty principle** was first introduced into Skopos theory in 1989, in order to account for the culture-specificity of translation concepts. Translators, in their role as mediators between two cultures, have a special responsibility with regard to their partners, i.e. the source-text author, the client or commissioner of the translation, and the target-text receivers. Thus **loyalty** '*is interpersonal category referring to a social relationship between people who expect not to be cheated in the process*' (Nord, 2006). This is different from the traditional fidelity which is an intertextual relationship that usually refers to a linguistic or stylistic similarity between the source and the target texts, regardless of the communicative intentions and/or expectations involved. Nord (2006) believes that it is the translator's task to mediate between the two cultures, and that mediation can never mean the imposition of the concept of one culture on the members of another.

Nord (2006) hopes that introducing the loyalty principle into the functional model, would lay the foundations for a trusting relationship between the partners in the translational interaction. She provided the following example:

'In 1972, Ernesto Cardenal published a book with the title En Cuba ("In Cuba", Cardenal 1972a), in which he enthusiastically described how wonderful he found the "new" Cuba under Fidel Castro. The West German publisher asked the translator to adjust the author's Latin American pathetic style' to what they considered acceptable for a West German audience – precisely in connection with a communist system during the Cold War period. Consequently, the translator omitted, or at least, toned down most of the author's positive evaluative and emotional utterances with regard to post-revolutionary Cuba, Fidel Castro or the Cuban Revolution, and his negative remarks about the United States and their representatives, e.g. the US ambassador… German readers received the impression that he was a journalist describing his visit to Cuba in a rather detached, "objective" kind of style'.

For Nord (2006), as it is stated in the quotation, the translator could meet the expectations of the target audience.

As a teacher of translation, this principle seems to me defective in different ways:

1. If we consider the translation of En Cuba, a book written by Cardenal, 1972, loyalty to the author has been disregarded. The translator was concerned with producing a target language text best meets the expectations of the target language audience, exemplified by omitting most of the author's positive evaluative and emotional utterances with regard to the Cuban Revolution, and his negative remarks about the United States and their representatives.

In this particular context of expressing allegiance to specific ideologies, it is primary; I believe to be loyal to

the author even if his ideology is completely rejected by the target language audience. In such a case, the translator would choose not to translate the text at all or try to be explicit in explaining the cultural references or else of the source text.

2. A somewhat disimilar example can be found in the translation of Belkacem Saad Allah of a French journalist's journey to Algeria in the colonial period. Saad Allah is an Algerian translator, historian and writer who translated the pamphlet of the French journalist. The journalist described the Algerians with the worst words that existed in French and Saad Allah did not hesitate in translating it into Arabic as faithfully as it was written. The aim was to show to the Algerians the way they are perceived and hence would be treated by the French. What is more interesting, here, was the fact that though Saad Allah did so, he was never perceived as being a traitor to his country. **Thus loyalty was achieved by saying what hurts the target language audience**.

3. Another example concerns the translation of an isolated sentence 'Jesus is the son of God'. Following **loyalty** as perceived by Nord (2006), the translation عيسى رسول الله **(Jesus is the messenger of God)** in Arabic **is more target audience-oriented.** This is not acceptable as the translation does not render the ideology of the author and has departed from the source text meaning. The translation عيسى ابن الله (Jesus is the son of god) renders the meaning of the source language text, though not meeting the expectations of the target audience, producing an unacceptable and even a counter meaning to the existing ideology in the target culture.

4. The following example consists of two headlines from *The Australian* and *The Times* respectively:
Three-hour Gaza War lull too little, too late (Article from: **_The Australian_ January 09, 2009)**

U.N and Red Cross Add to Outcry on Gaza War (article from *The Times* **09/01/2009)**.

These headlines and their respective articles were chosen to be translated in the same period of the war on Gaza into Arabic. This was essentially meant to strengthen the use of authentic material. Note that the original headlines refer to the war as 'Gaza War'. Calling the war after the place where it started had a negative connotation that the people of this place are responsible for setting it, this is on the one hand. On the other hand, translating the phrase by   حرب غزة   was not **communicatively adequate** because the context of the source language text was one of humanitarian aid, UN and Red Cross outcry to stop the war, calamities...etc. In addition, the target language audience was deeply concerned that it could not accept such an **indifferent translation as Gaza War**. The translation strategy was to meet the target audience expectations especially that the articles **did not contain any 'direct' ideology** and the information they contained came from UN, Red Cross and Human Rights organization, i.e. there is no ideology except that of helping people! **Loyalty here seems to be a little different, depending on the specificity of the text type and the expectations of the target language audience!**
Here I felt obliged to translate the headline as   الحرب على غزة this was done under the sole condition that the translation was not meant in a political analysis framework, but as a mere authentic material ! and that the emotional framework was strongly affected.

In all these examples, I believe that except from cases of plain ideology and points of view, a translation brief stating clearly the objectives of the translation will help choosing strategies.

One more important aspect of the translation brief is that it sets parameters for assessing the target language version against the source language text. In this respect, Lõrscher (1993) commented that while professional translations in his TAP study checked the TL versions for stylistic and text type adequacy, language learners tend to check only how they had actually solved what they received as problems, usually lexical or syntactic, in the SL and always produce deficient and unacceptable translations that didn't reel TL text produce criteria.

There seems, then, to be both theoretical and empirical support for notion of briefing both practicing and trainee translators.

Conclusion:

Finally, though briefing is very important to produce high-quality translation that is adequate for the clients' needs, and - in the case of students or learners- to ease transition into a skill that many of them still find difficult, a professional translator needs other resources. Some of these resources are controlled largely by the translator himself such as dictionaries, glossaries and other reference works and others controlled by the client or by the translation agency/company.

I definitely agree with Fraser (2000: 55) who said *'I believe we [teachers] need to see ourselves in a role slightly different from that in which we have perhaps traditionally seen ourselves, or rather not just as teachers but also as a resource, helping students to frame the questions they need to be asking in order to produce translations that are **adequate**'*.

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