Can literary translation be taught?

Ros Schwartz

As with creative writing, there are contradictory schools of thought about whether literary translation can be taught. If an aspiring translator possesses the two fundamental requisites, i.e. an in-depth knowledge of their source language and culture as well as excellent writing skills in their target language, is there a role for training to develop their abilities as a literary translator? I argue that there is, and I shall expand below on how I see that role. Over the past decade, I have led translation workshops and training events, including literary translation summer schools under the aegis of various UK universities, and the views I offer below are rooted in my observations.

Literary translation is a solitary activity. There is no one to say that "this is the right way to approach this particular challenge". Often, translators are hamstrung by a lack of confidence. Working instinctively, a fledgeling translator will often come up with an interesting and creative response to a thorny problem, but then pull back because they're "not sure this is allowed" or "it's going too far from the original". And so, the role of the translation mentor or tutor is to boost the hesitant student's confidence and empower them. It's about encouraging them to be bold and to take ownership of their translation, while being able to justify their choices, even though these may be controversial.

With the proliferation of university degrees in translation studies from the 1970s[1], graduates have emerged armed to the teeth with theory, having been taught mainly by academics and rarely by practitioners. I believe that peer training can help bridge the disconnect between abstract theory and publishing realities. Some students espouse a particular theory and use it as a sort of shield, applying it to everything they do in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

[1] 'Translation studies' was coined by the Amsterdam-based American scholar James S. Holmes in his 1972 paper 'The name and nature of translation studies'.

The role of the mentor then is to wean them off theory (I'm not arguing against theory, it can provide a useful framework for articulating our practice) and offer a more nuanced approach that weighs up the translator's various and sometimes conflicting loyalties – to the author, to the reader and to the publisher.

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Training initiatives

So, what kind of training is beneficial to the aspiring and even the mid-career literary translator? I have been actively involved in several types of training, all of which I have found to be of great value.

Single-language-pair workshops

Participants work on the same excerpt, taking a deep dive into the source text and discussing possible solutions to the challenges it presents. This format is eye-opening in that it reveals different ways of understanding the source text and the different translation options, all of which may be equally valid. It gives the students (and often the tutor) pause for thought and prompts them to slow down and question their own assumptions and habits.

Translation clinics

Facilitated by an experienced translator, the idea of translation clinics is to have participants working from different source languages. Each person outlines the particular translation problem they are facing, which could be a generic issue, such as "the three protagonists all speak different dialects which reflect their social class/geographical origin", or "should I keep in source-language honorifics?" "When to italicise (or not)". The interest of these clinics is the discussion of common translation problems and the cross-fertilization that happens between translators working from very different languages.

The "Vice-Versa" model

A bilingual workshop as practised by ATLAS at the Centre International de Traduction Littéraire in Arles. During a week-long residential course, 6 participants working from French into a given language and 6 translating from that language into French work together on an excerpt of a translation in progress from each person, under the supervision of two tutors, one from each of the two languages. It is a unique opportunity for each participant to garner mother-tongue-speaker insights as well as constructive input from peers. In addition to overall confidence-building and technique-sharing, another benefit of all these group activities is the

networking and informal social media groups that evolve out of them, providing ongoing peer support. As well as strictly translation-related discussions, participants also gain valuable industry knowledge about working with publishers and editors and how the book chain operates, which is another key aspect of professional development.

One-on-one mentoring

Like artisan apprenticeships, mentoring offers a privileged opportunity for emerging translators to learn from an old hand. There is a financial consideration here: mentoring is time-consuming, and the mentor needs to be remunerated. In the UK, there is a well-established, funded mentoring scheme run by the National Centre for Writing in Norwich, which matches emerging translators with top professionals. The mentorship takes the form that best suits the mentee's needs, depending on the stage they're at in their career. It may consist of a granular analysis and reworking of a first-draft translation, or it may involve introducing the mentee to publishers and helping them find their way into print.

Remote tutoring

This the format offered by the Belgian Centre Européen de Traduction Littéraire spearheaded by Françoise Wuilmart. Tutors provide texts for translation and the students' work is submitted to them for critiquing. There is also the option of a follow-up Skype session. The advantage of this scheme is that the students have a chance to work on a range of texts with several different tutors (who may have differing, even diametrically opposed, approaches), and it takes place over an extended period, unlike a one-off workshop or short course, allowing the student to develop their skills with practice over time.

A two-way street

To any translators considering branching out into training/mentoring, I would add that there are huge benefits for the trainer too. Tutoring has made me articulate and constantly question my own practice, which was initially intuitive. I myself have developed as a practitioner through having to analyse my translation process – what I do and why I do it –, and from becoming aware of some theories, mainly through my students' writings.

> *"Group training workshops lead to ongoing peer support"*

Training the trainers

There have been initiatives to 'train the trainers', notably a summit first held at the British Centre for Literary Translators summer school in 2014 and now a regular feature of the summer school. This week-long gathering brought together translation tutors to brainstorm and share best practice. There is also the European School of Literary Translation (ESLT) conference which again brings together translators involved in professional development activities from different countries to pool ideas. Translator trainers may also find some valuable guidance in the PETRA-E Framework for the education and

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training of literary translators, developed for institutional teaching purposes, but useful too for peer training practitioners.

Joining the dots

I firmly believe that practitioners can play an important part in bridging the gap between academia and translation at the coal face. Some universities recognise this and invite literary translators to give masterclasses, workshops and talks, often focused on the practicalities of working within the publishing industry and covering topics such as how to pitch a project to an editor; the editing process; contractual considerations; or to give talks about how they approached the translation of a particular title and even to stage events with a pedagogical component, like translation duels.

And so, to answer the question of whether literary translation can be taught, I would argue that when an aspiring translator has a solid grounding in their source language and culture, and can write well in their target language, they can be encouraged and empowered through established practitioners sharing their know-how and experience. When I started out, forty years ago, there were no translation courses, no peer-led workshops. My early translations were toe-curlingly bad. I learned the hard way, on the job, thanks to the patience and generosity of skilled editors. Sadly, nowadays, editing can be very patchy because since the advent of new technologies, publishers have cut down on in-house staff, putting experienced editors out to grass and consequently losing their wealth of knowledge. I would not wish that painful uphill slog on anyone, and perhaps that is why today I am so committed to reaching out to emerging translators to pass on the wisdom and techniques that weren't available to me at the start of my career.