

# Some Reflections on Teaching Sight Translation in the Classroom

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## Abstract

With the various cultures and many languages round the world, the need for a professional translator who works as a mediator between cultures is getting very urgent day after another. Katan (2004: 16) stresses that the translator is "a bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two different language communities." It is well-known that the interpreter interprets an oral message into an oral message in another language. In sight translation (ST), the translator faces a very big difficulty in that s/he has to render a well written text into an oral one without having the chance to formulate it carefully. Here, ST is a challenging activity, since it requires so many different skills at once. The present paper explores, discusses, and clarifies various aspects of ST. Accordingly; it proposes an ST course to function as a model for providing practical information on ST skills. It will also give some suggestions on sight translation teaching that can be adapted to different learning scenes.

## بعض الأفكار عن تدريس الترجمة المنظورة الكلمات المفتاحية ( الترجمة المنظورة، تمارين الترجمة المنظورة، الترجمة)

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ملخص

مع تنامي مختلف الثقافات واللغات حول العالم أضحت الحاجة إلى المترجم المحترف، الذي يعمل بصفة وسيط بين الثقافات، ملحة جداً يوماً بعد آخر. إذ يؤكد كاتان (٢٠٠٤: ١٦) أن المترجم "أداة ثنائية اللغة وسيطة بين أفراد مجتمع أحادي اللغة في مجتمعي لغة مختلفين". وإنه لمعروف تماماً أن المترجم الشفوي يقوم بتحويل نص شفوي إلى نص شفوي آخر بلغة أخرى. أما في الترجمة المنظورة، فيواجه المترجم صعوبة أشد؛ إذ ينبغي عليه تحويل نص مكتوب جيداً إلى نص شفوي من دون أن تسنح له الفرصة بصياغته بدقة. هنا تكون الترجمة المنظورة نشاطاً ينطوي على تحدٍ؛ إذ أنها تتطلب مهارات مختلفة في وقت واحد. ويتقصى البحث الراهن، ويناقش ويبين مختلف جوانب الترجمة المنظورة ويقترح، تبعاً لذلك، مقررأ دراسياً ليكون بصفة أنموذجاً يقدم معلومات تطبيقية عن تدريس الترجمة المنظورة يمكن تعديله ليتوافق مع مختلف البيئات التعليمية. ويقدم بعض الأفكار عن عدد من تمارين الترجمة المنظورة، منها مثلاً القراءة السريعة وإعادة الصياغة. وسوف يُستهل هذا المقرر بمناقشة أوجه الاختلاف بين اللغة الشفوية واللغة التحريرية وذلك لغرض تبيان أوجه الشبه والاختلاف بين الترجمة المنظورة وأنماط الترجمة الشفوية الأخرى.

## Introduction

It is commonly known that translation plays a significant role in supplying the target language culture with new knowledge by opening new horizons. Besides, there is a general agreement among translation researchers that the translator task is not only looking for equivalent words in the TL in order to transfer the SL meaning (Dingwaney and Maier, 1995: 3) but s/he plays a vital role as a bilingual transmitter of the genuine TL message. Hung (2002: 2) argues that

**Translation renders communication possible despite language differences; it provides access by removing or overcoming those barriers, by leading us across the chasms that prevent understanding.**

Lonsdale (1996: 24) argues that "translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message."

It is clear that translation cannot be detached from interpretation, though each has a different type of text; the former has a written text and the latter an oral one. They both aim at transferring meaning from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL).

Chan et al (2001: 1079) state that both translation and interpretation include:  
**the successful transmission of all of the information of the original source language text to a reader or a listener who does not know source language and was not the intended receiver, by means of target language text or discourse that seems natural to a target language reader or listener while maintaining an effect equivalence to that which the original text or discourse would have on a reader or listener of the source language.**

Sight translation (henceforth ST) appears on the crossroad between translation and interpretation. It is a sort of a translation which is done orally from a written text. Agrifoglio (2004: 43). In other words, it is a mixture of two aspects; the visual and the vocal. To be more precise, it is a combination of the written aspect (represented by translation) and the oral one (represented by interpretation).

Lambert (2004: 298) defines it as "a specific type of written translation as well as a variant of oral interpretation." Besides, it is a combination or hybrid of interpreting (oral output) and written translation (written input) (Leube, 2000: 178).

Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2003: 272) defines ST as "a professional service which interpreters may be asked to provide on conferences, business meetings, court hearings, and so on." Weber (cited in *ibid*: 274) considers ST as a good preparation for both consecutive and simultaneous interpretations because it trains students in rapid text analysis, public speaking and avoiding transcoding.

Hence, ST entails an interpretation aspect since it is concerned with the oral output. Interpretation is a very important field. It facilitates the oral communication between different languages. It is "an immediate form of translational activity, performed for the benefit of people who want to engage in communication across barriers of language and culture" (Pöchhacker, 2004: 25).

As regards teaching, Dalton (2008: 29) insists that teaching consists of assisting performance. It occurs when assistance is offered at points at which performance requires assistance. Accordingly, teaching here means assistance.

As for teaching translation, one may refer to Delisle (1980: 54) who explains the torture of teaching translation by arguing that "teaching translation is an arduous job that mortifies you, puts you in a state of despair at times, but also an enriching and indispensable work, that demands honesty and modesty."

### **Skills of the Translator**

According to Wu (2010: 35), there are many basic skills that a translator must have in order to do his/her task successfully. They are as follows:

- 1- A wide range of vocabulary in the SL and TL
- 2- Being quite efficient in grammar, morphology and rhetoric of both languages
- 3- Comprehensive knowledge
- 4- Faithfulness in transferring the original thoughts and ideas
- 5- Patience, since translation requires a long time of practice and training

Kelly (2005:64) suggests another group of skills. They are as follows:

1. Communicative and textual competence
2. Cultural and intercultural competence
3. Subject area competence
4. Professional and instrumental competence
5. Attitudinal or psycho-physiological competence
6. Interpersonal competence
7. Strategic competence

### **Differences between Oral and Written Language**

Many people realize that language is a means of communication among humans. There are two types here; the written and the spoken. Each has its unique characteristics that create certain differences between them.

Jahandarie (1999: 216) argues that the spoken language is the same as the written; they both seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever.

Agrifoglio (2004: 47) suggests four parameters by which oral and written texts clearly differ: lexical variety, sentence construction, level of vocabulary, and involvement and detachment.

But many researchers (for example, (Jahandarie, 1999: 10), Olson et al. 1985: 285, Kaump, E. 1940: 772, Lenk, 1998: 18, Nattinger, J. et al., 1992: 78) have talked about a number of differences. These differences can be summarized in the following way:

1. Writing is static.

Speaking is a dynamic interaction between two or more people.

2. Writing is more precise and sophisticated because words can be well chosen. It tends to be more complex and intricate with longer sentences and many subordinate clauses. It also makes use of punctuation, word order, colours, etc.

Speeches are not sophisticated; they use shorter and incomplete sentences. Most of them may begin with "and", "but", etc. They tend to be full of repetitions, incomplete sentences, corrections and interruptions.

3. In writing, the character of the writer has no control over his/her reader.

Speech makes use of gestures, intonation, pitch, pauses, body language and many other ways to communicate meaning. Eye contact plays a major role in speech by which the speaker can control the listener.

4. Writing is permanent. It is not possible to change written texts the moment they have been written. In other words, a written text can survive through time.

By contrast, speech is of a temporary nature not permanent. It is used for immediate interactions.

### **Differences between Sight Translation and Interpretation**

There are certain similarities between ST on the one hand, and consecutive and simultaneous interpretations on the other hand, the most salient of which is that all of them are oral (Lambert, 2004: 298).

ST seems to be a simple task, but in fact is just as difficult as consecutive and simultaneous interpretations. Its task is often considered the most difficult that translators face because other modes of interpreting (consecutive and simultaneous) involve oral language exclusively, while it entails oral and written aspects.

Agrifoglio (2004: 43) points that ST appears as a complex and unique technique, just like consecutive and simultaneous interpretations.

Shreve et al. (2010:63) stress that ST is "perhaps as difficult as simultaneous interpretation", while saying that some interpreters find ST more difficult than the other types of interpretation because they are troubled with focusing on meaning other than words. He (ibid.) adds that "ST is sometimes thought to be less difficult and demanding than translation, with which it shares as input medium, or interpretation with which it shares as output medium."

This section concentrated on showing the differences between ST and consecutive and simultaneous interpretations for a very important reason. Shreve et al (2010: 7) stress that the task differences between ST and interpretation have a deep effect on their processing of texts.

Consequently, it is better to show a clear-cut distinction between them. Concerning ST, the input is visual (the written word) and not oral (the spoken word), yet the sight translator is forced to render a thought in the SL and then produce the TL version of that thought while simultaneously processing the next SL thought, and so on (Lee et al, 2009: 2).

But there are other differences. They are:

1. The translator has the chance to look at the text s/he going to render without being confined to follow the speaker word by word (Gile, 1997: 204).

2. The translator does not extensively burden his/her memory, contrary to what happens in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting (ibid:203).

3. The translator has more flexibility in terms of speed of delivery. (Ibid)

Gile (cited in Shreve et al., 2010: 43) adds that the memory in the two types of interpretations does three functions, which the sight translator is relieved from. They are as follows:

- 1) Comprehension in SL,

- 2) Reformulation in the TL, and

- 3) Memory operation, temporarily by storing the information which the interpreter is currently processing.

Besides, Gerzymisch-Arbogast, (2003: 272) mentions other differences between ST and other types of interpretation. They are:

1. It includes a language shift (from SL to TL)
2. It entails a specific shift (from written to spoken language)

### **Advantages of Sight Translation**

Many have talked on ST advantages and benefits (for example, Leube, 2000: 178, Kardela, H. et al. 2004: 346, Agrifoglio, 2004: 44 and Gile, 2009: 179). They may be summarized as follows:

1. In ST, information is always available (i.e., the source text remains visually accessible) to the translator who is not forced to burden his/her memory by storing them for some time before rendering the translation.
2. Since ST deals with written texts, these texts have more advantage over the oral texts because the written are more coherent and cohesive than the oral. Besides, they are devoid of imperfections, redundancy and omission that characterize oral speech.
3. The student gets the chance of checking the text before them to see what is coming up or what has been left. Accordingly, the student will concentrate on the text itself and extract the meaning easily.
4. It encourages the marriage between the translation of a written text and the oral speech in a way that leads to naturalness of expression.
5. ST does not require any equipment to be done.
6. Students translating a text at sight from the foreign into their native language develop their understanding of all structures of the written language and increase their vocabulary repertoire.
7. In ST, students are enabled to decipher unknown texts by examining many materials in the foreign language.
8. Students translating from their native language into the foreign one are able to understand the level of their command of the foreign language, to foster their linguistic creativity, and test their ability to autonomously create personalized structures of the language they are studying (Gile, 1995: 111).

### **Types of Sight Translation**

Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2003: 272) mentions three types of ST. They are as follows:

1. The interpreter is given a written document in advance and has time to perform an oral translation of the text (it is called a rehearsed ST).
2. The interpreter is given a previously unseen written text and asked to provide an on-the-spot oral translation (it is called an unrehearsed ST).
3. The interpreter is given a copy of a speech which will be read by a speaker and which will have to be interpreted simultaneously in the booth.

### **Difficulties of Sight Translation**

Martin (1993: 404) refers to the difficulty of ST by saying that

**Although the instant comprehension factor and the need for instant analysis of cognitive content present in interpreting is similar in sight translation, the hybrid nature of the latter requires more effort to be put into attaining independence from the source language text than is the case with written translation and interpretation.**

Besides, there are many researchers (Bowen et al., 1990: 53, Shreve et al., 2010: 63 and Gambier (2012: 320) who mentioned many difficulties, among which are the following:

1. Since formal written language usually involves longer, more complex sentences than oral language, the task of interpreting the text can be more challenging, particularly in the areas of appropriate and natural expression and grammatical coordination.

2. The interpreter has to move to a different level of complexity, from punctuation to pauses and intonation. This technique demands sorting the ideas in a way that is often different from the way ideas are arranged in writing.

### **Skills of Sight Translation**

Gambier et al. (2012: 8), Lonsdale (1996: 107) and Bowen et al. (1990: 50) talked of the importance of teaching ST skills, especially at the beginning of any training program. These skills are of a vital importance because they include most of the skills which are necessary for any interpreter, particularly the skills required to translate at speed.

Lonsdale (1996: 13) confirms that there are three qualities which are essential in any learning situation, especially when teaching sight translation: accuracy, clarity and flexibility. These qualities are the basic skills here; they train the student on how to search (flexibility) for the most suitable words (accuracy) in order to convey meaning (clarity).

Bowen et al. (1990: 50) stress on a number of exercises that students must practice. Among which are the following:

1. Get rid of stage fright. This is achieved by student presentations in which the teacher and students observe a student's performance. Here, students are advised to give comments and raise questions after the presentation of their colleague. This is a very important element in this process when used in a sort of class discussions.

Students must also be told about the importance of facial expressions and other body language because they both have the ability to negatively affect their performance and undermine the audience's confidence in them. They must be positively used to make meaning clear and understandable.

Another important element here is eye contact which is a very effective technique. The teacher urges his/her students to make sure that they have the audience's attention by looking at them. The teacher must maintain eye-contact with students by looking across the whole class.

2. Never to use word-for-word translation; the student must analyze the text very well. This technique leads to literal translation. Newmark (1988: 76) points out that, "literal translation is the first step in translation, and a good translator abandons a literal version only when it is plainly inexact or . . . badly written. A bad translator will always

do his best to avoid translating word for word." Besides, students are advised to avoid word-for-word reading from the written text because this may lead the audience to find speech-reading boring and therefore will not get but very few of the information rendered.

In addition, students are taught how to control the speed of their translation in order to keep pace with the speaker without being too late behind or going ahead. It is well known that pacing is also crucial in ST. If the student uses sudden starts and stops, the listener will not get the message correctly.

3. Recordings of students' presentations to detect errors. Here, the teacher may use videotaping for this purpose. For example, a student may start with a wrong translation, s/he must find their way back to correct translation.

4. Training students how to deliver their translation as a speech. The teacher must concentrate on teaching public speaking. The students must perform at a stage, and the teacher must guide them through constructive criticism about their delivery.

The teacher must also concentrate on pacing. In other words, students are trained on how to deliver their speech with a normal pace without rendering their translation quickly through the easy parts of a passage and slowly during its difficult parts.

It is possible to say that the present course will cover these ST skills in a way that leads to:

1. Fast reading and understanding of written source texts.
2. Paying attention to meaning instead of wording, since translation itself is a process of meaning transfer. This can be done by many things, among which is the use of paraphrasing and deciphering of the original text.
3. The smooth reproduction of a TL text into an oral message through the ability of moving from the written to the spoken mode. This skill can be obtained by using various ways of presentation that encourage students to combat stage fright and reluctance.

### **Exercises of Sight Translation**

Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2003: 273) stresses that ST exercises are very important since they enable students to deal with SL texts in a more flexible way and be able to solve TL problems.

Besides, many studies have found that translation and interpretation activities and exercises are critical to successful knowledge transfer, among which the study done by Cranefield and Yoong (2007: 95).

At the very beginning of the course, students have to read first the SL texts silently. Then they are trained to read and understand them faster. They are then asked to paraphrase and summarize texts, focusing mainly on the content and ideas. They are guided gradually to sight translate them into the TL. To develop the skill of fast reading and comprehension, students are required to read different materials.

Concerning paraphrasing, Chan et al (2001: 1072) concentrate on exercises of extracting meaning, i.e. paraphrasing as the practice by which students are encouraged to express the same meaning or ideas in many different ways.

Paraphrasing is a helpful exercise that trains the student to solve problems quickly by focusing on meaning, not words.

Moreover, students will be trained on how to be fluent by increasing their repertoire of vocabulary because good knowledge of languages is a prerequisite for any translator.

Lee et al. (2009: 2) gives an example of a ST practice. He advises the teacher to allow the student about 3 minutes to read the text without checking any dictionary and then s/he must record what s/he has translated slightly. He stresses that this practice is just like a test of how to perform in a professional context.

Ersozlu (2005: 3) argues that the teacher must advise students to follow one rule in each exercise: Do Not Change the Meaning. She proposes the following exercises to do this job:

1. The students are given texts written in their native language and they are asked to paraphrase every sentence in the text.

2. To guess the meaning of the word by using clues from the text itself. The teacher may choose texts by which students can decipher unknown words.

3. To focus on the message of the sentence/paragraph instead of concentrating on the meaning of the word. This exercise will help students to focus on the meaning rather than the structure and the words of a given text.

On the other hand, Davies (2004: 189) enlists a number of ST exercises, among which are the following:

- a. The teacher or students choose two texts in the L1 related to certain topic and each student receives one. The students work in pairs, Student A receives one of the texts and Student B the other.

- b. Individually, each student translates his/her text with the help of any resources students need.

- c. Once they have finished, student A carries out a sight translation of the text he or she has not translated, i.e., Student B's text. Student B listens and, without interrupting, underlines any interesting points worth commenting on.

- d. Student B sight translates A's text and the same procedure is followed.

- e. Students A and B comment on the points of translation that could be improved.

- f. The teacher presents a possible translation of the texts and a class discussion may follow.

Davies (ibid: 190) mentions another group of exercises. The goal here is to assess end product and solve problems. They are as follows:

- a. The student writes a translation of about 200-250 words in the class or at home. In this activity, the text may be the same for all students, or two texts may be chosen, one for Student A and one for Student B. In this case, the edition will be a more realistic task as the student editors will not know the text until it is presented to them to edit.

- b. Students sit in pairs and exchange their translations.

- c. Individually, with the same source text, each student checks the translation of another student by using the symbols to be found in professional editing-these may vary, of course, and the students should be aware of this possibility.

- d. They return the edited translation to its "author".

- e. Each student reads the edited version of the translation.

- f. The pairs sit together and comment on the editing with the author of the translation.

- g. Each student takes the translation and rewrites it taking into account what has been discussed with their "editor".



## **Sight Translation Course**

The present section is concerned with teaching sight translation at a course designed for this purpose. Aristotle (cited in Spangler, 1998: 4) defines teaching as:

**A process which must be built on the knowledge possessed by the student. Besides, the teacher cannot instruct his pupils if he proceeds from ideas unfamiliar to them." Here, one notices that Aristotle concentrates on the importance of starting with students from the known to the unknown.**

Many researchers argue that for a course to be successful, a number of qualities must be met. Stern and Payment (1995: 79) claim that course designers might not be aware of certain things that help to make a success for their course. These include, among other things, the following:

- \*Trainees are supposed to learn too much information.
- \*The time limit is not enough to practice new behavior.
- \*There is no time for the trainees to own the new material.
- \*Only fragments of the information are remembered.

Students, in this course, will concentrate on the differences between the role of translator and that of interpreter by showing, in advance the difference between the written and oral language. In order to perform such a challenging job professionally and responsibly, materials of the course must be well designed to offer various exercises from the easiest to the most challenging ones. That is why Weber (cited in Bowen, 1990: 47) advises course designers to use exercises of different levels of difficulty through the training period because such kinds of ST exercises will enable students to work on analyzing texts and developing TL re-formulation problems. But it is better, at the beginning of the course, to start with short sentences in order to be able to build longer paragraphs.

This course is designed to teach ST. It will help students to get better ideas on various features of ST. It represents a step on the way of practicing sight translation in real-life situations. It will endeavor to develop the oral skills by using different exercises. The main objective here is to train students to become accurate and speedy when practicing sight translation of different texts in order to prepare them for practicing interpretation.

It will teach students practice and self-evaluation techniques that can be used in real-work situations. It is planned to provide the basics and exercises of ST in a way that enables them to develop their professional skills to sight translate more complex written texts. The main goal of the course is to train students to develop the ST skills in order to orally translate written texts immediately after a quick first reading.

It will be introduced by discussing the difference between the oral and the written language to show the differences and similarities between the written aspect of translation (represented by ST) and the oral aspect of it (represented by interpretation). It is designed to enable students to read, understand and translate different texts, as well as learning how to use various ways of presentation in the classroom. It also endeavors to develop the student's awareness into the nature of language through the relationship

between their mother tongue and the foreign language. In this respect, Leube (2000: 14) stresses that:

**The student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.**

But one must put in mind that the success of such courses depends largely on the skillful and professional teacher who is the cornerstone here. If s/he has a translational/interpretational experience, students will be positively affected by him/her. Such a view is supported by Sainz (1994: 139) who argues that:

**I agree that the most adequate and competent teachers at university are those who, apart from their teaching positions, are also practicing professionals in the subject they are teaching.**

It is worth mentioning here that the designer of the present course had studied basics of translation at the university (in the department of translation) and became a sight translator for a certain time. Hence, depending on her personal experience as a translator and teacher, she believes that sight translation is perhaps the most effective pedagogical means a student may need when intending to practice simultaneous interpretation.

The importance of this course lies in the fact that sight translation itself is found at the crossroads of the two main branches: translation and interpreting. Gerzymisch-Arbogast (2003: 273) stresses that the mixed nature of ST could be the reason behind the controversy concerning ST. Hence, if one combines these two different sorts of interpretations together, it will be quite clear then to show that ST demands the knowledge and skills demanded in both.

There is another important thing in this respect. The teacher and students must comment on every student immediately after their presentation. This method will drag the students' attention to the positions where they had some mistakes.

### **Assessment of Students' Performance**

Assessment plays a crucial role in the education process because it supports the teaching/ learning process (Gipps, 1994: 3). Rowntree (1987: 1) added that "if we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures". Hence, the usefulness of assessment is shown in the fact that through which students recognize which aspects of the course are most valued.

Newmark (1988:181-2) considers assessment of translation as fulfilling five goals:

- (a) Improving the levels of translation
- (b) Providing translators with a tangible lesson
- (c) Shedding light on specific aspects of translation
- (d) Clarifying the work of significant writers and significant translators
- (e) Showing semantic and grammatical differences between SL and TL

## **Conclusion**

Recently, sight translation has occupied an important position because of the many changes in work demands. It is on the midway between translation and interpretation. It belongs to interpretation since it is concerned with oral interpreting. It belongs to translation since it is concerned with the written aspect, and belongs to interpretation since it is concerned with the oral one. That is why it is, sometimes, more difficult than other types of interpretation because its input is written and its output is oral.

Whereas every translation student is supposed to master simultaneous interpretation, ST is considered an important step in the right direction. It has already been clearly demonstrated that ST has an important role in training students for real-work situations because it improves their delivery and pace of translation. Besides, it appears that teaching ST is a prerequisite for any interpreter's training programs. It would be unreasonable to expect that students can do difficult interpreting tasks just because they have learnt how to ST. ST needs to be taught early in any interpreting program.

In addition, it is shown here that there are critical differences between the written and the oral language that requires considerable training to master ST. But one must remember that translation and interpretation are two very different areas of expertise. Asking an interpreter to do a sight translation without previous training is basically asking that person to adopt an entirely different set of skills.

This paper aimed to show how ST is considered as an important means to train students and help them to improve many skills. For instance, they can get some experience on how to analyze, scan and decipher texts by encouraging students to let their eyes test the text from left to right or the text as a whole, while paying attention to the fact that they must choose the appropriate meaning. In other words, they are trained on how to decode the message of the text correctly and quickly.

Translators are advised, when they translate at sight, to scan the text to decipher it in order to arrive at the correct meaning, as well as quickly identifying its key features. Besides, they are warned against focusing on more than one unit of meaning at a time. Instead, they should translate sentence by sentence, small sentences are better. Starts and endings are of crucial importance; translators must keep on a stable pace, and pay attention to the delivery of their translation as clearly and loudly as possible.

Based on the paper findings, a model course is designed as a basis for understanding the mechanism of teaching ST in the classroom. It aimed at broadening the student's competence in the SL and the TL. It proved to be a rather advantageous method to improve ST skills in light of sight translation exercises in order to enhance different student skills because such exercises are a prerequisite for mastering sight translation skills at first and then interpretation. When getting good training translation, on the one hand, and be prepared for interpretation on the other hand.

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