

EN MARGE DE / REFLEXIONS

Developing Translation Assessment Skills. A Case Study

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Abstract

The current article addresses the topic of translation assessment - from theory to practice. On the theoretical side, we briefly review the evaluation criteria for translation output recommended in the literature – both in scholarly publications and in translation certification contexts. On the practical side, we provide extensive details on the training of translation students to evaluate their own and peer translation products. Thus, the case study section of the article focuses on activities designed for developing translation assessment skills in second-year Master's students enrolled in the study program "Modern Languages and International Business Communication" organized by the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania. The article contributes to the debate on translation assessment by proposing an evaluation scale with certain weight added to a selection of the most common criteria mentioned in translation studies.

Keywords: translation studies, translation assessment, translated text, translation process, Master's course in Translation Theory and Practice

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Introduction

The present article focuses on the topic of translation assessment and developing translation assessment skills in Master's students. We start by reviewing the translation assessment criteria referred to in the specialized literature, and then proceed with describing a teaching scenario developed by the author to train second-year Master's students from a Philological program in a (mainly) business university to evaluate their own and others' translation output. We believe such skills to be an asset for any language professional working for international institutions and companies, as the latter are directly affected by the quality rendering of content into foreign languages for targeted international markets.

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According to Palumbo (2009: 10), translation “[a]ssessment (or evaluation) is the activity aimed at establishing the **quality** of a translated text.” [emphasis in original]. Palumbo highlights the fact that different frameworks emphasize different evaluation criteria used to establish whether a translation is good or bad: *criteria for the translated text* (such as: “linguistic and textual features”, acceptability, terminological and content accuracy, register, as well as examination of “types and gravity scales [...] for translation errors” ranging from spelling mistakes, text formatting errors, to “questionable [...] lexical choices”), and *criteria for the translation process* (including “the communicative purpose of the T[ranslated] T[ext] or the specifications provided for the job, the procedure adopted to arrive at the TT, and, crucially, the time taken by the translator to complete the job”) (Palumbo, 2009: 10-12 and references cited therein).

Similar criteria for the translated text are specified by organizers of translator certification exams. For instance, the Candidate Guide for the Translator Exam organized by the Romanian Ministry of Culture lists the following aspects of interest in the evaluation of candidate output: type of content, communication function, presupposed beneficiary requirements, and context. More specifically, the grading scale includes: target language style, punctuation, spelling, grammar; gravity of errors; register; observance of the communication situation; text formatting; lexical and terminological accuracy; effect on target language reader (the TT should have the same effect as the source text on the source language reader); and “reading fluency” (CulturaData.ro, 2018: 23-26). Although these criteria are not given a certain weight in the evaluation scale, there is some mention of how errors are penalized – errors are classified into “major, minor, [and] weak points” (idem, p. 24); what counts as a major error is a grammatical or terminological choice that leads to changes in the meaning of the source text. Error penalties range from 0.10 points to 1 point per error, function of the latter’s gravity. The minimum passing grade is 7 out of 10, as specified in the Frequently asked questions for the Translator Exam (CulturaData.ro. 2021: 2).

In a previous study (Dima, 2022), we made an extensive review of translation evaluation criteria used around the world in the foreign language classroom, in translator training contexts and in professional contexts, grouping criteria into three categories – *criteria for the translation product (text)*, *criteria for the translation process*, and *criteria for translation knowledge*, as epitomized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Criteria for translation evaluation – literature review
(Table 4 in Dima, 2022: 179, see references cited therein)

Evaluation criteria	Translation evaluation in the foreign language classroom	Translation evaluation in the translation classroom	Translation evaluation on the job-market
Criteria for the translation product (text)			
Meaning transfer	✓	✓	✓
Use of language A lexis; grammar; syntax (including word order); register and style	✓	✓	✓
Use of language B reading; writing (spelling, punctuation, text-type conventions, discourse competence)	✓	✓	✓ use of reference material/job-specific instructions
Coherence and consistency terminology; sentence level; paragraph level; text level;	✓	✓	✓
Creativity in dealing with problematic issues		✓	
Intercultural knowledge	✓	✓	✓
Thematic/ subject-matter knowledge			✓
Digital skills text editing and re-editing; use of technological aids in translation (electronic dictionaries/ glossaries, online machine translation, offline software for subtitling etc.)	✓	✓	✓
Criteria for the translation process			
Process and resources employed to meet client/ industry/ legislative demands: translators' qualifications; translation process (text analysis, use of style guides, use of translation resources, revision and review, proofreading, final verification, post-editing of machine translation output); extra-linguistic factors (fitness for purpose, feedback exchange with the beneficiary, data protection etc.)		✓	✓
Criteria for translation knowledge			
Awareness of translation theory and practice – concepts, methodologies, strategies, workflow, liaising with beneficiaries etc.		✓	

None of the sources mentioned in this brief section clearly and explicitly stipulate the weight of each criterion or type of criteria into the overall assessment of a translated text, hence translator trainers/evaluators and translators themselves have to rely on their own experience and intuition regarding what weighs more or whether each criterion is of equal importance. However, an evaluation scale is necessary when assessing both trainee translators and candidates for translation certification exams. A suggestion is made in the following section, which describes, among other things, how student translations are assessed for a translation studies course. At this point, we merely highlight the fact that translation assessment is a complex, multifaceted process, and what counts as a good or bad translation may vary from one context to another, depending on what aspects are targeted by the evaluator and the evaluation context.

1. Case study

The aim of the current section is to describe the activities designed for second-year Master's students enrolled in the study program "Modern Languages and International Business Communication" (LICOM) organized by the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania, during the course in Translation Theory and Practice, with a view to train them to produce good translations, and to become reflexive and better at (self)evaluating translation output, so as to meet (industry and wider audience) expectations regarding translation quality.

The course in Translation Theory and Practice is a one-semester course, amounting to 4 hours per week in class lectures and seminars, and a total of 225 hours per semester, including individual study and practice, documentation, and examination activities. The syllabus contains topics such as: fundamental concepts in Translation Studies, translation typology, stages in the translation process, the translation profession, project management, current trends in Translation Studies.

To reach the above-mentioned aims to train students as translators and translation evaluators, the following steps were employed in the 2024-2025 academic year: the completion of an initial questionnaire on student background; lecture and seminar activities on various theoretical and practical issues related to the aspects of interest in the syllabus (including translation exercises including literary and non-literary work and translation quality assessment); testing translation quality and awareness of/reflection on own and peer translation output (by means of midterm and final exam exercises). For reasons of space, this article refers only to the initial questionnaire and the testing activities undertaken.

The *initial questionnaire* on student background comprised 20 questions related to aspects such as: the students' demographics, academic background (previous higher education studies), experience in translation (as a learner, teacher/instructor or translator/ interpreter, for other types of jobs), professional certification as a translator etc. Another part of the survey relevant for the current article is made up of questions related to previous experience related to translation evaluation (both types of evaluation criteria Master's students had been exposed to previously, and their level of satisfaction with evaluation results).

Based on the students' responses, we may understand their profile, which is why we include here a short description of the answers received for the survey. As regards participants' academic background, 85% of the students are foreign language graduates (from Language and Literature or Applied Modern Languages programs), while 15% are economics graduates (from study programs whose curricula included classes of two foreign languages).

As concerns the participants' previous experience in translation, the overwhelming majority report experience as learners – 83%, while 17% report experience as teachers/instructors; no respondents mention experience in translation for roles such as translator/interpreter, or for other types of jobs). The languages mentioned are English, French, German and Japanese (i.e. the languages students had studied before enrolling for the LICOM Master's program). In the learner role, respondents usually mention Bachelor's level activities (such as: translating worksheets, short paragraphs, mainly non-literary text types – economics, law, technical documents, journalistic articles, both formal and informal, oral or written texts); sometimes, respondents also mention school level activities (without giving details); moreover, two respondents refer to translation work done during student years, not for academic purposes, but for work (letters from clients, campaigns, websites). In the teacher/instructor role, respondents mention the translation of dialogues, literary and non-literary paragraphs, short narrative or descriptive texts.

As regards professional certification in the field, none of the participants reports having a professional certificate as a translator. However, 46% would like to obtain such a certification², while 31% are undecided whether a translation certification would be necessary for their future careers, and 23% think they do not need one. We believe the question (and answers) to be relevant both for initial MA student motivation in pursuing a career in translation (which is but one of the possible paths a LICOM graduate may embark upon), and for their previous (lack of) exposure to translation assessment involved in getting a certificate.

² Interestingly, despite the 46% who would like to obtain a translation certification, only 33% would actually like to work as a translator, either as a freelancer, or employed by a translation agency.

With reference to previous experience in translation evaluation, the initial survey contained open-ended questions targeting both types of evaluation criteria MA students had been exposed to previously, and their level of satisfaction with translation evaluation results. Answers refer to aspects such as: who evaluated their translation output (e.g. teachers for 41% of respondents, peers and teachers for 8%); the criteria for evaluation (grammar and connectivity, personal experience of the evaluator); the marks awarded in the past for translation output (e.g. ranging from 8.5 to 9.5 out of 10, or 'ok', 'ok but not very accurate'). By examining the answers on the level of satisfaction with translation evaluation results, we noticed that 83% of respondents were satisfied with the results, with motivations ranging from: 'I trust my teachers.', 'It was fairly made.', 'It was thorough.', to 'It was for my own good.', 'I learned from the evaluation.', to 'I have had mixed feelings about the way translation output was evaluated. In some cases, the evaluation process was thorough and aligned with the complexities of translation work, while in others, it seemed too rigid or surface-level'. One respondent wrote 'It hasn't ever been evaluated'.

The *testing of translation quality* was accomplished by means of teacher evaluation of students' classwork and homework throughout the semester, as well as by midterm and final exam exercises. In what follows, we refer only to students' midterm and final exam outputs.

The *midterm* was scheduled before the lecture on translation assessment – by that time, students had to do translation exercises followed by unstructured classroom feedback from peers and the teacher. The translation exercises were part of the seminars on the topic of Translation typology – both literary and non-literary texts, as follows: a page of literary text from English to Romanian (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*), a page of literary text from Romanian to English (Mircea Cărtărescu, *Nostalgia*) and several non-literary pages (press covers of aggressive driving, sources: the Euroactiv platform for the English versions, and the Digi24 platform for the Romanian versions). The midterm test contained several items, out of which two items are related to the present article - a translation exercise and a reflection exercise.

The task for the translation exercise was to translate from English into Romanian a short excerpt from a YouTube recording of a conference talk delivered for the Translation Europe Forum organized by the European Commission in 2019, a talk that had been viewed and discussed in class at the beginning of the semester, from the point of view of content,

not language or translation options. The students' translation output for this exercise was evaluated by the teacher, based on the following criteria (which the teacher had not previously explicitly raised awareness on): meaning transfer (4 points out of 10), use of language (4 points out of 10), creativity (1 point out of 10), text structure (1 point out of 10). The students' results were the following: for meaning transfer, 69% obtained 4 points out of 4, 31% obtained 3 points out of 4; for use of language, 100% obtained 3 points out of 4; for creativity, 75% were awarded the point; while for text structure, 100% were awarded the point; overall: none of the midterm test takers obtained 10 points out of 10, 63% obtained 9 points, 19% obtained 8 points, 19% obtained 7 points³.

The task for the reflection exercise was to comment on the options/ methods/ strategies adopted while translating the text in the previous exercise. The comments were intentionally *not guided* by the teacher, to be able to identify students' own grassroots reactions. To obtain the 10 points allotted for the task, students were expected (not explicitly) to provide at least three comments on whatever aspects came to their mind. Upon evaluating the students' answers, the teacher grouped comments into three categories: comments on the translation product (text), on the translation process, and on translation knowledge (to reflect the criteria in Table 1 above, which was to be discussed after the midterm). Some exemplification is given below:

- Student *comments on the translation product (text)* referred to aspects such as: meaning transfer, tonality/tone and register (conversational yet respectful tone), use of language by the author in the source text (the narrator's perspective, trying to convey the author's feelings accurately);
- Student *comments on the translation process* referred to steps/stages/strategies employed while translating: paying attention to the source language ('I tried to ... sound like the original text', 'I wanted to keep the punctuation'), paying attention to the target language (changing word order, omissions, breaking the long sentences from the source language into smaller sentences in the target language, 'I tried to make it

³ Should the midterm evaluation criteria have mirrored those of the Translator certification exam organized by the Romanian Ministry of Culture, all midterm test takers would have passed the respective exam, whose regulation states that candidates should obtain at least 7 points out of 10 in order to obtain the certification (cf. CulturaData.ro, 2021). For a description of the evaluation criteria for the Romanian Translator certification exam, see the previous section.

sound Romanian.’, paid attention to colloquialisms ‘which could never be translated *ad litteram*’, ‘I analyzed the words in order not to repeat myself.’). Other comments: ‘I read it again, revised it, checked again the grammar’; ‘I did not have a clear method’, attitude towards the text (= confusing editing as it contained an ellipsis marked with ‘[...]’ were passages were taken out from the original text); one student grouped strategies into **syntactic and semantic strategies**, specific **solutions** and translation **procedures**, providing examples from the source language and the target language.

- Student *comments on translation knowledge*: ‘Before translating, I analyzed the text to create a brief general view, during translation, I took the sentences one by one to understand and translate them, after translating I revised and reviewed the text’; ‘I used **faithful translation** [...] to preserve the meaning and tone of the original text [...], while making it readable in Romanian. I also used **free translation** to prioritize the overall meaning [...]’; ‘I mostly used the **literal translation** [...], **cultural equivalence**’.

As can be seen from the comments above, students were really professional in their attitude towards the task. Answers ranged from empirical to ‘metalingual’ - the bold items are highlighted by the teacher, who would like to mention that such terms had not been used during the lectures and seminars before the midterm, so they belong to the students’ previous knowledge in translation studies. Since 85% of the students are foreign language graduates (from Language and Literature programs, or Applied Modern Languages programs), it is expected that they have previous knowledge of such metalanguage, as the curriculum of the Bachelor’s programs mentioned above is required by national standards to comprise so called ‘practical courses’ to practice translation (among other aspects), and – for Applied Modern Languages – an introductory course on translation (see ARACIS 2017, 2025b).

The *final exam* was scheduled at the end of the semester, after the lecture on translation assessment. By that time, students had practiced both translation and translation assessment skills. On the one hand, translation exercises ranged from translating movie songs/ signature tunes, mobility reports, and press coverage of climate deals, to practicing text analysis before translation, and comparing translation strategies and/or translation output from several online translation tools. On the other hand, translation assessment exercises were based on a detailed checklist provided by the

teacher and clarified during lecture and seminar discussions (i.e. Table 1 above, cf. Dima, 2022: 179). Thus, in the interval between the midterm and the final exam, the students were exposed to extensive *explicit* reference to a wide set of criteria and tools for both translation and translation assessment.

The final exam paper contained several items, out of which two items are related to the present article - a choice between a translation exercise and an evaluation exercise, and a choice between a reflection exercise referring to one's own translation in the previous translation exercise and a reflection exercise referring to the usefulness of the evaluation criteria provided by the teacher for the previous evaluation exercise, as in Table 2 below. Explanations are provided in what follows.

Table 2. Final exam items

First set:
Choose between: A. Translate the following text from English into Romanian: B. Evaluate the following translation(s) according to the criteria below
Second set:
Choose between: A. In no more than a page, comment on the options/methods/strategies adopted while translating the text in the previous exercise. Refer to meaning transfer, use of language, problematic aspects and creativity, intercultural and subject-matter knowledge needed to produce a good translation. B. Comment on the translation evaluation criteria used for the previous exercise. Refer to the usefulness of each translation criterion in reflecting the quality of the translation, the need for extra criteria (suggest one/s that would help improve the translation).

The first set of tasks described above gave students a choice between A. Translate the following text from English into Romanian (on a business-related topic), and B. Evaluate the following translation(s) according to the criteria below (again, the text was on a business-related topic, the translation into Romanian and the evaluation criteria were provided by the teacher). Option A was chosen by 62% of students – out of which 20% obtained 10 points out of 10, 20% obtained 9.5 points, 20% obtained 9 points, 10% obtained 8.5 points, 20% obtained 8 points, and 10% obtained 7 points. Mention should be made that the teacher evaluated

student output based on the same criteria used for the translation exercise in the midterm, but the criteria were not mentioned on the test paper itself - meaning transfer (4 points out of 10), use of language (4 points out of 10), creativity (1 point out of 10), text structure (1 point out of 10). When comparing final exam marks with midterm marks, we notice that overall, all students obtained more than 7 points out of 10 in both tests, but the marks were more varied in the case of the final exam item. This variation may stem from: the students' enriched translation practice throughout the semester, their exposure to explicit evaluation criteria, as well as from familiarity with the type of text itself (oral transcript in the midterm versus business news in the final exam). Option B asked students to evaluate a source text in English and its rendering in Romanian, based on the criteria given in Table 3 below. This option was chosen by 38% of students, out of which 33% obtained 10 points out of 10, 50% obtained 9.5 points, while 17% obtained 9 points.

Table 3. Translation assessment criteria for the final exam

Criteria:	Mark from 1 (least satisfying) to 5 (most satisfying)
Meaning transfer	
Use of language A lexis; grammar; syntax (including word order); register and style	
Use of language B writing (spelling, punctuation, text-type conventions, discourse competence)	
Coherence and consistency terminology; sentence level; paragraph level; text level;	
Creativity in dealing with problematic issues	
Intercultural knowledge	
Thematic/ subject-matter knowledge	
Digital skills text editing and re-editing	

The second set of final exam tasks gave students a choice between two reflection exercises: A. Comment on the options/methods/strategies adopted while translating the text in the previous exercise (i.e. the previous A option = translation of the business text from English to Romanian), and B. Comment on the translation evaluation criteria used for the previous exercise (i.e. the previous B option = the evaluation exercise of a translation provided by the teacher, based on the criteria in Table 3 above). In this second set of exam items, Option A was chosen by 80% of the students who chose option A for the previous exercise, and by 17% of the students who chose option B for the previous exercise⁴. When comparing answers received for this exam item to those received for the similar midterm item, we notice that the former were much more elaborated than the latter (probably due to both midterm feedback and the presence of the translation evaluation criteria in the wording of the task, and in option B of this exercise). In the exam, students were explicitly told to refer to meaning transfer, use of language, problematic aspects and creativity, intercultural and subject-matter knowledge needed to produce a good translation. Here are some of the student comments received: 'it is important to focus on the meaning, for the first draft, [...] then you adjust the translation to improve grammar, style, naturalness, [...] and ensure that it is culturally appropriate'; 'after analyzing the text, I realized I should focus on formal equivalence, I used literal translation, [...] then I tried to adapt through faithful and semantic translation [...], at the end I examined the meaning transfer and accuracy'; 'to convey the meaning accurately, I paid attention to technical terms'; 'I used a word-for-word strategy of translation due to the lack of terminology skills'; 'I adjusted sentence structure and word choice'/ 'I restructured long sentences' to sound natural in the target language; 'the use of language B [writing (spelling, punctuation, text-type conventions, discourse competence)] was a little bit problematic'; 'certain metaphors and idioms required creative adaptation'; or, conversely, 'there was no space for creativity, as we have a formal source, where we have to 100% convey the meaning of the text'; 'awareness of economic and legislative terminology was crucial for accurately conveying the message'; 'for this text, a good understanding of European and Romanian law could be really helpful'; 'a balanced approach between semantic and

⁴ Which was unexpected, as the teacher anticipated that 100% of the students who chose Option A for the first set would also choose Option A in the second set, as they are related to one another.

communicative translation was used, ensuring that the translation remained faithful while also being readable and culturally appropriate’.

In the second set of exam items, Option B was chosen by 10% of the students who chose option A for the first set, and by 83% of the students who chose option B for the previous exercise⁵, the remaining 7% of students did not make any choice (i.e. they did not solve any of the options in the second set). Student comments on the translation assessment criteria provided in Table 3 above included: ‘meaning transfer and use of language should be at the top, [...] intercultural and subject-matter knowledge stand close behind’; ‘these are the basic criteria for a translation’ but the human/machine translator status should be taken into account ‘as digital skills and creativity should not be given as attributes to a machine’, instead ‘the use of terminology should be a primary criterion’.

In sum, this section has provided a glimpse into the training of translation and translation assessment skills that students are involved in when taking the second-year course in Translation Theory and Practice, part of the curriculum of the study program “Modern Languages and International Business Communication” (LICOM) organized by the Faculty of International Business and Economics, from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania. We opted for describing three of the course stages – the initial questionnaire, which gave the teacher an insightful view on student background and expectations; student answers and results for the midterm test items on translation and translation assessment; student answers and results for final exam items on translation and translation assessment. When comparing the two tests, we notice an overall (slight) improvement in students’ translation skills, and a more significant improvement of students’ awareness of and reflexivity as regards their own and others’ translation output. The teacher felt that designing translation assessment tasks for students does increase their awareness of the fact that mastering a language, translating from/into that language, and assessing the quality of the translation output are different (albeit related) issues. Hence, this increased awareness dismantles the myth (believed by students, and possibly professionals in other fields?) that if you master a language, you are probably a good translator/interpreter too, and the outcome of your translation efforts should probably be taken for granted as quality translation output.

⁵ Again, this was unexpected, as the teacher anticipated that 100% of the students who chose Option B for the first set would also choose Option B in the second set, since they are related to one another.

Conclusions

The present article has focused on the topic of developing translation assessment skills. We first presented a range of translation assessment criteria discussed in the literature, and highlighted the complex and diverse nature of these criteria, which range from aspects concerning the translated text itself, to aspects related to the translation process, and even to issues concerning knowledge of translation theory. Next, the most extensive part of the article described the teaching scenario developed by the author for raising awareness of the translation assessment process and the training of Master's students for undertaking such a process for their own (and peer) translation outputs. The scenario is part of a course in Translation Theory and Practice included in the curriculum of the Master's program in "Modern Languages and International Business Communication", aimed at language specialists with a career in international companies. We believe this article is relevant not only for language professionals (translators, translator trainers, certification bodies), but also for larger audiences interested in the quality rendering of content into foreign languages. Further research is needed to explore variations in translation assessment grids in use in academia, certification examinations, as well as the translation industry, both at national and at international level.

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