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INTERCHANGING ROLES

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Abstract

The paper deals with several issues related to problems posed by translations used in teaching ESP, seen from an intercultural perspective. A special emphasis will be attached to the concept of ESP which is not seen as a mere classification of the lexical items specific to a particular discipline of knowledge; it presupposes that both the sentence level elements and other discourse elements are specific as well. We consider that the integration of the two, the grammatical and the communicative properties of language in specific situations is essential for the proper teaching of ESP. We demonstrate that translation plays its role in ESP as it ensures the interface between the two languages and has obvious advantages in teaching, facilitating a better understanding of new concepts and a more profound insight in the technical culture under consideration. We also consider that the ability to translate is indispensable in the bilingual or plurilingual context that is now influencing Europe's educational priorities. Starting from all these, we also think that teaching ESP is a sort of intercultural approach since both the student and the teacher teach and learn at the same time. Therefore, we have a case of interchanging roles, that we consider worth probing theoretically stating from the two classical approaches in language acquisition, i.e. the nativist vs. the non-nativist theories. From the intercultural point of view we consider that the aspects of communication that appear should be clearly stated and admitted if the overall communication process is to be successfully accomplished.

1. General view on ESP

Non-native speakers of English who use English in international settings may come across both linguistic and cultural difficulties. When teaching ESP, emphasis should not only be laid upon grammatical issues, but also upon language functions and culturality in order to frame communication as a type of mediation between cultures.

It is generally assumed that ESP classes are aimed at developing students' abilities with the view to performing specific job-related functions. This may be the reason why stress is laid upon language in context or language functions rather than general grammar and language structures. Thus, English is taught and integrated in the learners' area of interest.

Consequently, in light of Leonardi's study (2009: 141), ESP should not be conceived as "*a different language but a different approach to language teaching*". Unlike general EFL classes where all skills are constantly and equally covered and developed, in ESP only one or two of them come to the fore to meet students' needs. Moreover, ESP teachers should be both language experts and content specialists. However, in the great majority of cases it seems that ESP may trigger interchanging roles with teachers becoming students and vice-versa, given the fact that sometimes students are more content-oriented and teachers more language-oriented.

Taking into account all these considerations, translation plays a fundamental role in ESP because it highlights contrasts between L1 and L2. It is through translation that learners are provided with mediation strategies and both linguistic and cultural differences.

2. Teaching translation in ESP

The current article lays emphasis upon the role of translation in ESP teaching. More precisely, it argues that translation, both from the native language (henceforth NL) into the target language (TL) and vice versa, is a complex process, which cannot be reduced to transferring structures from one language to structures in another language. Thus, translation is not a merely linguistic activity since it requires contextualization and attention to both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, such as culture, for example.

Furthermore, as Leonardi (2009: 143) pointed out

"translation should not be seen, and consequently treated, as a completely different language skill as compared to Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening because it is an activity which includes them and, is, to a certain degree, dependent on them."

In this vein of thought, before starting translating the source text, with the view to avoiding misinterpretations or misunderstandings, ESP students should go through two main stages, that is the pre-reading stage aimed at providing students with general understanding through skimming and scanning, and the critical reading stage which is aimed at developing critical and analytical understanding of the text through questions and replies.

Moreover, recent literature in applied linguistics (Leonardi 2009: 1440) claims that translation also requires good writing skills when decoding the source text, transferring linguistic and cultural elements into the TL and encoding the text into the new language and context. Therefore, a good translation flows naturally as it reproduces both the style and the context of the source text by observing the TL writing conventions. Consequently, if the translation task is approached from a contrastive perspective, ESP students will have the opportunity to notice the similarities and differences between different writing skills in different languages, and will end up with parallel texts.

Added to all these, translation is a communicative activity since it involves interaction between the teacher and the students to discuss issues related to the translation task. Rights and wrongs regarding translation are looked into in a meaningful context. Putting all these together, if applied to an ESP context, the role of translation is to teach and subsequently test the core abilities such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is also through translation that specific needs are enhanced. The following sections of the current paper are devoted to these particular needs which include lexical, grammatical and intercultural knowledge.

2.1 Semantics

Specialized vocabulary is a key element in teaching ESP that enables learners to perform better in their professions. Basically, students are exposed to concepts and they must associate the form of the word with the meaning it conveys in order to decode and encode messages.

Over the past years computer analysis of the English language has revealed a widespread occurrence of lexical patterns in language use. Some researchers call them '*lexical phrases*' or '*lexical items'*, others adopted the term '*multi-word chunks*' or just '*chunks*' of language. Irrespective of the term one decides to employ, they are an important feature both in language use and language acquisition and offer advantages for language teaching, especially for teaching ESP. Broadly speaking, both language fluency and accuracy are mainly achieved by retrieving and combining ready-made chunks of language.

'*The ability to chunk language successfully is central to understanding of how language works'* (Lewis: 1997).

In the study he conducted, Lewis (1993) advocates the lexical approach for the acquisition of ESP vocabulary by arguing that language consists of lexical items that belong to four major categories. A relatively small group of lexical items consists of words and polywords which are considered basic vocabulary for learners to memorize. The second group is collocations, which is the way in which words typically occur with each other. The acquisition of the most common ESP collocations is paramount to develop an accurate level of English. The third and fourth groups include fixed and semi-fixed expressions, which are considered to be, along with ESP collocations, the most important types of chunks or lexical phrases, because, as native speakers use and combine them, mastering these accurately will offer the learner the possibility to understand how language works.
Kavaliauskienë and Janulièiènë (2001) propose that

"*most learners equate 'vocabulary' with 'words', and there is a tendency among learners to translate any professional text word-for-word, i.e. they usually try to simplify most lexical phrases to separate words. The role of teachers is to raise students' awareness of the existence of lexical items*".

Therefore, one of the central activities in ESP teaching is to encourage students to identify language items in authentic materials. Another important point is that language units should be learned in context. Lexical items can be, in theory, learned in isolation, context-free,

but this does not ensure mastery of the item. Contextualised learning is preferable, because learning vocabulary does not equal a simple memorisation of lexical phrases. According to research on memorising, a human being forgets 80 per cent of new information in 24 hours. Thus, lexical phrases must be integrated into the learner's linguistic resources so that they are spontaneously available when needed. A clear-cut distinction should be made between vocabulary *usage* and vocabulary *knowledge*. Undoubtedly, it is the ESP teacher who must know how to activate these items in a ESP classroom by making learners process the newly-acquired vocabulary. Consequently, Kavaliauskienë and Januleviènë (2001) emphasize that

"*a logical follow-up is a multi-step procedure: 1) checking comprehension of authentic passages; 2) providing more practice; 3) revision and 4) consolidation*."

To conclude this section, learning ESP in chunks means an improvement in the L2 vocabulary acquisition. It is not only effective and beneficial, but also indispensable, as learners become involved in the process of becoming aware of lexical phrases. ESP learners will end up by identifying and processing high-frequency and low-frequency lexical items either orally or in writing. In what follows, the paper unfolds ticklish matters related to grammar, another important issue on the ESP agenda.

2.2 Grammar

It is worth noting that in specialized fields such as engineering, grammar may be characterized by special features, i.e. simplicity, precision and objectivity.

Special attention should be given to those grammatical structures with frequent occurrence in scientific texts. Thus, passive constructions in English must be carefully looked into by Romanian students whose specialties and specializations pertain to engineering. They must become aware of the contextualization of the passive in reports, formal notices, instructions and processes. Passives without agents, for instance, are common in academic and scientific writing to emphasize the action and not the agent who carried out the action as such.

The structure of the sentence in English is another aspect ESP students should study during grammar lectures since they must embark upon a contrastive analysis which highlights

the differences between Romanian as a Pro-drop language and English as a non Pro-drop language where it is mandatory for the subject to occupy the canonical subject position.

Faulty parallelism is a seminal area that must be addressed. Parallel structures should be explicitly taught to ESP students who must successfully learn how to identify and coordinate items in a series which are the same part of speech. In order to be coherent, ESP students are asked to productively observe parallelism when expressing their ideas either in writing through scientific articles, essays and abstracts, or in speaking when interacting with their interlocutors.

Another issue under scrutiny within the current section is the translation of noun-phrases which, particularly in specialized texts, often tend to be employed with the view to presenting a concept in a more compact and succinct way. As a matter of fact, both the number and the length of noun phrases in a text can affect the sentence readability and thereby the overall comprehension. This holds in those cases that favour ambiguity due to the use in English of nominal phrases as shown in the example in (1) taken from Walker (2005):

(1)   decreased water tolerance phenomenon

This phrase can be decoded in three ways along with three distinct possible readings. Therefore, the phrase in (1)[1] may be interpreted with three possible translations as illustrated in (2), (3) and (4) below:

(2)   the phenomenon of tolerance of decreased water
(3)   decreased tolerance phenomenon to water
(4)   the phenomenon of water's decreased tolerance

Leonardi (2009: 147) suggests that all the interpretations formulated above could possibly be accurate. Hence, the contextualization of the phrase is required in order to figure out or infer the correct meaning from the overall context the reader is provided with.As repairing strategies, the use of the possessive case or appropriate punctuation could facilitate accuracy of meaning.

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[1] Unlike (Leonardi 2009: 147), we will use the term "phrase" and not "sentence" to refer to the example in (1) since an obvious series of nous surface within the phrase under scrutiny. There is no VP in the current sequence of lexical items to concatenate with the existing NP.

Consider the examples in (5) and (6) which serve to disambiguate the meaning of the phrase formulated in (1):

(5)   decreased water-tolerance phenomenon

(6)   decreased phenomenon of water tolerance

With respect to teaching grammar through translations, Petrocchi (2006:3) acknowledges:

"*By starting from grammar, students can reach higher level of translation and vice-versa, by translating they acquire more competence in the knowledge of grammatical structures*".

3. Intercultural perspectives

Exceeding the linguistic scope largely discussed hitherto, particular attention should now be given to extra-linguistic elements: it is a real fact that two languages involve two different cultures. From this point of view, besides acquiring linguistic skills such as grammar and vocabulary, learners also have to acquire cultural awareness. Therefore, the present article claims that ESP teaching must be somehow perceived as a culture mediator. Hence, careful insight into the technical culture may clarify communication across cultures mirrored in L1 and L2.

Throughout this paper, we will adopt Kastberg's view (2007:104-109) according to which cultural competence in technical translation must be prioritized by assuming that cultural issues are inherent to technical texts and should not be overlooked, both in translation practice and in translation training. Basically, sciences must be conceived as cultural and not acultural constructions. The culturelessness of the technical culture elaborated by Maillot (1981) and Schmitt (1999) was formulated due to the fact that the laws of the sciences from which technical specialties stem, namely the laws of physical sciences, are above the constraints of any one national culture. This is true, with the observation that this does not mean that sciences are acultural or devoid of cultural influences. On the contrary, "*they are artifacts of a professional culture*" (Kastberg 2002), which is in line with Albert Einstein's (1938):

"Science is not just a collection of laws, a catalogue of facts. It is a creation of the human mind, with its freely invented ideas and concepts".

In their capacity of constructions of the human mind, physical theories are not true or valid across ages. Kastberg (2007: 105) labels them as "*justified belief*" as opposed to "*justified true belief*". Therefore, they are models of explanations which fit our perception at present but they are not static, God-given entities. By contrast, they are dynamic, man-made cultures that societal progress and scientific advances may make obsolete.

Moving on to technical concepts as cultural concepts, it is to note that standardization applied to the conceptual systems of technical disciplines. Nevertheless, uniformity of concepts across languages failed to emerge. Agencies such as the International Organization of Standardization succeeded in standardizing terms of art without creating uniformity. Kastberg (2007:106) determined two factors which hinder the uniformity of technical terminology: the exponentially increasing number of technical concepts and the number of technical disciplines/ sub disciplines. With the view to illustrating his assumption, Kastberg (2007:106-107) provides two relevant examples that prove obvious terminological incongruence across closely related European cultures. Thus, the inconspicuous translation of the Spanish term *soldar* into English, German and Danish is ambiguous because it covers both *welding* and *soldering*. This was triggered by the Spanish culture which developed other means of distinguishing between these methods of combining materials than the English, German and Danish speaking cultures.

The English category of screws and bolts seem to pose translation problems with non-native speakers of English. The different conceptualization of identical objects is determined by cultural and historic preferences as shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure1: The conceptualization of the English *screw* and *bolt* notions by German
technicians.

Screw	Bolt
Schraube	
ohne Mutter	**mit Mutter**
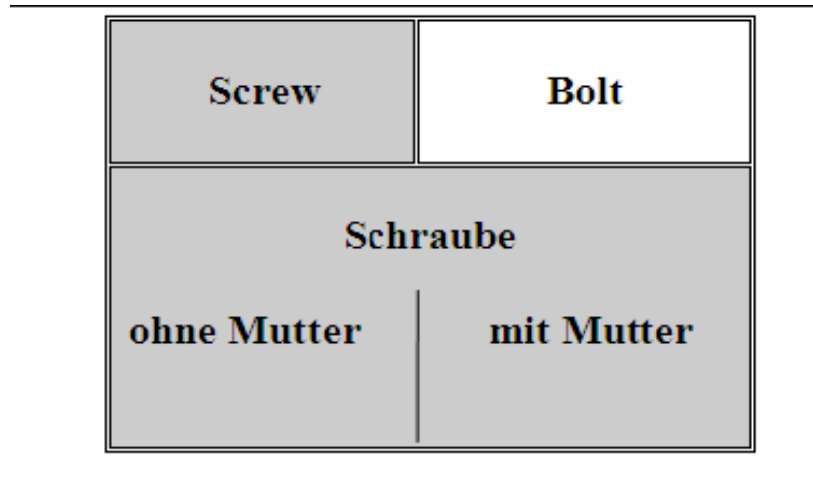
Göpferich (1995: 23-24)

According to the data in Figure 1, German technicians approach the terminological difference between screw and bolt by resorting to the specification *ohne Mutter*, *mit Mutter*. Instead of creating two separate lexical categories which are kept widely apart, they split one single lexical category to designate two referents by adding additional specifications.

In a nutshell, as obviously illustrated in the examples discussed so far, there is an intercultural exchange between L1 and L2 when teaching ESP. Even if standardization applies to technical texts, the way terminology is conceptualized is mainly cultural-oriented hindering uniformity across cultures. Despite its scientific content, the technical culture is not constant across cultures. Hence, teaching ESP involves conspicuous intercultural communication between the NL and the TL.

4. Interchanging roles

By admitting intercultural perspectives when teaching ESP, another tetchy issue should also be considered: interchanging roles between ESP teachers and their students. It is generally accepted in applied linguistics that teachers having a background in general English should adapt their competences so that they would comply with the ESP learners' needs and interests. Bell (1996) claims that

"In traditional, skill-based 2 EAP courses, it has generally been thought that the trainer does not require specialized academic knowledge of the learners' major subject of study. This is because such training focused on developing language and study skills and not on the academic subject itself. The learners, it is often argued, can deal with complexities of terminology and ambiguities of subject content that may be beyond the trainer's knowledge of the specialist subject".

It appears that ESP teachers were trained to generate opportunities for the students to develop their fluency, produce extended spoken discourse, and effectively share their knowledge of the subject, even if this knowledge goes beyond the ESP trainer's command of the subject in question. This approach however, involves a high degree of risk for the trainers, especially in terms of their reliability with the learners. Nevertheless, ESP teachers without relevant technical background, which is the case of the great majority of philologists majoring in English, should assume their status and accept they need extra content-based preparation of the subject they teach. They must also be flexible and poised to accept learning language from students who paradoxically master a wide range of terminology given the fact that they get input and intake in English by studying for their specialized classes in English.

In teaching ESP, teachers and students reverse their roles in turns. Whereas teachers are facilitators of the learning process by selecting and employing methods to develop their learners' abilities, students themselves turn into ESP instructors by providing the teacher with the technical concepts they already manipulate. There is no doubt that their technical profile enables them to have an overall comprehension of the content of the subject they are taught.

However, irrespective of the limited input and intake they are exposed to, in time, ESP learners end up by producing an infinity of utterances in English as a foreign language. For instance, nobody teaches ESP students all possible collocations even if the lexical approach is adopted when teaching ESP vocabulary. The reason which may account for the L2 acquisition may be the students' direct access to the Language Acquisition Device (Chomsky: 2006) which consists of a set of language learning tools, provided at birth. Perhaps it is UG which facilitates the ESP learning process along with the innate students' capacity to be genetically endowed with linguistic creativity. Therefore with a finite set of rules, students succeed in producing or generating an infinite number of utterances in their L2. This is an issue that non-nativists (Sampson 2007: 35-63) failed to invalidate.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, through translation students are taught strategies to overcome language barriers and identify suitable terms and concepts in both L1 and L2. As shown throughout the current paper, translation is central to ESP teaching in the sense that it enhances the students' analytical and mediation skills.

In an increasingly globalized world, two languages in interaction unfold an intercultural perspective that exceeds the linguistic scope of grammar and semantics. The technical culture, as a conspicuous extra-linguistic element, was looked into. Thus, we adopted Kastberg's view (2007) according to which technical disciplines must be interpreted as cultural disciplines, and technical concepts must be read as cultural concepts, both being constructions of the human mind.

With limited content-related input and intake from the teacher, the acquisition of ESP may end up being successful due to the students' direct access to the Language Acquisition Device as the nativist approach advocates (Chomsky: 2006). Furthermore, teaching ESP favours intercultural communication between teachers and students who interchange roles in the learning process with teachers being the language experts and students the content specialists.

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