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An Investigation of Final Tests of Translation as Practiced in Iranian Undergraduate English Translation Program

Hossein Heidari Tabrizi, Azizeh Chalak

***Abstract*—**The present study examined how translation teachers develop final tests as measures for checking on the quality of students' academic translation in Iranian context. To achieve this goal, thirty experienced male and female translation teachers from the four types of the universities offering the program were invited to an in-depth 30-minute one-session semi-structured interview. The responses provided showed how much discrepancy exists among the Iranian translation teachers (as developers of final translation tests), who are least informed with the current translation evaluation methods. It was also revealed that the criteria they use for developing such tests and scoring student translations are not theory-driven but are highly subjective, mainly based on their personal experience and intuition. Hence, the quality and accountability of such tests are under serious question. The results also confirmed that the dominant method commonly and currently practiced is the purely essay-type format. To remedy the situation, some suggestions are in order. As part of the solution, to improve the reliability and validity of such tests, the present summative, product-oriented evaluation should be accompanied with some formative, process-oriented methods of evaluation. Training the teachers and helping them get acquainted with modern principles of translation evaluation as well as the existing models, and rating scales does improve the quality of academic translation evaluation.

***Keywords*—**Iranian universities, students' academic translations, translation final tests, undergraduate translation programs.

I. Introduction

TEACHING translation involves assessing the quality of the translations produced by students and giving a grade for the achievement of the intended goal; i.e., the instructional objectives. In fact, translation evaluation through quality assessment is an integral part of the career of every translation teacher. There are always mid-term and final tests as well as other more formative diagnostic assessments done for pedagogical purposes in the academic centers. Over the last couple of decades, the number of Iranian universities offering the "Academic Translation Program" as well as the number of the candidates entering such programs has been increasing. Whereas in mid-1980's only one university in Iran (Allameh Tabatabai University in Tehran) offered this program at BA level, the number of Iranian universities offering just the "English Translation Program" at BA and MA levels now exceeds to 130.

Along with such a drastic increase in quantity, attempts have been made to improve the quality of translation programs too. We now have an increasingly sophisticated body of research and knowledge on various aspects of translation training programs including curriculum and materials development, teacher training, translation technology and translation evaluation, among which the often-neglected teacher evaluation of trainees' translations has received the least attention. In other words, while translation evaluation is of central concern and significance in the context of translator training, it is, as observed by many translation scholars (see, e.g. [1] or [2]) that while it is a common practice, it is "under-researched and under-discussed" [3]. In the debates on the subject of the assessment of translations in a round-table discussion on translation in the New Millennium, [4] even goes further: "this is an area in which Translation Studies has its worst failure" p. 45. In sum, it can safely be concluded that in comparison "little is published on the ubiquitous activity of [translation] testing and evaluation" [3].

The reason for such neglect of this field of inquiry may be the fact that translation evaluation, though an extremely important issue in translation and translator training programs, is at the same time one of the most problematic areas of translation, having been referred to as a "great stumbling block" [5], a "complex challenge" [6], "assessment chaos" [7], a "thorny issue" [8] and a "most wretched question" [9] in the related literature. Translation evaluation schemes are also regarded as "dead ducks" [4] or "unsystematic, hit-and-miss methods" [3]. The principal difficulty surrounding translation evaluation as a tricky matter is its subjective nature: the notion of quality has such fuzzy and shifting boundaries, difficult to determine, that a translation which is deemed acceptable in one context or by one evaluator may be deemed inappropriate in another context or by other evaluators. In other words, as many translation researchers and practitioners [5], [10]-[13] have pointed out, neither is there a universally acceptable model of translation evaluation nor can the same set of objective criteria be applied uniformly to all translation activity.

In an academic setting, evaluating translations is even much more daunting because a translator trainer has an obligation to help students improve their performance. Needless to say, every teacher of translation has an academic obligation to rank his/her students' work. In fact, translator teachers are said to play two major and simultaneous functions: they are both

H. Heidari Tabrizi is with the Department of English, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran (corresponding author phone: +98-31-35354001; e-mail: heidaritabrizi@gmail.com).

A. Chalak is with the Department of English, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran (e-mail: azichalak@gmail.com).

facilitators of learning and evaluators of what has been learnt. Thus in training translators, judging the translation quality "should not be an end but a means" [11]. It seems, at least based on common sense and experience that translation teachers of Iranian universities are least informed and familiar, if at all, with the current translation evaluation approaches and methods in the field of translator training. This is in line with the assertion that "obviously, many teachers and lecturers are not aware of the fact that there is such a wide variety of evaluation scenarios and applied criteria [11]. Likewise, [14] observes that "… examination boards and examiners are not aware of the literature." In fact, the existing method commonly and currently used in the undergraduate translation program at Iranian universities does not seem to create the sense of satisfaction neither in the students nor in the teacher assessors themselves. This problem becomes even more serious when such students sit for the MA Translation Entrance Exam where evaluation of students' competence in translation must be made in a systematic and highly valid as well as reliable yet practical way. On the whole, translation evaluation is undoubtedly one of the most difficult tasks facing a translator trainer: the problem of evaluation and decision-making in translation. It is unlikely that there will ever be a ready-made formula that will transform this task into a simple one; however, attempts have been made to investigate this issue from different perspectives. Such attempts, to the best knowledge of the authors of the present paper, are rare in the Iranian academic context.

This study aimed to determine the dominant trends/methods of evaluation of students' translation quality in their final tests as practiced in universities in Iran, to describe the distinguishing characteristics from translation teachers' perspective. In brief, the present study investigated in depth the way translation teachers design and develop final tests as measures for checking on the quality of students' academic translation in Iranian context.

II. Method

A. Participants

The participants of the present study included the translation teachers who attended the semi-structured interview sessions. To establish this sample, it should be mentioned that since the prospective interviewees were widely dispersed in different cities of Iran, the researchers had to limit their investigation, because of the transport and cost problems, to the following Iranian cities: Isfahan, Tehran, Shiraz, Bandar Abbas and Arak. First, the researchers checked the lists of full-time faculty members of English Departments of various universities offering the English Translation Program at the BA level. Then, those who were teaching translation courses there at the time of conducting the study were identified through consulting the Heads of the English Departments. Next, those who were more involved in teaching interpretation than in translation were excluded. Moreover, the teachers were required to have at least ten years of experience in teaching non-theoretical English translation courses at the university to be included in the final sample group for a semi-structured one-session interview. Finally, thirty translation teachers (12 Ph.D. holders and 18 with an M.A.) qualified for the purposes of the present study accepted to participate in the interview. Table I summarizes the characteristics of the teachers who were finally interviewed by the researchers:

TABLE I
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVIEWEES

1- Sex	Male: 19				Female: 11		
2- Age	Range: 36-59				Average: 48		
3-Translation Teaching Experience				Range: 10-25		Average: 17	
4-Affiliation	State: 8	IAU: 10		Payam-e-Noor: 6		Private: 6	
5- Educational Background							
Level \ Major	Literature	TEFL	Tran.	Ling.	AZFA	Graduated from Iran	Graduated from abroad
B.A.	12	8	10			30	--
M.A.	5	19		6		30	
Ph.D.		8		4		10	2
6- Academic Position	Instructor: 12	Asst. Prof.: 10		Associate Prof.: 7		Full Prof.: 1	

B. Instruments

The instrument used in this study was one of those conventional ones for typical descriptive research; namely, the semi-structured interview. The justification behind the application of this instrument but not others was that unlike other possible instruments like protocol analysis and portfolios, interviews utilized were more product-oriented and therefore in full harmony with the purposes of this research.

The research instrument used in this study was interviewing the male and female translation teachers. Thirty translation teachers were invited to an in-depth 30-minute one-session semi-structured interview. The interviews were mainly conducted in English, but to ensure that the participants were able to express their ideas fully and clearly, they were allowed to use their native language (Persian) when necessary. Throughout the whole process of designing, preparing and conducting the interview as well as interpreting the outcome, the researchers carefully followed, among others, especially the guidelines and principles proposed by [15] and [16].

First of all, to guarantee the quality of the questions posed in the interview session, the researchers generated a shortlist of content specification through consulting the existing

literature especially following the steps [17] and McNamara [18] proposes for test constructions. In brief, the questions posed mainly dealt with "why to test", "what to test", "how to test" and "when to test": on how familiar they are with translation evaluation models currently in use, how they establish the test quality of their final translation tests, how they determine the time span to be allocated for such tests, how the papers are scored/evaluated and what consulting sources of information are allowed. Moreover, as [19] who talks about "a human rights-based approach to correction of translations," argues, "students have the right to know the evaluation system used to evaluate their translation, they have to know who is judging their work" (p. 200). This is also in line with [20]. Accordingly, one item was also allocated to this question: Would the testees be informed, through instructions, of how their translations are evaluated and scored? The questions were arranged in such a sequence that respondent's reactions to a question naturally led to posing the next one by the interviewer. One possible procedure for conducting the interview was to give participants the questions in advance a couple of days before the session to allow them prepare themselves for the interview. However, the researchers avoided such a procedure since the purposes of the study was to determine the status quo of the participants' knowledge, opinions, and attitudes about the translation evaluation and tests without preparation as such which would otherwise make the study biased.

As the final step, the questions were reviewed by three testing experts who unanimously approved their appropriateness and relevance. After applying the comments made by these experts for the improvement of the instrument, the researchers administered a trial interview session to pinpoint any possible problem with the practicality of the instrument. A copy of the finalized, refined version of the interview questions is provided in Appendix.

In practice, by way of introduction, the participants were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire on their personal information: their sex, age (optional), educational background, teaching experience and the translation courses they had taught. Next, they were given the interview questions in writing to skim through for a couple of minutes. In this way, they got general information about what the interview was about which contributed to the structuredness of the interview. Then, in separate sessions for each participant, they were interviewed by the researchers themselves. Of course, the interviews were done on different days in a time span of two months. The interview sessions were tape-recorded and then transcribed for further analyses. While the interviewees were also allowed to use their native language; i.e., Persian as well in order to ensure that they can express themselves, just one of them preferred the interview to be conducted in Persian. It took at least 15 minutes and 45 minutes at most for each interview.

The interviewees were first asked about the degree of their familiarity with the existing modern quantitative and qualitative approaches, models and rating scales for translation scoring and evaluating in academic contexts. Then, they were asked to imagine they were going to develop a test for the final test of the course "Translation of Simple Texts." The questions posed accordingly covered nine domains encompassing 'Test Format', 'Text Choice', 'Difficulty Level', 'Validity', 'Reliability', 'Testee's Awareness of Scoring Criteria', 'Instructions', 'Time Allocation', and 'Dictionaries/Glossaries'.

C. Data Collection Procedure

An interview session was held by the researchers themselves as the interviewers for each of the translation teachers separately. The allocated time for each session was about 30 minutes. Twenty male and female translation teachers having at least ten years of experience were interviewed to collect information on their perceptions of translation evaluation in an academic setting, on how they develop their final tests of translation, establish their validity and reliability and mark them. In this semi-structured interview, a few predetermined, precise, clear and motivating questions were posed with considerable flexibility concerning follow-up questions pertinent to their teaching experiences. All the interviews were tape-recorded to enhance the dependability of the data through techniques such as triangulation and member checks. Before analyzing the data, it is absolutely essential, as a fundamental step in statistics and a key component of qualitative research, to organize the raw data into a manageable, easily understandable, more orderly form. In so doing, first, the recordings of the interview sessions were transformed into a textual form; that is, transcription. Then, the data collected through the transcription of the interviews were codified. To this end, the researchers involved in identifying and codifying key topics in such data through reading them over a variety of times, looking for key ideas and labeling them by marginal notes and post-its.

The interview questions were divided into two major sections. The first introductory part included just one general question:

1. General Introductory Question

There are a variety of quantitative & qualitative approaches, models and rating scales for translation scoring & evaluating in academic contexts. Which one are you familiar with?

The answers given showed that except for just one single teacher, the majority of interviewees were not familiar with the existing approaches for translation evaluation at all, though they had been teaching translation courses for a long time. In other words, they applied their self-made criteria adopted based on their own experience and intuition rather than any kind of theory-driven sets of criteria.

The second part of the interview covered more practical issues presented in nine questions. The translation teachers were asked to imagine they were going to develop a test for the final test of the course "Translation of Simple Texts". Then, nine questions were posed accordingly.

2. Interview Question One

What kind of test format would you use? The MC items or

Essay-type format or else? Twenty eight participants responded that they preferred essay-type questions; i.e., a passage of appropriate size over which there was no consensus among them; the size ranged from some passage(s) of about 200 words up to 750 or more. The other two preferred a combination of essay-type and multiple-choice items. One argued that multiple-choice items are appropriate to test the ability of students to choose best equivalents for a word or collocation. However, all agreed that since translation is a productive skill, multiple-choice items are not good for testing translation performance.

3. Interview Question Two

What kind of materials would you select? SEEN or UNSEEN texts? All the respondents believed that it is not an appropriate way to evaluate translation ability of students by giving them seen texts in the final achievement tests since they evaluate memory rather than translation.

4. Interview Question Three

How would you adjust the difficulty level of the test? The interviewees mentioned that they followed no objective criteria or formula to do so. Rather, they are heavily dependent on their intuition and experience. They did not believe that any readability formula can be of any help in this regard. But the majority of the participants do believe that the vocabulary and the grammatical structures used in the text can indicate its difficulty level for the students.

5. Interview Question Four

How would you establish the validity of the test, especially its content validity? Some table of test specifications? The responses revealed that none of the participants used the table of test specifications strongly recommended by test developers to guarantee the test validity. They just relied on their intuition and experience for developing a valid test.

6. Interview Question Five

What about its reliability? In other words, what kind of criteria would you use for evaluating & scoring student translation? Twenty six participants mentioned that they use a "red-ink-scribble-over-the-TT" approach; i.e., the penalty system and deduction of scores for errors. In other words, they were mainly concerned with the microstructure of the texts; namely, translation at word and sentence levels including students' choice of equivalents and appropriateness of the structures used. They mentioned that they assigned weighted score to translation problems or traps of the texts and grades for major and minor errors were deducted from a perfect score.

7. Interview Question Six

Would you inform the testees of how their translations are evaluated and scored? All the participants claimed that their students are mostly informed about how the teachers evaluate and score their translations either through the in-test instructions or by the prior in-class explanations given by the teachers during the course.

8. Interview Question Seven

Would you write instructions for the different parts of the test? If yes, how? At first, all the participants claimed that they did write instructions for their tests. But further investigation revealed that eight used repeatedly just a fixed cliché form of instructions: "Translate the following into proper Persian." One interviewee argued that it is nonsense to use such a qualifier as 'proper' since the students are supposed to provide an acceptable translation which has no way but to follow proper standards of Persian.

9. Interview Question Eight

How would you allocate the appropriate amount of time needed for individual test tasks or for the entire test? All the interviewees indicated that they determine the amount of time required for a test again by their own personal experience and intuition rather than on a standard objective basis. Of course, they suggested some clues in so doing. All believed that the length of the passage(s) is a good criterion for allocating the time needed

10. Interview Question Nine

Would you allow the testees to use dictionaries and/or glossaries/terminologies? Why? Almost all of the participants except for one admitted that students should be allowed to consult information resources especially general dictionaries and technical glossaries and terminologies in the test sessions. The main justification they proposed was the fact that in daily real-life situations such references are normally and typically available to the translator. Moreover, translation tests are not intended to measure mere vocabulary knowledge of the testee at all.

III. Discussion

The results of the interview sessions with the teachers revealed that the scoring methods currently used by English translation teachers at Iranian universities are mostly based on the so-called 'Classical True Score Measurement Theory'. Thus, no rating scale is at work in practice. In other words, the rater consistency and the task consistency is not checked at all. The scoring is done on a subjective basis usually through holistic, impressionistic method. It can safely be concluded that the translation teachers follow no certain standard models in scoring the translation of their students. Accordingly, the researchers should side with [11], who argues that most teachers are not aware of the wide variety of models and criteria applied for translation evaluation throughout the world. Similarly, [14] criticizes the test-takers for being unaware of the literature on translation evaluation schemes.

Time allocation, as one of the facets of the test rubric, is another characteristic of any testing method. The method used for translation evaluation of undergraduate students in final tests of translation courses at Iranian universities is no exception. Again, the responses the teachers provided for the relevant question in the interviews supplied enough supporting pieces of evidence to conclude that no systematic procedure or formulas are followed by the test-developers; no logical

pattern is behind the allocation of the time required. It was recommended in the literature that the amount of time required should be allocated according to the length of the translation tasks and the time the teachers themselves spend to translate the test texts. However, the research results showed in most cases these suggestions are not taken into consideration at all.

The testees' access to information resources during the test must be explained as far as the dominant method for translation evaluation of undergraduate students in final tests of translation courses at Iranian universities is concerned. Pieces of evidence elicited by the teacher-target interview show that teachers believe the testees should have access to dictionaries and glossaries during the tests. They add that in cases where the testees are not permitted to use these resources, they should be provided with definitions of some trouble-making words at the either sides or at the bottom of the test booklet. In addition, translation experts [21] argue that to guarantee the authenticity of translation job and to avoid artificiality, in all translation tests students must be allowed to use dictionaries during their test since they can always consult human/non-human resources and references especially a dictionary during translating a text in their normal career as a translator.

It is strongly recommended that translation teachers when developing the final tests try to improve the validity, reliability and practicality. They should apply reasonable criteria in selecting texts of appropriate length, topic and difficulty level as well as in allocating the sufficient time for final tests. To guarantee the authenticity of the tests, it is also advisable that the students be allowed to consult general and technical information resources. Moreover, the test instructions should be written in a much more instructive way, providing the testees with vital information on what points they should observe in translating test texts and how their translations are scored. It is also suggestible to make more use of appropriate modern-day test forms.

IV. Conclusion

By way of a conclusion to the present piece of research, as a touchstone, the researchers enumerate these general guidelines uncovered as follow: First of all, a shift must be made towards more direct, performance-based methods of testing and evaluation. Accordingly, it is obvious that to develop a translation evaluation scheme and scoring rubrics is by no means an easy task due to the large variety of factors affecting its success or failure in actual use. The near-to-ideal rating model for evaluating translation performance in academic contexts must, more than anything else, consist of a large set of consistent well-defined criteria. As a part of solution to this problem, the developers of the rating scales should be selective; they have to find a way to limit the number of criteria to be used and the number of processes to be done into a manageable, practical proportion. Instead, however, the present researchers propose that the criteria to be used must be prioritized by the teacher-evaluator who applies the rating scale just using those which are most relevant to the situational, cultural context and the course requirement.

As for the rater selection, characteristics and consistency, since almost always the translation teacher plays the role of the scorer, it is not possible to establish the inter-scorer reliability. In addition, scoring is done just once by the teacher-evaluator due to the numerous papers s/he has to score; hence, no intra-scorer reliability coefficient can be computed either. The teachers must be trained to use the scoring rubrics either through pre-service education or in-service training; their overall expertise in this regard is of paramount importance. Teachers must always keep in mind that student translations in final tests should never ever be scored and evaluated in such a way as if they are ready-to-be-published piece of work.

V. Appendix

Questions of the Teacher-target Interview Blank

I. Personal Information

A- Sex Male □ Female □
B- Age (optional): ……
C- University State□ IAU□ Payam-e-Noor □ Private □

EDUCATION

Major / Level	TEFL	Literature	Translation	Linguistics	AZFA	Others (Mention)	University	Years
B.A.								/
M.A								/
Ph.D.								/

E- Translation Teaching Experience: …….. years
F- Courses Taught: Please check the translation courses you have taught.

1. Translation Theory Area

a. Principles & Methodology of Translation □
b. Theories of Translation □

2. Interpretation Area

a. Audio-visual Interpretation □
b. Interpretation I □
c. Interpretation II □
d. Interpretation III □

3. Practical Translation Area, General Compulsory Courses

a. Translation of Simple Texts □
b. Translation of Idiomatic Expressions □
c. Translation of Adv. Texts I □
d. Translation of Adv. Texts II □
e. Translation Project I □
f. Translation Project II □

4. Practical Translation Area, (Semi) Technical Compulsory Courses

a. Translation of Literary Texts □
b. Translation of Political Texts □
c. Translation of Economic Texts □
d. The Study of Islamic Texts in English Translation I □
e. The Study of Islamic Texts in English Translation II □

5. Practical Translation Area, (Semi) Technical Optional Courses

a. Translation of Journalistic Texts I □
b. Translation of Journalistic Texts II □
c. Translation of Correspondence & Documents I □
d. Translation of Correspondence & Documents II □

II. Teacher-Target Interview-Questions FOR Translation Teachers

A. There are a variety of quantitative & qualitative approaches, models and rating scales for translation scoring & evaluating in academic contexts. Which ones are you familiar with?

B. Suppose you are asked to develop a test for the final test of the course "Translation of Simple Texts":

1) What kind of test format would you use? The MC items or Essay-type format or else?
2) What kind of materials would you select? SEEN or UNSEEN texts?
3) How would you adjust the difficulty level of the test?
4) How would you establish the validity of the test, especially its content validity? Some table of test specifications?
5) What about its reliability? In other words, what kind of criteria would you use for evaluating & scoring student translation?
6) Would you inform the testees of how their translations are evaluated and scored?
7) Would you write instructions for the different parts of the test? If yes, how?
8) How would you allocate the appropriate amount of time needed for individual test tasks or for the entire test?
9) Would you allow the testees to use dictionaries and/or glossaries/terminologies? Why?

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