

Training for Translation: How Can We be More Integrative in Our Approach? A View from the Formal Education Perspective in Africa

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Abstract

The paper presents problems in integrating what is learnt in the classroom at degree level to real life work situations in the African context. Three obstacles are discussed after which the paper attempts to propose solutions to each one and to stimulate other suggestions for change.

This paper arises out of the author's own experience in teaching at B.A. level in a university in Africa and also from what she has heard from others doing the same. The paper seeks to present problems in integrating what is learnt in the classroom at degree level to real life work situations (for example translation) in the African context. It also attempts to analyse these problems and to open discussion on possible teaching methods or other measures which may lead to better application of the learning experience to the work place.

1. Integrative Learning

My experience and others' in teaching at B.A. level in a university in Africa has shown that integrating what is learnt in the classroom at degree level to real life work situations does not always occur as we would like it. This seems to arise from several different causes. Firstly, there is the expectation of the student. Then there is the system of learning within the context of a college or university setting, and thirdly there is the method of teaching itself.

1.1 Obstacles from Student Expectations

First let us consider the expectation of the student. In Africa paper qualifications are very important. Everyone wants to be educated to as high a level as possible. Having qualifications is paramount to getting a good job. In this context the average student seems to come to university with the aim of gaining a qualification because that is a passport to getting a job. The actual usefulness or relevance of what is learnt to future employment is not a question that is often asked. This can be illustrated by the following three examples. The first two were described by Dr. Chip Kingsbury (lecturer in the Education department at Daystar University, Nairobi), when he was conducting a faculty development seminar organised by PAC (Pan African Christian University). First was a student at a theological college who made a remark to the effect that nothing learnt in theological school had any relevance to real life as a pastor. The second was an experience recounted to Dr. Kingsbury by a woman who visited the home of a trainer of nurses. The nurse-trainer was making up a bottle to give to her baby. Into the bottle went milk powder and water, but also sugar, flour and margarine. The visitor asked if that was how she trained the nurses to make up bottles and the reply was 'you don't bring the classroom into the home'. The third example is supplied by me. Towards the beginning of the Pragmatics course in a previous term, I asked the students what their expectations were from the subject. One of the students admitted that at the beginning he came along thinking that it was just a subject he had to take in order to get the degree, without particularly expecting it to be useful.

Thus it seems that what is learnt in the classroom is not expected to be relevant to real life or work. This attitude appears to be held also by some educators and can be illustrated by an example from a seminar on integrative learning held at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) which I attended earlier this year. One of the participants, a lecturer at a theological school, admitted, somewhat shamefacedly in the context, that he never told the students that what he was teaching them would be of any use to them, in fact he'd never even thought about the usefulness of what he taught, he just taught what he was given to teach, without questioning why that subject was on the curriculum or what use it was supposed to be to the students in their future work. It seems, therefore, that in the mind of many

people in Africa (and possibly elsewhere?) education is not supposed to be useful except in that it gives qualifications which make the holder more likely to be successful in the job market.

It is possible that this attitude arises from the educational system in the primary and secondary schools in many African countries. The emphasis is often on rote learning. The teacher is viewed as the knowledgeable one whose task is to pass on that knowledge to the student. The expectation that this is how teaching and learning are done may be brought into tertiary education, too. Students, when first introduced to a critical thinking style of education, can be quite resistant to it and make it clear that they want the teacher to give them answers rather than ask them questions to set them thinking. At least one lecturer at PAC has struggled with students resisting a teaching style that requires critical thinking.

1.2 Obstacles from Application Timeline

Educational establishments hit another possible obstacle when it comes to their system of learning. In such establishments a student usually comes out of a work situation for a period of two to four years in order to be trained in subjects which are to be applied when he returns to his job. So, there is a potential problem in integrating the class into the work situation in that it can be several months or years after taking a subject that the student is in a position to apply what was learnt. The college or university system which has discrete courses that last a term (trimester) or a semester, with exams at the end of each term, possibly exacerbates the problem. All too often the student seems to think that at the end of term he can draw a line under the subjects covered and forget all about them. It can, therefore, be difficult to motivate students to apply what they learn in linguistics subjects when they come to doing translation several terms down the line.

1.3 Obstacles from Methods of Teaching

Thirdly, on the method of teaching, it can be seen from the example of the lecturer at the seminar on integrative learning, that not all teachers seek to apply their subjects to anything outside the classroom. Also, too often, the teaching style used in primary and secondary education is also used in tertiary education. The style is often very teacher-centred, and students expect to take notes which they then learn in order to reproduce in the exam. There is no real engagement of the critical faculties of the brain. The knowledge is to pass from the teacher to the student without any processing, critical discussion or application to life. This may be exacerbated by the attitude, on the part of some students and teachers, that the teacher's view cannot be questioned, and the teacher expects to see his own opinion reproduced on the exam paper. Teachers in many African countries are still authority figures whose word is law and who must not be embarrassed by awkward questions, though this attitude is changing in some places. In addition, some students, from relatively newly-literate societies, tend to an attitude that anything written in a book must, necessarily, be true, and the possibility of disagreeing with anything they read is a foreign concept. So, again, an uncritical approach is adopted.

Even when a more practical approach to teaching is used it is met with mixed results. Where Translation Principles is concerned, at PAC this subject lasts two terms and is presented as two distinct subjects – Translation Principles 1 and Translation Principles 2. The first term includes topics related to Relevance Theory and the second covers more traditional topics such as those found in Barnwell's book on Translation. In class the Learning that Lasts format has been more-or-less followed, and topics have been presented with exercises which may include translation into the Mother Tongue. Sometimes one passage has been used to which to apply several topics. Alongside this each term the students have had a Bible passage to translate. During the term they are given questions which guide them to relate certain of the topics to the passage they are to translate.

In applying these topics to the passage, students make some initial translation decisions. At the end of term when they hand in their translations they also hand in the answers to these questions to enable the teacher to verify if they have applied the topics in the way they indicated when answering the questions. In this way the students have been encouraged to apply topics to translation directly. The results have, however, been less encouraging than hoped. When marking their translations there is often little

evidence that they had applied the answers to these questions when completing their translation. So, clearly, this method is not helping them to achieve optimum application of the teaching to real translation.

Also, where exercises are concerned, students' performance on these does not always reflect what has been learnt. The teaching on Genitive Constructions, for example, is followed by an exercise to translate a number of these into the MT. The teaching emphasises the different possible meanings they can have which may call for restructuring in the MT if they are to be correctly understood. Thus it is expected that most (or all) would be restructured in the exercise to better bring out the meaning. But two students out of five last year did literal translations of all the examples and had to think hard before they could understand why their work was considered disappointing. Similar stories come out of NEGST where there is an M.A. course in Translation Studies.

So, to summarise, there seem to be three major obstacles to overcome when trying to help students to integrate their learning into real life translation. Firstly there is the expectation that what is learnt in the classroom does not have practical application. Secondly there is the system of learning which divorces the classroom from the workplace. Thirdly there is the method of teaching which is often not integrative. However, even when teaching attempts to be integrative, actually succeeding in having students apply translation principles as they are being taught is not as easy as it sounds.

2. Addressing Obstacles to Integrative Learning

So, how can training programmes for translators be more integrative so that students will apply what is learnt in a number of different subjects to their translations? In other words, how can we, as educators, seek to address these three obstacles to integrative learning? At this point this paper is going to present ideas, some in fairly fledgling form, and invite comments and developments from them as well as other ideas.

2.1 Addressing Student Expectations

Where the first problem, that of students' expectations, is concerned, it would be good if the teacher could find a way to raise these in at least two areas. First is the students' attitude to the usefulness (or otherwise) of the course of study on which they are embarking. An obvious possibility here is that right from the beginning of the study of a subject it could be made clear to the students how the subject relates to their work, and this could be reinforced continually during the term by various methods to be discussed later. Secondly their expectations of teaching and learning styles needs to be addressed. Perhaps during freshman orientation a class or classes could be given during which the university's or department's approach to learning and teaching could be outlined together with an account of what expectations the faculty will have of the students' role in the learning process. This would, of course, assume that the institution or department supports an integrative approach.

2.2 Addressing Application Timeline

The second obstacle to integrative learning is the system of learning within a college or university setting where students come away from a work situation for a number of years. The current trend towards offering degrees in extension programmes, where students keep their jobs and study in evenings and weekends may do something towards helping them to apply what they learn immediately. However, not many translation projects are located in urban areas where translators can take advantage of these. Another possibility would be if universities offered courses in blocks in interterms where students could be sent for 2 to 4 weeks at a time. In SIL we have a particular advantage here in that the trainers and the 'employers' are from a family of sister organisations so there is the potential for co-operation. If the trainer knows what the students are working on currently, he or she can help the students to apply their learning to the current task. That way the students can begin to apply what is learnt to their current work while they are still in the classroom. Then they return to work while it is fresh and they can continue to apply it. Thus they could be applying subjects taught to current translation work all the way through their training.

SIL already has something like this approach in the workshop system but this would be part of training for a degree if universities were to buy into it. In fact this is what the new ATP (Africa Training Programme) is endeavouring to accomplish. For students wanting a degree, non-translation courses may still be taken in the university, but translation-related subjects will be taken as modules in different places. In this way the students will be able to take subjects for credit in a manner that is very similar to the workshop system, and while still working in a project.

SIL, at least in Europe, now focuses on Assignment Related Training (ART) which is somewhat similar to what I am describing. In ART people are given only what training they need for the following field term, the assumption being that they will gain more training when needed. In this way there is more immediate opportunity for using what they have learned.

Offering some subjects by distance learning, with a required practical element is another possibility which may be used by ATP and already is used by PAC in its MA course in Leadership. It could also be used by other institutions.

Even in the traditional set-up, however, more could be done to help students to integrate real life work experience into the classroom. In subjects such as Grammar (Morphosyntax) and Discourse Analysis etc. some more practical work could be given. This will be addressed again when we consider the third problem. Also, it may be possible to utilise interterm breaks as is done in some countries such as the UK. In the UK's educational system, where many subjects cover a whole year or more, without exams at the end of every term, good use is often made of the interterm breaks for writing papers and doing extra reading. This opportunity is not currently taken up at many institutions where each term sees final exams signalling the end of the current courses of study. This would not be the case if the interterm breaks were used for practical application of what was learnt during the previous term.

Students could be given some task relating the term's learning to the job at hand, for example gathering phonetic data to be analysed, doing some analysis or writing a draft paper based on the analysis. Where translation is concerned they may even be able to return to their work during interterm breaks (or for longer periods e.g. a whole term or semester) to do a draft translation of a passage or book, or if a draft is already done, to test and improve the translation. This would require a high level of co-operation between teachers and project supervisors. FATEAC in Côte d'Ivoire does something like what this paper is advocating, in that at one point students are sent home to do extensive translation work. This seems to be an excellent idea. In addition, if translation courses were spread out throughout the period of learning, rather than all put together at the end, as happens in some institutions, this may help the students to apply what has been learnt in other subjects to the translation task.

2.3 Addressing Methods of Teaching

The third problem is that of the method of teaching. Here, we can learn a lot from studies that have been done on teaching and learning styles. Many people have done studies on learning styles, personality types and teaching styles, each one showing that not everyone likes to learn in the same way. Given the truth of this, it seems likely that the reluctance noted on the part of students to participate in non-lecture styles of learning probably comes from their experience if all they know is the style where the teacher knows all and 'feeds' this knowledge to the students who restate it in exams. Being taught in a different style can be uncomfortable at first and that can lead to lack of cooperation. However, given the research mentioned above and also the fact that adults learn differently from children, students should be able to adapt to a style which focuses more on their needs. Adults, we are told, need to build on experience and have 'a deep need to be self-directing'. (Frank 2005)

On a similar theme, Cross (n.d.) asserts 'In order for learning to occur, students must be actively constructing the experience in their own minds'. She also outlines three factors that research suggests are necessary to effective learning:

1. communicating high expectations,
2. encouraging active learning, and

3. providing assessment and prompt feedback.

Tertiary education should take these facts into account. Active learning is going to involve a lot more than sitting at a desk taking notes from the lecturer. Scholars agree that the best way to approach the teaching of adults is to use a variety of different styles, including lecture, group work or discussion, application to problems, evaluation etc. In this way, we are told, each learner will, at some stage, find that his or her preferred learning style is being addressed. Also, having different learning activities which relate to the different levels of Bloom's taxonomy will give a much better learning experience. The levels of this taxonomy, from lowest to highest are: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. It has been shown that the traditional lecture method only addresses the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy. (Stover 2004)

The modern approach to teaching adults needs to be learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. By including modules on problem-solving, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, teaching and learning will be integrative and the learning experience will be related to real life and work. The Learning that Lasts model, as taught within SIL, seeks to approach the teaching of Adults in a way that conforms to modern scholarship on the subject, and I believe that many of us in SIL are using it or, at least, a varied style in teaching. However, since I, for one, still find that students don't always relate what they have learned to their assignments it seems relevant to consider the issue here. Part of the challenge, at least in Africa, in a degree situation where students come out of their jobs, is to create realistic real life situations to which the subjects can be applied, and to help the student to accept this approach. It is also possible that Africans, even more than Westerners, have a learning style that is best suited when they are given the opportunity to handle real problems and solutions in the classroom. The term 'global learners' has been used of many Africans, meaning that they may respond well to a method of teaching where the whole picture is first presented and then the individual parts are examined and their place in the whole understood. It would seem, then, that learning activities that include synthesis before analysis may be important to such students as they are likely to find analysis more difficult.

Some specific ideas I have had on how to achieve more integration in the classroom, are the following. In subjects such as Morphosyntax, Discourse Analysis, Semantics and even Pragmatics some more practical work could be given. At present in PAC, all the linguistics subjects require that the students do some analysis of their MTs. This could be taken further and passages, at first non-Biblical ones, could be given to translate, taking care that natural grammatical patterns or discourse features etc. are applied. The suggestion of translating non-Biblical material first is made because it may be easier to encourage students to translate such material into natural RL structures rather than in a way that follows the structure of the original. This is because there may not be the emotional attachment to the wording of the original that may be there in Biblical material. Alongside the translation there could be an explanation of how the translation accurately follows the grammar or discourse etc. of the RL, noting how a consideration of these features in the MT has shaped the translation. This would entail quite a lot of extra work, and may be difficult for the weaker students, who would need a good deal of individual supervision, which may mean that teaching assistants would be needed. It would also be possible to use interterm breaks for this kind of activity.

What about translation principles classes themselves? Being rigorous in following the Learning that Lasts method may help to a certain extent in that each topic ends with a 'Change' section where students think about how what they have learnt will make a difference to their work. This forces them to answer the question 'how will this be useful to me, in what way will I now change the way I work?' Assignments could also be more integrative and related to their work. For example students could be required to go through a draft translation, changing it where appropriate by applying the principle just taught. This could be accompanied by an explanation of how and why the principle was applied. This is currently being attempted at PAC.

A further possibility would be to use a text-based method of teaching. I don't know if any course books on translation have been written using this approach. It may be possible to teach it from conventional topic-based books if the teacher and students don't mind following the book in the 'wrong' order, going to the relevant chapter as a topic is reached in the Biblical text being used as the basis for the course.

Where global learners are being taught it may be important to give an overview of the whole syllabus at the beginning of the course, showing how topics relate to each other and to the work of translation. This is currently done in the Phonology course at PAC, and following on from the overview, the topics are presented in the order in which the analysis may be done, rather than starting with finding phonemes and then going back, for example, to initial interpretation issues. This different approach does seem to work well. Another aspect of global learning is that it takes time to assimilate, and students cope better when assignments or tests do not immediately follow the teaching. Since this is the case, the use of interterm breaks for some assignments may be helpful.

These are a few ideas I have been gradually formulating over the past few months. They are in fledgling form as yet. I welcome any further contributions to the question of how we can make formal learning experiences more integrative.

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1. Use the same text in all subjects e.g. Exegesis, Discourse Analysis, etc. so the teachers work together.
2. Make everything practical, including the exams.
3. Have no exams, just translation.
4. Compare earlier and later translations to show they improve as they go on.
5. Give an overview first for all subjects for the whole degree and then show how individual subjects or parts relate to each other. Keep this in view throughout the whole course of study.
6. Do a task analysis showing how every module relates to the job.

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