

Translators in the Making: An Empirical Longitudinal Study on Translation Competence and its Development

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, research on Translation Competence (TC) has been quite productive and fostered the conceptualisation and analysis of translation-specific skills. TC is generally assumed to be a non-innate ability that does not coincide with bilingual competence, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of (professional) TC. However, apart from these shared assumptions, the definition and modelling of TC still remain open questions and have resulted in a wide variety of concurrent (near-synonymic) terms and conceptual frameworks aiming to identify the essential constitutive components of such competence. From the mid-1980s, empirical studies have considerably contributed to the investigation of TC and, in some cases, led to the development of several empirically validated definitions and models. However, most empirical analyses focus on the translation process, i.e. the behavioural and procedural features of (un)experienced translators, and aim to identify possible patterns which might be conducive to high (or poor) translation quality. To provide a complementary perspective to this approach, an empirical longitudinal study was designed which is mainly product-oriented but also encompasses process-related data. The aim of the study is to observe whether different levels of competence reflect on different linguistic patterns and common procedural practices, which might be used to define TC and the stages of its development. The study monitored the performances of a sample of professional translators and BA- and MA-level translation trainees, who carried out six translation tasks over a three-year period. Each translation task involved the translation of a non-specialist English source text into the participants' L1 (i.e. Italian) as well as the compilation of a post-task questionnaire inquiring on their translation processes. The synchronic and diachronic analysis of data mainly relies on descriptive perspective that considered both product-related data, i.e. mainly lexical and syntactical features, and the process-related data concerning delivery time and the participants' responses to the post-task questionnaires. Moreover, the assessment of translation acceptability and errors resulted in the identification of different levels of translation quality, which appear to be associated with the descriptive trends observed. The findings led to the profiling of three different stages in the acquisition of TC (i.e. novice, intermediate, and professional translator) and to the development of training guidelines, for both translation trainers and trainees, which may help anticipating and preventing possible unsuccessful behaviours, thus speeding up the learning process.

KEYWORDS: empirical study, longitudinal study, product-oriented study, translation competence, translation quality.

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