

**Agata Klimczak-Pawlak\***

# Intercultural Competence in Translator Training

## Introduction

Translator training needs to constantly adapt to the changing reality. The stakes are high, as the very need for the training hinges on the ability of the programmes to address specific needs of the translators-to-be. In fact, if translator training programmes do not meet the modern challenges, then the insufficiently prepared students graduating from translation programmes may be losing jobs to people without formal language training, but with broad knowledge and awareness of various issues (Tymoczko 2009). With language education becoming much more accessible and obvious in Europe, more people gaining high proficiency in English, coupled with many companies hiring translators without training, the profession of a translator could be at risk. The observation of the practice of translation shows how difficult the task of training a translator has become. Ideas such as community translations are growing in popularity, as the cooperation between community members offers benefits to both companies and volunteer translators. Although costs of crowdsourced translations could be comparable to those of professional translators, some companies (e.g. Waze, Khan Academy) still opt for that solution.

In the case of English, translators are no longer in the comfortable position of mediators operating between just two cultures. They are no longer in the comfort zone of set rules, set genres, predictable norms – they need the readiness to accept and recognise the challenges of e.g. ‘hybrid texts’ (Taviano 2010 in Taviano 2013) which are “the product of negotiations between different cultures and languages, resulting from overlapping rhetorical and discourse norms, created by and addressed to a supranational community, in which the traditional distinction be-

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\* Uniwersytet Warszawski, e-mail: agata.klimczak.pawlak@uw.edu.pl

tween source text and target text/culture is no longer applicable". It has been a long time since we have entered the world of many Englishes in Europe (e.g. Euro-Englishes, EU-English, ELF, British English etc.). Additionally, texts produced by non-native users of English are rarely translated and analysed in translation courses (Holmes 2013). Yet, as reported by the European's Commission Directorate-General for Translation (2009), 72.5% of source texts translated by them were in English and many of them were authored not by native users of English but non-native users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (as noted by Holmes 2013). In the past, when it was sufficient to master the rules of one standard variety of English and to be knowledgeable about language use and the culture of a given English speaking country/countries, translating was a much easier task than nowadays. Today, that does not suffice.

The focus of this paper is on intercultural competence in translation training. What follows is an overview of selected approaches to translation competence, and the role intercultural competence plays (or should play) in translator training. Then results of a questionnaire are presented and English Studies students' perceptions of the profession of a translator are discussed.

## **Translation competence**

Translation competence as a concept properly entered the academic discussion in 1990s (e.g. Hewson and Martin 1991; Pym 1992; Kiraly 1995; Hatim and Mason 1997), with various scholars defining it as a construct comprising numerous components.

Kiraly (1995), for example, focused on psycholinguistics and the translation process. He describes the translator's mind in terms of "an information-processing system in which a translation comes from the interaction of intuitive and controlled processes using linguistic and extralinguistic information." (p. 102). The following are the elements of the translation process: information sources (long-term memory – knowledge of the world, L1 and L2 cultures and languages, translation process etc., source text input and external resources, such as reference books etc.); the intuitive workspace (a subconscious process where the source text information is synthesized and processed with the information retrieved from the translator's long-term memory and with external resources) – the result of the intuitive process are two-fold: tentative translation elements and problems which then may either progress to the controlled processing centre or to one of the two types of monitoring – target language or textual monitoring. Kiraly's (1995) model includes:

- (a) a translator's awareness of the situational factors that may be involved in a given translation task (translation expectations constructed from contexts of situation);

- (b) the translation-relevant knowledge that the translator possesses, including, for example, linguistic knowledge of L1 and L2 (syntactic, lexicosemantic, sociolinguistic, and textual), cultural knowledge of the L1 and L2 cultures, and specialized knowledge of the topic under consideration; and
- (c) the translator's ability to initiate appropriate intuitive and controlled psycho-linguistic processes to formulate the L2 text and monitor its adequacy as a translation of the source text (translation-relevant skills). (p. 108)

The focus in this model is both on the translator and their ability as well as on the process of translation. In the following model the focus is on the abilities of the translator, rather than on the process of translation.

Neubert (2000), who sees translators as “polyhistors in an age of specialisation” whose “mindset is an assemblage of everything that is worth communicating from one lingua-culture into another” (p. 3) describes translational competence as being responsible for the translator’s ability to manage the demands imposed on the cognitive system by the tasks involved in the translation process. He distinguishes the following contextual features which “overlay the various individual ingredients of translating knowledge and skills” (p. 4). The first element he describes is complexity, and then heterogeneity – a translator should master a wide variety of skills which are typically very different from one another and rarely taught (e.g. specialised language translation requires a high level of knowledge and language ability in the language pair). Translation is approximate in its nature – translator knowledge on the subjects they may have to deal with is rarely exhaustive, but translational competence includes the ability to approximate the subject to meet both average and expert reader/receiver. Translation competence is open-ended with translators needing to continually develop, research texts and keep feeling the pulse of their working languages (*ibid.*). Translator competence is also formed by derived/guided creativity – as translators’ task is to ‘have the word for it’, they have to be creative in translating elements they cannot locate in the target language. Situationality, or the ability to deal with situational challenges is the next feature, which is closely related to the previous one. Historicity (the history of translation) along with the dimension of change (the impact of local conditions necessitating the change) are the final components on Neubert’s list of cognitive orientations; he stresses that much more than just linguistic knowledge is needed in a translator’s toolbox.

Pym (2003) opposes multicomponential models of translation competence on grounds of conceptual flaws related to their inability to maintain relevance to market demands, and their origin (if only partly) in institutional interests. Additionally, he claims that multicomponential models “accept complexity without critically distinguishing between means and ends” (p. 494). The model he proposes is minimalist and stresses theorizing over declarative knowledge and technical skill. The model consists of one’s ability to “generate a series of more than one viable

target text for a pertinent source text (ST)” and “to select only one viable target text (TT) from the series, quickly and with justified confidence” (Pym 2003: 489).

The most comprehensive model to date seems to be the one of the Process in the Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation Group (PACTE) which was formed in 1997 and which undertook the task of defining translator competence and its acquisition process based on empirical research. To this end they investigated the translation competence from two perspectives: the translation process and the product. The translation competence, according to the PACTE Group, is – in simplest terms – the system of knowledge needed in order to translate. It can be defined as involving expert, mostly procedural, knowledge, as comprising a number of interrelated sub-competences with one, particularly important strategic component. Translation competence in the PACTE model is a multi-component construct consisting of the following sub-competences: bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, strategic, knowledge about translation, and psycho-physiological components.

The abovementioned models are only a selected few from a number of proposals put forward by different scholars. They all focus on the abilities a translator should possess, including practical skills connected to the process of translation, language knowledge, world knowledge, cultural knowledge, as well as personal characteristics. The element of interest here is the intercultural competence of translators.

## Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence (IC) is not a new concept and it is a concept which appears, although mostly not explicitly, in some of the multi-componential translation competence models. A translator is often referred to as a mediator between cultures and languages and translation as intercultural communication (e.g. Katan 2009). To prepare for the tasks ahead of them trainee translators learn about the cultures of different English speaking countries – their history, traditions, values, beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes etc. Gaining this cultural competence is, obviously, not enough anymore, as globalisation and a high level of contact between different cultures make the work of translators ever as challenging due to what has been referred to by Blommaert (2010, 2013) as superdiversity, a hybridity of societies. Indeed, looking at Europe one does not need to be an expert to note the ethnic, cultural and linguistic hybridity.

English as a lingua franca is not a one language with clearly defined rules pertaining to its use and structure, it is more of a hybrid, a fluid, dynamic language which is in constant negotiation and interaction with other languages and cultures – without this interaction it would not exist. According to Jenkins (2011), to be a proficient user of ELF it does not suffice to know the forms of any given native variety of English; rather a successful user of ELF “has acquired the pragmatic skills needed to adapt their English use in line with the demand of the current lingua franca situation” (p. 932).

What does this mean for translator training? In 2013, Taviano stressed that “it is time for translation academics and professionals, to acknowledge the special status of English(es) today, and [...] translation training, consequently requires quite different assumptions from those informing the teaching of any other language” (p. 156). Apart from gaining linguistic proficiency in a standard variety of English, students need to be aware of the diversity inherent in ELF and need strategies, skills and knowledge on how to deal with them. As professional translators, they need the sensitivity and awareness of diversity to recognise the value of the fluid nature of ELF and the culture encoded in texts they may come to translate. Additionally, the awareness of one’s native culture should not be overlooked in translator training. Students may need awareness raising to understand what they do not know about their own culture and to learn about it in a much broader, much deeper sense (Kelly 2005; Witte 2008; Olk 2009). Future translators should be aware of the worldviews and cultures expressed by their own native language and the other languages in their repertoire they intend on working with.

The question regarding the nature of intercultural competence translators should have, how to include it in teaching and how to assess it, are all issues which are still under debate. Katan (2009), who refers to translators as cultural mediators views intercultural competence as “being able to perceive and handle differences” (p. 284). Tomozeiu et al. (2016) propose that an interculturally competent translator is “one who demonstrates a high level of intercultural knowledge, skills, attitude and flexibility throughout his or her professional engagements” (p. 256).

When we look at the translation competence models discussed in the previous section we can see that IC, although present, is included in those models rather implicitly than explicitly. In the PACTE model, for example, IC is not explicitly mentioned in any of the five sub-competences – implicitly IC could be said to be present in the bilingual sub-competence and in the extra-linguistic sub-competence. However, the authors do not stress the mediation process in between languages and cultures. Similarly, in the model proposed by Pym and Neubert IC is not addressed explicitly.

One of the larger projects on intercultural communication in translation is the Promoting Intercultural Competence in Translators (PICT) Project whose aim was to propose a toolkit which would facilitate and encourage translator trainers in postgraduate programmes in translation to systematically include IC in their teaching. The results are based on empirical research – a survey on intercultural competence was conducted among translation teachers and students in seven European countries. The results showed a high level of awareness of the importance of IC among both groups of participants from all countries, however, there was a mismatch between the level and content of IC the students and the teachers felt was present in courses. The reasons for this could be twofold (as pointed out by Tomozeiu, Kokinen and D’Arcangelo 2016) – the lack of a precise definition and boundaries of IC and its implicitness in courses. Many more teachers reported including IC competence development through text translations than students in-

dicating IC development in class. There is a possibility that because of the lack of overt intercultural training students did not notice it. Very few teachers who took part in the survey declared offering students separate intercultural communication modules.

Another finding of PICT pertained to students' understanding of culture – they tend to associate it most with the 'traditional' approach to the study of culture, i.e. with institutions, geography, politics, current affairs etc. As Koskinen (2015) notes – "the hidden curriculum in translator training tends to over-emphasise national cultures and may easily lapse into a dualistic world view and stereotyping" (p. 181). Although knowledge of national cultures is very useful, it is not sufficient – it helps develop student's cultural competence but not *intercultural* competence.

The key element though seems to lie in comprehensive understanding of what intercultural competence for translators means, what level on intercultural competence students have and what skills and abilities need to be taught and developed. Junior translators from different European countries have different experiences, knowledge and skills. Poland is still a very much mono-culture country and therefore Polish students might need more awareness raising with respect to the intercultural differences, and more training in intercultural skills than their friends from such countries as Germany or France. The study reported in this paper is the first step at understanding what preconceptions students bring with them regarding the profession of a translator, the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to be a successful translator, and what issues they have to overcome.

## The study

The study aimed to explore the awareness of intercultural competence as an element of professional translator competence, among students enrolled in the programmes which make it possible for them to choose a translation specialisation as an option. The target group were language majors at the University of Łódź, Poland. The University offers one or two language programmes, and it was decided that the two types of programmes might offer an additional insight into a possible effect of multilingualism on the level of perceived need for intercultural awareness. As the main interest was in the beliefs rather than experience in translation and/or translation courses, participants were recruited from the first and second year of the BA programme, when translation courses are not offered yet.

## Methods and materials

The exploratory aim motivates the selection of an open-question questionnaire in the native language of the respondents (Polish). The questionnaire contained a short biographical part and three major questions:

1. A translator is a person who....
2. What skills/ knowledge / competences should a good translator have?
3. What problems do you think translators might have when doing their job

The questionnaires were distributed after lectures, and participants were encouraged to take their time and provide as much information as possible.

## Participants

Two groups of participants: English majors (1<sup>st</sup> year, BA programme, E Group) and two-language majors (French/ German/Russian plus English, 2<sup>nd</sup> year BA programme, T Group) took part in the study. There were 30 participants in each group, with the mean age 19.4 and 21.6 respectively. An overwhelming majority declared they would like to be translators in the future (93% and 83%).

## Procedure

The answers provided by the students were first coded by the most frequently occurring phrases and then analysed for the specific wordings used by the students. As the key issue was connected to intercultural communication/ competence, it is the reference to culture and the context in which it occurs that was treated as the key aspect in the analysis.

## Results and analysis

With respect to the beliefs as to who a translator is, the vast majority of the students in both groups say that it is a person who translates texts from one language to another (73% in the English majors and 90% in the two-language majors). They also mention the translator's role as a person who explains and facilitates communication between speakers of two different languages, and it is the E Group that does it more often (30% compared to 13%). Other mentioned characteristics of a translator include a high level of language competence and the ability to translate different types of texts, written and spoken. As one of the respondents puts it (all answers translated from Polish by the researcher):

*[11A] A translator knows at least one foreign language at (at least) C1 level, can translate written and spoken texts in a correct way grammatically as well as stylistically.*

Occasionally, however, respondents go beyond the linguistic aspects, as in the case of another respondent, who mentions not only the language, but also culture:

[14A] *A translator makes use of his/her knowledge of the language and culture of a given country.*

The question regarding the skills/knowledge and competences a translator should possess yielded predictable answers, i.e. it was the language that was mentioned most often, with the translator expected to have full linguistic competence. Interestingly, it was the English major group that stressed language skills most regularly (90%), with the proportion going slightly down in the two-language group (57%). Culture was the second most-often mentioned aspect, with 53% of English majors and 43% of two-language majors pointing to the importance of knowing the target culture. It is the second group of respondents (T Group) who tend to mention many other aspects of knowledge they believe to be important more often, including general knowledge (6 respondents in T Group, 5 in E Group), customs and politeness (8 in T Group, 1 in E Group), history (6 in T Group, 7 in E Group), politics (2 in T Group). The skills in L1 are mentioned by 3 two-language majors and 1 English major, with other occasionally mentioned aspects including literary skills (2 respondents in E Group, 1 in T Group), pragmatic skill (1 respondent, T Group). Individual respondents added other skills or qualities required from a translator, such as being communicative (4 in T Group, 1 in E Group), having a good memory (2 in T Group, 1 in E Group), being open to new cultures (2 in T Group and 1 in E Group), and finally – reliability (1 in T Group). As one of the respondents from a T Group puts it,

[12T] *A translator should be educated, should know a cultural context, have a basic historical and social knowledge of a given culture, and should be a proficient user of his/her native language and use it well.*

And another, from E Group:

[15E] *A translator should know everything that is a part of the language to which s/he translates (culture, etc.).*

When asked about the problems translators may need to cope with, respondents provide varied answers, ranging from linguistic, such as the very language differences (9 in E Group, 3 in T Group), language change (8 in E Group, 2 in T Group), new vocabulary (4 in T Group, 3 in E Group), false friends (1 in T Group), rare words (1 in T Group) and old texts (2 in T Group) to practical, such as stress and tiredness (5 in T Group, 1 in E Group), responsibility and potential consequences of making an error (1 each in T Group). Cultural differences are mentioned by 6 respondents in each group, making it the third most often mentioned problem in the E Group (after language differences and language development) and the first

most often mentioned problem in the T Group. The understanding of cultural differences, however, tends to focus on words and phrases.

[1T] *Translators need to cope with cultural expressions, which are difficult if you're not a native speaker and you don't know idiomatic expressions.*

[8T] *A translator must cope with cultural differences, some expressions can't be translated literally.*

It is only in one case, that the respondent refers to language users:

[19T] *They must cope with cultural differences between users of two different languages. They must be also aware that sometimes you cannot translate literally, you must look for equivalents which fit the other culture.*

The results of the study suggest students are aware of the cultural competence needed in the profession of a translator, but not intercultural competence. They seem to be very much in the “one language, one culture” mindset. The one vs. two-language study programme do not seem to cause much difference as far as the pre-conceptions and potential expectations are concerned. Across the programmes, students bring with them a high awareness of the linguistic challenges a translator may face at work and the need to perfect their language skill and understand the need of through knowledge of the target culture.

## Conclusion

Translators mediate between cultures and to do so they need a thorough understanding of what culture is, and how their work is a type of intercultural communication. A high level of intercultural competence and an understanding of issues and skills related to IC should be a substantial component of translator training. In a rather mono-culture country as Poland, students need awareness raising and systematic, explicit inclusion of IC training as part of their translation programmes. The results of this study suggest that students entering their linguistic university education are aware of the basic requirements and challenges connected to translating, what they do not seem to bring with them, however, is the awareness of how complex issues a translator may face. What remains to be done is to guide them towards a broader understanding of these challenges.

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Agata Klimczak-Pawlak

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### Summary

With the superdiversity (Blommaert 2010, 2013) of today's societies translator training faces new challenges. This article sets out to explore the issue of intercultural competence in translator training from the perspective of the views and beliefs of English language majors in Poland. Rather than discussing the translation programmes offered to students, the study presented here concentrates on pre-conceptions as to who a translator is, what skills, knowledge and competences are crucial for a translator and what difficulties s/he may face. Students' beliefs prove that they are ready for courses which will encourage them to reflect on their views and will help them deepen their understanding of culture to include intercultural aspects as well as aspects of their own culture. As Polish students wanting to be translators may simply not be aware of the intercultural challenges entailed by the profession, it is argued here that overt, explicit focus on intercultural communication and raising students' intercultural competence is needed.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence; translation competence; translator training; language majors' beliefs.

## Kompetencja międzykulturowa w procesie szkolenia tłumaczy

### Streszczenie

Określenie kompetencji tłumacza dla potrzeb kształcenia stanowi ogromne wyzwanie wobec zmieniającej się rzeczywistości, w której przyjdzie pracować absolwentom studiów językowych. Jednym z kluczowych elementów, których brak może podważyć użyteczność oferowanych kursów jest kompetencja interkulturowa. Omówiony model kompetencji tłumaczeniowej oraz rolę kompetencji interkulturowej jako elementu kompetencji tłumacza, artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania przeprowadzonego wśród 60 studentów I i II roku, z których większość deklaruje gotowość podjęcia kursów i pracy tłumacza w przyszłości. Badaniu poddano przekonania dotyczące tego, kim jest tłumacz, jakie umiejętności, wiedzę i kompetencje powinien posiadać i jakie trudności może napotkać w swojej pracy. Wyniki pokazują, że studenci potrzebują kursów, które zachęcą ich do refleksji na temat ich poglądów i pomogą im pogłębić zrozumienie kultury o aspekt interkulturowości oraz ich własną kulturę. Ponieważ polscy studenci pragnący zostać tłumaczami mogą nie być świadomi *międzykulturowych* wyzwań związanych z tym zawodem, istnieje potrzeba rozwinięcia ich kompetencji interkulturowej poprzez wyraźne zaznaczenie wagi tej kompetencji w ich kształceniu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kompetencja interkulturowa; kompetencja tłumaczeniowa; dydaktyka przekładu; opinie studentów.