

# Translation Quality and Awareness of Functional Translation Theories

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## Abstract

The present article reports a study carried out to investigate whether or not awareness of functional translation theories has any impact on the translation quality of translator trainees. 200 Iranian undergraduate students took part in this study. They were divided into four groups -two- experimental and two control groups. After homogenizing the participants by a TOEFL test, a translation pre-test was administered and then functional theories of translation like Translational Action and Skopos Theory were taught to the experimental groups who were later required to use the material taught in their classroom translation practice during one academic semester. The control groups were instructed traditionally as widely practiced in Iranian undergraduate translation classes. A translation post-test was given to all the groups at the end of the semester. The statistical results demonstrated a significant difference between the pre- and post- test in the two experimental groups as compared with the control groups.

**Keywords:** Translation Theories, Functional Theories, Translation Pedagogy, Translation Quality, Translator Training

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## **1. Introduction**

In the present world there is a great need for competent translators. Previously, translating mostly meant literary translation but now there are great economic, political, commercial, technical, and scientific demands which call for training competent translators in as short a time as possible. Such a huge demand, necessitates a planned and organized approach, the basic step of which is the mastery over sound theoretical frameworks. Flourishing of translation theories and expansion of new ideas towards the translating process was a turning point in translation studies. Gentile (1991: 344) maintains “practice which is not informed by a theoretical framework, suffers from the idiosyncrasies of practitioners”. Gile (1991: 185) also mentions the potential advantages of incorporating theoretical components into translator training programs, thereby: “accelerating and enhancing the scope of students’ progress, helping them make appropriate decisions in new situations and maintaining appropriate strategies and tactics”. However, he has not performed any empirical studies to validate his findings in authentic pedagogical settings.

The purpose of translation theory, according to Bassnett (2002: 43-44), is to reach an understanding of the processes undertaken in the act of translation.

Theory and practice are indissolubly linked, and are not in conflict. However, Chesterman and Wagner (2002: 64) mention that we can make some guesses based on intuition or experience in this regard, but we need more empirical evidence before we can make good predictions. Also, Gonzalez Davies (2004: 11) confirms the above point by asserting that translation studies has a multifaceted character and is a complex and still relatively unexplored area of study which lacks a rich pedagogical tradition.

This is why some new approaches to teaching translation include awareness of theories of translation, text functions and text types in their curricula and

syllabi. Gonzalez Davies (2004: 3) suggests that the “read and translate” directive to teach translation is probably as obsolete and unproductive as the Grammar-Translation Method is to teach a foreign language. Several authors and researchers in the field have written about the role translation theories, text types and awareness of text functions can have in enhancing translation skills among translator trainees (see Gentile, 1991; Gile, 1991; Munday, 2001; Bassnett, 2002; Chesterman and Wagner, 2002).

The undergraduate English major programs in Iranian universities include translation courses as a core component. In most translation classes, the “read and translate” directive (Gonzalez Davies, 2004) is the most common event which takes place. Most translation courses are taught by instructors whose major is TEFL and whose knowledge of translation theories is very limited.

Most instructors are unaware of the recent findings in translation studies because this is not their major, although they are expected to be able to teach translation. The reason behind this is that the depth and complexities of the nature of translating are not yet recognized, not even in our academia.

Moreover, it is widely known that theory and practice are complementary while most translation instructors in Iranian universities are not into the practice of translation themselves.

## **2. Functional Theories of Translation**

To elaborate more on the trends of translation theories, we can say that Translation Studies was mainly linguistic in focus up to 1970s. Gradually, there was a movement from static linguistic typologies towards more functional approaches (Munday, 2001: 73). Linguistic models were at the level of typologies and real translation theories found life by emergence of functional theories of translation. Among the functional theories of translation

'Translational Action' proposed by Holz-Manttari can be mentioned. Munday (2001: 77) mentions that translational action views translation as purpose-driven, outcome-oriented human interaction. Translation in this sense is considered as a communicative process involving a series of roles and players including the initiator, the commissioner, the ST producer, the TT producer, the TT user and the TT receiver. Translational action focuses very much on producing a target text that is functionally communicative for the receiver (ibid).

Schaffner (in Baker 1997: 3) mentions that the primary purpose of translation action is to enable cooperative, functionally adequate communication to take place across cultural barrier and that the source text is viewed as a mere tool for the realization of communicative functions; it is totally subordinate to its purpose, is afforded no intrinsic value, and may undergo radical modification in the interest of the target reader.

Another important functional theory of translation is *Skopos theory* which was the main focus of this study. Schaffner (in Baker 1997: 235) mentions that Skopos theory is an approach to translation which was developed in Germany in the late 1970s and which reflects a general shift from predominantly LINGUISTIC and rather formal translation theories to a more functionally and socioculturally oriented concept of translation. The main point of this functional approach is that it is not the source text as such, or its effects on the source-text recipient, or the function assigned to it by the author, that determines the translation process as is postulated by EQUIVALENCE-based translation theories, but the prospective function or *skopos* of the target text as determined by the initiator's, i.e. client's, needs. Consequently, the *skopos* is largely constrained by the target text user (reader/listener) and his/her situation and cultural background (ibid: 236). Vermeer (1996: 7) says that the purpose

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for which a translator designs a translation (“translatum”) in agreement with his commissioner is called the “skopos” of the text. The skopos can (in many cases should) be explicitly stated so that whoever hears or reads the translation knows for which skopos it was designed.

Munday (2001: 79) writes:

Skopos theory focuses above all on the purpose of the translation which determines the translation methods and strategies that are to be employed in order to produce a functionally adequate result. Therefore, in skopos theory, knowing why a source text is to be translated and what the function of the target text will be are crucial for the translator.

Munday states that an important advantage of skopos theory is that it allows the possibility of the same text being translated in different ways according to the purpose of the target text (ibid: 80).

### **3. The Study**

The present study was designed to see whether or not awareness of functional theories of translation improves the quality of students’ translations at the undergraduate level.

### **4. Methodology**

About 200 Iranian undergraduate students from two different universities in Tabriz, Iran took part in this study. The students from Nabi-Akram University (named as groups B1 and B2) were translation trainees and the students from Maragheh Azad University (named as groups A1 and A2) majored in ELT.

The subjects were informed at the beginning of the semester that they were participating in a study for the purpose of enhancing translation pedagogy. The course devoted to the study was a translation course offered to students who had already passed two basic courses on translation, but no course on theories of translation. All the subjects were Iranian and factors such as age and sex were assumed to be randomly distributed.

#### **A. Procedure**

The subjects were randomly assigned to two experimental and two control groups. A TOEFL test was administered to the subjects at the beginning to secure homogeneity in terms of English language competence. Then, a translation test (from English to Persian) was administered to all groups at the beginning of the semester as a pre-test. After the pre-test, the treatment started which included teaching functional theories to the experimental groups during the whole semester. Functional theories were taught theoretically to two experimental groups in one university. The translation practices which took place besides teaching the theories were based on Gonzalez Davies' (2004) description of a student- and learning-centered context that focuses on collaborative study and exploration of the translation process with the teacher acting as guide. The students practiced translating in groups and they consulted with one another within the groups while the teacher was available to exchange views among the groups. This was done to maintain the student-centered context mentioned above. The texts chosen for translation practice in the classes reflected the points highlighted by the theories. In teaching functional theories to students, learning through 'reflecting, communicating, and translating', as suggested by Gonzalez Davies (2004: 129), was emphasized. It included working on linguistic skills, encyclopedic knowledge and transfer skills. Transfer skills as suggested by Gonzalez Davies (2004: 131) included

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mental activities such as reinforcing memory, maintaining agility in the class and reflection on translation problems. It also included resourcing skills such as making use of various electronic and human resources and finally decision making skills such as problem spotting and solving, and reinforcing trainees' creativity. Other related activities in the experimental classes included: reflecting on text typology (ibid.: 56), detecting the author's possible motivated choice, learning to spot problems and solving them creatively, trying to produce a similar effect on the reader, learning to take decisions and justify choices, exploring translator's subjectivity and accepting different translation options (ibid.: 67), practicing resourcing skills, becoming aware of and accepting different translation options (ibid.: 69), awareness of different registers (ibid.: 71), practicing reader-oriented translation, awareness of the importance of function of translations, relaying content in a different register and form, justifying one's choices and taking decisions (ibid.: 75), practicing team-translation and learning to negotiate, reflecting on text types and conventions of presentation, reflecting on different aims of different publications (ibid.: 77).

The control groups received no treatment with regard to the theories and were in fact a traditional kind of translation class, which is the commonest type of translation class prevalent in Iranian universities. This type of translation class is what Gonzalez Davies (2004: 14) depicts as 'the traditional product-oriented and teacher-centered learning context'. In such contexts, students have a minor role in deciding about their translation decisions and teachers usually single out model translations.

At the end of the semester, another translation test (from English to Persian) was administered to the students as a post-test. Students' translations in the pre- and post-test were assessed based on the model presented by Farahzad (1992: 277) called objectified scoring. It presupposes a careful

examination of the target text. The model takes the sentence as the unit of translation and the verb as the marker of a sentence, which is assigned a score.

In her model, complex sentences are broken down into main and sub-clauses, each receiving a separate score (ibid: 277). The model also accounts for cohesion and style which cannot be checked and scored at the sentence and clause level but leaves determination of the weight of their scores to the examiner. As such, the target texts were read two times, first for accuracy and appropriateness, then for cohesion and style.

To ensure the inter-rater reliability of the test results, another rater who was also a translation instructor was asked to rate the translations based on the above-mentioned model. The scores given by the two examiners were compared; the scores yielding no significant difference were to be indicative of precision and reliability in scoring. This was implemented by employing a paired t-test the results of which are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 sk1.1.pr	11.5986	220	1.49074	.10051
sk1.2.pr	11.6020	220	1.51228	.10196

**Table 2. Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1 sk1.1.pr- sk1.2.pr	-.00341	.14231	.00959	-.02232	.01550	-.355	219	0.723

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The results in Table 2 confirm that there was no significant difference between the scores as checked by the two examiners ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Hence, the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the scores of the examiners was not rejected.

## 5. Results and Discussion

To verify the homogeneity of the TOEFL test scores obtained from the experimental and control groups a one-way ANOVA test was calculated. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4 below:

**Table 3. ANOVA Groups A and B**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3250.033	3	1083.344	8.300	.450
Within Groups	15923.396	122	130.520		
Total	19173.429	125			

The results of table 3 indicate that there is no significant difference between scores obtained in the TOEFL test in experimental and control groups ( $P > 0.05$ ). In the following table (4), the mean of TOEFL scores of these four groups have been calculated. It indicates that there is no significant difference between the scores and all students are at the same level.

**Table 4. Descriptives<sup>a</sup>**

Group		Statistic
Maraghe1 (A1)	Mean	37.3243
Nabiakram1 (B1)	Mean	37.20
Nabiakram2 (B2)	Mean	37.35
Maraghe2 (A2)	Mean	37.2750

Since there were two experimental groups and two control groups, the results of each group are presented independently:

The mean of the four groups are presented in the following tables:

**Descriptives (pre-test) 5**

Group		Statistic
A1	Mean	11.30
	Std. Deviation	0.306
B1	Mean	11.308
	Std. Deviation	1.065
A2	Mean	11.21
	Std. Deviation	0.921
B2	Mean	11.51
	Std. Deviation	0.747

**Descriptives (post-test) 5**

Group		Statistic
A1	Mean	11.57
	Std. Deviation	0.278
B1	Mean	12.14
	Std. Deviation	1.084
A2	Mean	11.46
	Std. Deviation	1.47
B2	Mean	11.67
	Std. Deviation	1.074

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between pre- and post-test scores of the students of the first control group (A1).

The results of the paired t-test are presented in Table 7 as a way to analyze the discrepancies between the scores obtained in the pre- and post-test.

**Table 6. The Statistical Indexes for Analysis of the Pre- and Post-test Scores**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pair 1 sk1.pr	11.3026	38	1.88805
sk1.1po	11.5789	38	1.71451

**Paired Samples Test 7**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1 sk1.pr- sk1.1po	-.27632	2.30437	.37382	-1.03374	.48111	-.739	37	.464

The results in Table 7 prove that there was no significant difference between the scores obtained from the students of A1 in the pre- and post-test ( $p > 0.05$ ). Thus the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between pre- and post-test scores of the students of A1 could not be rejected. ( $p > 0.05$ ) A1 students were all in the control group undergoing no teaching program, so it looked quite natural that their scores did not change from one exam to another.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between pre- and post-test scores of the students of the second control group (A2).

The results of the paired t-test are illustrated in Table 9 as a way to analyze the discrepancies between the scores obtained in the pre- and post-test.

**Table 8. Statistical Indexes for Analysis of the Pre- and Post-test Scores**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pair1 sk2.pr	11.2115	39	1.78124
sk1.2po	11.4615	39	1.47517

**Paired Samples Test 9**

	Paired Differences					t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1 sk2.pr- sk1.2po	-.25000	1.98266	.31748	-.89270	.39270	-.787	38	.436

The results in Table 9 indicate that there was no significant difference between the scores obtained from the students of A2 in the pre- and post-test.

( $p > 0.05$ ) Therefore, the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between pre- and post-test scores of the students of A2 could not be nullified.

( $p > 0.05$ ) A2 students were all in the control group undergoing no teaching program, so it was quite natural that their scores didn't change from one exam to another.

Hypothesis 3: Teaching functional theories of translation to the first experimental group (B1) has no impact on their translation quality.

The results of the paired t-test are illustrated in Table 11 as a way to analyze the discrepancies between the scores in the pre- and post-experiment stages.

**Table 10: Statistical Indexes for Analysis of the Pre- and Post-experiment Scores**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pair1	sk1.pr	11.3081	43	1.08403
	sk1.1po	12.1395	43	1.06528

**Paired Samples Test 11**

		Paired Differences					t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair1	sk1.pr- sk1.1po	-.83140	1.38414	.21108	-1.25737	-.40542	-3.939	42	.000

The results in Table 11 reveal that there was a significant difference between the scores obtained from the students in B1 group in pre- and post-experiment stages ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Hence the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between pre- and post-experiment scores of the students of B1, was rejected. ( $p < 0.05$ ) As Table (10) illustrates, the mean of the students' scores increased in the pre-test stage by 11.30 and in the post-test stage by 12.14 which indicate that there was a 0.83 or %7 rise in translation quality of the students.

Hypothesis 4: Teaching functional theories of translation to the second experimental group (B2) has no impact on their translation quality.

The results of the paired t-test are presented in Table 13 as a way to analyze the discrepancies between scores obtained in the pre- and post-training stages.

**Table 12: Statistical Indexes for Analysis of the Pre- and Post-tests Scores**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pair 1 sk1.pr	11.5193	42	1.07432
sk1.1po	11.6786	42	.74753

**Paired Samples Test 13**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1 sk1.pr- sk1.1po	-.15929	1.07227	.16546	-.49343	.17486	-.963	41	.045

The results in Table 13 show that there was a significant difference between the scores obtained from the students of B2 in the pre- and post-training stages ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Thus the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between pre- and post-tests scores, was rejected ( $p < 0.05$ ). As Table 12 illustrates, the mean of the students' scores increased in the post-test stage.

As the statistical results suggest, there has been a significant difference between the pre- and post-teaching stages in the two experimental groups.

Teaching functional theories of translation to students expands their views on translating process and what is required of a translator in a real translation context. Translation is viewed by the trainees as a purpose-driven activity as suggested by Holz-Manttari and this will directly affect their style of translating in a gradual process during the whole semester. A process which is not traced

in the control groups which were run traditionally and without any direct or indirect teaching of the theories and were mainly practice-oriented.

## **6. Conclusion**

Hopefully, the results of this study will shed more light on the positive effects of incorporating teaching functional translation theories on translation quality of translator trainees in our universities. Moreover, due to lack of empirical studies in the literature, this study would hopefully contribute to the field in terms of the practicality and efficiency of teaching functional translation theories in translation classes and improving the quality of students' translations. The findings can be applied to various translation courses in English literature, teaching, and translation majors at BA level in Iranian universities. I think there are many other contexts which are similar to Iranian universities. So the findings can also be useful in other countries and in various translator training programs at undergraduate level. This can be tested scientifically in similar contexts and if the results are the same as found here, perhaps a radical change of teaching methodology may be necessary for training translators.

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