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Literal Translation in Translator Training: Pedagogical Implications and Institutional Constraints in Algerian Higher Education

الترجمة الحرفية في تدريب المترجمين: الانعكاسات البيداغوجية والقيود المؤسسية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي بالجزائر.

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Abstract:

The persistence of literal translation practices in translator training remains a critical issue in contexts where traditional linguistic paradigms continue to dominate. This article investigates the overreliance on literal translation in Algerian universities and examines its impact on both translation quality and the development of professional competencies among students. Drawing on a qualitative case study informed by curricular analysis, pedagogical observation, and institutional context, the study identifies a set of interrelated factors underlying this phenomenon. These include the predominance of instructors with legal translation backgrounds, the legacy of linguistics-oriented teaching models, and the limited integration of contemporary translation didactics. The findings suggest that literal translation is often unconsciously normalized as a default strategy, leading to reduced functional adequacy, pragmatic failure, and limited student autonomy. By mobilizing competence-based frameworks and functionalist theories, the article argues for a paradigm shift in translation pedagogy from form-oriented equivalence to purpose-driven and context-sensitive practices. The study concludes with targeted recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher training, and pedagogical innovation, aiming to align Algerian translation programs with international standards and professional realities.

الملخص:

لا يزال استمرار ممارسات الترجمة الحرفية في تكوين المترجمين يمثل إشكالية جوهرية في السياقات التي تهيمن فيها النماذج اللغوية التقليدية على العملية التعليمية. تستقصي هذه المقالة الاعتماد المفرط على الترجمة الحرفية في الجامعات الجزائرية، وتبحث في تأثيره على جودة الترجمة وعلى تنمية الكفاءات المهنية لدى الطلبة. واعتمادًا على دراسة حالة نوعية تستند إلى تحليل المناهج الدراسية، والملاحظة البيداغوجية، ودراسة السياق المؤسسي، تحدد الدراسة مجموعة من العوامل المترابطة الكامنة وراء هذه الظاهرة. وتشمل هذه العوامل هيمنة الأساتذة ذوي الخلفية في الترجمة القانونية، وإرث النماذج التعليمية المتمحورة حول اللسانيات، ومحدودية إدماج المقاربات الحديثة في ديداكتيك الترجمة.

وتشير النتائج إلى أن الترجمة الحرفية غالبًا ما تُطبع بصورة غير واعية باعتبارها استراتيجية افتراضية، مما يؤدي إلى تراجع الملاءمة الوظيفية للنص المترجم، وحدوث إخفاقات تداولية، والحد من استقلالية الطلبة في اتخاذ القرارات الترجمية. ومن خلال توظيف نماذج الترجمة القائمة على الكفاءات والنظريات الوظيفية، تدافع المقالة عن ضرورة إحداث تحول في بيداغوجيا الترجمة، ينتقل من التركيز على التكافؤ الشكلي إلى ممارسات ترجمية موجهة بالغاية وحساسة للسياق.

وتختتم الدراسة بجملة من التوصيات الموجهة لإصلاح المناهج الدراسية، وتطوير تكوين الأساتذة، وتعزيز الابتكار البيداغوجي، بما يسهم في مواءمة برامج الترجمة في الجزائر مع المعايير الدولية ومتطلبات الممارسة المهنية.

Introduction:

Over the past three decades, translation studies have undergone a significant epistemological shift from a predominantly linguistic discipline to a multidisciplinary field grounded in

communication, cognition, and professional practice (Munday, 2016). This transformation has been accompanied by the emergence of competence-based models of translator training, emphasizing the development of strategic, instrumental, and intercultural skills (PACTE, 2005; EMT, 2017). However, in many higher education contexts, particularly in developing countries, traditional approaches to translation teaching remain deeply rooted in literalist and equivalence-based paradigms.

In the Algerian academic context, translation is still frequently conceptualized as a subcomponent of applied linguistics, resulting in pedagogical practices that prioritize lexical and syntactic correspondence over communicative effectiveness. One of the most visible manifestations of this orientation is the pervasive reliance on literal translation, often treated as a default or "safe" strategy by both instructors and students. While literal translation may be justified in specific domains—most notably legal and technical translation—its generalized application across text types raises serious concerns regarding translation quality and pedagogical effectiveness.

This article addresses a critical yet underexplored issue: **the normalization of literal translation in translator training and its impact on student competence development**. More specifically, it examines how the lack of awareness regarding the limitations of literal translation shapes teaching practices and learning outcomes in Algerian universities.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent does literal translation dominate pedagogical practices in Algerian translation programs?
- What institutional and academic factors contribute to this dominance?
- How does this orientation affect the quality of student translations and the development of professional competencies?

By situating the Algerian case within broader debates in translation pedagogy, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on curriculum reform and the modernization of translator training.

2. Literature Review:

2.1 Literal Translation Revisited

Literal translation has occupied a central position in the history of translation theory and practice. Traditionally defined as the direct transfer of linguistic units from the source text into the target text while preserving grammatical structure and lexical correspondence, literal translation was initially regarded as a legitimate and often desirable translation strategy (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). In contexts where linguistic structures and cultural references overlap, literal translation may indeed facilitate accuracy and fidelity to the source text. However, contemporary translation studies have demonstrated that translation is a far more complex communicative activity that extends beyond lexical equivalence and syntactic correspondence.

The debate surrounding literal translation reflects broader tensions within translation theory between source-oriented and target-oriented approaches. Early linguistic models largely focused on formal equivalence, viewing translation as a process of transferring linguistic meaning from one code to another (Catford, 1965). Such approaches tended to privilege textual fidelity and linguistic accuracy. However, scholars working within functionalist and communicative paradigms have challenged the assumption that linguistic equivalence alone can guarantee translation quality.

Newmark (1988) distinguishes between semantic translation and communicative translation, arguing that excessive literalism often compromises the communicative effectiveness of the target text. Similarly, Nida (1964) introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence, emphasizing the importance of producing in the target audience an effect equivalent to that experienced by the source audience. From this perspective, literal translation becomes problematic whenever it hinders comprehension or fails to reproduce the intended communicative function.

The limitations of literal translation become particularly evident when dealing with idiomatic expressions, culture-specific references, metaphorical language, pragmatic meanings, and discourse conventions. Baker (2018) argues that translators must constantly negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural systems rather than merely transfer words. Consequently,

translation decisions should be guided by contextual, functional, and audience-related considerations rather than by formal correspondence alone.

The emergence of functionalist theories further challenged the dominance of literal translation. Skopos Theory (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984) proposes that the primary criterion for evaluating a translation should be its purpose within the target context. According to this framework, translation strategies must be selected according to communicative objectives rather than linguistic form. Likewise, Nord (1997) emphasizes the importance of translation briefs and target readership, suggesting that fidelity should be understood in functional rather than purely linguistic terms.

Recent developments in translation competence research reinforce this perspective. The PACTE Group (2005) identifies strategic competence as one of the core components of translation expertise, enabling translators to solve problems, make informed decisions, and adapt their strategies according to contextual demands. Overreliance on literal translation may therefore indicate not competence but rather a lack of strategic awareness and professional flexibility.

In translator training contexts, literal translation presents a particular pedagogical challenge. Novice translators often resort to literal solutions because they perceive them as safer and less risky than adaptive strategies (Pym, 2014). However, if such tendencies are reinforced by teaching practices and assessment criteria, students may internalize literal translation as the default mode of translation. This can ultimately hinder the development of professional competencies and limit students' ability to respond effectively to diverse translation situations.

Therefore, contemporary translation pedagogy does not reject literal translation outright; rather, it seeks to situate it within a broader repertoire of translation strategies. Literal translation remains one possible solution among many, but it should be employed selectively and critically according to the communicative requirements of each translation task.

2.2 Translation Competence and Pedagogy

The concept of translation competence has been extensively developed in recent decades. The PACTE model (2005) defines it as a complex system of interrelated sub-competencies,

including bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, and strategic components. Similarly, the EMT framework (2017) underscores the importance of adaptability and professional awareness.

Pedagogically, this has led to a shift toward **constructivist and task-based approaches** (Kiraly, 2000), where students engage in authentic translation tasks rather than isolated sentence-level exercises.

2.3 Challenges in Traditional Contexts

Several studies have identified resistance to pedagogical innovation in contexts where translation remains closely tied to linguistics (Gile, 2009; Kelly, 2005). In such environments, literal translation often persists due to institutional inertia, lack of teacher training, and limited exposure to professional practices.

2.4 Literal Translation in Translator Training

Numerous studies have demonstrated that novice translators tend to rely more heavily on literal translation than experienced professionals (Kiraly, 2000; Pym, 2014). This tendency can be explained by several factors, including limited confidence, insufficient strategic competence, and the influence of traditional classroom practices. Students frequently perceive literal translation as a safer option because it minimizes the risk of departing from the source text.

Research conducted in translator training contexts suggests that excessive reliance on literal translation often reflects developmental rather than professional behavior. As students acquire expertise, they gradually learn to evaluate translation problems from functional, cultural, and pragmatic perspectives. Consequently, successful translator training should facilitate the transition from linguistic transfer to strategic decision-making.

3. Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the Algerian university context. The methodology is interpretative and exploratory, aiming to understand the underlying dynamics of translation pedagogy.

Data sources include:

- Curriculum analysis of translation programs
- Observation of teaching practices
- Analysis of recurrent patterns in student translations
- Reflexive insights grounded in the researcher's academic experience

The analytical framework is structured around three axes:

- Instructor profile and training
- Pedagogical practices
- Institutional and curricular constraints

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study design. Case study methodology is particularly suitable for investigating complex educational phenomena within their natural contexts (Yin, 2018). The approach enables an in-depth examination of the pedagogical and institutional factors contributing to the persistence of literal translation practices.

3.2 Research Context

The study focuses on Algerian university translation programs operating within the LMD system. Particular attention is given to institutions where translation is taught within departments of translation or foreign languages.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring themes related to pedagogical practices, assessment methods, teacher profiles, and curriculum structures were identified and categorized.

4. Findings and Analysis:

4.1 The Institutionalization of Literal Translation

The findings indicate that literal translation is not merely a strategy but an **institutionalized norm** within many Algerian programs. It is often implicitly presented as the most "accurate" form of translation, particularly in assessment contexts.

4.2 Teacher Background and Pedagogical Transfer

A key factor is the dominance of instructors with expertise in legal translation. While this specialization ensures terminological rigor, it also promotes a restrictive view of translation, where deviation from the source text is perceived as error rather than adaptation.

Teacher cognition research suggests that instructors often reproduce pedagogical models encountered during their own academic training (Borg, 2006). In the field of translation, professional experience similarly influences teaching practices. Consequently, instructors with extensive experience in legal translation may unconsciously transfer professional norms from legal contexts into classroom environments.

This phenomenon may explain the predominance of source-oriented approaches observed in many translation courses. While such approaches can be valuable for specific text types, their systematic application may limit students' exposure to alternative translation strategies.

4.3 Pedagogical Consequences

This orientation leads to:

- Overemphasis on micro-level accuracy
- Neglect of macro-level coherence and function
- Limited development of strategic competence

Students internalize these norms, resulting in translations that are formally correct but communicatively ineffective.

5. Impact on Translation Quality

5.1 Effects on Textual Naturalness

One of the most visible consequences of literal translation is the production of target texts that sound unnatural to native speakers. Although grammatically correct, such translations frequently fail to respect discourse conventions, stylistic norms, and collocational patterns of the target language.

For example, direct translation of English idiomatic expressions into Arabic or French often results in awkward formulations that obscure meaning rather than facilitate communication.

5.2 Impact on Specialized Translation

The limitations of literal translation become even more apparent in fields such as audiovisual translation, advertising translation, and localization. These domains require adaptation, condensation, and audience-oriented decision-making, which cannot be achieved through word-for-word rendering alone.

6. Impact on Student Training

6.1 Reduced Development of Strategic Competence

Strategic competence is widely recognized as a core component of translation expertise (PACTE, 2005). Students trained primarily through literal translation approaches often demonstrate difficulties in identifying translation problems and selecting appropriate solutions.

6.2 Dependence on the Source Text

Another consequence is the development of excessive dependence on source-text structures. Students frequently hesitate to reformulate ideas, fearing that any deviation from the original wording may be interpreted as an error.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the persistence of literal translation in Algerian translator training cannot be understood merely as a methodological preference. Rather, it reflects a broader epistemological and institutional paradigm that continues to shape how translation is

conceptualized, taught, and assessed within higher education. The issue therefore extends beyond individual classroom practices and must be examined in relation to the historical evolution of translation studies in Algeria.

One of the most significant findings concerns the influence of instructors' academic and professional backgrounds. The predominance of teachers specialized in legal translation appears to contribute to the normalization of source-text-oriented practices. Legal translation is characterized by terminological precision, textual stability, and a high degree of fidelity to legal formulations (Cao, 2007). Within such contexts, literal translation may often be justified or even required. However, problems emerge when pedagogical principles derived from legal translation are generalized to other domains, including literary, audiovisual, journalistic, and commercial translation. The transfer of professional habits from legal practice into classroom instruction may unintentionally promote a restrictive conception of translation that privileges linguistic correspondence over communicative effectiveness.

The findings also reveal the enduring influence of traditional linguistics-based approaches to translation teaching. Historically, translation was frequently treated as a subsidiary component of language learning, particularly within foreign language departments (Kelly, 2005). Consequently, assessment practices often focused on grammatical correctness, vocabulary transfer, and sentence-level equivalence. While such skills remain important, contemporary translation studies emphasize that professional translation involves decision-making, problem-solving, intercultural mediation, and adaptation to specific communicative contexts (PACTE, 2005; EMT, 2017). The persistence of literal translation may therefore be interpreted as a symptom of a broader gap between traditional academic models and contemporary professional realities.

Another important dimension concerns curriculum design. The analysis suggests that many translation programs have not evolved at the same pace as developments in translation studies and translation didactics. Emerging fields such as audiovisual translation, localization, accessibility studies, machine translation post-editing, and transcreation have transformed professional translation practice over the past two decades. Yet many curricula continue to prioritize traditional text-based translation exercises. This discrepancy limits students' exposure to authentic professional challenges and reduces opportunities to develop strategic competence.

The implications for translation quality are equally significant. Students trained primarily through literalist approaches often demonstrate strong linguistic awareness but limited communicative adaptability. Their translations may exhibit lexical accuracy while failing to achieve pragmatic equivalence, textual coherence, or cultural appropriateness. Such findings support previous research suggesting that translation quality cannot be evaluated solely in terms of linguistic fidelity but must also account for functionality, readability, and audience reception (House, 2015; Munday, 2016).

From a didactic perspective, the challenge is not to eliminate literal translation but to reposition it within a broader pedagogical framework. Effective translator training should help students understand that translation strategies exist on a continuum and that strategy selection depends on purpose, genre, audience, and context. Developing such awareness requires a shift toward competence-based pedagogies, project-based learning, authentic translation tasks, and reflective practice (Kiraly, 2000; Hurtado Albir, 2017).

Ultimately, the Algerian case illustrates the need for a paradigm shift from translation as linguistic transfer to translation as intercultural and professional communication. Such a transformation would not only improve translation quality but also enhance graduate employability and strengthen the alignment of Algerian translation programs with international educational standards.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the overuse of literal translation in Algerian universities is a systemic issue rooted in pedagogical tradition, teacher specialization, and curricular limitations. Its impact extends beyond translation quality to affect the overall professional readiness of graduates.

To address this issue, the article recommends:

- Integrating competence-based frameworks into curricula
- Providing continuous training for instructors
- Introducing diversified translation tasks

- Promoting awareness of functionalist approaches

Reforming translation pedagogy is not merely an academic necessity but a strategic imperative for aligning Algerian higher education with global standards.

The challenge facing Algerian translation education is not merely methodological but structural. Addressing the overuse of literal translation requires coordinated efforts involving curriculum designers, university administrators, researchers, and instructors. Future research should investigate student perceptions of translation strategies and examine the effectiveness of competence-based pedagogical interventions in Algerian classrooms.

Only through sustained pedagogical innovation can translation programs fully prepare graduates for the increasingly complex realities of multilingual and multicultural communication.

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