

The importance of active foreign language competence – Maximising choice for graduate translators

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss why active foreign language competence is an essential skill that universities must teach translation students to ensure that they can meet the market needs of today and tomorrow. Commencing with a discussion of the native speaker principle and the traditional arguments against translating into the non-native language, this paper will critically examine the native speaker principle, its assumptions and consequences before going on to explain why the academic ideal, propagated particularly at Anglophone universities, of the target language native-speaking translator often does not, for many reasons, fit with what clients really want and need. The paper will conclude by illustrating additional benefits of excellent foreign language competence, aside from the question of translating into the non-native language, to ensure that graduates are equipped to master the many additional skills they must acquire in order to be competitive in the market and to maximise their flexibility and adaptability in an ever-changing industry.

KEY WORDS

Native speaker principle, foreign language competence, non-native language, market requirements.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many countries, particularly English-speaking countries, the native speaker principle, which requires translators to only translate into their native language, continues to be the industry standard and is regarded as a marker of both quality and professionalism in translation. In the meantime, many language service providers in countries which have not traditionally applied the native speaker principle, such as Germany, have now also adopted a native speaker requirement for their translators.¹ At first glance, this may seem to be a welcome development and, given this apparent continued advancement of the native speaker principle, raises the question of how important active foreign language competence is for graduate translators.

However, as this paper will demonstrate, there is a discrepancy between such ideals, on the one hand, and what is realistic and desired in practical terms today, on the other. What is more, the native speaker principle is misleading to say the least and must be broken down into what it means and what it does not mean in order for it to bring with it any advantages in terms of quality.

This paper will therefore commence by looking at the native speaker principle from the point of view of the stances taken in the literature and the requirements of selected professional associations in terms of language directionality in translation. It will then go on to consider reasons why applying the native speaker principle as a blanket principle is in some cases unfeasible, in others undesirable and in yet others unwise. The latter aspect will be illustrated by presenting a summary of a case study into translation quality and adequacy in the field of legal translation which the author carried out in the framework of her MA Legal Translation. The paper will finally conclude with a discussion of what this means for universities in terms of teaching translation into the non-native language and fostering active foreign language competence in general as well as of the additional benefits of excellent active foreign language competence as an essential business skill for future language professionals.

1 I repeatedly receive enquiries from language service providers based in Germany looking for new translators. These enquiries invariably require any potential translators to translate into their native language.

2. THE NATIVE SPEAKER PRINCIPLE

A review of the literature illustrates how ingrained the native speaker principle is in the translation industry, particularly in English-speaking countries and how what started off as a principle which was applied mainly to the translation of literature with its focus on fluency and aesthetics is now applied across the board to all fields of translation, irrespective of text type and the purpose of the translation. In his translation textbook, Newmark (2003: 3), for example, states:

I shall assume that you, the reader, are learning to translate into your language of habitual use, since that is the only way you can translate naturally, accurately and with maximum effectiveness.

Baker (1992: 65) provides similar advice to students:

Assuming that a professional translator would, under normal circumstances, work only into his/her language of habitual use, the difficulties associated with being able to use idioms and fixed expressions correctly in a foreign language need not be addressed here.

Both Newmark and Baker completely dismiss any need to address issues of translation into the foreign language, and thus any need for excellent active foreign language competence, since they do not regard translating into the non-native language to be acceptable practice.

Until recently, the requirements of both of the two main professional associations in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) and the Institute of Translation & Interpreting (ITI), concretised these views. The ITI's Code of Professional Conduct requires its members to translate "only into a language that is either (i) their *mother tongue or language of habitual use*, or (ii) one in which they have satisfied the Institute that they have *equal competence*" (ITI, 2013) (emphasis added). Until very recently, the CIOL's code of professional conduct included a similar requirement: "[...] only into their *mother tongue or language of habitual use*" (CIOL, 2007; emphasis added).

The CIOL's new code of professional conduct, dated July 2015, however, no longer contains this requirement, stating simply that its members "will offer professional language services only in languages and/or language pairs in which they are registered with CIOL". Members must, of course, demonstrate a certain level of language competence in order to be registered for particular language combinations but there is no longer a "mother tongue" requirement. This suggests that, while until a few years ago, translating into a foreign language was not regarded as acceptable practice in the UK, this may now be changing. The CIOL, at least, seems to be recognising that the native speaker principle is not always sustainable, particularly in cases of languages of limited diffusion and in some very specialised subject fields.

Indeed, not all countries have traditionally applied the native speaker principle. In Germany, for example, students are taught and learn to translate in both directions. Groethuysen (2016) suggests that the fact that the native speaker principle has traditionally been less widespread in Germany has two explanations. The first reason she gives is the fact that courts and authorities expect their certified translators to translate in both directions. The requirements for becoming a certified translator in Germany, for example, include the proof of the ability to translate in both directions. The Federal State of Baden-Württemberg makes the following requirement of such translators:

Die Kompetenz der Übersetzerfähigkeit bei sowohl allgemeinen als auch fachlichen Texten jeweils in und aus der Fremdsprache muss zweifelsfrei nachgewiesen werden.

(author's translation: "The translator's competence and ability to translate both general and specialised texts both into and out of the foreign language must be evidenced beyond doubt.").

The second reason Groethuysen gives is that, for many years, until EU requirements prescribed otherwise, non-German native speakers were not appointed as certified translators if there was a sufficient number of German native-speaking translators for the language in question. This naturally meant that there was a requirement for translators to also translate into the foreign language.

The Federal Association of Interpreters and Translators (BDÜ) includes only the following requirement in this regard in its code of professional conduct (2015):

Mitglieder des BDÜ übernehmen Aufträge nur in solchen Sprachen und Fachgebieten, in denen sie oder die von ihnen beauftragten Subunternehmer über die Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten verfügen, um die übertragenen Aufgaben in der erforderlichen Qualität ausführen zu können.

(author's translation: "Members of the BDÜ will only accept assignments in the languages and specialist fields in which they, or the subcontractors they commission, have the skills and abilities to carry out their task to the required quality standard".)

There is no mention of directionality here and the use of the phrase "to the required quality standard" clearly demonstrates an understanding that requirements do differ from assignment to assignment. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Despite the fact that the German translation market has always recognised that it is sometimes necessary for translators to translate into their non-native language and the recognition of the CIOL that the native speaker principle is not always sustainable, there is still a general presumption in the industry that a translation by a native speaker of the target language will automatically be superior to a translation by a non-native speaker. Language service providers in Germany have now also adopted this presumption, requiring their translators

to only translate into their native language, and using the fact that they abide by the native speaker principle as a stand-alone guarantee of quality. As we will see, this is problematic.

3. THE NATIVE SPEAKER PRINCIPLE AND ITS PROMISE OF QUALITY

The problem with the native speaker principle as it is commonly applied in the industry and is being increasingly applied by language service providers is its inherent assumption that (i) translators who are native speakers of the target language always produce high quality translations and (ii) translators who are not native speakers of the target language cannot produce high quality translations. The conclusion is then drawn from these assumptions that translations by native speakers of the target language are always superior to those of non-native speakers of the target language. However, this is not necessarily so.

It may be true that a text written by a native speaker of that language will normally read more fluently than a text written by a non-native speaker. However, the task of translation involves many more skills than an ability to write fluently in one's native language. As Pokorn (2000) says, "the advantage of fluency in the target language that native speakers of the TL have is often counter-balanced by an insufficient knowledge of the source language and culture, which means that translations by native speakers of English are not automatically 'superior'". In very specialised fields, such as law, for example, an accurate translation can only be produced if the translator has an in-depth understanding of the subject-field and excellent source language comprehension skills. Simply being a native speaker of the target language is clearly not sufficient.

Working on the basis of the fact that the prime purpose of a translation is to accurately communicate the source text message, if it were necessary to put these three skills into an order of priority, subject-field knowledge and excellent source language comprehension skills must be placed higher than the requirement that the translator be a native speaker of the target language, since inaccurate comprehension of the source text will lead to a semantically inaccurate translation which will render it inadequate despite reading fluently. Accurate and fluent would clearly be the ideal but it is often unrealistic to find all three skills in the person of one translator for very specialist fields and the requirement that the translator be a native speaker of the target language is not essential for an adequate translation but merely the icing on the cake. Perhaps, then, there is a case for translators or subject-field specialists translating out of their native language, and working with a native speaker of the target language as a reviser where there is also a fluency requirement. This is a question the author examined in the framework of a case study for her MA Legal Translation dissertation.

The small case study required legal translators, some of whom were native speakers of English and some of whom were native speakers of German to trans-

late a short German legal text about the German court system into English. The translation products were subsequently examined to determine whether they were semantically accurate and read fluently. Since the purpose of the translation task was to communicate the source text message accurately, the author was seeking to determine whether the translations by both the native and non-native speakers of English were “adequate”. For the purpose of the study, the translations were considered adequate if the source text message was accurately communicated and the translation did not contain any grammatical errors or general errors of fluency so serious as to distort the meaning in the target text or render it incomprehensible (Rückert, 2011).

As expected, the translations by some of the non-native speakers did contain errors of fluency. However, surprisingly, so did some of the translations by native speakers, although less frequently. The errors by the native speakers were generally errors which resulted from “translationese”, where the translator stayed too close to the source text, and from miscomprehension of the source text, resulting in disjointed sentences in the target language. Also as expected, some of the translations by native speakers of the target language contained semantic errors which were concealed by the fluency of the target text. Such errors are arguably more serious than the odd minor grammatical error which does not distort the meaning since the attention of a monolingual reader would not be drawn to semantic errors of this nature if the alternative meaning substituted by the translator also makes sense despite being incorrect. Such errors can normally only be detected and corrected by recourse to the source text, which is not an option open to a monolingual reader of the target text. Interestingly, all of the translations regarded as adequate were those by translators, irrespective of whether they were native or non-native speakers of the target language, who had subject-field training.

The above findings show that translators and language service providers using the native speaker principle as a stand-alone guarantee of quality, without understanding that in-depth knowledge of the subject-field concerned and a very high level of foreign language competence are equally essential factors for an accurate and effective translation, are on shaky ground. The fact that a translator is a native speaker of the target language is therefore definitely not, in itself, a sufficient guarantee of quality. Moreover, translators who are non-native speakers of the target language can also produce adequate translations which, although perhaps not perfectly fluent in all respects, are certainly fit for purpose where a different level of quality is required.

4. CLIENT AND MARKET REQUIREMENTS

When looking at the market requirements, it is important to take account of the fact that translations are produced and required for a wide range of purposes and are therefore subject to different quality requirements. For example, if a transla-

tion of a text in a foreign language (i.e. an external document) is required for the purpose of passive comprehension, a polished and perfectly fluent translation is unlikely to be necessary. In some cases, even machine translation is adequate (e.g. to quickly get a rough idea of the content of a large volume of text to determine which parts of the text must be translated more carefully or edited). There is no place for academic ideals in the business world, which is generally characterised by efficiency, sufficiency and budgets. It is true that translations must sometimes be both completely accurate and polished to the highest degree (e.g. for a marketing brochure or for a legal opinion for a foreign client) but it would be unwise to assume that these are the only types of translations for which there is a place in today's market. Three reasons why this is the case will now be addressed.

4.1. GLOBAL ENGLISH

Many companies today have English as their corporate language or use English when communicating with their clients, even where English is not the native language of either party. Companies are increasingly satisfied with this use of global English, even though it is clearly of non-native speaker standard. Since the purpose of language is, first and foremost, communication, if companies are successfully able to communicate their message and generate business using English as a foreign language, it would not make sense for them to dismiss accurate translations produced by non-native speakers which are also meeting this purpose, in favour of an idealistic native speaker principle. This almost certainly also applies to other languages being used as *lingua francas* in a business context.

4.2. EFFICIENCY OF ORGANISATION

Companies and institutions with in-house translators but without enormous volumes of translation work tend to want translators to cover as many different language combinations and directions as possible. In this way, companies can maintain their own translation department and remain flexible without hiking up costs for a large number of staff members. Small and medium-sized companies, particularly in Germany, where small and medium-sized companies are often the world leaders in their fields (Groethuysen, 2016), expect their translators to translate in both directions. They simply cannot afford to employ one translator per language pair, let alone one translator per language direction. They are very much looking for a one-stop shop. This also applies to companies which choose to work with freelance translators. The additional time requirement involved in finding additional translators, complex internal purchasing processes and the importance of confidentiality, reliability and trust, means that these companies tend to work with as few outside suppliers as possible for all of

their requirements. What is more, there still seems to be an industry focus on using local suppliers, even though the Internet makes it possible for companies to work with suppliers all over the world.

4.3. SPEED

Clients typically have a problem (i.e. a text in a language they do not understand, a text in a language one of their customers does not understand, a need to advertise their business to a market in a language with which they are unfamiliar) which they need solved swiftly and satisfactorily for a price which fits with their budget. The highest possible quality is often not on their shopping list. A recent online article (Leenstra, 2016) corroborates this:

Anyone in his right mind would expect that the client's main concern when engaging a professional translation agency is to get a high-quality translation. Not so. Studies have shown that most clients are in fact more interested in speed than in quality. This is not to say that your client will be pleased to accept any trash as long as he gets it fast; the point is that quality standards in a business context are different from those in an academic context, and may be overshadowed by practical concerns.

As a freelance translator or a language service provider it is therefore important to always enter into a dialogue with the client to determine their requirements, as it may not always be wise to offer to provide a perfectly polished translation which will take several days to produce when the client has a contract they need to sign within a twenty-four hour period.

It is, of course, likely that many translation buyers are initially unaware of the differences in translation and that the translator will need to do further client education work in this regard. However, if problems with quality were having a negative effect on that client's business, these quality issues would come to the fore and become a priority for that client.

If translations into the non-native language are meeting a market need, then this must be accepted. If it is not accepted, then this could lead to extremely undesirable consequences. For instance, if professional translators are made to feel that they should not be offering translations into their non-native language and choose to refrain from doing so because they feel that they should follow the native speaker principle at all costs, it is a fact of life that somebody somewhere will provide the translation required, qualified translator or not, native speaker or not. As McAlester (2000) so vividly puts it,

prescribing such translation work [translation into the non-native language] as illegitimate can only lead to it being shunned by conscientious professionals, with the result that, being needed anyway, it will end up being done by the incompetent and the untrained. In demanding a soufflé, and rejecting an omelette, all we shall get is "beaten up eggs".

Since the differences in professional practice and views and requirements in the industry vary so greatly and can be confusing, it is important for universities to sensitise their translation students to these issues. Lack of education in this regard leads to uncertain nervous graduate translators who end up working for low rates at the bottom end of the market and letting clients (in this case generally low-paying language service providers) define their businesses, rather than to self-confident translators who understand the industry they are entering and who are in a position to actively make their own choices. Graduate translators need to be sensitised to the fact that the employment market and business are less about rules and ideals, “shoulds” and “should nots”, and more about reality, needs and honing the skills to meet those needs.

It is important for graduate translators to understand that they do have a choice about whether they wish to translate into the non-native language or not and that this should be a choice they make consciously. Yes, this choice will impact of the types of position they will later apply for, the kinds of client they later work with, the services they offer, the place where they choose to position themselves in the market, and, should they decide against doing so, the additional structures they will need to put in place if they are working in a freelance capacity to ensure that they have a network of translators they can refer their clients to should their client require a translation in the opposite language direction.

If the translation graduate does ultimately go on to pursue an in-house role where translation into the foreign language is a requirement or chooses, as a freelance translator, to offer this service, it is absolutely essential that they have been trained in this reverse skill. Such training sensitises students to the potential problems of translating into the foreign language, which include the fact that translation in the opposite direction tends to take much longer and the fact that the quality of final product may be fit for some purposes but not others.

A certain amount of client education is also part of the freelance translator’s task since many clients are very unfamiliar with the translation process and are unaware that the native language of the translator and language direction can have an effect on quality. Only once they understand this, can they make an informed decision about whether a translation by a translator into the non-native language will meet the requirements in a particular instance. And only once the translator has the necessary information about the client’s requirements can the translator determine whether they wish to submit a quote for the assignment in question or, as the case may be, can accept the rate being offered. One of the most important questions which the freelance translator must ask in this connection is: what would I need to charge, in this instance, in order to ensure a satisfactory hourly rate? This question takes account of the fact that translation into the non-native language generally takes longer and that if the client does require a polished and fluent translation, the difference in quality will likely need

to be compensated for by an additional proofreading step by a native speaker. The costs of this additional step will need to be factored in. Language directionality, like the field of specialisation, should be a choice which translators make and can help them to carve out their niche and ultimately to translate more efficiently.

6. ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF ACTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

Whether graduates ultimately go on to translate only into their native language or also into their non-native language, active foreign language competence is of utmost importance. When it comes to the process of translating into the native language, increased active foreign language competence and experience translating into the foreign language can only be warmly welcomed as this can teach students to read the source text more closely and avoid errors of interpretation. Graduates deciding to pursue an in-house role will likely be faced with tasks which require them to communicate accurately, in writing and orally, with both colleagues and clients to an extremely high standard. Indeed, graduate translators are likely to fail at the relatively simple task of applying for a job in the source language country if their source language skills are not up to scratch since they will inevitably be competing with native speakers of that language. As freelance translators, they will require active foreign language competence all the more since not having these skills will limit their ability to look for jobs and market to clients in their target language markets, where the output is generally lower. In order to run a successful freelance translation business, translators must be able to market themselves. Marketing texts tend to be difficult to write even in one's own language requiring an ability to achieve a certain tone and to observe cultural peculiarities. Potential clients will be unlikely to make excuses for the fact that the translator's native language is not the language in which they are communicating. First impressions count, and many clients assume that translators should be equally competent in both (all) their working languages. Freelance translators working with clients in their source language country may also find themselves having to justify their translation decisions in their source language, which requires a high level of linguistic competence. Finally, networking skills also make up an important part of a successful freelance translator's repertoire. Active foreign language competence naturally instils confidence, which leads to the translator making a more favourable impression both on colleagues and potential clients.

7. CONCLUSION

As has been illustrated, active foreign language competence cannot simply be disregarded in light of the apparent continued advancement of the native speaker principle. It is absolutely essential for both those pursuing in-house language-based positions as well as for those going on to start their own freelance translation businesses, irrespective of whether they decide to translate into their non-native language or not. In short, excellent active foreign language competence makes graduates more competitive and more confident and ultimately gives them choice which will allow them to flexibly evolve in a proactive manner in this ever-changing industry.

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