How to teach writing abstracts in a foreign language?

Marion Ivonne Cohen-Vida

“Politehnica” University of Timisoara, “Faculty of Communication Science, 2, Traian Lalescu, Timisoara, 300223, Romania

Abstract

Writing abstracts is a complex exercise, which implies understanding a text, penetrating another person’s way of thinking and being able to differentiate the essential elements from the accessory ones. This exercise allows the teacher to treat various subjects, forces the students to improve their written expression abilities by rendering the author’s ideas using their own words and shows them how to treat the subject in a rational way in order to obtain a text with the same characteristics as the source one. This paper aims to prove the impact of studying abstract writing on the professional development of future translators.

Keywords: abstract, source text, reduction, translation;

1. Introduction: Why should future translators be taught to write a good abstract?

Knowing how to write a good abstract is very important in our era as the quantity of information in each domain is huge and as we may find ourselves in the situation of reducing long texts to shorter ones, which must contain essential elements. This exercise is very useful for future translators, as they may have to translate a short form of the source text. But what we consider even more important is the fact that this exercise develops certain abilities, which are absolutely necessary for apprentice translators. Deslile (2010, p. 20, our translation), speaking about teaching translation, explains that its object is mainly to develop “a double general competence and four basic skills to be practised at three levels”. The double competence includes, according to Deslile (2010), the understanding of a source text and the re-expressing of its meaning in the target language, a competence which we have to develop during the first year writing seminar in French. That’s why it is advisable for first year students in translation to study the techniques of writing a good abstract.

In order to be useful, an abstract has to be “as concise and as faithful to the source text as possible. The concision is limited by the concern for autonomy, for self-sufficiency” (Baril and Guillet, 1992, p. 120, our translation). The abstract has to be understood without using the source text, a fact which raises the problem of faithfulness, an issue which is also important in translation studies. It has been an essential debate since antiquity whether translation should be faithful to the source language or to the target language. Starting with Cicero who stated that one should not translate “verbum pro verbum” and continuing with the modern theorists, the main question has been to define...
the relation between the source text and the translation. The answers have ranged from the faithfulness to the linguistic structures of the original text to free translation.

Concerning the abstract, faithfulness may be just relative. Even if the gap between the abstract and the source text is not a significant one, from a linguistic point of view the slightest modification of a statement determines a change of its meaning. Students must know that, both in the case of a translation and when summarising a text, there is no perfect or unique solution. Variants are admitted, but they must all satisfy the condition of relative faithfulness to the source text, by having the same structure and expressing the same ideas as the original author did. What differs is the way of rendering these ideas.

Gaillard and Launay (1979, p. 5, our translation), speaking about the importance of knowing how to write a good abstract, show that this exercise “has become part of many written exams in France: Bachelor’s Degree, Professional exams, and admission exams at higher education institutes”. Unfortunately Romanian first year students are not familiar with the rules of writing a good abstract, with the teacher being in the position of correcting their bad habits and teaching them techniques of writing a good abstract.

2. What should students know about writing good abstracts?

Clerc (1992, p. 19, our translation) defines the abstract “as a reduced text, having an imposed number of words, being conceived by a second author who writes as if he/she were the initial author of the text and who tries to preserve the characteristics of the original text”.

Thus an abstract may be considered a reduction of a source text, an exercise which is also called “contraction of text”. The first question is to know the proportion in which the original text has to be reduced. Generally this is given in the label of the exercise. The goal of the abstract is to evaluate the student’s skill in presenting another person’s way of thinking. The student has to know, that he/she is supposed to hide behind the author of the original text. The student is not supposed to either change this way of thinking, or to omit any essential elements and to add any of his/her own ideas.

The students are taught from the very beginning that they have to write the abstract as if they were the author of the original text. That’s why constructions such as: “In this text taken from… the author states that…” or “The author presents the idea that…” must not be used in the abstract as it would become a commentary. Even at the beginning of the abstract such constructions must be avoided. Getting used to writing abstracts as if he/she were the author of the original texts, the student becomes aware of the fact that he/she does not need any introductory constructions. The introduction of the original text provides the material for the introduction of the abstract.

A good abstract renders the “movement” of the original text that a good reader can perceive. The author of the text raises a problem, exposes the facts and finally gets to a conclusion. The text progresses in a certain way and the abstract has to follow this same path. But the student must not take fragments of the text and put them together, or change just a few words of it. Neither is he allowed to make a mechanical reduction of the text paragraph by paragraph or phrase by phrase. A good abstract cannot be written looking at the text, the student has to write it after having understood its development very well. This represents a first similarity with what a student has to do when he gets an assignment of translating a text. An apprentice translator will be tempted to begin the translation the very moment he/she gets the text, translating line after line and paragraph after paragraph, without trying to understand its global meaning. For the abstract the student has to go even further, as he may be put in the situation of having to write the plan of the text, as well (if the text is a long and a complex one).

3. Methods used in writing abstracts

Speaking abstracts, Clerc (1992, p. 27, our translation) makes two comparisons which seem to be very relevant to what we consider a good abstract. First of all she compares it to what “the Jivaro Indians of South America used to do with their enemies, reducing the heads of the captured prisoners to the size of an apple but preserving the main characteristics, such as the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the ears” A second very suggestive comparison of the same author is that an abstract should be similar to the image of what can be seen when a plane takes off. The further the plane is from the earth, the less number of details can be seen, but the structure of the image is the same. At a certain altitude the rivers, the mountains, the hills can still be seen, however later on only the shape of the country surrounded by rivers remains visible.
Having in mind these comparisons, students have to know that the abstract must have an organic unity and must preserve both the same structure substance as the source text.

In what follows we shall try to present a number of techniques we use in written expression seminar with first year students in translation, in order to develop their skills of writing a good abstract.

3.1. Abstract in one phrase

In order to write a good abstract, the students should be able to perceive the essential problem of the source text. That’s why a very profitable exercise is to ask students to reduce the original text to one phrase. This phrase must not be inserted in the abstract at the beginning because it has to present the way of thinking of the author and it would be a mistake to anticipate from the first lines the conclusion of the text. It must not be inserted at the inner part of the abstract either. The students have to know that what they have obtained is not a phrase of the abstract but the axis around which the abstract should be organized. The same exercise of writing one phrase in the target language which should present the essence of the text in the source language is a very useful one for apprentice translators.

3.2. Abstract based on the notes made on the text

For the long and complex texts a good method which precedes the writing of the abstract is to work on the text, to underline and frame certain elements of the original text. This work does not aim to bring up the elements which will be preserved in the abstract, after having changed a few of them, but it must bring up the structure of the original text.

Thus the following elements must be revealed by this work:
- The units of meaning;
- The connectors between these units;
- The connectors inside the units;
- The elements situated on the same level.

We have adapted the system of underlining and framing used by Clerc (1992, chapter 6) so that we have our own system which we advise students to use (at least at the beginning, because later on they can adopt their own system of working on the text):
- “The important elements will be underlined, while for the key-words a wavy line is to be used.
- The connectors between the great units of meaning are to be framed by a rectangle, while the connectors inside the units will be put in parentheses (if there is a coherent text, the connectors are not so important, juxtaposition being enough to render the relations between the elements).
- The examples, the elements of an enumeration will be surrounded by a circle.
- The great units of meaning which do not necessarily coincide with the paragraphs are separated by a horizontal line, while a dotted line will mark a kind of break within the unit of meaning.” (Cohen-Vida, 2002, p. 54, our translation).

Using this system, the structure of the source text is brought forward, without overloading the text. Those who want to write a few words on the margins of the text are free to do so.

As a result of this work, students establish the units of meaning of the source text, the relations between these units and the number of paragraphs of the abstract. Now they may begin to resume “paragraph after paragraph” because what they have now are no longer the paragraphs of the source text, but the paragraphs of the abstract. According to the number of words required, they will be able to write a good abstract.

3.3. Abstract based on the plan of the text

After having defined the summary as “a restatement, in shortened form and in your own words of the main ideas contained in a reading selection”, Frank (1990, p.1) states that it is “best to prepare the summary from an outline. Outlining and summary writing will help you to read actively instead of passively. They will help you distinguish between generalizations and their supporting details.” We would like to add that the plan of the text will help students answer a frequently asked question namely: “How many paragraphs should the abstract have?” Generally
the abstract has a relatively reduced number of paragraphs. What students should know is that paragraphs have to be consistent, each of them corresponding to a unit of meaning. That is why, in order to determine the number of these units, students will find writing the plan of the text useful. For a while they leave their main goal - writing the abstract- in order to focus on the plan of the text (which will be the plan of the abstract, as well). Clerc (1992, p. 24, our translation) states that “this ability to defer an action in order to take it over later and better characterises the intelligent activity.” This method allows the student to “rethink” the text and to “reformulate” it. In establishing the plan of a text, students are advised to look for the set of oppositions the text is based on, which also have to be found in the abstract.

3.4. Abstract based on the scheme of the text

It is possible, as well for long and complex texts, to visualize the structure of the text before starting to write the abstract. This method, which we highly recommend together with the previous one, consists in establishing a very suggestive and relatively detailed scheme of the source text. The result will be a well structured abstract in which the text is really rethought and reformulated, preserving the author’s way of thinking and the characteristics of the text.

The best method of writing the abstract is established according to the characteristics of the source text, the required dimensions of the abstract and the student’s own choice. More important than this option is the student’s ability to understand the text and to re-express it in a concise way, preserving its distinctiveness.

4. Should the abstract contain words from the source text?

The problem of words from the source text to be used in the abstract is a difficult issue, as it is impossible to establish rules that could be used universally. When discussing this problem, we do not think only about isolated words which may be replaced by their synonyms, but also about parts of sentences and even about the structure of the phrases. Students must know that abstracts in which they simply replace words by their synonyms and copy structures from the source text resemble a word for word translation and are not considered good abstracts, the same way as word for word translations are not recommended in most situations. The phrases of the source text must be forgotten and the abstract must be written according to the new paragraphs which correspond to the units of meaning of the source text. This stage is similar to the “deverbalisation” in the translation process.

However, we can not avoid repeating in the abstract words from the source text, especially if they are keywords. These have to be used, while the author’s specific expressions or phrases should be avoided in the abstract.

The summary may contain quotations of the original text, but one should not use them too frequently. The abstract should give the feeling of being an autonomous text and not “a text taken from another one”. Consequently, we may use quotations only if it is otherwise not possible.

5. Conclusion

The abstract is an exercise of intelligence, and so is the translation. In order to write a good summary, the text must be “rethought” and “reformulated”. It implies an intra-language reformulation, while the translation implies a reformulation in the target language.

A good abstract is obtained only after having practised a lot. The need of training is fundamental in order to acquire the ability to react properly when faced to a source text. The work is comparable to that of translators, but also to that of musicians, dancers or athletes, who can give an impression of ease, only after having practised for long hours.

Writing a good summary requires a good proficiency in French and a minimum of general knowledge. The language proficiency is necessary in order to understand the original text and to avoid very serious mistakes of misunderstanding and misinterpreting when reformulating the text (such mistakes may appear during the translation process, as well). Writing a good abstract does not mean just reducing a source text and replacing a word with another one, it means finding expressions to replace several relevant components of the original text.

Concerning the student’s general knowledge, one must know that it is difficult to make a good abstract of a text when ignoring the subject matter. Experience shows that one does a good summary on a question that he/she knows well. Documentation is very important when writing an abstract, as well as when translating a text.
Writing a good abstract implies, as we have tried to prove, having good written expression abilities, being able to express another person’s thinking in a concise manner (in the required number of words) and using a personal way of putting across the ideas of the source text.

In conclusion, we would emphasize the fact that by learning to write good abstracts, students will know how to express the movement and the structure of the source texts, by using consistent, organized and well articulated paragraphs. This will impose on them a certain intellectual discipline, which is very important for a translator as well.

References