

# Practical knowledge vs translation theory: assessment of students' knowledge

## [Практические знания против теории перевода: оценка уровня знаний студентов]

Larisa G. Fedyuchenko

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### Abstract

The article focuses on the problems of teaching translation theory at the university level and the ways to eliminate the gap between the theory and practice of translation/interpreting. It revises different points of view on the problem and presents the two opposite opinions concerning the theory of translation, i.e. total rejection of translation theory and its justification. The article postulates, that theory and practice of translation/interpreting are interdependent and cannot function separately. The current paper asserts a lack of new educational techniques, which can integrate theory and practice. One of the ways to solve the problem is to rely on the volume and nature of the theory that the students of translation studies acquire during the course. Thus, the survey among the students of Tyumen State University (Tyumen, Russia) has been conducted, and its results show that the majority of them master practical knowledge faster and more willingly; as for the theory, the students learn some fundamental terms but have no clear understanding about their application. The results could be used in developing new teaching methods in the field, which in its turn will help to present translation theory as a means to explain a translation strategy and thus be flexible in decision-making process.

**Key words:** translation theory, translation studies, translation education, teaching methods, the linguistic theory of translation

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### Introduction

Nowadays, translation activity is connected with the processing of information, the value of which is determined by social, economic and legal categories, and translators/interpreters are ensuring national security in the information sphere. Thus, training of highly qualified specialists who successfully can solve professional problems is becoming one of the state's priority strategies in the development of modern linguistic education. The contemporary society demands such translators/interpreters who are able to transmit sense of the original message from another source quickly, fully and accurately, which in its turn stresses the importance of a strong theoretical and methodological foundation and search for adequate technological solutions to ensure and evaluate the quality of vocational training in the field.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Russian translation training systems were built in line with the linguistic translation studies or reflected the laws of language education (Min'yar-Beloruichev (1980); Komissarov (2001); Latyshev (2008)). In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker, 2001: 541) we can find such a proof:

“Theoretical investigations of translation in Russia are largely carried out within a linguistic framework. Most researchers regard the linguistic theory of translation as an important branch of the linguistic sciences, alongside general linguistics, comparative linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, text linguistics and other areas of linguistic research.”

As E. V. Alikina (Alikina, 2017: 3) postulates:

“In recent decades, within the framework of the interdisciplinary and anthropocentric paradigms, an independent scientific approach is developing more and more clearly—the teaching methods of translation practice.”

That is why the problem of developing special methods to train different types of translation activities is of current interest (Porshneva (2002); Garbovsky (2007); Gavrilenko (2011); Zainudin and Awal (2012); Karimnia (2012); Clavijo and Marin (2013)). And one of the main issues here, in our point of view, is the problem of translation theory presentation to the students (it is unnecessarily theorized), i.e. the content, quality, and presentation methods of theoretical material which students have to learn under Translation Theory Course or Translation Studies in order to illuminate the gap between the theory and practical skills. It is a very difficult task to do, because translation theory is a complex object that cannot be studied according to a single unified approach. Moreover, unlike foreign universities, where the training of interpreters and translators is separate, the majority of Russian universities combine these educational programs. Such an approach demands special methodological guidelines to the presentation of translation theory.

The volume of necessary theoretical knowledge depends on many factors: the language school and tradition which an educator belongs to; the overall goal of the education (whether we train interpreters or translators, technical translators or community interpreters and so on); the background theoretical knowledge of the students; the methodological approaches adopted in a single education institution; the final competences claimed by the national educational standards and so on.

G. Davies (Davies, 2004: 11) asserts that translation studies have a multifaceted character and is a complex and still relatively unexplored area of study which lacks a rich pedagogical tradition.

We assume that one of the possible solutions of the problem is to focus on the experience of the final-year students who study translation studies. Students' opinion will demonstrate the volume of acquired knowledge, its character (theoretical or practical), and maturity of the skills.

In this regard, the aim of this article is to present the results of students-translators' survey who were asked to assess the degree of their translation theory mastery in order to find out whether the current method of translation theory presentation is too theorized and thus needs to be improved.

### **Theory and Translation**

There is an ambiguous attitude to the translation theory within the professional community. The first reason is that the term *translation theory* itself is very heterogeneous, since there is no common opinion about what is considered to be a theory and what is considered to be a translation.

If we explain the term *theory* from the point of view of the methodology of science (in our case, it is translation theory), then *Sociological Dictionary* has the following definition (Sociological Dictionary, 2017):

“It is regarded as the most complex and developed form of organization of scientific knowledge, which gives a holistic view of the essential links of a certain area of reality—the object of this theory.”

Analyzing a number of dictionary definitions of the term, we can distinguish the following ones:

- Merriam Webster Dictionary (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2017): a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena;
- Merriam Webster Dictionary (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2017): the analysis of a set of facts in their relation to one another;
- The Free Dictionary (The Free Dictionary, 2017): a set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena;
- one of the possible explanations for the observed phenomena;
- a system of interrelated statements, conclusions, assumptions and hypotheses;
- an abstract common vision of the realm of reality, usually including the formulation of general concepts;
- a theory can be explained as a lens with which we can view something. It is a way of viewing what seems to be a coherent field of data calling for explanation (Frank, 2008: 1).

So, we can view theory either as an explanatory technique to explain some phenomena or as a notion whose function is to formulate some abstract reasoning.

The problem is even more complicated with the definition of the term *translation*: there is a fairly large number of various interpretations of this concept, starting from very broad: translation is a text translated from one language to another, and ending with more specific definitions affecting a specific aspect of this process, for example, N. K. Garbovsky (Garbovsky, 2008: 46) defines it in the following way:

“Translation is a public function of communicative mediation between people using different language systems, implemented in the course of psychophysical activity of a bilingual and in reflection of reality on the basis of his individual abilities of the interpreter, the transition from one semiotic system to another for the purpose of an equivalent, i.e. the fullest but always partial transfer of a meaning system, enclosed in the original message.”

The absence of any umbrella definition of the term means “weakness” of translation theory and lack of educational techniques in the field, as A. Trosborg (Trosborg, 1994: 9) states:

“Translation still seems to be a mysterious phenomenon which defies understanding and still lacks a comprehensive theory which can explain what it is and how it happens.”

Thus, we have a kind of vicious circle according to K. Malmkjær (Malmkjær, 1992: 25):

“There is, apparently, not a single theory of translation, but many, and this multiplicity goes hand in hand with an apparent inability on the part of translation theorists to agree on what is to count as 'translation'.”

Being the subject of the study, translation can be viewed either as a product (the completed translation to be compared with the source text), or as a process (analyzing strategies of translation), or as translation in its function (questioning the translational environment) (Stolze, 2011: 21). The first vision of translation we can support by the opinion of J. House (House, 2015: 2) who writes the following:

“Translation can be defined as the result of a linguistic-textual operation in which a text in one language is re-contextualized in another language. As a linguistic textual operation, translation is, however, subject to, and substantially influenced by, a variety of extra-linguistic factors and conditions.”

Some Oxford explanatory dictionaries define translation as a process but not only as a purely linguistic activity (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2017):

“the process of translating words or text from one language into another; a written or spoken rendering of the meaning of a word or text in another language; the conversion of something from one form or medium into another; the process of moving something from one place to another.”

From our point of view, the interpretation of the term *translation* depends greatly on the “end user” of the translation, and thus, there is no need to develop a universal vision of the concept: under different conditions it will have various interpretations.

Such a complex nature of translation is reflected by a variety of metaphors, some of which we quote below.

- R. S. Valentino (Valentino, 2012): “I’ve been thinking about translation as a kind of adoption, as when one adopts a child. You take her from her home context, love and care for her, teach her what you know, and then, when she gets big enough and, you hope, has learned enough from you to live on her own, you introduce her to the world and hope she can thrive.”
- R. Benjamin (Benjamin, 2013): “Translation is a handshake. It always takes place between a translator and the original author . . . With the handshake you are reaching out to them and you are also asking for their trust.”
- S. Cotter (Cotter, 2014): “The process of translation feels like playing chess with a more talented opponent, who makes a seemingly mysterious move with the rook. Maybe a piece is left unguarded as a result, maybe the position seems more awkward, and I stare and stare at the board, trying to guess the point. Why this enjambment? Why didn't the character respond to the flashing light? Why put the word ‘dentures’ in the middle of the sentence, rather than the end?”
- K. Lee (Chaffee, 2016): “Translation is a strange art. One translates out of a faith in and love for a language, then realizes that the gaps between two languages will betray each time.”

Thus, we see that translation is a multifaceted activity/product, often a subjective process without a definitive interpretation. Hence, the ambiguous interpretation of the translation theory and the polar views on its place in the process of training translators are quite understood.

### **Translation Theory: pros and cons**

The professionals’ opinions on translation theory can be divided into two large groups: 1) absolute rejection of the theory; and 2) attempts of the academic community to justify translation theory in the eyes of practicing professional translators and naturally integrate it into the training process of students.

All points of view of professional translators of the first group can be reduced to one statement by S. Morgenbesser (Frank, 2008: 13):

“To explain why a man slipped on a banana peel, we do not need a general theory of slipping.”

Among the arguments against translation theory are the following:

- A. Sakamoto (Sakamoto, 2014: 11): the theories of translation currently preferred in academia do not sufficiently cover the reality of translation practice;
- A. G. Vitrenko (Vitrenko, 2003): “careless term-making”, which makes it difficult to understand and master the foundations of translation theory;
- A. G. Vitrenko (Vitrenko, 2011): excessive “metaphorical translation” and slow implementation of research results in the practice of translation;
- lack of understanding of what to teach and how;
- multiple theories of translation;
- absence of a homogeneous subject of research.

Based on a number of studies on this topic, we can conclude that practicing translators mainly “blame” translation theory that it is out of the realities of translation, and therefore in many respects it looks artificially.

N. K. Garbovsky (Garbovsky, 2008: 30) believes that this attitude of practitioners is explained by the fact that “at a certain formation period of this theory (the beginning of the second half of the 20th century), the translation theorists agreed with the opinion that the translation theory is an applied branch of linguistics.” In our opinion, the statements of some translators—translation theory is not needed or anyone who possess a special gift and learn from their own experience can translate well—do not quite reflect the reality. Whenever an interpreter ponders how to translate a particular piece of text, he/she begins to theorize, build his/her hypotheses and formulate a translation strategy. Not to mention those cases when it is necessary to give a review of a translation or to edit a translated text.

Therefore, we believe that it makes sense to include translation theory into training course for students-translators. To support this view, we can come up with the following arguments

In 2009, D. Catan (Catan, 2009), a teacher of English and translation at the University of Salento, Italy, conducted an international study, whose tasks included an attempt to find answers to the following questions: how effectively is the theory of translation in high schools, whether it promotes the development of professional skills and whether the theory of translation simplifies the theory. The survey involved 1000 respondents from 25 countries (practicing translators who have a university level of preparation, teachers of translation/interpreting, teachers of translation theory, students, and translators). Participants in the survey had to answer a number of questions, including the question of the university disciplines required in the training course for translators. More than 50% of respondents noted the translation theory as a necessary discipline, and in the group of practicing translators, 32% noted the translation theory as an “important” discipline and only 9% said it was “optional”.

Based on the results of A. Sakamoto’s (Sakamoto, 2014: 37-38) review of the works of foreign authors devoted to various theories of translation (in the Western translation school it is common to teach several translation theories simultaneously, thus providing a choice to students), the following arguments can be singled out to “defend” teaching translation theory/theories:

- they give translators more choices when generating translation / they make creative translators (Pym, 2010)
- they help translators with their decision-making in selecting the best solution (Bartrina, 2005)
- they make the training process efficient and speedy (Lederer, 2007; Schjoldager, 2008)

- they give translators a common metalanguage (Nord, 2005; Pym, 2010)
- they give translators explanatory power (Schjoldager, 2008)
- they promote consistency in translation assessment (Tennent, 2005)
- they make translators aware of matters of translation (Pym, 2010; Nord, 2005; Bartrina, 2005)
- they help make predictions (Chesterman, 2000).
- they provide guidelines for teachers (Zhu, 2002)
- they provide tools for observing and checking one's own progress (Zhu 2002)
- they help systematize translation practices (Bartrina, 2005; Hanna, 2009)

S. Bassnett (Bassnett, 2002: 44-45) postulates that the main function of translation theory is an explanatory one:

“The purpose of translation theory is to reach an understanding of the processes undertaken in the act of translation and, not, as is so commonly misunderstood, to provide a set of norms for effecting the perfect translation.”

In his turn N. K. Garbovsky (Garbovsky, 2008: 46) views translation theory as a kind of theoretical approach to understand and study translation and interpretation:

“The translation theory in the proper sense is not a set of related knowledge about the translation, but a certain research program, a theoretical model, through the prism of which all the various aspects of translation activity could be studied: linguistic, psychological, aesthetic, communicative, etc.”

Thus, we see that the instrumental theory is required today because it has an “explanatory power”, as D. Gile (Gile, 2009) postulates, without theoretical knowledge, it will be difficult for students to understand what translation is, how the quality of translations is assessed, what professional competencies are, and how to explain their own choice of various methods of translation. In addition, according to G. Shreve (Tennent, 2005: 250), it is impossible to formulate the logical goals and objectives of teaching translation without a theoretical basis, to create and apply teaching methods and evaluate the translations done by students:

“Translation pedagogy without a theoretical basis will be a blind pedagogy. It will fail to set reasonable objectives, will be unable to create and apply methods appropriate to the learning task, will be unable to measure and evaluate results, and will ultimately fail to create the effective translators our society increasingly demands.”

Finally, the lack of theoretical knowledge can make professional communication between the teacher and the students difficult.

## **The Study**

There are two aims of the study, firstly, to find out the students' opinion about the relevance of translation theory (the studied literature resources have shown that as a rule, the opinion of the students is not considered by the researchers), and secondly, to assess the volume and nature of their knowledge in the field in order to use the results in the future planning of translation studies course.

## Methodology

The study was carried out among 20 final-year students (64.5%) of the Tyumen State University (Tyumen, Russia) who majored translation studies and attended several theoretical courses of lectures: Lexicology, Stylistics, Theoretical Grammar, General Language Science, and Translation Theory.

## Research results

There were several stages of the study. At the first stage, each student received a list of 120 terms denoting the basic concepts of the linguistic theory of translation. The terms were selected from several sources: Explanatory Translation Dictionary by L. L. Nelyubin (Nelyubin, 2003) and textbooks by such authors as V. N. Komissarov (Komissarov, 2001), I. S. Alekseeva (Alekseeva, 2004), and V. V. Sdobnikov (Sdobnikov, Petrova, 2007). The students were asked to assess their level of knowledge of each concept, distributing them into the following 5 groups:

1. I fully understand this concept, use it freely, and can explain it.
2. I do not fully understand this concept; can make mistakes in its interpretation.
3. I do not understand this concept and cannot explain it.
4. I know nothing about this concept, but I read/heard something about the concept several times.
5. I have never heard of it till now.

It should be noted that out of 120 selected terms, only 45 are the terms of translation theory, the rest are the terms of related sciences borrowed by the translation theory, some of which have not lost their original meaning, and some have acquired a new understanding which is different from the original source.

We interpreted the results, proceeding from the fact that 100 to 50% of the ticked terms—mastered, less than 50%—not mastered.

Table 1 shows the results in the first group *I fully understand this concept* and it includes only mastered terms.

**Table 1. Mastered terms of the first group**

Ticked terms, %	Terms
100%	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. bilingual</li><li>2. genre</li><li>3. contextual meaning of the word</li><li>4. simultaneous interpreting</li><li>5. note taking</li><li>6. consecutive interpreting</li></ol>
95%	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. culture-specific words</li><li>2. inversion</li><li>3. concretization</li><li>4. target language</li><li>5. word-base translation</li><li>6. word by word translation</li></ol>
90%	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. generalization</li><li>2. literal translation</li><li>3. loan translation</li><li>4. rheme</li></ol>
85%	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. linguo-ethinc barrier</li><li>2. translation transformations</li><li>3. translation means</li><li>4. transformation</li><li>5. semantic structure of the word</li></ol>

80%	1. target text 2. translation unit 3. key information 4. corpus 5. background information
75%	1. denotation 2. usage
70%	1. grammatical transformations 2. source text 3. speech act 4. communicative function of the text 5. sentence fragmentation 6. translated text
65%	1. phrase based interpretation 2. translation adequacy 3. connotation 4. word-for-word translation 5. grammatical form of the word 6. translation equivalents
60%	1. sight interpreting 2. communicative competence 3. communicative task
55%	1. variant equivalent 2. meaning extension 3. translation equivalence 4. text integrity 5. translator's linguistic persona
50%	1. source language 2. invariant 3. lexical extension 4. speech compression 5. untranslatability theory 6. narrow context 7. broad context

As we see, 100% of the respondents identified six terms among which the last three terms belong to the translation theory. At the same time, more than half of the respondents (15 people) indicated that they did not use the term *bilingual* at all.

In general, from 100 to 50% of the students identified 54 terms, 27 of which are terms of the translation theory. Thus, we can assume that 45% of the total number of the proposed terms is fully mastered by the students. Among them there are seven terms that the students do not use: *bilingual*, *linguo-ethnic barrier*, *denotation*, *connotation*, *communicative competence*, *translator's linguistic persona*, *untranslatability theory*.

Analyzing the composition of the terms defined in this group, we conclude the following: the students distinguish different types of translation transformations, but they do not realize the transformations as components of a single system of transformations, i.e. as a set of translation tools. This is what translation theory should strive for—to form a system of knowledge about translation in the minds of students studying translation. For example, the umbrella term *translation transformation* includes the following subnotions: *concretization*, *generalization*, *sentence fragmentation*, *semantic extension*, and *speech compression*, i.e. all these are transformation types. However, the students' answers show the following:

95% of the respondents identified *concretization*,

90%—*generalization*,

85%—*translation transformations*,

70%—*sentence fragmentation*,

55%—*semantic extension*,  
 50%—*speech compression*.

It turns out that some students understand these concepts as isolated abstract units, rather than segments of a single system of transformations.

A similar tendency we trace with the understanding of a number of other terms. Thus, 100% of the respondents ticked the term *contextual meaning of the word*, which is an umbrella term, including a number of subnotions, without which its full understanding is impossible. But the results show that the subnotions forming the meaning of this term and related terms do not have 100%. Thus, 80% of the respondents ticked the term *background information*,  
 75%—*denotation and usage*,  
 65%—*connotation*,  
 55%—*variant equivalent*,  
 50%—*broad context and narrow context*.

It means that students have a “practical” understanding of this concept, but there is no a “theoretical” one, i.e. a systemic understanding.

Table 2 shows the results in the group *I do not fully understand this concept*.

**Table 2. Mastered terms of the second group**

Tickd terms, %	Terms
85%	accurate translation
65%	probable prognosis
60%	parallel translation explication stylistic transformation linguistic competence
55%	topic-comment relation output vocabulary semantic analysis contextual substitution
50%	recipient semantic for of the word communication task text rhythm levels of translation equivalence semantic structure of the word

Here the students identified only 16 terms, 5 of them refer to translation theory:

85%—*accurate translation*,  
 55%—*contextual substitution*,  
 50%—*semantic structure of the word*,  
 50%—*recipient*,  
 50%—*levels of translation equivalence*.

It is worth mentioning that 85% of the respondents ticked the term *equivalent* and 55%—*variant equivalent* as “totally understood”, but these concepts are not perceived by the students as the terms of the V. N. Komissarov Theory of Equivalence Levels, although the theory was considered in details, and at the seminars the students were asked to analyze the source and target texts according to the five levels of the theory.

In the group *I do not understand this concept*, the respondents ticked 4 terms: 54%—*communicative and functional theory of translation*,

46%— *text segmentation, text rhythm, functional dominant of the text*.

Interestingly, less than a half of the students (13 out of 20 respondents) ticked this category.

In the fourth group *I know nothing about this concept, but I met this concept several times (I read something, I heard something)*, 19 out of 20 respondents ticked 5 terms:

58% —*functional dominant of the text*;

53% —*the theory of regular matching* (but 65% of the respondents indicated the adjacent term *matching* and 55%—*variant equivalent*, as *I fully understand this concept*);

47%—*coherence, interference, and dynamic equivalence* (but 85% of the respondents ticked the term *equivalent*, 65%—*translation adequacy*, 55%—*translation equivalence*, and 50%—*invariant as I fully understand this concept*, i.e. the key concept of the theory of dynamic equivalence (*equivalent*) and the adjacent concepts are not perceived as parts of one theory).

In the category *I have never heard of it till now*, 10 students out of 20 marked 3 terms:

80%—*translatology*,

60%—*activity theory of translation*,

50% — *superphrasal unity*.

At the second stage of the study, the students were asked to identify those terms that they used in the process of translation / interpretation.

In the category *I use the term*, from 100 to 50% of the respondents ticked 60 terms (we did not deliberately consider the terms that were identified by less than 50% of the respondents), of which 100% of the respondents ticked the term *generalization*.

If to compare these results with those of the first stage, we get the following: 90% of the respondents ticked the term *generalization* in the group *I fully understand this concept*.

The students ticked 11 terms out of the 60 selected ones in the groups *I do not understand* and *I know nothing*, i.e. some of the students applied the metalanguage of translation theory without clear understanding of its content, as a result, we have a low level of students' explanatory skills. Very often it is difficult for them to explain their own translation strategy or criticize someone's translation professionally.

In the group *I do not use the term*, 90–55% of the respondents marked 56 terms, of which 21 terms belong to translation theory. At the same time, such terms as *descriptive translation theory*, *activity theory of translation*, *theory of regular matching*, *dynamic equivalence* got the highest percentage (90%) of negative answers.

Thus, we can conclude, that the students select practical techniques from the translation theory course that form the operational skills of translation, and this knowledge is best mastered by them.

## Conclusion

The results show, that the students master practical techniques more easily and they are ready to use them in their future profession, which should be taken into account in the course of translation theory. Thus, it should not be presented as some kind of abstract static knowledge, which the students just need to know in accordance with the curriculum. We are to ensure that translation theory is perceived by the students as a means of understanding the translation process, as a way of formulating one's own conscious actions in the translation process, as a set of techniques to perform an adequate equivalent translation of a high quality. Based on the results, we suppose it is necessary to improve the teaching of explanatory theories. Thus, it is possible to narrow the gap between theory and practice, which, undoubtedly, will form the integrity of a single system of knowledge about translation.

The above mentioned proofs the necessity to develop new methods for translation theory presentation with account of the real mastering of the theory and modern requirements for translators/interpreters.

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Assoc. Prof., PhD. Fedyuchenko Larisa  
 Institute of Social and Sciences and Humanities  
 Tyumen State University  
 6, ulitsa Volodarskogo,  
 625003, Tyumen  
 Russia  
 lfedyuchenko@mail.ru