What Japanese University Students Need to Know

About Their Translation and Interpretation Courses

BRIAN G. RUBRECHT

Instructors who teach translation and interpretation at the university level face numerous challenges, many of which stem from the fact that such courses rarely last beyond one or two semesters. Moreover, many students enroll in such short-term courses with erroneous assumptions about course content and unrealistic expectations about what they can accomplish in such a short span of time. The author outlines ten concepts to be presented to students so that they may be realistic and productive in their learning goals and receive maximum benefit from their courses.

As technological development increasingly shrinks our world and brings us into greater contact with people of different cultures and varied linguistic backgrounds, it behooves institutions of higher education, both within Japan and abroad, to provide students with courses on translation and interpretation (hereafter, T/I). For non-foreign language majors, such courses round out students' education and can only be considered beneficial. For foreign language majors, such courses are indispensable. In the past authors railed against universities for failing to provide such courses (Balupuri, 1997; Gentzler, 2001). Others have noted how methodologies associated with T/I have ascended from disfavor to become valid literary pursuits and are even encouraged in second or foreign language learning contexts if used appropriately and with the proper understanding (Maier, 1998; Nae, 2004).

Unfortunately, even if university students have various T/I courses from which to choose, their instructors are still plagued by numerous obstacles that hinder their teaching effectiveness. One such obstacle is the mismatch between what a university T/I course can provide students and what students expect to gain from taking the course. These inaccurate student assumptions can eventually lead to dissatisfaction and disaffection on the part of the students, which in turn can hinder the efficacy of the curriculum. Even the best universities are not designed to be professional translation or interpretation schools. There are limits to what instructors can teach and to what students can learn, particularly in the semester or two of T/I offered by most universities.

Although each university has its own rationale for offering T/I courses (just as each instructor subscribes to his or her own methodological and pedagogical procedures), students still need to be aware of what it means to learn about and engage in T/I at university, which includes their grasping of the limitations inherent in the courses offered. Providing students with knowledge about what they can expect from their university T/I courses is not meant to discourage them or diminish their enthusiasm, but rather to provide them with a realistic perspective so that they may reach attainable goals.

The Ten Concepts

Ideally, the following ten concepts should be presented to prospective T/I students before their enrollment in such courses so that they may know what is involved with the courses and what is required in order to conduct T/I. As this would likely be impossible for numerous practical reasons, it is recommended that T/I instructors discuss these concepts during the very first lesson of a course. These concepts originated mainly from personal experience in teaching T/I and are presented here only as suggestions. Instructors should feel free to add or delete concepts depending on their own preferences and on the goals of the course. It is hoped that if students are made aware of these concepts at the outset of a T/I course, they will have a better understanding of what is involved with T/I, the role of the T/I course as part of their education, and their own role in learning.

Concept 1: Students should not expect to become proficient at T/I while still at university.

Though it is of course possible for students to gain considerable knowledge about T/I technique while at university, such knowledge will likely only be superficial and will not have involved a considerable amount of practical application. Students often enroll in T/I courses expecting to emerge with professional T/I skills after only a semester or two of study. Such expectations are far from realistic. It takes professional translators and interpreters years of training and hands-on experience to reach a workable level of proficiency. Without proper instruction, students may not appreciate all that is required for professional T/I and may become disillusioned after a few weeks of study. Tell them early. Temper students' unrealistic expectations into realistic ones so that the students who are serious about pursuing T/I as a career may consider their study time at university as a working foundation. Armed with appropriate expectations, the students who are less serious about T/I will not direct their frustrations at the course, the instructor, the university, or themselves.

Because the most a university T/I course can do is acquaint students with the essential elements of T/I, the major aim of such courses should simply be that: acquaintance with T/I processes. Students should of course gain more knowledge of the source and target languages, but they should additionally be required to understand something of the socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds behind the languages in question (Balupuri, 1997), especially if they wish to improve in accuracy and clarity of meaning. Cote (1990) states two principal objectives explicitly for introductory-level translation courses (which are similar and equally valid for interpretation courses):

1. Provide an opportunity to develop skills through practice.
2. Acquaint students with the fundamentals of the translation (or interpretation) process.

While both are important, the latter should be a commonly understood rule for all university T/I classes. One may even take the position that unless students are majoring in translation and/or interpretation, the most they will likely get from taking such classes is simply some familiarity with T/I.

Concept 2: Translators and interpreters must be strong in both body and mind.

Relaying this concept to students may cost instructors much in terms of time and effort. Many students enroll in university T/I courses expecting to do normal class activities such as in-class and homework assignments and believing the only prerequisite is knowledge of a foreign language. T/I requires much more, particularly commitment on the part of the translator or interpreter to grasp the written or spoken message from one language and convey it accurately and succinctly in another language. To do this well, students will need both physical endurance and mental fortitude.

To convey the message behind this concept, I tell my T/I students the story of the plight of an acquaintance's Romanian friend who worked as a company secretary. Being bilingual, she was requested to engage in some impromptu Romanian-English interpretation work for visiting Romanian businessmen. Her day of interpreting started early in the morning and finished just before midnight. As the interpreter, she had eaten almost nothing the entire day, for she could not interpret with her mouth full of food. She not only had to be available and ready to interpret every message being spoken but had to be on her mental toes and interpret quickly and accurately. Needless to say, this required a tremendous amount of concentration. The next day at the office the exhausted secretary was upset to learn that her coworkers envied her and her "day off," for they believed that her bilingualism allowed her to naturally and easily interpret between languages. The secretary had to convince them that such was not the case. Her ordeal neatly exemplifies the need for mental concentration plus physical effort when conducting interpretation. Just sitting at a desk and constantly looking up terms in a dictionary or reference texts, which translators are often forced to do, also requires a significant amount of energy.

Researchers often list the various requirements needed to conduct T/I (see Massoud, 1988; Ward, 1992), and often their lists overlap. Balupuri (1997) presents a list of requirements for simultaneous interpreting, which is one of the most extreme forms of T/I due to the physical and mental demands on the interpreter. The list is also useful for those engaged in other forms of T/I, since they are all required to some degree. The list, which I have divided into body/mind categories, is as follows:

BODY:
    1. Voice
    2. Clear diction
    3. Physical strength

MIND:
    1. A perfect knowledge of the source and target languages
    2. Background knowledge of the country/countries where a language is spoken
    3. Excellent memory (especially short-term memory)
    4. Quick reaction
    5. Anticipatory skills
    6. Erudition

Balupuri makes it a point to single out the requirements of good memory, good organizational skills, and physical endurance for simultaneous interpreters. *Physical strength* (listed under the BODY category above) may actually be one of the most important factors in interpretation, for fatigue "affects the sound, the precision and the speed of translation, which in turn tells upon the quality of translation resulting in the loss of information" (p. 34). One should also be capable of self-control (i.e., able to deal with stress) in order to reduce unnecessary physical exertion.

A number of the skills listed above are equally applicable to translation. For instance, translators require strength so that they may stay focused for long periods of time and concentrate on the task at hand. Massoud (1988) also insists that translators be good writers because they must be able "to spot (from among three or four possibilities) the most effective way of conveying the correct meaning. Only then will translators succeed in their task and become communicators" (p. 17).

Concept 3: Knowing another language is necessary but insufficient for conducting T/I.
The ability to read and write in two languages is a prerequisite for T/I, but such skills are far from sufficient. A good translator or interpreter need not be perfectly adept in all four skill areas of both languages, since fluency in the source language is only needed for special areas (Ward,

1992). Regardless, the uninformed tend to equate language knowledge (however superficial) with T/I ability. As evinced in the example story above, there are other requirements for conducting T/I beyond simply knowing two languages.

That knowledge of language is not sufficient for conducting T/I bodes both good and ill for university students. Positively speaking, students need not feel that they must be fully proficient in the foreign language, nor that they must have perfect command of the foreign language upon enrollment in the course. Only professional translation schools expect students to have a high level of proficiency in another language (Cordero, 1984). Negatively speaking, students may initially be overconfident in their own foreign language ability, especially if they count their years of English study or trips abroad as indications that they are ready to conduct T/I. One's perspective and frame of mind can partially dictate whether or not a person is prepared to begin T/I study.

To avoid disheartening students, instructors are encouraged to remind them that they have likely been doing T/I from the moment they began studying English. People often rely on mental translation when learning foreign languages, which, according to Kern (1994), is important from a developmental perspective. Moreover, as nearly all students enrolled in Japanese universities are native Japanese and have gone through Japan's primary and secondary education system, the chances are good that they have had their language ability assessed via translation activities (Buck, 1992).

Concept 4: Conducting T/I is part of the process of language learning rather than its result.

This concept follows from the one preceding. T/I ability does not directly develop from language learning. It is also incorrect to assume that becoming involved in T/I is the next logical step to take after one has learned and practiced using another language. While there is certainly some overlap between language learning and conducting T/I, each activity uses its own distinct methodologies (Maier, 1998). It is better to consider T/I within the framework of constant learning and the addition of skills rather than simply the application of current knowledge.

Instructors should stress that one must continually learn new things in a variety of fields. As listed by Ward (1992), one of seven necessary skills for T/I involves "an elementary knowledge of, interest in and ability to learn rapidly the basics of a wide variety of technical fields and their vocabularies in all the languages with which one works even though one has no experience in these fields" (p. 579). It is not possible to expect students to use only their language ability to conduct T/I. It is more a matter of adding and refining knowledge, which includes expanding one's vocabulary and striving to improve the four language skills.

Unfortunately, the nature of translation and its function in language learning has for too long gone unspecified (Cordero, 1984). It is likely that many T/I instructors have encountered students who wished to "kill two birds with one stone," that is, to learn a language by taking a T/I course. Conducting T/I cannot be considered language learning per se. For example, engaging in translation practice may aid one's speaking of a foreign language but does not necessarily foster communication skills (Maier, 1998). Although translation has often been used as a test instrument to assess language learning, especially in Japan (Buck, 1992), this assessment method may in fact not always be the appropriate one to use. The method should be decided based on the many aspects of a particular language learning situation.

Concept 5: The ultimate aim for T/I students should be to make others understand.

It is commonly understood that translators and interpreters should strive to accurately convey meaning. In a similar vein, T/I students at university should learn to communicate messages between languages. However, they must be aware that messages can differ depending upon situational

context. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1958, as cited in Cordero, 1984), there are three main areas of translation: the *educational* area (for verifying comprehension and assessing accuracy), the *professional* area (for helping others understand), and the *linguistic* area (for research and linguistic analysis). As Japanese T/I students are not necessarily being tested on their comprehension, nor are they conducting linguistic research, they should realize that their aim in translating lies squarely in the professional area. The reasons for stating this are twofold.

First, Japanese university students have already passed through the educational area to reach the university level. Their comprehension and accuracy in English have been tested and verified in their previous language classes. The linguistic area, on the other hand, is considerably more complex and is beyond the scope of most university T/I classes. Students should endeavor to overcome the difficulties encountered in communicating a source-language meaning in the target language so that it may be easily and accurately comprehended, which is why Cote (1990) insists students realize how catastrophic guessing in T/I can be. Guessing indicates deficiencies in message comprehension. How could a translator or interpreter possibly make others understand if he or she does not fully understand the original message?

To help others comprehend meaning, Massoud (1988) recommends translators to ask themselves two basic questions about the source language message:

1. What does it mean?
2. How should it be said in the new (other) language?

By way of example, to address the first question, there may be sarcasm embedded in the original message (e.g., someone says "What a lovely day" in the midst of a hurricane). The translator must understand the intended sarcasm and properly convey it so that it remains subtle yet evident. The second question concerns stylistic intent and adjusting message conveyance. For instance, though the source language message was uttered in one sentence, the translated message may sound better if conveyed via three or four short sentences. Massoud (1988) was correct in stating that "good translators…do not try to reproduce the formal order of words or phrases, nor do they try to find one-for-one sets of verbal correspondence. What they do aim at is a faithful reproduction of the original so that the meaning of the message and its spirit may be satisfactorily communicated" (p. 35).

Concept 6: Not all students will find all T/I assignments interesting.
Not a few students find this sixth concept a bitter pill to swallow. Students enthusiastic about learning the tricks of the T/I trade can quickly become dejected when they learn that they will be asked to translate material outside of their areas of interest. An all-too-common example involves students interested in foreign music and movies – the reasons why they became interested in English to begin with – balking at the idea of translating "boring" material: newspaper clippings and short magazine articles. Students should learn early that translators rarely have the luxury of choosing their assignments. This is not to say that translators cannot specialize in areas that interest them, but translators (both full-time and freelance) will quickly find themselves out of work if they decline to translate documents just because those documents do not coincide with their own areas of interest.

Interest in a T/I topic, though definitely beneficial, should not be the students' sole focus. T/I at university should be about practice and gaining perspective on how to approach translations. For the instructor, this means choosing assignments from a variety of sources (Cote, 1990) that allow students to work both to and from English and the students' native language (Maier, 1998), providing, of course, that there is no overarching theme behind the T/I class, such as "conference interpreting" or "medical translation." For typical introductory T/I courses, the instructor can find

material from many different areas: computer magazines, advertisements, television sitcoms, or even from the university catalog, so long as the messages and sources are varied and provide students with challenges and opportunities to practice.

Concept 7: Always keep the purpose behind the T/I assignment in mind.
      While I agree with Hu (1999) that an interpretation of a text depends upon what the translator brings to the reading of that text and that individual interpretations can arise from numerous sources (e.g., cultural background, subject-matter familiarity, etc.), there are nevertheless inherent components of a text that a translator must identify and come to terms with. The translator's cognitions and intuitions about meanings can only be put to use after close inspection of the text. T/I students often fail to ask the fundamental questions that all good translators ask themselves concerning a text, including its original purpose and its intended purpose after translation.
      Many authors besides Hu (e.g., Cordero, 1984; Ishikawa, 1995; Massoud, 1988) have discussed what questions translators should ask themselves about the text. In general, they all agree that before beginning an assignment, the conscientious translator or interpreter should consider the following questions:

   1. Who is the author?
   2. Who is the intended audience of the original text?
   3. Who is the intended audience of the translated text?
   4. Is it possible to remain faithful to the style and intent of the original text while also providing a natural style in the translated text?

      While these questions may be crucial when conducting T/I, the training and practice in which students engage at university, including practice of pronunciation, writing, vocabulary building, and increased comprehension of translation strategies, can inadvertently confuse students. University T/I training should assist students in their aim of clearly and effectively communicating the intent of the piece being translated or the message behind the words being interpreted. It therefore becomes vital to understand the various pieces of the text: who the author is, who the audience is, and so on.
      As many instructors can attest, students rarely see the forest for the trees. Students will view pronunciation and writing training as only practice to improve pronunciation and writing. They do not see how such practice presents them pieces of the larger puzzle that is T/I. Even if told explicitly that such training is giving them the very tools needed for effective T/I, students will still tend to view such practice as isolated and independent.
      It has been my experience that, even after being continually reminded, students will still engage in T/I coursework with their own agendas, that is, to (a) get *any* meaning from the original text, whether or not it is the intended meaning, and (b) simply complete the T/I assignment because they have other classes to study for and other responsibilities that require their attention. The result is that students will forsake both faithfulness and naturalness in their translations in exchange for expediency. To remedy this situation, I direct my students' attention to a two-step process.
      First of all, I instruct them to try to understand what the author is saying and the intended context. In my university T/I classes I have gotten my students to do much work with the English version of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's book "The Little Prince." Overlooking the book's context (i.e., the fact that it is a children's book written from an adult's perspective) has given my students unlimited problems. Second, when my students attempt a translation of a sentence or a paragraph, I tell them that it should of course make sense after being translated. Even so, there is no need to sacrifice naturalness in the translated version. Students must respect the author, the text, and their own role as the translator of the text.

Concept 8: T/I ability requires more than comprehension of word-level meanings.

Following from the previous concept, university T/I students must be prepared to move beyond their vocabulary limitations. Such lexical limitations can be placed into two categories: word meanings from linguistic and cultural perspectives, respectively.

To explain the former, imagine students in a T/I course come across the word "minute." They may initially conclude this word to mean "a unit of time sixty seconds in duration," yet suppose the sentence in question is: "The minute amount of work presented the girl little problem." The meaning and pronunciation of the word "minute" turns out to be quite different from how the students (erroneously) concluded. Unless they attempt to decode the author's meaning in the context of this and the surrounding sentences, the students will remain confused about the sentence's meaning and will translate the sentence incorrectly. T/I instructors must therefore make it a priority to convey how source language words cannot simply be translated into target language words without taking context into account. Not only is one-to-one correspondence between words in two languages a rarity, but also terms in one language may not even have linguistic or cultural references in the other, which occasionally is the case because words are but the mechanism by which "whole areas of meaning" (Cordero, 1984, p. 353) are conveyed.

In addition to words differing in lexical meaning, they may also present cultural connotations that must be acknowledged and dealt with. This can be one of the most difficult yet common challenges for a translator (Cincotta, 1995). As language is reflective of cultural systems (Balupuri & Munjal, 1997), the attempt to find a common middle ground between two different linguistic systems has been the job (and ultimate challenge) of translators over the millennia. How the translator will convey the meaning of a word or phrase in the source language with no direct or even indirect equivalent in the target language requires a deep understanding of the word's cultural connotations. It hence becomes necessary for translators to be good writers who can balance faithfulness and naturalness by conveying the intended meaning of the text yet not reduce it to what is obviously a translation (Massoud, 1988).

Concept 9: You are never really finished when you complete a translation or interpretation assignment.

Unlike assignments in many other university courses (e.g., assignments asking students to fill in worksheets, answer questions in a workbook, etc.), a translator cannot consider a translation complete after the last word has been written. T/I assignments require checking, proofreading, editing, and an assessment of how the source language meaning was ultimately rendered in the target language (i.e., faithfulness and naturalness). The situation is no different in interpretation, for the interpreter cannot just state something in the target language and then forget about it completely. A good interpreter will continually assess his or her interpretation of messages and make adjustments as necessary. If the interpreter realizes a mistake has been made in rendering the source message, it is usually possible to interject at some point and rectify the error. Translators and interpreters must therefore constantly analyze and assess their work at every stage.

Continual reassessment of translations is not a novel concept. Other authors present similar steps (see Rose, 1981). However, I find Percival's (1983, as cited in Cote, 1990) five recommended steps the simplest for presentation in my university T/I courses:

1. Read through the text to be translated.
2. Research the subject to be translated.
3. Translate the text.
4. Put the translation aside for 48 hours.

5. Read through the translation again for checking, revising, and editing purposes.

Though it is the task of a translator to state in one language what has already been stated in another, the translation process itself is never a perfect one. The translator or interpreter must always face the difficulty of making judgment calls on a variety of levels. There may occasionally be a loss of meaning in the translated version, which, as has been noted, "provokes a continuous tension" (Newmark, 1981, p. 7) that must be scrutinized and dealt with in the best possible manner. Yet, as Chaudhuri (1999) remarks, "perhaps more than any other intellectual endeavor, translation rests on a basic defeatism of outlook. Whatever other purposes a translation might serve, whatever new creative energies it might unleash, as a translation or rendering it must always be inadequate, never a total reflection or equivalent of the original" (p. 23).

Concept 10: Above all, T/I requires discipline.

This final concept stems partly from Concepts 2 and 9 and partly from personal experience teaching translation at university. This concept means to impress upon students that T/I is a serious endeavor not to be taken lightly. Not a few translators have struggled long into the night, alone, searching for the right wording for a particular phrase. Interpreters often must endure demanding listeners and unsympathetic speakers. Professional translators and interpreters understand the commitment required for T/I work. To quit halfway through a project would be unthinkable, as would be the thought of completing a project without having first exhausted every resource available to produce the best work possible.

Although university T/I students should not be held to the same exacting standards as professional translators and interpreters, they should nevertheless be made to see that discipline and effort are keys to T/I success, and as such, university T/I courses require more discipline from them than almost any other course they will take, including other English courses. As Ward (1992) states: "A translator must be a self-starter, an independent worker with a good dose of perseverance and determination to see a project through without any guidance or supervision, and often without any help even with specialized terminology" as well as have "solid integrity to do the very best job possible, to be absolutely accurate, to avoid taking any shortcuts or doing any 'fudging'" (p. 580).

Conclusion

This brief paper has expounded upon ten concepts deemed important to Japanese university students learning translation and interpretation. Students must learn, understand, and appreciate the demands required of those engaged in T/I. As university T/I courses foster a broad range of skills and development competencies in numerous areas, the more information students have about T/I the better their perspective.

In closing, I shall end this paper with Cordero's (1984) explanation of translation courses:

> [T]he various activities taken up in translation courses are designed to develop practical and marketable skills for the foreign language student. However, the benefits of such courses are not limited exclusively to the development of translation skills. In the process the student has acquired knowledge and competence in other areas of the foreign language as well: he has practiced pronunciation, built up his passive and active vocabulary, deepened his comprehension, and perfected his writing ability. It all adds up to learning to communicate, and that is, after all, what lies at the heart of foreign language learning. (p. 355)

That message is certainly worthy of being translated.

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Appendix: The Ten Concepts

Concept 1: Students should not expect to become proficient at T/I while still at university.
Concept 2: Translators and interpreters must be strong in both body and mind.
Concept 3: Knowing another language is necessary but insufficient for conducting T/I.
Concept 4: Conducting T/I is part of the process of language learning rather than its result.
Concept 5: The ultimate aim for T/I students should be to make others understand.
Concept 6: Not all students will find all T/I assignments interesting.
Concept 7: Always keep the purpose behind the T/I assignment in mind.
Concept 8: T/I ability requires more than comprehension of word-level meanings.
Concept 9: You are never really finished when you complete a translation or interpretation assignment.
Concept 10: Above all, T/I requires discipline.