



## Rethinking the Role of Metalanguage in Teaching/Learning Translation: A Case Study

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### Abstract

Since it started to be scientifically thought and academically taught, translation has generated continuous improving research as far as its process is concerned. Actually, it is commonplace to make translation perfect with limited theoretical material, but this suggests a completely controversial trend: while teachers overlook translation metalanguage importance in training classes, they just miss the acquisition of the outstanding translational competence consisting in describing the process and its issues experiencing. In this respect, the present paper explores the factual presence of translation metalanguage in translation training classes, and seeks to unveil its key role in pedagogical frameworks, with a particular focus on the translator's competence as a didactician. Through a combination of a theoretical background and an empirical analytical review on a case study, all related to a teacher-learner context, and with the introduction of CERTTAL's electronic database for translation and translation terminology, as an assisting methodological tool, the research seeks to shed light on the major and inevitable objectives of metalanguage use in any translation training class. The findings revealed that teaching translation metalanguage spurs the ability of translation practitioners to determine translation errors nature and definitely state their causes to the learner. This enables the latter to activate his cognitive awareness and be able to detect his weakness in order to prevent future translation errors.

**Keywords:** learning; metalanguage; process; teaching; translation.

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## **Introduction**

Translation training, being performed as ‘learning through practice’, consolidates the idea that translation is a practical activity taken without much conscious awareness, and expert translators produce high quality translation without being necessarily able to name and describe all what they are empirically doing in the process: namely, the strategies being adopted, the errors being made and the problems being experienced. Such an idea enhances this paper supposition stating that using theoretical notions, including translation metalanguage, within a pragmatic translation class should be done in a very limited proportion since it is not considered as an essential translational competence and could be taught in theoretical modules exclusively. However, this assumption did not make a unanimous point of view among scholars of different translation approaches, and the question of teaching translation with its own terminology is becoming more and more stressing out currently.

Chomsky once said<sup>2</sup>: “People who are involved in some practical activity such as teaching languages, translation, or building bridges should probably keep an eye on what’s happening in the sciences” (Chomsky, 1987, p. 180). Indeed, with the extension of the translator’s skills requirements over the three last decades, the ability of describing translation process and its different issues, using accurate scientific words, is no longer an optional pedagogical tool for the teacher neither an additional skill for the learner. It has shifted into an intrinsic part of the translator’s competence and his metacognitive knowledge. Miyata notes the importance of the translator’s competences including the ability to explain translations and related acts, in addition to traditional translation competences related to the ability to translate (Miyata & al., 2022). The European Master’s in Translation (EMT) Competence Framework (2017) listed the abovementioned competence, in the tenth position, as one of the target competences that learners must acquire. It refers to the ability to “analyse and justify their translation solutions and choices, using the appropriate metalanguage and applying appropriate theoretical approaches” (p. 8).

From this point of view, the problem of the present paper being how and why a teacher of translation DOES use metalanguage in his class, the empirical study intends to highlight the importance of adopting a systematic and objective discourse using an appropriate and accurate metalanguage within a translation class. To pursue this aim, the research suggests the introduction of an electronic database as an assisting methodological tool to back the study case analysis.

### **1. Metalanguage in teaching translation**

A couple of years ago, Boukhelef asserted that “Teaching translation requires paying special attention to the terminology used in this discipline”. She also confirmed that “It is widely argued that terminology is the key to science so that the latter can’t be reached without understanding the former” (Boukhelef, 2022, p. 42). In this respect, and before tackling the role translation terminology plays in any translation lesson, and for the sake of terminological accuracy, it is appropriate to point out, at this level, that there should be a distinction between translation metalanguage and translation teaching metalanguage. Metalanguage is a variable noun denoting, in linguistics, the words and expressions that people use to describe or refer to language (Collins Dictionary.com). Hence, translation metalanguage should refer to the words and expressions deployed to describe or refer to translation, while teaching translation metalanguage leads to the words and expressions that translation didacticians employ in their pedagogical activities.

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<sup>2</sup>This citation is part of a comment made by Chomsky in his answer to a question on the possibility of applying findings in theoretical linguistics to translation.

### **1.1 An up-to-date definition**

The teaching translation metalanguage is specifically and exclusively the language used by the teacher inside the classroom. It can be noticed in glossaries included in various courseware. Teaching metalanguage is substantially composed of translation terminology; likewise, it includes, in fluctuating ratios, terms from didactics, linguistics, grammar, rhetoric and even from general language.

Jean Delisle (1998) defines the notion of ‘teaching translation metalanguage’ as a semi-autonomous language formed partly from words of the common language; its acquisition requires special training, and it is used by translation specialists (teachers, students, translators, revisers). It makes the conceptualization of the field and the classification of its notions and operations possible and, finally, it facilitates the communication (between professors and students and between professional translators). Kageura admits that languages used for describing both linguistic and metalinguistic phenomena can be validly called metalanguages. He asserts that “we can analogously justify our use of this term to analyse and describe translation processes, only parts of which are linguistic” (Kageura, 2022, p. 19).

### **1.2 A two-process combination for a three-objective gain**

Translation professionals, Eggen and Kauchak (1995) for instance, admit that a translation academic course is not only an applied lesson, but also a theory-based background that combines two different, complementary and correlative processes. While the first one is embodied in the transfer of knowledge about translation through the teacher’s discourse, the second is axed on translation concepts and process. This latter contributes to the development of the learner's cognitive competence by enabling him to possess solid knowledge bases on translation. This process is the know-how of translation and is carried out during practical exercises on original corpora. Hence, it leads in turn to the development of the learner’s procedural competence.

Subsequently, during these two processes, the learner performs unconsciously another mental process: he develops his cognitive awareness, activating the mechanisms of representing the knowledge he has acquired and those he wants to acquire, and systematically, self-control in the learning process. This is called a metacognitive knowledge, which develops good thinkers, and lifelong learners who could cope with new situations in this fast changing world (Eggen & Kauchak, 1995). As a notion, metacognition is regarded as the knowledge of one's cognitive processes. Shimamura (2000) and Niemi (2002) consider the efficient use of this self-confidence to best self-regulate these cognitive processes.

This being said, it should be acknowledged that with a view to make a translation lesson successful and fully achieve the three aforementioned objectives, a translation teacher is supposed to possess the requisite tools to activate his theoretical and procedural knowledge in the classroom. At this stage, translation metalanguage intervenes as a key instrument to form an orderly and relevant discourse to carry out the communicative and teaching goals with the learners and to preserve the originality of the translation lesson. Since it is relevant to an academic discourse wielded by the teacher to steer the reflexion of his students, translation metalanguage should not be reduced into a mere recitation but it becomes, rather, a descriptive, conversational and argumentative discourse, in which the concepts are framed and the terminology is well- structured.

## 2. The importance of teaching translation metalanguage

Theorists and researchers have always stressed the need to master metalanguage and to know how to use it inside the classroom. Ballard (1992) highlights its importance in the teaching process, stating that with metalanguage, it is possible to objectify processes, become aware of differences, identify them and name them. It is through naming and with specific terminology, that one understands and assimilates an object of knowledge and a practice.

When it comes to translation, Jean Delisle (1998), one of the most important theorists who focused on the role of metalanguage in teaching translation, highlighted the importance of this language in activating the translation lesson. Delisle asserts that in a bid to be truly effective, the practical teaching of translation, whether academic or professional, must seek to transmit organized and thought-out knowledge while striving to develop the ability to translate in a reasoned way. He states that learning to translate at university level is, among other things, learning to think on texts, to make a rigorous analysis of them (Delisle, 1998). While considering that employing a precise and practical language is a potent weapon against educational curricula that are based on excessive intuitiveness and arbitrariness, Delisle used the term *danger* to describe the pedagogical consequences brought about by the absence of a relevant terminological basis in a translation lesson. He notes the danger he sees in not basing the teaching of translation on rigorous terminology is to fall into impressionism (Delisle, 1998).

As for translation teaching process itself, Delisle (1998) insists on the fact that a university level discourse should not be founded on vague opinions and superficial observations deprived of objectivity and accuracy. According to him, expressing opinions about the student's translation by delivering impressive expressions like *You can do better*, or *No, that is not true*, or even *Try again*, among other types of answers, tends to complicate the student's learning process rather than help him to progress (Delisle, 1998). Actually, he considers employing precise and practical descriptive language in the classroom a mighty weapon. It is an effective communication tool connecting the teacher and the learner and a guarantee of the lesson success.

## 3. Latest research

Many recent endeavours call for the establishment of a specific metalanguage that allows a discourse on the nature of the object to be translated, the translated object and the translating subject (El-Himer & Elaref, 2020, p. 26-27). About a decade earlier, Gambier and Doorslaer (2012) had already devoted, from 2010 to 2012, special issues of the *Benjamins Current Topics* academic journal, to the *Metalanguage of Translation*, in which twelve articles dealt with different issues related to the terminology used in describing the translation process.

Currently, endeavours on the importance of the translation metalanguage in the training context are still being made and marking the academic writings. A group of Japanese scholars deduced that detailed metalanguages could make it possible to externalize the implicit knowledge of skilled translators for use in translator training and in communication among different actors. That was a conclusion of a conference paper dealing with the lack of concrete and systematized language about translation processes, and while setting out a project of developing a set of metalanguages for facilitating and promoting the level of shared understanding of translation (Yamada et al., 2020). By operationalizing this knowledge through metalanguages, translation learners can intentionally behave like professionals, and different actors can talk about translation in a truthful way.

#### **4. Methodology and research investigation**

It is common knowledge that the flow of new virtual lexical and terminological resources is regarded as a prominent achievement, especially within the teaching/learning process. It should be conceded also that today's teachers and learners have the propensity to make the entirety of their research online, at a time when the customary means and ways of seeking knowledge are considered as no longer effective in terms of time saving, availability and physical effort. In this turning point, translation teaching and learning process makes no exception. This is probably one of the fields being most affected by the revolution made in specialized terminology transfer given its multi-linguistic and multidisciplinary nature since it moves from a language to another and deals with more than a discipline.

In this respect, the subsequent part introduces one of the most recent attempts in terms of developing and promoting translation and translation teaching terminology using the latest technological modes, and sheds light on the part that this new type of resources can play within a translation lesson in terms of organizing the teacher's discourse and enhancing the learner's understanding.

##### **4.1 CERTTAL's electronic database: an achievement to fully explore**

At the outset, and with an eye towards elaborating a clearer practical study, the research requires to define a terminological database (also called glossary) as a collection of information related to a particular topic or purpose, provided with a management system which stores, retrieves, arranges and formats the contained information.

###### **4.1.1 CERTTAL's database presentation**

Created and designed by CERTTAL (Centre d'Études et de Recherche en Traductologie, en Terminologie Arabe et en Langues) from the Faculty of Languages and Translation, University of Saint-Joseph, Beirut, this achievement presents a side of endeavours to promote research in the field of translation and translation studies.

The electronic database for translation and translation teaching terminology is part of a project aiming to produce a terminological resource (paper version and online database) of the key terms used in the teaching of translation and translation studies. According to its designers, this project was a response to an increasing and pressing need in the field of translation studies as a relatively young and a multidisciplinary science.

###### **4.1.2 CERTTAL's database characteristics**

After examining this database, the researchers of this paper found that it does not sound like any other electronic dictionary or glossary among those used to be looked up in. A range of new options made it a valuable terminological resource which can serve as a highly affective reference for teachers-researchers and students in translation and interpretation. Its main characteristics are cited as follows:

- It is available in a free electronic format. This makes it an easily accessible terminological source that everyone can use anywhere and at any time.
- It has three different dictionary entries (Arabic, French, and English). This option implies that the database covers the three languages and suggests at least one term or expression to every key notion.

- It is arranged in an alphabetical order: one click is enough to display the term's definition in the three different languages.
- Some entries show terms accompanied by their possible contextual synonyms. This option might help to recognize them as such.
- Every definition includes some key words that are anchor linked<sup>3</sup> (marked in blue) in order to make it easy to the visitor to jump directly to their own definition without having to scroll as much.
- At the end of every definition, the database does not fail to cite the page and year of the reference from which the definition has been extracted, with an anchored link to the whole and exact reference. This option gives more credibility and helps the reader find out more by using the given source.
- It divides the research into one domain that is translation studies and into twelve sub-domains consisting in the different features. This option can help to limit the results and go straight ahead to the field in which the word can be identified.

#### 4.1.3 CERTTAL's database qualities

Some very specific characteristics and options make the database different in terms of efficacy and performance from other databases. First, it is designed especially to meet academic needs. Indeed, its designers are not anonymous terminologists but well-known researchers and scholars specialized in translation studies like Faiza El-quassim and Isabelle Collombat. Second, in addition to a fully detailed definition that not every other terminological resource can provide, this one encompasses two extra elements namely: 'context' and/or 'observation' in which a reflexion, comments, examples and further explanations are added, with the aim of improving the term understanding and observing its behaviour in the context in which it is used. This option is offered for the Arabic, French or English entry or for one of them only, according to the availability and relevance of the needed information. This method allows the reader to draw advantage from the abundance of theoretical reflections and practical studies achieved in the three included languages.

Finally, the most important quality in the database, from the paper researchers' point of view, is the fact that the Arabic part comprises very authentic words. These latter refer to original Arab words that are not conceived or created for special purposes or those borrowed from English or French languages in order to refer to some newly created notions in translation studies. The table below provides some examples.

**Table 1: Examples of authentic equivalents in Arabic**

The term in English	The term in French	The term in Arabic
The correct usage	Le bon usage	أصول اللغة
Incorrect meaning	Faux sens	خطل
Nonsense	Non-sens	هراء
Under-translation	Sous-traduction	قصور
Constraint	Constraint	مقتضيات اللغة

Source: CERTTAL's database

<sup>3</sup> An anchor link is a link that helps to link to the content on the same page that has an anchor attached. It is a unique identifier attached to the content block or specific element.

As displayed, the words *خطل* and *هراء*, for instance, are rarely used in Arabic writings to refer respectively to incorrect meaning and nonsense conceived as translation mistake categories. Instead, other literally translated equivalents are widely used either in Arabic written references or in those translated into Arabic: *انعدام المعنى* and *المعنى الخاطئ*.

#### 4.1.4 The database contribution to translation teaching/learning process

The present study's objective is not limited to a formal and simple presentation of the database; it has also a didactic reflection on it with the purpose to examine its usefulness and effectiveness in a translation learning/teaching process: it will put it in a real teaching context and measure its contribution to meet the teaching/ learning goals.

Based on this paper researchers' relatively long teaching experience, it seems that the database's content with its special presentation can intervene effectively to help the teacher and the learner within teaching/learning translation classes, and some other modules have long relied on it such as translation studies, translation methodology and translation criticism. During these two processes, the use of a specific metalanguage is necessary in order to reach the planned objectives. It is about what Delisle calls 'teaching translation metalanguage'.

In fact, the terminology offered by the database can assist teachers to properly explain processes, identify and describe phenomena and analyse problematic situations such as developing theoretical notions, explaining translational strategies, pointing out and categorizing learners' mistakes as well as figuring out solutions to translation problems. In such conditions, students, on their part, can make use of the database to express their impressions on translation problems and difficulties by choosing exact and appropriate words.

## 4.2 Case study

From this point, the researchers intend to reiterate how important is translation metalanguage in the learning process inside the classroom, by showing an example of successful teacher's discourse based on the use of an accurate and convenient terminology allowing defining and describing the different elements constituting the transfer objects, techniques and problems. It is the practical frame revealing the effectiveness of teaching with translation metalanguage.

### 4.2.1 Method and analysis

The analytic study is based on a practical example extracted from a learner translation try; it will show how substantial the acquisition of translation metalanguage is to the teacher to make the course effective and objective at a time.

**Table 2: Example for analysis**

The source text	The learner's translation into English
Tout le monde peut voir le même journal de Rabat à Bagdad.	<u>All the world</u> can <u>see</u> the same paper from Rabat to Baghdad.

Source: Researchers' suggestion

All is about a French into English translation lesson. The selected sequence is quite short and elementary, but the researchers figure out that the same metalinguistic discourse can be applied even on longer and more complicated sequences. As for its preliminary description, and although the passage is very clear and comprehensible in the source text, two mistakes emerge at a beginner learner's try. The underlined sentence constituents are the words or expressions the learner had given an incorrect translation for, which implies the presence of an error.

Faced with this problematic situation, teachers' discourses can be different and uneven in terms of effectiveness and objectivity. By and large, two cases can be supposed: <sup>4</sup>

The first, and actually the most prevalent case, is that the teacher directly chooses the intuitive and arbitrary approach: commenting negatively on the translation and asking the learner to think again to provide another try. In the best case, he may tell him where exactly the error lies. Behaving in such a way does not necessarily imply that the teacher does not understand the errors nature or causes, nor does he lack the necessary tools to form an appropriate teaching discourse for this situation. This is most probably because "some declarative knowledge turns into tacit knowledge when brought together with knowledge got from experience" (Bereiter 2002, p. 148), or simply because "we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4). In this case, the teacher finds using all his conceptual and/or theoretical knowledge to make the learner understand the issue quite trivial.

The second case consists in making use of an organized and objective discourse. To succeed in his task, the teacher will need to involve a great number of terms belonging to linguistics and translation metalanguage. Furthermore, he will have to distinguish between them in order to avoid a conceptual confusion that may bring about a terminological confusion. He will also speak in a way that allows the learner to activate his cognitive awareness, so that he detects his weakness firstly and avoids it eventually.

To be able to analyse the two translation mistakes made by the learner, the teacher should form the following discourse, focusing on the underlined bolded expressions in the three possible languages:

**Table 3: Example of a teacher's discourse using the translation metalanguage**

The teacher's discourse in English	The teacher's discourse in French	The teacher's discourse in Arabic
"You have given an <b>incorrect meaning</b> to the phrase <i>tout le monde</i> and the word <i>voir</i> because you have not taken the <b>co-text</b> into account.	Tu as commis un <b>faux-sens</b> en traduisant le groupe nominal <i>tout le monde</i> et le mot <i>voir</i> car tu n'as pas pris en compte le <b>cotexte</b> .	لقد ارتكبت خطأ وأنت تترجم عبارة <b>التصريح</b> و <i>voir</i> و <i>le monde</i> لأنك لم تأخذ <b>السياق اللفظي</b> بعين الاعتبار

**Source: Researchers' suggestions**

To offer a descriptive-analytic aspect to the abovementioned example, the researchers display the steps the teacher is likely to go through, together with the terms he is potentially to employ directly or indirectly. The terms, gathered in a table, appear in a gradual manner according to the necessity of their occurrence in the teacher's discourse, and in pairs to show the possibility of a conceptual overlap occurrence, and accompanied by definitions that refer to every concept.

<sup>4</sup> This supposition was made according to the researchers' experience as teachers and researchers in the field of translation, translation teaching and assessment.



- Step 1: Determining the errors nature

Before discussing the errors nature and causes, the teacher has to draw the learner's attention to a very important detail, which is the fact that the issues found in his try are errors and not just mistakes. Thus, he needs to explain the difference between an error and a mistake. Thereafter, he has to distinguish two types of errors, linguistic errors and translation errors. The following table shows the metalanguage needed by the teacher to determine the errors nature:<sup>5</sup>

**Table 4: The required metalanguage to determine the learner's errors nature**

Terms to describe the errors nature	Terms definitions
Difference between mistake and error	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Errors are usually defined as systematic deviations from the rules of a target language. They may occur because a learner does not know a rule.</li> <li>- Mistakes, on the other hand, are seen as unintentional, accidental slips resulting from simple laziness or forgetting.</li> </ul>
Difference between language errors and translation errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language error: an error that occurs in the target text most probably ascribed to a lack of knowledge of the target language or of its use.</li> <li>- Translation error: any fault occurring in the target text, ascribable either to ignorance or to inadequate application of translation principles, translation rules, or translation procedures. It can also result from either the misinterpretation of a source text segment, or a methodological error.</li> </ul>
Translation error categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misinterpretation: a translation error where the translator misunderstands the text or lacks general cultural knowledge, with the result that a word or segment from the source text is given an entirely erroneous sense from that intended by its author.</li> <li>- Nonsense: a translation error where the translator misinterprets the sense of a word or statement in the source text or commits a methodological error, which leads to an illogical formulation in the target text.</li> <li>- Incorrect meaning: a translation error where a sense is attributed to a word or a segment from the source text that it does not have in the context in which it appears.</li> </ul>

Source: CERTTAL's database

- Step 2: Stating the causes of the errors to the learner

For the first error (*Tout le monde* versus *All the world*), the teacher is supposed to use his knowledge about collocations. He needs to give the learner some rules about his translation and show him that the literal transfer proved futile for this category of expressions. While doing this, the teacher will automatically explain the difference between word for word translation and literal translation.

<sup>5</sup> The metalanguage terms and their definitions were regenerated directly from CERTTAL database. (<https://etib-certtal-terminologie.usj.edu.lb/>)

As far as the second issue is concerned (*voir* versus *see*), the teacher will highlight the importance of considering the verbal context when trying to find the appropriate equivalent for each linguistic unit of the source text. In the example above, the French verb *voir*, in reference to the words which constitute its verbal context, refers to the act of watching and not seeing as the learner thought. The following table shows the metalanguage that the researchers found necessary to the teacher to accomplish the task of explaining the errors causes to the learner:

**Table 5: The required metalanguage to explain the learner's errors causes**

The acquired terms to explain the errors causes	Their definitions
Word for word translation versus literal translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Word for word translation: a literal translation that consists of transferring the elements of the source text in the target text without changing the word order.</li> <li>- Literal translation : a direct transfer of a SL text into a grammatically and idiomatically appropriate TL text in which the translator's task is limited to observing the adherence to the linguistic servitudes of the TL.</li> </ul>
Collocation	- Two or more frequently used words that can be consecutive or non-consecutive, that form a unit of meaning, and that are accepted by common usage.
Verbal context	- The linguistic environment of lexical items, which contributes to the specification of their relevant meaning. Its perception is circumscribed by the visual or aural spans of readers/hearers.

Source: CERTTAL's database

## 5. Findings and discussion

The one-sentence example analysed in this paper generated a series of requirements to conduct a very basic pedagogical assessment. Actually, a teacher of translation will need to employ more than ten terms from the very specialized translation metalanguage. If he succeeds in using all the terms mentioned in the table effectively, he will be able to activate the learner's cognitive mechanisms and achieve his teaching goals. Thus, his lesson can be described as an authentic translation lesson; otherwise, it revolves around a comparative lesson that employs, at its best, an aspect of lexical semantics.

CERTTAL's electronic database, as a methodological tool used in this study, contributed to overcome the difficulties as far as the determination of errors nature is concerned; this is on the one hand. On the other hand, it could provide an ample explanation of their causes. It is worth noting that this database open access is very promising since it allows both teachers and learners acquire metacognitive knowledge, save time and ease up their efforts.

## Conclusion

Translation didacticians endeavour addressing issues in their training classes; nonetheless, they tend to overlook the use of metalanguage to describe translation process. The common assumption that general language may settle the issue proved pointless and ineffective especially when learners fail to fix their translational weaknesses. The paper conducted on a case study aimed to provide an overview of the usage of an electronic database and display the extent of its

viability in the provision of teaching translation metalanguage. The importance of this latter lies in the attained objectives that positively affect the learner whether through the transfer of knowledge about translation via his teacher discourse, or thanks to the development of his own cognitive competence that prevent any potential future errors.

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