

Overcoming Abstractions of Abstract Translation: A Workshop Concept

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Introduction

Various strategies are being implemented as Leibniz University Hannover progresses towards the institutional goal of internationalization. One strategic facet of this effort involves broadening the university's course offerings in English into a wider variety of degree programs and academic departments (Sprachenpolitik 2018). The use of English in composing academic texts, which is already a requirement in certain programs of study, is likely to become more relevant in the future. In order to successfully complete a PhD program and receive a doctorate degree, for instance, students must compose and submit dual abstracts with a completed thesis: the original German abstract and an English translation (Leibniz Informationszentrum 2011). Additionally, some of the guidelines of the university's three engineering faculties suggest that it is encouraged, or even required, to submit dual abstracts with all final theses (Leibniz Universität Hannover: Institut für Stahlbau 2017: 21). Students facing this requirement have often received little or no training for such a task, and are understandably overwhelmed, given that such a specialized translation would be a challenge even for a professional translator. Such a task requires students to not only read and write at a native speaker level in both the source and target language, but furthermore, to be experts in the cultural realities associated with both languages.

In the context of multilingual academic writing, where academic discourse is inevitably culture-specific, the intricacies of English academic discourse (EAD) pose an additional challenge. A well-embedded translation into EAD may for instance require the replacement of the passive voice with the active voice, of nouns with verbs, or of "high-flown vocabulary with more straightforward equivalents" (Bennett 2013: 99). Additionally, students must be familiar with set academic English structures and phrases.

If the translation fails to account for the linguistic and cultural realities of EAD, potential readers may judge the abstract harshly, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the English academic writing of non-native speakers. To assist students through the abstract translation process, the L2 writing center at Leibniz University, Team Internationales Schreiben (InterWRITE), offers a workshop titled "Translating Abstracts from German to English". This paper will further detail the conceptual framework and practical approaches for the workshop.

Background

In recent semesters, we have noticed that an increasing number of students have approached us for assistance with the task of translating an abstract from German to English, sometimes from English to German. The frequency of this particular task led me to investigate the writing guidelines for academic papers of different departments at Leibniz University, particularly those of the engineering faculties, as that was where most of the students in need of assistance had come from. Many of these guidelines show that students are often required to write the abstracts of their final thesis in German (when the thesis was written in German) and translate them into English without receiving any instructions or advice on how to approach that task. In fact, the writing guidelines of the Faculty of Civil Engineering state that an English abstract is “merely” a translation of the original German version (Fakultät für Bauingenieurwesen: “Abstract”). Framing such a complex task as a relatively simple assignment suggests that the faculties developing such guidelines may be unfamiliar with the translation process. As a result, students turn to unreliable online resources, such as Google Translate, out of sheer necessity.

Not knowing how to implement suitable tools and strategies and lacking experience with translation are the main reasons why students seek help. Giving each student an introduction to translation strategies and tools during their first, and sometimes only, consultation, however, does not follow the indirect approach of a writing consultation. Without this background knowledge, on the other hand, the consultation is reduced to comparing source and target text, which is more product-oriented than process-oriented, and offers no substantial learning effect for the student. Thus, students would benefit most from a combination of an introductory translation workshop and elective one-on-one writing consultations.

Didactical Concept

One of the main issues we encounter when students approach us with a translation task is that they do not even have the confidence to make an attempt at translating the text themselves. This lack of confidence often stands in the way of learning. Kiraly argues that in order to give students more self-confidence, they must be free of the “imposition of the teacher’s norms” (Kiraly 2000a: 67) and the idea that there is only one solution, one *correct* translation. According to Kiraly, the acceptance of a variety of solutions to the same translation problem, and letting go of the idea that the instructor always has the right answer helps students assume responsibility for their own texts and ultimately to gain the self-confidence they need to complete the task (Kiraly 2000a: 67). Additionally, working on an authentic translation project further develops a sense of self-confidence and accomplishment. Students immediately get a better sense of context than with a sample text and they see the importance of the final outcome (Kiraly 2000a: 66). Massey and Braendli

define an authentic translation project as one where the target text product has to be “made available, by publication or other forms of dissemination [...], for the benefit of one or several users” (Massey/Braendli 2015: 178 f.). For the PhD students at Leibniz University, for instance, the authenticity of their task lies in the publication of their research papers or their dissertations. For Kiraly, an authentic translation task is one where the “real world outside of the classroom” (Kiraly 2000a: 66) is judging the translation rather than the instructor. The feedback that the students receive is thus not centered on one person (the instructor) but rather a community. In our case, where students are translating abstracts that will be read by their supervisors, fellow students, colleagues, or even journal editors, the feedback on the final product comes from the academic community at large.

Kiraly’s approach and the indirect approach of our writing consultations are quite similar. Like Kiraly, we believe that learning happens best when students never give up responsibility for their own texts and when they can accept that there are many different possibilities instead of one correct answer. The workshop presented in this paper is thus based on Kiraly’s concept with modifications adapted to the needs of our students. It follows a six-step model¹ in order to simulate an authentic translation project.

- **Researching the Background:** During this first step, it is essential that students familiarize themselves with the topic of the text in order to better understand its content. Their task for this first step of the workshop is therefore primarily to focus on what they do not know; for example, understanding how to write an abstract. According to the guidelines of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, most students do not receive any information about how an abstract is typically structured or what it should include (“In der Zusammenfassung sollten die wesentlichen Punkte der angefertigten Arbeit enthalten sein. Hierbei ist es wichtig, in wenigen Sätzen die entscheidenden Punkte der Arbeit darzustellen“, Fakultät für Bauingenieurwesen n. d.: 3). Even though abstracts can vary from discipline to discipline, students need to familiarize themselves with the general outline and components of an abstract.
- **Analyzing the Source Text:** The workshop participants learn to identify the difficult passages of the text. We initially look at a sample translation together before the students attempt to analyze their own texts.
- **Preparing to Translate:** In preparation for translating, the participants learn to use online research tools more effectively. The aim of this step is to help students realize that there is no one-to-one equivalence when using online dictionaries. The focus is thus on providing different options for more in-depth research and on highlighting the interdependence of language, culture, and context. According to Kiraly, “Translator competence does not primarily refer to knowing *the* correct translation for words, sentences or even texts. It does entail being able to use tools and information to create

¹ Unlike many linguistic translation process models, this model does not attempt to explain any cognitive processes. It is merely intended to be a guideline for the instructor to ensure a certain structure for the workshop. The model is based on my own experience as a freelance translator.

communicatively successful texts that are accepted as good translations within the community concerned” (Kiraly 2000a: 13 f.). This means looking up words in dictionaries, glossaries, corpora, etc., making decisions about the intended meaning of the text, and choosing an appropriate interpretation based on the research, which goes hand in hand with the next step of drafting the translation. Even though these two steps normally occur simultaneously in the translation process, we discuss them separately in the workshop in order to first equip students with tools they can rely on later.

- **Drafting the Translation:** As students become more sensitive to the decision making process involved in conducting online research, they are more prepared for the drafting of the translation. Students form groups and collaboratively work on their own translation projects. Even though they are each working on their own text, the group setting helps them to ask questions and exchange ideas or help each other use tools effectively.
- **Giving and Receiving Feedback:** During and after the group work phase, students receive feedback from peers and the workshop facilitator.
- **Revising/Editing:** The last step does not take place during the workshop, but is more suitable in the context of an individual consultation. The one-on-one setting and the existing foundation for the translation facilitate discussions about the specifics of EAD and other stylistic aspects. The students receive a reminder that we offer this service, and are encouraged to make an appointment for the final editing of the translation.

Overall, the main aim of this workshop is to equip students with tools, strategies, and a space for collaborative learning to give them the confidence they need in order to have a successful learning experience.

Practical Application

Based on the didactical concept and the six-step model described in the previous section, I began to offer a three-hour workshop titled “Translating Abstracts from German to English” to our students in Summer Semester 2018. The workshop was open to students from all faculties; however, the participants were students of the engineering faculties (civil engineering and mechanical engineering) and the natural sciences. Of the nine participants, six were PhD students; three were Master’s students. All workshop participants were international students. At the beginning, students were asked to give their motivation for attending the workshop and talk about the type of abstract they were translating. All participants were required to translate their abstracts for their final theses. One participant was additionally translating an abstract for a journal article, and one participant did not bring an abstract.

After a brief introduction, we began with the preparations for the translation project. For step 1 of the process, we had a short in-class discussion gathering the group’s collective knowledge of abstracts. We answered questions, such as: How is an abstract typically

structured? What type of information belongs in which section of the abstract? Who is our target audience? Additionally, we collected standard academic English phrases that may be included in an abstract (e. g. “This study investigates/examines ...”).

For step 2, the students read the German abstract of an already published dissertation (mechanical engineering) together. It quickly became clear that discipline-specific words and technical terms, such as “Mikro-Wegmesssysteme” and “Flussführungssysteme” (Miletić 2012: IV), would require a lot of research in order to embed them in an English context. Moreover, subject-specific phrases, such as “die Verkippung des Läufers zum Ständer” (Miletić 2012: IV), are coherent expressions that cannot simply be looked up in an online dictionary. With some help, the students also realized that the sentences in the German abstract were quite long, and would have to be broken up into two sentences in the English translation. Students then looked at their own texts, trying to find similar patterns.

In step 3, students listed translation tools they were already using (e. g. Leo, Linguee, etc.); we then focused on how to use these tools more effectively. Oftentimes, the results in online dictionaries are so numerous and unstructured that finding the most suitable word for one’s text becomes a guessing game. In order to feel more confident in working with online research tools, we decided on certain criteria for each online dictionary. The online dictionary Leo, for instance, is helpful when we have a general idea of the word that we are looking for. When we are completely lost, however, Leo gives us too many options without sufficiently categorizing them. Students mentioned Linguee as a good online resource for looking up words in a specific context. As Linguee provides context as well as the source for each search result, we decided that this tool is quite suitable as long as both criteria are considered.

The students quickly realized that, similar to selecting literature for an academic paper, the credibility of the source plays an important role when using online dictionaries. I therefore introduced them to one website that they had not worked with before. ProZ.com offers an ever-expanding glossary of terms, including a variety of subject-specific vocabulary. The search results usually include the translators’ names. Typically, they are professionals whose profiles detail their work experience, first and second language, and specialized fields. Having this knowledge about the translator can help students discern the authenticity of the translation. Other tools that maintain credibility are corpora, such as AntConc, which allow research of subject-specific vocabulary in English academic texts.

For the collaborative translation in step 4, students formed groups and started working on their texts. As one student did not bring an abstract, she decided to help another student with his translation. Throughout and after the process, all students received instructor and peer feedback (step 5).

Finally, the students were encouraged to make use of our writing consultations (step 6), and the workshop was concluded.

Outcomes

Coming from a translation studies background, it was difficult developing a workshop for students with no experience in that particular field. The situation that was previously described, i. e. engineering students who are required to create a translation of an academic text, stands in stark contrast to students who are studying to become translators. Throughout the workshop, it was important to keep in mind that the aim was to support the students in their particular situation, not to train them to become professional translators.

Specifically, this means ...

- Students feel that online tools support them best. Instead of increasing the workload and time pressure by introducing a number of new resources, offer strategies to make better use of the tools they already know.
- Collaborative work with authentic texts supports writer and translator autonomy.
- Step 4 (group work) and step 6 (individual consultations) are ideal for discussing topics such as syntax and EAD.

Limitations

All workshop participants stated that neither German nor English was their first language. They were thus not only translating their texts into a foreign language, but had also written the source text in another foreign language. As ample research from the field of translation studies has shown, the quality of the translation is impacted by whether we are translating from or into our mother tongue. A translation into the mother tongue is often considered more natural, provided the translator is able to grasp the full meaning of the non-native source text. When translating into a non-native language, on the other hand, the understanding of the source text comes more easily to the translator, but the transfer into the non-native language can be more challenging (Kiraly 2000b: 117). The students who participated in the workshop were L2 writers and L2 translators, which made their situation fairly unique. More research is needed to investigate how we can further adapt this workshop and our writing consultations to their particular needs.

Conclusion

Multilingualism is increasingly becoming a reality in the academic world. Students are writing, reading, speaking, thinking, and translating in a multitude of languages and their corresponding cultures. As English takes a more prominent place across various fields of study at Leibniz University, multilingual tasks will be assigned with greater frequency. In anticipation of more students seeking help with such tasks in the future, we must continue to investigate new and varied ways of supporting students who are both writing and translating in foreign languages.

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