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TEACHING THEORY THROUGH PRACTICE: A REFLEXIVE APPROACH

Silvia Kadiu

University College London

Abstract

This article discusses the benefits of a reflexive approach to teaching theory in translator training. This methodology consists of translating theoretical texts reflexively by folding a theory back on itself when adapting it into another language or medium. The hypothesis behind this approach is that applying a theory (such as foreignization) back onto the text that develops it (Venuti 1995/1998) would help students to better capture the applicability of specific translation theories, and make them experience the scope and limits of key translation concepts in a tangible way.

Translation theory plays a crucial role in translator education (Király 1995). A core element in curriculum and syllabus design, theory is however often considered difficult to teach and to study. The reflexive method discussed in this paper seeks to address this issue through an innovative approach, which helps students engage with theoretical texts in a practical way while encouraging them to think reflexively about their own practice.

Key words: Translation studies, translation theory and practice, translator training, reflexive method, reflexivity, process-driven pedagogy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Translation theory plays a central role in translator training. Many scholars have underlined the benefits of theoretical instruction in translator education throughout the development of the discipline (see Sakamoto 2014: 37). Translation theory is essential according to these scholars because it gives translators more options to choose from when they translate (Baker 1992: 2); it makes them aware of problems they may not have anticipated (Nord 2005: 2) and it provides them with a metalanguage for explaining their choices (Pym 2010: 4). In other words, it helps them to make better-informed decisions.

However, theory and practice modules in postgraduate Masters programs often run in parallel because many students feel that if they are not doing translation they are not really learning anything. In fact, students generally perceive theory classes as being quite removed from the actual practice of translation (Schäffner 2002: 64). This negative attitude to theory has been widely documented by scholars, including Shuttleworth (2001: 498), Hanna (2004: 142) and Chesterman and Wagner (2002: 7). In her doctoral thesis, Sakamoto (2014: 11) provides a typical example of the negative perception of students:

... too much emphasis is placed on [theories], and more often than not, to a useless degree, since there are a lot of

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theories which are too abstract and they don't have to offer anything in practice.

This example, Sakamoto explains, reflects that many students do not deliberately engage any theory when practicing translation.

And yet, ironically, as Anthony Pym reminds us, “translators are theorizing all the time (...) as part of the regular practice of translating.” (Pym 2010: 1) When translators identify a translation problem, they have to decide between several possible solutions. So they are already theorizing through the very decisions that they make when they translate. Therefore, according to Pym, it is essential that theoretical discussions are promoted in conjunction with a hands-on practice of translation (2010: 5). This is precisely my objective in the present article—to propose a reflexive translation pedagogy that goes beyond the opposition theory versus practice.

This innovative methodology consists of translating theoretical texts reflexively by folding a theory back on itself when translating it into another language. It is inspired from Jacques Derrida’s performative approach in ‘Des Tours de Babel’ (1985), in which Derrida undertakes a Benjaminian translation of Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923) to investigate the scope and limits of Benjamin’s theory of translation. The reflexive method I discuss in this article extends Derrida’s performative approach and applies it to translation

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pedagogy by inviting students to translate theoretical texts following the translating approach presented in the text itself.

The hypothesis is that applying a theory (such as foreignization) back onto the text that develops it (Venuti 1995/1998: 13-20) would help students to better capture the applicability of specific translation theories, and make them experience the scope and limits of key translation approaches in a very tangible way. To what extent can this reflexive practice help reconcile students with theory? What are its main benefits and challenges? And what are its contributions to translation studies at large?

To answer these questions, I conducted two seminars using the reflexive method at University College London (UCL) in February and March 2015. In the following pages, I explain the modalities in which the teaching sessions took place before presenting the results of the students' response to the survey I asked them to fill out after the seminars (Tables 1-5). Lastly, I summarize the main contributions of the reflexive method to translation pedagogy, concluding that the sense of uncertainty triggered by the reflexive method is both the main challenge of the reflexive method and one of its greatest benefits.

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2. METHODOLOGY

On 27 February and 6 March 2015, I taught two one-hour seminars on the theme of “Translation and Deconstruction” using the reflexive method. The seminars were part of UCL’s Translation Studies core module CLITG002 within the Masters postgraduate program in Translation Theory and Practice. The two sessions were video-recorded with the consent of the 14 total participants—two of the students in attendance agreed to participate in the discussion but did not want to appear on camera.

The objective of the lesson was to explore the possible applications of a deconstructionist approach to translation. During the seminars, the students were asked to complete three tasks related to the following excerpt from Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel”, which they had to read in preparation for the session:

This singular example [the word Babel], at once archetypical and allegorical, could serve as an introduction to all the so-called theoretical problems of translation. But no theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance. This is one of the reasons why I prefer here, instead of treating it in the theoretical mode, to attempt to

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translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation. (Derrida 1985: 175)

This paragraph was chosen because it exemplifies both the central elements in Derrida’s approach to translation and those of the reflexive method—performativity (translating as simultaneously saying and doing), the inseparability of theory and practice (theorizing through translation) and reflexivity (the subjectivity at play in translation).

Below is a summary of each task (action requested, suggested discussion points and learning outcomes), as it was presented to the students during the session.

Task 1: Translate Derrida’s comment into another language

Discussion:

- What was your approach?
- What difficulties did you come across?
- How did you solve them?

Learning Outcomes:

1. Translating is a reflexive activity
2. Translating requires theoretical engagement
3. Form and content are inseparable in translation

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Task 2: Translate Derrida’s comment reflexively (i.e. in a Derridean way)

Discussion:

- How did you translate?
- What aspect of his theory did you focus on?
- Why?

Learning Outcomes:

1. Difficulty to translate performatively
2. Translation as displacement
3. Partiality of any performance

Task 3: Discuss this passage from Derrida’s comment: “to attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation.”

Discussion:

- To what extent is Derrida translating Benjamin’s text?
- Where is the limit between glossing and translating?
- How far can we take transgression and still call it translation?

Learning Outcomes:

1. Blurred limits
2. Need for vigilance and risk-taking
3. Limits of theory

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Following these two seminars, I conducted a small-scale survey inquiring about the students' responses to the sessions. On 20 March 2015, respectively two and three weeks after the seminars, I asked the students to fill out a questionnaire about their experience of translating translation theory reflexively. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: (1) Section A, a list of *Likert scale* items wherein the respondents were asked to evaluate a statement by selecting the relevant level of agreement/disagreement (see Table 1); and (2) Section B, an open response section relating to three questions (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). The questionnaire was entirely anonymous.

3. FINDINGS

All 14 students who attended the sessions responded to the questionnaire (100% response rate). All 14 students responded to section A (100% response rate). In section B, 3 students did not answer the first and second questions (78% response rate), and 4 students did not answer the last question (71% response rate).

Below I present the results of the questionnaire parts A and B.

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(1) Section A

Table 1: Responses to Section A (by level of agreement*)

#	Statement	++	+	=	-	--
1	Translating translation theory is a playful, engaging activity	14%	57%	21%	7%	0%
2	I enjoyed translating translation theory	14%	57%	21%	7%	0%
3	I enjoyed translating translation theory reflexively (e.g. translating Derrida in a Derridean way)	14%	36%	43%	7%	0%
4	Translating translation theory is boring, useless	0%	7%	14%	71%	7%
5	I thought translating translation theory was challenging	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
6	I thought translating theory reflexively (e.g. translating Derrida in a Derridean way) was challenging	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
7	In my experience, translating theory is a reflexive activity (e.g. while translating I kept thinking about the author's own translation theory)	36%	57%	7%	0%	0%
8	In my experience, translating theory is not more reflexive than translating other types of texts (e.g. literary)	0%	29%	29%	43%	0%

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9	In my experience, translating theory requires a good understanding of a theorist's work and concepts	43%	50%	7%	0%	0%
10	I feel that I have a better grasp of what a deconstructionist approach to translating means concretely since I attended this reading group	14%	43%	29%	14%	0%
11	I feel that trying to translate a theorist (e.g. Derrida) helped me to better understand his theory (i.e. more precisely)	14%	50%	22%	14%	0%
12	I feel that translating a theory reflexively (e.g. Derrida in a Derridean way) is impossible	0%	7%	79%	14%	0%
13	While translating theory, I felt I was positioning myself in response to the theory developed in the text	14%	71%	14%	0%	0%
14	While translating theory, I felt I was more critical towards the theory I was translating	14%	57%	14%	14%	0%
15	While translating theory, I felt I was developing my own theory of translation	7%	21%	64%	7%	0%

* Level of agreement/disagreement: ++ Strongly agree; + Agree; = Neither agree/nor disagree; - Disagree; -- Strongly disagree.

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NB: The highest rate is highlighted in blue (e.g. in question 1, 57% of the students agreed with the statement; 14% strongly agreed; 21% did not agree nor disagree; and 7% disagreed).

(2) Section B

1. Please describe one aspect that you found particularly compelling during this session:

Table 2: Responses to Question 1 (Section B)

	Comments
1	Translating translation theories
2	Discussions
3	Reflexive translation of Derrida
4	Translating such complex text in a limited amount of time
5	Translating Derrida's work: The practice is inspiring
6	Translating Derrida in a Derridean way
7	Trying to translate Derrida
8	That translating translation theory would be interesting at all
9	Rethink the significance of translating theory in a reflexive way
10	The idea of thinking translation by translating theories
11	I found it very interesting to attempt translating in a reflexive manner.

NB: 3 students did not answer this question

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2. Please describe one aspect that you found particularly challenging during this session:

Table 3: Responses to Question 2 (Section B)

	Comments
1	How to be critical
2	Applying Derrida's theory
3	Translating Derrida in his own way (in terms of his theory) vs. translating him accurately according to my own
4	Translating a complex piece of translation theory and justifying your own choice of translation strategies
5	Understand Derrida's approach generally
6	Translating Derrida in a Derridean way
7	Trying to translate Derrida
8	Translating in a Derridean way
9	The difference between translating theories and other genres of texts
10	Did not see where the following questions were leading to...
11	Changing my initial translation in a reflexive manner (already translated reflexively)

NB: 3 students did not answer this question

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3. Please describe the most useful thing you learned during this session:

Table 4: Responses to Question 3 (Section B)

	Comments
1	Think about translating translation theory from an "insider's view"
2	Translating theory is a reflexive activity
3	Thinking of the theorist's own theories about translation while translating
4	Even a translation itself is open for (re)translation and further interpretation
5	During the practice, when I was asked to translate the material for the second time, I compared the experience of the first, it is interesting and inspiring.
6	To think reflexively about translation theory
7	To be made aware of the value of translating theory
8	How to reflect on or build up one's own theory/ideology by translating a piece of theory
9	A new way of understanding theories
10	Better understanding of Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel"

NB: 4 students did not answer this question

4. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This small-scale survey confirms my initial hypothesis that the reflexive method (translating translation theory reflexively) provides a playful and stimulating pedagogy, which 1) sees students engage with theory in very practical terms (according to 71% of respondents); 2)

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helps them to better understand specific concepts (according to 64% of respondents); and 3) invites them to be more reflexive (according to 93% of respondents) and critical (according to 71% of respondents) about the theories under examination. Further, 85% of the students said that the exercise encouraged them to position themselves in relation to the theory translated. The students' responses thus largely establish that translating theory makes for an enjoyable, effective and critical learning activity.

However, 100% of students considered that translating translation theory reflexively was challenging (50% strongly agreed with the statement, while 50% simply agreed). In fact, the challenges described by the students in the free comments section suggest that in a few instances the reflexive method did not result in a better understanding of the theory translated, but in a greater questioning of its scope and confines—in greater uncertainty. During the sessions, several students expressed their concerns about the limits of their understanding of Derrida's text, the fact that their understanding was already a subjective and partial interpretation. One in particular stressed the dizzying effect of trying to be reflexive on a text that is itself self-reflexive, suggesting that reflexivity makes translating impossible for some students.

Being reflexive and critical is not something that can be passed on securely from teacher to student. Rather, the

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reflexive teaching method shows that reflexivity comes about as a singular experience of uncertainty inseparable from the process itself of translating. The reflexive method is a process-driven approach embedded in the translator's point of view. For that reason, it provides a uniquely effective instrument for teaching the values and limits of reflexive decision-making in translation. The attempt is not to pass on precedent knowledge, but to allow students to experience the limits of their own reflexivity through and as a translation process. In the following pages, I contextualize the main benefits of the reflexive method in translator education in terms of its broader contributions to translation studies.

An Innovative and Stimulating Pedagogy

The reflexive method offers an innovative, stimulating and playful way of engaging with theory, thus closing the gap between theory and practice denounced by several translation studies scholars today (Hatim 2001: 3; Rogers in Schäffner 2002: 64; Hanna 2009: 142). Combining theory and practice, the reflexive method provides stimulating exercises which enable students to engage with theory in a practical way by translating the theoretical texts themselves. Translating theory in a reflexive way stimulates students to learn theory by practicing it, in so far as translating a concept involves attempting to understand it. The reflexive method invites students to interact with theories in form as well as content, highlighting the fact that translating necessarily

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involves a degree of theoretical engagement. One cannot translate a text without also positioning oneself in relation to it, without developing one's own view of translation, as 85% of the students participating in the survey acknowledged.

A Performative Approach

Using the reflexive method in an educational framework helps to allow students to experience the challenges of fidelity in translation. Striving to fold a theory back on itself through translating formulations of it invites students to rethink the demand of fidelity not in opposition to unfaithfulness or betrayal, but in terms of performativity, simultaneously saying and doing what the source text says/does (Austin 1975). The aspiration to being faithful to the source text is challenged through the reflexive lens, since the translator cannot perform a theory or concept, without going beyond it, displacing it and transforming it. During the second session, one of the students described this challenge in the following terms:

I always find translating from English into English difficult because what I want to say has already been said. So trying to think of form and content, that last phrase “to attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation” is deliberately repetitive, deliberately a bit difficult, so how can I

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rewrite something that preserves the form and gets the content? And ultimately by trying I'll just literally write down what he said. (...) I found it quite hard because I couldn't rephrase it without losing the way he's been phrasing things, which I think is important to what he's trying to say. (...) I don't know, I just find it basically impossible.

Trying and failing to perform a theoretical text by simultaneously saying and doing what it says/does, students tend to experience translation as a performative act rather than as “the transport of a semantic content into another signifying form” (Derrida 1982/1985: 120).

A Critical Activity

Attempting to translate translation theory reflexively also throws into relief the limits of the theories translated. It teaches students that whilst being familiar with an existing theory will help them make better-informed decisions, in order to make effective use of theory they also need to continuously interrogate it in light of their own practice. 71% of the students participating in the survey stated that translating a theoretical text made them more critical towards the theory developed in that text. In fact, for one student, the most useful aspect of the session was the realization that “even a translation itself is open for

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(re)translation and interpretation” (Table 4). The attempt to fold a theory back on itself seems to allow students to experience the contingency of any given theory; it invites them to resist the temptation of applying theory unconditionally and indistinguishably from text to text. In other words, it encourages them to develop their own point of view and explore new possibilities of translation—for, as Pym explains, the more ideas translators have, the better they can explore the possibilities of translation (Pym 2010: 4). By getting students to prospect the limits of existing theory, the reflexive method invites them to develop a tangible form of theoretical vigilance.

Responsibility

The reflexive method allows students to experience their own partiality in highlighting a concept within a given text and choosing to translate it in a certain way. It shows them that the way a text is translated depends very much on how the translator interprets it. By inviting students to translate Derrida’s text “in [their] own way” following Derrida’s own approach in “Des Tours de Babel” (Derrida 1985: 175), the reflexive method puts them face to face with their own agency, with the fact that they are responsible for the translation they produce since it reflects their own interpretation of the source text, their subjective interaction with it and position in relation to it. As such, the reflexive method contributes to developing the students’ awareness of their role as translators—a key

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objective of successful translator training according to Donald Kiraly (1995: 110- 112). For Kiraly, this self-perception (or “self-concept”, as he calls it) is crucial for developing translator expertise because it provides translators with their own point of view to carry out the tasks (see also Muñoz Martín 2014: 31). The mechanism of reflexivity at play in the reflexive method does certainly enable a heightened sense of self-awareness, a grasp of one’s own relation to and positioning toward the source text, but the self-awareness it brings about is incomplete and partial. The knowledge the reflexive method generates is the knowledge of partiality and opacity—of the impossibility of stepping outside one’s own perception.

Risk-Taking

The reflexive method shows that translating involves a double risk: the risk of misunderstanding the author and the risk of being misunderstood by the reader. Through the reflexive lens, translating becomes an experience of double uncertainty. On the one hand, translators realize that their interpretation of the text is inevitably partial and subjective, determined by factors that exceed the frame of their awareness. On the other hand, they recognize that their imperfect rendering will in turn be interpreted in a subjective or intuitive way. Training translators who understand the risks involved in translating is essential in encouraging them to take responsibility for their decisions. By inviting students to acknowledge the

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partiality of translation tasks and the uncertainties involved, the reflexive method requires them to be all the more daring and experimental in the choices that they make.

A Flexible and Process-Driven Pedagogy

In *Becoming a Translator*, Douglas Robinson stresses the importance of developing a learner-centered training curriculum which is adapted to its audience, and which respects the learning preferences of each student:

[T]ranslation is intelligent activity involving complex processes of conscious and unconscious learning; we all learn in different ways, and institutional learning should therefore be as flexible and as complex and rich as possible, so as to activate the channels through which each student learns best. (Robinson 1997/2003: 49)

The reflexive method allows students to engage with translation both theoretically and practically in their own and multiple ways. Translating Derrida reflexively will mean different things to different students. During my sessions, some students decided to emphasize the ironic element of Derrida's approach; some were paralyzed by the self-reflexivity involved in his comment; whilst others approached the task in a more pragmatic way. The reflexive method allows for plurality because it is a

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process-oriented pedagogy. Several translation training scholars have insisted on the necessity of a praxis-centered approach (see Nord 1991: 177-179; Gile 1995: 10). For Gile, for example, the “idea is to focus in the classroom not on results, that is, not on the end product of the translation process, but on the process itself” (Gile 1995: 10). The reflexive method answers this demand by presenting a process-driven approach that does not teach by showing, but through experience, the experience of failing to enact a translation theory exhaustively.

Preparing for the unknown

As a method that changes according to the text it translates, the reflexive method emphasizes the singularity of translation tasks as unique events embedded in an individual, historical experience. The reflexive method shows that performing a given strategy or concept mechanically is impractical, for the significance of this strategy or concept is itself subject to change, fluctuating, contingent. Translating reflexively highlights the unpredictable nature of translation, the impossibility of anticipating every translation problem, of predicting one’s own response to a particular challenge. When asked to translate translation theory performatively, students realize that elements in their translation decisions exceed prediction. Translating reflexively invites them to recognize that as professional translators they will have to face situations for which they will not have been prepared. Using the reflexive method means also, from an

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instructor's perspective, to acknowledge that, however thoughtful and thorough our training might be, it is itself limited—not only because it is informed to a certain extent by our own partial and subjective experience of translation (see Arrojo 2005), but also because it cannot encompass every translation situation, or the state of translation in the future—something which has become all the more apparent in recent years with the rapid evolution of translation technology and its growing impact on the way we translate. The question then is: how can we prepare translators for something which does not yet exist? The possibility offered by the reflexive method is to teach translation not by providing ready-made solutions but by engaging in a process of interrogation and discovery. Students are inspired to constantly challenge their own approach to translation and to remain open to the possibilities offered by the specific context of the translation tasks they undertake.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The students' responses to the two seminars I taught using the reflexive method suggest that this innovative approach fulfils many key requirements of effective translator training, including combined theory and practice (Kiraly 2015: 30); a process-driven approach (Gile 1995: 10); a learner-centered pedagogy (Kelly 2005/2012: 17); flexibility (Robinson 1997/2003: 49); intuition (Kiraly

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2015: 16); self-perception (Kiraly 1995: 101) and critical thinking (Baker and Maier 2011: 4).

In “Ethics in Interpreter and Translator Training”, Mona Baker and Carol Maier describe the main objectives of translator education in the following terms:

First, training should aim to provide students with the *conceptual tools* they need to reason critically about the implications of any decision. This means engaging with some of the theoretical literature on ethics that can provide a coherent terminology and a means of reflecting on the pros and cons of particular ways of justifying behaviour (...). Second, training should enable students to identify a range of *potential strategies* that may be deployed to deal with ethically difficult or compromising situations (...). And third, educators need to develop a set of *pedagogical tools* that can be used to create an environment in which students can make situated ethical decisions, rehearse the implications of such decisions, and learn from this experience. (Baker and Maier 2011: 5-6; original emphasis)

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The reflexive method fulfils every aspect of the above description and more: it provides students with the conceptual tools they need not only to reason critically about the implications of their decisions, but also to think critically about the tools themselves. It invites them not only to identify a range of potential strategies for dealing with ethical issues, but also to interrogate the usability of these strategies in a different situation. It provides a pedagogic tool which invites students to reflect on possible consequences and learn from experience, and to consider that a responsible decision cannot be programmed or calculated. In other words, it teaches the importance of both vigilance and risk-taking.

As an educational tool geared towards a flexible, learner-centered approach, the reflexive method is also traversed by contingency and uncertainty. The present research has focused on translator education at the MA level because it is the type of translator training most widely provided in the UK, according to the European Society for Translation¹. However, in certain institutions training in translation also takes place at the undergraduate level or as part of language courses. Some of the learning outcomes of the reflexive method (especially those related to uncertainty) may prove challenging for less advanced students, resulting in self-doubt and inactivity, instead of humility and responsibility (Pym 2010: 111). Moreover,

¹ EST Translator Training Observatory: Last accessed 24 September 2014, <<http://www.est-translationstudies.org/resources/tti/tti.htm>>

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in some countries, certified translators are not required to complete postgraduate studies, meaning that this pedagogy may be irrelevant in countries where there is no postgraduate teaching of translation.

Further research is needed to inspect the specific advantages (and limits) of the reflexive method at the undergraduate level. Some initial ideas include using it as an exercise in academic writing (learning to write essays by translating/imitating other academic texts); as a close-reading task (since translating requires a precise, careful and slow engagement with a text); thinking critically about the theories examined (the fact that many theories are themselves taught in translation); and to un-teach reflexes acquired over “many years of school translation focused on equivalence” (Gile 2004: 5). Additionally, a comparison of students’ response to the reflexive method at the graduate and undergraduate levels might provide productive insights into the different pedagogic needs involved at each stage.

In translator education, great emphasis is placed on determining teaching objectives and learning outcomes prior to a session (see Kelly 2005/2012: 20-41). However, as the students’ diverse and conflicting responses to the reflexive method have shown, the effects of any reflexive project are contingent, meaning that the benefits of the reflexive method itself are not entirely securable or sustainable. Prompting critical engagement is not something that a tutor can fully control or guarantee, for

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educating is as much an encounter with the singular, the uncertain, the unknown, as the experience of translating itself. I can spell out learning outcomes to students so as to influence them, but how they understand them, internalize them and transform them over time, is not something that I, as a tutor, can ensure or wish to control. This challenge, which applies to any teaching approach and not only to the reflexive method, does not mean that the pedagogic benefits listed previously are immaterial, but that their emergence is itself subject to instability, change and uncertainty. From the translator trainer's point of view, the reflexive method makes evident the need for continual re-evaluation and re-adjustment of teaching objectives.

The reflexive method does not provide, nor does it seek to provide, the ultimate approach to teaching translation theory. Recognizing the value of uncertainty in translation, and using it to provide training that is self-critical, does not mean accepting the benefits of the reflexive method at face value. For, like non-reflexive approaches, the reflexive method is also flawed, imperfect and lacking. The experience of indeterminacy that it triggers should therefore also be applied to itself, drawing attention to the fact that parts of its learning outcomes may be irrelevant in certain contexts or proved wrong in certain situations. One of the dangers of a reflexive pedagogy is to be misinterpreted by both students and trainers as solving the contradictions that it raises, instead of being used to face them. For, whilst the contingency of the

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reflexive method is perhaps its biggest challenge, it is at the same time—as I hope to have demonstrated in this article—one of its most innovative contributions to translator education.

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