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The translator's bookshelf: the role of reading in a freelance translator's continuing professional development portfolio

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ABSTRACT

The role and place of reading in the development, maintenance and growth of a translator's knowledge and skills are discussed. Reading is highlighted as a valid, and indeed valuable, form of continuing professional development (CPD) activity for freelance translators. Consideration is given to the range of reading in which a translator can usefully engage for professional development purposes, the forms of learning that can occur through the reading of particular types of materials, and the approaches a translator can take to reading in order to maximise the learning to be derived from it. The benefits and challenges of including reading in a translator's programme of CPD activity. A typology of reading for professional development is outlined for freelance translators.

KEYWORDS

Freelance translator; continuing professional development (CPD); formal learning; informal learning; profession; professionalism; lifelong learning; professional body.

"I do not question the use of email and cyberspace for most day-to-day, or urgent, or ephemeral, or up-to-date and updated texts. However, many people will always prefer to read books—or even hard copy—to the evident strain of gazing at a screen. Moreover, books have a wonderful, handy, hard or leathery, familiar feel". (Newmark 2011b: 29).

1. Introduction

In a section entitled 'The role of the translator' in his book '*About Translation*,' Peter Newmark observed that

The image of translators—as underpaid, anonymous parasites, at their best when, like an imaginary window-pane, they are invisible and least noticed, desk-bound, cocooned in a library, a bookworm, obsessed with words, knowing nothing about the culture of the countries whose languages they translate, which they have never visited anyway, ignorant of facts, a remote recluse—is obsolescent but dies hard (1991:39).

Newmark was accurate in stating that this image of translators "dies hard." Yet in the twenty years that have elapsed since Newmark wrote those words, universities and the leading membership bodies for translators in the UK, such as the Chartered Institute of Linguists and the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, have played an important role, and indeed made considerable and commendable progress, in steering translating away from amateurism towards professionalism. Discussion of

this professionalisation process has also become the subject of a growing body of academic research (see for example Katan 2009).

In universities, a range of programmes and courses at various levels has been designed and developed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and formal academic qualifications needed to launch them into careers in translation. Indeed, as Hackett and Connell (2006:1) have noted, it is now the case that “the minimum qualification required to break into the translation field is really a degree in the language in which you are going to specialise,” and thus the translator has moved from being “a person untrained or semi-trained at an institute to one educated at a university” (Newmark 1991: 45).

The professional bodies have played their part in changing the “position of the translator” from an “amateur to a professional status” (Newmark 1991: 45) by devising professional postgraduate-level (and post-experience) qualifications for translators (such as the Diploma in Translation offered by the Chartered Institute of Linguists), requiring members to adhere to appropriate professional codes of conduct and ethical guidelines, and by placing a growing emphasis on the need for, and importance of, Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In line with other professions, schemes have been devised to encourage and support translators in assessing their individual professional development needs, setting their development goals and objectives, undertaking a range of relevant learning and development activities, and recording and reflecting on their learning. This increasing emphasis on Continuing Professional Development has, in turn, spurred the professional bodies on to provide more structured professional development training programmes and activities for translators in recognition of the fact that “much of the learning required to attain full professional competence actually take place after the completion of formal training” (Cheetham and Chivers 2001: 285) and that “newly trained professionals should embark on their careers recognising that the greater part of their professional learning is still to come” (ibid). Whilst such programmes and activities have tended to be voluntary, there are growing indications of a move towards making the undertaking, recording and monitoring of relevant CPD activities a compulsory aspect of membership of the professional bodies for linguists. Indeed, a demonstrable commitment to, and engagement with, relevant CPD is a core component of the Chartered Linguist Scheme administered by the Chartered Institute of Linguists in partnership with other leading professional bodies for linguists in the UK (Wagner 2010).

This progress towards professionalism made by the universities and professional bodies has been achieved in an era in which the translation sector has experienced both growth and change. Notably, there has been a “radical change in the labour market for translators” (Fraser 2001: 31): many in-house translation departments in large organisations have closed, and translation work has been outsourced to translators working on a

freelance basis (Holland et al. 2004: 254; Locke 2005: 19). For the novice translator embarking on a career in translation, the effect of these closures has meant that “instead of being able to learn their trade in the relatively ‘safe’ atmosphere of a translation department, and having the experience and knowledge of senior translators to draw on, they are in a majority of cases pitched on to an unsupervised freelance market” (Fraser 2001: 31). Furthermore, the working practices of translators have altered significantly as new technologies have emerged to support their daily tasks, including terminology look-up, background research, translation of repeated text, terminology storage and retrieval, as well as the more general business management tasks of marketing, quoting, invoicing, and the transmission of translation assignments between client and translator (Fulford and Granell-Zafra 2004 and 2008). As a result of these significant changes in the translation sector, it is now crucial for translators to develop and maintain a portfolio of professional knowledge and skills encompassing not simply language, translation and cultural issues, but also business acumen (including marketing, sales, finance and tax matters, contracting, administrative processes, and business networking), research skills (including Internet search skills and database search strategies) and information technology competence (including both proficiency in general-purpose and translation-specific software, as well as the use of a range of hardware).

Typically, to achieve a balanced portfolio of relevant knowledge and skills, it is not enough to adopt an “opportunistic” approach to professional development (Fraser 2010: 14), but rather freelance translators need to plan their own professional development in the light of the decisions they have made regarding the type of translation work they wish to undertake (e.g. subject specialisms, document types) and the working practices they wish to adopt (e.g. types of client to work for, the use of translation tools, or not). Having made such plans, it is then incumbent on freelance translators to seek appropriate learning opportunities to ensure that their portfolio of knowledge and skills is maintained and developed in order that they can practice their profession competently and efficiently, and ultimately operate a successful freelance business producing work that meets clients’ expectations and requirements.

As Wagner (2010) has stressed, it is important that translators take a broad view of their professional development and of the learning opportunities that exist. They need to recognise that engagement in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is not simply a matter of “going on training courses” (2010: 10), although participation in formal training does tend to be the best understood, and most widely discussed, form of CPD in translation as well as in many other professions. Beyond training courses, CPD for the freelance translator can encompass activities such as familiarising ourselves with a software program or “read[ing] around a new subject,” “language maintenance” through reading

newspapers or watching films (Fraser 2010:15) and “reading, TV, visits and online tutorials” (Wagner 2010: 11).

Building on some earlier discussions of freelance translators and their professional development activities (see for example, Fulford 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, and 2009), the purpose of this article is to explore the role and place of reading in the development, maintenance and growth of a translator’s knowledge and skills, and to highlight reading as a valid, and indeed valuable, form of CPD activity for freelance translators. Consideration is given to the range of reading in which a translator can usefully engage for professional development purposes, the forms of learning that can occur through the reading of particular types of materials, the approaches a translator can take to reading in order to maximise the learning to be derived from it, and to be able to provide evidence that learning has taken place. The benefits and challenges of including reading in a translator’s programme of CPD activity are also noted.

2. Context: reading for professional development purposes

In a report compiled by the Institute for Learning as a result of a series of ‘professional knowledge symposia’ in the further education and skills sector (including adult and work-based learning), it is asserted that:

Professionals and professional bodies have a [...] powerful role to play as part of the improvement and self-improvement landscape. Professional bodies give the public, the sector and the government confidence that individual professionals will be striving to continuously improve their skills, knowledge and expertise to offer the highest quality and exemplary professional services they can to their learners (IfL 2009: 6).

It is further claimed in the IfL report that: “commitment to professional practice within a profession is not only personal but an obligation to the profession itself” (2009: 10).

If these points are considered within the translation sector, then it is clear that membership of a professional body such as the Chartered Institute of Linguists or the Institute of Translation and Interpreting implies a commitment on the part of individual members to ongoing professional development in order that quality of work can be guaranteed to external stakeholders, such as clients. It is clear too that the professional bodies have a part to play in ensuring not only that their members can perform to the standard required within the sector (i.e. the professional bodies have a support role to play for their members), but that they can demonstrate to stakeholders that their members have the appropriate levels of knowledge and expertise to perform competently (i.e. the professional bodies have a form of quality assurance role to play for external stakeholders).

The notions of “improvement and self-improvement” referred to in the IfL report in the context of professional learning and development can perhaps most usefully be understood first in terms of Eraut’s “types of progress” in the workplace, summarised as “doing things better”, “doing things differently” and “doing different things” (Eraut 2008: 2), and second in terms of the Dreyfus progression model for individuals, moving from the novice level through advanced beginner, to competent, then proficient, and finally to expert (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986). Such progression can involve both formal and informal learning.

There has been much discussion and debate in the literature regarding precise definitions of terms such as “formal learning” and “informal learning” (see Cheetham and Chivers 2001 and Hodgkinson, Colley and Malcolm 2003 for overviews of the scope and landscape of this debate). For the purposes of the present discussion of freelance translators and professional development, the definition of informal learning put forward by Livingstone (1999: 51) seems most appropriate, namely ‘any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies.’ Eraut (2004) further notes that the term “informal learning” provides “a simple contrast to formal learning or training that suggests greater flexibility or freedom for learners,” and also that it “recognises the social significance of learning from other people, but implies greater scope for individual agency than socialisation” (2004:247). Cheetham and Chivers (2001) make a useful contribution to the discussion of informal learning by providing a taxonomy of informal professional learning methods derived from an extensive study of workplace learning in a number of professions. This taxonomy includes “observation and copying”, “mentor/coach interaction”, and “unconscious absorption or absorption” (2001:281).

Schugurensky (2000) has analysed the concept of informal learning, and broken it down further into a number of categories to create a taxonomy of informal learning based upon the notions of “intentionality” and “consciousness.” His taxonomy includes three forms of informal learning: “self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialisation” (2000: 2). His category of self-directed learning “refers to ‘learning projects’ undertaken by individuals [...] without the assistance of an ‘educator’ (teacher, instructor, facilitator) [...]. It is both intentional and conscious. It is intentional because the individual has the purpose of learning something even before the learning process begins, and it is conscious, in the sense that the individual is aware that he or she has learned something” (2000: 3). His second category (incidental learning) “refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place. Thus, it is unintentional but conscious”. (2000: 4). Finally, his third category of informal learning, namely socialisation (or tacit learning)

“refers to the internalisation of values, attitudes, behaviours, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life. Not only do we have no a priori intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we learned something” (2000: 4).

Discussions of workplace learning typically suggest that reading constitutes a type of informal learning. As with other forms of informal learning, one of the challenges associated with reading for professional development purposes is that it can be difficult to determine if and when learning has taken place, that is to say, the learning may sometimes have occurred unconsciously rather than intentionally (to use Schugurensky’s terminology cited above), and thus ascertaining what value has been derived from it can prove problematic. Fraser (2010) highlights this issue in her discussion of the value for freelance translators of reflecting on, and evaluating, their CPD activities. She notes that freelancers need to be extremely disciplined in their recording of the learning derived from their various reading activities, whether this be reading to familiarise themselves with a specialist subject area, or reading of a foreign language newspaper to keep their vocabulary current (2010: 15). The underlying suggestion seems to be that the less goal-oriented the reading activity, the greater the need to make explicit the learning that has occurred, in order to avoid the risk of the activity being of no value as a professional development activity.

The present research attempts to contribute to existing discussions about reading as a valid and valuable professional development activity for freelance translators by examining the types of reading a translator typically undertakes and proposing a typology of reading based upon the learning that can be expected to occur during, or as a result of, each type.

It is envisaged that this typology will provide a useful basis for translators planning the reading component of their continuing professional development programmes, as well as enable them to make explicit in their CPD records the learning that has occurred, and to reflect more meaningfully upon the value of that learning for their development. For the language and translation professional bodies, it is anticipated that this typology could be used to assess and monitor more effectively the informal learning recorded by members in their CPD logs, and thus enable them to verify and assess its value. From a training point of view, the proposed typology should provide universities with a tool for introducing students to the notion of informal CPD activity and for helping to guide students through the range of reading they should be encouraged to undertake as an integral part of their professional development. The next section of the present article comprises an overview of the proposed typology of reading for freelance translators.

3. A typology of reading for the freelance translator

Today, the range of reading material on the freelance translator's bookshelf is likely to be greater than ever before, and may well include reference books (dictionaries, encyclopaedia, glossaries, thesauri), textbooks, manuals and handbooks, academic journals, professional journals, technical and/or company reports and reviews, newsletters, novels (and other works of fiction), newspapers and magazines. Some of this reading material will be in conventional paper-based formats, whilst other items will be in the form of digital media, electronic books, online resources, and so on. Some more recent additions to the freelance translator's 'bookshelf' are likely to be websites, online discussion groups, blogs and tweets.

With regard to coverage, the translator's bookshelf is likely to include material and works dealing not only with language and translation related topics, but also geographical and cultural matters, business, information technology, general literature (including fiction), and current affairs/news, as well as materials related to the translator's own specialist subject areas.

This breadth of coverage gives an indication of the range and scope of knowledge, skills and expertise that are likely to have be considered when a translator plans his/her own portfolio of professional development. It is likely also that the various reading materials outlined above will be used in different ways as aids to, and resources for, the translator's learning and development. The range and scope of a translator's reading cab e summarised in the following typology:

Reading for mastering

Reading for mastering comprises the reading a freelance translator would undertake to learn a specific skill such as the use of some new software, or to acquire some pre-determined area of expertise or knowledge, such as a new subject specialism or a new language. This type of reading tends to fall into the category of what has been referred to elsewhere as 'self-directed study,' and is likely to be planned and goal-oriented. It is purposeful and highly focused. It is likely to involve the reading of textbooks, manuals, handbooks, grammar books, online tutorial materials, and so on. It will typically be undertaken by setting aside specific time to achieve particular learning goals.

Reading for problem solving

Reading for problem solving is the kind of reading a freelance translator will undertake to resolve terminological queries arising in the course of his/her daily translation work, to sort out specific IT-related problems (e.g. finding out how to use a particular feature of a piece of software), or to deal with a business matter (e.g.

resolving a tax-related question). The translator is likely to consult reference works, websites, or previous postings to online discussion groups, and so on. It is a highly directed and focused form of reading, and will typically occur on an ad hoc, 'need-to-know' basis, rather than forming part of a planned programme of learning.

Reading for gleaning

Reading for gleaning is the type of reading a freelance translator will undertake 'in and around' his/her day-to-day work, and will typically involve following threads on online discussion groups (Granell-Zafra and Fulford 2005), browsing websites, reading magazines, and trade and professional journals. This type of reading is not typically embarked upon with a specific learning goal in mind, but rather the emphasis is simply on 'picking up' whatever facts, hints, tips or news may catch the translator's eye, and which he/she may then store for possible future use, as the need arises. This could include hints and tips for resolving particular terminological, business or IT issues, ideas on how to deal with particular client-related matters, marketing ideas, indications of rates charged for translation work, or news of forthcoming events and training activities. It may also involve 'observing' other practitioners (via the medium of their postings and responses on online discussions groups, or their blogs and/or tweets) to gain insights into their working practices, the way they communicate with colleagues and clients, or to discover latest developments in the profession. Whilst the translator is likely at times to be conscious of having 'learned something new' through this type of reading, it is perhaps less likely that they will record or reflect upon that learning as it will tend to occur in a rather unplanned way, perhaps in the midst of other activity during the working day, or indeed in 'downtime' between translation assignments, or when travelling etc.

Reading for role modelling

Reading for role modelling involves 'following' the written communications of particular individuals, whether this be other (perhaps more established and more experienced) translators or professionals and experts associated with a translator's subject specialism. Such communications could include books, articles, blogs, tweets, and forum postings. Whilst the freelance translator may not embark on this type of reading with a specific learning goal in mind, the general motivation will be to 'sit at the feet' of experts, to emulate and imitate, in order to improve his/her own working practices and increase his/her own professionalism. As Cheetham and Chivers (2001) have noted, this notion of role modelling constitutes an important learning method in the workplace. For the freelancer, working alone without the benefit of day-to-day contact with more experienced colleagues, this form of learning can take place through reading. McDonough Dolmaya (2011) notes, for

example, that translator blogs provide insights into how experienced translators work, how they approach their work, how they communicate about their work, and how they think about and reflect upon their work.

Reading for absorbing

Reading for absorbing is an activity freelance translators typically engage in throughout their lives, both in the course of their work and outside of work, the aim being to soak up language and cultural knowledge, as well as expertise relating to their subject specialisms. It is often a subconscious process, rather than a structured and planned activity, and involves reading novels and cultural/country guides, reading newspapers and magazines, as well as a wide variety of 'incidental' reading, such as signs, packaging, promotional materials, technical equipment instructions and so on. As Newmark so succinctly indicated in his penultimate "Translation now" article in *The Linguist* (2011b), this kind of reading can also have a critiquing function, during which translators reflect on other's translations (or mistranslations) and think about how to improve them. To illustrate this point, Newmark cited an example of errors in translation he had spotted on the packaging of shortbread from Duncan's of Deeside (Aberdeenshire). He also spotted and accentual and spelling mistakes. Characteristically, as well as noting the linguistic blunders on the packaging, he was also keen to point out that the shortbread itself was "delicious beyond words"!

The above typology of reading for freelance translators indicates that they are likely undertake both planned (intentional) reading for professional development purposes, as well as a variety of unplanned (less specifically intentioned, or goal-oriented) reading. A key challenge for translators is devising a means of recognising and capturing the learning that occurs through each type of reading in order to derive maximum benefit from that learning for professional self-improvement purposes.

Linked to this challenge is the need for translators to be able to provide evidence of their learning from reading for their CPD record keeping and monitoring purposes. Fraser (2010) has highlighted a number of ways translators can usefully reflect on their informal learning, such as through being disciplined about questioning themselves about how they have made improvements to their working practices, or what new knowledge they have acquired, and so on. Suggestions are made about ways of recording and reflecting on that learning (2010: 15). The use of the above typology, coupled with the sort of self-questioning and reflective approach outlined by Fraser (2010), should go some way towards enabling freelance translators to ensure that their reading is both purposeful and meaningful, and contributes to their professional development in a way that can be both recognised by themselves and more easily assessed and

verified by relevant professional bodies operating structured CPD programmes.

Reading as a professional development activity has advantages for freelance translators as firstly they are, by the very nature of their work, highly familiar with consulting and using texts in a wide range of forms and media. Second, it does not need to be an expensive form of professional development activity, unlike training courses and conferences. In particular, much of the reading material available online is offered free of charge. Third, it is a flexible professional development activity that can be undertaken in a variety of settings and is not restricted to specific timeslots (and often also not tied to specific deadlines).

However, it should perhaps also be noted that reading may be an unwelcome form of professional development activity for freelance translators. Working with texts all day may mean that the last thing a translator wants to do is engage in informal learning involving yet more reading. It will be important, therefore, for individual translators to plan their own portfolio of professional development activities to ensure that they achieve a balance of activity that is acceptable to them, and which provides the level of variety required to keep their learning fresh and stimulating. Coupled with this is the fact that freelance translators often work in isolation and so again may prefer their professional development activity to be more social and involve networking with fellow translators (Wagner 2010). One way round this might be for freelancers to consider forming small informal reading and discussion groups with colleagues in their locality. This would seem to fit best with the first type of reading activity described in the typology above, namely the 'reading for mastering' type, where translators could perhaps study a topic or issue together. It may also be appropriate for some forms of 'reading for absorbing,' perhaps particularly involving reading and discussion of foreign language novels, biographies and so on for language and vocabulary learning and improvement.

4. Concluding remarks

Freelance translators now have at their own disposal a wide range of reading materials (both hardcopy and digital) that they can usefully draw upon to support them in their professional development and learning. A key challenge is how they can benefit from that reading, and reflect upon their learning from it in a meaningful way. It is envisaged that the reading typology proposed in this article will help go some way towards providing a framework or structure for translators to capture and articulate their learning from various forms of reading. This should help them when they seek to meet the requirements of their professional bodies to present evidence of their professional development activity. In turn, it should enable the professional bodies to assess more easily the informal learning

reported in translators' CPD records and thus enable the assessors to recognise and 'count' this form of learning within their structured continuing professional development programmes.

The universities can play their part too by introducing typologies, such as the one proposed here, to their students to enable them, at an early stage in their careers, to recognise both the range of reading that a translator can usefully engage in for professional development purposes, and the value and meaning that can be derived from that reading if a structured, focused and reflective approach is taken to it as a professional development activity.

Further work in this area is now underway to test and apply the proposed reading typology, as well to develop learning materials to accompany it.

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Biography

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