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Graduation Paper as a Tool of Assessing Professional Aptitude of a Translator (Bachelor's Degree)

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Abstract

New market realities in the translation industry and elsewhere require an innovative approach to the content of higher education and a refocus on soft and hard skills. A prospective translator shall possess communicative skills, be capable of critical thinking, self-management, teamwork, engage in project activities, as well be creative, intellectually flexible, and digitally literate.

New trends in the profession are conducive to revising educational strategies for graduation papers (GP) written by undergraduates. GPs are still theory-oriented, thus failing to meet the pragmatic needs of the translation industry, and lack correlation with hands-on professional activities. Bachelor GPs seem especially challenging, since neither Russian education authorities, nor academic instructors have a clear-cut vision of the bachelor's degree training and its specific nature. Most often, the bachelor's degree is deemed as a simplified version of the specialist's degree.

The professional standard and the Federal State Educational Standard on Linguistics provide that graduates shall have general cultural, general professional, and professional competences (PCs). If mastered, these competences will qualify graduates for independent professional activities outside the academic institution. This paper presents feasibility study results for practice-oriented GPs. These results are analyzed to see if such GPs match relevant translation problems and if a new practice-oriented method can be used as a tool to assess graduates' professional aptitude for independent translation activities. The authors discourse upon effectiveness of this tool in education based on LUNN case study. The selection scope covers GPs written in 2015–2020, their number exceeding 200.

Keywords: practice-oriented training, graduation paper, professional competences, annotated translation, translation project.

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Introduction

In line with the final certifying examination procedure for higher educational programs (bachelor's, master's, and specialist's degree) established by Order No. 636 of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science of June 29, 2015, the final certifying examination shall be arranged in the form of a state exam and/or defense of a graduation paper (GP) (hereinafter jointly referred to as final certifying exams[†]). Universities can choose between a state exam and defense of a graduation paper, the preference being given to the latter. The GP format is determined by the university itself, however final certifying exams shall provide an opportunity to assess whether all relevant general cultural (GCC 1-12), general professional (GPC 1-20), and professional competences (PC 7-15) are formed[‡].

The Federal State Educational Standard fails to regulate the GP format. The only requirement states that a GP shall be a study reflecting the level of a graduate's aptitude to conduct independent professional activities. However, in many universities, the structure and topics of GPs for bachelors majoring in Translation Studies are no different from those for specialists. Most often, GPs aim at analyzing translation techniques used to render grammatical, lexical, or stylistic phenomena in different texts or they focus on translation of separate text fragments, which prevents from singling out a communication task or developing a translation macro-strategy. GPs mostly consist in comparative analysis of different translations of a literary text. GPs are not practice-oriented and fail to demonstrate graduates' professional abilities since they are designed to explore a general translation problem rather than a specific translation objective. Meanwhile, any general translation problem to be solved requires analysis of vast amounts of text materials and some specific theoretical background necessary for researchers in Translation Studies. All of this goes beyond the scope of the bachelor's degree program.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The goal of this research is to theorize, develop, and test a new practice-oriented format of GPs as an effective tool of assessing professional aptitude of a prospective translator. The following research objectives were set to reach the goal:

1. study Russian and foreign experience of arranging final exams, analyze requirements to GPs established in Russia;

[†] See <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71045690/>.

[‡] See http://fgosvo.ru/uploadfiles/fgosvob/450302_Lingvistika.pdf.

2. conduct a survey among employers and translators/interpreters to see if GP topics comply with the requirements of the translation market;
3. describe LUNN experience in developing and testing a practice-oriented format of GPs (bachelor's degree);
4. identify the potential of a translation project as an optimal form of a final exam that could be an efficient tool to assess graduates' professional aptitude for independent translation activities;
5. perform comparative analysis of state final examination programs at Russian universities that train translators/interpreters, of thematic dynamics, and GP requirements in terms of the professional standard and the Federal State Educational Standard of the latest generation.

Literature review

Early publications on the nature of bachelor's degree training in translation and translatology appeared in 2011 (Porshneva & Zinovyeva, 2011). Over the past decade, the level of graduates' professional aptitude for independent translation activities has come to the fore. This issue is considered rather challenging among instructors of higher schools of interpreting and translation who are in charge of developing educational programs. When searching for an optimal final exam form, four fundamental questions have to be answered: what form / type of professional activities a graduate bachelor should be ready for; what competencies they should master; what kind of employer needs a graduate of this type; and what requirements a GP should meet.

We find partial answers to these questions in regulatory documents on final certifying exams (GP defense) that have been prepared in compliance with the Federal Law of the Russian Federation on Education (2012); Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education (<https://fgos.ru/>); Order No. 636 of on Establishing the Procedure of Final Certifying Examinations in Higher Educational Programs (bachelor's, master's and specialist's degree programs) (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2015); key professional educational programs of higher education for universities that train bachelors in Linguistics, Translation Studies (45.03.02) and specialists in Translation Studies (45.05.01). Publications by Mityagina (2012), as well as reports by CEOs of translation agencies and other employers at numerous conferences, including Pavel S. Bruk (2006), focus on tackling these challenges following an active and competency-based approach. Almost everyone insists on developing a practice-oriented format for a GP in translation.

Methodology

Transition to a two-tiered system of education in Russia, introduction of a 4-year bachelor's degree, and implementation of a competency-based approach to educational processes prompted us to identify final examinations that would be best aligned with the times. It should be noted that while pursuing a bachelor's degree, an undergraduate covers the first stage of higher education (grassroots of theoretical training), gets a basic degree in linguistics and practice-oriented translation. Towards graduation, students shall prove ready for professional activities. Therefore, a GP as an evaluation tool shall reflect the knowledge and expertise acquired during the entire period of studies, various skills such as the ability to process scientific literature in a wide range of subject areas, or the ability to apply basic techniques of professional translation. Another major aspect is that GPs should be based on the disciplines taught as part of the curriculum.

The present study aimed at identifying and developing a new GP format that would fit the bachelor's degree framework was carried out in four stages:

1. The preparatory stage focuses on scientometric analysis of relevant Russian and foreign publications and on theoretical and methodological basis of research, as well as on track record and best practices of leading European translation schools: ESIT, ISIT (Paris), ISTI (Strasbourg), UMONS (Mons), Johannes Gutenberg-University (Faculty of Applied Translation, Linguistic and Cultural Studies in Gernersheim).
2. The ascertaining stage aims to study regulatory documents, final examination programs at Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod (LUNN), Moscow State Linguistic University, Perm National Research Polytechnic University, Irkutsk State University and other higher educational institutions that offer majors in interpreting and translation in order to identify traditional goals and objectives of final exams (specialist's degree), as well as to conduct comparative analysis of GP topics (bachelor's degree) with view of the tasks set by the Federal State Educational Standards.
3. The analytical stage focuses on justifying changes to final examination programs and revising GP objectives and the GP format. Therefore, the analysis embraces over 200 final examination programs of various universities engaged in training translators/interpreters.
4. The experimental and systematizing stage aims to clarify GP practice-oriented targets, to develop and test the optimal GP format that would meet the bachelor's degree requirements.

Results

During the preparatory stage, while studying best practices of arranging final exams in European higher schools of interpreting and translation, we learnt about the tradition of preparing and defending practice-oriented GPs, each focused on finding a real complex translation solution. It prompted us to study the traditions of similar schools in Russia.

Russian regulatory documents examined at the ascertaining stage revealed another tradition in Russian linguistic education: GP requirements for “Linguist, Teacher”, “Linguist, Translator/Interpreter”, “Linguist, Expert in Cross-Cultural Communication” are uniform and define a GP as “a complete study of some general or specific problem raised in fundamental or special disciplines and put forward for public defense”. It has to contain thematic justification, relevance and novelty of the goals and tasks set, some rationale behind research methods, literature review, and description of the results obtained. Theoretical orientation of GPs is generally manifested in their subject matter and goals of research. As a rule, GPs study either problems of general translation theory, or issues of comparative linguistics, or fiction translation (Porshneva & Alekseeva, 2021).

Examples of such GP topics are listed below:

- Color adjectives in economic terminology in Russian and French
- Polysemy in Russian and French legal terminology
- Language game in the headlines of English-language newspaper texts on political and economic topics and challenges of their translation
- Challenges of translating Soviet realia into English. Case study of the English translation of novels “Twelve Chairs” and “The Golden Calf” by I. Ilf and E. Petrov
- Preserving original ambiguity and obliquity in translation. Case study of public statements by public and political figures.

At the analytical stage, methodological recommendations for the LUNN Higher School of Interpreting and Translation were amended by adding the following definition: “The graduation paper (GP) is mostly practice-oriented and involves translation of a small text (or several similar texts) and analysis of the process and outcomes of translation in terms of text functions, discourse features, translation difficulties and solutions”.

The GP goal now is to demonstrate compliance of the level of graduates' theoretical knowledge and practical skills with the requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education and the Major Professional Academic Program for 45.03.02 Linguistics; to assess graduates' aptitude for independent professional activities and professional tasks within the framework of their major; to enhance academic training and introduce students to creative research activities. GP tasks involve formation and development of academic research skills, including the ability to obtain, analyze, systematize, deepen, and formalize scientific knowledge in the selected area; development of skills required for practical analysis of linguistic material; further consolidation of theoretical thinking and research skills.

Meanwhile, the area of research gradually narrowed making GPs more streamlined and built on relevant material, thus changing students' attitude to graduation research. Here are a few GP topics as an example:

- Some features of legal discourse and translation problems. Case study of the Council of Europe master documents;
- Specific nature of legal discourse in a comparative aspect. Case study of ECHR applications in English, French, and Russian);
- Annotated translation of a legal text from French into Russian.

It was the first step made by the LUNN Higher School of Interpreting and Translation towards a new practice-oriented GP format that follows a context and competency-based approach (Verbitsky, 2010; Zimnyaya, 2004).

In search of an adequate GP format that would fit the bachelor's degree, we examined over 200 final examination programs of various universities that train translators/interpreters. The analysis showed that when the Federal State Educational Standard of the third generation and that of the 3+ generation were introduced, only 20% of universities opted for a practice-oriented GP format (Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Togliatti, Pyatigorsk). The remaining 80% of academic institutions still stick to GPs on translation that meet traditional requirements for a specialist's degree, i.e. suggest research in general and applied linguistics, as well as translation theory. Such a GP rests on the analysis of theoretical material related to the topic that an undergraduate can choose from the proposed list. Traditionally, students are offered linguistic topics aimed at studying translation techniques applied to certain grammatical, lexical, or stylistic phenomena. At the same time, students do not provide their own translations and often analyze linguistic units outside the context. As a result, such papers mostly reproduce someone else's research rather than provide a student's authentic line of thought.

As a rule, GPs consist of two parts, the first being theoretical with an overview of similar research papers with corresponding references. The second part tends to have a practical focus. However, students analyze some collected material rather than do their own translations. Most GPs border on reviews. This contradicts the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education, pursuant to which the goal of a GP is to develop and assess professional competences and graduates' aptitude for independent professional activities. In this case, the tenet saying that the GP demonstrates the level of graduates' aptitude for independent professional activities appears to be wrong. The analytical stage brought about a set of criteria for a practice-oriented graduation research, based on which a new GP format was developed.

At the experimental stage, the LUNN introduced a new type of GPs – annotated translation of topical texts of 30,000-36,000 characters long that could be a real-life translation job (research papers, legal cases, contracts, manuals or guidelines, advertising booklets, film scripts, websites, etc.), except for literary texts that require special training, which is not provided for in the bachelor's degree program. We reckon that relevance of translated texts appears to be a core component of a GP. We analyzed GP topics offered to students in 2020 and found that most of them have been rather relevant recently and are in demand on the translation market: IT, physiology, and medicine. Note that until 2018, most GPs centered around literary translation challenges or specific problems of general translation theory. Translations that are generally required by employers used to be out of focus when preparing GPs. For the first time, most translations were done for real customers, LUNN partners: Privolzhsky Research Medical University, Nizhny Novgorod State Technical University, psychotherapists and psychologists. Experts in a particular field played a crucial role acting as mentors and consultants for LUNN students.

At the experimental stage, new recommendations for practice-oriented GPs were formulated. A prospective translator shall tackle specific challenges and find solutions that serve as an indicator of stable professional competences formed with graduates, i.e. perform pre- and post-translation analysis, offer equivalent and adequate translations that meet the customer's needs, comment and justify their translation decisions, edit translated texts, and make up a project-specific glossary. Earlier, these GP-related tasks used to be underperformed. Tasks aimed at checking professional competencies (PCs) remained unaddressed as well: the ability to perform pre-translation analysis that allows to accurately understand the original text (PC-7); the ability to prepare for and perform translation, including the ability to search for information in reference books, professional literature, and on the Internet (PC-8); the ability to demonstrate mastered basic techniques of equivalent translation and basic translation techniques (PC-9); the ability to provide translation that complies with lexical, syntactical, and stylistic norms (PC-10); the ability to edit translation using the word processor (PC-11).

Let us compare the topics of GPs before and after the experiment was launched.

Linguistic research projects (before):

- Language game in the headlines of English-language newspaper texts on political and economic topics and challenges of their translation;
- Preserving original ambiguity and obliquity in translation. Case study of public statements by public and political figures.

Translation projects (after):

- Specifics of translation of medical reports from German into Russian;
- Annotated translation of a book on personal growth (mentalism techniques);
- Annotated translation of a research paper on sports injuries;
- Annotated translation of a text on digital technologies in medicine (from French);
- Annotated translation of an insurance booklet (insurance for travelers);
- Annotated translation of a popular-science text on linguistics;
- Annotated translation of a text corpus on artificial intelligence and big data;
- Annotated translation of a new tax code;
- Annotated translation of a textbook on administrative law.

This approach helps not only to comprehend and develop required competences, but also to assess the extent of mastering these competences while working on and defending a GP.

Discussion

Linguistic education is undergoing major changes as affected by the new educational paradigm. Transformations cannot but take place in training of translators/interpreters as well.

Speaking about foreign language training, Tareva and Galskova (2013, p. 9) suggest that these transformations are characterized, first of all, by “an increase in problemat�icity, situationality, contextuality in teaching” and by a shift from a “textual educational paradigm” to a discursive one. These tenets found their way into the latest Federal Standard of Higher Education in the field of translation and translatology, which prescribes a competency-based practice-oriented training model that radically changes the vocational education system, both in terms of its content and results evaluation.

Based on the experience of the Strasbourg school of translation, publications by our colleagues (Nagovitsyna & Lekomtseva, 2017; Nechaeva & Stepanova, 2017), and our own experience in managing bachelor’s degree graduation projects, we conclude that the GP should be aimed at fulfilling a complex translation task, i.e. be a real translation order or project. In this case, the translation research component involves development of a specific translation strategy depending on the type, genre, structure, and relevance of the discourse, customers’ requirements, context, including comments and ability to justify their translation decisions, in line with the bachelor’s level of professional training. This new practice-oriented approach gives an opportunity to unleash the educational potential of the GP as an efficient tool for assessing graduates’ aptitude to perform professional activities and as an indicator of professional competences developed by graduates. The translation project format gives soon-to-be translators an opportunity to go through all the stages of their future professional activities and get an idea of how ready they are for such activities (Mushtakova & Panteleeva, 2019). Since 2018, graduates of the LUNN Higher School of Interpreting and Translation have successfully performed their GPs following the new format.

The results of the study prove that linguistic research fails to fully contribute to the development of the ability to solve practical problems that require well-formed professional translation competencies. At the same time, the new practice-oriented GP format helps better assess graduates’ qualifications, their aptitude for professional tasks, and the degree of mastering professional competences set forth in the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education and the Major Professional Academic Program. Execution and defense of a translation project supervised by a prospective employer significantly boosts students’ motivation to master the translation profession. The format fully complies with final certifying standards, on the one hand, and with employers’ requirements, on the other hand.

According to Pavel S. Bruk, member of the Union of Translators of Russia (employer), translations done by graduates themselves should be the most important and obligatory part of their GPs. Representatives of the academic community who deal with the problems of training translators also emphasize that the GP shaped as a translation project should become a tool to assess graduates’ professional aptitude for independent translation activities (Alekseeva, 2006; Mushtakova & Panteleeva, 2019).

The results of the study prove that while preparing their GPs, students systematize and put to practice theoretical knowledge acquired in the course of training and upgrade practical skills acquired while mastering general professional and special disciplines; students expand and deepen their theoretical knowledge by writing the so-called “translator's notes” on problematic issues of the translation they deal with. In the process of carrying out a translation project, students learn to tackle complex professional tasks and develop integrated translation skills, e.g. the ability to justify, develop, and apply translation strategies, the ability to analyze and edit their own translations and other translations.

The proposed GP format helps assess graduates’ aptitude for independent professional activities and professional tasks that they will have to cope with in the future.

Conclusion

The results of the study prove the advantages of practice-oriented GPs as an effective tool for qualification assessment. The authors have explored the expertise and common topics of GPs of different higher educational institutions in Russia, determined the best GP structure and objectives pursued thereunder, worked out a practice-oriented GP format and highlighted its core features, tested the new format followed by respective guidelines. The present study contributes to the efficiency of Russian education. The practice-oriented format, as the study confirms, guarantees translators’ stress resilience.

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Competing interests

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