

# Café, thé Ou Lait?: How Shall We Train Technical Communicators to Translate?

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*Despite global trade, technical communication training programs have largely ignored translation issues. Some technical translation specialists suggest a full course to remedy this, a fully caffeinated approach we call café; others recommend fitting translation preparation into already existing courses, a lighter caffeine approach we call the. (Lait refers to the “caffeine-free” courses lacking mention of culture, translation, or international audiences.) The second option, thé, is probably the most realistic. Brewing our own the, one of us has experimented with addressing translation “pests.” The other has examined the cultural gaps between U.S.-based technical communicators and their audiences abroad.*

Although the exhibition halls at recent STC conventions have featured booth after booth devoted to translation of technical documents, and although journals like *Technical Communication* are filled with advertisements for technical translation services, technical communication courses at most universities and colleges are surprisingly silent when it comes to the tasks a technical communicator must perform to ensure successful document translation. Despite much public ballyhoo about global trade and markets, technical communication programs have, so far, by and large ignored issues of translation when training communicators for the nearly-upon-us 21st century. Rare is the U.S. classroom in which students learning technical communication receive instruction in how to prepare documentation for translation. The time now seems ripe for the curriculum to change. We have experimented with inserting into our courses lessons on linguistic and cultural differences as we attempt to train our students to prepare technical documents for translation. Is what we are doing enough? Is it on target? Should we be doing something different? How should we advise our colleagues at other institutions?

## RESEARCH ON TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION IN TRANSLATION

One reason technical communication education has not caught up to the world around it is the lack of research that might guide a retooling of the curriculum. Research in North America on technical translation is scant at best. As an example, the latest available (1994) Association of Teacher of Technical Writing annual bibliography (13), which aims to be comprehensive, contains no designated section listing the year's publications in technical communication and translation. Instead, the few pieces that do fit such a category are lumped in the catch-all section “Technology and Culture,” which, the editor says, “includes international issues

and ethics” (13,437). Ironically, even on other continents research is lacking. As Hoft (7) has pointed out,

There is so little research on international technical communication. An increasing number of business case studies are published annually, but little in the way of traditional research, with its valuable quantitative data and conclusions, supports or offers guidance for these business realities. (652)

Similarly, little is available to guide and support technical communication instructors either. Nevertheless, says Weiss (18),

We need a framework that extends the concept of audience to international contexts and inquires into the universality or non-universality of the rhetoric and document design of North American pragmatic documents (42 1).

## CHANGING THE INTRODUCTORY TECHNICAL WRITING COURSE

The need for an improved curriculum seems clear, and has been noted with some frequency recently (2) (7) (16) (18). Asked about the training of technical writers, many technical communication and translation company officials plea to have universities and colleges teach technical communication students ways to prepare documents for translation. Some (5) (8) (15) suggest a full course to do this, a fully caffeinated approach we like to call *café*; others (3) recommend fitting in translation preparation to courses that already exist, a lighter caffeine approach we have taken to calling *the'*. (In our nomenclature, *lait*, then, refers to the bland, “caffeine-free” courses that omit any mention of culture, translation, or international audiences altogether.)

Of these three options, the second, or *the'*, is probably the most realistic. Capaldi (3) points out that unless a technical writer is also planning a career as a translator, a full course is “overkill.” Much of what might be taught in such a course would confuse the roles and division of duties that exist between original writer and translator. Moreover, few translators interpret competently in more than one language direction (e.g., French to English). Yet technical writers will often see their documents reproduced in multiple languages, more than two or three of which they could not in all likelihood gain even a passing knowledge. As

Boiarsky (1) points out,

It would be virtually impossible to provide instruction in the conventions of every culture that students, employees, and management may encounter in the workplace. However, it is possible to create a sensitivity on the part of students and those in the workforce to cultures that are different from their own and an awareness that the conventions of each of these cultures affect the way in which business is conducted and documents are written and read. (255)

Curricular changes that attend to cultural differences are also important (2) (6) (16) (18). One of us (Thrush) has investigated the cultural gaps that exist between U.S.-based technical communicators and their audiences abroad. Her publications (16) (17) demonstrate why so many documents in translation fail miserably. They also suggest ways to update the technical communication curriculum so that students' cultural awareness is heightened as they write and design. An instructor in such a course might, for example, use international students already enrolled in the class or on campus to "shed light on their own cultures" (16,280). Technical writing courses, we submit, are now obliged to raise awareness of both culture and language, particularly one's own culture and language, and the ways in which they can cause confusion, not only for a non-native reader of the language but even for a well-practiced and knowledgeable translator. Hoft (7) calls for

A curriculum for international technical communication . . . [that will] . . . teach technical communicators practical skills that can prepare them: (1) to address the needs of a linguistically and culturally diverse audience; and (2) for a global business climate that is fiercely competitive.

Technical communicators need to learn how to work with new partners—translators. (65 1)

Unfortunately, American students are all too often miserably unaware of linguistic diversity, not to mention competence in a tongue other than English. As Thrush notes, ". . . few U.S. students study a foreign language beyond a very rudimentary level" (16, 273). To make matters worse, few are even aware of the range of differences within the English language. Unlike Britain and some of the Commonwealth nations, where the "language awareness movement"

has taken hold in the primary and secondary schools to teach pupils about the flexibility and diversity of the many English language dialects (1 1), in the United States language awareness instruction is spotty at best and controversial when it does occur. Speaking of American technical writers, Weiss (18) remarks that

Oftentimes writers do not think of their audience as a potentially international one, nor do they recognize that American English can be highly idiomatic and therefore potentially confusing in a wider, international context. . . . The difference between British and American English should . . . be taught in our courses, since many speakers abroad, especially in Europe, Africa, and Asia, learn British English. (421)

Hence, an introductory technical writing course with an international component needs to raise students' awareness of their own language (the "source language," in translators' terms) and its key differences from other languages (the translators' "target languages"). General agreement exists that part of a technical communicator's job is to prepare documents for translators to render into other languages and that technical communication students need to be trained for that part of their future jobs (1) (3) (5) (6) (7) (8) (15) (18).

#### AN EXAMPLE OF AN INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT IN A TECHNICAL WRITING COURSE

In the fall of 1995, one of us (Maylath) revamped his syllabus for English 3601—Technical and Professional Writing at the University of Memphis to include instruction on preparing technical texts for translation. The instruction led up to an assignment for which the students had to apply what they had learned. (The curriculum's rationale and operation is spelled out in [10]). Instruction focused on the following:

**1. Clarity:** Persons in the field are united in maintaining that the easiest text to translate is the one that avoids ambiguity and confusion (3) (5) (6) (7) (8) (15) (18). Weiss (18) reports that the translation experts whom he interviewed for a survey "repeatedly cited poorly written source texts as the most common problem that translators must struggle with" (418). Weiss (18) further points out that "Textual clarity can only be taught as an element of the overall rhetorical situation; what is clear in one situation may be opaque in another" (421). Linguistic features that hamper clarity in translation include idioms, acronyms, ambiguous antecedents, the deleted conjunction or relative pronoun "that," shifts in person, shifts in words (use of

synonyms), adjective phrases, and gerunds.

**2. Terminology management:** Both Sue Ellen Wright (20) (21) and Ami Wright (19) have demonstrated the need to keep track of terms and their definitions if documentation is to succeed in translation. The main lesson for students is to keep a glossary of all specialized and new terms and definitions. The glossary is used both to keep track of which terms have been used or created and to attach to the document to be translated so that the translator can render a better interpretation of the document.

**3. Space and signposts:** Thomson and Camm (15) note that in multi-language documentation, which is highly common (consider the number of product instructions you have seen with more than one language appearing on the instruction sheet), space needs to be left on the page for simultaneous translation or later in a manual for consecutive translation for other languages to appear. According to Thomson and Camm (15) most languages take 30% more space than does English to say the same message. Dutch often takes up to 40% more.

Signposts indicating organization, such as headings, are also vital for effective translation. The translators Weiss (18) interviewed said that documents were “easier to translate when they were deductively organized with summaries, headings, and topic sentences” (421).

**4. Cultural and rhetorical differences:** It is important to teach technical writing students the unintended effects that humor and advertising slogans can have on translated documents. Curtis has shown the difficulty of translating advertising slogans that both North American marketing agents and consumers take for granted but which make little sense elsewhere (e.g., Nike: Just Do It; Pepsi: Uh huh!). Likewise, Hoft (6) makes a good case for avoiding humor altogether, given the inevitable misfirings and backfirings that take place in translation from one language and culture to another. One of us (Thrush) (17) has developed several strategies for introducing students to other cultural pitfalls when writing for audiences of other cultures and languages. These are spelled out in her publications listed in the References.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR TRANSLATORS, EDUCATORS, AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS:**

1. According to your experience, what aspects of international documentation should be taught in college-level technical writing programs?

2. At what level or in which courses should such aspects be taught?

3. Does international documentation warrant being taught in a full-term course devoted to translation matters solely? Or are such matters better parceled out among several already-existing courses?

4. What stands out to you as aspects of technical translation that need to be researched? What would you like to know more about from research?

5. What have you seen in the way of machine-assisted translation (MAT)? Is it sufficiently used for it to be introduced to technical writing students?

6. How extensively should terminology management be taught?

7. Have you handled documents that needed to be “translated” into dialects (British English into American English or Parisian French into Canadian French)? Should translation between dialects be taught in technical writing programs? If so, how might one best do so?

10. Whom do you know that might help you or your organization shed light on revamping technical communication programs to include cross-cultural and multi-language issues?

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