Chapter 14
L’hexagone?
Not Just a Pretty Shape

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors seek to investigate how undergraduates in French translation classes can be taught to identify and move beyond their own individual cultural identities to improve intercultural and linguistic competences. Language students must “reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture” (MLA, 2007). The authors confirm their observations, that students are unaware of cultural assumptions made when transferring lexical items from one language to another, through a series of studies. These documented studies inform strategies they develop to help students attain the high level of intercultural and linguistic competences expected. The authors discuss how the diversity of student identity has an impact on cultural approaches to translation. The authors draw on Iceberg theory (Hall, 1976) and Byram, Kramsch and Olk’s work. They review methodologies including the translation of specific lexical items and also back translation. They analyse the resulting data and conclude with further points for reflection and potential methodologies.

INTRODUCTION

Hexagone: Masculine noun

1. (forme) hexagon
2. (la France) l’hexagone- France (because of its hexagonal shape) Collinsdictionary.com

In this chapter the authors seek to answer the question of how language undergraduates, developing advanced translation skills, can be taught to identify and move beyond their own individual cultural identities to improve their intercultural and linguistic competences. It has been our observation that
undergraduate students of Modern Foreign Languages appear to be increasingly unaware of cultural associations they and others make when transferring lexical items from one language to another. Not only is there a lack of knowledge or understanding of content or information with regard to these associations, but a student’s lack of awareness is exacerbated by the linguistic challenges of working between third and fourth languages in some cases and/or unconfident or undeveloped language acquisition. This has prompted us to test and evaluate approaches to addressing this issue with students of French by means of qualitative, quantitative and methodological studies. In this chapter we present an evaluation of student responses to vocabulary and translation exercises designed by the authors to focus on developing intercultural competence and awareness alongside linguistic knowledge.

Our observational studies have focused on the following:

1. Understanding and translation of specific, and usually culture-laden, lexical items with first and final year students
2. Using back translation with second year students.

We conclude with suggestions of ways forward concerning methodologies which merit further investigation.

BACKGROUND

The incident which provided our motivation for this study came when the class was reading an article from the French news website Libération (Sabéran, 2015) and a final year student offered a translation of “les migrants de Calais sont hébergés dans les camps de rétention” as “Calais migrants are housed in torture camps”. When the class discussed how the phrase “camp de rétention” should be translated and how far from the SL meaning “torture” is, the student who offered this particular interpretation defended her lexical choice. Did this decision on the part of the student arise from a cultural assumption, a linguistic deficiency or misunderstanding of a specific lexical item?

To provide a general context, whilst our particular students’ first or second language may be neither French nor English, our undergraduate degree programme in French requires students to undertake assessments which require accuracy and precision in terms of moving between the two languages in a range of translation tasks at each level of study. It is important to indicate the composition of the groups involved. Our students have a range of first or native languages in all groups including Danish, English, Farsi, French, German, Italian, Mauritian Creole, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, and Ukrainian. Second and other languages include Creole, English, French, German, Italian, Lingala, Pampengo, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Yoruba.

In addition to our students’ range of first and second languages, coupled with a broad spectrum of competence in French and English, as far as language competency levels are concerned there are students who have formal qualifications on entry in French (varying from GCSE to A level (CEF A2) to Baccalauréate from a variety of countries), but also students who have spent several years in French medium schools, students who have a French speaking background but need language and cultural formalisation, students who have spent from a month to a year on study or work placement in France. There are also students, including mature students, who have lived for considerable periods and at different times in French speaking areas such as Ivory Coast or DRC.
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