Cognitive Proactivity of Translators-to-be

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the analysis of the cognitive proactivity of those students who prepare for professional functioning as translators and interpreters[1]. Firstly, the main aspects of the translation profession are discussed. Next, the notion of cognitive proactivity and some related concepts are presented. The author emphasizes the importance of proactivity in translator education and professional performance. The next part of the article discusses research concerning the proactive attitudes and behaviours of a selected group of students of a translation specialization. Research methodology and research results are presented and discussed. The concluding part contains practical recommendations, intended to help students of academic philological and other language-related courses develop their cognitive proactivity, with the focus on their transition to the labour market as well as on the quality of their future translation performance.

Keywords: translator, cognitive proactivity, translation competence(s), transition to the labour market, academic translation courses

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[1] In most parts of this article, the concept of translation is used in its most general sense, covering written translation and interpreting. Hence, the translation profession, translation courses or translator education is meant to cover interpreting as well – irrespective of the differences that these two modes of mediated communication involve on the cognitive and professional level. In this sense, our notion of translation corresponds directly to the German concept of *Translation*, as a generalization covering both *Übersetzung* and *Dolmetschen*.

Abstract

Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie proaktywności poznawczej studentów przygotowujących się do zawodu tłumacza. Na początku omówiono główne kwestie dotyczące zawodu tłumacza, następnie przedstawiono zagadnienia dotyczące proaktywności poznawczej. Ukazano znaczenie nastawień i działań proaktywnych zarówno w pracy zawodowej, jak i w procesie przygotowywania się do niej. Dalsza część artykułu poświęcona została przedstawieniu metodologii badań oraz zobrazowaniu i omówieniu wyników badań nad proaktywnością poznawczą studentów specjalności translatorskiej. W części podsumowującej wskazano propozycje praktyczne ukierunkowane na rozwijanie w studentach studiów lingwistycznych proaktywności poznawczej zarówno odnośnie ich tranzycji na rynek pracy, jak i związanej z jakością usługi tłumaczeniowej.

Słowa klucze: tłumacz, proaktywność poznawcza, kompetencje translatorskie, tranzycja na rynek pracy, studia translatorskie.

Translation seems to be the only known tool of intercultural communication. According to Anthony Pym (2009), the critical event for the development of the translator's profession was the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazi war criminals. He points out that these trials showed the social role of translation and perhaps made contemporary societies aware of the role of the translation profession in the modern world. It also became apparent that translators can and should be trained – despite the still common conviction that translation is an art that depends on innate talent and as such it cannot be taught (cf. e.g. Gouadec 2007, 327).

Facilitating the communication between countries and states is nowadays one of the most essential tasks for translators. The best example is that of the European Union, with its 27 member states and their official languages. In accord with the provisions of the multilingualism policy promoted by the European Commission, translation has become Europe's "lingua franca" (cf. e.g. European Commission 2009). In order to understand the nature of the translator's work within the numerous institutions of the European Union, one needs to keep in mind that with the 27 EU member states, each official document has to be translated into 26 languages. During a session of, for instance, the European Parliament, every delegate speaks in their native language. In practice, this implies a large number of translators working to meet that demand. It can be said,

therefore, that the EU is the best example of political globalization, which has brought an exponential increase in the demand for translation services.
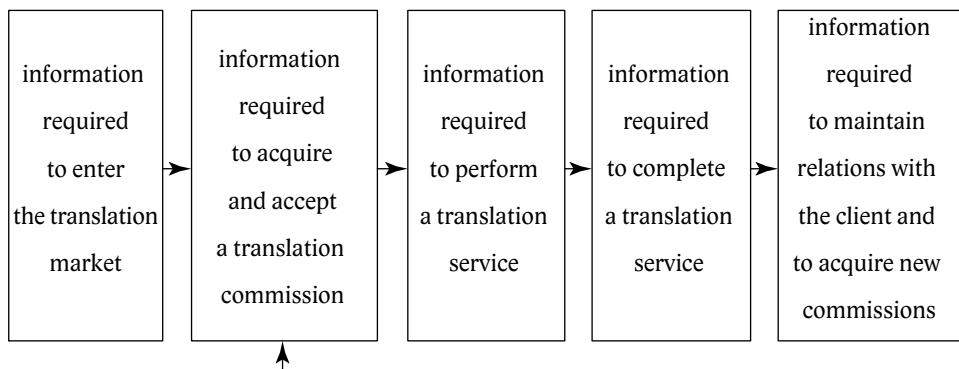
Economic globalization has also been largely conditioned by translation, as its crucial means of communication. The last decades of the 20th century saw the beginning of an intensive internationalisation of business institutions, including banks, distribution and trade corporations, or consulting companies. Operating in different countries, these institutions faced a growing need for unifying their procedures in the circumstances of the diverse legal systems in the countries where they operated. In this context, the service and the supporting role of legal, business or other specialist translators became particularly important. As mentioned by J. Żmudzki (2009), the primary role of the translator is not to manage 'text transfer', but to facilitate communication and cooperation between people.

The status and distinctiveness of the translation profession manifests itself in various classifications of professions, including the official Polish classification of professions and specialties. This latter document mentions the main category of Philologists and translators, which then branches into the following subcategories: Translator of the English language; Translator of the Arabic language; Translator of the Chinese language; Translator of the French language; Translator of the Spanish language; Translator of the Japanese language; Translator of the sign language; Translator of the German language; Translator of the Russian language; Translator of the Italian language; Conference interpreter; Translator of written texts; Other philologists and translators (MPiPS 2010, 46).

Given the civilizational role of the translation profession, numerous universities in Poland decided to expand their curricula with language-related academic courses that include majors or specializations in translation and/or interpreting. These courses have turned out to be attractive to a lot of language students who perceive the translation profession as an opportunity to achieve their personal aspirations, including their need for a satisfactory income.

It must be noted, however, that translation is hard to classify as a profession in the classical sense of the term. It seems more advantageous to see it as a network of domains of professional activities. Some of them are performed by all translators, while others are specific for particular types of translation process or product (service). In order to present the complexity of a professional translation service, Daniel Gouadec singles out nine stages of the translation process, which, in turn, consist of as many as 156 separate activities (2007, 57–83). Hence, translators' professionalism and professional success depend not only on their language proficiency, but also on their level of competences in all other translation-related domains.

Information mining is one of the pivotal activities in a translator's work. The concept of information mining refers not only to the skill of gathering the required information, but it also covers the sense of dependence on information for the sake of translation quality. Such continuous or repetitive search routines become an inseparable component of a translator's workshop and they evoke considerable involvement and cognitive effort. This effort is needed if the information gathered is to be adequately used in the translation process – the latter being a skill of its own. The particular stages of a professional translation service require that a translator should obtain different types of information from different sources and by different means. This complexity is presented in the diagram below.

| information required to enter the translation market	information required to acquire and accept a translation commission	information required to perform a translation service	information required to complete a translation service	information required to maintain relations with the client and to acquire new commissions

**Figure 1. The sequence of information acquisition necessary
for effective translation service provision**

As presented in Figure 1, a professional translator exhibits a specific "information sensitivity." He/she should be open to new information at every stage of the translation service provision.

The importance of a translator's skill to manage information and construct knowledge is emphasized in the model of translation competence developed by the team of experts for the purposes of the academic programme called European Master's in Translation (EMT). In this model, *info mining* has been singled out as a separate competence module (Figure 2).

According to EMT experts, *information mining competence* consists of:
– Knowing how to identify one's information and documentation requirements.
– Developing strategies for documentary and terminological research (including approaching experts).
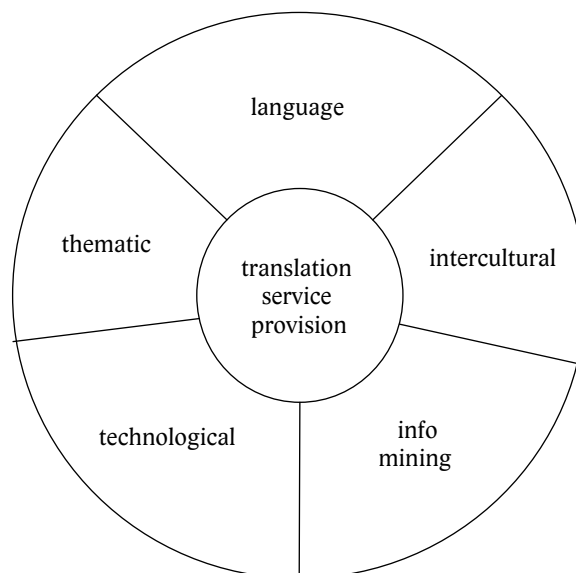
Figure 2. Translation competence model according to EMT (2009)

Source: EMT 2009, 4.

– Knowing how to extract and process relevant information for a given task (documentary, terminological, phraseological information).
– Developing criteria for evaluation vis-à-vis documents accessible on the internet or any other medium, i.e. knowing how to evaluate the reliability of documentary sources (critical mind).
– Knowing how to use tools and search engines effectively (e.g. terminology software, electronic corpora, electronic dictionaries).
– Mastering the archiving of one's own documents (EMT 2009, 6).

Information mining in the translation process and in the holistically perceived translation service provision is not confined to the tasks and skills listed above. The other translation competences postulated by EMT experts also expose a translator's need for information research and effective knowledge acquisition.

Proactivity is one human trait that is closely related to the skill of effective information mining, hence it is of utmost import to translator training. It is particularly cognitive proactivity – a specific type of proactive behaviour – that is worth analysing in detail for didactic reasons, since it stays in close relation to the quality of a translator's professional performance, achievements and success.

Researchers agree as to the nature and characteristics of proactivity. However, there is a discord of opinion as regards its roots. Proactivity is generally understood to be a personality trait (Bateman, Crant 1993), an attitude of involvement in the transformation of reality, partly conditioned by environment and circumstances (Morrison, Phelps 1999).

The notion of proactivity is defined by Thomas S. Bateman and Michael J. Crant (1993) as a disposition of an individual to undertake action to alter his/her environment, while remaining relatively independent from situational factors. Thus, a proactive personality is marked by a constant predilection towards proactive behaviour (Seibert, Crant, Kraimer 1999, 417).

When using the term proactivity to describe the relation between an individual and his/her environment, one needs to assume that

> each person has the ability to shape his/her environment to a degree surpassing the tendency of the environment to shape individual human behaviours. Hence, people are able to intentionally and directly affect various elements of their environment, thus increasing the chance of achieving success (Bańka 2005, 8 – translation mine K.K.).

Proactive behaviour is transgressive in that it noticeably and intentionally exceeds the norms and behaviours that are necessary and sufficient for social adaptation. In the translation profession, proactive behaviours are a tool of achieving the highest possible standards of the translation service quality.

Proactive behaviour is necessarily an autonomous activity of an individual, aimed at changing the environment in which that individual lives or works. As Augustyn Bańka (2005, 8) observes, following Bateman and Crant (1999), we can speak of proactivity only when the effects of human behaviour transform the environment. A proactive individual does not need anyone to adjust his/her life environment to his/her demands. Instead, such an individual is an agent of intentional, effect-driven actions.

People undertake various actions when in need of transforming their current situation and environment. But these behaviours are not always proactive. On the basis of an analysis of how proactive business people (i.e. managing directors and managers in companies in the US, Central Europe and North Eastern Asia) function, Bateman and Crant (1999) develop a profile of a proactive person. The researchers have established seven key defining traits which coexist and form the basis of proactive behaviours. Thus, according to the authors, proactive persons:

1. Scan for opportunities for change.
2. Set effective, change-oriented goals. Proactive behaviour is focused on accomplishment, but particularly on accomplishment with real impact.
3. Anticipate and prevent problems.
4. Do different things, or do things differently.
5. Take action.
6. Persevere. Proactive people persist in their efforts.
7. Achieve results. (Bateman, Crant 1999, 63−64)

An interrelation of proactivity with professional and career successes, as well as the value of proactivity in predicting chances of professional success, have been verified in numerous research projects, e.g. Seibert, Crant and Kraimer (1999), Bateman and Crant (1999), Li, Liang and Crant (2010).

Although the professions studied by the authors listed above concentrated on some professions different from translation (sales people, marketing specialists, business management staff), one can still observe many overlaps in the competence profiles in these professions and the translation profession. For example, despite the fact that a lot of translation work is done individually, translators – as service providers – can often be expected to work in teams – either with other translators, or with specialists like reviewers, proof-readers and terminology managers. Even in the case of uncomplicated translation projects, a translator functions as a communicator (Hatim, Mason 1997), which implies a relationship with other service stakeholders, e.g. the client or his/her representatives. Thus, irrespective of the complexity of a translation project, translators have to exhibit advanced communication skills and show effective team work. Since translation as a profession is a service provision activity, translators' success hugely depends on how they are regarded by their partners and clients.

The value of proactivity as a predictor of future professional success is researched specifically by Brown, Kane, Cober, Levy and Shalhoop (2006). Having researched 180 students, the authors proved that the graduates exhibiting a proactive personality were more efficient and effective in searching for and getting a job. The proactive attitude of these people was also accompanied by their strong conviction, as well as their self-efficacy and high self-esteem, which also added to their speed in finding a job.

The cognitive proactivity of future translators has been studied by Katarzyna Klimkowska (2013). Proactivity was one of the predictors of professional success discussed in that study. Having researched 436 students of translation in diverse academic institutions in Poland, Klimkowska managed to determine that the would-be translators

displayed excellent and higher than average levels of general proactivity (83.48 percent of the total of researched students). Yet, as far cognitive proactivity is concerned, the results turned out to be less spectacular, with a huge percentage of scores below average and lower (70.40 percent) (2013, 351).

The research ventured by Klimkowska had two main objectives to attain:
– to examine the level of the students' cognitive proactivity in relation to their immediate transition to the translation market;
– to examine the students' cognitive proactivity as part of their mastering translation skills.

The research relied on the diagnostic survey method. The *Scale of Proactive Actions in Career Making* by Bańka (2005) and the relevant questionnaire developed by the author were employed as research techniques.

Bańka's study allowed the author to establish the level of involvement of the respondents in the actions that "helped them pursue their professional career goals, as a fundamental life objective" (2005, 22 – translation mine K.K.). The *Scale* helped obtain data on the following four indicators of proactivity: general proactivity, cognitive proactivity, proactivity in building a support network and proactivity in building psychological comfort. The research reported in the present article only focuses on cognitive proactivity.

The examination of the cognitive level allows a working diagnosis of the level of

> involvement of an individual in the activities oriented towards the exploration of the environment in order to obtain the maximum amount of information and feedback needed to facilitate the realization of his/her goals connected with starting a career (Bańka 2005, 48 – translation mine K.K.).

Finding and acquiring information concerning the nature of the local, regional, domestic and global labour market is one of the key factors that increase the chance of a successful transition from education to the labour market. The competence capital and the professional qualifications that the graduates possess may not guarantee their successful search for jobs, unless they make an effort to fully recognize and comprehend the requirements of the particular profession they aspire to, as well as other related professions.

The subjects, who acknowledged their interest in a translation career, were a group of 109 students of the 1st and the 2nd year of an MA in Applied Linguistics, major in translation, at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (UMCS). The respondent group

consisted mostly of women (88.99 per cent), and the age bracket was 22 to 25. The number of students in their 1st year was slightly higher (57 students, accounting for 52.29 percent of the pool) than that of the 2nd year respondents (52 students).

In the first research question, the students were asked to evaluate their own cognitive proactivity. The results showed that 69.73% of the students acknowledged having a low level of cognitive proactivity, while only 13.76% scored above average and higher (Table 1). It is worth mentioning here that none of the subjects acknowledged having a very high level of cognitive proactivity.

Table1. The level of cognitive proactivity of the surveyed students

Score level	Cognitive proactivity	
	N	%
very low	0	0.00
low	24	22.02
below average	52	47.71
average	18	16.51
above average	12	11.01
high	3	2.75
very high	0	0.00

Source: the author's own research

It comes as a surprise that the majority of the surveyed students admitted a relatively low level of proactivity in their search for information on possible employment opportunities, requirements and expectations of the labour market. As explained by Bańka (2005, 33−34), the search for information about the expectations of the labour market and about one's job-related assets is a natural course of action of an individual in a situation of uncertainty that accompanies the transition from education to the professional world. The increased knowledge about the world and about oneself enhances self-control and helps overcome the sense of uncertainty. Bańka also points out that the level of involvement in the search for information and feedback stays in close correlation with the predilection of an individual to study or act. He observes that the

> active search for feedback is more typical of *learning-goal oriented* people rather than of the *performance-goal oriented* ones. This is because, as VandeWalle and Cummings (1997) have proved, the former type of people have a tendency to develop competences through building new skills and controlling the situation, while the latter type focuses

on role performance, and hence they demonstrate and evaluate their competences by looking for positive evaluation and avoiding negative assessment (Bańka 2005, 33−34 – translation mine – K.K.).

Bańka's argumentation presented above is helpful in explaining the low level of cognitive proactivity of the surveyed students. Yet, owing to the fact that the research procedure did not cover examining either orientation mentioned by Bańka, a complete verification of the issues at hand would require further research.

To examine the role of cognitive proactivity in developing the translation competences of the researched students, the author decided to investigate to what extent their educational translation tasks simulate (situate) their future professional activities as translators; and to what extent the students become committed to assuring the highest possible quality of their translations.

The research results show that the students perceive their university classes as only moderately related to the real-life translation commissions (Table 2). Over half of the surveyed students admitted approaching their academic translation tasks as real-life commissions. This is a relatively positive result, auguring well for the students who are just about to start their professional career.

**Table 2. Selected aspects of the students' cognitive proactivity
as part of mastering translation competence**

	Viewing educational translation tasks as simulation of real-life commissions		Getting involved in the educational translation tasks as if they were professional translation services		Maximizing efforts to gain information necessary for the performance of professional translation tasks	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Definitely yes	20	18.25	2	1.83	4	3.67
Rather yes	38	34.86	26	23.85	29	26.61
Difficult to say	42	38.53	27	24.77	31	28.44
Rather not	9	8.26	51	46.79	43	39.45
Definitely not	0	0.00	3	2.75	2	1.83
Total	109	100.00	109	100.00	109	100.00

Source: the author's own research

Only one out of twelve of the surveyed students admitted to seeing no relation between their participation in academic training and real translation commissions. Fortu-

nately, this is a very small group. At the same time, nearly 40.00 percent of the surveyed MA students found it difficult or impossible to define their stance on the issue at hand, which can be seen as the gravest problem revealed through our research.

Although more than a half of the students admitted experiencing their academic courses as a situated simulation of real translation service provision, almost an equal number of the subjects admitted that they fail to get involved in those classes to the same degree as they would in the case of a real translation service. One out of four students declared that they approached their tasks by adopting the role of a professional translator. The distribution of answers to the third question in Table 2 was similar to those for the second. High involvement was reported by one out of three of the surveyed students, while 41.28 per cent of them admitted that their approach to gaining information necessary to complete a translation task was not very proactive.

Statistical analysis helped determine that there were no significant discrepancies between the answers given by the 1st and the 2nd year students (p=0.050). Statistically significant discrepancies emerged when the level of the academic achievements of the researched students was taken into account (p<0.001). The students with high and very high levels of academic achievement prevailed in the group of respondents that admitted their highest level of involvement in seeking information about the translation market and the nuances of translation service provision. This distribution of results is hardly surprising. It was to be expected that good and excellent students would exhibit a higher level of involvement in their professional development, which manifests itself in their increased engagement in gaining knowledge, skills and competences. At the same time, it is rather surprising that the results for the 2nd year students – i.e. those who at the time when they participated in the research were just about to start their professional functioning – did not differ significantly from those of the 1st year ones. One could perhaps expect the former group to be more active in maximizing their information resources that could help improve their position at the threshold of their career making.

When justifying their choices, the students explained that they did not know exactly what their professional translation work was going to look like, and so they often did not see the need to approach their academic tasks as a simulation of real translation commissions. They understood the fact that all the translation classes helped them develop their essential professional competences, but they approached their academic tasks as students, not as professionals (cf. Fraser 1996 or Jakobsen 2002). They also observed that performing in the professional role during their classes was difficult, since the particular parts of the translation process were distributed over a variety of academic subjects.

Hence, there was hardly any single class that could help them see the entirety of the translation service. The respondents declared that they would be much more involved in real translation tasks and they would show greater readiness to search for information much more actively when acting as professional translators. These facts disclose an urgent need for translator education programmes to be open to cooperation with representatives of the market, so that the students could take part in real or real-like translation projects of different sorts (cf. e.g. Kiraly 2012). A need for this kind of situated initiative, bridging the Academia-market divide, was also signalled by the researched students.

The final question in the questionnaire addressed the needs that the students expressed in relation to their academic education. In other words, the students were asked about steps that could be taken by curricula designers and teachers to help them boost their cognitive proactivity. The data presented in Table 3 show that the majority (88.99%) of the respondents admitted that the element they needed most in their education was translation practice in real, market conditions. The possibility to carry out translation services as part of student practice could give the students an opportunity to put their skills to test. Also advisable is inviting experts to play the role of teachers (facilitators) in translation training. These practitioners can hugely contribute to the improvement of training by providing insight into those aspects of the professional functioning of translators that are difficult to cover under the standard constraints of formal curriculum.

**Table 3. Students' suggestions concerning the university's actions needed
to help them boost their cognitive proactivity**

Suggestion	N	%
Real translation service, mostly within the framework the student practice	97	88.99
In-class simulations of a complete translation service, including search for commissions, offer preparation, contact with the customer, agreeing on the rates, etc.	65	59.63
Teachers' narrative focused on the professional approach to translation tasks	39	35.78
Classes in information mining competences as part of the curriculum	30	27.52
The assessment of student's performance should not only cover the quality of the translation, but also the level of involvement in information mining	21	19.27
Role playing – students as translators and clients	12	11.01
I don't know	5	4.59
Nothing	1	0.92

Source: the author's own research. The data does not add up to 100.00% due to multiple answers allowed

The translators-to-be also pointed out the need for classes to be organized in order to simulate the complete translation service provision process (59.63%). Worthy of note

is the fact that a fairly large group of students (35.8%) expressed their expectation that teachers emphasize more often the need for searching for all the available relevant information (27.52%) and check the students' progress in this respect (19.27%). Let us add here, that by checking the progress we mean providing the students with quality feedback that can make them construct their own learning trajectories (cf. Eraut 2000), and develop the sense and skills of self-regulation (Moser-Mercer 2008). Bańka observes that

> feedback is a fundamental developmental asset, since it helps initiate and sustain motivation for achievement. People find it extremely difficult to formulate the objectives they want to pursue and to define precisely the horizon of their aspirations when expected to perform in the conditions of increased uncertainty – as is the case with university graduates, who are novices and often have "no slightest idea" about how the market is structured (Bańka 2005, 33 – translation mine – K.K.).

To conclude our discussion, it should be stressed that the research presented here is far from exhaustive, and the discussed results are only an indication of a wider range of issues relating to cognitive proactivity of the translators-to-be. In spite of the limitations connected with the non-representativeness of the group of respondents and the simplified research methodology presented in this article, the research results open a way for practical didactic actions. The respondents proved to be emerging adults – a developmental stage which is characterised by *instability* and *feeling in-between* (Tanner, Arnett, Leis 2008, 34). They showed a clear tendency to postpone the adoption of professional roles, reducing their involvement in academic classes mostly to that required by the formal educational framework, rather than to a proactive search for significant information. The relatively weak results from this large group of respondents, as regards their cognitive proactivity displayed in the area of transition to the labour market, raises the question about the degree to which their visions of professional careers and targets are crystallized.

The research also exhibited the need for academic teachers and curricula designers to emphasise more the importance of a proactive search for information, especially as part of the task-based translation classroom methodology. Creating learning conditions (scaffolding) in which a high level of involvement in information mining and management is a prerequisite for the performance of a translation task can become an essential stimulus for the development of certain information mining mechanisms which, if reinforced, will build the students' *information mining competence* (cf. EMT 2009).

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