

Input and Output as Reflected in Postgraduate Translation-Oriented Training. An ESP-Centred Approach

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Abstract: In quest of enhancing consistent performance across all the skills encompassed by a proficient translator's loadout, the curricula of bachelor and master's degrees are oftentimes subject to thorough scrutinization. In this respect, special consideration is usually given to the development of the textual and transfer sub-competences whose technical and practical mastery eventually determines the quality of the message rendered into the target language. Based on this premise, the study provides a brief overview of the peculiarities displayed by these two sub-competences as reflected in the questions addressed to a group of MA students pursuing a degree in *Translation Studies* (TS) and to the academic staff in charge of instructing them.

Keywords: academic staff; MA-level trainees; textual sub-competence; transfer sub-competence; TS-oriented master's degrees

1. Background and rationale

While technology has gradually transformed the translation industry and redefined its standards, human touch may still be credited with settling most of the cross-cultural issues arising in the process. Regardless of the textual typologies that are to be rendered into the target language, there are several sub-competences that always come into play, particularly those dealing with cultural, evaluative, textual and transfer characteristics. Identifying the extent to which postgraduate degrees providing instruction in *Translation Studies* develop these sub-competences turns into an essential task as a result. Despite its small-scale application (considering only one

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such degree), this study reveals certain connections between curricular objectives (input) and student performance (output) as emphasised by the answers provided by academic staff conducting classes within the *Theory and Practice of Translation* master's programme (West University of Timișoara) and their students. The master's academic offer comprises tailor-made theoretical and applied classes for professional translators of English or French, which is why ESP-related aspects have inherently been considered when structuring this paper.

2. The position occupied by the textual and transfer sub-competences in the acquisition-based schemata

A substantial majority of researchers in the field of *Translation Studies* (TS) have long agreed upon the fact that translation competence calls for “both innate predisposition and nurture in translation education” (Zou, 2015: 787), resulting in a skill combination rooted in “bilingualism, biculturalism, adequate knowledge of the content of a text and competence in writing” (Nida, 2001: 100). On a particular note, several scholars have referred to the linguistic, textual and transfer sub-competences as key components of the hypernym *translation competence* (TC). This aspect is also reflected in the range of TC models emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly the category of transfer-oriented models. Among the renowned scholars who approached this sub-competence when designing their translation competence models are Bell (1991), Beeby (1996), Hatim and Mason (1997), and PACTE (2000, led by scholar Amparo Hurtado Albir). For example, Nord's model (1991) develops sub-competences related to text reception and analysis, research, transfer, text production, and translation quality assessment, which brings to the forefront a groundbreaking approach and one of “decisive importance in translation” (Zou, 2015: 788).

Additionally, Hatim and Mason's comprehensive model outlines a range of skills comprising organization, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences (Reza Esfandiari et al., 2015: 48). Among the skills brought forward in their model, the textual and transfer sub-competences stand on top of the pyramid. For instance, the *source text processing skills* integrated into their model encompass tasks pertaining to the textual sub-competence spectrum: identifying genres, registers, intentionality (speech acts), analysing lexis and syntax-arising peculiarities (2015: 48). The transfer sub-competence has also been thoroughly analysed in this model as Hatim and Mason emphasise two major categories of skills: *transfer skills* entailing the adjustment of “effectiveness, efficiency, relevance in fulfilment of a rhetorical purpose (plan, goal)”; and *target text processing skills* based on matters surrounding “intertextuality, situationality, [...] intentionality, [...] texture and structure and [...] informativity”, all considering the impact on the target text readership (Reza Esfandiari et al., 2015: 48).

In hindsight, these sub-competences overlap with two stages of utmost importance in translation: the pre-production phase entailing proper genre-derived

analysis of lexical and syntactic components, cross-cultural elements and ‘skopos’, and the production stage covering methodology-based knowledge in matters surrounding the application of suitable translation methods and techniques at the level of larger and smaller text units.

3. Research methodology

This study is based on the design, administration and analysis of two surveys consisting of several close and open-ended questions. The first survey was distributed to second-year students enrolled in the *Theory and Practice of Translation* MA (class of 2019 and 2018), while the second targeted academic staff conducting classes within the same programme. In order to design the two questionnaires that follow a nearly identical layout, I have resorted to a comprehensive framework commissioned by EU bodies, entitled *The European Master’s in Translation Competence Framework* (2017). It is especially suitable for TS degrees focusing on competence-based training as it references sub-competences corresponding to macro and micro-level application. In this regard, it features concrete examples of tasks that future certified translators should be able to perform upon graduating and which are related to language and culture, technology, personal/interpersonal skills and service provision. For instance, candidates are expected to fulfil tasks based on discourse analysis/textual sub-competence and methodology of translation/transfer sub-competence. In order to carry out specific tasks, graduates should resort to “appropriate tools and techniques, implementing [...] style guides, or conventions relevant to a particular translation, understanding and implementing quality control strategies” (EMT, 2017: 8).

4. Data mining and preliminary results

As discussed before, this case study is grounded in two surveys aimed at one major category of social actors each, more specifically MA-level students and teachers delivering lectures within the same programme. The comparative approach has been adopted when similar matters such as those surrounding certain theoretical aspects were targeted. Subsequently, close and open-ended questions mirroring the same sub-competences have been correlated in order to obtain a preliminary overview of the way the master’s curriculum currently functions.

4.1. Questionnaire no. 1 – target audience: MA students

This questionnaire consists of one major section, the *testing component*, which comprises several questions purposefully designed so as to detect the output of the current curricular content. Participants were provided with the online version of the questionnaire via Google Forms. The following questions cover a combination of textual and transfer theory-based tasks, exploring the students’ criteria when having to identify particular genres, text types, and registers, and to apply translation methods/techniques in context-specific situations.

4.1.1. Textual sub-competence

There were 21 (100%) participants answering the semi-closed question “At what particular text features do you look first, in order to classify a text in a certain typology (e.g. legal texts, medical texts, literary texts, etc.)?” in **Figure 1**. Twenty participants (95,2%) opted for the pre-established answer “lexico-semantic features”, while one participant (4,8%) provided an original answer: “usually the title and the format already provide a first idea about the text type”.

The textual sub-competence under scrutiny here emerges from a translation-covered area, *discourse analysis*, which explores aspects related to genres, registers, lexico-semantic and syntactic features. The only non-pre-established answer pointed out a fairly easier and faster strategy for identifying the typology and genre of a text: looking at the macro-level features of the text, such as the title and layout instead of painstakingly analysing paragraph-long text units.

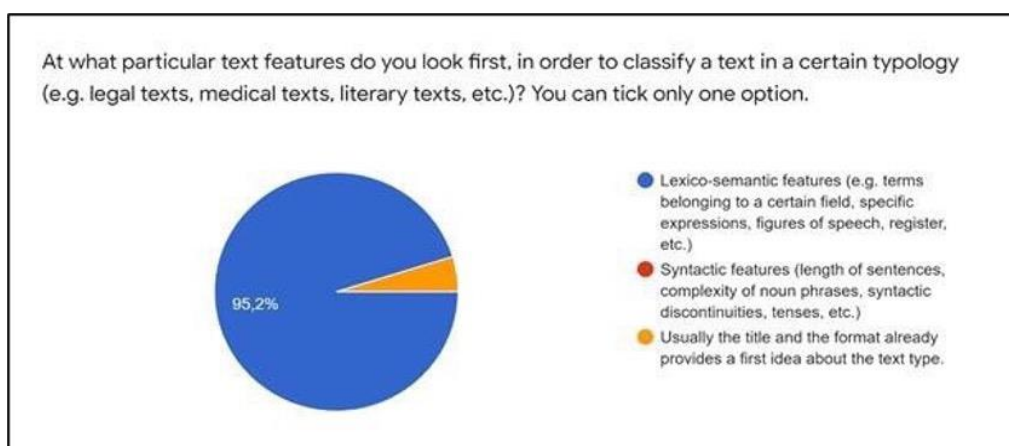


Figure 1. Early stages in the activation of the textual sub-competence

This approach highlights a possibly much more effective and less time-consuming solution in the short run, yet it may not work as effectively when dealing with sub-typologies and interweaved genres where a more in-depth analysis might be needed.

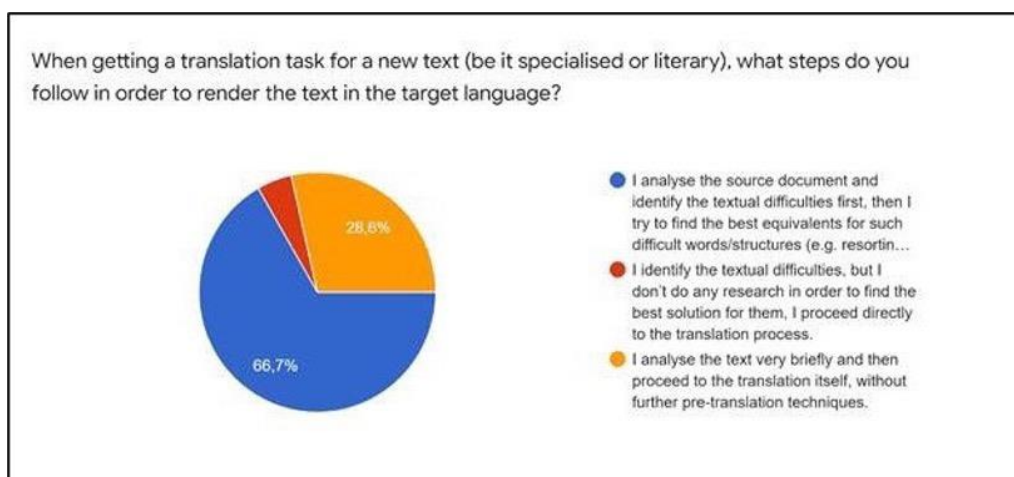


Figure 2. Metacognitive aspects associated with textual analysis

There were 21 (100%) participants answering the close-ended question “When getting a translation task for a new text (be it specialised or literary), what steps do you follow in order to render the text in the target language?” in **Figure 2**. 14 participants (66,7%) opted for the “I analyse the source document and identify the textual difficulties first, then I try to find the best equivalents for such difficult words/structures” answer, 6 (28,6%) chose the “I analyse the text very briefly and then proceed to the translation itself, without further pre-translation techniques” answer, while one participant (4,8%) opted for “I identify the textual difficulties, but I don’t do any research in order to find the best solution for them”. These numbers indicate a generally favourable pre-translational step as most students openly acknowledge the importance of the textual sub-competence when surmounting the difficulties related to the identification of text typologies and registers. With this step leading to the activation of the next sub-competence (transfer), students will then attempt to find the most adequate equivalents in the target language.

It should also be noted that several teachers providing instruction in Translation Studies for this category of trainees (enrolled at the Theory and Practice of Translation M.A.) have long been interested in the way their students acknowledge the several stages encompassing the complex process of translation and the steps they take in order to complete the task. In this regard, the article authored by professor L. Pungă and entitled *On the Role of Raising the Metacognitive Awareness of Born-Digital Translation Trainees* (2020) embarks on the detailed exploration of metacognitive skills such as “awareness of self-reflection” and their impact on “translation quality” (2020: 118). At the same time, the article provides penetrating and thought-provoking insight about the relationship established between the activation of metacognitive skills and the translation of literary excerpts.

4.1.2. Transfer sub-competence

The pair of questions illustrated in **Figures 3** and **4** will be comparatively analysed, targeting skill-specific tasks derived from the methodology of translation. Resemblance-wise, there were 21 participants (100%) answering both close-ended questions “With what procedures/methods/strategies do you usually associate specialised/non-literary texts?” and “With what procedures/methods/ strategies do you usually associate literary texts?”.

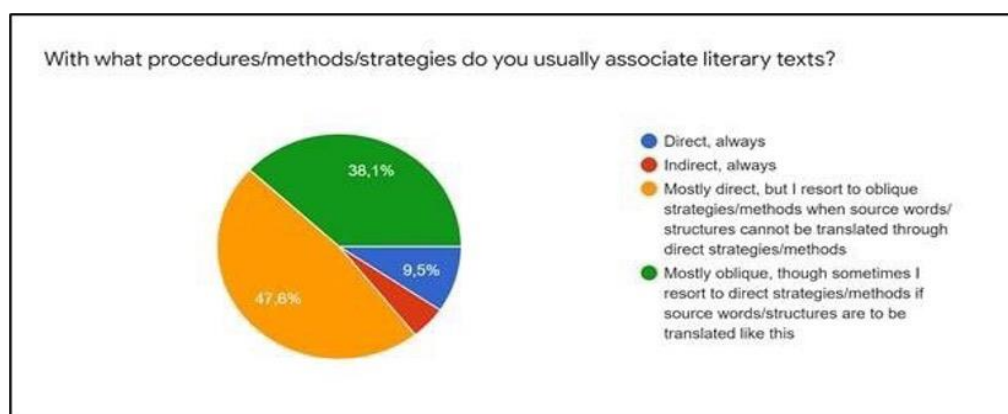


Figure 3. Technical know-how in the translation of literary genres

In the case of the question depicted in **Figure 3**, 10 participants (47,6%) opted for the “mostly direct, but I resort to oblique methods/strategies if source words/structures cannot be translated through direct methods/strategies” answer, 8 (38,1%) chose the “mostly oblique, though sometimes I resort to direct strategies/methods if source words are to be translated like this” answer, 2 (9,5%) opted for the “direct, always” answer (representing 9,5%), while one participant (4,8%) ticked the “indirect, always” answer.

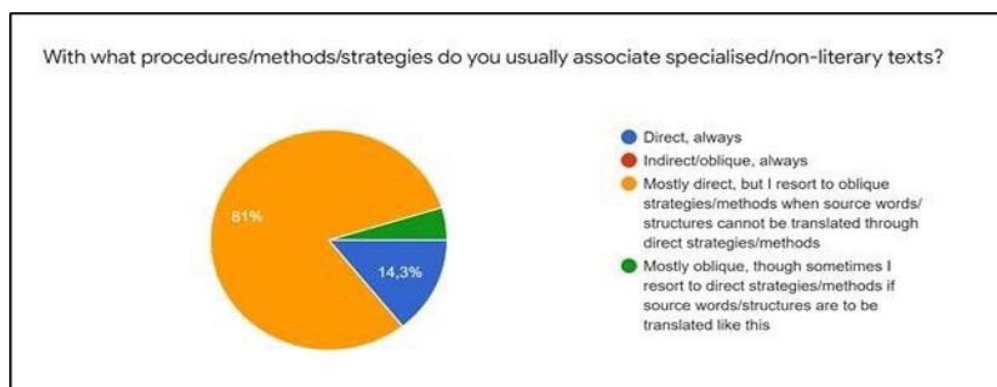


Figure 4. Technical know-how in the translation of non-literary genres

As far as the question in **Figure 4** is concerned, 17 participants (81%) opted for the “mostly direct, but I resort to oblique strategies/methods when source words/structures cannot be translated through direct strategies/methods” answer, 3 of them (14,3%) chose the “direct, always” answer, while one participant (4,8%) opted for the “mostly oblique, though sometimes I resort to direct strategies/methods if source words/structures are to be translated like this” answer.

These statistics show that a vast majority of students are aware of the set of procedures and strategies that are to be applied in the case of specialised texts, yet a high number of participants did not appear to distinguish between direct and indirect procedures/strategies considering that many of them chose the same answer of “direct procedures/strategies” for both questions. Among the range of direct translation strategies and procedures, there can be mentioned word-for-word translation, literal translation, faithful translation, borrowing, and calque, while in the case of indirect/oblique translation strategies/procedures, one could include semantic translation, adaptation, free translation, idiomatic translation, communicative translation (macro level) and modulation, transposition, explicitation, omission, compensation (micro level) (Newmark, 1988: 45-47).

According to Newmark (1988: 194), indirect methods/strategies such as semantic translation and adaptation are preferred in the case of literary texts where style usually prevails over meaning – “it is normally accepted that the literary genres which in translation [...] suffer varying degrees of loss of meaning are poetry, sonorous prose, texts with [...] cultural contents” – as they closely render key literary devices such as “the expressive components of 'expressive' texts (unusual syntactic structures, collocations, metaphors, words peculiarly used, neologisms)”. Direct strategies/methods, on the other hand, are more suitable for specialised texts which should be rendered as faithfully as possible. To put things into perspective, most students are still hesitant when it comes to associating methodology-related terminology with the corresponding textual level and genre-specific texts with the required set of strategies and procedures.

4.2. Questionnaire no. 2 – target audience: academic staff

This questionnaire was designed to be answered by the students’ main category of trainers and relies on the same method-based framework (EMT 2017) as the previous one. It reflects the teachers’ assessment of their students’ theory and practice-based skills in matters surrounding the textual and transfer sub-competences.

4.2.1. Textual sub-competence

The following two questions – Figures 5 and 6 – are to be comparatively analysed by correlating the teachers’ answers to those provided by students in Figures 1 and 2 included in the previous survey (the emphasis has been placed on the textual sub-competence).

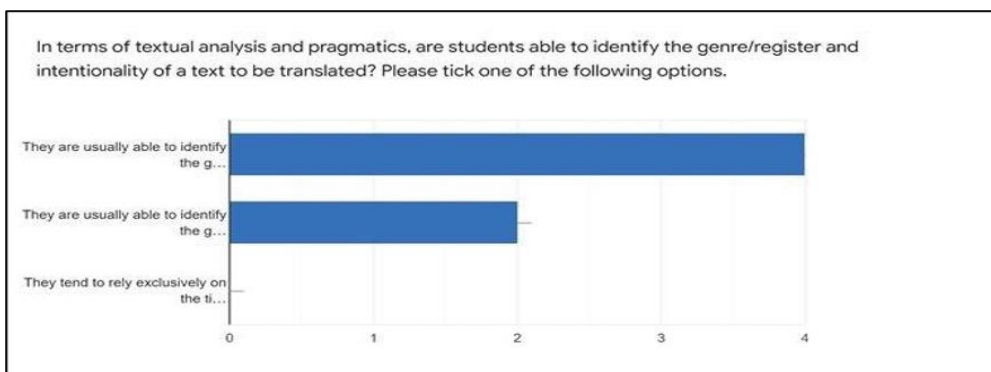


Figure 5. Internal assessment of the trainee analytical skills

There were 5 participants (100%) answering the semi-closed question “In terms of textual analysis and pragmatics, are students able to identify the genre/register and intentionality of a text to be translated?” in **Figure 5**. While 4 of them (80%) opted for only one answer, i.e. “they are usually able to identify the genre/register and intentionality of a text”, 1 participant (20%) chose two alternatives, additionally opting for the answer “they are usually able to identify the genre/register, but are oftentimes misled by the text producer’s attitude and intentions”. These statistics show generally positive feedback provided by teachers and reinforce the idea that students manage quite satisfactorily within the grounds of discourse analysis. It must be noted, however, that slight weaknesses might resurface at times, particularly when students have to resort to their knowledge involving pragmatics-related tasks (e.g. identifying the intentionality of a text, speech acts, etc.). Considering the largely favourable answers, it could be concluded that the strategy used by students (analysing the lexico-semantic features as a first step) when identifying certain genres/text types/registers works quite efficiently and produces successful outcomes.

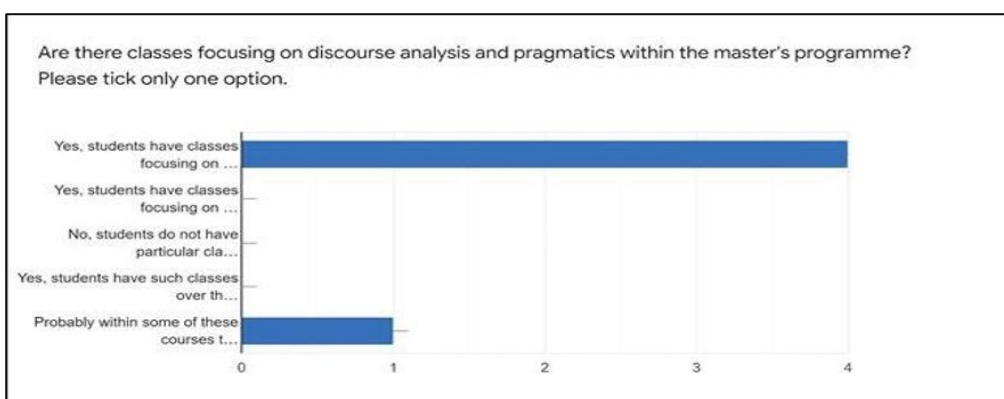


Figure 6. The development of the textual sub-competence as reflected in the programme’s curriculum

There were 5 participants (100%) answering the semi-closed question “Are there classes focusing on discourse analysis and pragmatics within the master’s programme?” in **Figure 6**. While 4 of them (80%) opted for the first pre-established answer available, i.e. “yes, students have classes focusing on discourse analysis/pragmatics during their first MA year”, one participant (20%) originally came up with an answer of their own: “probably within some of these courses they do touch upon issues of pragmatics and discourse analysis”. Given the focus of this study, this question constitutes a basic starting point as far as the content of the master’s curriculum is concerned. According to Calvo (2011: 11), curriculum design or development should be analysed on a dual level: as a *product*, at a theoretical level, and as a *process*, at a practical or pragmatic level. Considering that theory-based curricula commonly target the attainment of “durability, homogeneity and standardisation, measurability [...] and manageability” (Calvo, 2011: 9), it is extremely useful that this master’s programme integrates contiguous subjects such as discourse analysis and pragmatics within its curriculum.

4.2.2. Transfer sub-competence

The following two questions – Figures 7 and 8 – will be comparatively analysed with those depicted in Figures 3 and 4 (previous survey), as the emphasis has similarly been placed upon the transfer sub-competence.

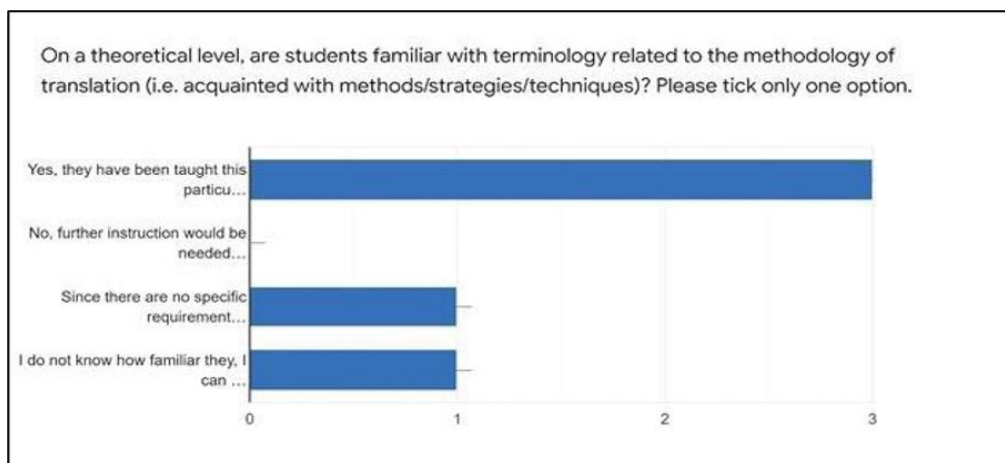


Figure 7. Internal assessment of the trainee terminological awareness

There were 5 participants (100%) answering the semi-closed question “On a theoretical level, are students familiar with terminology related to the methodology of translation (i.e. acquainted with methods/strategies/techniques)?” in **Figure 7**. Three participants (60%) chose the pre-established “yes, they have been taught this particular range of concepts” option, while the remaining two (40%) came up with their own answers, either concluding that “since there are no specific requirements for

the profile of the BA graduates who enrol in the MA Translation Studies program, there are sometimes differences between the level of knowledge the students have in the area of translation specific terminology” or showing ambivalence in that respect: “I do not know how familiar they, I can only speculate that they should”. A potential explanation for the feeling of uncertainty faced by one of the participants is that not all the teachers completing this questionnaire give lectures designed for the transfer sub-competence acquisition; some of them teach pragmatics, others discourse analysis or related subjects.

By drawing parallels to the questions integrated into the previous survey, several curricular aspects should be highlighted. For instance, there are no pre-requisites for students who aim at getting enrolled in this master’s programme regardless of their bachelor’s degree specialty. As the Faculty of Letters (West University of Timișoara) provides two major BA courses in English (each entailing different ESP curricula) – *Languages and Literatures* (literature-oriented), and *Applied Modern Languages* (translation-oriented) – this creates a real advantage for students that might not have studied certain foundation subjects during their BA years and have now the chance to do so within the master’s programme.

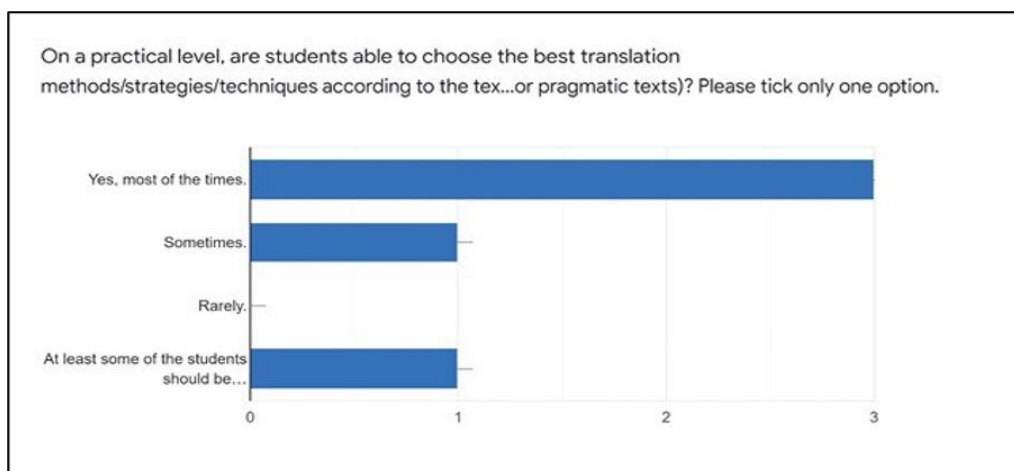


Figure 8. Internal assessment of the trainee transfer skills

Finally, there were 5 participants (100%) answering the semi-closed question “On a practical level, are students able to choose the best translation methods/strategies/techniques according to the text typology and register (e.g. oblique strategies for literary texts as opposed to direct methods for pragmatic texts)?” in **Figure 8**. Three of them (60%) opted for the first answer “yes, most of the times”, one (20%) chose “sometimes”, while the remaining participant (20%) came up with an original answer: “at least some of the students should be able to do it, but it depends”.

By casting a brief glance at all the charts targeting transfer-related aspects (both surveys), slight discrepancies seem to be emerging. A narrow majority of teachers pointed towards the students' ability of distinguishing between the methods and procedures to be applied according to the text type, yet a number of students showed ambivalence in that respect. While most students seem to be able to identify the links between specialised texts and direct methods/procedures, confusion can arise when associating literary genres with the appropriate range of strategies and techniques, at least theoretically-wise. Despite these slight inconsistencies, a conclusion regarding the master's curriculum efficiency should not be reached by relying on theoretical and terminological aspects alone.

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the *textual sub-competence* targets the students' ability to identify textual features at both macro and micro levels in order to classify texts into certain typologies and genres. Upon analysing the answers provided by students enrolled in the *Theory and Practice of Translation* master's programme correlated with those given by their teachers, it might be concluded that future graduates possess to a satisfactory extent the necessary skills that are usually activated during the pre-translation phase.

Researched by several theorists in the field of translation methodology, the *transfer sub-competence* embodies the core of the translation process and encompasses skills that are based on the strategic decisions reached by translators during the translation stage proper. Based on the data collected, issues arising from terminological inconsistencies might be highlighted, yet no outright conclusion should be reached by taking into consideration only the theoretical side of the master's curriculum. The academic staff participating pointed out the fact that, despite the students' terminological ambivalence, they usually apply the most accurate strategies and procedures when translating.

While theory-based subjects are essential constituents of an ESP-centred curriculum, the ability of demonstrating the knowledge gained rounds off the acquisition process. This study could thus be significantly improved by analysing the practical side of the master's curriculum, while the sampling method could consider additional generations of alumni of this master's programme.

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