Translation commentary re-examined in the eyes of translator educators at British universities

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ABSTRACT

Translation commentary is often used as an assessment method in translation degrees. In spite of this, relatively little attention has been paid to it empirically. This paper, on the one hand, proposes Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2014) to conceptualise the use of translation commentary in translator education; on the other hand, it reports on an interview study detailing translator educators' perception of translation commentary and their institutional practice of using translation commentary as an assessment method. Interview results show that translation commentary is perceived to be a hybrid of both an academic essay and reflective narrative. Its assessment is found to be linked to the hybridity. The true value of translation commentary probably lies in its conjunctive nature of transcending the boundary among knowledge, skill, theory and practice.

KEYWORDS

Translation pedagogy, translation commentary, experiential learning, reflection, translator training, translation annotation.

1. Introduction

It has been well documented that most students' studying efforts are spent on their assessment or preparation for their assessment (see Miller and Parlett 1974; Snyder 1971; Becker et al. 1995). In other words, how students are assessed has a direct and fundamental impact on their learning. Given that translation commentary is increasingly considered to be a default assessment method in translator education and yet little attention has been paid to it empirically, the present study is intended to (re-)examine it.

The popularity of translation commentary as an assessment method, to a certain extent, is linked to the progression in translation pedagogy, from a teacher-centred and product-based approach to a learner-centred and process-based approach (see Kiraly 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Kelly 2005). Such pedagogy runs in parallel to translation assessment; from assessing the translation product exclusively to assessing a combination of the translation product, translation process and many related applications to translation. For example, Kiraly (2000: 200) advocates that translator education should anchor on authentic translation tasks and move towards a form of dynamic and collaborative socio-construct that is shared by translator educators and translation students collectively. In other words, learning and teaching based on authentic translation projects is what modern translation pedagogy should strive for.

Despite the increasing popularity of translation commentary as an assessment method, it appears to be a unique notion that is relatively

unknown to translators outside academia or even to students who are new to Translation Studies as an academic discipline. From a practical point of view, I see a real need to build a consensus or at least establish some common ground among translator educators regarding their perception and use of translation commentary as assessment, particularly in the UK. It may be worth explaining the context of translation degrees in the UK in relation to the comment above. British translation degrees, particularly postgraduate degrees, tend to recruit a large number of overseas students from different countries and in different language combinations. This is partly because of the internationalisation of British Higher Education and partly because there are relatively few British students choosing to study translation at postgraduate level. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that foreign languages became non-compulsory subjects at British secondary schools. As a result, practical modules in translation degrees in the UK often run parallel language-specific groups and many of these rely heavily on professional translators who ordinarily work outside academia. This means that a complex set-up must be established, and managing learning, teaching and indeed assessment (including translation commentary) in parallel language-specific groups within the same module may be logistically challenging. Furthermore, it is possible that along with the advancement of Translation Studies as a discipline, translation commentary may have also evolved as an assessment in different institutional contexts. This study is therefore intended to investigate two aspects of translation commentary in the current context of British universities: translator educators' perception of translation commentary and the ways it is used as an assessment method. A list of operational questions that encapsulate these two general aims is presented below:

(1) What is translation commentary perceived to be?
    (1.1) To what extent is translation commentary considered to be an academic essay, reflective narrative, or something else?[1]
    (1.2) To what extent are translator educators (in the UK) accustomed to using the term, translation commentary or any other related terms? Do they use such terms interchangeably?
(2) What does translation commentary look like?
    (2.1) What are the desirable features of translation commentary?
    (2.2) What are the undesirable features of translation commentary?
(3) What does translation commentary aim to assess?
    (3.1) To what extent is translation commentary considered to be an effective assessment method? Why?
(4) How is translation commentary used as an assessment method in different institutional contexts?
    (4.1) What (assessment) criteria are used to mark translation commentary?
    (4.2) To what extent are these marking criteria specific to translation commentary or do they also apply to generic academic essays?
    (4.3) What weighting/percentage of marks is distributed between translation and translation commentary?

(4.4) What provision is available for teaching students how to write translation commentary?

2. Theoretical framework: Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Arguably, Translation Studies can be considered a discipline that inherently entails applied purposes. Partly due to this applied nature, translation commentary (as an assessment) lends itself well to the theory of experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb. According to Kolb (2014: 51), "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Kolb's (2014: 31-49) experiential learning cycle consist of four phases, "concrete experience," "reflective observation," "abstract conceptualisation" and "active experimentation". In other words, trainee translators learn by doing translation, reflecting on translation, forming principles about translation, planning (for future) translation and finally going full circle back to doing translation. In Kelly's view (2005: 47), different students might have different starting points in their learning cycle and may dwell on different stages of the cycle. Therefore, the key is to keep some form of flexibility in the curriculum design, so that different students' potential learning styles and cycles can be catered for. She suggested that a translation portfolio is a type of flexible assessment method to facilitate this cycle. Interestingly, "commentaries on translation" was suggested by Kelly (2005: 139) to be an essential component of translation portfolios, even though she did not elaborate nor define "commentaries on translation". Nevertheless, it confirms the fact that translation commentary is habitually used as an assessment attached to translating a piece of text. When students are asked to write translation commentary or comment on their own translations, they are effectively asked to learn translation not just by doing it, but by reflecting and possibly forming some insights about it so that they can improve their translation practice in the future. Kolb's experiential learning cycle will be discussed further in Section 5.

3. Relevant literature

In the following, I will discuss in detail how translation commentary has been referred to in the literature. In particular, several related terms (e.g. commented translation, annotated text for translation, and translation annotation, etc.) will be conferred and differentiated wherever possible.

3.1 Translation commentary and commented translation

In spite of the fact that empirical research on translation commentary is scarcely available, reference to translation commentary can be found in many practice-based or guideline-based translation publications. One of the earliest ideas about translation commentary was mentioned by German scholars in the 1980s, e.g. Justa Holz-Mänttäri, Albrecht Neubert, Britta Gabrian (cf. Garcia Alvarez 2007), where they argue that students should be given a chance to voice their reasons for making translation choices in

addition to their translation. Sewell (2002) and Garcia Alverez (2007) were two scholars who specifically addressed translation commentary at length in their work. In fact, Sewell (2002) was the first scholar who published a book-length work on translation commentary. Her book was based on her experience of teaching BA and MA French Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. The aims of Sewell's book are worth citing in detail since they appear to accord with potential aims of translation commentary as an assessment method.

(1) to raise awareness of translation policy
(2) to promote [the] ability to reflect upon procedures which are often taken for granted
(3) to draw attention to the relationship between surface words and the underlying meaning
(4) to raise the profile of cultural knowledge required by translators
(5) to focus attention on patterns of differences between French and English using the techniques of comparative stylistics
(6) to promote awareness of notions of textuality, such as cohesion and coherence
(7) intertextuality, i.e. to begin to do justice to a 'gigantic network of cross-references, echoes and illusions'
(8) to encourage reading of a theoretical nature to underpin the commentaries.

(Sewell 2002: 17-23)

As seen above, raising students' awareness of what they are doing and promoting their ability to reflect may well be why students are asked to write translation commentary. In addition to this, Sewell (2002) proposes 13 theoretical approaches (as seen below) that could be used to underpin and inform translation commentary. This seems to suggest that translation commentary is very much seen by Sewell as an academic essay that should be supported by theoretical grounding. In fact, the rest of her book consists of a selection of sample translation commentaries produced by her students along with her feedback and comments. Many of these translation commentaries focus on arguments for or against theoretical grounding, citing translation examples of particular texts. The following is Sewell's suggested theoretical underpinning for translation commentary:

(1) Newmark's elaboration on case grammar
(2) Jakobson's theory of communication and the functions of language
(3) metaphors
(4) textual filters
(5) models of translation
(6) frames
(7) skopos
(8) the importance of conventional collocations
(9) text typology and text linguistics

(10) relevance theory
(11) Grice's maxims for conversational exchange
(12) the culture of the source text
(13) contrastive stylistics.

(Sewell 2002: 37-54)

Sewell's suggested theoretical underpinning appears to be largely linguistics-based. While this may be due to Sewell's own academic background outside Translation Studies, it is also a possible reflection of Translation Studies as an academic discipline in its relative infancy at British universities.

A more recent publication by Garcia Alverez (2007) also focuses on translation commentary. Similar to Sewell, Garcia Alverez emphasises the importance of concrete guidelines and descriptive documentations to help students to write translation commentary, since many may not have come across translation commentary previously. Again, this suggests that producing translation is one thing but writing (good) translation commentary can be quite another, particularly for the purpose of assessment. Consequently, Garcia Alvarez compiles an elaborate list of 19 guidelines or in Garcia Alvarez's own words, "these guidelines are suggested for the purpose of orientation in order to help [students] to plan and organise their line of reasoning and decision in a coherent fashion" in writing translation commentary (2007: 144). Similar to Sewell, Garcia Alvarez's guidelines consist of some linguistic and textual analytic theories but they are slightly wider and somehow go beyond the linguistic and textual levels at times. For example, practical issues, such as commission for translation, negotiation with clients and consulting informants, etc., are included as guidelines.

Each of Garcia Alverez's guidelines is then elaborated upon in detail in conjunction with a few relevant theoretical concepts in Translation Studies. Just like Sewell, Garcia Alvarez (2007) then presents a sample translation commentary apparently produced by one of her students. But, unlike Sewell's sample translation commentary, not a single theoretical reference was explicitly referred to in Garcia Alvarez's sample even though it shows that the student discussed her translation decisions based on many of the suggested guidelines. Garcia Alvarez appears to demonstrate that translation commentary and arguably a well-written one, can simply be a reflective report justifying one's translation decisions without theoretical underpinning explicitly, although it should be pointed out that Garcia Alverez's students were undergraduates, as this might be a contributing factor. It will be interesting to find out in the present study whether this is common practice or general perception of translation commentary in the eyes of current translator educators in the UK (see Section 1, operational questions 1.1).

Commented translation, or simply translation report are alternative terms to translation commentary used by scholars, such as Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir (2015: 71), even though their notion of commented translation or translation report is not dissimilar to Sewell and Garcia Alvarez's translation commentary. Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir define it as follows:

> … a document in which students can identify problematic fragments they have encountered when translating a text, explain the process they have followed to resolve problems, specify the sources they have consulted and the time they have spent on the task, etc. (2015: 71).

They add that the value of this type of report is the fact that the translation process can be appraised along with the translation product. In fact, they point out that translation instructors can use it to distinguish two types of students: one being able to identify a translation problem but unable to solve it and the other being totally unaware of a problem in the first place.

Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir's definition highlights a few characteristics of commented translation. Firstly, commented translation is seen as a supplementary part of translation. In other words, instead of viewing it as a stand-alone or independent piece of academic work, the comments were used, on the one hand, by students to justify their translation decisions accompanying a piece of translation, and on the other hand, used by translator trainers/educators to supplement their evaluation of the translation. Secondly, the awareness of identifying problems is of prominent importance. In fact, Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir elaborate that students are required to actively pursue translation problems and this process of pursuing problems is highly valued in many similar types of assessment (2015: 71-72). The same notion of viewing translation as a problem-solving activity is epitomised by Shei (2005a, 2005b) in his two problem space models, which will be explained in detail in Section 3.1.

Interestingly, Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir (2015: 71) categorise commented translation as a type of report that accompanies a text to translate, among a list of other assessment instruments, including reflective diary, translation process recordings, and student portfolio, etc. This is different from Presas' (2012: 153) use of the same term, commented translation. Presas (2012: 153-160) described commented translation as an assessment scheme that comprises three distinctive and yet connected components: ST analysis, text translation and reflection. In other words, Presas uses commented translation as a label for her prescriptive assessment scheme in which the translation is a second component. On the contrary, Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir (2015: 71) simply view it as a reflective report that is attached to a piece of translation. This difference reflects discrepancies in using the same term and a need to find a more uniform use for the term or at least to clarify the use of relevant terms so as to avoid confusion.

Apart from the prescribed structure for commented translation, Presas (2012: 154-164) also presents her assessment criteria in detail. She claims that there are no existing assessment criteria for marking commented translation. Her assessment criteria for the ST analysis and reflection will be highlighted here. For the ST analysis, she identifies three main assessment criteria. They are: "identification of subject and main ideas, identification of text-types and linguistic features, and identification of the communicative situation" (Presas 2012: 155). These assessment criteria also have a set of indicators, including clarity, accuracy, details and coherence" (ibid). In other words, the ST analysis is assessed on the basis of how clear, accurate and coherent it is, or on how many details are offered in terms of identification of various ST features. In terms of the reflection component, she also devises three main assessment criteria. They are: "definition of information needs, justification of solutions/contrastive language rules/ explanation of semantic changes and finally, description of processes" (Presas 2012: 159-160). Again, these three main assessment criteria are guided via indicators such as detail, accuracy, completeness, objectivity, accuracy, elaboration and order (Presas 2012: 159-160). In addition, there are associated descriptors related to each of the assessment criteria corresponding to the Spanish marking scales. Of particular interest is that the ST analysis accounts for three points, translation five points and reflection two points among the ten available points in the Spanish marking scale (Presas 2012: 160). This effectively indicates that the reflection component only accounts for 20%, being the lowest percentage, when compared to translation and the ST analysis components account for 50% and 30% respectively. This shows that compared to translation, the reflection component (20%) is comparatively less important, even though it could be argued that when taking into consideration the ST analysis combined with the reflection component, they are of equal weighting to translation (50%). It will be interesting to find out in the present study whether similar weightings are used at British universities.

As mentioned earlier, Shei (2005a: 34, 2005b: 314-322) produces two problem space models for translation commentary. Largely based on his teaching and analysis of Chinese students' translation commentary (written in English as their second language) at Swansea University, UK, Shei develops these two successive models. The first one is named "translation problem space model" (Shei 2005b: 314, 2005a: 34) and the second one "translation problem space exploration model" (Shei 2005a: 41). Both models are developed according to the classic theories of problem solving in cognitive psychology (see Newell and Simon 1972; Keren 1984), from which Shei borrows the concept of problem space, consisting of initial state, goal state and operators. In Shei's models, ST represents the initial state and TT represents the goal state. The so-called "operators", which lie between the two states, are defined as tools that students could use to solve their translation problems. Five types of operators (i.e. conceptual tools for translation) are proposed. They are: "text analysis tools, reference

tools, translation methods, translation units and translation strategies" (Shei 2005b: 311-314). Crucially, by utilising classic problem-solving theories, Shei is able to conceptualise the idea of problem and solution in translation commentary.

3.2 Annotated text for translation and translation annotation

Apart from "commented translation", similar terms such as "annotated text for translation" and "translation annotation" are also used by translation scholars. In their workbook series, Adab (1994, 1996) and Schäffner (2001) use the term, "annotated text for translation". Schäffner points out the general aims of her book:

> By focusing on recurring translation problems and illustrating the translation strategies applied, we want to demonstrate that critical reflection on a translation assignment will help translators to make informed decisions, to comment on them, and defend them, if required (2001: 3).

In many ways, these aims are very similar to commented translation proposed by Galán-Mañas and Hurtado Albir (2015: 71), and Presas (2012: 154-164). However, in addressing annotations throughout their books, it is clear that Adab (1994, 1996) and Schäffner (2001) do not consider annotated text for translation as a type of assessment. For them, annotations seem to be extensive lists of notes directly attached to a piece of translation and these notes represent recurring translation problems that should be taken into account by a good translator dealing with similar texts in the same language combinations.

Rather than annotated text for translation, Almanna (2016) chooses to use the term translation annotation. In fact, in his textbook, *The Routledge Course in Translation Annotation: Arabic-English-Arabic*, he specifically addresses his reasons for using the term translation annotation, as opposed to translation commentary. According to him, translation commentary refers to comments on other people's translations whereas annotations refer to critical notes on one's own translation. In addition, he claims that annotations should not be confused with translation with footnotes, since annotation is seen as a type of reflection (2016: 8). In fact, rather confusingly, Almanna's use of the term, translation annotation, appears to contradict Adab's and Schäffner's (2001) use of annotated text for translation. Almanna (2016: 8-9) sums up the notion of translation annotation by claiming that the purpose of translation annotation is to explain and/or defend choices made by the translator. Interestingly, according to Almanna, one needs to distinguish "obligatory features" from "optional features" when analysing translation problems. "Obligatory features" involve certain choices that have to be made by translators "in order to satisfy the [grammatical] rules imposed by the TL." (2016: 9). "Optional features" are cases where translators are genuinely left with multiple options to render the ST. This is when translators have to pause

and exercise their own judgement for an informed decision (2016: 9). Almanna seems to imply that the latter (i.e. optional features) is more desirable. This seems to be in contrast to the "reoccurring translation problems" that Schäffner (2001: 3) has focused on in her book.

Almanna (2016) then presents eight chapters of translation annotations coupled with translation examples, which include global strategies, local strategies, grammatical issues, lexical and phraseological choices, cohesion, register, pragmatic, semiotic and stylistic aspects, cultural and ideological issues. Effectively, these eight chapters of translation annotations are manifestations of an important theoretical framework that can be conveniently used to comment on, or, to use Almanna's preferred word, "annotate" translation. To sum up, Almanna's use of the term translation annotation is actually quite similar to translation commentary, as described by Sewell (2002) and Garcia Alverez (2007). This is despite the fact that he argues against the use of the term translation commentary.

4. Data collection

Ten translation lecturers based at ten British universities were interviewed. These universities were (in alphabetical order): Bristol University, Durham University, Leicester University, Newcastle University, Portsmouth University, Roehampton University, SOAS, Surrey University, Swansea University and Westminster University. The sampling for this interview study was non-probabilistic and purposive in nature. Subjects were purposely selected largely based on their relative length of experience in teaching translation at British universities. At the time of the data collection, out of the ten lecturers interviewed, seven of them have been lecturing in translation (studies) in the UK for over ten years. Two of them had over five years and one of them had over three years of teaching experience, respectively. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face, via telephone or Skype, lasting 40 minutes approximately. The interviews were designed to be semi-structured and open-ended. They largely followed the two themes and operational questions as indicated in Section 1.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 Translation commentary: definition and clarification

In terms of terminology, the majority of the interviewees conceded that they preferred to use the term translation commentary and indicated that translation commentary was a different notion from "translation annotation", as the latter implied a type of footnoted justification that is more fragmented and less substantial when compared to translation commentary. There was, however, one exception, as one interviewee cited Almanna's (2016) book (see Section 3) and claimed that translation commentary and "translation annotation" could be used interchangeably.

The following is a selection of responses by the interviewees when asked to describe what translation commentary is:

> Translation commentary is a way for students to be assessed as to how they analyse ST by applying relevant theories and how they make relevant translation decisions.
>
> Translation commentary is an opportunity for students to justify their translation product. They are given a chance to justify their translation. It does not matter whether their translation is good or bad, they are all given a chance to justify their translation.
>
> Translation commentary is a way to distinguish between professional and unprofessional translators. Professional translators have to justify their decisions with the support of relevant theory. So, it is important for translators to equip themselves with theories in translation and to try to use these theories to inform their decisions and their practice.
>
> Translation commentary is an essay about a piece of translation and about students' experience of translating this piece of work. One of the purposes is meant to be reflective. Students are reflecting on their process and gaining professional awareness.

A few key notions were repeatedly mentioned by interviewees to describe translation commentary in the present study. They were: reflection, justification, choice, theory, translation product and process, translation problem and solution and being professional. Notions such as reflection, problem, solution and justification were discussed by many previous scholars (see Section 3) as indicative elements of translation commentary and will not be repeated here. However, there were also two interesting notions that stood out and warranted further scrutiny. The first one was the notion of being professional. This was mentioned by two interviewees specifically in that they associated translation commentary with being professional translators. One of them went as far as saying that professional translators should be able to justify their translation (choices) with the support of relevant theories. They claimed that professional translators should be familiar with theories and indeed on occasion might be required to defend themselves when it came to their translation choices being questioned. Therefore, in a sense, writing translation commentary was about mimicking such potential situations so that students were equipped with that extra edge to protect themselves in their professional career. The reason that these interviewees associated professionalism with translation commentary probably relates to their perception of the translation degrees or courses they teach, as some translation degrees might be more profession- or vocation-oriented than others. In one of the interviewee's own words, "we are running a degree that is basically professional training but with grounding in translation and interpreting scholarship...".

The other notion worth looking into is theory, as all interviewees linked translation decision and/or justification to theory. When prompted about this particular notion, most interviewees described it in abstract terms. For example, interviewees described theory as meta-language,

conceptualisation, framework, contextualisation or anything in translation research and scholarship, but there was also one interviewee who favoured a selection of more specific translation theories only. In fact, s/he claimed that certain theories were more readily applicable in translation commentary. Therefore, such theories were often referred to in his/her teaching in practical translation modules. As a result, students were expected to refer to these theories in their translation commentary. This seems to strike a chord with an interesting point raised by Shih (2011: 319) where selective theories that were perceived as being readily applicable to translation practice were often favoured by translation students in their written assessment. The only difference is that in Shih's study, this was found from students' perspectives, not from the perspective of a translator educator.

In addition, there were also interviewees who described translation commentary as a fixed structure assessment. According to one interviewee, translation commentary should consist of two parts:

> The first part is about skopos, text types, background research and terminology research. The second part is about translation problems or challenges and their corresponding solutions. The first part is more theory-oriented and the second part is a kind of reflection.

This appears to be very similar to Presas' (2012) proposed structure of commented translation as indicated in Section 3 in that translation commentary is seen as a two-part essay which begins with source text analysis and ends with reflection and justification of translation choices being made.

In terms of the question of the extent to which translation commentary was seen as an academic essay or reflective narrative, most interviewees considered it to be a kind of hybrid academic work. One interviewee described the hybrid nature of translation commentary as similar to a self-case study. In other words, fundamentally, translation commentary is perceived to be an academic essay but it also carries an indispensable element of personal reflection and narratives. On the one hand, translation commentary is an academic essay; therefore, it should abide by the convention of academic essays. For example, it should have a coherent and clear structure. It should include practical translation examples, but perhaps more importantly, it should cite academic references to support or substantiate arguments. One interviewee even suggested that translation commentary should have a title so that students could present a themed and coherent argument based on the suggested title. But, on the other hand, translation commentary is also a piece of personal reflection; therefore, using a first-person's point of view, such as 'I', is not only acceptable but often preferred, particularly when students' own translation examples are discussed in translation commentary.

One interesting point worth noting is that the academic element of translation commentary and particularly how translation commentary should be underpinned by translation scholarship is repeatedly and unanimously stressed by all the interviewees in the present study. It seems to highlight how translation commentary is perceived or primarily used as an academic assessment in translation degrees in the UK. This may be related to the legacy that unlike their continental counterparts, translation degrees have been predominately (if not exclusively) taught at postgraduate level for many years in the UK (Malmkjær 2004: 3; Beeby 2004: 39). But, two of the interviewees also indicated that when translation commentary was used as an assessment at undergraduate level, they did not necessarily expect the same level of academic requirements. They might expect students to produce reports that are less substantial, less structured and consisting of less translation scholarship, given that undergraduate students might not have substantial theoretical input in their degrees yet.

5.2 What are the desirable and undesirable features of translation commentary?

As mentioned in Section 5.1, translation commentary was perceived to be a type of academic essay. Naturally, features of academic essays represent desirable features of translation commentary. As suggested by many interviewees, these features might include coherent structures, competent use of meta-language, and themed arguments convincingly supported by theoretical references, etc. One interviewee put it as follows:

> A good translation commentary should demonstrate that students have fully understood the theories cited and are able to apply such theories in their translation practice or examples competently. But, it is not just about applying theories to examples. It is also about students' awareness of their own strategies by being able to stand back [to observe themselves] and to accurately describe their own practice.

In other words, in addition to linking theories to practice, competently describing one's practice (i.e. reflective narrative) is also a crucial element of translation commentary, as the latter is probably seen as a manifestation of "awareness." The notion of "awareness" will be discussed further in Section 5.3.

In contrast, undesirable features of translation commentary often coincide with poor academic writing. Based on the experiences of the interviewees, the following is a collective list of undesirable features for translation commentary:

- Diving into the translation examples straight away without appreciating proper research on relevant background information and terminology.
- Theories are not linked to translation examples.

- Attempting to discuss too many issues or problems without clear categorisation of problems and in-depth analysis on translation examples.
- Inaccurate application of theoretical concepts.
- Developing an argument based on a mistaken translation or mis-comprehension in translation.
- Only discussing one issue or one type of translation problem.
- Failing to identify core issues in a piece of translation.
- Lack of awareness of what a real translation challenge or difficulty is.

Apart from the notion that undesirable features of translation commentary often bore the idiosyncratic symptoms of poor academic essays, they were also associated with inadequate selections of translation problems, as pointed out by many interviewees. One interviewee claimed that students should not include too many translation problems as it might result in superficial treatment for each of the translation problems. However, it would be unwise to choose to discuss just one single (type of) issue, as it might be seen as not being reflective enough. Such remarks appear to be contradictory. Yet, ultimately, the most important thing is probably less about the number of translation examples, but more about whether the chosen examples are representative enough to illustrate core challenges and problems that are specific to the text being translated.

Again, part of the difficulty of writing a (good) translation commentary is to demonstrate awareness that is pertinent to one's insights and practice of translating a piece of work. One interviewee described an example of a student choosing to discuss a problem of finding a TL equivalent for a ST term. However, this translation problem was not a real translation problem or a real challenge because it could easily be solved by using a good bilingual glossary or specialised dictionary and thus in the interviewee's mind, this problem was not worth discussing and possibly showed that the student was not aware of other, more pressing issues in translating this particular piece of text. As a result, this represented an example of undesirable features in translation commentary. This example seems to link to Almanna's (2016: 9) notions of "obligatory features" vs "optional features" as mentioned previously in Section 3.2, as this interviewee seemed to indicate that discussion of "optional features" (i.e. features that call for genuine choices/dilemma) was more desirable in translation commentary.

5.3. Assessing what?

When asked about what translation commentary aims to assess, the interviewees indicated that it aims to assess a wide range of knowledge, abilities and skills. The following table summarises their collective view.

Categories of assessment aims	**Detailed assessment aims**
Knowledge (of)	translation theories
Abilities (to)	combine theories with practice
	reflect
	articulate ideas in writing convincingly and coherently
Skills	practical skills associated with translation, e.g. - background research skills - skills of contacting informants
	problem solving skills
Awareness (of)	professional issues
	key translation challenges

Table 1. What translation commentary aims to assess (according to translator educators)

It seemed that translation commentary aimed not just to assess translation know-how but also many other generic academic skills, e.g. the ability to solve problems, reflect, and articulate ideas in writing, etc. In addition, many interviewees also mentioned that translation commentary aims to assess students' awareness. One interviewee even labelled translation commentary as "a type of awareness-raising exercise." According to the interviewee, translation commentary assessed students' capacity to stand back and look at their own translation practice objectively. In other words, awareness was demonstrated through informed observation and insights into the translated text and one's own translation process. It is almost as if awareness is a type of overarching and all-encompassing, accumulated understanding that sits above and beyond many of the more measurable skills, knowledge and abilities for translation. For many interviewees, the true educational value of translation commentary and possibly the reason why it is widely used or considered to be an effective assessment probably lies in the concept of "awareness". Such awareness is not just a matter of self-reflection but also represents something that is a step further. In fact, it very much emulates the transition from the phase "reflective observation" to "abstract conceptualisation" and possibly "active experimentation" in Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2014: 31-49). Table 2 below presents this in detail.

Phases of Kolb's experiential cycle	**Corresponding phases for translation**	**Corresponding features for assessment in translation commentary**
Concrete experience	Translating a text	---
Reflective observation	Reflecting and observing the translation experience	- Presenting translation problems and solutions.

		- Demonstrating terminological/background search
Abstract conceptualisation	Forming principles and insights about translation	- Relating translation theories to translation practice/examples - Justifying translation choices/solutions - Demonstrating awareness of professional issues and key challenges
Active experimentation	Planning for future translation	- Planning for improvement or future actions

Table 2 Features of translation commentary corresponding to Kolb's experiential cycle (2014)

"Reflective observation" (Kolb 2014: 31-49) relates to the phase when students reflect on what they have done or experienced. This may include a description of selected translation problems and solutions. They may present their experience of doing background or terminological research for the ST and for potential target readership. "Abstract conceptualisation" (Kolb 2014: 31-49) corresponds to the next phase when students stand back from their translation experience and try to make sense of it. They may draw on theories from translation scholarship to frame, explain or justify their translation decisions and solutions. In other words, this is the phase where students are required to contemplate on their own description or observation of their translation behaviours. "Active experimentation" (Kolb 2014: 31-49) relates to the final stage when students consider how they can put into practice what they have learned after the phases of reflection and conceptualisation. They may describe/conclude what they could do better next time and what actions they could take on board to improve or refine their future translation procedures.

5.4 Institutional practice for translation commentary

After clarifications of translation commentary and its perception, Section 5.4 reports on the institutional practice of using translation commentary as an assessment at British universities.

5.4.1 Marking criteria and weighting

Probably because translation commentary and translation are marked separately in most institutions, there were also separate sets of marking criteria or descriptors dedicated to translation commentary and translation. Table 3 summarises marking criteria for translation commentary only. Please note that the data about marking criteria and weighting were

primarily collected based on the interviews, but supplementary documentation was also provided by the interviewees wherever possible.

Categories of marking criteria	**Marking criteria**
Essay-related criteria	clarity and consistency
	critical analytic ability
	acknowledgment of references
	use of theories/reading
Translation commentary-specific criteria	Analysis on ST intension and TT readership
	sensitivity of cultural transfer
	ability of justify solutions to problems
	awareness/consideration of problems
	formation of overall translation strategy
	specific translation strategy

Table 3. Summary of marking criteria

Based on the marking criteria collected, two main categories emerge: essay-related criteria and translation commentary-specific criteria. It is clear that many marking criteria are not dissimilar to criteria for marking generic academic essays (e.g. clarity, consistency, critical analytic ability, acknowledgement of references, etc.). This is probably due to the fact that translation commentary was considered to be a hybrid academic essay by most interviewees, as mentioned earlier. In fact, some interviewees even claimed that in their institutions, marking criteria for translation commentary were often identical to or produced from generic marking criteria for academic essays in the first place. However, it is interesting to see that some institutions appear to take a more prescriptive approach in terms of the expected content for translation commentary, as reflected in the marking criteria. For example, ST intention, TT readership and cultural transfer, etc. are specific aspects that are listed in the assessment criteria.

In terms of the weighting for translation commentary, as mentioned earlier, the majority of the interviewees indicated that translation and translation commentary had separate weighting for marking purposes. They were either equally weighted (50%) or had a much lower weighting for translation commentary (ranging from 20% to 40%). But, there was also one institution which did not have separate weighting for translation and translation commentary at all. In fact, according to the interviewee, their marking guidelines clearly indicated that the mark for translation may be adjusted marginally based on translation commentary. In other words, translation commentary was merely seen as periphery or supplementary information for marking translation. This reflects a diverse and almost incongruous phenomenon of how translation commentary is used in translation degrees in the UK. Translation commentary on the one hand, is

highly regarded for its academic value attached to translation scholarship, as pointed out in Section 4.3; on the other hand, in some institutions, it is merely used as an offshoot for a piece of translation. One interviewee explained that the weighting for translation commentary was under heated debate among colleagues in his/her institution. One rationale of having much lower weighting for translation commentary (particularly when it is used as an assessment in a practical module) was because translation commentary can transcend the boundary and assess many different kinds of skills and competence that was well beyond the primary aim of a practical module. Therefore, it was argued that translation commentary should play a supporting role to aid the assessment of a translation product and should not be used as a substitute for assessing translation theories or professional skills, given that such theories and skills were assessed in other modules in the curriculum. However, a counter-argument was that translation commentary represented an ideal assessment (probably even more so for dissertation), due to its transcending nature of assessing different knowledge, skills and competence related to translation. This debate is probably related to two issues: One is the issue of designing and placing various assessments in a balanced translation curriculum and the other is whether the translation degree is perceived to be a more vocation-oriented one or not. Such perception may have a knock-on effect on how translation commentary is used as an assessment and indeed where it is placed in the translation curriculum.

With regard to where translation commentary is used as an assessment method in translation curricula, it was found that it was most frequently used in practical translation modules, but also used as an alternative to the research-based dissertation for postgraduate translation degrees. In the case of the latter, the length of translation commentary is obviously on a much larger scale. Translation commentary was even occasionally used as an assessment for theory-based modules, although, in this case, only translation commentary (not the translation) was assessed.

5.4.2 Teaching of translation commentary

In terms of teaching students how to write translation commentary, it was claimed that some forms of provision were provided at all institutions. Some interviewees reported that writing translation commentary was considered to be a part of the academic writing skills taught in research skills modules. Others noted that there were one or two formal sessions specifically designed for translation commentary writing in the practical translation modules. Nevertheless, some interviewees claimed that this was left to instructors' own discretion either at language-specific workshops or at private tutorials with individual students. In other words, in these cases, it was difficult to tell to what extent translation commentary writing was actually taught, as indicated by an interviewee in the following:

> Different language groups may have different approaches. Some tutors focus on theories a lot less because they are professionals. Comparability is a problem; sometimes we need to second mark or re-mark things because theories are neglected.

This further confirms my observation earlier (see Section 1) that there is a genuine and practical need to find some consensus with regard to translation commentary, particularly in the context of translator educators in the UK.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine translator educators' perception of translation commentary, in terms of its definition, value and their institutional practice of using translation commentary as an assessment at British universities. It was found that translation commentary, on the one hand, is perceived to be a reflective report where students justify their translation choices for a particular piece of work. On the other hand, it is also perceived to be an academic essay. In other words, translation commentary is a hybrid academic essay that requires students' critical reflection on their own process of producing a piece of translation. In terms of the use of the term, translation commentary appeared to be a preferred choice among the translator educators to describe this type of assessment, as opposed to "translation annotation", which is often seen as a less structured, less substantial and footnote-like justification for a piece of translation.

Interestingly, despite the nature of translation commentary being attached to a piece of translation, it was also found to be potentially assessing many different types of knowledge and skills that transcend beyond a piece of translation. They include knowledge about translation scholarship and problem-solving skills, background research skills, abilities to reflect, etc. Awareness is also indicated as an important assessment aim for translation commentary. What is even more interesting is that translation commentary does not just assess many different skills and knowledge individually, but effectively provides a platform to amalgamate them. This highlights the true educational value of translation commentary and possibly why it is commonly used as an assessment method in translation degrees because it encourages translation students to wrap up and encapsulate a wide spectrum of translation knowledge (theory) and skills (practice) through a reflective piece of work, so as to guide and transform students into fully-fledged professional translators. This encapsulation process sits right at the heart of Kolb's (2014) notion of experiential learning where learning occurs when experiences are transformed into knowledge.

There is also evidence to suggest that translation commentary may not be a homogeneous assessment method. It was certainly found to be used in a range of diversified manners in different translation degrees or even in different modules. Translation commentary was found to be commonly used in practical translation modules, but also frequently used as an alternative

assessment for dissertation. This is obviously related to how a translation degree programme is designed in the first place. The weighting of marks, for example, very much depends on how it is perceived in a translation degree. If a translation degree is perceived and designed to be vocation-oriented, weighting of marks for translation commentary tend to be much lower in comparison to that for translation.

In terms of what represents desirable features of translation commentary, it is interesting to find that apart from bearing the features of good academic writing, good selections of translation problems prove to be vitally important. In fact, it was suggested that desirable features of translation commentary consist of translation problems representing key issues specific to the commented piece of translation and those truly posing challenges for translators. In other words, discussing stereotypical or generic problems of translating between two languages (in general) may not be desirable in translation commentary.

It is hoped that the present study offers vital empirical evidence to illustrate how translation commentary is perceived by translator educators and reinforce its educational values in translator education. Such evidence may also be used to further enhance students' assessment literacy in relation to translation commentary. Although the educational value and perception of translation commentary may resonate with translator educators outside British universities, findings regarding institutional practice in this study may not be applicable. Therefore, future research is recommended to scale up the research population to other parts of the world. It is also recommended that future researchers could take into account of both students' and translator educators' perspectives. In the same vein, action research may be conducted in examining to what extent assessment/marking criteria may be linked to the perceived aims of translation commentary in different institutional contexts.

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Biography

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Notes

[1] The assumption that translation commentary is an academic essay and/or reflective narrative is partly rooted in the existing literature (see Section 3) and partly rooted in the author's own experience of lecturing in the UK.