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"Educational Documents: Translation or Evaluation?"*

By George Fletcher

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Educational Documents: Translation or Evaluation?

By George Fletcher

I am the co-owner of Globe Language Services, Inc., in New York City, a dual agency that specializes in the translation and evaluation of foreign educational credentials. I used to teach foreign languages in grade school and high school, and later in college, and then worked in the international office of Oklahoma State University for many years, which is where I learned there was a difference between translation and evaluation. This article describes a specialized area within the field of translation—educational documents. The first thing we have to realize is the importance of translations of this type, because how you translate the document may determine whether or not that person gets a degree or a job. Just imagine going to another country with your bachelor's degree only to have it translated as an associate's degree. Obviously, that could affect you drastically in the job market. This demonstrates why an accurate rendering of an education document is so crucial to your client. It's probably as important as any translation you do in terms of helping people.

One of the questions we have to ask ourselves when translating an educational document such as a diploma is: "Should I analyze it or should I just describe what's in the document?" Are any of you familiar with Jack Child's *Introduction to Spanish Translation*? I personally feel a broader title would be acceptable, because any translator would benefit from this text. Anyway, Child presents a scale that goes from the lowest level of translation (word-for-word, where you don't worry about the overall meaning) to the highest level (where the translator reads the document, assimilates it in his or her own thinking, analyzes it, and then reproduces it creatively in his or her native language). And then there are levels in between. The question is, on an educational document, what should we do? Should we sit down and analyze it? What is it? Is it a *baccalauréat* from France? Should I tell people exactly what that is in the United States? As a translator, is that my job? My feeling is we don't have to analyze the document, or assimilate a diploma and then recreate it. We only need to describe what's on that document. If we analyze the document and try to recreate it in English at the educational level that it represents in the U.S., what we are doing is called evaluation. There is an entire profession out there consisting of evaluators who are going to do the evaluation. That's their job. What we need to do is simply translate the document, describe it, and then let the evaluators analyze it. So, in a way, this makes it easier for us as translators.

What is an evaluator and what do they do? An evaluator researches foreign educational documents and recommends the closest U.S. equivalents of those documents. Evaluations are required by U.S. schools, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, licensing boards, and federal, state, city, and private employers. The U.S. is very generous in accepting education from other countries; basically, if any education is accredited in another country, it is accepted at face value. However, someone must scrutinize the foreign documents to determine their eligibility for acceptance, and thereafter establish their U.S. equivalents. Of course, documents not in English must be translated. Let's discuss translating for evaluators. What, specifically, does the evaluator need from the translator?

The first thing a translator asks is "Who's going to receive my translation?" The translation may be good or bad, but it's only as good as the level of understanding of the person receiving or utilizing it. Practically speaking, the translator has to please the client. If the client has certain requirements, the translator must consider those requirements. I would say that when translators translate transcripts and diplomas, the people who will ultimately receive and work with them are evaluators.

What do we do when the client is an individual who requests an analytical or evaluative translation?

That's exactly what you don't want to do. Somewhere along the line someone who knows evaluation will look at that document. Ultimately, your translation of any educational document will go to an evaluator. You can rest assured that eventually someone who knows the system of education you're

translating will receive your translation. They will know the grade scales and the names of the diplomas. You don't have to worry about that.

So, when you ask who's going to receive an educational translation, it's going to be an evaluator. Admission officers at institutions of higher education are trained to be evaluators. That's where we all came from originally, from the universities. Even if the translation is sent for state licensing, such as to engineering boards, boards of education, etc., there are evaluators there and that's what they do—they evaluate.

Now, if you want your translation to be rejected by an evaluator, the best thing you can do is try to analyze and evaluate that diploma and tell the evaluator what it is. Therefore, what a translator needs to determine is what the evaluators will need. First, they will need the name of the university on the foreign diploma. If you translate the name of the university, which translators tend to do, that's okay; however, there is a book that has the official translations of the names of foreign schools: *The International Handbook of Universities and Other Institutions of Higher Education*. If you're inventing your own translations, yours may be better, but they're not "official." So what can a translator do? If you're using a translation that's not in the *Handbook*, you're prejudicing your client, the student, who is going to have a harder time. The evaluator/admission officer is going to say that the school is not accredited. So now it's another hassle for the student. He or she will come back to you and say, "Look, they're not accepting my application because of your translation. They claim my school's not accredited." If you're going to translate the name of the school, consult the *Handbook* and use that translation. You will be doing a great favor to the student, believe me.

The next point is to always put the name of the school in parentheses in the native language. Even if you are going to take it upon yourself to translate the name, albeit correctly for you, your translation might be considered incorrect by the evaluator. Then the evaluator can at least look it up in the native language in the *Handbook*. As long as the evaluator can find the school listed there, the student is okay. Translating the name of the school is, in my opinion, not necessarily good unless you use the *Handbook*. This publication also has a breakdown of the schools (faculties) within the institutions, including majors offered, and so on.

What about non-Latin-script languages?

My suggestion in these cases is to transliterate the words in parentheses into Latin script. I would transliterate whatever words are in the name of the university. In these languages, you will need to translate the names of the universities. That's why the *Handbook* is so important to you. You can also get lists of schools with translations from consulates and embassies. At any rate, official translations already exist.

However, the most difficult part of a translation is the name of the degree itself, the diploma or title. That is the part that will be evaluated for U.S. equivalency. For example, you see a French *baccalauréat*. Is the translation "bachelor's degree?" Definitely not, and this is the problem. The minute an evaluator sees that type of translation, the translator is thrown out. That's why most schools, at least in the New York metropolitan area, have a list of translators or translation agencies they will use. The schools communicate with these individuals, and the translators know what the schools want. If you want to build your client base, work with the admission officers of your local colleges and universities. In turn, they will recommend you to their inter-national applicants, since it helps school officials to have translators who understand what they need. It is a lot of trouble for them to receive translations that say, for example, bachelor's degree for high school diploma. And many mistakes have been made along these lines, e.g., admitting high school graduates as graduate students. Then it's a disaster for them; the evaluators can lose their jobs, not to mention the harm done to the student.

Whom do we address at the schools?

The admission office. Call the school and ask who's in charge of foreign applications. There's usually a separate person or office that deals with these. We've done this with all the local schools in our area, and they're quite happy to find someone who's aware of what they need.

What about the *abitur* diploma from Germany?

From the evaluator's point of view, the *abitur* generally represents completion of high school and up to one year of college credit. You, as the translator, don't want to shortchange the student by evaluating the certificate as a "U.S. high school diploma." That's not fair to the student because it represents a higher level of education. So, what's a translator to do?

There are benchmarks common to most education systems throughout the world. First comes primary school, followed by secondary, followed by undergraduate education, graduate education, and upper graduate education, such as the doctorate. When we translate a secondary school diploma, a *bachillerato* from Colombia, for example, we will put “secondary school diploma.” This is the benchmark for Colombia. We are not saying it is a high school diploma in the U.S., but that it’s a secondary school diploma from that country. Of course, always put the word as it appears in the native language in italics, since that’s what the evaluator is going to look at; he or she will want to know what the original says. Therefore, for an evaluator the *abitur* represents a high school diploma plus up to one year of undergraduate credit. This is the secondary school benchmark in Germany, but represents more than that in the United States.

What about the other information on the document?

The rest of the information does not have to be in the original language in your translation (see more on this below). All the other information is very important and needs to be in English, because the evaluator must know data such as date of birth, dates of enrollment, graduation, and so on. The date of birth can be very important if it appears on the document. The diploma may indicate a master’s degree and the person’s age as 14 years when completed. A lot of information appears on a diploma that an evaluator needs to verify for cross-reference purposes in terms of evaluation. This is especially true in languages with different scripts, such as Russian, Chinese, and Thai, for example. I think we can safely assume that not very many admission officers read all of these languages, which is why school personnel are very dependent on the translator. This is another reason why it’s extremely important for you to earn the trust of school officials. Yes, in French, Spanish, or other Western European languages, it is easier for them to verify words, dates, and general information in the originals, but I don’t think you can expect them to be totally fluent in all the languages with Latin script either.

What about the authenticity of each document?

That’s not specifically the translator’s job. Legally speaking, people can bring us a handwritten message on a napkin, and we can translate it. But, when you realize the evaluators are responsible for ascertaining authenticity, what do you do upon receiving the same diploma every day with the name whited out and a new name written in? Legally, yes, you can translate that diploma and certify the translation. However, the evaluator is going to catch on sooner rather than later. So, if you can be aware of forgeries and reject them, it’s better to lose one client than to lose the university that’s sending you clients every day, notwithstanding morality and our society. In New York, for example, there are companies that duplicate foreign university seals not to mention diplomas, transcripts, you name it. And guess who’s selling these forgeries on the open market? Translation agencies.

How does one translate grades?

This is the other red-flag area for translators. My suggestion is don’t interpret the grades, since that’s an evaluator’s job. There are publications that list foreign grades and give equivalents in terms of the U.S. grading scale of A, B, C, D, and F. The evaluator does not want you to do this because you are going to do it incorrectly. It will be more difficult for them to deal with your translation and they will want to get rid of you. What I would recommend is that you contact the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) at www.NAFSA.org, and obtain a list of country-specific books that contain information about each country’s educational system, including the translations of grades accepted in the field and bilingual glossaries.

Do evaluators appreciate it if you put, along with the English translation, the words for foreign-language grades in the original language in italics?

They will love you if you do this. That would be fantastic, because the evaluators are trained to know the grades, the diplomas, and the schools for the countries they deal with. Those are the three things we can assume they know in the foreign language, at least in most languages. In the books and charts evaluators use, the foreign-language terms and the English equivalents are given. So, if you write them both, even if the translation is off, they can go back to the original language. When in doubt about any point of information, it does not hurt to put the foreign words in parentheses and italics along with the translated words.

What about the translations of the French grades *Très bien*, *Bien*, *Assez bien*, *Passable*, and *Ajourné*.

The reference book on France, which all evaluators use, translates French grades as follows:

Très bien — Very good

Bien — Good

Assez bien — Good enough

Passable — Satisfactory

Ajourné —Failed

I am suggesting that evaluators appreciate such direct translations. It is when the translator evaluates the grades and translates them as A, B, C, D, or F, for example, that the line is crossed between translation and evaluation.

Do we have to explain what a *baccalauréat* is in our translation?

No. Footnotes, a translator's opinion, or interpretation are precisely what is not wanted. Just directly translate what you have in your hands, and that's it. This actually makes it easier for you. Most NAFSA books also contain the translations that all evaluators use for the different degrees and diplomas. If you use these, then it's fine to translate these terms, always remembering to put the original in italics. The evaluator will not have any problem with this. Considering the French *baccalauréat*, there is no translation. You can use *baccalauréat* as long as you put it in italics; it's not a bachelor's degree. In the reference book on French education, the word *baccalauréat* is used throughout, however, it is translated in one place as "Secondary school leaving examination."

What if I'm translating a resume—shouldn't I put footnotes about the education?

There are two mistakes here. First, you're making a mistake worrying about this, because it's not your job. You don't have to do that. Second, somebody, someplace, even if it's the employer, is going to have to evaluate the educational document itself. And if they don't have the good sense to call a professional evaluation service, then the employer is making a big mistake. What you could do, as a favor to your client, is give them the name of an evaluation association and tell them that if they need an evaluation of their documents, they can go to a professional organization that does that. This would be the best thing you could do for that person and for the employer. You may want to refer your client to the Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE), at www.AICE-eval.org, for a list of reputable evaluation services.

Should we add a footnote stating the document needs to be professionally evaluated?

No, I wouldn't put any footnotes.

If an individual comes and doesn't say he or she is going to try to get into a university or doesn't say what the translation will be used for, what do we do?

What I'm saying is that eventually an evaluator is going to look at it, even if it's the employer.

What if the client insists that we put in the explanation of what the degree is?

I wouldn't do it. Almost every person educated in another country, including a lot of us, will insist that they have the equivalent of a Ph.D., because "the education is different in our country." That's the first thing you're going to hear. "In my country we study six days per week, all day, and we know a lot more than Americans, because I've talked to American students and they know nothing. American education is horrible, and you should really award me a doctorate here, although it says *bachillerato*." That's a normal response, and, should I go to another country, I'm sure I would do the same ("Hey, don't underestimate my education, this is my life!").

Isn't there a possible liability involved if the translator adds information to a translation?

Exactly. On the one hand, an evaluation always contains a disclaimer. "These are recommendations only, we are not responsible..." An evaluator can only recommend, since there's no law. A translator, on the other hand, does not have this freedom—we're supposed to be translating. A certified

and notarized translation becomes a legal document; it must be faithful to the original. So, assume that a translator is more liable than an evaluator.

What about transcripts?

It would probably help you to request some college catalogs with the names of courses in U.S. schools. For example, in mechanical engineering, the courses may be very similar in the foreign country. This could help you as translator. If not, a literal translation of the names of the courses is preferred. Evaluators are going to know what the courses are; seeing a transcript in mechanical engineering will not be new to them. On the other hand, you may be asked to translate a course in mechanical engineering from the home country as civil, mechanical, and electronic engineering all rolled into one, because this is going to meet some specific requirement in one of those areas at the U.S. school. The translator needs to be careful. Evaluators will also certainly question translations that exactly match their own curricula. I think it bears repeating: you don't need to evaluate.

Would a document in a language such as German need to be translated?

Yes, it would. There's a good chance the evaluator is not totally fluent in German, for instance. It is possible to know the German system of education and not be fluent in German. This is a good subject for debate within the evaluation field. Therefore, the evaluator may not be able to read the other data in a foreign-language document, but he or she must make sure all the information in that document fits for validation and authentication purposes.

In conclusion, I would suggest providing direct translations to make things easier on yourself. It's not our job to evaluate these documents in order to translate them. If a student insists on evaluation, don't translate this type of document for that client. Lose one customer, but don't lose the goose. Please the school, because the school is going to be sending you clients all the time. If one person wants a doctorate for a high school diploma, lose that person. The evaluator is going to give credit where it's due. The translator is the one who stands to lose.

References

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Websites:

1. www.AICE.-eval.org
2. www.globelanguage.com
3. www.NAFSA.org

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