



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2021.3.6>

UDC 81'25:378  
LBC 81.18

Submitted: 09.12.2020  
Accepted: 30.03.2021

## A TRANSLATION TEACHER PROFILE IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The paper discusses the results of a survey of a translation teacher profile in the context of Russian academia. It reveals that there is no integral profile of a translation teacher in Russia today. Translation teachers can be categorized into certain groups according to their initial training, practical experience in translation and age. The survey shows that a significant number of translation teachers have had no translation training. Regardless of their initial training, almost all translation teachers are engaged in practical translation, however only few of them perform translation or interpreting on a regular basis. Among those who teach Translation Theory there are some who have never been taught it, thus they may be regarded as self-educated theorists. Virtually no translation trainers in Russian universities have ever been professionally educated in translation didactics. 75% of the total number of translation teachers have completed short-time advanced training courses, which does not seem to be sufficient to become an experienced translation teacher. A large number of those who do have initial translation training teach translation copying their own teachers. It is doubtful that all of them possess translation mode of thinking and are able to develop it in their students. The overall conclusion is that a comprehensive system for training and retraining translation teachers is required.

**Key words:** translation teacher, translation teacher competence, translation training, translation didactics, Translation Theory.

**Citation.** Petrova O.V., Sdobnikov V.V. A Translation Teacher Profile in the Russian Context. *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 2. Yazykoznanie* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University. Linguistics], 2021, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 65-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2021.3.6>

УДК 81'25:378  
ББК 81.18

Дата поступления статьи: 09.12.2020  
Дата принятия статьи: 30.03.2021

## ПОРТРЕТ ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯ ПЕРЕВОДА В РОССИЙСКИХ ВУЗАХ<sup>1</sup>

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**Аннотация.** В статье представлены результаты изучения профиля преподавателя перевода в российской высшей школе. Показано, что сегодня в России не существует единого целостного портрета преподавателя перевода. На основании проведенного авторами опроса, в котором учитывалось базовое образование, опыт работы переводчиком и возраст, выделены несколько категорий преподавателей. Установлено, что значительная часть респондентов не имеет специального переводческого образования; вне зависимости от базового образования большинство преподавателей перевода осуществляют практическую переводческую деятельность,

однако незначительное их количество делают это на постоянной основе. Обнаружено, что среди российских преподавателей теории перевода есть такие, которые не изучали эту дисциплину в вузе, а осваивали самостоятельно. Выявлено, что большинство опрошенных не получили профессиональной подготовки в области дидактики перевода, три четверти от общего количества опрошенных обучались на краткосрочных курсах повышения квалификации, чего явно недостаточно для того, чтобы стать опытным преподавателем перевода. Значительное число тех, кто получил базовое переводческое образование, преподают перевод, опираясь на устаревшие методики, что не позволяет сформировать у студентов современное переводческое мышление. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о необходимости создания комплексной системы подготовки и переподготовки преподавателей перевода.

**Ключевые слова:** преподаватель перевода, компетенция преподавателя перевода, обучение переводу, дидактика перевода, теория перевода.

**Цитирование.** Петрова О. В., Сдобников В. В. Портрет преподавателя перевода в российских вузах // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 2, Языкознание. – 2021. – Т. 20, № 3. – С. 65–74. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu2.2021.3.6>

### Introduction

Training translators has been conducted in Russian universities for approximately ninety years already. In the Soviet Union it was confined to a small number of academic institutions that specialized in training translators / interpreters to meet the needs of the Army and government agencies. The situation changed upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the transfer to the market economy, dramatic expansion of foreign trade and development of relations not only on the government-to-government but also on the business-to-business level. It became obvious that various domains required a great number of qualified translators and interpreters able to satisfy their needs. In the 1990s, the challenge was quickly responded to by many Russian universities which began to offer bachelor-equivalent and master-equivalent programs in translation and interpreting. The expansion of the academic training of translators resulted in the pressing need of competent translation teachers who might be able to design translation courses, to develop translation skills in their students and to transfer their knowledge of translation to them.

And here a question arises: where did those translation teachers come from? It is obvious that those who joined this noble profession had never been taught how to teach translation. We know that only few of them had had some translation training at universities and gained appropriate experience in the field. Apparently, it was those few who were best prepared to fulfill the mission of training novice translators and interpreters, at least due to the fact that they had already acquired the knowledge of how translation can be taught in

the course of their own studies. This view is shared by Roberto Mayoral who argues that “the best way to learn how to teach translation is to study the way good teachers teach, and then enrich that with one’s own innovations” [Mayoral, 2003, p. 5]. Michael Gove as cited by J. Orchard and Ch. Winch metaphorically compares teaching with a craft: “Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom” [Orchard, Winch, 2015, p. 12]. Indeed, in the 1990s, it seemed to be the only reliable way to become a translation teacher. Being reliable and based on common sense, the method still lacks some training which is essential for those who are engaged in teaching translation and which we shall mention below.

The academic landscape has changed in Russia, and those who have joined the profession of translation teacher differ from one another in terms of their initial training, qualification, translation and teaching experience. Thus, the categorization of translation teachers is possible and most probable in order to outline a translation teacher profile (or profiles, as the case may be), which constitutes the aim of this article. With this aim in view, a questionnaire has been distributed among translation teachers of Russian universities, and results of the inquiry will be dwelt upon below.

### Translation teacher competences

In order to solve the task, it is necessary, first and foremost, to determine what requirements a translation teacher must meet. In other words, what competencies (s)he should possess.

Some scholars believe that “whereas the term ‘competence’ is largely used in many disciplines and contexts, it is difficult to find a definition that reconciles all different ways in which it is used” [Esfandiari, Shokrpour, Rahimi, 2019, p. 1]. Translation Studies (TS) literature is also abundant in definitions of a competence. We believe that F. Lasnier’s definition is one of the most comprehensive: “A competence is a complex know-how to act resulting from integration, mobilization and organization of a combination of capabilities and skills (which can be cognitive, affective, psychomotor or social) and knowledge (declarative knowledge) used efficiently in situations with common characteristics” [Lasnier, 2000, p. 24]. This broad notion of competence must be made more specific in relation to training the trainers.

It has become a good tradition to refer to Dorothy Kelly who has offered a list of translation teacher competences which includes: 1) profession translation practice; 2) Translation Studies as an academic discipline; 3) teaching skills [Kelly, 2005, p. 151]. The latter is subdivided into “subcompetences” or areas of competence: *organizational* (i.e., the ability to design courses and appropriate teaching and learning activities); *interpersonal* (i.e., the ability to work collaboratively with trainees towards their learning goals); *instructional* (i.e., the ability to present content and explain clearly); *contextual* or *professional* (i.e., understanding of the educational context in which training takes place) [Kelly, 2005, p. 151]. Kelly believes that the first two competences “constitute prerequisites rather than the central competence we are interested in”, and presents the third one as the most essential [Kelly, 2005, p. 151]. Yet, be it prerequisites or core requirements, the first two competences are of paramount importance, especially in the Russian context. We shall note, in passing, that the same requirements are formulated by D. Li and Ch. Zhang who termed them as “knowledge of teaching”, “knowledge of research” and “knowledge of the trade”. The latter encompasses translating abilities and the knowledge of the profession, including familiarity with the market and the technology [Li, Zhang, 2011, p. 697].

The fact is that the question whether a translation teacher should have experience in translation is still unresolved in Russia. To be more exact, many educators as well as many

practitioners who are not indifferent to what is going on in academia and in the professional field insist that to be experienced in practical translation / interpreting is a must for a translation teacher. At the same time, educational authorities pretend not to hear the claims because they need to provide for training a sufficient number of translators; so they do it by recruiting *any* specialists who have at least command of a foreign language and, as the case may be, some experience in teaching a foreign language.

This situation contradicts the principles voiced in the TS literature and insisted upon by many scholars. In particular, members of the EMT Expert Group mention a Field Competence as the one which is indispensable for a translation teacher / trainer (together with Instructional Competence, Organizational Competence, Interpersonal Competence and Assessment Competence) (EMT). A Field Competence is eloquently defined as the “ability to perform any task assigned to the students according to the quality standards required in professional practice” (EMT) and breaks down into two sub-categories: 1) *knowledge of the professional field* including translation-related professions; constraints of translation projects (e.g. time / budget / qualities); domains of specialization in translation-related professions; market requirements; operating procedures and tools used in professional translation; foreseeable development of the professions; 2) *translation-service provision competence* including knowledge of the existing standards and specifications; ability to critically analyze these standards and specifications; ability to perform the tasks and sub-tasks involved in the translation-service provision (including planning, preparing the material for translation, quality assurance, document management, terminology management, etc.) (EMT).

The vision of a translation teacher being a practitioner is also upheld by Marta Roses as cited by Defeng Li and Chunling Zhang [Li, Zhang, 2011, p. 696] when she writes that “since one of the main tasks of the social constructivist teacher is to represent the community in which the apprentices wish to take part, translator trainers should be active translators or, at least, have ample professional experience in the area. This way, it will also be easier to take real projects to the

classroom (with the clients' approval) or help students get such projects, enabling them to do just what professionals do: translate real texts, for real clients and real readers / users". We can add a number of arguments to support the idea that a teacher must be able to do what (s)he teaches. But it is hardly necessary to do so since the idea seems to be self-evident. Moreover, in Russian and Western Translation Studies it is deeply rooted in the views of the precursors of the science of translating. Suffice it to recall Peter Newmark's definition of translation teacher's professional qualities that can be seen as comprising of "translator's skills" on the one hand, and teaching skills on the other [Newmark, 1991, p. 131]. Vilen Komissarov also argues that translation must be taught only by a person who is an experienced translator himself, who has professional competences, who knows the translation activity "from within", who is familiar with the challenges, possibilities and conditions of the translator's work. Komissarov states straightforwardly that "not every practitioner is able to teach translation successfully but every translation teacher must be able to translate professionally (translation mine. – *V. S.*)" [Komissarov, 2001, pp. 340-341]. Donald Kiraly is no less straightforward in his statement that "it cannot be expected that language instructors without professional translation expertise will have a professional translator self-concept themselves or that they will be able to help their translation students develop one" [Kiraly, 1995, p. 3]. It is only regrettable that this idea, so simple and transparent, is not fully understood by the Russian academic community.

However, Kelly justly states that "professional experience as a translator is simply not sufficient to become a professional translation teacher" [Kelly, 2008, p. 102]. As was stated above, the list of translation teacher competences outlined by Kelly includes such item as Translation Studies as an academic discipline. It implies that a translation teacher, first, must have some knowledge of Translation Studies, and second, must be engaged in scientific research. Other scholars insist that a translation teacher should also possess deep knowledge of General Linguistics. For example, Komissarov argues that a translation teacher "must know linguistic and translation aspects of his or her course both practically and theoretically, must have

comprehensive knowledge in the fields of Language Theory and Translation Theory. Analyzing the content and stylistic peculiarities of the source text, comparing various versions of translation with the ST, explaining errors in translations to his / her students, the teacher uses analysis methods and terminology of semasiology, lexicology, grammar and other linguistic disciplines (translation mine. – *V. S.*)" [Komissarov, 2001, pp. 342-343]. Both Linguistics and Translation Theory help a translation teacher make his / her arguments convincing enough. Yet, it is clear that the knowledge of Translation Studies constitutes an integral and indispensable part of a translation teacher's theoretical background, one of the core components of his / her competence. As Dmitry Shlepnev has put it, "a translation teacher needs a well-articulated theory that (s)he can use as a basis, a background for their explanations to students. If it is the case, (s)he will not beat about the bush in his / her speculations about translation and his / her work in class will be more effective (translation mine. – *V. S.*)" [Shlepnev, Sdobnikov, 2007, p. 105].

It is well known that the university faculty is often required to conduct scientific research. In this respect, the situation in Russia differs little from the situation abroad. Kelly writes that "most university systems expect full-time lecturers to be quite heavily involved in research, and promotion and incentive schemes are usually based on reward for dedication to, and achievements in, research, whereas teaching and achievements in teaching tend inevitably to play second fiddle" [Kelly, 2008, p. 100]. The requirement to be involved in research does not cause much concern, provided the research is done in the field of Translation Studies and not only in purely linguistic disciplines. Concern is caused by the fact that within Translation Studies, both in Russia and abroad, there exist various concepts, theories and approaches that not only differ from one another but often contradict one another. It follows that a translation teacher is expected to stick to a certain Translation Theory among the multitude of theories, to a specific system of views concerning translation activity. It is clear that any translation course must be aimed at the indoctrination of the correct attitude of students towards translation as an activity. The course should result in the students' comprehension of the laws and essence

of translation, of the tasks (not considered in terms of methods of translation or achieving equivalence at a certain level) a translator solves in each translation act [Shlepnev, Sdobnikov, 2007, p. 107]. But to make it happen, a translation teacher himself should have the correct attitude towards translation, and this attitude must be based on the correct Translation Theory. Based on our observations, we can state that, regretfully, many translation teachers in Russia have an eclectic mix of early theories of translation (mainly, purely linguistic theory underpinned by equivalence as its core notion), provisions of the theory of intercultural communication and a rough idea of real translation activity in their minds, instead of the correct and systematized theory based on the functionalist approach to translation.

There is no doubt that a translation teacher should possess teaching skills. As was stated above, Kelly views them as the central competence. We are disinclined to build a hierarchy of translation teacher competences as we believe that all of them are equally important: if a teacher lacks one of them his / her activity in the classroom is unlikely to produce the desired effect. The same is true about the teaching skills. In their review of the literature devoted to translation teacher competences Nataša Pavlović and Goranka Antunović mention a number of works that stress the importance of teaching skills [Pavlović, Antunović, 2019]. But a question arises: how, when and where can translation teachers acquire those skills? There are no university programs of training professional translation teachers in Russia. We know about some attempts to introduce such programs in Russian universities but they were not a success due to the lack of interest and low motivation among bachelors to get involved in teaching translation. Does it mean that Roberto Mayoral cited above is right when he states that “the best way to learn how to teach translation is to study the way good teachers teach” [Mayoral, 2003, p. 5]?

So, the topical issue is “What does a translation teacher need to do to become good at teaching translation?” Daniel Gouadec is more specific than Mayoral in his consideration of the ways of acquiring necessary competences by translation teachers. He writes that “teachers on a translator-training program should spend one month in all three of the following situations:

1. Working in a translation firm (either as a translator or a reviser or a terminologist).
2. Working in an in-house translation service (same as above).
3. Being a freelance professional.

That should be enough for a start. And that should clearly decide on their teaching approaches” [Gouadec, 2003, p. 13].

We believe it is perhaps excessively optimistic to expect a person to become a good translation teacher after working in the three situations specified by Gouadec for a total of three months. It will not be enough even for a start. True, it can provide some knowledge of the field (or trade). But it can hardly equip a teacher with an appropriate teaching approach. Suffice it to recall that even well-experienced practitioners are not always good translation teachers (when they teach translation part-time or even full-time). They lack a lot of necessary qualities which can be obtained only in the academic environment. Thus, we are impelled to conclude that Gouadec, again, is excessively optimistic and non-specific when he answers the question “Who should train translators?”: “The answer to who should train translators is quite straightforward: both professionals with a talent for teaching and teachers with a good knowledge of the job (not a collection of subject matters) that they are supposed to train people for” [Gouadec, 2003, p. 13]. The notion of “talent for teaching” is too vague to apply it to an individual. The knowledge of the job is hard to be measured.

From the above it follows that so far provisions of Translation Studies and even the best practices of universities in Russia and abroad cannot form the basis for any recommendations as to how translation teachers should be trained. Apparently, there can be different paths to the profession of teaching translation. Having walked a certain path to the profession, each teacher brings their own wealth of knowledge, expertise and experience to the classroom, which implies that what a translation teacher knows and can do inevitably influences his / her teaching approach. That is why our study includes review of 118 Russian translation teacher’s backgrounds in the form of a questionnaire which, as we hope, can help outline a translation teacher’s profile or various profiles.

**The Survey Results**

So what is the current situation as revealed by the survey?

Out of the 118 translation teachers 64 (54.2%) have a degree in translation (T group) and 54 (45.8%) have diplomas of foreign language teachers, linguists, philologists or specialists in cross-cultural communication (Non-T group).

Almost all respondents have completed advanced training courses, with only less than 1% stating that they have attended no professional development programs and teach on the basis of their university education and personal experience as translator. However only 11 persons (9.3%) have been retrained as teachers of translation. 29 respondents (24.6%) have completed advanced training courses in translation: 18 respondents in the T-group and 11 in the Non-T group. The majority (75.4%) have completed short-time advanced training courses. The figures do not sum up correctly because several respondents in both groups went through two and one person even through 3 courses.

According to comments made by some respondents, short-time advanced training courses are not always perceived as targeted specifically at teaching translation. Having positively answered the question about completing such a program a person says they have never undergone any professional training as a translation teacher.

The breakdown by age groups shows that 11 respondents (9.3%) are people under 30; 39 (33.1%) between the ages of 30 and 40; 25 (21.2%) between 40 and 50; 27 (22.9%) between 50 and 60 and 16 (13.6%) are over 60. However the picture within the T group and Non-T group is not uniform (Table 1).

While the percentage of people having a degree in translation is the highest in the age group between 30 and 40 and then gradually decreases to the minimum of slightly over 6% in the senior group, in the Non-T group the highest figure is in the age group between 50 and 60 years with quite a high result for the people over 60 (22.2%). It is also noteworthy that the number of young people (those under 30) is more than twice as high among teachers with a degree in translation as it is in the other group.

The result can be interpreted in two ways. First, it shows that the majority of “the old guard” among translation trainers are people with no degree in translation. Besides, it reflects a tendency for recent graduates to choose the field of work coinciding with the field in which they have a degree (or probably a tendency for the employers to give preference to such graduates).

The analysis of the distribution according to teaching experience and experience in practical translation / interpreting has not revealed any direct correlation. Neither has it shown any dependence of practical experience in translation / interpreting on the age (see Table 2 and 3).

*Table 1. Age groups*

Age (years)	General result		T group		Non-T group	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
22–30	11	9.3	8	12.5	3	5.5
30–40	39	33.1	25	39.1	14	25.9
40–50	25	21.2	15	23.4	10	18.5
50–60	27	22.8	12	18.7	15	27.8
Over 60	16	13.6	4	6.3	12	22.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>100</i>

*Table 2. Teaching experience*

Teaching experience (years)	General result		T group		Non-T group	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Less than 5	7	5.9	7	10.9	–	–
5-10	19	16.1	13	20.3	6	11.2
10-20	38	32.2	20	31.3	18	33.3
20-30	32	27.2	16	25.0	16	29.6
Over 30	22	18.6	8	12.5	14	25.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 3. Translation / Interpreting experience

Translation / Interpreting experience (years)	General result		T group		Non-T group	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Less than 5	21	17.8	10	15.6	11	20.4
5–10	29	24.6	12	18.8	17	31.5
Over 10	68	57.6	42	65.6	26	48.1
Total	118	100	64	100	54	100

The absence of Non-T group respondents with less than 5 years of teaching experience agrees with the tendency of recent graduates having a non-translation degree not to engage in teaching translation. Other results, however, do not allow of any straightforward interpretation. The thing is that there are respondents whose translation experience exceeds their teaching experience and vice versa. Some responses show that a person with the teaching experience of 20–30 years and more can have a very limited experience in translating or interpreting (practically never of both). At the same time responses show that some people in the age group under 30 have over 10 years of translation experience, which means that they started practicing translation before graduation.

It is necessary to admit that the results concerning teaching experience are not very reliable and need further verification. On the one hand, the questionnaire was circulated among translation teachers, so the question about teaching experience implied teaching translation. It probably should have been formulated in a more explicit way. On the other hand, judging by what some respondents have written in the comments, they do not always differentiate between teaching translation and teaching foreign languages and consider translation to be an aspect of teaching a language. Such comments were found in the senior Non-T group. So it is possible that in some cases the figures in the responses indicate the time a person teaches both languages and translation.

Comments concerning practical translation also show that not all translation trainers are at the same time practitioners. Some respondents say it directly; some others enumerate aspects of practical translation they teach as an example of their practical work as translators, which actually means they do not practice translation professionally.

Another question in the survey relates to the character of translation classes taught by the

respondents. The most remarkable and significant is the following result: among 54 respondents who teach theory of translation only 31 have a degree in translation. It means that 23 translation theory teachers are self-taught theorists.

What conclusions can be drawn from this survey?

90.3% of teachers have no professional education in teaching translation and interpreting. Those with a degree in translation do it by copying their own teachers. The quality and results of their work depend to a large extent on how professional those teachers were. Those having no degree in translation do it empirically, taking their own practical experience (if any) as a basis or proceeding from general principles of didactics and methods of teaching foreign languages. Neither way can be adequate to the state of things and new challenges in the present-day translation market.

42.6% of those teaching theory of translation have no education in translation at all. With due respect for people who achieve great results by means of self-education it is necessary to admit that in many cases it leads to eclecticism that can hardly serve as a sound theoretical basis for professional training of translators and interpreters.

## Discussion

Overall analysis of the profession age structure shows that a degree in translation is more often found in younger groups of teachers, while the majority of teachers constituting elder groups have no such training.

In class, the older generation with a degree in education is mainly guided by general didactic principles and methods of language teaching, by some eclectic, fragmentary recommendations and guidelines randomly found in various teaching aids (often with a purely linguistic approach to

translation), and by their own experience in translation – if any. Having no education in the subject they teach, they do not always realize that translation is not just another aspect of teaching language practice, but a specific type of language mediation dealing more with sense and meanings than with words and syntactic structures.

Another group of elder teachers (nearly 25%) do have professional training as translators. They were taught by luminaries of translation and inherited a system approach to the profession.

The younger generation has an advantage: they have an education in the subject they teach. But they lack education in translation didactics, or, for that matter, in teaching anything at all. So, they copy their teachers, which means they use either the wrong didactic approach or the approach of their teachers who had a systematic understanding of translation. It all depends on what teachers they had.

Whichever the case may be, the general conclusion is that there are practically no translation trainers in our universities professionally educated in translation didactics. The fact that 75.4% of them have completed short-time advanced training courses does not change the situation radically. Such courses, usually not longer than 36 classroom (contact) hours, can hardly be considered as a comprehensive program, the more so because these 36 hours usually encompass lectures on the theory of translation, master classes in various aspects of practical translation (which is another variety of the do-as-I-do approach), sometimes even classes of language practice, leaving no time for translation didactics proper. Another problem with such courses is that their program is usually developed on the assumption that all listeners have a high enough level of practical translation skills – which is often not the case. So instead of discussing problems of translation didactics it becomes necessary to try to hastily patch up the gaps in the practical translation skills of the retrainees. It is obvious that with all these limitations and disadvantages short-time advanced training courses cannot be viewed as an adequate form of educating translation trainers in translation didactics.

The figures showing that the majority of teachers in the non-T group have a considerable experience in practical translation is not in itself a reason for too much optimism either. Practical

experience is indispensable. But if a person translates something it does not necessarily mean that they know how to do it and do it well. The percentage of poor, amateurish, low quality translations in the translation market today is distressing. Practical experience is not yet a proof of a translator's high professional level.

Besides, a translation experience does not always mean that the translator is knowledgeable about the modern tools and technologies used by translators and often required by agencies today. So they are not able to teach their students to use them.

Teaching Theory of Translation is another problem. Analysis of the course descriptions shows that the content of the course varies from university to university but is practically never perceived as the basis for developing translation mode of thinking in students. In many cases it is a more or less detailed retelling of various theories and models merely for information, without any attempt at purposeful analysis. So the very fact that teachers from T group were themselves taught Theory of Translation as part of their professional training is not a guarantee either of their translation mode of thinking or of their ability to develop it in students.

Today translation market imperatively demands from translators many skills unknown not only to the non-T group, but also to many T group teachers, especially belonging to the older generation. It will suffice to mention the use of various CATs or postediting techniques. Translation teachers are responsible for equipping students with the skills and knowledge adequate to the requirements of the market. So, teachers themselves must be taught everything that their students are supposed to know, and taught at a much higher level. Unfortunately, the current practice does not provide a sufficiently effective training of translation teachers in this respect.

### Conclusions

The survey and its analysis show that there is no integral profile of a translation teacher in Russia today. There are categories and subcategories of teachers according to their age, training, teaching experience, translation expertise, etc., with no clear-cut correspondences, correlations, and regularities that would allow to



view them as a more or less consistent conglomeration – except one thing: they all lack training in translation didactics. Which means that we need a comprehensive system for training and retraining translation teachers.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The reported study was funded by RFBR, project number 20-013-00149 “The Basic Principles of Training Translation Teachers”.

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