

Between rocks and hard places: Soft skills, competence and translator education

Gary Massey
ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences

Translator education finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place as it seeks to equip graduates with the adaptive, reflective, contextually sensitive skills needed to perform competently in a hugely dynamic, diversifying language industry. The industry itself places an evident premium on so-called “soft,” transferable or transversal skills (Angelone, 2022; Bernardini et al., 2022; Risku & Schlager, 2022) which, under umbrella terms like “service provision,” “interpersonal and personal,” “consulting” or “risk assessment” competence (EMT Board, 2017; Nitzke & Hansen-Schirra, 2021), have come to occupy a key position in competence modelling and curricular outlines – between those traditionally perceived as “hard”. But both inside and outside translation studies and didactics, soft skills are often ill-defined and poorly demarcated – a “phrase in search of meaning” (Matteson et al., 2016) – and their development can be notoriously hard to operationalise, monitor and evaluate (Cimatti, 2016). This presentation will consider the progressive upvaluing of soft skill sets and explore some of the confusions, contradictions and caveats contained in the taxonomies that exist. Referring to current strands in cognitive translology (Muñoz Martín, 2016) and to the intrinsically embodied social enaction of language mediation, it will attempt to account for the fuzziness in delineating soft skills and in distinguishing them from the hard. Proceeding from this, it will then outline a practicable basic framework, approach and tool for identifying, mentoring and assessing soft skills development in translator education.

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