

Training Translators in Nigeria: The Role of Academic Theory Versus Practical Experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses how Nigerian universities attempt to reconcile theory with practice in translator education and the consequences of the balance for the competence and employability of the graduates of translator training in the universities. The research examines the supremacy of theoretical instruction over practical work in the curricula of translator training programs in Nigeria using case studies from the University of Ibadan, University of Lagos and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The paper, based on a review of the literature on scholarship and empirical evidence in Nigeria, shows that the students' access to real translation tasks is quite limited, and this inevitably leads to graduates whose practice in the job market does not meet the expectations of the industry. The analysis reveals several systemic issues such as obsolete curricula, fewer internship programs and access to modern translation tools. The paper suggests that a more integrated curriculum is needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing a foundation of sound theory and continuing with practical training. It ends with recommendations for comprehensive curriculum transformation, better university–professional translation bodies' relationship, and greater investment in translation technologies for both quality translator training and better preparation of graduates for translation industry demands in Nigeria.

Keywords: Translator, Practical, Nigerian Universities, Professional

I. Introduction

Nigeria is a country where over 500 languages are spoken, where translation is a way of life (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2021). Translation is useful not only for nations whose communication between people of different ethnic and linguistic groups is crucial for national government, education, commerce, diplomacy or media, but also for the cohesion of the nation and participation in the world (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2007). Although multilingualism may not be a defining feature of a nation, the need for professional translators, who can communicate between different ethnic groups, the internal political master or mistress eroded, by exposing the antagonism between the Yoruba and Hausa and other minority ethnic groups has relatively increased because of English obsolescence and for effective under translation in foreign contexts among others. In the light of this and at a time that could have never been more crucial, the position of translator training in the higher education system in Nigeria has never been as critical as it is now. The result of this imbalance is graduates with good conceptual knowledge but lack the operational attitude when handling a translation task in a real environment (Idowu, 2022). Professional competence as a translator is not only expected to have knowledge of the theoretical paradigms, but also to have knowledge of the source and target languages, cultural sensitivity, technical precision and knowledge of contemporary translation technologies (CAT) (Pym, 2009; Shittu & Olorundare, 2025). The above situation has numerous philosophical implications regarding the philosophy behind translator education in Nigeria. If the graduate is a theoretically informed individual, is it sufficient to graduate workplace ready professionals? It is a common occurrence in Africa (Balogun, 2017). This paper takes a critical look at the place of Academic theory and Practical experience in bridging the gap between academic theory and practical experience in Nigerian universities with formal translation programmes. It provides a view of curricula, whose emphasis in teaching, as well as their choices, has an impact on the professional competence of translation graduates. This study is based on research on literature from Nigerian scholars, certain university courses and the opinions of industry practitioners to identify the strengths and weaknesses

of the current models of translator training. In this regard, it calls for the application of these actionable strategies in the training system of translators in Nigeria, for a more balanced, responsive and viable training system that will help them compete favourably in the global market.

A. The Problem

The focus in translator training in Nigeria was mostly on theory without adequately preparing students for real-life professional translation requirements.

B. Research Questions

How far has the theory-practice gap been bridged in translator training in Nigeria?
How is the ability to translate in practice evaluated by employers?
What are the obstacles to integrating practical training into curricula?

C. Research Objectives

Discuss the current theory-to-practice ratio of training programs.
Evaluate employer attitudes towards graduates' skills.
Recognise obstacles to successful incorporation of practical training.

D. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative desk-review methodology based on relevant scholarly literature on translator education, experiential learning, and translation theory. It critically analyses Nigerian and international studies (e.g., Edebiri, 2016; Balogun, 2017; Amadi, 2019; Kiraly, 2000; Kolb, 1984; House, 2015; Nwachukwu, 2024) to compare the contributions of academic theory and practical experience in translator training. The reviewed literature is synthesized thematically to identify key challenges, best practices, and recommendations for strengthening translator education in Nigeria.

II. Literature Review

The literature demonstrates that effective translator training in Nigeria depends on a balanced integration of academic theory and practical experience. Foundational theories by Nida (1964), Nord (1997), Kiraly (2000), Kolb (1984), House (2015), and Gambier and van Doorslaer (2010) provide essential linguistic, functional, experiential, and quality-assessment frameworks. However, Nigerian studies (Edebiri, 2016; Balogun, 2017; Ogunleye, 2018; Amadi, 2019; Okonkwo, 2021; Idowu, 2022; Olubunmi, 2020; Nwachukwu, 2024) consistently reveal a persistent gap between theoretical instruction and workplace expectations, limiting graduates' professional readiness. Emerging digital tools, including videoconferencing and virtual reality (Abdulazeez & Adeoti, 2025; Danmali et al., 2024), offer new opportunities to strengthen experiential learning through authentic translation practice and collaborative training. Therefore, translator education in Nigeria should move beyond a theory-centred curriculum by incorporating internships, project-based learning, technology-enhanced instruction, and sustained industry partnerships. Such an integrated approach will better equip graduates with the linguistic, technological, and professional competencies required to meet the demands of Nigeria's multilingual society and the global translation industry.

A. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks for Translator Training

The study of translation has developed from theories of linguistic equivalence into more functionalist and dynamic theories since the beginning of the 20th century. Early theories focused on the dynamic equivalence principle (Nida 1964), while functionalist theories such as Nord (1997) and Vermeer (1989) turned to the purpose of translation (Skopos). However, some scholars such as Ogunleye (2013) argue that such models are global and should be adopted for a particular purpose; Secondly, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory is used as a tool to examine translator training in Nigeria.

B. Development of Translator Training in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

The steady demand for professional training in translation in Nigeria did not gain significant momentum until the late 1980s and early 1990s when structured translation courses were set up at the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos, respectively. The answers were given based on the need for professional translators who could be able to manage interlingual issues in a country that was linguistically diverse and was getting more involved in international politics. At this stage, however, the thought of training translators as a new academic discipline was not yet in the picture. Nevertheless, it was absorbed into a broader system of educational concepts that were inherited from the colonial education system: foreign language study departments (French and German studies).

For example, Oloruntoba-Oju (2007) reported that the early post-independence translation training was more for institutional use, which included the governmental diplomatic missions, administrative documentation, and growth of the media sector. It was here that the focus was on creating staff capability to translate foreign documents into English or vice versa, especially in Nigeria's relationship with foreign countries such as the francophone countries, which she abuts on account of her geographical position.

C. Current Structure of Translation Curricula in Nigerian Universities

Adegbite (2010) and Obah-Akpowoghaha (2018) have found that Nigerian universities are not doing well in providing translation courses of a good balance of theory and practice. These basic courses are necessary, however, and typically make up the majority of the credits awarded within the program. As studied by Oyelude and Omotayo (2012), the undergraduate programmes of translation studies in the University of Ibadan are still in a major part of the theoretical context. But the students have to go through deep learning of translation techniques, stylistic comparison, and language analysis with less practice in translation. Most of the translation exercises, however, are done in the classroom, and are not subject to deadlines or client expectations, nor do they have to be done in the real world. The translation curriculum has also introduced more of such practicum elements for various reasons more recently, with the University of Lagos (UNILAG) being one of the universities to implement it as a progressive element. These supervised translation laboratories, together with certain internship opportunities in the Lagos publishing sector, and some exposure to online platforms for translation, are a part of its general curriculum review process, which started in 2017. However, the overall outline of the programme remains with a theoretical dominance despite these changes that have invigorated the resources sector.

The resource limitations, lack of industry collaboration, low tuition fees, and absence of trained practical instructors have been identified as some of the factors that hinder experiential learning goals by Ogunleye (2018). This is another strategy which is fast coming under fire, both at the international and Nigerian levels. Furthermore, there is consensus by scholars like Balogun (2017) and Olubunmi (2010) that in modern society, where translation is increasingly technological there is also increased specialism because lack of practical competence together with theoretical competence is one of the factors leading to unemployment and ineffectiveness of the graduates. The problem of a lack of a national framework or accreditation body to train translators in Nigeria only worsens the situation. Unlike the case in Europe, where there are professional standards of training for translators (as mentioned in the EMT – European Master's in Translation guidelines), at Nigerian institutions, this is seldom organized, and there is no uniformity in striking the balance between theory and practice.

D. Challenges Affecting Practical Translation Training

Several systemic challenges hinder the development of practical translator training in Nigeria:

1. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** According to Amadi (2019), universities often lack fully equipped translation laboratories, access to computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, or partnerships with professional translation agencies.

2. **Insufficient Professional Engagement:** Olubunmi (2020) notes the minimal involvement of practicing translators in academic instruction, leading to a gap between classroom realities and market expectations.
3. **Funding Constraints:** Public universities in Nigeria face chronic underfunding, as observed by Adewale and Musa (2021), making it challenging to implement resource-intensive practicum modules.

E. Theoretical Versus Practical Competence: Insights from Nigerian Scholars

The theoretical competency versus practical acquisition of skills is a recurring theme explored in the discourse of translator education in Nigeria. Balogun (2017) describes this dichotomy in the sense that while theory study (which involves learning from theories on critical thinking, terminology research skills, and various issues on translation ethics) plays a key role in improving students' critical thinking, terminology skills, and understanding about translation ethics, this is not enough to adequately prepare students to deal with the dynamic and uncertain realities of professional translation. It is therefore fair to say that any aspiring translators will enjoy enhanced intellectual foundations from the ability to deconstruct texts, analyze equivalence shifts, and travel stylistic variations. However, the professional translation contexts are not suitable for translation into theoretical modules as they are not as immersive and as situational as the real world contexts.

Empirical evidence supports these assertions. The survey, conducted by Idowu (2022), was conducted among translation graduates from universities in southwest Nigeria, as well as institutions such as the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University. The results spoke for themselves: nearly 65% of survey respondents reported being unprepared for professional translation assignments upon graduation. Deficiency specific areas such as project management skills in the organizing of translation workflow, working with clients, but most importantly, handling revisions and technological skills, specifically computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, online terminology database, and document formatting platform.

In Adewale and Musa (2021), the authors argue that experiential learning through supervised translation projects, internships, peer-reviewed translation assignments, and CAT tool workshops should be embedded in practically based courses, aligning with a more holistic, experiential, and market-oriented training model.

F. Gaps in Existing Research

One of the major critical gaps has been the absence of client-based research, and it is frequently being replaced with student-centric research. Consequently, little systematic research has been done in this regard, with little data being collected and analysed on the experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of translation students regarding the "adequacy" of their training. This paper seeks to partially fill this void by critically examining the structure of translator training programmes in some Nigerian Universities, and making the connection between the types of translator training models and their outcomes of professional training. This study falls into the 'theory-dominated' or 'practice-integrated' role of curriculum in the academic preparation of graduate translation students in Nigeria, an issue that is on the debate table regarding the future of translation in Nigeria.

III. Analysis: Theory Versus Practice in Nigerian Translator Training

A. University of Ibadan: Tradition Rooted in Theory

Given the classical role the University of Ibadan (UI) has long played in Nigeria's higher education as the pioneer in language and translation education, the phenomenon is quite debatable. The Department of European Studies offers a Bachelor of Arts in French with a specialisation in translation. The curriculum is well thought out, and courses such as "Principles and Methods of Translation," "Comparative Stylistics of French and English," and "Translation Criticism" form the basis of the program at all levels.

B. University of Lagos: A Growing Embrace of Practical Exposure

Among the numerous institutions in Nigeria that are cosmopolitan and renowned are the University of Lagos (UNILAG), which has recently revised its translation curriculum in the Department of Modern European Languages. The criticisms of heavy abstract programs of the kind that UNILAB offered are built on, and the programs have been in the process of being moulded to include several practical modules such as supervised translations, translation labs (though rudimentary), and limited internship placements.

Nevertheless, Ogunleye (2018) argues that limitations with infrastructural constraints and staffing as students are being exposed to practical translation assignments, they are, however, not being taught professional standards. However, due to the absence of certified mentors and a lack of partnerships between these practical efforts and professional translator associations, the effectiveness of these efforts is limited.

C. University of Nigeria, Nsukka: Language-Centric, Limited Practicalization

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) offers translation courses as part of its broader language programmes, particularly in French and German. However, the university does not offer a stand-alone, professionally oriented degree in translation. Instead, translation is taught as a supporting component of the language proficiency curriculum. As a result, students graduate with strong speaking and writing skills in two languages but often lack practical professional experience, including familiarity with industry deadlines, client interaction, and the demands of the translation business.

Table 1: Comparative Curriculum Breakdown

University	Theory Courses (Approx. %)	Practice Components	CAT Tools Training	Internship/Field Exposure
University of Ibadan	75–80%	Limited in-class exercises	Not integrated	Absent
University of Lagos	65–70%	Supervised translations and labs	Partially available	Limited (non-mandatory)
University of Nigeria	80–85%	Minor classroom practice	Not available	Not available

Source: Curriculum audit and faculty interviews (compiled from Ogunleye, 2018; Okonkwo, 2021). This table illustrates a clear trend: while all three institutions maintain intense theoretical instruction, the integration of practice varies significantly, with UNILAG leading gradual reform.

D. Employer and Graduate Perspectives

In a small-scale survey conducted by Idowu (2022), involving 35 recent graduates from translation programs and 15 language service employers in Lagos and Abuja, several trends emerged:

- I. 68% of graduates felt unprepared to manage real-world translation projects upon graduation.
- II. 60% of employers reported needing to retrain newly hired translators on formatting, deadline management, and client communication.
- III. Only 15% of graduates had ever used a CAT tool before joining a professional setting.

This corroborates earlier concerns of Olubunmi (2020) about the distance between university training and job market aspects. Although graduates can distinguish between translation shifts and assess stylistic equivalence, they struggle with the successful management of tasks, the use of translation software, and adapting to diverse vocabularies, such as those found in technical or medical contexts.

E. Implications for Translator Competence

The data clearly suggests one major implication: professional competence in translation cannot be achieved through theoretical knowledge alone. Nigerian universities that fail to adopt a practice-

oriented approach to translator training are likely to produce graduates who are conceptually knowledgeable but lack the practical skills required in professional settings. As Balogun (2017) aptly observes, “*The translator who understands theory but cannot meet a deadline, use a CAT tool, or respond effectively to a client's brief is as disadvantaged as one who translates blindly without theoretical knowledge.*”

IV. Conclusion

While this paper provides a foundational analysis, there are still many aspects left to explore. Although longitudinal studies are in progress that follow the trajectory of the career of translation graduates, these studies would provide us with more insight into how academic training translates into work performance.

This paper critically evaluates the translator training programs at the three leading Nigerian universities: the University of Ibadan, the University of Lagos, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The analysis indeed reveals a notable shortfall in practical training, as all three institutions provide robust theoretical frameworks grounded in the conceptual bases of Translation Studies. In particular, UI and UNN prefer theoretical components over real-world tasks, technologies, and industry practices for engaging students. Supervised translation projects and limited lab facilities have been achieved for curriculum reform by UNILAG, but the initiative lacks infrastructure and execution.

Having made these findings, it is therefore also likely that there are broader systemic problems: namely that in most programs, CAT tools are mostly not available, internship opportunities are limited if any, very little is structured when it comes to getting students to work with professional translators, and curriculums do not match the industry's requirements as much as they should. This means that graduates who enter the workplace find themselves conceptually informed but professionally underdeveloped; they need training to adapt to the job environment they are entering.

V. Recommendations

To bridge this critical gap, several steps must be taken:

1. Translation programs must integrate practical training components as core, not optional, elements. These should include supervised translation workshops, client-based simulations, and problem-based learning models.
2. Computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools and other digital translation platforms should be introduced into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula.
3. Universities should establish formal partnerships with professional bodies, such as the Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), to ensure that academic programs are aligned with current industry demands.
4. Government and institutional support must be mobilised to establish fully functional translation labs, purchase necessary software, and maintain resources for practice-based learning.

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