



Welcome to the Real World: Professional-Level Translator Certification

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive and up-to-date description of the American Translators Association (ATA) translator certification program. It describes how the written exam is created for various language pairs, the responsibilities of various parties, including the professional staff at ATA headquarters and volunteers such as the overall committee chair, the language chairs, and the graders. It includes specifics concerning the grading of translations produced by candidates. It concludes with a look to the future of the ATA certification program. This article is intended not only to document the ATA translator certification program but also to provide a basis for discussions between ATA and other associations that have translator certification programs.

Keywords: ATA certification, grading

“Although 100% perfection in translation may be unattainable, it is hoped that persons who become competent professional translators will eventually progress closer, ever closer, to 99.9% efficiency.” – Charles M. Stern, *Guidelines for Prospective Candidates*, (1984, p. 4)

Introduction

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” – Dorothy, just arrived in Oz

Like Dorothy arriving in Oz, graduates of foreign language programs are shocked to discover that their painfully acquired Level 2 proficiency¹ is not sufficient to cope with the real world, where the American Translators Association Certification Examination confronts them with the linguistic demands of the “language industry” (businesses supplying translations that meet the informational and transactional needs of government and industry). The examination is not a language acquisition test and does not serve the needs of academic training programs. It is also not a test of business

¹ Magnan (1986) tested students completing various years of a French major and discovered that those completing the French major (n=10) had oral proficiency levels on the ACTFL scale ranging from Intermediate Mid (ILR Level 1) to Advanced + (ILR Level 2+) (435).

practices, time management, networking, or research skills. Instead, it tests the specific ability to produce a translation in a target language based on a source text, in compliance with the standard conventions of target-language writing and with the passage-specific Translation Instructions, which simulate translation specifications. While the ability to comprehend a text written in a foreign language is a necessary (but not sufficient) prerequisite for professional translation, of all the skills that are necessary or useful to a professional translator, transfer competence—the ability to transfer a text “to reflect as faithfully as possible the concepts in the original passages” (Stern, 1984, p. 2)—is *sine qua non*.²

In the present article, the “transfer of concepts” mentioned in the quote above is referred to as “meaning” or “meaning transfer.” We do not intend to imply that meaning is a concrete entity somehow encoded immutably in the text and not subject to interpretation by each reader. Instead, we use the terms due to the historical development of the ATA Certification Program, which was initially created by practitioners for practitioners and only later acquired a theoretical basis, which is still incomplete. When the present article speaks of transferring meaning, we are not asserting any particular theoretical position relative to meaning in philosophy, linguistics, and translation studies.

Creating the Examination

The ATA Certification Committee is charged with management and oversight of the Certification Program. The creation, maintenance, and grading of the individual Certification Examinations in each language pair are the duty of the language-specific workgroups, while the day-to-day affairs of the program are handled by the Certification Program Manager at ATA Headquarters. The Certification Committee is responsible for all policies relating to the testing program and conducts appeals. The first author currently chairs the Certification Committee and the second author is a member. The substance of this article reports on circumstances as of July 2010, with some subsequent updates.

Language-Specific Workgroups

The heart of the ATA Certification Program is its workgroups. Each workgroup is composed of the graders in a specific language pair, all of whom are certified translators in that language pair.³ As of April 2012, the American Translators Association offers certification examinations in 25 language pairs. Ten examinations are offered in translation into English from the following languages: Arabic, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Fifteen examinations are offered in translation from English into the following languages: Chinese, Croatian,

² This document was found in the archives of the Certification Program and is currently located on the ATA’s private, password-protected grader training and administration website.

³ Exceptionally, non-certified translators work as graders in new language pairs. Once the language pair has certified translators, the non-certified translators leave the workgroup until such time as they can be certified.

Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Ukrainian. Each of the 25 language pairs is a separate examination with its own staff of volunteer graders who are certified translators provided with training by the ATA Certification Program. The language pairs offered fluctuate somewhat from year to year as new workgroups develop and offer examinations or existing workgroups falter due to a lack of volunteers. Note that the language pairs offered are not limited to the traditional languages taught in the academy; instead, they reflect the initiative of professional translators in developing such examinations, the demand for such examinations from those who would become certified, and the need of the marketplace for excellent translations in these language pairs. The Certification Committee has not implemented any policy specifying which language pairs must be offered; instead, ATA members interested in certification in a particular language pair follow a strictly prescribed policy for forming a language workgroup in a new language pair.

Each workgroup has a Language Chair (LC) and a Deputy Language Chair (DLC), each of whom has clearly defined duties. The other members of the group have specified duties as well. As a rule, workgroup members only come together once a year, at the annual ATA conference, where they work on group concerns and attend training sessions. The activities of the workgroup and communication among its members are conducted largely via Moodle, a free, Open Source software package for course management.

Duties of the Language Chair and Deputy⁴

The LC's duties are as follows:

- To act as liaison between graders and the Certification Committee Chair or ATA Headquarters
- To ask ATA Headquarters to send graded examinations randomly during the year and upon introduction of new examination passages in order to check graders' work⁵
- To monitor the graders' performance by comparing the point scores marked by individual graders and checking random graded examinations sent by ATA Headquarters and to give feedback to graders about their performance
- To conduct random reviews of graders' application of ATA grading guidelines and language-specific guidelines and to inform graders if they are not applying guidelines objectively and consistently
- To monitor graders' compliance with all their duties (including passage selection and sample translations) and to report results to the Certification Committee Chair for action
- To participate actively in support of Certification Committee activities by attending and contributing to the periodic Language Chair meetings and grader training sessions

⁴ These lists of duties, as well as following information on selecting test passages are taken from documents on the Certification Program's internal website.

⁵ That is, the Language Chair requests copies of the examinations in order to review work performed by the graders.

- To maintain contact with and consult the Certification Committee Chair, ATA Headquarters, other LCs, and graders throughout the year to ensure objectivity and consistency
- To conduct an examination review if assigned that responsibility
- To recruit and train new graders as needed
- To cast the deciding vote if the workgroup is evenly split on the selection of a new examination passage
- To ensure that graders are registered on Moodle and have access to the language pair's workspace, and to work with Moodle administrators to help graders make optimal use of the site's resources

The DLC's duties are as follows:

- To implement the passage selection process, following the *Guidelines for Passage Selection, Modification, and Review* and quality control procedures outlined by the Passage Selection Task Force, as available on Moodle
- To oversee submission by all graders of prospective examination passages and the identification of challenges, and to steer discussions
- To set and follow up on a workgroup deadline for graders to submit sample translations for each new set of examination passages
- To review sample translations and, if advisable, modify examination passages accordingly
- To submit completed *Passage Submission Forms* to the counterpart group (if applicable) for consultation, and then to the assigned member of the Passage Selection Task Force for approval
- To post approved examination passages on the workgroup's Moodle space or otherwise ensure that graders have them in final form
- To submit examination passages to ATA Headquarters in final form according to the current procedure for examination preparation

Graders

Graders are selected in a multi-step process that examines both their qualifications and their performance in grading a test examination. Primary responsibility for selecting new graders rests with the Language Chair of the respective workgroup, in consultation with other graders in the group. Graders must have the following qualifications:

- ATA certification in the appropriate language combination and direction
- Appropriate education and experience
- The respect of their peers and clients
- E-mail and Internet access

If the LC determines from an initial interview that the candidate is acceptable, the candidate is asked to provide three professional references (contact information for persons who are familiar with the candidate's translation skills). These references, along with the candidate's résumé and the LC's recommendation, are sent to the chair of the Certification Committee, who, in consultation with the committee, may approve or reject the candidate. Approval is based not only on the candidate's qualifications, but also on the need for graders in that particular group.

Upon approval, the candidate is asked to grade a failing examination from an earlier year. If available, this test is one that failed with a score in the range of 26–35 and contains enough errors of various categories to determine whether the prospective grader is aware of the nuances of the language and understands the grading standards and procedure. The grader also receives the following key grading documents: *Introduction to the ATA Certification Examination*, *Framework for Standardized Error Marking*, *Explanation of Error Categories*, *Flowchart for Grading Decisions*, and the *Into-English Grading Standards* and/or the applicable language-specific guidelines.

The LC is encouraged to consult other graders in the group about whether to accept a new grader. Upon deciding to accept the grader, the LC notifies the Certification Program Manager at ATA Headquarters. Accepted graders must complete a comprehensive on-line training course and by doing so, become familiar with the key documents and their application to the grading process.

Duties of the Grader

Grader duties are as follows:

- To objectively and consistently apply the ATA grading guidelines and the language-specific guidelines (LSGs) and passage-specific guidelines (PSGs) when grading each passage, and to consult the LC and/or other graders if in doubt
- To participate in the selection of examination passages, namely:
 - To submit potential new examination passages to the LC, indicating their source
 - To review, vote on, and comment on new examination passages
 - To provide the DLC with a sample translation of each new examination passage and any pertinent grading comments for inclusion in the workgroup's guidelines. (Graders are asked to translate under pseudo-examination conditions, i.e., with a time limitation, paper resources, and no access to the Internet.)
- To participate in grader training (regional workshops, workshops at the ATA Annual Conference, and/or on-line training opportunities)
- To stay informed about style and usage in the workgroup's target language

Passage Selection

The ATA Examination is designed to evaluate the ability of translators to understand texts written in a source language and to transfer them into a target language text that is usable for a specified purpose in accordance with translation instructions. Each workgroup in a given language pair maintains four passage sets to be used in rotation. Certain criteria apply to the selection of texts for use as examination passages and their combination into passage sets, as follows:

- English-language passages in the examination contain between 225 and 275 words. Foreign-language passages are selected such that the average length of a translation into English falls within this range.
- Each passage set comprises three passages labeled A, B, and C.

- Each passage text must meet specified ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) reading level requirements.
- Each passage set should contain a variety of subject matter and different types of challenges. Passages should present translation challenges at three levels: textual (i.e., style, register, and cohesion), sentence (grammar/syntax), and word (vocabulary/terminology). (Some text types are inappropriate for the examination, see 2.2.4.)
- Each passage must have Translation Instructions.

Passage Characteristics

The candidate must translate two passages. Passage A is required. This is a general text written for the educated lay reader in expository or journalistic style. The candidate must also choose between two elective passages, one from the domain of science/technology/medicine (B) and one from the domain of law/business/finance (C). These passages have the character of typical texts within their domains without requiring mastery of a particular field. Texts used as examination passages must be at an appropriate reading level as defined by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Language Skill Level Descriptions for Reading (see Interagency Language Roundtable [n.d.-a] and Howard [2004]). The A passages must be at Level 3 to 3+, while the B and C passages must be at Level 2+ to 3 on the ILR Reading Skill Scale.

Each passage set should be internally balanced, featuring complementary subject matters and types of challenges in the three texts. During selection, workgroups consider the required and elective passages as making up a single examination that tests a wide range of structural challenges and not simply different lexical challenges.

A passages

The subject matter of the A passage is selected to be readily familiar to an educated layperson. While truly esoteric cultural references are avoided, material specific to the culture of the respective language is used if it is common knowledge to an educated reader of the source language and can be rendered without major difficulty in the target language. The vocabulary is nontechnical, i.e., it requires no particular knowledge of a specific field or discipline. Terminology is commonly known or readily accessible in any good general dictionary.

The A passage presents a clear and coherent progression of thought and reasoning in which the candidate may be required to follow an argument or supported opinion and possibly the author's implications. Texts that present straightforward factual material are generally too easy for the A passage, while highly evocative pieces are usually too difficult (see 2.2.4). Editorials in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are typical examples of English-language texts at the appropriate level. An ideal passage requires the candidate to comprehend and translate at the paragraph level, i.e., to follow a line of thought through an entire paragraph or text.

Possible sources for A passages include newspaper editorials and commentaries, magazines at the level of *The Atlantic* or *Harper's*, books or journals (history, popular science, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.), essays, speeches or conference proceedings that set out a position.

B and C passages

B and C passages test the candidate's ability to translate different text-types than those found in the A passage by requiring that the candidate follow the conventions of a specific type of document or maintain a specified register or style. The terminology found in B and C passages does not demand the use of highly specialized dictionaries. Rather, the challenge often consists in selecting the correct equivalent from among those offered by the bilingual dictionary, which requires a certain general knowledge of the world. Terms not found in a general dictionary may appear in a text if they can be found in any universally recognized bilingual "general technical" or "general business/legal" dictionary that is in common use. Any terms that do not meet these criteria are edited out in the process of preparing the examination passage or their translation is provided in the Translation Instructions.

Possible sources for B passages include specialized journals and periodicals, clinical studies or other research reports, test procedures or specifications, instructions for operating machinery, descriptions of industrial processes, technical encyclopedias, or university-level textbooks, while possible sources for C passages include business and financial documents such as commercial documents, financial reports, banking or stock trading regulations, insurance policies, leases, and business letters, as well as select legal documents.

Inappropriate Text Types

Some text types and content are inappropriate for the examination. Among the text types and content to be avoided are:

- Texts with an easily recognizable source
- Highly evocative or atmospheric texts⁶
- Passages requiring expert knowledge in a specialized field
- Texts not originally in the source language (translated material)
- Texts with numerous equations or formulas
- Texts containing large numbers of proper nouns, dates, figures, and other non-translatable material
- Simple lists that present no grammatical challenge and require only recourse to a dictionary (ATA Certification Program, 2007)

Translation Instructions

Every passage is accompanied by translation instructions that provide context for the candidate, much like a client's specifications in the working world. The instructions state the purpose, audience, and medium of the target text, and may provide an indication of how a specific term or terms should be translated to meet these requirements. They also indicate whether the target text is intended for publication. Translation instructions give the candidate significant information about what sort of style and register are expected in the target text, as determined by audience and target medium.

⁶ These texts bring strong images or feelings to mind, or create a distinctive mood, and are considered by the program to be inappropriate because they rarely occur in the work of professional translators.

Taking the Examination

Information for Candidates

Extensive information about the nature of the Certification Examination is provided on the ATA website, including tips for candidates,⁷ the *Into-English Grading Standards*,⁸ the error categories,⁹ and Frequently Asked Questions.¹⁰ This enables candidates to prepare for the examination sitting.

Eligibility

The American Translators Association Certification Examination is designed and conceived of as a general professional-level examination. As such, it requires that candidates for the examination present evidence of experience (preferably professional/remunerated) in the translation field that goes beyond merely having completed an academic course of study in translation or merely being bilingual. Therefore, candidates must meet one of five sets of criteria for eligibility established by ATA:¹¹

- Current accreditation or certification¹² by a member association of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs¹³
- An advanced degree (master's, doctorate, or the equivalent professional degree in any field)
- A degree or certificate from an approved academic translator or interpreter training program (from the list approved by the ATA Education and Training Committee)
- A bachelor's degree *and* evidence of at least two years' work as a translator or interpreter
- Evidence of at least five years' work as a translator or interpreter

These standards are intentionally quite high, requiring either some years of experience, formal translator or interpreter training, an advanced degree, or a reciprocal certification.

Examination Sitings

As stated on the ATA website,

The certification examination is a three-hour, open-book, proctored exam in a specific language pair. Before taking the exam, candidates must sign a statement acknowledging that

⁷http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutexams_tips.php

⁸http://www.atanet.org/certification/Into_English_Grading_2010.pdf

⁹http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutexams_error.php

¹⁰http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutexams_faqs.php

¹¹http://www.atanet.org/certification/eligibility_requirementsform.php (accessed July 9, 2010)

¹²In any language pair.

¹³FIT is the international umbrella organization for translation associations. See <http://www.fit-ift.org/>.

they know they will be informed only of the final result of the exam, without comments from graders, and that the exam will remain the property of ATA. Except for persons with disabilities, who may use non-memory typewriters, the exams must be written by hand. No electronic equipment of any kind is permitted at the exam sitting.

Several examination sittings are scheduled throughout the country and overseas every year.

An ATA ad-hoc committee has been working for many years on developing a system for keyboarding Certification Examinations in controlled settings such as university computer laboratories. Hanlen (2006) is the last published update on this project. An initial, partially successful sitting was held in 2009,¹⁴ but many issues remained that precluded immediate widespread implementation of computerized examinations for some time. A keyboarded sitting was scheduled for October 2012 in conjunction with the annual ATA conference.

Grading the Examination

The grading of the Certification Examinations, like the grading for licensing of lawyers, doctors or contractors, differs markedly from grading in an academic setting because there is no intent to teach the candidate. In fact, grading of the ATA examination is *sui generis*, with the elusive goal of bringing maximal objectivity to an undertaking that cannot ever be strictly objective. Within the sphere of complete understanding of the source text and transfer of its content to an articulate text in the target language, there is no single right answer, but there are indeed numerous wrong answers. The individuals who grade each examination must separate the narrow band of correct solutions from the wide morass of possible incorrect versions. In doing so, they work with tools, rather than relying on their individual and possibly individualistic reactions to each candidate's rendition. Some tools are used across all language groups, while other tools are language- and passage-specific.

The ATA Certification Examination seeks to identify those translators who are capable of producing translations at the "journeyman" level or above, i.e., those who can meet the needs of the translation industry to varying degrees. The translation that candidates must produce in order to pass the examination is one that, at a minimum, a client could use for the purpose given in the Translation Instructions, after some work by a bilingual editor and a target language copy editor. A failing examination would at best require extensive bilingual editing and target-language copy editing before it could be used for the purpose given in the Translation Instructions, and at worst, complete retranslation. These criteria are adapted from and coordinated with the U.S. government's Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) standards for translation performance.¹⁵

¹⁴ Information on ATA Certification history and statistics is based on communication with ATA Certification Program staff in 2009 and 2010.

¹⁵ The passing level on the ATA examination is analogous to ILR Professional Performance Level 3, which is defined as follows:

The process of grading the examination begins when a grader receives one or more examinations. Each examination is graded independently by two graders. The grader reviews the source text and the translation instructions and then reads the target text to obtain a general impression of the candidate's writing. The next step is to carefully read the target text against the source text to identify errors of transfer or mechanics. Graders mark errors on the examination by circling them using a red pen. At this point, graders determine error severity and error classification with the help of a number of evaluation tools: the *Explanation of Error Categories*, the *Flowchart for Error Point Decisions* and the *Framework for Error Marking*, which apply to all language groups, the *Into-English Grading Standards* or the applicable language-specific guidelines, and the passage-specific guidelines. Once the category and severity of an error have been determined, these codes are marked directly on the examination. The tools will be discussed below.

Tools that Apply to all Language Groups

Graders in all language groups use the same core tools because the principal thrust of evaluation in the ATA Certification Program is completeness and accuracy of transfer from source language to target language in accordance with the specifications of the Translation Instructions. The question of how much an error in the target text evokes a different meaning than that evoked by the source text, and the answer to that question, are language-neutral. The reliance on meaning as a primary criterion for evaluating a test translation in this program is a reflection of the fact that this is a test for professional translators who, by and large, are working with texts that are information-intensive, rather than style-intensive.

Flowchart

The Flowchart for Error Point Decisions is the tool used to determine, first, whether an error is one of transfer of meaning or “merely” an error in the mechanics of target language usage, and second, the severity of the error. As seen from Figure 1, the severity of an error is judged on the basis of the effect it has on the meaning and usability of the passage to the reader. This is a criterion that can be applied for all language pairs and with a certain level of objectivity, particularly in discussion between the two graders concerned. It applies both to translation (transfer) errors and to mechanical errors in writing in the target language.

Can translate texts that contain not only facts but also abstract language, showing an emerging ability to capture their intended implications and many nuances. Such texts usually contain situations and events which are subject to value judgments of a personal or institutional kind, as in some newspaper editorials, propaganda tracts, and evaluations of projects. Linguistic knowledge of both the terminology and the means of expression specific to a subject field is strong enough to allow the translator to operate successfully within that field. Word choice and expression generally adhere to target language norms and rarely obscure meaning. The resulting product is a draft translation, subject to quality control. (ILR, n.d.-b)

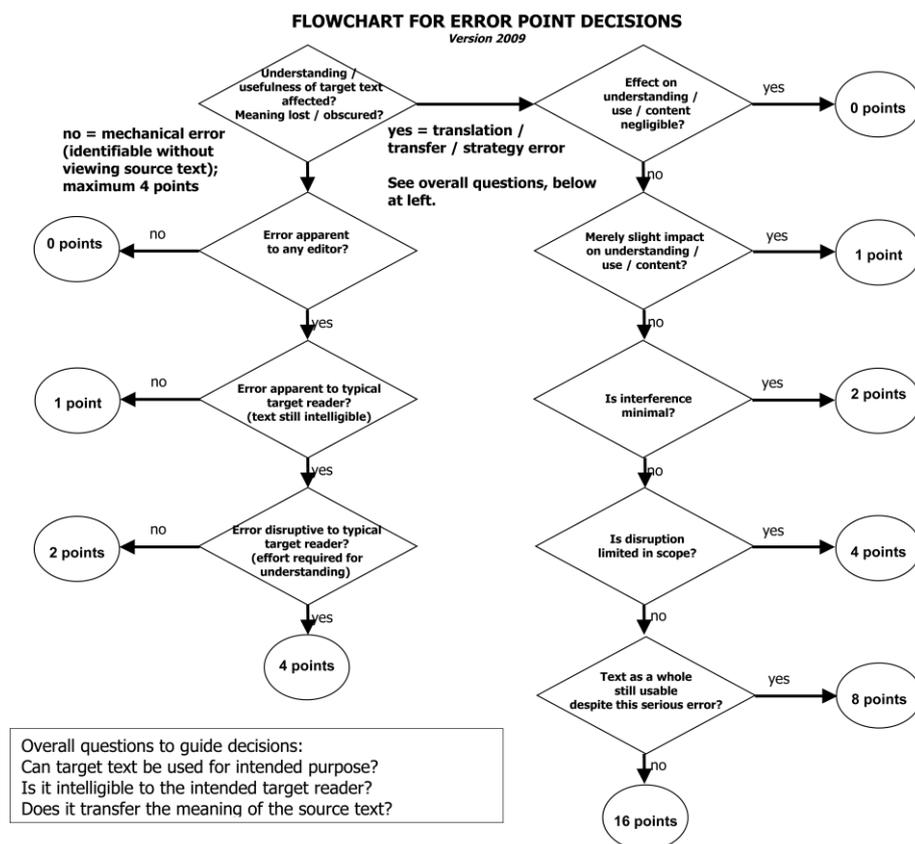


Figure 1: The ATA examination's Flowchart for Error Point Decisions

The first question on the Flowchart is intended to make the distinction between errors that are seen as mechanical errors in the target language, i.e., errors that do not affect the understanding or usefulness of the target text. In other words, answering “no” to the first question guides the grader to the left side of the Flowchart, where distinctions are made and points assigned based on how disruptive this error would be to a typical reader of the target text, although no meaning has been lost or obscured. Note that no error on the left side of the Flowchart can be assigned more than four error points.

If the grader has determined that meaning has been lost or obscured, then the severity assignment process proceeds down the right side of the Flowchart where the criteria are based on the error's effect on the understanding, use, and content of the target text. The severity of an error depends very much on its effect on the text as a whole: any error that is assigned zero, one, or two error points has little effect in and of itself on the usefulness of the target text; however, large numbers of such less severe errors can have a collective effect of obscuring the overall meaning of a text. The criteria for the more severe errors (four, eight, and sixteen points) look at the extent of an error's effects. The effects of a four-point error are limited in scope. Such an error may render a clause or phrase unusable, but not more of the text. An eight-point error is one that affects an entire sentence or more (i.e., it is not limited in scope), but this serious error does not render the entire text unusable, while a sixteen-point error would be one that renders the entire text unusable for the specified purpose. Note that these criteria are designed for the ATA grading scale where a passage has a specified length and a score of 18 is a failing grade; they cannot be used in other rating systems without

adaptation. (See Koby & Baer, 2005 for an example of academic adaptation of the ATA Framework.)

Explanation of Error Categories

This document is located on the Moodle grader-training site and is used in initial grader training. Thereafter, graders can consult it to determine whether the category for an error is appropriate. It contains extensive definitions for each category, as well as examples. One such definition is the newly adopted (2009) category of Cohesion, which is defined internally as:

Cohesion: (COH): A **cohesion** error occurs when a text is hard to follow because of inconsistent use of terminology, misuse of pronouns, inappropriate conjunctions, or other structural errors. Cohesion is the network of lexical, grammatical, and other relations that provide formal links between various parts of a text. These links assist the reader in navigating within the text. Although cohesion is a feature of the text as a whole, graders will mark an error for the individual element that disrupts the cohesion.

ATA CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

FRAMEWORK FOR STANDARDIZED ERROR MARKING

Version 2009

Exam Number: _____
Exam Passage: _____
Check here if <input type="checkbox"/> for Review

1	2	4	8	16	Code	Reason
Errors that concern the form of the exam						
Treat missing material within the passage as an omission.					UNF	Unfinished (If a passage is substantially unfinished, do not grade the exam.)
					ILL	Illegibility
					IND	Indecision, gave more than one option
Translation / strategic / transfer errors: Negative impact on understanding / use of target text.						
					MT	Mistranslation (use a subcategory if applicable)
					MU	— Misunderstanding of source text (if identifiable)
					A	— Addition
					O	— Omission
					T	— Terminology, word choice
					R	— Register
					F	— Faithfulness
					L	— Literalness
					FA	— Faux ami (false friend)
					COH	— Cohesion
					AMB	— Ambiguity
					ST	Style (inappropriate for specified type of text)
					OTH	Other (describe)
Mechanical errors: Negative impact on overall quality of target text. Points may vary by language. Maximum 4 points.						
					G	Grammar
					SYN	— Syntax (phrase / clause / sentence structure)
					P	Punctuation
					SP / CH	Spelling / Character (usually 1 point, maximum 2; if more than 2 points, another category must apply)
					D	— Diacritical marks / Accents
					C	— Capitalization
					WF / PS	Word form / Part of speech
					U	Usage
					OTH	Other (describe)
0	0 x 2 = 0	0 x 4 = 0	0 x 8 = 0	0	Column totals	
A grader may stop marking errors when the score reaches 46 error points.			A grader may award a quality point for each of up to three specific instances of exceptional translation.		Quality points are subtracted from the error point total to yield a final score. A passage with a score of 18 or more points receives a grade of Fail.	
Total error points (add column totals): 0			Quality points (maximum 3): 0		Final passage score (subtract quality points from error points): 0	

Figure 2. The ATA certification examination's Framework for Standardized Error Marking.

Framework

The Framework for Standardized Error Marking (Figure 2) is a scoring sheet that forces graders to assign a category to each error, and provides them with a reference list of error codes to mark on the examination. It is primarily used to tally the errors that are already marked on the face of the examination sheet, and to calculate the final score. Graders are permitted to stop marking an examination passage once the tally of errors reaches 46 points.¹⁶ They are also given discretion to award up to three “quality points” for particularly elegant solutions to thorny transfer problems. A passage with 17 or fewer points is awarded a grade of “Pass.”

Tools that Apply to Specific Language Groups

In addition to the three standard grading tools, graders also use tools that apply within each language workgroup: the language-specific and passage specific guidelines. Because about half of the language pairs tested by the ATA Certification Program involve American English as the target language, the language-specific guidelines for translation into English were formalized across the various language workgroups into the *Into-English Grading Standards (IEGS)*. This document was developed and is maintained by a committee of graders from various language workgroups. It presents a relatively broad band of acceptable English diction in glossary form. For all issues of contemporary US English usage that are not explicitly addressed in the IEGS, a style guide, the *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (2005 edition), was adopted to ensure consistency across the workgroups. This particular title was chosen over other possible standards for its flexibility. Language workgroups testing translation from English into a foreign language adopt their own style guides and write their own *Language-Specific Guidelines (LSGs)*.

Passage-Specific Guidelines (PSGs) are initially compiled from the graders’ sample translations of a given passage. They include acceptable and unacceptable translation variants produced by the graders working under examination constraints. As candidates’ examinations are graded, the PSGs are expanded to include acceptable and unacceptable translation variants produced by candidates, in order both to define the band of acceptable solutions and to ensure consistency in grading future examinations. Variants that are ambiguous as to severity or category are posted and discussed in the document or in a Moodle forum.

Assigning the Grade and Grader Consultation

Once the examination has been graded, the two graders communicate their results to each other. If the graders agree on the pass/fail outcome on both passages and the scores are within 15 points of each other,¹⁷ the examinations are returned to ATA Headquarters for further processing.

On the other hand, if the scores differ by more than 15 points, the pass/fail results are different, or the scores fall within the borderline range of

¹⁶ During the period between 2002, when the current grading system was implemented, and January 2004, graders were required to mark every error.

¹⁷ This range was decided upon in earlier years and records are lacking on the reasoning.

15 to 25 error points, the two graders are required to consult with one another to determine the source of the discrepancy and whether it can be reconciled. If discrepancies still remain, significant disagreements are documented in ATA's internal *Two-Grader Consultation Form*. "The primary purposes of two-grader consultation are to promote adherence to program-wide standards and grading consistency within the workgroup, and to furnish documentation to assist a reviewer or appeal panel in reaching a decision. Neither grader is obligated to defer to the other grader's opinion. Graders may agree to disagree about a particular decision or the overall outcome".

If the two initial graders agree to disagree about the overall Pass/Fail with the graded examinations and the consultation forms. The third grader may consult with the initial graders but is not required to do so.

Pass Rates

It has been found that transfer skill is rarer than one might think. As the ATA's official website states, "The certification examination is challenging with an overall pass rate below 20%." The two factors influencing transfer skill are source of language knowledge (i.e., native language, heritage language, or academically acquired language) and direction of translation (i.e., L₁ vs. L₂ translation). Unfortunately, the ATA does not currently track native languages or other language acquisition profiles of candidates. In the future, ATA will have to collect these data in order to determine whether there may be a correlation between sources of language knowledge and success on the ATA examination.

ATA headquarters reports that eligibility requirements were instituted in an attempt to improve the pass rates on the Certification Examination, particularly to reduce the disproportionately large volume of examinations in Spanish, which were "wearing out the graders." In data covering 2006 to 2009, the Spanish-to-English and English-to-Spanish examinations represented 19% and 38% of all examinations, while no other language combination represented more than 5%. Pass rates have always been low in these two language combinations. In our opinion, this low rate may be due to the large number of native English speakers in the United States who have studied Spanish at the secondary or post-secondary level and erroneously believe that the language knowledge they obtained in "Kansas" is sufficient to enter Oz. After 2004, the number of candidates taking the Spanish-to-English and English-to-Spanish examinations was half as great as before that date; however, this drop in numbers failed to improve either group's pass rate or the overall pass rate for the program, which has remained below 20% for at least 15 years. Implementation of eligibility requirements only raised the overall pass rate by about 3–5%.

The eligibility requirements were put in place in January 2004 as an attempt to prevent unqualified individuals from taking the examination with unsatisfactory results. However, they have not been notably successful either in increasing the pass rate or reducing the number of unqualified individuals who take the examination. Occasionally, there are individuals who meet one of the eligibility requirements (say, with a master's degree in an unrelated field) who take both the practice examination and full examination multiple times (over several years) in both of their language directions and repeatedly fail the examination with catastrophically high scores. We may speculate that the reasons for this poor result may lie in a disconnect between the eligibility categories and the needs of real-world translation. For instance, it has been assumed that an advanced degree brings with it the ability to write coherently in the target language, yet anyone who has read academic prose (particularly

as submitted to scholarly journals prior to editing) knows that many academics do not write well, despite their advanced subject-matter skills.

For this and other reasons, the ATA Certification Committee is currently studying the correlation between examination success and the various eligibility requirements in order to determine whether they should be modified. In October 2009, ATA headquarters provided basic statistics for 2004–2009:

The eligibility requirements went into place in January of 2004. Since that time there have been 2,828 exams taken for which candidates offered proof of eligibility. Of those 2,828 exams, some multiples were taken by the same candidate [i.e., some candidates took the exam multiple times]. They only had to offer proof of eligibility once, but they may have taken and failed the same examination multiple times or taken exams in more than one language combination. (2010)

Table 1 shows the breakdown of candidates by numbers of multiple examinations.

Exams taken	No. of candidates	% of candidates	Total exams taken	% of total exams
1	1845	81.46%	1845	65.24%
2	325	14.35%	650	22.98%
3	65	2.87%	195	6.90%
4	19	0.84%	76	2.69%
5	8	0.35%	40	1.41%
6	2	0.09%	12	0.42%
10	1	0.04%	10	0.35%
Total	2265	100.00%	2828	100.00%

Table 1. Number of candidates taking multiple examinations (2004–2009).

A total of 98.68% of candidates in this period took the examination one, two, or three times, which represent 95.12% of all examinations taken. These multiple examinations may be repeat examinations in a failed language combination, or they may be examinations in different language combinations. Although the data are unavailable, we consider it unlikely that candidates taking the examination more than three times are taking it in multiple languages. Rather, these candidates continue to take the examination despite failing it numerous times. A further study would be necessary to see whether these candidates show any improvement over time.

Table 2 breaks down these figures by percentage of candidates passing. Because the original statistics did not break down information on an advanced degree vs. a translation/interpreting degree, further research in ATA's database provided this information, which is shown in Table 3.¹⁸

¹⁸ The category *Unclear* appears where ATA records do not indicate what type of degree was submitted.

Proof of eligibility provided	Total examinations taken	Failed examinations	Passed examinations	% of candidates passing
Any advanced degree or T&I degree	1512	1257	255	17%
Bachelor's degree plus two years' experience	873	765	108	12%
FIT accredited or certified	57	35	22	39%
Minimum 5 years' experience	386	339	47	12%

Table 2. Breakdown of failing/passing rates on ATA Certification Examination by eligibility requirement from the beginning of the eligibility requirement in January 2004 through September 2009.

Proof of eligibility provided	Total examinations taken	Failed examinations	Passed examinations	% of candidates passing
Unclear	212	167	45	21%
Advanced degree	1252	1053	199	16%
T&I degree	48	37	11	23%
Total	1512	1257	255	17%

Table 3. Breakdown of advanced degree vs. T&I degree from the beginning of the eligibility requirement in January 2004 through September 2009.

These figures suggest that formal translation training may improve success on the Certification Examination, but the small sample size makes it impossible to make a definitive statement. Further research is needed.

Reviews and Appeals

If candidates disagree with the grade of *Fail* assigned by two graders, they may request a review.¹⁹ The review is conducted by another grader from the relevant workgroup. In the period from 2006–2009, 99 reviews were requested and 8 grades of *Fail* were overturned.

¹⁹ The ATA examination review procedure can be found at http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutreview_procedure.php.

If candidates disagree with the outcome of the review, they may appeal.²⁰ The appeal is conducted by a three-member panel chaired by a Certification Committee member and including the original reviewer or the workgroup language chair and a grader who has not graded the exam. In the period from 2006–2009, four appeals were completed and no reviewed grades of *Fail* were overturned. The outcome of the appeal process is final.

Looking to the Future

In addition to handling the important issues that arise in the day-to-day operations of the Certification Program, the Certification Committee is developing a research program that is expected to yield information and new directions for continuous improvement of its system for identifying and certifying competent translation practitioners. This research will be based on previous years' examinations, academic theory, and translation industry best practices. The Certification Committee is exploring the possibility of creating an advisory council including representatives of the translation industry, translation buyers in other industries, freelance translators, and academics, in order to increase the transparency, reliability, and validity of the certification program.

²⁰ The ATA review appeals procedure can be found at http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutreview_appeal.php

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