

An Empirical Study of Chinese-English Translational Thinking While Doing CET-4 Translations

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Abstract: Sixty undergraduates participated in a special test of this study, which was entitled a paragraph in the Chinese-English translation of CET4. Their texts of translations, together with their answers to a post-test questionnaire, have been collected and analyzed from the perspective of translational thinking. The focus of this study is placed on the mental activities of the 60 undergraduates when they tried hard to translate texts about Chinese culture into English with a view to revealing some characteristics of C-E translational thinking in the 60 student translators when they grappled with words and sentences with distinct Chinese cultural denotations and to generate on the basis of those revelations some suggestions which may help English teachers to train college students to improve their quality of C-E translation and overcome fear when doing CET-4 translations.

Keywords: Translational thinking; C-E translation in CET-4; C-E translation teaching; Empirical study

1. Introduction

It is well-known that converting words and sentences about Chinese culture into English is usually baffling to translators, especially inexperienced translators. This empirical study attempts to look into the characteristics of Chinese-English (C-E) translational thinking demonstrated by sixty Chinese undergraduates of non-English major who volunteered to translate from Chinese into English in a special test consisting of four passages for C-E translation chosen from College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). Their texts of translations, together with their answers to a post-test questionnaire, have been collected and analyzed from the perspective of translational thinking. The focus of this study is placed on the mental activities of the 60 undergraduates when they tried hard to translate texts about Chinese culture into English with a view to revealing some characteristics of C-E translational thinking in the 60 students translators when they grappled with words and sentences with distinct Chinese cultural denotations and to generate on the basis of those revelations some suggestions which may help English teachers to train college students to improve their quality of C-E translation and overcome fear when doing CET-4 translations.

2. Defining the concept of translational thinking

In the past few decades, translational thinking has been drawing attention from scholars on translation research in China. In 1985, Liu Miqing published an article entitled “On translational thinking” in which he argues that translational thinking belongs to abstract thinking and that, therefore, logical analysis must be placed at the core of translational thinking (Liu Miqing, 1985: 14). Following the publication of Professor Liu’s article on the discussion of translational thinking, more and more articles and books on translational thinking from various theoretical perspectives

Translational thinking is defined by Yu Dong (Yu Dong, 2013: 78) as a kind of thinking capacity and thinking pattern typical of a translator. Whereas the term of translational thinking was not explicitly explored until the 1980s in China, the phenomenon of translational thinking has always been, albeit most of the time implicitly, touched upon by scholars on translation throughout the history of translation research.

Given that their definitions are not reflective of the essence of research on translational thinking, this author prefers to produce a relatively dynamic and generalized definition of translational thinking. It defines translational thinking as mental activities taking place inside a translator while trying to solve difficulties in a translation task. It includes thinking activities of expert translators as well as novice translators, such as college students of non-English major in China.

3. Methodology and Analytical Framework

3.1 Analyzing C-E translation thinking of participants

Take the text of translation by Participant 1 for example. His English version is reproduced below in italics.

Paper cut is an unique form of the Chinese folk art, which have history of more than 2,000 years. Paper cut probably originate in the Han Dynasty, after the invention of paper. Since then, it has been popular in many parts of China. The materials and tools for paper cut are very easy: paper and jiandao. Paper cut work are always made of red paper, because red is associated with happiness in traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, in wedding, Spring Festival and other festive occasions, red paper cut is the first choice for door and window decoration.

In this translation, first of all, “paper cut” is misuse of noun; it should be “paper cutting.” The use “an” before “unique” is not considered a misuse of article in this study because this study does not look into phonetic translational thinking. In “... the Chinese folk art, which have history of more than 2,000 years,” there are two mistakes: one is the mismatch between the subject, the singular “which” and the verb “have,” which is considered a grammar error; the other mistake is the lack of the article “a” before “history,” which is considered a misuse of article since the participant used zero article. “The materials and tools for paper cut are very easy: paper and jiandao.” The fact that the participant used the Chinese phonetic alphabets “jiandao” to mean “scissors” indicated that in the student’s mental lexicon the word “scissors” is absent. The sentence “Paper cut work are always made of red paper, because red is associated with happiness in traditional Chinese culture,” has a misuse of the noun “work” which should be translated as “works” rather than “work.”

From the explanations above, it is clear that mistakes in the participants’ texts of translation are identified principally at three levels: lexical, syntactic, and stylistic.

3.2 Post-test questionnaire

What do you think is the most difficult part of Chinese-English translation?

Is it the difficulty in finding out which word is the most accurate word to use?

Or is it the difficulty in finding out which sentence pattern should be used?

Is the choice of prepositions the most difficult?

Is it the difficulty in deciding which tense to use?

Is it the difficulty in deciding whether to use an active or passive voice?

Is it the difficulty in deciding what kind of article to use?

Or is it the difficulty resulting from differences Chinese grammar and English grammar which make your translation look awkward or unidiomatic?

3.3 Analyzing C-E translation difficulties perceived by the participants

Various answers to the question in the post-test questionnaire about the most difficult part in C-E translation	Number of students thinking alike
Finding the right words for accurate translation	30
Finding the right sentence patterns for accurate translation	12
Finding the right prepositions for accurate collocations	3
Deciding on the right tense for various verbs in various sentences	10
Deciding whether an active or passive voice should be used	5
Finding an appropriate article to go before a noun or noun phrase	0
Making the TL text look natural and idiomatic	29
All of those difficulties mentioned above	10

It can be seen from the Table of the 60 private college students think that finding the right words for accurate translation is the most difficult problem for them, which means that half of the students have the same view. Twenty-nine participants think that making the TL texts look natural and idiomatic is the most difficult problem for them. Chinese students use native language thinking to translate, which obviously makes the translated sentences look strange.

Twelve participants think that finding the right sentence patterns for accurate translation is the most difficult and 10 participants

think that deciding on the right tense for various verbs in various sentences is the most troublesome. There are 5 participants who think that the most difficult is about deciding whether an active or passive voice should be used. It is after all a grammatical problem. We are astonished to find that none of the students mention the misuse of articles. Many students are not familiar with the usage of definite articles and indefinite articles.

Finally, 10 participants think that all of those difficulties mentioned above were very difficult for them. Normally, most of the students of non-English major in private colleges are not very good at English. Their college entrance examination scores for English are lower than 70 points. Generally speaking, the biggest problems for the students are grammar and vocabulary.

4. Conclusion

This study provides specific statistical data from real surveys, observations and experimental tests. The author's analysis is based on these statistical data and survey results. Therefore, the research results and suggestions are of great significance to improve Chinese-English translation teaching and help Chinese college students improve their Chinese-English translation and cross-cultural communication skills.

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