

## Enhancing Learners' Critical Thinking Ability Through Pedagogical Translation in English Language Teaching

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### Abstract

The paper explores the strategic use of pedagogical translation in English language teaching (ELT) to enhance Chinese learners' critical thinking ability. Different from the studies on translation theories and the teaching of translation to English majors, the present study assumes that pedagogical translation is a rational activity which can effectively help learners understand the source language and target language precisely. The translation of four different word categories is discussed and analyzed by using examples. It is concluded that learners can improve their critical thinking ability and language competence through designed translation activities.

**Key words:** Critical thinking; Pedagogical translation; English language teaching

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is one of the most widely discussed concepts in higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and appears frequently in current education reforms. It empowers people to uncover the underlying beliefs and

assumptions behind the messages they encounter, mentally assess the validity of statements, and consider the potential ramifications of the conclusion (Hadley & Boon, 2022). Critical thinking ability is emphasized mostly in science and technology to encourage people to innovate and be creative. However, the close relationship between language and thought indicates that foreign language teachers can also cultivate students' critical thinking skills in addition to teaching language skills.

Currently, the research on critical thinking in language courses mainly focuses on reading and writing. The bulk of literature on translation mainly involves the study and discussion of diverse translation theories and principles conducted by only translators and translation scholars. There is limited literature on using pedagogical translation as an effective means to engage non-English major students in developing critical thinking ability in ELT. One of the main reasons is that college English instructions tend to emphasize the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and the mother tongue is not encouraged. The other reason is that translation is often regarded as the expertise of those who specialize it or who wants to become a translator. The vast majority of college students who study English as a foreign language fail to give enough attention to its important function in language learning. Translation is not recommended at the beginning stage of learning a foreign language, but it is needed when learners' language competence reaches a higher level. This paper explores how translation strategies can be applied in General English teaching to enhance college students' ability to think critically.

### 2. PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL THINKING

Pedagogical translation is a method adopted in foreign language teaching to help students have better

understanding of the source language and target language. Due to the popularity of communicative method in FLT and overemphasis on learning language knowledge, translation activity is often neglected and shunned in the classroom. Many university students are faced with the imbalance between language competence and critical thinking ability (Tao, 2020).

The word *critical* is defined in the Webster Dictionary as “excising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation”. As for the concept *critical thinking*, it is the ability of analyzing and evaluating information deeply, comprehending complex ideas, going beyond the literal meaning to form a sound judgment. In other words, it refers to the capacity to question, reason, interpret, evaluate and make a judgement about what people read, hear, say, or write. This ability needs to be cultivated through disciplined and systematic study. Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.” (Nida & Taber, 2004, p12). A good translation is a highly complex mental activity that involves diverse areas of knowledge and skills, and the atmosphere of classroom has a pivotal role in developing critical thinking (Fatemaeh, 2013). Therefore, it is of great significance for the language teachers to provide students with challenging translation exercises to develop their critical thinking skills.

The research on using translation strategy to enhance learners’ critical thinking ability is mostly conducted by foreign researchers, and the literature written by Chinese scholars is found scant. A survey of 360 undergraduate students by Al-Musawi (2014) in Bahrain University showed that Arab students frequently use strategies involving translation to learn English vocabulary, to read and write. Saud (2020, p.19) in Saudi Arabia found that “students with a higher grade in translation scored better on critical thinking test” after examining 72 undergraduate students’ critical thinking skills and their translation performance in King Khalid University. This result may have implications for EFL teachers to use translation approach to improve learners’ critical thinking skills, which are essential for innovation, creativity and leadership. The studies by Fahim and Parham (2013), Nasab and Shariati (2017) in Iran also revealed there is a statistically significant relationship between critical thinking and translation quality. Their findings highlight the importance of teaching critical thinking skills by means of translation activities in foreign language learning.

The translation between Chinese and English is never easy and simple even with the advent of machine translation. It is often the case that students who tend to focus on the four language skills have difficulties in using English to introduce Chinese culture. One of the difficulties is that language is loaded with polysemy and synonym. Students often find it hard to find an

equivalence in comprehension and translation. For example, the Chinese character *de* (德) is translated into “morality”, “virtue”, “ethics”, and “character” by translation machine when there is no context. Therefore, translating *li de shu ren* (立德树人) into English pose great difficulty for Chinese learners because there is no such a word in English which carries the full meaning of the Chinese *de*. People may translate this phrase by using different words, such as “fostering virtue through education”, “strengthening moral education and cultivating people”, and “fostering character and civic virtue”. According to Nida and Taber (2004, VII), “translating a text involving significant cultural differences is like a juggler trying to toss and catch a variety of objects all at the same time”. Translation is not just an activity of finding the equivalence in two different languages; it is about translating ideas when no exact equivalence exists. This translating process obviously needs cross-cultural awareness and acute sensitivity to cultural differentiation (Zhao, 2000).

To enhance cognition at college level, it is necessary to “change the goals of learning from memorizing and reproducing knowledge to shaping the thinking of a student who is able to find, evaluate, assimilate and apply this knowledge in new situations” (Solodikhina & Solodikhina, 2021, p.88). Critical thinking can be a teachable mental skill in foreign language teaching when effective strategies are applied (Hadley & Boon, 2022). Although the widely accepted communicative approach in language teaching does not recommend the use of native language, it does not mean that translating is unnecessary. In fact, translation, a very challenging and complex process, involves different skills and knowledge, especially when learners’ language competence is at a higher level. Using translation approach can facilitate both learners’ foreign language abilities (Delisle, 1988) and cognitive and critical thinking abilities (Nasab & Shariati, 2017).

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### 3. DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL TRANSLATION

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Thinking critically through translation is a kind of cognitive skill to analyze the source text from different angles. Since English and Chinese belong to two different language families: the Indo-European language family and Sino-Tibetan language family, Chinese learners are often faced with difficulties in understanding and using English words accurately when their English reach a higher level, i.e., when the English words and expressions become more abstract and culturally loaded. Moreover, the number of English words is far greater than that of Chinese characters. For instance, more than 86000 words and 95000 phrases are included in Oxford Advanced Learner’s

Dictionary (10<sup>th</sup> ed.), while in Xinhua Dictionary (12<sup>th</sup> ed.) there are about 13000 Chinese characters. This implies it is somewhat impossible to find the exact equivalence between the two languages and individuals are likely to interpret the source text differently. How to develop learners' critical thinking skills by using translation strategy in language teaching will be discussed in terms of polysemy, synonym, semantic change and culture-loaded words. The translation examples are chosen from dictionaries, textbooks or classic works.

### 3.1 Critical Analysis of Polysemy Through Translating English Into Chinese

Polysemy, as opposed to monosemy, is the coexistence of several meanings in a single word or phrase. Polysemous words, may cause misunderstandings or misinterpretations if students take it for granted that they know the core meaning of the word well and neglect the context in which the word may carry a different meaning. Translating such multi-meaning words may not only enable the learners to ponder over them more carefully but also help the teachers know better how their students comprehend the source text.

There are many examples to illustrate the difficulties posed by these multiple sense words in language learning. Guiding the students to be conscious of the context by means of translating is one of the effective ways to develop critical thinking ability. The word "institution" will be used as an example to illustrate in the following sentences.

Example 1: The most important approach we can take to keep AI safe is to work on our human governance and social *institution*.

确保人工智能安全最重要的途径是致力于改善我们人类的管理方式和社会制度。

Example 2: The bank does not accept loans of a high risk because it is a very conservative financial *institution*.

该银行不接受高风险贷款，因为这是一家非常谨慎的金融机构。

Example 3: Although there is variation across cultures, marriage is an *institution* in almost every culture, and most people do get married.

尽管人们结婚会因文化而异，它仍然是几乎每个文化的习俗，大多数人确实是会结婚的。

The word *institution* in the above three examples is a polysemous word, meaning "an organization, a custom or system". In example 1, it is translated into "system" in Chinese, while in example 2 and example 3, it means "organization" and "custom" respectively. Very often, students are confused on the exact meaning of the word when it occurs in different context. In order to translate the word accurately, students must analyze the sentence carefully and make their own judgement. Their translated work will also enable the teacher to know whether there is miscomprehension or not.

### 3.2 Critical Analysis of Synonym Through Translating Chinese Into English

Synonym, a word or phrase that means exactly the same or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language, often present difficulties for Chinese learners. Quite a few undergraduate students need to keep translating their thoughts mentally from Chinese to English when they are not familiar with the English expressions. Sometimes, a certain meaning in Chinese may be literally related to several English words. For example, the Chinese word *yingxiang* (影响) can be translated into "affect", "effect", "influence" or "impact" in English if there is no context clues. Usually, the students have no difficulties in understanding this kind of words in the English text. However, they may misuse the word when they need to express it in English. Translating Chinese into English is a good way to enable them to make comparison of the context and find how to use these English words correctly.

Example 4: 辐射泄漏对环境造成了灾难性的影响。

The radiation leak has had a disastrous *effect/impact* on the environment.

Example 5: 核能对环境的影响一直是科学家和政策制定者们争议的问题。

The environmental *impact* of nuclear power remains a contentious issue among scientists and policymakers.

Example 6: 我们的环境不断影响着我们的生活方式。

Our environment continually *influences* our lifestyle.

The Chinese word *yingxiang* in the above three sentences is translated into different words in English. In example 4, the word *effect* is used to mean the disaster that the radiation leak has caused on the environment and it emphasizes the "outcome" or "consequence" of one thing on another, while the word *impact* refers to the powerful effect of radiation leak on the environment. These two meanings are both possible in such a context. By comparison, the word *effect* cannot be used in example 5 because it only refers to the "consequence". The word *impact* refers to the powerful effects of nuclear power on the environment since such effects are usually sudden and unexpected. The word *influence* in example 6 means that our environment affects the way we live. Used as a verb, it means to have the power or force to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen.

There are a larger number of synonyms existing in English vocabulary. Obviously, the process of translating Chinese into English involves careful and critical analysis of the word meaning in the context. This kind of translation practice is an effective way to help students learn to give a deep thought of the words more actively instead of just memorizing their meanings mechanically, which cost them a great amount of time. After being able to sense the differences of these synonyms by themselves students will gradually be capable of using them precisely and naturally without consciously making comparisons.

### 3.2 Critical Analysis of Semantic Change Through Translating English Into Chinese

Semantic change refers to any change in the meaning(s) of a word over the course of time. Although it is not much difficult for the English natives to know this kind of change, Chinese learners may often misunderstand the word because they have little or no chance to be exposed to the English environment and are lack of cultural background knowledge. A typical example is the misunderstanding of the word “gay” in the book title by Lin Yutang (1948).

Example 7: *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo*

The author Lin depicted Su Tungpo as an open-minded, optimistic, encyclopedic literary figure in the Song Dynasty (960 AD -1279 AD) in China. However, the word “gay” in the book title is likely to be misinterpreted by some Chinese learners.

In order to find out whether the college students can interpret the title correctly or not, a survey was conducted among 118 freshmen taught by the author. These students are the non-English majors in their first semester of study. They were asked to translate the title into Chinese during the class without checking the dictionary and submit the translation online. Altogether, there are 104 freshmen who submitted their translations and 11 students mistranslated the word *gay* into “homosexual”. Among them, five students did not know whom Su Tongpo is. Obviously, if there is no translation involved, it is less likely for the learners and teachers to know that they have made a serious error and distorted the fact.

After finding there is misunderstanding of the word, the teacher suggested the students to check the word in the English dictionary and guide them to evaluate the context. These students realized that the old use of the word *gay* was “happy or merry” and found its first known use as “homosexual” was in 1953 according to the Webster Dictionary, which occurred years later after Lin’s book was published.

Such critical scrutiny of semantic shift contributes to students’ cognitive process and enables them to make connection between the new sense and the old one. Pedagogical translation helps those who are struggling with rote memorization of vocabulary and engage them more actively in building and enlarging English vocabulary in contextualized teaching and learning. It also helps them to use the target language as precisely as possible.

### 3.4 Critical Analysis of Culture-Loaded Words in Translation

The understanding of culture-loaded words often causes difficulties for language learners, which also poses a great challenge to ELT teachers. Xu Guozhang (1980), the first Chinese scholar to discuss the culturally loaded words

in English teaching, put forward that language teachers should think about a place for the intellectual skills (history, literature and culture) in teaching after examining the different interpretation of the same word between Chinese and English. Using translation practice to teach words with special connotation enables learners to think more deeply about both the target language and source language, and thus better understand what is implied at the same time.

Example 8: In the USA, NASA didn’t accept applications from women to become **astronauts** until 1978.

Example 9: Ever since **cosmonaut** Yuri Gagarin became the first person to journey into space in 1961, scientists have been exploring it and pushing the boundaries to try and go further and discover things that are yet to be discovered.

Example 10: The Shenzhou-15 **taikonauts** on board the orbiting Chinese Tiangong space station completed their first spacewalk at 12:16 a.m.

Astronaut, cosmonaut, and taikonaut in the above three examples are all terms for those who travel into space. The Americans used the term *astronaut* whereas the Soviets used the term *cosmonaut*. The term *taikonaut* was proposed when China became the third country to successfully conduct a crewed space mission in 2003. In translation practice, the difference in terms often cause students’ curiosity to dig into the word history through various ways, enabling them to better understand the space race among superpowers and also become proud of their motherland.

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## 4. CONCLUSION

Since the meaning of words and concepts in different cultures vary, it is somewhat difficult for learners to understand them well or they might be unconscious of the miscomprehension. The difficulties in properly translating the source language also hinders students’ comprehension sometimes, causing a lack of confidence in learning English. Pedagogical translation, different from translation courses, provides opportunities for non-English learners to dig into both the source language and target language more deeply and thus improve their critical thinking skills.

A broad assumption underlies this paper: pedagogical translation is a rational activity. The translation of four different word categories is discussed and analyzed. Through critical analysis of translating polysemy, synonym, semantic change and culture-loaded words in the context, learners are able to go beyond the literal meaning and build their cognitive skills by actively questioning and analyzing the source text from different angles and evaluate translated text as to the degree of its adequacy in relation to source text.

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