

## English Majors' Translation Learning: A Questionnaire-Based Study

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Received 6 November 2012; accepted 23 January 2013

### Abstract

This paper investigates the translation learning of English majors. Specifically it reports on the effective ways of teaching and learning translation and English major's translation learning techniques. It also discusses what is in a good translation syllabus. Data come from a questionnaire that was designed to investigate English major's translation learning techniques consisted of 32 questions, with 30 ranking questions and 2 open-ended questions. Those questions are divided into 3 sections. The paper reports on 89 of 100 questionnaires.

**Key words:** Translation study; Translation syllabus; Translation teaching methods; Translation learning techniques

CHEN Hua (2013). English Majors' Translation Learning: A Questionnaire-Based Study. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 4(1), 1-6. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020130401.11188> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130401.11188>

### INTRODUCTION

The objective of the study is to better understand the translation learning of university English majors. The study is specifically trying to gather more information for teachers, by asking our students, on what are the effective ways of translation teaching and what are for English majors' the most effective translation learning techniques. The study seeks to answer three questions. The first question is "How do the students view translation syllabus

design?"; the second question asks "How do students view translation learning techniques?" and the last questions is "How do students view translation teaching methods?" These questions and the data from them are summarized in Appendix A.

Translation learning and the ability to translate between two languages, is an important part of language learning and also is critical in students' language capability. There are many questions surrounding the topic of translation leaning, and debates spring up regularly on various issues in this field. This paper adds to the discussion from an English language teacher's perspective and one who is teaching English major students in a key economic university in Shandong, China.

As more and more English majors have difficulty in finding a job. Even after they have graduated and have received their degree or certificate, some students are still not competent English speakers or users. This is a very severe question, and quite a lot of discussions and research has appeared in this field. One such study carried out says that "It is necessary to make the market demands clear in teaching regularities" (HE, YIN, HUANG, & LIU, 1999). There are other studies on this topic, e.g. Catford (1965), Nida and Charles (1969), Hatim and LAN (1997), as well as Wolfram (2001). These studies have been conducted in diverse contexts, with widely differing student population, and using methodologies that are varied.

Furthermore, there have been a series of conferences on translation teaching in the last decade, ranging from domestic conferences to international conferences (MU, 1999, pp. 95-101, 294-316). This has greatly improved the study on translation teaching and learning. The present study is aimed at investigating and analyzing English majors' translation learning in Jinan, Shandong. It employs a questionnaire to further analyze and explain translation learning and teaching.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation is a significant process of language learning and development. Consequently, it is important to critique teaching methods and translation learning techniques. However, research has repeatedly shown that there is not enough time for students to learn proficiently how to translate. Most of the universities and colleges offer translation courses only for juniors and seniors. The overall time is up to 80 hours, including students' formative practice and holiday time (WANG, 2001). In China, teaching methods are in some ways out of date. Many teachers randomly choose translation materials.

In fact, findings from the few studies that have investigated translation teaching methods as well as learning techniques have examined the effect of proper teaching and effective learning. Mu Lei (2005) found significant relationships between the two. Moreover, Li Yuchen (1999), Xu Bin (2006) suggested that translation learners need to improve their language capabilities while translation teachers improve their teaching methods in order to better teach students.

Most recent investigations of translation teaching and learning have focused on translation teaching methods, neglecting translation learning techniques. Numerous studies have investigated translation teaching methods. Most teaching methods are input based, assessing students' translation practices, but not very many focus on students' translation technique improvement (e.g., WANG, 2002; WANG, 2003; MU, 2004; LIU & MU, 2006).

Other studies of translation teaching and learning have been output based. These have specifically looked at the effect of translation learning techniques. Wang Zhanbin (2005) found that students' efforts are not consistent with their achievements.

Overall, there are both positives and negatives in the previous studies. The current study sought to find a new viewpoint of the effect of translation teaching methods and learning techniques.

## 2. METHODS

This section describes the methods for this research. The questionnaire was designed to examine translation learning of English majors, specifically on the effective ways of translation and students' viewpoints toward translation teaching methods as well as English majors' translation learning techniques.

### 2.1 Participants

The subjects are 100 full-time third-year undergraduate

English majors of the four classes in the School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Economic University. The participants completed the questionnaire in class time during the semester. They were given 30 minutes to complete it.

### 2.2 Materials

The questionnaire used in the study is based on the one designed by Wang Zhanbin (2005) but somewhat adjusted for this study. The questionnaire was piloted in one of the classes in the School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Economic University and some modifications were made before it was administered to the subjects. The present investigation addressed the following research questions: (1) How do students view translation syllabus design? (2) How do students view translation learning techniques? (3) How do students view translation teaching methods?

### 2.3 Procedures

In the summer of 2007, the research participants completed the questionnaire. The participants completed their questionnaire by themselves. Subjects received the questionnaire, being reminded how to answer two open-ended questions in their English-Chinese translation class. They were completed in class, and then submitted it to their instructor. All statistics were computed with SPSS software. The tables of these data are presented in the Results and Discussion section and Appendix B.

### 2.4 Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered in class time. The questionnaires consisted of 32 questions and focused on how the subjects felt about the role of translation teaching and learning, including students' views on learning translation, on their work in and after class. This study analyzed 89 of these 100 questionnaires.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

For the analysis, the questionnaire was divided into 3 sections, based on their different characteristics, as measured by their overall appropriate use of teaching method as well as learning techniques. Afterwards, the author used SPSS software to analyze the data. The tables of the detailed information show different percentages from the results.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results and statistical analyses for the three research questions are reported on.

### Research Question 1: How do students view translation syllabus design?

**Table 1**  
**Frequency & Percent of Questions About Syllabus Design**

| Question 6 | Frequency | Percent | Question 14 | Frequency | Percent | Question 23 | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| 1          | 83        | 93.3    | 1           | 23        | 25.8    | 1           | 60        | 67.4    |
| 2          | 6         | 6.7     | 2           | 42        | 47.2    | 2           | 20        | 22.5    |
|            |           |         | 3           | 18        | 20.2    | 3           | 9         | 10.1    |
|            |           |         | 4           | 6         | 6.7     |             |           |         |

Questions 6, 14 and 23 give an overview of research question 1.

Question 6 in Table 1 presents the statistics of students' views toward the percentage of translation theory teaching in class. The results of this question show that 93.3% of the students consider that translation theory teaching is rather important and necessary while 6.7% of the students do not like it. It is estimated that translation theory should cover approximately 15% for those undergraduate English majors (MU, 1999). This result indicates that there is of great necessity to have more time in class for university teachers to teach students translation theory.

Question 14 in Table 1 presents the time spent doing translation. The results show that the percentage on a little bit too little time was 47.2% while the percentage of too little time spent doing translation was 20.2%. The results indicate that universities and colleges should spend more time on translation courses for students.

Question 23 in Table 1 presents the way of testing, whether it should be open book or not. The results show that the percentage of those saying that translation tests should be open book were 67.4% while there were about

22.5% of the students holding the opposite opinion. This result indicates that universities and colleges could possibly employ both methods in testing.

The results of this study indicate that students should have more time to do translation practice in and outside class. Also teachers should spend more time explaining translation theories; schools should spend more time for students to have translation classes, including both translation work as well as interpretation. If there could be any way of integrating translation assessments, where students can use their dictionary when translating, it would be very good for the students.

Results from this research question are varied: students had different opinions towards translation syllabus design. In other words, if learners only follow the current translation syllabus, they feel that they cannot become very competent. They will learn better in translation if there could be a new and standard translation syllabus.

**Research Question 2: How do students view translation learning techniques?** Table 2 gives an overview of the frequency and percent of questions about translation learning techniques.

**Table 2**  
**Frequency & Percent of Questions About Translation Learning Techniques**

| Question 1 | Frequency | Percent | Question 2 | Frequency | Percent | Question 3  | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------|------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| 1          | 31        | 34.8    | 1          | 38        | 42.3    | 1           | 28        | 31.5    |
| 2          | 45        | 50.6    | 2          | 50        | 56.2    | 2           | 55        | 61.8    |
| 3          | 7         | 7.9     | 3          | 1         | 1.1     | 3           | 6         | 6.7     |
| 4          | 6         | 6.7     |            |           |         |             |           |         |
| Question 4 | Frequency | Percent | Question 5 | Frequency | Percent | Question 26 | Frequency | Percent |
| 1          | 31        | 34.8    | 1          | 20        | 22.5    | 1           | 7         | 7.9     |
| 2          | 37        | 41.6    | 2          | 39        | 43.8    | 2           | 82        | 92.1    |
| 3          | 20        | 22.5    | 3          | 27        | 30.3    |             |           |         |
| 4          | 1         | 1.1     | 4          | 3         | 3.4     |             |           |         |

Questions 1-5 in Table 2 present students' viewpoints toward the style of translation, students' interest in translation, essay writing, in-class discussion, and outside class translation. The results show that 50.6% of the students prefer literature, while 7.9% of the students like articles about specialist topics. The majority are interested in translating while 1.1% of the students are not interested and they do not like writing translation essays. The writer assumes that Chinese undergraduate education does not emphasize writing essays. A total of 4.6% of the students think discussion outside the class time is a very good way to learn but not often used because cooperation outside class is hard. The research also shows that 49.4% of the students seldom do any exercises outside the class time. That means, if students are forced to, they would like to do it; if there is no strict control over students, students do nothing although almost half of the students want a career in translation. The findings from research question two reveal that in the course syllabus design, different kinds of essays need to be studied. Teachers should try their best to make students interested in translation and improving students' skills of translating. More time should be given to the students and with this students will improve

their translation skills and confidence. Teachers should carefully choose materials, organizing different kinds of translation competitions for students. Question 26 in Table 2 shows that students need to have formal translation training and practice.

Regarding the purposes of translation learning, the results indicate that the majority of students prefer improving their abilities, whereas some other students learn translation in order to job hunt in the future. In addition, this study shows that at present students face serious competition. Thus, students need to integrate translation in their studies in order to learn more so that they can improve quickly and effectively.

**Research Question 3: How do students view translation teaching methods?** Table 3 gives an overview of the findings related to the questions in the questionnaire about translation teaching methods.

Question 8 in Table 3 shows the percentages of the use of Chinese and English in translation classes. The results show that 70.8% of the students insist that teachers should speak both Chinese and English. This result indicates that students feel Chinese English teachers have a good command of both English and Chinese.

Question 9 in Table 3 presents the amount of time of teachers' talk in class. The results show that 44.9% of the students think teachers can talk for half of the time while only 2.2% of the students insist that teachers should talk

all the time. The results indicate that half of the students still depend on teachers' talk instead of their own active talking and discussion. This phenomenon means that independence among the university students should be advocated.

**Table 3**  
**Frequency & Percent of Questions About Translation Teaching Methods**

| Question 8  | Frequency | Percent | Question 9  | Frequency | Percent | Question 10 | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| 1           | 13        | 14.6    | 1           | 2         | 2.2     | 1           | 50        | 56.2    |
| 2           | 13        | 14.6    | 2           | 24        | 27      | 2           | 17        | 19.1    |
| 3           | 63        | 70.8    | 3           | 40        | 44.9    | 3           | 18        | 20.2    |
|             |           |         | 4           | 23        | 25.8    | 4           | 4         | 4.5     |
| Question 11 | Frequency | Percent | Question 12 | Frequency | Percent | Question 16 | Frequency | Percent |
| 1           | 33        | 37.1    | 1           | 17        | 19.1    | 1           | 9         | 10.1    |
| 2           | 43        | 48.3    | 2           | 65        | 73      | 2           | 39        | 43.8    |
| 3           | 7         | 7.9     | 3           | 7         | 7.9     | 3           | 41        | 46.1    |
| 4           | 6         | 6.7     |             |           |         |             |           |         |

Questions 10 and 11 in Table 3 summarize translation teaching methods. The results show that 48.3% of the students prefer paragraph translation and 44.9% of the students insist that they do not have a very good command of English, while 41.6% of the students believe their general knowledge of translation is not wide enough. This result indicates that students should improve themselves and teachers should try their best to motivate students.

Questions 12 and 16 present students' viewpoints about giving answers directly in a translation course in the traditional teaching methods or with student-centered teaching methods. The results show that 73% of the students support the idea of giving the answers and 46.1% of the students insist that there should be a combination of both traditional teaching methods and student-centered teaching methods.

Further results also show that students could be more successful if there are new translation materials. Also teachers could incorporate better improve ways of teaching, such as being more humorous and more student-centered.

The questionnaire ended with two open-ended questions. The first question asked students' for suggestions for teaching translation classes. The second asked the students' attitudes towards teachers. Results show that students like more interesting rather than dull translation courses. Students hope that there could be a separate exercise course book. Some of the students even want to have interesting films as the teaching materials. From the students' viewpoint, teachers should be humorous, knowledgeable and qualified. Most importantly, it is expected that teachers should have a very good command of oral English.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, ways of translation teaching methods, translation syllabus, and English majors' translation

learning techniques were examined in an attempt to probe English majors' translation learning. Findings of the study confirmed that students are interested in translation and want a career in translation. Previous studies (e.g. MU & LEI, 2004) have shown that with effective teaching significant gains in learners' ability to translate are seen. Training students to identify and effectively utilize translation resources may help to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their translating learning skills. The study was designed to examine the effects of translation teaching methods and English majors' translation learning techniques and shows that students would like some slight changes in the teaching of translation and that hopefully these will be of great help to improve the translation abilities of the students, particularly for their future employment, in the future.

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## APPENDIX A

### An Investigation into English Majors' Translation Learning

- What kind of text do you like to translate?  
 News Literature  
 Articles about specialist topics Others (\_\_\_\_\_)
- I am interested in translation.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
- Writing a paper about translation is very helpful.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
- Class discussion makes the classroom learning fun.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
- Group discussion outside class is useful.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
- Do you think translation theory is necessary or not? If yes, what is the percentage of theory to practice?  
 Yes No
- I have done quite a lot of translation exercises outside class time.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
- The teacher in translation class should use\_\_\_\_\_.  
 English Chinese Both English and Chinese
- How much the teacher's talk do you want in class?  
 100% 80% 50% 30%
- What are the best translation materials to you?  
 Interesting materials Interesting activities  
 Detailed explanation Others (\_\_\_\_\_)
- What example should the teacher use in class?  
 Sentences Paragraphs

- Long passages Others (\_\_\_\_\_)
- It is preferable to be given the answer immediately the task is finished.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - What is the biggest problem you have in translation?  
 Understanding the texts Expressing your ideas  
 General knowledge Culture
  - 2 hours per week is not enough.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - How many hours per week do you spend on practice translation?  
 0-1 1-2 3-4 5-6 Others (\_\_\_\_\_)
  - Do you prefer the traditional teacher-oriented method or student-centered method?  
 The former The latter Both
  - Do you think the teachers should explain in detail or just given an overview?  
 The former The latter Both
  - I like the way of teachers pointing out your translation mistakes and correct them immediately after the task is finished.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - I want a career in translation.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - Studying translation under different topic headings is useful.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - How do you use your textbook?  
 Read textbooks carefully Read quickly for gist  
 Seldom read Never read
  - Do you prefer to select your own translation texts?  
 Yes No
  - Which is better: using or not using a dictionary when having translation exams?  
 The former The latter Both
  - I am familiar with the different kinds of translation certificates.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - I like the different kinds of translation activities in school.  
 Strongly agree Agree  
 Disagree Strongly disagree
  - Have you ever participated in any kind of translation training previously?  
 Yes No
  - There is a close relationship between translation and other subjects.  
 Strongly agree Agree

Disagree Strongly disagree  
 28. How do you like to correct your translation mistakes: correcting on your notebook or just reading the answer the teacher gave you?  
 The former The latter Both  
 29. The main objectives of learning translation are: (in order of importance)  
 (most important)----- (least important)  
 (1) To find a really good job (2) Improving your skills and confidence (3) Enjoying translation (4) Passing the post-graduate exam (5) High marks (6) Family expectation

(7) Others (\_\_\_\_\_)  
 30. The methods of learning translation well are: (in order of importance)  
 (most important)----- (least important)  
 (1) Enjoying translation (2) Making an effort (3) A good learning environment (4) A good teacher (5) A good learning method (6) Good textbooks (7) Sitting exams (8) Others (\_\_\_\_\_)  
 31. Any other comments about translation class?  
 32. Any other comments about the translation teachers' qualities?

**APPENDIX B**

**Table 4**  
**Frequency & Percent of Some Questions**

| Question 7  | Frequency | Percent | Question 13 | Frequency | Percent | Question 15 | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| 1           | 4         | 4.5     | 1           | 6         | 6.7     | 1           | 49        | 55.1    |
| 2           | 40        | 44.9    | 2           | 40        | 44.9    | 2           | 24        | 27      |
| 3           | 44        | 49.4    | 3           | 37        | 41.6    | 3           | 10        | 11.2    |
| 4           | 1         | 1.1     | 4           | 6         | 6.7     | 4           | 6         | 6.7     |
| Question 17 | Frequency | Percent | Question 18 | Frequency | Percent | Question 19 | Frequency | Percent |
| 1           | 33        | 37.1    | 1           | 41        | 46.1    | 1           | 19        | 21.3    |
| 2           | 10        | 11.2    | 2           | 44        | 49.4    | 2           | 43        | 48.3    |
| 3           | 46        | 51.7    | 3           | 3         | 3.4     | 3           | 24        | 27      |
|             |           |         | 4           | 1         | 1.1     | 4           | 3         | 3.4     |
| Question 20 | Frequency | Percent | Question 21 | Frequency | Percent | Question 22 | Frequency | Percent |
| 1           | 52        | 58.4    | 1           | 3         | 3.4     | 1           | 66        | 74.2    |
| 2           | 35        | 39.3    | 2           | 35        | 39.3    | 2           | 23        | 25.8    |
| 3           | 2         | 2.2     | 3           | 47        | 52.8    |             |           |         |
|             |           |         | 4           | 4         | 4.5     |             |           |         |