



ON THE ROLE OF CHINESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATION SKILLS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING

ZHANG YU¹, HUANGFU WEI²

¹Master Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China, E-mail address: 1058252775@qq.com

²Professor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China, E-mail address: hfw@ncepu.edu.cn



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Abstract

In the study of English, compared with reading, writing is a general shortcoming for Chinese students. College students, as a group who has received English education for at least 7 years before attending university, still have various problems in their English writings. To sum up, the issues are on lexical, syntactic and textual levels. It deserves our serious attention that many years of English learning fail to equip college students with solid writing ability. In this context, this paper aims to propose an effective method to help students tackle with this issue. That is to improve their English writing performance by practicing Chinese-English translation and using these skills in writing.

Keywords: English writing, Chinese-English translation, English teaching

1. The main problems in the English Writing of college students

In China the study of English is made universal at schools, from elementary to senior high school. Even in rural areas, students have chances to study English from junior middle school. Therefore, as a group who have been educated in English for a long time, college students are equipped with English listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities to a certain extent on the average. However, writing, compared with other aspects, is a weakness for students. The following problems exist in their English writings.

1) First, the vocabulary used in their writing is poor in abundance. This can be summed as “strong receptivity and weak output ability”, which stems from the Grammar Translation Method that has a long history in the English teaching in China. Grammar Translation Method is a teaching method stressing on the study of grammar and text translation, with native language as the teaching

medium, paying more attention to reading and writing than listening and speaking, as well as reciting grammar rules and vocabulary accurately. The students trained though this method often have a solid foundation and practised reading ability. However, their weaknesses are also obvious. Too much emphasis on grammar analysis and text translation fails to foster the communicative competence of students.

Li Jie (2015) did a research on 548 non-English major sophomores consisting of 434 (79.2%) science students and 114 (20.8%) arts students from four Chinese universities. 77.9% of them began to learn English from junior high school, and about 20% began to accept formal English learning at primary school. The result shows that the average vocabulary of these students is close to 3000 words, and they generally have a good command of at least 2000 words. This result is close to what Shao Hua (2002) and Zhou Dajun, Wen Boyan (2000) got from their researches.

Words can be understood to varying degrees, in other words, words may not necessarily all be understood at the same level. Words one can recognize and understand are receptive knowledge and words one can actually produce are productive vocabulary. Many experimental studies found that second language learners' productive vocabulary knowledge tends to lag far behind their receptive knowledge. As the researches above suggest college students have medium amount of vocabulary. However, most of these words belong to receptive vocabulary, which means students has few problems in doing reading comprehension and cloze, nevertheless, they often have poor performance when writing in English. Reflecting in detail, they either stuck for words or afraid to make mistakes when using words. Therefore, they choose the most commonly used words.

2) The second major problem is that the writing of college students does not sound like the authentic English. To be more specific, they produce the kind of writing which is a mixture of English and Chinese, especially a type of English that includes many Chinese words and/or follows Chinese grammar rules. "Chinglish, of course, is that misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as 'English with Chinese characteristics'". (Pinkham 2000: 1-4) This problem is especially common in the writing of the students who has a bad command of English grammar. Frequent problems include the misuse of subject-predicate agreement, tense, incorrect use of part of speech, incomplete sentences and so on. Such knowledge is fundamental in the English grammar system, thus can be avoided if they study carefully. The more prominent obstacle is that even though some students have a good grasp of English grammar, they produce the kind of expressions which sound strange to the native.

3) Also, students on the whole do not attach importance to diversified writing style, or to organizing the writing in structure properly. This problem is largely related to the most widely accepted examination of English proficiency in China—CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band 6), criteria of English level which ask students to write a short

composition of 120 to 150 words based on the requirement of the question in the writing section. No requirement for the structure or layout is mentioned at the same time. Consequently, college students study and practice according to these demands in order to get high marks, losing awareness of the arrangement of the composition. At the same time, the requirements for composition also seriously restrict teachers from instructing students in other important factors of writing a good essay such as cohesion and coherence, and cultivating the discourse awareness of students. On this condition, most students concentrate on using advanced vocabulary and complex grammar when writing, ignoring the layout of the overall composition, the cohesion between paragraphs, which makes their article read like a medley of loosely connected advanced words and grammar.

2. The reasons for applying Chinese English translation skills in English Writing

What comes first is that English writing and C-E translation have a thing in common: like writing, C-E translation is also an essential way of producing foreign language. Writing differs from translating in that it is more independent and need the subjective initiative of the second language learner. Based on the requirements of the composition question, students can express ideas and psychological activities freely, not being restrained in the content and arrangement of their writing. Due to weak of mastery of vocabulary, syntax and layout, they may produce an essay which is easy to understand but rambling in structure. By comparison, translating asks for analysis of the original text first. Only after understanding the meaning and knowing the structural characteristics of the original text, can the translation of semantic meaning and structure be completed accurately. In this sense, translation is a kind of "simplified" writing in which personal creation is not allowed but a higher request is made for use of vocabulary and syntax.

Another reason is that students are generally influenced by their mother tongue in the process of second language learning. Often when writing, students tend to design or write a composition in Chinese, then translate it into English. However,

Chinese and English are non-homologous languages. There are essential differences between the two language systems. English learners and researchers usually believe that Chinese will interfere with English learning. This phenomenon that is called the negative transfer of the first language. Fries and Lado first introduced the word "transfer" into the study of second language acquisition, pointing out that language transfer is "the influence of acquired knowledge and skills in the native language on the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the target language". When the first language is similar to or same as the second language in morpheme and syntax, that is to say, it has a positive impact on the learning of the target language, it will promote positive transfer to the second language. If it has interference, it is "negative transfer". Language transfer exists widely in the study of English among Chinese students. (Zhu Yuefang, 2005) Since C-E translation is a step that most Chinese students take in writing, it is worth trying to promote their writing ability by improving their translation skills.

Thirdly, studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between English writing level and translation ability. An analysis of the correlation between the English writing performance and the C-E translation scores of some junior students majoring English found that higher writing results correspond to higher C-E translation scores, that is, there is a higher positive correlation between the two. (Tian Tian, Wang Shiqing, 2010)

3. Application of translation skills

Translation emphasizes the teaching of vocabulary, grammar and sentence pattern. Through the study of C-E translation, students can make a comparison of the two language thus find out the similarities and differences, developing an intensive understanding and a good command of the two languages.

British translation theorist Peter Newmark claimed: "He (one who writes or speaks in a foreign language) will be 'caught' out every time, not by his grammar, which is probably suspiciously 'better' than an educated native; not by his vocabulary, which may well be wider, but by his unacceptable or improbable collocations."

Therefore, to be a qualified and excellent English learner, it is not enough to overcome the difficulties of vocabulary and grammar. Only correct understanding and authentic use of various expressions and syntax is the yardstick by which to measure one's English level. The translation skills can be used for reference include the following two aspects.

1) Translating expressions

When expressing the set phrase "人山人海", for most beginning learners what is off the top of their head is "people mountain people sea", a translation which split the four-word phrase into four single words and correspond each Chinese word to four English word. However, this expression is not in line with the expression conventions of native English speakers. Although they might guess its meaning roughly, they will think it is so strange. Similarly, the majority of students translate "红茶" ("red tea" literally, "black tea" actually) into "red tea". Actually, "人山人海" should be translated as "a sea of people" or "huge crowds of people" and "红茶" as "black tea". Such cases are usual as in terms of understanding students only catch the meaning of words literally from the context, and in term of delivering, they fail to convey the message in accordance with native English. The problems that appear in a translation are also possible to emerge from a composition. That's because writing can be seen as a translation of one's thoughts, some concepts, or topics, which are ideas that cannot be split into single words and corresponded literally by words in another language. What is needed is to see it as a whole and interpret with real understanding.

2) Translating sentences

Compared with words, the expression of sentences should be more complex, with the context, cultural background, expression habits and other factors being taken into account. For example, there are great differences in the structure of Chinese and English sentences. The Chinese sentence says facts and background at the start, and judgments and conclusions at the end; English sentences, however, is the opposite situation. For example, we say "将一次工业革命同两次政治革

命相提并论，似乎有些奇怪。” in Chinese. This sentence should be translated as “It may seem strange to put into the same packet an industrial revolution and two political revolutions.” in English. The reason for this could be explained by the famous Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that our language help mould our way of thinking and, consequently, different languages may probably express speakers’ unique ways of understanding the world. It would be plausible to say the reverse that our way of thinking also determine how we speak. As of thinking mode, English is deductive while Chinese is inductive. Therefore, in C-E translation we should pay attention to the differences in logic. Specifically, on the basis of correct understanding of the logic of the original text, rearrange the translation according to the logic of the target language.

4. Suggestions on teaching

Reasonable application of C-E translation skills is conducive to better writing performance of students. To better play its role, the following points should be paid attention to in the actual teaching process.

First of all, teachers should help students know what language transfer is and its negative impact on the study of the second language. Second language learners can hardly escape the negative transfer of their native languages in the process of learning a foreign language. There are great differences in vocabulary, syntax, thinking mode and cultural background between Chinese and English, so negative transfer is especially easy to appear when a Chinese study English. In the process of English learning students are in unwitting control of Chinese expression habits, producing the English writing with Chinese characteristics. It is necessary for teachers to help students realize the existence of this problem and encourage them to overcome it.

Secondly, teachers should instruct students in some translation theories and skills. It is a very efficient method to choose the right theory to guide practice. It has been proven that learning translation theory and skills indeed can play a guiding role in translation practice. Meanwhile through training instructors can help learners fully understand the characteristics of English and Chinese through

comparison, and clarify the differences between the two languages, so that the translation of learners achieves the requirements of “language authentic”. Teachers should teach students to pay attention to authentic English expression in English translation, not simply grammar and vocabulary.

Last but not least, in the course of translation training teachers are suggested in selecting practice materials with suitable complexity based on the actual proficiency and interest of students. Basically, the practice can start with phrases, then sentence by sentence, then paragraph by paragraph so as not to dampen learners’ enthusiasm by excessive input. According to the “i+1” principle put forward by the American linguist Krashen, learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level. “i” is the current level of learners, and “+1” is the slightly difficult language knowledge learners need to grasp. To do this, teachers should ensure that what to learn must be within the comprehension of students while being challenging. For the sake of motivating learners and making the training more targeted and effective, teachers can select movie lines, songs, specialized shoptalk as practice materials, so that students can realize how practical and funny C-E translation is.

5. Conclusion

Though getting higher marks in English is the major task Chinese students are facing, it should never be the overarching goal of learning English. For every second language learner, the more fundamental things are to master the new language, to read the articles of authors from other countries, to communicate smoothly with people from all over the world, in a word, to use English in life and work. Therefore, language output is a necessary skill for learners. English writing demands learners to express themselves in written words of another language, in which such factors as content planning, use of words and sentence structures, organization should all be taken into consideration. C-E translation provides a way for learners compare the two language on lexical and syntactic level, demonstrating to students how authentic

expressions are used in writing, thus is a promising method to improve one's English writing ability.

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