

# The Language Used for Teaching Translation Theory Courses on Master Programs in Translation and Interpreting

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**Abstract**—Concerning using which language, the native tongue or a foreign one, to teach translation theory courses on master programs in translation and interpreting, investigations have been carried out in some universities running such programs in both Wuhan, a Chinese city and the UK. Additionally, textbook compilation for theory courses published by Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press, China's leading press in foreign languages, has been reviewed. The study finds that such courses are mainly taught in the native language with three motives identified: 1) to defend national ego and elevate the status of the native language; 2) to inspire students to be interested in studying intricate and abstract translation theory; 3) to encourage students to contribute to the development and innovation of translation studies in the local context.

**Keywords**—*master programs in translation and interpreting, translation theory courses, the language used for teaching*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the approval and launch of MTI (Master of Translation and Interpreting) by the Degree Committee of China's State Council in 2007, the past decade has witnessed the number of the higher institutions running such program soaring from 15 to 246 in 2008. MTI is aimed at developing high-level, applied and specialized translators and interpreters who will meet the country's desire for social, economic and cultural development and strengthened international competitiveness [1]. In recent years, MTI has been developing at full swing, with studies on curriculum design, pedagogy, teaching materials, teachers and facilities mushrooming. Since the program is oriented to practical training, skill-based courses are highlighted while those on translation theory seldom capture the attention of researchers. Regarding the language used for teaching MTI, skill-based courses are more often than not taught in English or at least bilingually (this paper mainly discusses the English-Chinese language pair) while translation theory is primarily taught in Chinese. A further probe into the reasons for this may deepen our understanding of the nature of

translation theory courses and identify their key role in training prospective translators and interpreters.

## II. CONTENT AND FUNCTIONS OF TRANSLATION THEORY COURSES

China National Committee for Translation and Interpreting Education divides MTI courses and textbooks into five categories: translation, interpreting, theory, extralinguistic knowledge and reference books. The translation theory series consists of Introduction to Translation, Methodology of Translation Studies, Translation History in China and West, and Classic Readings of Contemporary Western Translation Theory. Introduction to Translation is aimed at guiding students to understand the mechanism and nature of translation, to appreciate the fundamental theoretical issues in the field, to know in detail its professional characteristics and to improve translation skills by forming a rightful translation outlook. Methodology of Translation Studies is aimed at cultivating students' awareness of researching translation using scientific methods. In this way, students with a solid logic reasoning capability are guided to base their findings on adequate facts and arguments, making their studies rational, scientific and a significant contribution to existing knowledge. Translation History in China and West while helping students grasp the development trajectory of Chinese and Western translation history, deepens their understanding of the evolution of the key concepts in translation studies and the necessity of establishing Translation Studies as an academic discipline. Classic Readings of Contemporary Western Translation Theory illustrates distinct notions and strategies in translation and interpreting research carried out in the West, helping students to know and understand the evidence supporting various teaching modes in the field.

Clearly, the four courses are there to foster students' attainment in translation theory while many prestigious scholars in China have emphasized the importance of theory to trainees. For example, as on the list of the first batch of trial teaching units of MTI, Fudan University maintains that we should cultivate trainees into insightful practitioners with a desire to learn on their own rather than people who can serve as nothing but a soundboard. As Prof. He argued, "they are supposed to be equipped with not only adept skills

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in translation but also a knowledge repertoire on macro issues and the nature of translation” [2]. Prof. Zhuang Zhixiang, the former director of the Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, pointed out that “despite a general introduction for undergraduates, translation theory in postgraduate programs should enable students to appreciate research methods, the evolution of key thoughts and the relationship among different theoretical schools in the field” [3]. Prof. Mu Lei, a research fellow with Center for Translation Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, also argued that “thanks to translation theory, practitioners are making sensible choices of translation strategies, understanding the connotation and effect of each choice so as to perfect their translation” [4]. In a word, a qualified translator / interpreter is supposed to know something about translation theory, “which not only guides translation practice on the macro level but also serves as an indispensable part of translation competence” [5]. Therefore, the teaching of translation theory should not be overlooked in MTI programs.

### III. THE LANGUAGE USED FOR TEACHING TRANSLATION THEORY COURSES

In order to give full play to the effects of the immersion teaching mode, the conventional English major tends to deliver courses in English or at least bilingually. However, “the English major is aimed at cultivating qualified English users while the translation major is aimed at fostering professional translators and interpreters” [6]. In other words, the two majors focus on different targets: English competence vs. translation competence. Apart from including English competence, translation competence also includes “the capability to coordinate, to use translation strategies and translation tools and to reflect on translation theory” [7]. Therefore, when training students with translation skills and theory, we are targeting not only their English proficiency but also their overall translation competence, which subtly influences our choice of the language for teaching translation theory courses aimed at motivating academic innovation and critical thinking.

Via telephone, email and face-to-face interviews, the paper finds that the 10 Wuhan-based universities running MTI teach translation theory courses unanimously in Chinese, while English only serves as a supplement. This means that both the teacher and students on such courses are proceeding in Chinese, except when touching upon English quotes and translation examples. Most of the respondents propose that MTI is aimed at training professionals while translation theory per se is profound, far from practice and rarely represented in the program syllabus and consequently students might feel confused or even grudge theory if it is taught totally in English.

Apart from that, the teaching language is affected by the language used for compiling MTI textbooks, which are authorized by the MTI Committee. As is investigated, since 2009 the Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Press entrusted by the MTI Committee, has compiled a series of

books for the program. More specifically, four textbooks on translation theory have been commissioned to four leading translation scholars in China who will complete the compilation according to the program syllabus set by the Committee. They are Introduction to Translation, by Prof. Xu Jun of Zhejiang University; Methodology of Translation Studies, by Prof. Mu Lei of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies; Translation History of China and West, by Prof. Xie Tianzhen of Shanghai International Studies University; and Classic Readings of Western Translation Theory, by Prof. Liao Qiyi of Sichuan International Studies University. Seen from the language used for compilation, except that the last one is in English as it was introduced from abroad, the rest three were all written primarily in Chinese. Not only that, as investigated by the researcher, most of the MTI textbooks on translation theory in the market are written in Chinese except the original editions introduced from the English-speaking countries.

The convention believes that students majoring in English are primarily aimed at learning English well so that they can communicate effectively. Influenced by this, schools offering MTI normally teach in English or bilingually. For example, English proficiency courses including listening, reading, speaking and writing are all taught in English while MTI core courses like interpreting, translation and sight interpreting are taught bilingually given the frequent conversions between the two languages. So against this background, we may wonder why only translation theory courses are taught in Chinese.

### IV. REFLECTING ON THE MOTIVES FOR TEACHING THE COURSES IN CHINESE

Prof. Xie expounds the choice of language for writing PhD thesis in China’s schools of foreign languages in his paper “Using which language to write a PhD thesis for foreign languages and literature” [8]. In his paper, he articulates the reasons for his persistence in writing in Chinese. Firstly, it concerns China’s sovereignty and the international status of its language. Normally, no university in the world except China would permit their students to write thesis in a foreign language. As surveyed by Prof. Xie, China’s PhD thesis was written in a foreign language, particularly English at the very early stage of Chinese universities around a century ago when China was nothing but a semi-colonial society, with many a supervisor being westerners who did not know Chinese or did not want to learn the language. As a result, they just copied the whole set of rules about degree management, implementing it in the Chinese setting. Secondly, PhD research is aimed at improving students’ independent research competence and creativity rather than training their writing skill in a foreign language. Overemphasis on grammar, syntax, semantics and so on will deviate the attention of both the supervisors and students from the research itself to minor language issues, thus overlooking the development of core research skills. Thirdly, writing PhD thesis in a foreign language may end up with the students quoting more from abroad than from home, as it would be energy-consuming to translate Chinese

references into foreign languages. Consequently, students tend to avoid quoting Chinese studies, impeding the academic development at home.

Comparing Prof. Xie's appeal for writing PhD thesis in Chinese and the delivery of translation theory courses in Chinese, it is not difficult to find great similarity between the two in motives. Firstly, from the perspective of China's national language policy, using Chinese to teach such courses plays a significant role in defending its national sovereignty and ego as well as elevating the status of its language in the world. After surveying the website of CIUTI [9], an internationally recognized association for higher institutions offering degree programs in translation and interpreting, the Chinese-English translation courses in the UK, the US, Australia and other English-speaking countries are unanimously taught in English or bilingually with English playing the main part. While pursuing his PhD studies in the UK, the researcher of this paper visited some universities offering MA or PhD program in translation and interpreting, such as University of Leeds, University of Manchester, University of Newcastle, Durham University, University of Surrey and University of Birmingham. After auditing courses and talking with teachers and students there, the researcher concluded that the thesis and the teaching of any subject including translation is done in English, although a few of them may use Chinese provided that they get the approval of the school (such as Chinese-English translation practicum and workshop). Therefore, it is hard to imagine universities running translation programs would ask / allow students to complete their thesis or give the course in Chinese.

Secondly, the aim of translation theory courses such as Chinese and Western Translation History and Research Methods is to cultivate students' logical, creative and critical thinking abilities, enabling them to reflect on their and others' translation practice and to inspire and guide their practice with theory. It is therefore argued in this paper that research should not be alienated from practice. MTI students are expected to reach a highly applied and specialized level in terms of practice, but their research awareness should be enhanced correspondingly, so "it is essential to posit academic research as an important cornerstone of MTI education" [10]. This also explains why long before the establishment of Translation Studies as an academic discipline in China, all the teaching and research related to translation used to be named Theory and Practice of Translation. Translation theory courses are aimed at training students' research awareness and capability instead of their language proficiency, so they cannot be simply replaced by skill-based courses. However, the reality is "the majority of MTI students are far from being proficient in using English; instead they are brushing up their English while receiving training in translation and interpreting" [2]. Therefore, teaching theory-based courses in Chinese enables students to better understand those complex and obscure theories and

to freely discuss them with their peers and supervisors, therefore more efficiently boosting their theory awareness and research competence.

Thirdly, translation theory courses should guide students to put local theories and Western theories in a dialectic perspective. Were the courses taught entirely in English, students' attention would be captured by only Western theories which are predominantly proposed and disseminated in English, which would undoubtedly impede their interest in studying and developing theories within the Chinese context. Therefore, teaching in Chinese will encourage students to be more concerned with the achievements of Chinese translation studies, inspiring them to develop local theories while critically accepting Western ones.

## V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the attainment of translation theory is crucial to improving translators' overall competence although MTI focuses on the practical side. After surveying MTI teaching points at the tertiary tier in both China and the UK and analyzing the choice of language for compiling the officially MTI textbooks, the research finds that the majority of such courses are delivered in Chinese and the three underlying motives have been discussed. There have been no other similar studies since the inauguration of MTI in China, so this paper attempts to draw more academic attention to the selection of language used for teaching MTI courses so as to jointly contribute to the development of translation education in both China and the world at large.

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