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## Task-Based Approach in Teaching Scientific Translation - The Case of English for Electrical Engineering

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### ABSTRACT

To respond to the recent shift in translation teaching from a teacher-centered tradition towards a student-centered approach, this paper seeks to study the application of the task-based approach in teaching scientific translation in the theoretical framework of social constructivism. It proposes that task cycles in translation teaching consist of six stages, namely, pre-task, task, reviewing, analysis, revising and reflection. With an undergraduate translation course—Translation of Specialized English for Electrical Engineering—as an example, the paper examines how the task-based approach can be incorporated into classroom practice in translator training. It is found that task-based teaching can effectively contribute to the cultivation of students' translation competence. However, as a highly demanding teaching and learning method, the adoption of the task-based approach in translator training can only proceed in an orderly way and step by step.

**Keywords:** Self and Identity, Therapeutic Writing, Developmental Creative Writing.

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### 1. Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed great progresses of translator training in the world, but there still exist lots of challenges. Capable translators are still in shortage all over the world, demanding that colleges, universities and translator training institutions to improve student translators' translation competence efficiently. Business and technical translation accounts for the biggest proportion of translation work currently being commissioned by the industry (Kingscott, 1995; Venuti, 1995). It is, therefore, no surprise that scientific translation teaching has been attached great importance in translator training programs.

Nowadays, it is widely agreed that the ultimate objective of translator training programs is to develop and/or improve students' translation competence through more effective and efficient teaching and

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learning (Lee-Jahnke, 2011). Research focus on the translation process in translation studies over the past two decades has brought about several translation competence models (e.g. PACTE, 2003, 2005; Kelly, 2005; Göpferich, 2009), among which PACTE's model is the most widely recognized and adopted one. PACTE's 2005 model of translation competence consists of the following five sub-competences and psycho-physiological components (PACTE, 2005):

- a. bilingual sub-competence, made up of pragmatic, socio-linguistic, textual and lexical-grammatical knowledge in each language;
- b. extra-linguistic sub-competence, pertaining to the translator's encyclopedic, thematic and bicultural knowledge;
- c. translation knowledge sub-competence, designating the knowledge of the principles that guide translation (processes, methods and procedures, etc.) and the profession (types of translation briefs, users, etc.);
- d. instrumental sub-competence, made up of knowledge related to the use of documentation sources and information technologies applied to translation;
- e. strategic sub-competence, understood as the capacity to plan a translation project, evaluate the translation process and outputs, activate any additional sub-competence that may be required to compensate for translation deficiencies, and identify/solve translation problems;
- f. psycho-physiological components, including cognitive and behavioral (memory, attention span, perseverance, critical mind, etc.) as well as psychomotor mechanisms.

It is clear that the traditional "presentation, practice and production" way of teaching translation cannot fully meet the requirement of translation competence development which requires higher level of student participation. In this instance, with an undergraduate translation course—*Translation of Specialized English for Electrical Engineering*—as the case of study, this paper proposes a task-based approach, a teaching approach initiated and popularized in second language instruction, to increase the effectiveness of scientific translation teaching and learning. The following parts of the paper is organized as follows: part 2 introduces the task-based approach and its theoretical foundation; part 3 discusses the use of task-based teaching in translation training; part 4 introduces the case of teaching translation of English for electrical engineering in a Chinese classroom; and the last part comes to the conclusion of the study.

## 2. Task-based approach and its theoretical foundation

Task-based approach was first proposed by British linguist N. S. Prabhu in India in the late 1970s. Prabhu designed many real learning tasks for students to accomplish in class in South India and claimed that "it's not English for communication but English through communication" (Prabhu, 1987). Since the 1990s, the task-based approach has been applied widely in foreign language teaching, focusing on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Task-based approach is an important way to carry out communicative language teaching and can find its theoretical foundation in constructivism.

Constructivism as a philosophy of learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) suggests that learning is an active process and people construct understanding and knowledge of the world by living through and experiencing things and reflecting on such experiences. Moving a step further, social constructivism views learning as a social collaborative process. Learners construct knowledge through interactions with their peers, the teacher as well as the tasks. It is in the real context reflective of the real world that learners discover concepts, principles and facts for themselves and it is because of such a focus on learning that learners are motivated and ready to take responsibility for their own learning (Lantolf, 2000). In this learner-centered approach, the focus is placed on the learners, the process of learning, the reflective practice of learning, and the use of real world authentic tasks.

Willis (1996) proposed an operational framework of task-based approach, dividing the task into three phrases, namely, pre-task, task cycle and post-task. Pre-task is an introduction and preparation to the topic and the task. Task cycle consists of three stages: a) the task stage in which students complete a task in pairs

or groups using their language skills and resources while the teacher monitors and offers encouragement; b) the planning stage in which students prepare a report on the process of implementing the task; c) report stage in which students report to the class orally or read their written report. The teacher may give the students some quick feedback. Post-task is also called language focus. The teacher selects relevant parts of the students' recordings of their activities and the students carry out language analysis on them. The teacher selects language areas for students to practice based upon their needs and what emerged from the task and report phases.

The most recent development in translator training is the shift from a teacher-centered (transmissionist) tradition towards a student-centered (interactionist) approach to knowledge construction (Kelly, 2005). As scientific translation covers a wide range of topics which cannot possibly be fully introduced to students, it is important to develop students' ability to learn on their own. In line with this, task-based approach could be used in translation teaching to facilitate student translators' learning as well as to improve their translation competence.

### 3. Task-based teaching of scientific translation

As mentioned above, task-based teaching is originally used in language teaching. It is necessary to make some adjustments when applying it to translation teaching as a result of the remarkable differences in language teaching and translation teaching. In translation teaching, it is suggested that the task-based model should consist of the following six stages: pre-task, task, reviewing, analysis, revising and reflection.

Although "task" is defined in numerous ways, it is generally agreed that a task used in translation teaching should be able to create a real world context for students to improve their translation competence. Translation classroom activities designed to facilitate learning could be tasks previously performed by the teachers (Vienne, 1994), simulated translation tasks (Király, 2000), or authentic translation projects (Király, 2005; Li, 2000; Lee-Jahnke, 2011). No matter what type the task is, it should be carefully selected to meet the teaching objectives.

In the pre-task stage, the teacher should introduce the topic and give students clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage. Translation strategies and techniques which might be useful for performing the task should be reviewed. In the meanwhile, translation resources such as related corpus or online research tools should be provided to students. Students should study the translation task comprehensively and clarify with the teacher any possible questions. Most importantly, they should read materials in both the source language and the target language to gain understanding of the related subject of the coming translation task, while familiarizing themselves with related terminology in both languages.

In the task stage, students should complete the task in pairs or groups during which they may make further research on related knowledge and resources necessary for translating the text. The teacher's task in this stage is to monitor and facilitate the pair/group work.

The reviewing stage requires students to summarize their translation processes, reporting difficulties, problems they meet in the translation process and their solutions. Students are encouraged to reflect on their translation process and product as well as to share their reflection orally with the class. The teacher is expected to coordinate the sharing and give brief feedback on both the translations and translation process.

In the analysis stage, the teacher should highlight the specific learning objectives and targets of the task, illustrating them with examples taken from the translation task. The students will be required to analyze in detail on certain selected translations with peers or the teacher.

In the revising stage, the students incorporate the feedback from sharing and analysis, revise and edit their translations in groups. The teacher should assist students with their revision and editing. The teacher should also coordinate final assessment in the form of peer review and self-evaluation of their translation task.

In the reflection stage, the students are expected to reflect on the translation task on both a macro (aspects such as implementation of the translation plan, quality control, communication with the client, etc.) and a micro level (aspects such as translation problems and difficulties and their corresponding solutions).

The teacher in this stage should reflect on the entire activity from a pedagogical angle and take notes of useful tips for future teaching.

#### 4. Application of a simulated translation task in scientific translation teaching

A translation task is ideally a genuine translation assignment from a real client, where the student translators are to produce a target text as per the terms and conditions specified in the translation commission (Kiraly, 2000). However, mainly due to the fierce competition in the language service industry, it is extremely hard to source a real translation task (Gouadec, 2007). In this instance, simulated translation tasks could be an alternative as they carry all the characteristics of an authentic translation project except for lack of a real client. Besides, unlike authentic ones simulated tasks can be tailor-made to suit the purpose of learning and the levels of the students. The following part in this paper will report an application of task-based approach in an undergraduate translation course-- *Transaction of Specialized English for Electrical Engineering*.

The task is English to Chinese translation of a book chapter on electrical power generation from an English book on electrical engineering. It should be noted that the book has no Chinese edition, therefore students have no available translation to refer to.

In the pre-task stage, terms and conditions of the translation task were clarified to students and an execution plan was made. The entire chapter consists of approximately 2800 words. Students, 16 in total, were divided into 4 groups, each taking responsibility for the translation of approximately 700 words. The turnaround time allowed for the task was one month. It was agreed that the first draft would be completed by the end of the first week; the class would then discuss the translation in the second week, thus providing ample time to revise and refine it. Students would then meet again in the third week to solve any remaining problems they might still have before submitting their translations to the teacher. A small group was formed to finalize and format the translation.

To prepare for the translation, the students conducted an online and library search for Chinese texts on electric power generation. Several English-Chinese parallel texts on electric power generation were provided by the teacher (the author). According to records of their reflection in the final stages of the task, the reading of these documents turned out to be quite helpful in facilitating their understanding of the English texts.

In the first week meeting in class, students came up with many questions arising from their translations, but the author as a facilitator encouraged them to discuss their questions and find answers collectively instead of answering their questions directly.

Questions and problems were also raised in the second week of the task. The author still insisted that students should rely on their own initiative to analyze their problems and find the answers. The author also reminded the group leader that he/she should control the time and the progress of their discussions.

The reviewing and reflection of the translation task were arranged in the third week. Each group orally reported problems and difficulties they encountered in the translation process in the first hour of the two-hour session. During the second hour, students reflected on their translations, the translation processes and their problem-solving strategies.

After a final week of revision, editing and proofreading, all the groups submitted their translations to the teacher in the fourth week. In this stage, the author took a more active role in ensuring that the translations were consistent and up to the required standard. The author found that the biggest difficulty students encountered in their translation was the accurate translation of some semi-technical words and expressions due to their lack of subject-related knowledge on power generation. Students were instructed to find an example in their translations that best illustrated their solutions to the translation of semi-technical words and expressions. After the completion of the task, all students were required to write a reflection journal on this task, which would be an important part of their final evaluation in the course.

According to their reflection, students felt very proud of themselves for completing such a difficult task. They reported that they learnt a lot about translation of science and technology under the high pressure

of completing the translation on time and coordinating with other group members. They didn't see translation simply as a conversion of languages and an easy job that can be done by anyone who has a good command of foreign languages. Their interest in translation is highly motivated, determined to take the challenge to produce better translations. It is no doubt that task-based approach is appropriate in teaching scientific translation.

As the teacher, the author also sensed the challenges in adopting task-based approach in translation teaching. It is more difficult for a teacher to assume the role of a facilitator than expected because he/she has to refrain from making decisions for the students. On the other hand, to design a simulated translation task is much more demanding than designing a traditional translation assignment. It is also quite difficult for students who have long been accustomed to having their questions answered by teachers to play a more independent role in their learning. Therefore, it seemed obvious that both teachers and students had to go through a transition period in order to fully embrace the requirements of the student-centered translation teaching approach.

## 5. Conclusion

Translation training programs are booming in universities all around the world, but the market is still experiencing a terrible shortage of qualified translators. It is urgent to have curricular innovation to provide more effective translator training. In line with the trend of shifting translation class from a teacher-centered one to a student-centered one, a task-based approach under the guidance of social constructivism can efficiently increase students' interest in the translation course and direct their attention to the translation process. By encouraging students actively participate in authentic or carefully designed simulated translation tasks, students' translation competence in various aspects will be improved gradually. The use of authentic or simulated tasks in translation teaching can make translator training more responsive to market needs and requirement, narrowing the gap between market demand for and translation training's supply of qualified translators.

However, it takes time for teachers and students to get fully used to their new roles in a student and learning centered class. The adoption of a task-based approach can therefore only proceed in an orderly way and step by step.

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