Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Translation Practice in University English Courses

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Abstract

This study focuses on the college English major translation courses, exploring feasible paths to consciously cultivate students' critical thinking in translation practice. It also clarifies the intrinsic connection between critical thinking and translation practice, and points out that the text interpretation, strategy selection, and result revision in the translation process naturally include thinking stages such as questioning, analysis, argumentation, and reflection. The article highlights a series of teaching strategies based on translation practice, including setting questioning tasks around text interpretation, guiding strategy analysis through comparisons of multiple versions of translation, strengthening immediate judgment and information screening in oral translation training, and developing reflection ability through group mutual evaluation and self-revision. The implementation methods of the strategies are demonstrated through classroom scenarios. The study believes that as long as the task design and classroom organization in the existing translation courses are moderately adjusted, it is possible to continuously improve students' critical thinking without adding excessive burden, thereby effectively improving translation quality and enhancing the effectiveness of English major talent cultivation.

1. Introduction

As the educational goals of higher education in our country shift from merely mastering language knowledge to developing comprehensive abilities, critical thinking has become one of the important goals for English major students. Translation courses have always been a core module in English major teaching. However, in many actual classrooms of universities, translation is often simplified to the search for equivalent sentences and the application of techniques. Students are accustomed to finding a seemingly smooth translation first, and then rush to finalize it, unwilling to reflect from the perspectives of context, logic, and culture. At the same time, translation itself is a complex activity that requires a comprehensive understanding of the text, comprehensive consideration of the purpose, readers, and cultural differences. If

the teaching design is slightly adjusted, the classroom that was originally biased towards skill training can be transformed into a good field for training critical thinking.

2. Theoretical foundations of translation practice and critical thinking

2.1. The basic connotation of critical thinking and the requirements for English majors

In the context of English major teaching, critical thinking is generally understood as the ability of students to purposefully analyze and judge language materials. They neither blindly accept nor casually deny based on personal preferences, but make relatively reasonable judgments and choices based on the information provided in the text, background knowledge, and task requirements. Relevant educational standards indicate that the critical thinking abilities that English major students need to possess include at least three aspects. The first is the ability to interpret and analyze texts, that is, to be able to raise questions when faced with complex expressions, identify ambiguity and contradictions, and attempt to clarify them with the help of context and materials. The second is the ability to analyze and compare multiple expression schemes, being able to explain the reasons why a certain expression is more appropriate rather than just saying "it feels better." The third is the ability to reflect on and improve one's own language works, realizing that translation is not a one-time task but a process that can be continuously optimized through feedback from others and self-checking. For translation major students, these abilities are not abstract but are directly related to their future work in oral and written translation, cross-cultural communication, and academic writing.

2.2. Characteristics of translation practice in university English majors

Translation practice in the English major of universities mainly includes two directions: written translation and interpretation. Written translation tasks cover various text types such as literary works, news reports, instruction manuals, and academic abstracts, requiring students to complete the entire process from reading, understanding, to expression within a relatively ample time. Although written translation seems to be merely a conversion on

paper, it often demands a meticulous analysis of stylistic features, logical structures, and culturally loaded words to ensure the translation is both faithful and fluent. Interpretation training is mainly conducted in classroom simulations, with common forms including short dialogue interpretation and summarizing conference speeches. It requires students to integrate listening, note-taking, thinking, and speaking within a short period of time. In such situations, students cannot translate word-for-word but must learn to grasp the key points and promptly determine where to condense information and where to add background explanations. Whether it is written translation or interpretation, both require students to make judgments and choices when dealing with texts, which is a concrete manifestation of critical thinking [1].

2.3. Translation practice becomes a natural carrier for cultivating critical thinking

From the perspective of the translation process, any complete translation practice involves at least three important steps. The first is the understanding of the source text, which goes beyond the comprehension of words and sentences. It requires the identification of the author's attitude, the intention of the discourse, as well as the culture and values hidden beneath the surface. If students do not get into the habit of asking questions at this stage but merely stay at the level of literal meaning, the subsequent translation is bound to be a simple copy. The second step is the selection of expression methods and strategies. Students need to make decisions among multiple options, such as literal translation and free translation, preserving the original cultural color or making moderate adjustments, and each decision requires reasons to support it. The third step is the checking and revision of the translation. If students only check whether the words are spelled correctly but do not consider whether the entire paragraph is logically clear or may cause misunderstandings, it is difficult to truly improve the quality of translation. It can be seen that each step of translation practice requires questioning, analysis, argumentation, and reflection. If teachers consciously increase the thinking component when designing tasks, the translation classroom can naturally become a field for critical thinking training.

3. The current situation and problems of critical thinking in translation courses for university English majors

3.1. The actual performance of students' critical thinking ability

According to relevant surveys, most English major students focus on whether there are appropriate words and correct grammar when doing translation exercises, but seldom actively consider why the author wrote in such a way and how readers might understand it. In a certain study, after analyzing the English-to-Chinese translation assignments of over a thousand English major students, it was found that less than one-fifth of the students would question the source language expression, such as pointing out that a certain sentence in the original text was not clear in logic, lacked examples, or was ambiguous, and then attempt to make adjustments in the translation. A considerable number of students, when encountering words with strong cultural connotations, tend to directly use the literal meaning without considering whether the readers can understand or what associations they might make. Moreover, many students, after receiving feedback from teachers, merely make a few word changes according to the annotations without seriously thinking about the reasons behind these adjustments, let alone actively comparing the differences between different translation methods. These phenomena indicate that the thinking activities displayed by students in the translation process are mainly superficial understanding and simple corrections, lacking in-depth analysis and active reflection.

3.2. Weak links in course objectives and contents

From the perspective of course design, the teaching objectives of many translation courses in universities still focus more on skill training, emphasizing that students should master many translation methods and understand the general handling methods of various types of texts. However, there is insufficient attention paid to the goal of "cultivating students' analytical and judgmental abilities during the translation process." In terms of course content, the texts selected in textbooks and self-compiled materials are often quite standard, with clear language, rigorous logic, and relatively neutral cultural factor handling. In class, teachers find it easier to explain "how to translate this sentence more beautifully" rather than encourage students to question the text itself. A few teachers may supplement slightly more difficult materials in class, but they usually still focus on explaining the "correct translation," and rarely encourage students to offer their own perspectives from different angles. This arrangement of content and objectives makes the course seem closely related to translation practice on the surface, but in reality, it lacks components that provide space for critical thinking.

3.3. Constraints on critical thinking by teaching methods and evaluation approaches

In terms of specific teaching methods, many translation courses still follow the model of "teachers explaining example sentences, students completing exercises, and teachers providing unified feedback," with relatively limited types of classroom interaction. When providing feedback, teachers often focus on explaining which translation is closest to the standard answer, rarely asking students, "Why did you translate it this way?" or "Are there any other possible interpretations?" Students are accustomed to waiting for the teacher to provide the so-called standard answer, and once they receive it, they consider the problem solved and see no need for further discussion. In terms of evaluation methods, translation courses typically rely on final exams or large-scale final assignments, with grading criteria mostly centered on the number of errors in vocabulary and syntax, lacking clear indicators for students' performance in text interpretation, strategy explanation, and self-revision. Peer and self-evaluation among students is also rarely seen in the course, making it difficult for students to identify their own thinking deficiencies through the evaluation process. Such a teaching and evaluation approach tends to reinforce students' reliance on the "single correct answer," rather than fostering their critical thinking in translation [2].

4. Teaching strategies and implementation paths for cultivating critical thinking based on translation practice

4.1. Setting questioning tasks around text interpretation

In classroom design, teachers can set up tasks specifically

about text interpretation before translation exercises, guiding students to start raising questions during the reading stage instead of immediately seeking equivalent expressions. Such tasks can either require students to mark the parts they do not understand or find ambiguous, or ask them to write down the possible attitudes of the author and the purpose of writing, and then have small-scale exchanges. Teachers can also deliberately select text segments containing ambiguous expressions, logical leaps, or strong cultural connotations, and ask students to try to retell the content in their own words, and then judge whether the original text has any inadequacies in expression. Through this approach, students gradually develop the habit of understanding before translating and questioning before expressing.

For instance, when a teacher was explaining an English passage about the promotion of a city's image, instead of directly asking students to translate the entire article into Chinese, he first presented a large section of it and guided the students to discuss in groups which sentences seemed flowery but were actually very vague in information, and some even contained contradictions. The students quickly found that there were multiple instances of clichés like "a vibrant city experience" without any specific explanations. Some groups pointed out that if such expressions were directly translated into Chinese, readers might finish reading without knowing the actual characteristics of the city. After the discussion, the teacher asked each group to try to write more specific and informative Chinese expressions and then translate the original sentences. Through this activity, the students realized that translation is not just about finding words; it is necessary to first understand whether the source text is truly clear in its expression, and make appropriate adjustments in the translation for any ambiguous parts. This process itself is a training in critical interpretation.

4.2. Guiding strategy analysis through comparison of multiple versions of translation

In translation classes, if teachers only provide one standard answer, students will find it difficult to realize the diversity of translation strategies and the necessity of analysis and argumentation. Therefore, teachers can select typical sentences and paragraphs, prepare two to three different translations, and have students compare and discuss them in class, guiding them to think about which type of reader each translation is suitable for and in which occasions it is more appropriate. During the comparison process, teachers should not rush to give a conclusion but encourage students to explain their judgments with simple and clear reasons, such as from the perspectives of whether the tone is natural, whether the information is sufficient, and whether the cultural color is retained. In this way, the focus of teaching shifts from "remembering this one translation" to "learning to compare and learn to explain reasons," and students' critical thinking is also exercised in the process of analysis and argumentation [3].

In a translation class discussion at a certain school, the teacher presented an English sentence related to a traditional Chinese festival and provided three Chinese translations. One translation was more literal, preserving the structure and order of the original sentence as much as possible, which read a bit stiff. Another translation made more adjustments, breaking down and reorganizing the original sentence, with a more natural tone but slightly reducing some background information. The third translation extended the meaning, adding explanations about the cultural significance of the festival. The teacher first asked the students to read the three translations individually, write down the one they preferred, and then discuss in groups. During the discussion, some students thought the second translation was the most natural because they did not like lengthy explanations; others pointed out that if the translation was for readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture, the third translation would be more helpful for understanding. After listening to the opinions, the teacher concluded that "different translations are suitable for different occasions" and emphasized that in real translation tasks, translators need to make choices based on the audience and purpose. Through this comparison, students not only learned several translation methods but, more importantly, learned to explain their judgment basis in simple language.

4.3. Strengthening instant judgment and information screening in interpretation training

Interpretation training often has more direct requirements for critical thinking because students must complete understanding, analysis, and expression within a short period of time. When designing interpretation tasks,

teachers can reduce overly difficult grammatical structures and rare vocabulary, and focus the training on information screening and logical organization. For example, when playing an English speech audio of moderate difficulty in class, teachers can first guide students to identify the theme and basic structure of the speech, and then require students to retell the content in Chinese in a key point style instead of translating sentence by sentence. In this way, students must constantly judge during the listening process which information is the core content and which belongs to examples or supplementary explanations, and also think about how to reorganize the order when expressing in Chinese to make the logic clearer. Under the premise of proper difficulty control, this kind of training helps students form a conscious habit of analysis and judgment [4].

When a teacher was conducting an interpreting training session in a certain class, they chose a short audio clip of a speech on environmental protection policies. The audio was not long, but it was packed with information. The teacher informed the students in advance that the focus of this task was not to translate word-for-word, but to grasp the main content of the policy and the speaker's attitude. After playing it once, the students were asked to write down three to five key points they had heard in Chinese. Some wrote down "The government has set new emission standards," others noted "Enterprises need to complete equipment upgrades within the prescribed time," and some paid attention to the speaker's repeated emphasis on the issue of "long-term interests." On this basis, the teacher asked several students to retell the entire speech in Chinese to the whole class, while the other students supplemented based on the key points they had written down. Only then did the teacher guide the students to think about how to briefly and accurately convey the key points if they were to translate this passage back into English. Through this series of activities, the students gradually understood that interpreting is not simply "hearing one sentence and saying one sentence," but making reasonable judgments and choices within a limited time, which is precisely the concrete manifestation of critical thinking in interpreting.

4.4. Developing reflective skills through peer review and self-revision in groups

Critical thinking is not only reflected in the analysis before translation and the judgment during translation, but also in the reflection and revision after translation. Teachers can set up peer review sessions in daily homework and classroom training, allowing students to learn to think from the perspective of a "reviewer" while reading their peers' translations. During peer review, the evaluation criteria should be as clear and simple as possible, such as giving opinions from aspects like "whether the original meaning is accurately conveyed," "whether the translation is smooth and natural," and "whether cultural differences have been considered." While giving suggestions to others' works, students will also reflect on whether their own translations have similar problems. Then, teachers should require students to revise their translations based on the peer review comments and write a brief explanation, stating the reasons for adopting or rejecting a certain suggestion. In this way, translation assignments transform from a one-time submission into a process that includes feedback and rethinking, which is conducive to the formation of a habit of continuous reflection [5].

During a review session for a translation assignment, the teacher did not directly present his own translation in class as usual. Instead, he selected several students' translations, printed out excerpts, and distributed them to each group without revealing the names. Each group was tasked with reading two different translations and writing their evaluation based on a set of simple criteria provided in advance. One group, while reading a translation of a science and technology news article, found that although the first translation matched the original text sentence by sentence, there was a lack of coherence between paragraphs, making it difficult for readers to follow through. The second translation, however, adjusted the sentence order, appropriately combined and split sentences, and was much more fluent. Thus, the group members noted in their evaluation form that the second translation was clearer in overall logic but needed to pay attention to the accuracy of certain terms. Later, the teacher returned these evaluation comments to the corresponding students and asked them to revise their translations based on their peers' feedback, and to write a short paragraph at the end of the assignment explaining why they accepted certain suggestions and why they chose to retain some original expressions. After several

such exercises, many students reported that they would consciously think about what questions their peers might raise when evaluating their translations, and this self-reminder obviously promoted the development of their reflective abilities.

5. Conclusion

In summary, cultivating students' critical thinking in the university English professional translation course does not mean completely restructuring the course structure or introducing overly complex theoretical frameworks. Instead, it can start with small designs in the daily teaching process. By guiding students to raise questions during text interpretation, encouraging them to explain their reasoning during translation comparison, highlighting information screening and logical organization in oral translation training, reinforcing reflection awareness in peer evaluation and revision processes, and supplementing with appropriately adjusted evaluation methods, the translation classroom can gradually assume the function of cultivating critical thinking. Such a classroom can not only maintain the practicality of translation skill training but also help students develop the habits of analysis, judgment, and self-correction, laying a solid foundation for their future careers in oral and written translation as well as broader cross-cultural communication.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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