
An Exploration of Task-Based Approaches in English Translation Teaching

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Abstract: In the era of globalization, the demand for competent translators has witnessed an unprecedented surge, as cross-cultural communication becomes increasingly frequent in various domains such as business, politics, media, and academia. English translation, serving as a bridge between different languages and cultures, plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective communication. However, traditional English translation teaching approaches, which often center on teacher-led explanations of translation theories and isolated sentence-level exercises, have been criticized for their limitations in fostering students' practical translation competence and autonomous learning ability. These approaches tend to prioritize linguistic accuracy over communicative effectiveness, and fail to adequately address the complex, real-world scenarios that translators encounter.

Keywords: task-based teaching; English translation teaching; translation ability training; limitations of traditional translation teaching; business English translation cases

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1. Introduction

Against this backdrop, task-based approaches (TBA), which originated from communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1980s, have emerged as a promising alternative to reform translation education. Task-based approaches emphasize learning by doing, where students engage in meaningful, goal-oriented tasks that simulate real-life translation situations. By immersing students in authentic translation tasks, TBA aims to develop not only their linguistic proficiency but also their strategic competence, cross-cultural awareness, and collaborative skills, all of which are essential for professional translators. This paper explores the application of task-based approaches in English translation teaching, examining its theoretical foundations, practical implementation strategies, effectiveness, challenges, and implications for future translation education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Origins and Development of Task-Based Approaches

The concept of task-based language teaching can be traced back to the work of scholars such as Prabhu, who first proposed the task-supported language teaching framework in his research on second language acquisition in India. Prabhu argued

that language learning is most effective when students are engaged in meaningful tasks rather than focusing on explicit grammar rules. Later, Willis further developed the task-based learning (TBL) framework, outlining three stages of task implementation: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. Willis emphasized that tasks should be goal-oriented, have a clear outcome, and involve some form of language use.

Over the years, task-based approaches have gained widespread recognition in second language education, with numerous studies demonstrating their effectiveness in enhancing students' communicative competence. For instance, Ellis defined a task as "a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed". He identified key features of tasks, including a primary focus on meaning, a gap to fill, a process of using language, a defined outcome, and a connection to real-world activities.

2.2. Traditional Translation Teaching and Its Limitations

Traditional translation teaching typically adopts a teacher-centered approach, where the teacher dominates the classroom by explaining translation theories, providing model translations, and correcting students' errors. The curriculum is often structured around linguistic units, such as words, phrases, and sentences, with little emphasis on the context and purpose of translation. Students are often required to translate isolated sentences or text excerpts without considering the target audience, cultural background, or communicative function of the translation.

Critics of traditional translation teaching argue that this approach fails to develop students' translation competence in a holistic manner. As Bell pointed out, translation competence is not merely a matter of linguistic knowledge but also involves strategic competence (the ability to solve translation problems), textual competence (the ability to produce coherent texts), and sociocultural competence (the ability to adapt translations to different cultural contexts). Traditional approaches tend to neglect these aspects, leading to students who can translate sentences accurately but struggle with real-world translation tasks that require flexibility, creativity, and cross-cultural awareness.

2.3. Integration of Task-Based Approaches in Translation Teaching

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have explored the integration of task-based approaches in translation teaching, recognizing its potential to address the limitations of traditional methods. For example, Kiraly proposed a "social constructivist" approach to translation teaching, which emphasizes collaborative learning and the completion of real-world translation projects. Kiraly argued that translation is a social activity, and students can develop their translation competence through interacting with peers and engaging in authentic tasks.

Other researchers, such as Hurtado Albir, have highlighted the importance of designing tasks that reflect the actual work of translators, such as translating for specific clients, collaborating with other translators, and using translation tools. These tasks not only enhance students' practical skills but also prepare them for the professional translation industry. However, despite the growing interest in this area, there is still a lack of systematic research on the specific strategies and outcomes of implementing task-based approaches in English translation teaching, which this paper aims to address.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Core Concepts of Task-Based Approaches

At the heart of task-based approaches is the idea that learning occurs when students are actively involved in completing meaningful tasks. According to Willis, a task is "an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome". Tasks should have several key characteristics:

Goal orientation: Tasks should have a clear, non-linguistic goal, such as translating a product manual for a specific audience or solving a cross-cultural communication problem. This helps students focus on the communicative purpose of the translation rather than just linguistic accuracy.

Authenticity: Tasks should be based on real-world situations that translators encounter in their professional practice. For example, translating a business contract, a news article, or a marketing advertisement reflects the actual work of translators and makes the learning process more relevant and engaging.

Interaction: Tasks should encourage interaction between students, either in pairs or groups. Collaborative translation allows students to share ideas, solve problems together, and learn from each other's perspectives, which enhances their strategic and social skills.

Completion: Tasks should have a tangible outcome, such as a translated document, a presentation, or a report. This gives students a sense of achievement and allows for meaningful feedback and assessment.

3.2. Translation Competence Framework

To understand how task-based approaches can enhance translation teaching, it is essential to clarify the components of translation competence. According to the PACTE Group, translation competence is a complex construct that consists of several interrelated sub-competences:

Linguistic competence: Knowledge of the source language (SL) and target language (TL), including vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and discourse structure.

Sociocultural competence: Understanding of the cultural norms, values, and conventions of the SL and TL communities, which is crucial for adapting translations to the target audience.

Textual competence: Ability to produce coherent, cohesive, and appropriate texts in the TL, taking into account the genre, register, and communicative function of the text.

Strategic competence: Ability to identify and solve translation problems, such as lexical gaps, cultural references, and stylistic differences. This includes both cognitive strategies (e.g., deduction, analogy) and instrumental strategies (e.g., using dictionaries, translation software).

Psychophysiological competence: Psychological and physical abilities required for translation, such as attention, memory, and stress management.

3.3. Alignment between Task-Based Approaches and Translation Competence Development

Task-based approaches are well-suited to developing the various components of translation competence. For example:

Linguistic competence: By engaging in authentic translation tasks, students are exposed to a wide range of linguistic features in both the SL and TL, which helps them expand their vocabulary, improve their grammar, and enhance their understanding of discourse structures.

Sociocultural competence: Tasks that involve translating texts from different cultural contexts require students to research and analyze cultural differences, which deepens their cross-cultural awareness. For instance, translating a traditional Chinese poem into English requires students to understand the cultural connotations of the poem and find appropriate ways to convey them to English-speaking readers.

Textual competence: Task-based approaches emphasize the production of complete texts rather than isolated sentences, which helps students develop their ability to create coherent and cohesive translations. By working on different genres, such as business letters, academic papers, and literary works, students learn to adapt their translation style to the specific requirements of each genre.

Strategic competence: Collaborative translation tasks encourage students to use various strategies to solve translation problems. For example, when encountering an unfamiliar cultural reference, students can research it together, discuss different translation options, and choose the most appropriate one. This not only enhances their problem-solving skills but also promotes autonomous learning.

Psychophysiological competence: Completing complex, real-world translation tasks helps students build their resilience and develop effective time management skills, which are essential for professional translators.

4. Application Strategies of Task-Based Approaches in English Translation Teaching

4.1. Principles of Task Design

Designing effective tasks is crucial for the successful implementation of task-based approaches in translation teaching. The following principles should be considered:

Authenticity: Tasks should be based on real-world translation scenarios that reflect the needs of the professional translation industry. For example, translating a company's website into English, creating subtitles for a short film, or translating a legal document for a client. Authentic tasks not only make learning more engaging but also prepare students for future employment.

Hierarchy: Tasks should be designed in a progressive manner, starting from simple to complex, to accommodate students' different levels of proficiency. For beginner students, tasks can focus on basic translation skills, such as translating single sentences or short paragraphs. For advanced students, tasks can involve more complex projects, such as translating a book chapter or managing a translation project from start to finish.

Interactivity: Tasks should promote interaction between students, either through pair work, group work, or class discussions. Collaborative translation allows students to share their knowledge, exchange ideas, and learn from each other's mistakes. For example, in a group task, students can divide the translation work among themselves, then review and revise each other's translations.

Relevance: Tasks should be relevant to students' interests and future career goals. For example, if students are interested in business translation, tasks can focus on translating business contracts, marketing materials, and financial reports. If they are interested in literary translation, tasks can involve translating short stories, poems, or novels^[1].

4.2. Types of Tasks in Translation Teaching

Based on the nature of the activity and the learning objectives, tasks in translation teaching can be categorized into several types:

Information-gap tasks: In these tasks, students are provided with different pieces of information, and they need to communicate with each other to complete the translation. For example, one student has a text with missing information, and another student has the missing information. They need to work together to fill in the gaps and translate the complete text. Information-gap tasks encourage students to use their communication skills and promote collaborative learning.

Problem-solving tasks: These tasks require students to solve a specific translation problem, such as dealing with a cultural reference, a technical term, or a syntactic structure that is difficult to translate. For example, students may be asked to translate a sentence containing a Chinese idiom into English, and they need to research the meaning of the idiom and find an equivalent in English. Problem-solving tasks help students develop their strategic competence and critical thinking skills.

Decision-making tasks: In these tasks, students are presented with several translation options, and they need to evaluate each option and choose the best one based on the context, target audience, and communicative purpose. For example, students may be given two different translations of a marketing slogan, and they need to discuss which one is more effective in appealing to the target audience. Decision-making tasks enhance students' ability to make informed judgments and consider multiple perspectives.

Project-based tasks: These are long-term tasks that involve completing a comprehensive translation project, such as translating a book, a website, or a documentary. Project-based tasks typically require students to plan the project, conduct research, collaborate with others, and revise their work. For example, a group of students may be asked to translate a local museum's exhibition brochure into English. They need to research the museum's exhibits, understand the target audience (tourists from English-speaking countries), and create a translation that is accurate, engaging, and culturally appropriate. Project-based tasks develop students' project management skills, autonomous learning ability, and professional competence^[2].

4.3. Implementation Steps

The implementation of task-based approaches in translation teaching typically follows a three-stage framework, as

proposed by Willis:

Pre-task stage: In this stage, the teacher introduces the topic and provides necessary background information. The teacher may also present key translation concepts, strategies, or tools that students will need to complete the task. For example, if the task is to translate a business contract, the teacher can explain the key features of business contract language, such as formal tone, precise terminology, and legal clauses. The teacher may also demonstrate how to use CAT (Computer-Assisted Translation) software^[3].

Task cycle stage: This is the core stage, where students complete the task individually or in groups. During this stage, the teacher acts as a facilitator, providing guidance and support when needed. Students are encouraged to use their own strategies to solve translation problems and collaborate with their peers. For example, in a group translation task, students can divide the work, then meet to discuss and revise each other's translations. The teacher can circulate around the classroom, observe students' progress, and offer feedback and suggestions.

Post-task stage: In this stage, students present their translation outcomes to the class, either through a written report, an oral presentation, or a display. The teacher and other students provide feedback on the translation, focusing on both the linguistic accuracy and the communicative effectiveness. After the feedback session, the teacher summarizes the key points of the task, highlights common mistakes, and reinforces the translation strategies and concepts that were learned. Students may also be asked to reflect on their learning process and identify areas for improvement.

5. Case Study: Task-Based Translation Teaching for Business English

5.1. Task Design

To illustrate the application of task-based approaches in translation teaching, this section presents a case study of a business English translation course for third-year English majors. The course aims to develop students' ability to translate various types of business documents, such as contracts, letters, and marketing materials. The task designed for this course is a project-based task: translating a small business's website into English.

Task Objective: Translate the website of a local Chinese tea company into English, targeting international customers. The goal is to create a translation that is accurate, culturally appropriate, and effective in promoting the company's products and services.

Task Steps: (1) Pre-task: The teacher introduces the background of the tea company, including its history, products, and target market. The teacher then presents key concepts in business translation, such as the importance of tone, terminology, and cultural adaptation. The teacher also demonstrates how to use CAT software and online resources to research tea-related terminology and cultural references.

(2) Task cycle: Students are divided into groups of 3-4. Each group is responsible for translating a section of the website, such as the homepage, product descriptions, company history, and contact information. Within each group, students collaborate to translate the text, research any unfamiliar terms or cultural references, and revise each other's work. The teacher provides guidance and feedback throughout the process, helping students solve any translation problems they encounter.

(3) Post-task: Each group presents their translated website section to the class. The teacher and other students provide feedback on the translation's accuracy, clarity, cultural appropriateness, and marketing effectiveness. After the presentations, the teacher summarizes the key lessons learned, such as the importance of adapting the translation to the target audience's cultural background and using persuasive language in marketing materials. Students are then asked to revise their translations based on the feedback and submit the final version.

5.2. Outcomes and Reflection

After completing the task, students reported that they had gained a deeper understanding of business translation and developed their practical translation skills.

They also appreciated the opportunity to work on a real-world project, which made the learning process more engaging and relevant. The teacher observed that students showed higher levels of motivation and participation compared to traditional translation classes.

However, several challenges were identified during the implementation. For example, some students struggled with time management, as the project required a significant amount of outside-class work. Others found it difficult to agree on translation choices in group work, which led to conflicts. To address these challenges, the teacher provided more detailed guidelines for time management and taught students effective communication and collaboration strategies. Overall, the case study demonstrates that task-based approaches can be effectively applied in business English translation teaching to enhance students' learning outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the theoretical foundations, application strategies, effectiveness, and challenges of implementing task-based approaches in English translation teaching. The case study of a business English translation course demonstrates that task-based approaches can effectively enhance students' learning outcomes when implemented properly. However, it is important to recognize the challenges associated with these approaches, such as task design difficulties, student diversity, and high demands on teachers. By addressing these challenges through professional development, differentiated task design, technology integration, and industry partnerships, teachers can maximize the benefits of task-based approaches in translation teaching.

Looking to the future, the integration of task-based approaches with emerging technologies, such as machine translation and artificial intelligence, holds great potential for translation education. For example, tasks can be designed to teach students how to use machine translation tools effectively, edit machine-translated texts, and combine human expertise with technology. Additionally, personalized task design based on students' individual needs and interests can further enhance the effectiveness of task-based approaches. Overall, task-based approaches are a valuable tool for reforming English translation teaching and cultivating competent, adaptable translators who can meet the demands of the globalized world.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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