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An Integrated Model of Autonomous Learning in Chinese-English Translation Learning: A Conceptual Paper

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ABSTRACT

Chinese-English (C-E) translation plays an essential role in China for its communication with the world, thus cultivating high-quality translators is of great importance. Numerous attempts have recently been made to explore effective C-E translation learning methods. The present paper draws upon the findings of previous studies and integrates two theoretical pillars of autonomous learning and translation process to construct an integrated model of autonomous learning (IMAL) in C-E translation learning. This model involves learners, peers, and teachers with each playing their respective role in the autonomous learning process. Further theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings for this IMAL are discussed.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning (AL), Chinese-English Translation Learning (C-E TL), Translation Process

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Translation plays an essential role in cross-cultural communication, but it is never an easy task. Catford (2000) stated that "translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language" (p. 20). This definition emphasized translation at the text level, so Toury (2015: 20) expanded the translation to include culture paradigm as "any target-language utterance which is presented or regarded as such within the target culture, on whatever grounds". Chinese-English (C-E) translation enjoys its peculiarity in that the two languages belong to two language families: Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European respectively. They bear huge differences on the lexical, syntactic and textual levels, dominantly reflected as "Chinese being parataxis while English hypotaxis in constructing sentences" (Nida, 1982: 16). In addition to language, Chinese and Westerners differ in their thinking, tradition, society and culture (Lian, 2010).

C-E translation learning imposes greater burden than English - Chinese (E-C) translation on learners in China because the target language, English, is not their mother tongue and they are on "a developmental path with respect to that language" (Campbell, 1998: 12). C-E translation is an important means to realize international communication, therefore, educating high-quality translators for China's communication with the world in this historic era is of utmost importance (Huang, 2022). Conventional translation learning is teacher-centered with a primary focus on transmitting knowledge and skills. This approach hinders learners' initiative and creativity (He & Zhang, 2015). Therefore, it is important to explore effective C-E translation learning method.

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2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Autonomous Learning

With the development of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), there is a growing realization that learners themselves play a final and decisive role. Teng (2019) observed that over the past few years, the education system has shifted its focus from traditional exam-oriented teaching methods, which have been increasingly criticized, to learner-centered approaches that prioritize autonomous learning.

It is thought that autonomous learning originated and developed in the West. In fact, the concept of autonomous learning has been embodied in Confucius' *heuristic teaching ideas*, Mencius' *importance of learning by oneself*, and Wang Fuzhi's *Taking initiative in learning* (Xu, 2020). All these ideas reflect autonomous learning in Chinese culture. In the 1980s, Holec (1981) formally introduced the concept of autonomous learning into the field of language teaching, first proposing "learner autonomy" and defining it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). In addition, this ability is not innate but must be attained either through natural means or, more commonly, through formal learning in a systematic and deliberate approach (Holec, 1981).

Holec's (1981) definition, like the thread of a necklace, runs through abundant definitions on autonomy. Learner Autonomy (hereafter LA) has several similar names such as "autonomous learning" (Benson, 2011), "independent learning" (White, 1998), "self-access learning" (Reinders, 2000), and "self-directed learning" (Holec, 1996). This paper adopts autonomous learning by following Benson's (2011) study in which he distinguished autonomous learning from autonomy in that autonomous learning refers to learning where learners demonstrate the ability to take control of their own learning process while autonomy is the "capacity to control one's own learning" (p. 58). The three dimensions of control over learning were learning management, cognitive processes and learning content. Little (2009) also described LA as the ability of learners to "set their own agenda and follow it through, to feel competent in what they do and to be assured of their relatedness to other people" (p. 223). All these definitions share one thing in common: learners themselves are the center of learning and play a dominant role.

Studies on autonomous learning have undergone various historical changes. Little (2007) reviewed that in the early 1980s, the concept of LA was mostly associated with adult education and seemed to be a matter of learners doing things on their own. By the end of that decade, however, partly under the impact of learner-centred theories of education, it was beginning to figure in language teaching generally, and through the 1990s more and more countries around the world came to include learner autonomy as a key goal in the national curricula.

Gradually, some researchers think that autonomous learning is not only individual, but is more group dependent, and learners can gain more autonomous learning abilities only by working with others (Dam, 1995). Autonomous learning emphasizes the sociological feature, deepening the development of this concept. "The ability to critically and fully engage in social interactions is central to autonomous learning" (Little, 1996: 210). Autonomous learning is not simply equivalent to independent learning, mutual cooperation and support are also mportant factors in developing autonomous learning abilities. In this sense, peers and teachers also play an essential role in the autonomous learning process within the formal instruction environment.

2.2 Translation Process

Translation process refers to the stages through which translation is completed, and what each stage is and does respectively (Liu & He, 2011). Translation process is understanding the original source text first, and

then expressing it in another target language. Therefore, there are two stages in translation practice: comprehension and expression. Wilss (1982) illustrated the translation process as shown in Figure 1:
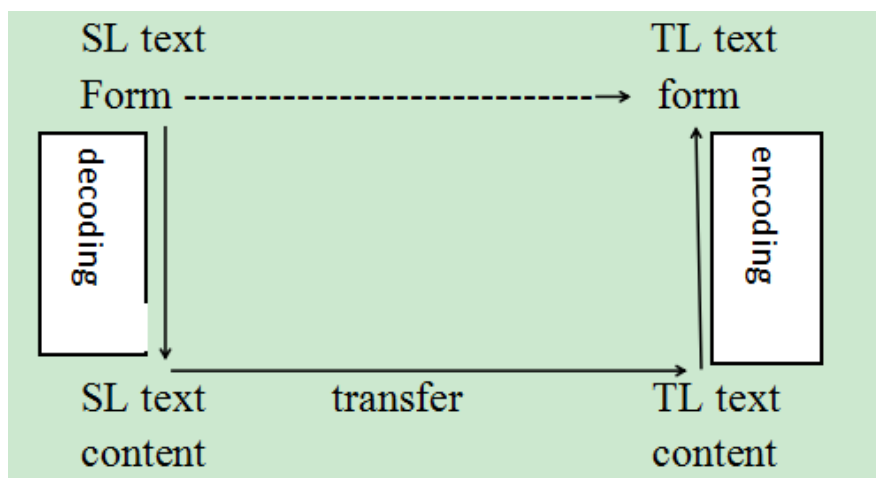

Figure 1 Indirect Transfer

The left part is decoding the form of Source Language (SL) text, then translators transfer the content of the SL text into the Target Language (TL) text content encoded in the form of TL text. Decoding is understanding while encoding is expressing. From the practical operation, after firstly understanding SL and secondly expressing in TL, there is a correction stage. After that, the whole translation process is finally completed. Therefore, many translation scholars such as Zhang (2009) held that the translation process includes understanding, expressing, and editing, as shown in Figure 2.
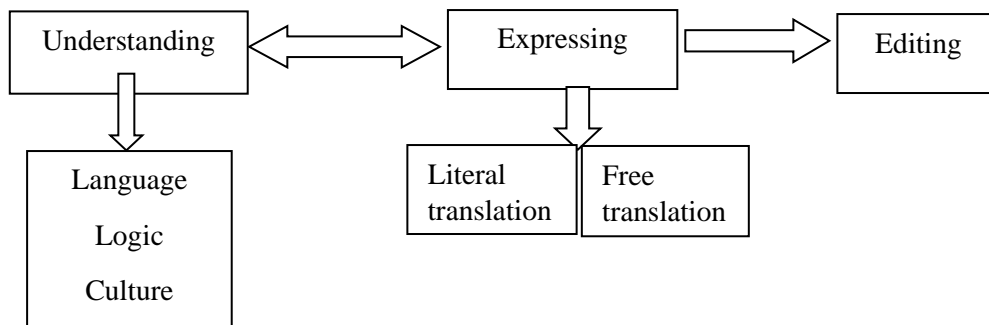

Figure 2 Three-step Translation Process

Integrating Wilss' (1982) translation process, Liu and He (2011) held that understanding is to decode what the author wants to express by analyzing the linguistic phenomenon, logical relationship and cultural knowledge of a text. Wilss' (1982) and Zhang's (2009) translation process diagrams both emphasized understanding and expressing. Translators should meticulously read and analyze the vocabulary, syntax,

logic, style as well as culture of the original text. When reading, translators should take note of ambiguous and difficult words. Furthermore, translators are expected to read between the lines to grasp the author's intentions and mood, gaining a comprehensive and explicit idea of the whole text.

The translation will be more precise when the original source text is analyzed more deeply, and the preparation is more thorough (Zhang, 2003). However, for many students majoring in English in China, their C-E translation practice indicates confidence with Chinese skills given that Chinese is their mother tongue. A survey conducted by Ma (2013) among juniors of Beijing Foreign Studies University who are enrolled in the C-E Translation program and Translation of Chinese Traditional Culture program revealed nearly 100% of the respondents believed that the difficulty of translating from Chinese to English lies in how to express the SL text in English. Particularly challenging is the fact that Chinese is an overt language and allows the existence of subjectless sentences (Pan, 2014), so when translating Chinese texts, translators need to carefully read and analyze the SL text.

Understanding the original source text and mastering the target language are key factors in effectively expressing the SL text in the target language. However, correct comprehension does not ensure accurate expression. A network of specific methods and skills operate in the whole process. After these, proofreading is necessary because of translators' carelessness or improper wording. During this process, translators can check whether there are mistakes in proper names, numbers, date as well as unidiomatic expressions in the TL text.

2.3   Studies on Translation Learning in China

Since the start of the 21st century, new approaches to translation learning have arisen in China. To begin with, translation learning is enriched by disciplines like psychology and corpus linguistics, which provide fresh perspectives and insights. Gong (2022) designed a task-based approach to translation learning based on Constructivism and elaborated its components including task selection, performance assessment and classroom teaching.

In addition, the translation curriculum takes into account the market demand. The aim of the translation courses is to enhance the students' translation skills and prepare them for a career in translation if they choose to pursue it as a profession. Jiang and Zeng (2017) gained valuable insights from Hawaii University's Practical Translation Course, which was created to train future professional translators by considering the market demand.

Finally, modern technology is making a significant impact on translation learning in China. Chai and Wang (2017) suggested creating a didactic corpus which included a large collection of source texts and parallel texts to train translation learners in the Master of Translation and Interpreting program. Qin and Xiang (2020) focused on Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) for translation education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from these studies, there is limited research that explores the connection between learners, peers and teachers involved or that covers the entire translation process. Therefore, the present research, by involving the three parties in the formal learning environment and focusing on translation process, intends to construct an integrated model of autonomous learning (IMAL) in C-E translation. Within this model, learners, peers and teachers get actively involved in the whole autonomous learning process.

3.0   CONSTRUCTION OF IMAL IN C-E TRANSLATION LEARNING

The scope of the present research applies autonomous learning in C-E translation learning and proposes this integrated model of autonomous learning (IMAL). Based on a review of related literature, this study constructs IMAL in Figure 3.
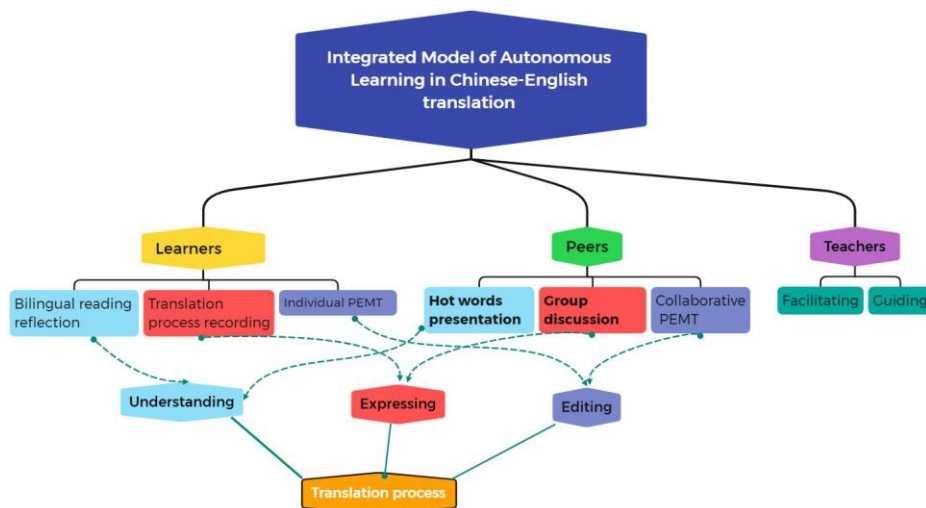

Figure 3 IMAL in Chinese-English Translation

In Figure 3, the three learning parties carry their respective roles in the C-E translation learning process: learners themselves take on three autonomous learning activities including bilingual reading reflection, translation process recording, and individual post-editing machine translation (PEMT). Their peers share three collaborative autonomous learning activities, i.e., presenting hot words, discussing translation in group, and collaborative PEMT. Teachers, instead of transmitting knowledge as a traditional authoritarian figure, facilitate and guide learners in their C-E translation learning. All these autonomous learning activities are grounded on translation process consisting of understanding, expressing and editing.

4.0   DISCUSSION

As was stated earlier, the concept of autonomous learning and translation process are the two pillars for the IMAL in C-E translation model. Translation process consists of understanding, expressing and editing tasks which entails specific autonomous learning activities undertaken by learners, peers and teachers. The reasons for backing up these autonomous learning activities are illustrated below:

4.1   Learners

4.1.1   Bilingual Reading Reflection

Goodman (1967) stated that reading is essentially a psychological and linguistic game of guessing. Cronin (2005) also acknowledged that taking a reading course as part of the translation course has proven to be highly effective. Bilingual reading reflection is a key element in C-E translation learning. Tao and Qiang (2015) created a reading model specifically for translation majors. This model involves bilingual reading which allows the participants to comprehend the source text in two ways. Firstly, they understand the original text independently, and secondly, they understand the translated text by comparing or revising it.

   Therefore, bilingual reading reflection may serve important functions. By reflecting on the translations, learners may become more aware of the challenges of working between Chinese and English and develop greater proficiency in these two languages. Moreover, bilingual reading reflection can assist learners in better understanding the source Chinese text by analyzing how the text's meaning is conveyed in both languages. Consequently, this autonomous activity can lead to a more profound understanding of the text.

4.1.2   Translation Process Recording

Gile (2009) suggested that a focus on the learning process itself should be employed during the initial stages of teaching. The process approach to translation learning is linked to the nature of translation, which requires a significant amount of mental effort and decision making when selecting translation techniques. This autonomous learning activity is in accordance with the second translation process, i.e., expression.

   Li (2012) provided a comprehensive guide on how to document the process of Chinese-English translation. By recording their own translation work, learners may become more analytical in their approach to translation learning in that this autonomous learning activity can help students to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, it allows learners to monitor their progress over time. All these can help learners to set realistic goals, track their progress, and stay motivated. All these making them a more successful autonomous learner.

4.1.3   Post-editing

The IMAL discussed in this study, the post-editing activities does not mean proofreading learners' own translations since recording translation process includes this step; instead, it refers to post-editing machine translation PEMT undertaken by online translation platforms such as Google or DeepL. The reasons for this lie in the profound impact of technology on the world including advancements in translation learning.

   According to Feng and Cui (2016), post-editing involves revising and fine-tuning the output of MT to meet the desired outcome, evolving into a budding profession in the worldwide language services sector. In this study, post-editing covers individual and collaborative PEMT. Learners spot problems in machine translation and improve them; accordingly, they can also discuss with their peers to exchange opinions to ensure its quality, fluency, and accuracy. Using PEMT, learners are motivated to enhance proficiency in both Chinese and English.

4.2 Peers

4.2.1   Hot Words Presentation

As a lexical phenomenon, hot words, also known as "buzz words", indicate topics and objects that are capturing the interest of people, particularly their lifestyles and perspectives within specific countries or regions during a particular period of time (Song, 2015). Chinese hot words reflect the current issues and topics that people pay attention to in China, for example, *ecological protection, smart manufacturing, brand upgrade.* Many scholars (e.g., Yan *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2022) have studied features of Chinese hot words and how to translate them into English.

By searching and presenting hot words in group, peers could master new words and phrases related to hot topics. This may guide and push them in keeping pace with what is happening in China and around the world. This activity may familiarize learners with common and frequent expressions in the target language i.e., English, thus guaranteeing translation accuracy in C-E translation learning. When translating similar text types from Chinese into English, they can see immediate results and practical applications of their newly acquired vocabulary. In this way, learners' motivation and interest in Chinese-English translation learning can be increased.

4.2.2   Group Discussion

Kiraly (2015) observed that individuals are never alone; instead, they learn to communicate, and then to think, by sharing and contrasting perspectives with other members of the communities to which they belong. Different learners hold different English translations for the same Chinese source text. In IMAL for C-E translation learning, peers in a group share their opinions on a particular translation issue, and draw inspirations from their group members.

This social interaction featured by sharing and discussing could improve their translation quality. Tudge (1990) listed the benefits of social interaction, i.e., "social interaction between peers who bring different perspectives to bear upon a problem is a highly effective means of inducing cognitive development" (p. 159). Therefore, this autonomous learning activity by peers' discussion may enhance C-E translation learning.

4.3 Teachers

Teachers are crucial in creating a supportive autonomous learning environment for C-E translation in two ways. One way is by offering C-E learning materials that are appropriate and relevant to their students' needs for them to preview and review. These materials may include handouts, multimedia resources, and online platforms. As Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) also pointed out that teachers provide the tools and "involve language learners in their own learning processes through learner strategy training" (p. 69), teachers can not only offer tangible tools but also intangible support. The other way is that teachers provide feedback and guidance to their students on their C-E translation learning, which helps them to develop their transaltion knowledge and skills. Feedback can come in many forms, such as written or verbal comments, assessments, and evaluations.

In doing so, teachers create a supportive learning environment where learners can explore and discover new C-E translation skills on their own. Teachers provide support and feedback, allowing students to take the lead in their own learning.

5.0   CONCLUSION

This study examined literature on autonomous learning and the translation process, and explored new developments in translation learning in China. Based on these findings, the authors constructed an Integrated Model of Autonomous Learning (IMAL) in Chinese-English translation, taking into account the three phases of the translation process: understanding, expressing, and editing. Based on this, autonomous learning activities were designed for learners, peers, and teachers to participate in. As a conceptual paper, this study offered a theoretical and pedagogical foundation to construct IMAL for better enhancing C-E translation learning efficiency and effect.

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