Translation Report Writing for China's MTI Program: Problems and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

As the ultimate assessment for Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI), translation report reflects not only students' overall abilities, but also the teaching quality of the postgrad program. After reviewing a large number of translation reports, this research article finds primarily four problems: lack of integration between translation theory and practical analysis, lack of correspondence of the strategies adopted to the difficulties in translation practice, overlooking the features of interpreting during the interpreting practice and considerable mistranslations in translation practice, and other grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting and style issues. In response to these problems, this article proposes four corresponding solutions as follows. First, in translation theory courses, theoretical explanations and comparisons need to be combined with specific translation practices. Second, the report should select representative translation difficulties for analysis and propose transferable strategies. Third, MTI supervisors should guide students to pay more attention to the quality of the translation and the characteristics of interpreting. Fourth, students should carefully study the translation reports submitted by former graduates, identify errors in their writings, and analyze, discuss and revise them. This research emphasizes that only through concerted efforts among universities, supervisors and students can the problems that often arise in translation reports be amended, thus improving MTI teaching quality and students' satisfaction.

Keywords: Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI), Translation report, Writing, Problems and solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

MTI has been running in universities and colleges in China's Mainland for 16 years since launched in 2007. It is aimed at cultivating high-calibre, applied and specialized interpreters and translators (Sun and Ren, 2019: 82). Unlike a research master program, MTI is equivalent to a taught postgrad program in British universities. Over the three-year duration, the first 1.5 years is devoted to practical courses such as interpreting and translation skills, introduction to translation theory and machine translation, with the course assessment also focused on translation practice. Correspondingly, by the time of graduation, students are required to submit a report on their translation practice. This report essentially highlights practice, but students are expected to analyze and explain their own practice using theory, so as to achieve the goal of combining translation theory with practice. However, as aforementioned, due to the program's practical nature and the fact that students mostly concentrate on improving their interpreting and translation skills, when it comes to writing academic translation reports, problems may arise. This study, based on the empirical experience of its author in guiding the writing and viva process for MTI theses (via translation report), analyzes typical problems existing in the writing process of translation report, identifies the reasons for problems, and propose corresponding countermeasures to help improve MTI teaching, the pass rate of thesis defense and student satisfaction.

2. PROBLEMS AND REASONS

Firstly, there is a lack of close integration between translation theory and practical analysis. As a popular form of MTI thesis, the translation report effectively coordinates originality, practicality, and feasibility (Ping, 2018: 45). From an academic perspective, translation reports lie

between research papers and introspection drafts. Students are expected to carefully compare the source text and different translated versions, explain what translation strategies and methods are used, and display that a final translated version is viable thanks to theoretical guidance. In other words, translation reports downplay the subjectivity in experience sharing thanks to academic vigor, enabling students to strike a balance between theory and practice, as well as academic and reflective thinking, by the time of graduation. Students are therefore required to find suitable theories that can effectively explain translation difficulties and strategies before starting their practice. However, as MTI focuses on practice and students often lack theoretical literacy and sensitivity, they may recklessly apply a theory to their practice in order to meet the thesis requirements. From the translation reports reviewed by the author, it can be seen that students often flock to choose certain classic theories, such as Nida's dynamic functional equivalence theory, Nord's skopos theory of translation, Newmark's communicative translation theory, Rice's text theory, Gile's interpreting cognitive load theory and so on. The primary reason for such preferences is clear: the more a theory is quoted and reviewed, the more templates can be referenced or even copied. Students tend to collect relevant translation reports quoting the same theory and integrate them into the theoretical part of their own report. Another common problem is the arbitrary expansion of how a theory might be applied. Regardless of the theoretical framework established, it ultimately boils down to the translation of words, sentences and texts (Li, 2021: 75). Here, the suspicion of plagiarism is put aside, as many students know how to circumvent plagiarism detection software by rewriting. It is this simple copycat writing attitude that virtually determines that students will not delve into whether the selected theory is suitable for their translation practice. So many reports have shown a disconnection between the theoretical framework and case analysis. Though it apparently meets the writing requirements, the aim of combining theory with practice through report writing has not been achieved.

Secondly, the strategies adopted do not correspond to the difficulties encountered in practice. Students seem to be able to identify difficulties in translation practice and propose some strategies, but interestingly there is a lack of causal relation between the two. For example, when faced with simultaneous interpreting (SI) practices featuring dense information and a fast speaking speed, some students proposed syntactic linearity as a strategy. Admittedly, such difficulties are indeed common in SI , and syntactic linearity as a key skill is frequently used, but the two in this typical case are not correspondent. Similar situations where strategies cannot tackle ad-hoc difficulties arise often in translation reports. The main reason is that students are unable to compare the source text and translation in detail. Nor can they accurately categorize difficulties and strategies. Translation Studies is largely about explanation, namely, justifying the translation strategies and methods used, which entails the capability to compare and classify. Students should discuss which constraints they have considered in order to solve the problems they have met in translation, and discuss how they will balance or choose between those constraints (Wang, 2022:74). However, many of them clearly lack such ability or a serious work attitude when engaging in translation report writing. From the reports reviewed in this study, it is not uncommon for them to randomly list some translation difficulties and strategies, along with a few examples for analysis. Furthermore, when analyzing the strategies used in conjunction with examples, the depth of analysis is inadequate. The most common problem is to gather the different versions of translations and briefly judge which one is better. Such analysis neither expounds the translation difficulties nor provides the theoretical explanations as aforementioned, thus separating theory, difficulties and strategic analysis.

Thirdly, the characteristics of interpreting are often overlooked in interpreting practice and there are a host of mistranslations in translation practice. An MTI thesis is a study on the student's own translation practice, a summary of personal practical experience and lessons learned, and a rational reflection based on practice (Zhu, 2019: 87). MTI consists of two routes: interpreting and translation. Although both belong to translation, they have their own distinctive characteristics. In interpreting, only the version at the first attempt has analytical and evaluative value, since on-site interpreting is a one-off activity. After the interpreter finishes interpreting, the speaker will continue to speak, and it is impossible for the interpreter to redo what has been interpreted. But interestingly, in quite a few interpreting reports, students have provided two versions of interpretation, comparing them and explaining how the second is better than the first. Such modification may benefit written translation, as students can

grow from such reflection. However, for interpreting, its academic value is not significant as it is not the routine for such working mode. Apart from that, issues exist with the evaluative form of the interpreting product. Many students simply offer their transcription for their peers to review, rather than on-site recordings or inviting peers to the spot, which clearly goes against the principle of interpreting, confusing interpreting with translation.

In contrast, translation practice allows students to provide multiple translations (oft two: the first draft and the revised one), with differences in strategies compared and analyzed. In other words, compared to the one-off interpreting practice, translation practice can be polished and modified, even with the help and suggestions from peers. What students need to pay attention is to ensure that their translations are finalized, especially the ones that appear in the report examples, as accurate as possible. The MTI thesis is based on the translator's original translation activity, so its quality presented in the thesis is a specific manifestation of the translator's translation ability. However, the translation quality of many reports is unsatisfactory: some are fraught with absurd mistakes while others have a strong translation tone with an unclear logic. Consequently, the thesis examiners will doubt the student's translation ability and writing attitude, and may even be unwilling to read the other parts of the report. The reason is simple: if there are many errors in the translation, the analysis on it will be invalid. Thus, the problem with interpreting practice is essentially a lack of understanding about its nature, while that with translation practice an inadequate translation ability and work attitude.

Fourthly, there are issues with grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting and writing style. If the first three aforementioned problems are closely related to the translation discipline, the fourth is related to academic writing in foreign languages (as the main foreign language for MTI is English, English will be used instead of foreign languages henceforth). Among these detailed issues, the first four are related to grammar, spelling, punctuation, and formatting as well as students' inadequate translation ability and work attitude. In common sense, the MTI graduating students should be good at English writing, but given that a large proportion of students pursing MTI have bachelor degrees other than languages, their English proficiency is generally worse than their peers with an English or translation related undergraduate degree. Some basic grammar errors can occur, with the most common problems being tenses,

singularity and plurality, misuses of persons, syntactical errors and improper use of word collocations. Spelling, punctuation and formatting issues are primarily caused by carelessness. Currently, almost 100% of papers are completed using computers, and computer programs such as WPS and MS WORD come with built-in spelling correction functions. Even if there are a few neglected errors, they should be corrected via proofreading. Punctuation and formatting confusions are also annoying for examiners. Students should be aware of the differences between the English and the Chinese punctuation. However, errors such as adding Chinese book quotation marks to English book / article titles or using Chinese punctuation marks in English writing are not uncommon. The thesis format should be uniform within a school, but it is often found that the theses submitted by students from the same class is somewhat varied in format, which is a manifestation of a lack of academic rigor and attention to details.

But among them, the toughest problem remains as the issue of writing style. Once a thesis is finalized and submitted to external examiners, it is often too late to make revisions to it, since such errors essentially fill the entire report and cannot be effectively amended in the short term unless rewritten. Specifically, the crux of this problem is that students are still relying on their Chinese mindset when writing in English. Indeed, many students lack the confidence in writing directly in English due to their insufficient English proficiency, so they adopt the way of drafting in Chinese first before using translation software to complete English writing. This method itself is understandable, but the problem is that students directly replace the words expressed in Chinese thinking with machine translation, resulting in a Chinglish thesis. For example, Chinese propaganda prefer to use some eulogies to show their allegiance to a specific ideology and fancy rhetorical devices (but lacking in substance). These words that read well in Chinese can feel unnatural once translated directly into English. Thesis examiners and native English readers are likely to feel averse to such a writing style. For a more specific example, some students like to use the word "we" to solicit empathy, such as "our motherland" (referring to China) and "our development and prosperity" (China's). But for Western readers with different political systems and ideologies, "they" are not "us" and they cannot truly empathize. So such eulogy for China's internal propaganda should be

averted in English academic writing. The root cause of such problems is that students' English proficiency is inadequate. They know only basic grammar rules with limited vocabulary, but pay insufficient attention to cultural differences, therefore with a weak cross-cultural awareness.

3. COPING STRATEGIES

Firstly, in response to the disconnection between theory and practice in writing, from the teaching aspect, Translation theory courses should integrate theoretical interpretation and comparison with specific translation practices. At present, many MTI theory courses mainly focus on academic dimensions such as theoretical background, development and debate. Even translation practice is used to illustrate theory, but such examples are often scattered and limited to the micro analysis of words, sentences and so on. Although some students, at the request of their supervisors, have dedicated a chapter to building a theoretical framework, they are unable to effectively reflect the guiding significance of that theory for practice in case analysis, that is, they cannot answer why they chose a theory over another (Yuan, 2022: 88). Translation theory courses should require students to integrate their practice with a theoretical framework for analysis, which will not only enable them to have a better understanding of the theory, but also inspire them to actively apply it to their practice and reflection. Supervisors should remind students that their chosen theory should provide a theoretical angle for addressing their research questions and be able to be combined with their specific analysis (Han and Hou, 2022: 29). Besides, students should realize that a key criterion for evaluating the quality of translation reports is the close integration of theory and practice. Thus, in their daily practice, especially during the preparation of translation reports, students should carefully consider the language and cultural challenges reflected in the selected materials, and which translation theory is more suitable as a guiding theory. It is advisable to choose theories that address specific difficulties, rather than overly broad or abstract theories (Sun and Ren, 2019: 85). From the perspective of individual students, admittedly, they will choose the easiest one to write, but the supervisor is obliged to tell them that only by selecting a theory that is suitable for their own practice can it help to quickly produce a high-quality report.

Secondly, in response to the disconnection between translation difficulties and strategies, supervisors have to remind students at the beginning of thesis writing that their translation is actually a solution to the source text. However, in the complete set of solution, there are many issues that are not worth mentioning because the source text does not constitute many noteworthy language and cultural challenges. And it is precisely those areas that make translators scratch their heads or interpreters stutter, that constitute the real challenges. As a case report, an MTI thesis needs to explain what difficulties it has encountered during the translation process, how it solved them, and also how readers may solve similar problems in the future (Sun and Ren, 2019: 83). For the difficulties in translation, students can repeatedly analyze the source text, provide optimized translations, and summarize constructive experience, which will boil down to the transferable translation strategies. As for the interpreting practice, which stresses one-off completion, interpreters can compare the initial interpretation with the source speech, identify their own gaps, summarize why certain types of errors occur, and then provide introspective countermeasures for those errors. The cited cases should be typical, not excessive in amount, leaving space for in-depth analysis over a small number of representative cases (Yang and Wang, 2023: 142). That is to say, translation strategies do contribute to the improvement of the quality of current translation tasks, while interpreting ones are more focused on improving task quality for the future. But both should focus on the specific problems encountered in practice. Based on the first coping strategy mentioned above, students should combine theory, difficulties and strategies when writing reports. Under theoretical guidance, reflecting on translation difficulties and proposing countermeasures constitutes the main body of translation reports.

Thirdly, regarding the low quality of translation and the neglect of interpreting features, supervisors should remind students to pay more attention to the quality of their practice. When sampling and evaluating academic theses, a full consideration should be given to the quality of students' translation and an objective and fair evaluation should be conducted (He and Yang, 2019: 91). Compared to interpreting, translators have the advantage of ample time, so students should make every effort to improve the quality of their translation. The report can adopt an approach of gradually improving quality, that is, comparing two

different translations (the initial and final), which can further provide meaningful reflections on their own translation practice. The quality of the final draft must be guaranteed. Students can ask classmates, supervisors and professional translators to proofread and discuss their translation report with them. The solicitation of opinions and discussion will be significantly helpful for the quality of the translation and even that of the entire report. In the interpreting report, students need not compare multiple versions as on-site interpretation is one-off and interpreters do not have the opportunity to interpret a second time. So in the report, students majoring in interpreting only need to reflect on their strategies based on the difficulties raised in their practice. If handled well, it is natural to combine theory to summarize the successful experience; if not, the student can point out his or her own mistakes and analyze the reasons for the errors. At this point, one can reflect on how to deal with a specific difficulty again from a posterior perspective. This kind of reflection on interpreting practice is more practicable and in line with the features of interpreting.

Fourthly, as for grammar, spelling, punctuation and writing style, supervisors should mobilize students to carefully study the translation reports done by former MTI graduates at their initial writing stage. Students should be guided to identify typical types of errors in these writings, analyzing, discussing and revising them. As long as they have a strong language proficiency, students may avoid the errors that they have identified once they have employed critical thinking. Language proofreading software may also enable them to refine their writing and promptly correct errors. Regarding the toughest issue of writing style, supervisors can clearly point out the need to avoid writing English academic theses using Chinese thinking patterns at the students' proposal stage. In addition, increasing the reading of excellent MTI reports might also be inspiring. Although students mustn't plagiarize, they can at least appreciate the strengths of those exemplary texts, including such aspects as report layout, theory selection, text analysis, combination of theory and practice, tallying strategies with difficulties and language quality, identifying useful experience that will enable themselves to successfully complete thesis writing. So concerning the quality of the report, supervisors should encourage students not only to learn from the experience of excellent theses, but also to proactively identify errors in poorly-drafted ones.

Through comparison and reflection, their writing quality will be gradually improved.

4. CONCLUSION

By the end of 2023, MTI will have been running in China's Mainland for 16 years, during which time its graduates have been playing an essential role in various sectors, especially in the field of professional translation and interpreting. As the final assessment of the program, the importance of translation reports is self-evident: it is not only a significant evaluation of students' academic achievements but also an essential indicator of improved teaching quality. (He and Yang, 2019: 89). A qualified report reflects not only the overall abilities of graduates, but also the teaching and research levels of the higher educational institutes that offer MTI. After reviewing a large number of translation reports, this research article finds primarily four problems: 1) disconnection between translation theory and practical analysis; 2) a lack of correspondence of the translation strategies adopted and the difficulties in translation practice; 3) overlooking the features of interpreting during the interpreting practice and considerable errors in translation practice; 4) other grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting, and style issues. In response to these problems, the study suggests four likely solutions as follows. 1) In translation theory courses, theoretical explanations and comparisons need to be combined with specific translation practices. 2) The report should select typical translation difficulties for analysis and propose transferable strategies. 3) MTI supervisors should guide students to pay more attention to the quality of the translation and the characteristics of interpreting. 4) Students should carefully study the translation reports submitted by previous graduates, identify errors in their writings, and analyze, discuss and revise them. In short, only through concerted efforts among universities, supervisors and students can the problems that often arise in translation reports be addressed, thereby improving MTI teaching quality and students' satisfaction.

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