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Undergraduate Students' Achievements in Pure-English-Taught Translation Class Influenced by Their English Learning Backgrounds

--An Empirical Research from Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract: This work aims to figure out factors relating to the English learning backgrounds of undergraduate students that influence their diversified learning outcomes from a pure-English-taught translation class. The statistics acquired from both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for analysis from the perspectives of effectiveness of language contexts and expectancy-value theory, so that certain connections between students' cognitive activities and their acceptance level of pure L2 learning environment can be demonstrated. The research found that more impressive academic performance in pure-English class were shown by students who were more frequently and closely exposed to divergent naturalistic English contexts and activities, and who had higher self-efficacy and interest in translation learning.

Keywords: SLA, translation learning, language contexts, expectancy-value theory, motivation

1. Introduction

This research aims to identify possible influence factors from students' English learning backgrounds to their divergent levels of learning outcomes in a pure-English-taught legal translation class and analyze the relations from a cognitive perspective. Vygotsky expressed that language and learning are inextricably intertwined; apart from being expressed in works, thought also comes into existence through them [1]. Thus, the classroom language used by both teachers and students is of great importance to students' thinking process which includes receiving, organizing, storing, and retrieving new information. These cognitive activities constitute the construct of "learning" in the interpretation of cognitivism. Therefore, as class guiders, teachers ought to take prudent consideration when choosing the language to teach. Recent researches regarding the choice of classroom language and its influence on students' learning outcomes were conducted from a wide range of perspectives such as varied disciplines (including the language itself as the taught content) taught in English as the second language(L2) [2], the effect of classroom language for students from multi-lingual backgrounds [3], the role of language context in second language acquisition(SLA) [4], and research on the

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combination of linguistic elements and cultures [5]. However, few researches shed light on translation teaching in this topic, though translation as a special activity encompassing both the native language of the students and the target language, i.e. L2, deserves our concern. Therefore, this research intends to investigate the discrepant effectiveness of pure-English teaching of translation discourse for different students, and figure out its reasons regarding students' personal experiences and cognitive characteristics, so that it may provide some constructive suggestions about teachers' choice of classroom language to teach translation.

This is an empirical research which comprehensively adopts quantitative and qualitative approaches. Three phases are included in the research. The first phase is a legal translation class taught by the researcher in pure English to junior students majoring translation and interpreting and an in-class exercise given to them. Afterwards, the researcher marked the exercises in number to rank the students from highest to lowest, and evenly divided them into two groups. In the second phase, a questionnaire was sent to the students to investigate their English-learning backgrounds. Lastly, the researcher matched the students with their answers in the questionnaire in order to find out similarities within the same group and discrepancies between the groups under different comparison items.

2. Research Design

2.1. Participants

Twenty-seven junior students from the College of Translation and Interpreting in Sichuan International Studies University were invited to participate in this research. Among them, 23 were females and 4 were males. All of the participants used to study in regular senior secondary schools and had no experience of studying in an international school. They gained admission to the University through the standardized National College Entrance Examination and to this major for their relatively outstanding grades compared to their counterparts in the English exam. All the participants have received the systematic training of general English skills and the junior-level discourses of translation theories, interpreting practice and English-to-Chinese translation practice in the first two years of their college life, yet none of them have been exposed to legal translation theories or practice. Therefore, neither an excessive gap of English expertise nor someone's known knowledge of legal translation were observed among the participants; thus no interference to the research results would be caused by them.

2.2. Procedure

Firstly, the researcher gave a class to the participants, talking about the history, characteristics, and basic principles of legal translation, which covered both factual knowledge and thought-provoking controversial issues under this topic. The instructional mode included the teacher talking and students discussing and answering questions, while all of them were only permitted to speak English in this process. When the teaching was over, an exercise printed in English regarding what had just been taught was delivered to the participants who were required to finish it in English within 20 minutes. Involving both objective and subjective questions, the exercise was designed to test the participants' working memory capacity and their understanding of the class content. Afterwards, the researcher set an explicit marking standard for each question, worked out the total score of each exercise, ranked the participants from highest to lowest, and evenly divided them into two groups——Group A(14 individuals) with higher scores, Group B(13 individuals) with lower scores.

In the next step, the researcher sent a questionnaire to the participants. Aiming to have a panorama of their English learning backgrounds, the questionnaire included six major sections:

(1) Level of absorption in English. Questions included were the length of time they spent in studying English, the language context, the frequency of using English, etc.

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(2) Students' divergent past experiences of English teaching. Questions included were the English nativeness of their teachers, and the pedagogical methods in English class they had experienced.

(3) Students' English proficiency. Questions included were the officially recognized English language tests they have passed, the English contests they have passed, and how difficult they find having an English-taught class is.

(4) Energy they distributed to listening, speaking, reading, and writing training.

(5) Self-assessment and others' comments on their language capacity, including how they assess the overall learning and the four subjects, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

(6) Motivation towards English learning. Questions were divided into their interest in and initiativeness of English and translation learning. For the former, questions involved their interest and changes in the interest in English and translation, and their preference of classroom language; for the latter, questions focused on their capacity to design, monitor, adjust their own learning, and their reactions to difficulties in translation studies.

Lastly, the researcher matched the feedbacks from the questionnaire with the students by their rankings within the two groups, analyzing the statistics under each item and make comparison when necessary, in order to discover possible universalities within the same group and discrepancies between the groups, so that we could find out elements which could affect students' translation learning outcomes in a pure-English-teaching environment.

3. Results

3.1. Level of Absorption in English and Learning of the Four Main Subjects

3.1.1. Age of Starting English learning

The ages when participants started to be exposed to English were distributed across a range from 4 to 16 with no obvious discrepancies detected between Group A and Group B.

3.1.2. Dedication and Frequency of English-applied Activities

Group A showed apparently higher dedication and frequency than Group B in daily activities of English application, including listening to English materials, communicating with others in English, reading English, and writing or typing in English. Meanwhile, the activities reported by Group A showed a much greater diversity in forms and categories.

In regard to the occasions where they speak English, answers from Group A included daily chatting with roommates or friends, online chatting with native speakers, using English slangs or homophonic expressions between Chinese and English when telling a joke, etc. While Group B generally claimed that they only spoke English when they had to, such as in a class. Reading materials reported by Group A covered multiple themes including literature, politics, news, musical scripts, etc, while Group B mainly focused on school reading assignments, texts from exercises for English tests, and news. For writing, more participants in Group A than Group B claimed they would post English content online or text native speakers, with even one girl saying she has been keeping the habit of writing a diary in English every day for 5 years. In comparison, participants in Group B presented much lower enthusiasm in English writing and the majority of them would not do extra exercise apart from school assignments.

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3.2. Students' Divergent Past Experiences of English Education

3.2.1. Teachers' Types

The majority of students had both the experiences of being taught by a Chinese teacher or a foreign teacher who is a native English speaker, and shared quite similar proportions of time they spent separately in the two types of classes.

3.2.2. Pedagogies Participants Experienced

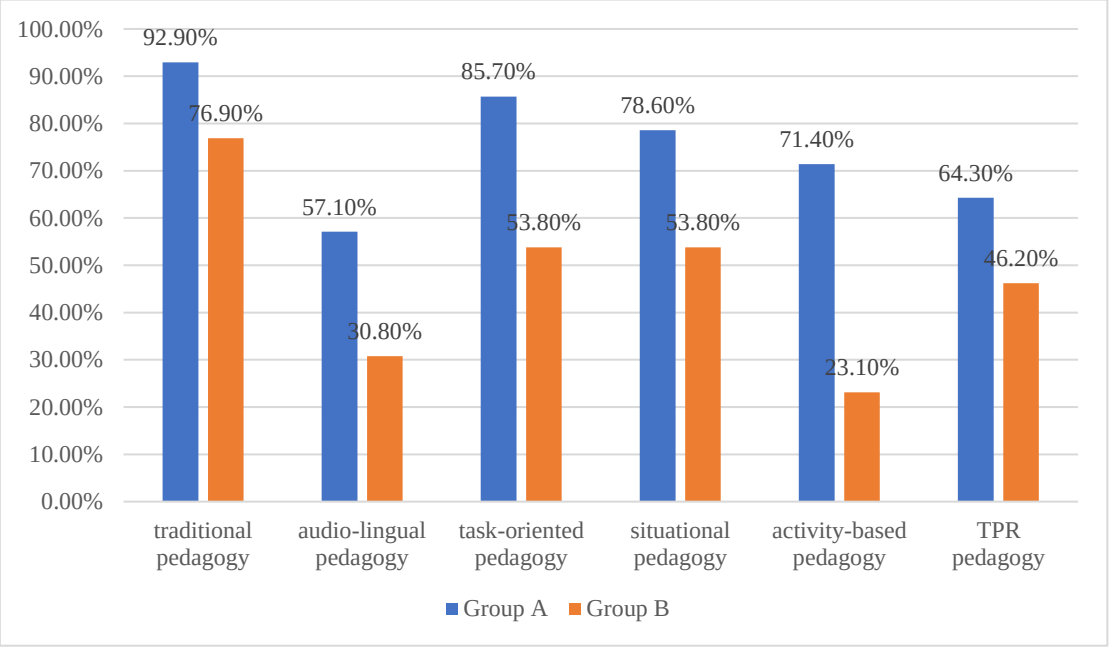

Figure 1: Types of pedagogies participants have experienced

It is found in Figure 1 that Group A members generally experienced more varied pedagogies than Group B. Extremely large gaps between the two groups can be observed in activity-based pedagogy, task-oriented pedagogy, and audio-lingual pedagogy.

3.3. Students' English Proficiency

According to their achievements in English qualifications and contests, no obvious differences were found between the groups.

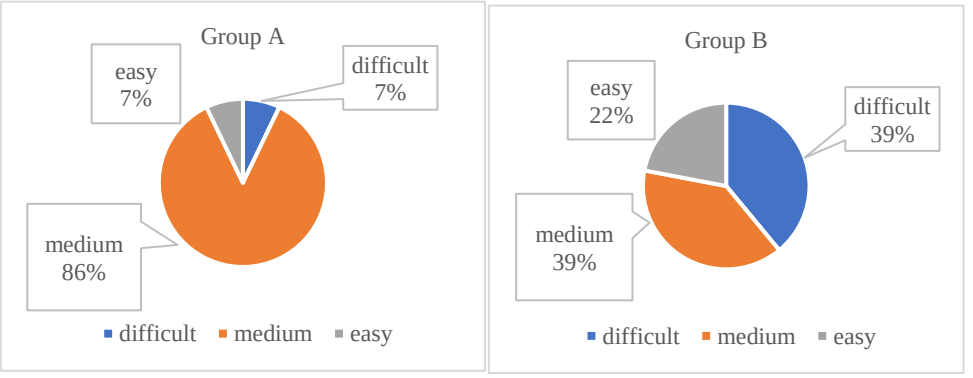

Figure 2: Difficulty level of being taught in English assessed by Group A and Group B participants

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Figure 2 shows that participants in Group A who regarded English-taught class of medium difficulty were more than twice of their counterparts in Group B. Whereas the numbers of who thought such classes were difficult or easy were both much smaller in Group A compared with Group B situation.

3.4. Motivation

Statistics show that 5 people regarded themselves as highly-motivated person in translation learning in Group A, which accounted for 35.7%. While in Group B, there was only one person and the proportion was 7.7%.

3.4.1. Interest in English

In Group A, 64.3% of the students clearly claimed that they liked learning English, while in Group B this proportion was reduced to 46.2%. Meanwhile, 7.1% in Group A and 30.8% in Group B said they disliked English learning. Therefore, it can be told that students in Group A have conspicuously greater interest in English learning.

More than half of the students claimed that their enthusiasm in English learning had gone through changes or was changing. According to their feedbacks, factors increasing their interest included teachers' application of intriguing pedagogical methods or tools, exposure to diverse cultures through learning languages, role model effects and so on; factors lowering their interest involved the spoon-feeding teaching mode in mandatory school time, high academic pressure, inability to find a goal or improper goal setting, excessive difficulty in learning, low self-assessment, the pandemic impact, etc.

3.4.2. Initiativeness in English and translation learning

In Group A, when encountering barriers in English and translation learning, no one just ignored and skipped them, with 78.6% trying to find a solution in their own efforts rather than directly turning to someone more experiential for help. In Group B, 8.0% of participants were used to skipping the difficulties, and 61.5% considered solutions on their own. Additionally, Group A presented higher sensitivity in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses in studies, deficiencies in the setting of learning goals, plans and strategies, and also presented better capacities to design and adjust their goals and plans accordingly.

3.4.3. Self-Assessment and Comments from the Environment

Lack of confidence was a universal phenomenon found in both groups, while the causes of self-doubt were varied from group to group. Group A members lost confidence mainly through comparison with more competent peers, and Group B members attributed the result mainly to frequent and challenging difficulties encountered in learning process. When it comes to the specific subjects of listening, speaking, reading and writing, Group A showed higher confidence than Group B.

Group A participants received more positive, detailed and targeted comments from others, and Group B generally received comparably negative, less specific comments.

4. Discussion

4.1. Effects of Language Contexts in Second Language Acquisition

Pica categorized contexts available to adults who wish to learn another language into three types: language classroom, real-world community and combination of the two [4]. In the classroom, learners were taught the formal features and linguistics rules of the language, while in communities which

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provide them with multiple opportunities to get in touch with native speakers, communication is required to be spontaneous and learners will get exposed to more casual and naturalistic expressions. According to Pica [4], "within these contexts, differences in role relationships, tasks, and topics effect variations in the language available as input to the second language acquirer"; "developmental sequences and 1inguo-cognitive processes of second language acquisition, therefore, may be different for instructed acquirers compared with their naturalistic counterparts."

To be more specific, Krashen has identified the differences between "learning" and "acquiring" of second language [6-12]. Krashen expressed that learning is a conscious process which only furnishes language performance when the learner is paying attention and spending time retrieving the linguistic features they used to encode into their mind. On the other hand, acquisition of the second language is subconscious and requires immediate and spontaneous language production in the communicative situation.

In this research, stronger adaptability to pure English-taught teaching was found on participants who used English in different forms, on divergent occasions and with people sharing a rich diversity of cultural and lingual backgrounds, compared with those who limited their application of English merely in the classroom to meet teachers' instructions. In such case, Group A students had much more chances of exposure to naturalistic English use, from which they internalized the language subconsciously through acquisition. When they needed to use knowledge gained from acquisition, their brains reacted immediately and naturally to the outer language stimulus without activating the consciousness, which enabled them to simultaneously understand the researcher's words and contents shown on the whiteboard in the pure-English class. No extra pressure was caused in this process, and students' attention could be focused on the class content itself. However, for those who seldom practiced English outside the class, after they received a certain language signal, extra interval time was necessary to recall linguistic features encoded previously such as vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax or grammar. In this way, a waste of time was very likely to be caused with even more potential accidents such as temporary memory blanks, failure of information pieces encoding, etc. Students' attention got easily grabbed, which led to a loss of information.

4.2. Expectancy-Value Theory of Motivation in Translation Learning

4.2.1. Students' Performance Explained by Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy, as another name for expectancy [13,14], refers to the strength of an individual's belief in accomplishing a task or achieving a goal. Self-efficacy is a multidimensional mechanism and differentiates for different individuals in terms of strength, generality, and level [15]. Bandura's self-efficacy theory categorizes expectancies into two types, i.e. the outcome expectations—beliefs that certain outcomes can be realized through certain behaviors; and efficacy expectations—beliefs about whether one can effectively perform the behaviors necessary to produce the outcome. Bandura believed that it is efficacy expectations that play the primary role in individuals' goal setting, activity choice, willingness to pay efforts, and persistence [13].

In this research, although a lack of confidence was shown in both groups, students with higher scores attributed it to the capacity gaps between themselves and more competent others, while students with less impressive performance expressed that their low self-assessment came from frequent failures and negative experiences when encountering obstacles in translation learning.

By delving into participants' specific explanations about their lack of confidence, the researcher found that for Group A students, they recognized their current language proficiency and efforts having been done to achieve it, or in other words, had adequate efficacy expectations for their studies at hand. Nevertheless, they were simultaneously aware of the existence of someone superior. This awareness would cause negative reactions such as anxiety from lower self-assessment and self-efficacy (which

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/61/20240559

might be inconsistent with and often lower than their true capacity), but for someone also acted as an external driving force fostering an increase of intrinsic motivation pushing them to work harder to meet their expected standard. On the other side of the coin, what Group B students doubted was their intrinsic ability in English and translation studies, in a case of being evaluated as below the average level in their class. They were more directly stuck in the plight of low efficacy expectations. Therefore, what these students pursued was neither setting a higher goal nor finding a role model for self-inspiration but catching up with their peers in a daily, immersive atmosphere of feeling being left behind. This, as a result, unfailingly caused them high pressure, the consequent avoidance of getting involved in learning activities, and finally further lowered efficacy expectations.

4.2.2. Value of the Task

Value refers to the importance of tasks [16]. It overlaps with other constructs described in other motivational models such as the need for autonomy in SDT [17], interest theories [18], and achievement-goal theory. Value in expectancy-value theory is the sum of three constructs: interest, utility, and attainment value [19]. This empirical research mainly dived into students' interests in translation and English learning rather than the latter two factors.

People's interest in a certain activity is closely related to their ability in performing this task. Intrinsic motivation appears to develop as a result of expectancy and experiences of success and failure [19]. As children grow older, they tend to place greater value on the tasks in which they succeed and distance themselves from activities that are difficult [20,21]. In this research, students in Group A showed less difficulty in taking pure-English-taught translation lessons and had more preference for English and translation learning, which proved the effectiveness of the theory.

4.2.3. Expectancy-Value Theory of Motivation

As one of the most prominent constructs contributed to human motivation, expectancy-value theory (EVT) was constructed on the base of two core questions: "Can I do this task?" (expectancy) and "Do I want to do this task?" (value) [13,16,22]. These two questions jointly determine individuals' motivation through complex interaction and integration rather than functioning solely and separately. Yet, expectancy and value play different roles in determining motivation as expectancy more strongly predicts the achievement, and value is more predictive of the activities one chooses [19].

From the results shown in Motivation Section, Group A students presented greater interest in learning their major and manifested comparatively strong self-efficacy in their overall language and translation proficiency as well as the four subjects of listening, speaking, reading and writing, while Group B was quite the contrary. Consequently, Group A students showed much higher motivation compared with Group B members, with the number of students claiming themselves as highly-self-motivated translation learners around 4.6 times of its equivalent in Group B, which has proved the construct that the combination of high expectancy and high intrinsic interest generally lead to stronger motivation for language learners.

5. Conclusion

This research has shown a general view of factors possibly affecting students' preferences for classroom language in translation teaching, emphasized the significance of language contexts for translation-major students, and provided empirical evidence to the expectancy-value theory of motivation in a context of translation teaching. It provided translation teachers and students with some practical suggestions.

For students, to order to be become more spontaneous language learner and more adaptive to translation courses taught in L2, they should expand their learning context out of the classroom to a

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broader, more elaborate, and naturalistic environment where they can gain more chances of L2 practice in the real world through directly relating to native speakers and resources. Variable methods leaning to improve different skills can be adopted, while students' interest and autonomy should be taken into consideration in order to maximize their motivation.

(1) Teachers should wisely choose the languages they use to teach translation classes after having an overall consideration of different language levels of all the students in order to avoid failure of understanding by some and the consequent reduction of self-efficacy for them. If the class is composed of advanced language learners who have little trouble understanding foreign-language-taught materials, using L2 to teach plays a major role in constructing a pure L2 context to help with students' language acquisition. But if the class is composed of both advanced students and less competent students, teachers should consider applying both languages for translation teaching. For example, they can speak students' first language when explaining essential conceptions and speak the second language to talk about less important content, or use both languages to interpret the same conception.

(2) Teachers should give frequent, detailed, and specific recognition to students' academic performance in order to improve their self-efficacy and meanwhile establish a positive, encouraging relationship in between. This can be great help for students' progress.

(3) Teachers should recognize students' interests both individual and collective, so that they can carry out diversiform class activities (such as games, debates, investigations, drama performance, etc.) to cater for students' consistent interest and give targeted advice to individuals' promotion.

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