

English Translation: A Perspective from the People's Republic of China

(Sylvia A. Thompson, May 1998)

INTRODUCTION

The opportunity to interact with people of another country is always beneficial—it fosters understanding, but to interact with people of a vastly different culture is a growth experience. So I count myself extremely fortunate to have been able to join Sam Dragga and his group on the technical tour of the People's Republic of China.

My choice of a topic for presentation is based in a firm belief that there can be no understanding without communication and no communication without a common language, and more specifically, no technical communication. Because there is a crucial need for interaction across peoples, we need a common language as a tool to achieve that interaction. In China, as elsewhere in the world, educators see that tool as English, the most widely taught of the global languages. (1)

In addition to the need to communicate with the world at large, China's educators are eager to join the worldwide technical community. They see the benefits of technology, especially communications technology, for China's masses. They are also keenly aware of the ground lost during the years of the Cultural Revolution and of the need to catch up. The premier language of discourse in modern technology is English. It is an emerging global language and is widely perceived as "a language of opportunity." (2) The first hurdle, then, is to facilitate the mastery of English. And in that endeavor, Chinese educators are moving forward with full speed. English is a language that can provide access to the world community.

TACKLING THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE

The national language of the People's Republic is Mandarin, and a language could not be more dissimilar to English. According to Mr. Shi Baohui, a professor and Chairman of the English Language Department at the Beijing Forestry University, not only is the script and grammar different from English, but learning and thinking patterns are greatly different. Additionally, Chinese is a *tonal* language where pitch carries meaning, and English is not. All these factors make English an extremely difficult language to learn for the average student, and it requires many years of study. Mr. Shi began at age 13 in 1974, and in college, studied 20 hours of English per week for 40 weeks a year. That kind of regimen takes commitment.

In the remainder of this paper, I focus on real-life examples that demonstrate the efforts of Chinese educators to promote the mastery of the "global language" and to close the technology gap. I will begin with a discussion of the Guilin Translation Service (GTS), a privately owned venture, and move to the two English Language departments that we visited at Guilin and Suzhou universities.

THE GTS

The Guilin Translation Service was established in 1984, as a non-governmental enterprise. Its founder, Mr. Zho Ji, is a translator who taught himself English.

Mr. Zho's experience is a fascinating one. In his biography, which accompanied the material that he gave us outlining the history of his business, he speaks openly of his stint with reeducation (in his words, "so-called Re-education") among the peasants in the Huangmei Mountain region, between 1969 and 1972. During this time, he studied the

English-language version of Chairman Mao's works and read English novels. He was also assigned work in the Guilin Prefecture Horticulture Farm, first as a bee-keeper and later as the "watcher" of the orchard. His job as a "watcher" was probably comparable to that of a security guard, who after making the rounds, has a lot of time to wile away before the shift ends. It was during this time that Mr. Zho was able to read a number of English texts.

In 1984, Mr. Zho began the Guilin Translation Service (then called the Guilin Translation Company). The biography describes his meager beginnings and how he had to borrow 200 yuan (the Chinese currency) as the registered capital to initiate his business. In our conversations with Mr. Zho, he spoke openly about the financial obstacles he faced owning a private venture. Banks would not lend to individuals, because it had never been done in China's socialist setting. They were accustomed to working solely with the government.

But Mr. Zho prevailed and in 1985, in addition to offering translation services, GTS began training in translation and foreign languages. By the end of that year, more than 900 young people had been trained. By 1995, more than 4,000 people had been trained, primarily in English and Japanese. Graduates of GTS training secured employment as guides in tourist agencies, and some went abroad for further study. Although operating successfully for over ten years, the Training Department of GTS ceased to function in 1995 because of obstacles. GTS continues, however, to provide translation services. It is Mr. Zho's hope to restart the training services, and 1997 was to be the targeted year. We left Mr. Zho in May of 1997, so I do not know if he was able to accomplish that goal. Given his other achievements, he probably was.

In the area of translation, GTS has made impressive contributions. From small beginnings translating business letters and notary documents, it moved to large-scale projects. We were given translated copies of one such project, "A Guide to the Investment in Guilin," authorized by the Guilin Municipal Planning Commission. The English translation is somewhat sketchy, but the art and presentation are very good. I attribute the level of quality of the translation to Mr. Zho's being primarily self-taught. Translations of materials that we received from the universities were stronger. Another large project entrusted to GTS was a 1995 request from Yunlin City to translate a 300,000-word technical document from General Motors in the U.S. into Chinese.

We toured the GTS quarters, which are attached to Mr. Zho's home, and he exhibited a noticeable pride in his achievements as he took us through the rooms. He seemed well-positioned to advance as China transforms.

THE TASKS FACING TRANSLATORS

Mr. Zho is a member of an association that consists of science and business translators. During a meeting with these professionals, we were given first-hand accounts of problems that translators generally face.

Professor Zhou Pei Yi, Dean of the Foreign Languages Department of the Guilin Institute of Tourism, apprised us of the current situation in China resulting from the Open Door Policy. It has generated extensive translation work involving scientific articles written by many non-English speaking or reading scientists. Professor Zhou points out that science and technology are the major areas of development in China, and as a result, there is what he calls a "knowledge explosion." More and more scientific terminology needs translating, making the translator's job more difficult.

He gave an example of the word "accupotomy" as one such term. It is a surgical operation without anesthesia. Job classifications and professional titles also pose a problem for translators. Terms like "manager" and "secretary" can have totally different meanings in different cultures.

Another translator of English, with the Guilin Planning Bureau, presented a couple of problematic areas for translators to which technical communicators can easily relate: jargon and long pedantic sentences. Writers of material to be translated should avoid them. It was uplifting to hear, as the saying goes, “from the horses mouth” an affirmation of some of the things technical editors and writers have been espousing for years.

Chinese translators encounter the additional burden of having to translate into Chinese, English that comes from nonnative English speakers; for example, Taiwanese scientists and writers. The translators employ several standard methods of approaching such writing to ensure that they remain true to the spirit of the original content. The methods of translating are as follows:

Conventional

The words in text are translated as they are currently used.

Phonetic

Words are spelled in the translation according to how they sound.

By description

The translator describes what is represented; for example, a scenic spot.

Partly by meaning and partly by description

Text is partially defined and partially described.

The principles that guide Chinese translators are probably the same for translators worldwide:

- Remain faithful to the original document. (Even when idioms are similar, use those from the culture of origin.)
- Strive to be communicable.
- Translate “gracefully.” (Always maintain clarity and conciseness.)

All the translators agreed that it is far easier to translate between a Germanic language (such as English) and a Romance language (such as French or Spanish) than it is to go from Germanic *or* Romance to Chinese. Anybody who has learned to speak one of these languages as well as a Chinese language would probably agree.

ENGLISH IN THE AREA OF ACADEMICS

Language Classes

Having taught high-school English many years ago, I was very excited about the opportunity to sit in on English language classes at the universities that we visited. The first visit was with instructors and students at Guilin Institute of Technology. Our guide was Ms. Tian Sui Wen, who is the Dean of the Foreign Language Department. She is a 20-year veteran English teacher, and has been with the University for 17 years.

The first class that we observed was headed by a male professor, Mr. Chin. The students were sophomore majors in International Training. I was immediately struck by their demeanor: everyone was at perfect attention; every head was directed toward the text, following the instructor as he discussed putting English sentences into Chinese.

Although this was a sophomore college class, it brought to mind my grade-school and high-school classes in the South. When class began, everyone came to attention—driven

by the fact that corporal punishment for disciplinary behavior was alive and well (and I might add—quite effective). But these students, beyond being a bit apprehensive about 12 foreigners staring at the napes of their necks, seemed genuinely caught up in the class. It was a fascinating experience.

The instructor gave the students a technique for successfully translating English sentences into accurate Chinese. He directed them to

- first, determine the meaning of the English sentence.
- then locate the crucial parts of the sentence and divide the parts into sense groups.
- finally, translate the sense groups into Chinese.

The groups of translated text can then be structured into an effective Chinese presentation. Throughout the exercise the instructor would present an English sentence, a student would stand and read it in Chinese, and the instructor would critique the performance.

As do Chinese translators, Chinese students learning English have difficulty with figurative speech. One of the sentences that the instructor presented for translation read

“I don’t carry much weight here.”

The instructor pointed out that the phrase “carry much weight” has to be translated to, perhaps, “I don’t have status.”

Another example was

“It may sound unconventional, but my decision is final.”

The Chinese alternative for “my decision is final” might be “my decision is unchangeable.”

The students must be able to make these connections if they are to move smoothly between the two languages. It is a much more complicated task than simply learning the word in your own language that best fits the word in the foreign language, because more often than not, there is no word in the Chinese language that fits.

The second class was headed by a young female instructor named Kang Tiang Yao. I had the opportunity to have lunch with Ms. Kang and to hear more about her experiences with English, which was quite interesting.

Her teaching technique was similar to that in the earlier class, but the students were not as engaged. She lectured more with less student involvement, and some of the students seemed lost. If she posed a question in English and no one responded, she moved into Chinese to prompt a response.

This exposure to the Chinese students and their instructors gave us a broader understanding of the commitment that Chinese educators have toward the students. They seem determined to guide this next generation of educators and leaders into the worldwide arena of communication.

Typically the students at the university take two years of general English, then two more years in specialized English for their majors. The components of this training consist of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Listening classes involve the presenting of stories about which the students must report to determine if they understood the meaning of the stories. Each year the university provides at least two foreign English language

instructors. And until 1983, an exchange program with Stanford University, in California, was in place.

English majors are required to take a class in foreign magazine reading, as well as assessing newscasts. All students take classes that deal solely with translation. The first term is an English to Chinese translation class and the second is Chinese to English.

With such rigorous programs, students committed to the effort eventually are successful. And the instructors acknowledge that once students get over the more difficult hurdles, they do well with English. Speaking the language, however, often comes easier than writing it.

At Suzhou University, we met with a group of English Language instructors to exchange ideas. The discussion evolved around how best to assist them in their quest for virtually everything needed to gain technical ground. Central to that conversation was the issue of English teaching and the learning of English. The spokesperson for the session was an extremely articulate, English-educated professor named Gu Peiya.

Ms. Gu described her classes as consisting mostly of adult students of English as a second language. She indicated that she has always made an effort to get more people interested in technology: more phone users and more computer users. She was instrumental in getting her department to set up computers—twenty-four stations are now available, and she taught a computer course at the graduate level. It is her hope that computer training will assist the students to develop their English skills further.

In preparation for the development of this paper, I asked Ms. Gu to send me her assessment of the difficulties Chinese students face in learning English. In response, she sent me several brief essays written by some of her students, stating the difficulties in their own words.

One student, Jin Weihong (who calls herself Jennifer—the students give themselves English names), describes the difficulty as two-fold: “skill-getting” and “skill-using.” She sees the former, learning the rules and grammar of the language, as relatively easy, and understandably because rules can be memorized. On the other hand, “skill-using” is very difficult for her. Spontaneous communication and free interaction with others who speak the language is her greatest problem. This is also understandable, because the language of her local community is not English and English is not what she most often hears. Exchange study in a country where the local language is English would be of tremendous benefit to the students.

Another student, Lu Hongyan (who calls herself Leila) cites the many tenses and verb forms as obstacles to her. She states that after having acquired quite a bit of vocabulary and learned most of the grammar rules, she found comprehension a problem.

The authors of the essays typically have each had about eight years of English, and theirs are indicative of the problems students face.

Concerns of Instructors

Ms. Gu summarizes the situation in her department as a general need for technical as well as theoretical assistance. She outlines the needs as follows:

- Instructor-led training and media-based training, so that students can teach themselves English
- Resources for the teaching of technical and business writing: reference books, teaching aids, and how-to books

- Professionals to show them how to design and write programs for computer use

Often the native Chinese computer experts have difficulty with English and are not skilled trainers.

- Skilled people to run and maintain computer systems
- Native English-speaking instructors to teach in the university

All the instructors, echoing a concern from several other professionals that we met during the tour, agreed that native speakers of English provide a tremendous benefit in language classes.

One instructor, Ms. Zhuang Lin, a teacher of oral English, described a particular problem that she faces teaching English as a nonnative speaker of the language. On occasion, situations occur where a language instructor who is a native speaker of English finds it difficult to interpret what a Chinese student wants to say in English. She, being a native speaker of Chinese, is well aware of what the student wants to say but finds it difficult to translate the text into English.

To address this problem, she proposes team-teaching. A native English-speaker sharing the classroom with a native Chinese language instructor could assist the students to interpret the meaning of difficult English text. The instructor could then concentrate on the students' Chinese. This technique should boost the quality of English translation classes and would be of tremendous benefit to the students.

Currently, many instructors of English in the University are not native speakers of English themselves. Consequently, they bring to the translation process any deficiencies that they may have in translating the language. Employing qualified native speakers of English would eliminate this problem.

Another concern of professionals involved in disseminating language and technical information is the prohibitive costs of technology. Ms. Gu pointed out that people in general cannot afford Internet connections and software is very expensive. She is attempting to secure approval for a campus network at Suzhou, so that at least students will have access to the vast flow of information on the Internet.

Additionally, because ready-made materials do not address their cultural needs, the language departments need help securing the equipment and resources that will enable them to develop their own computer-training materials. The schools of science currently have more access to computer technology, but their focus is not on language. The English department, on the other hand, has little in the way of computer equipment, but they feel they could make better use of it. Ms. Gu describes it as a very difficult situation.

CONCLUSION

What several of us in the delegation to China have stressed, in the two panel discussions presented today, is that Chinese educators can use your help. Pat Teigtmeier's presentation title says it all—China is hunger—for technical information, equipment, textbooks, periodicals, technical expertise, and also funding. And they sorely need teachers of English.

Those of you who are so inclined, who have funds or access to funding; who have the time, perhaps during a sabbatical; and who have the ability will do a service to the technical communication profession and the students of China if you can offer them assistance.

I will leave you with a couple of comments taken from the essays Ms. Gu's students wrote.

The first is from Jin Weihong, whom I mentioned earlier. After lamenting that she had made little progress from just memorizing rules, she finally realized that to learn the language, you must *use* it constantly. She also came to this conclusion, and I quote:

“. . . if I cannot master English well, I will have no place to stand in modern society.”

The other is from Wang Lu (who calls herself Barbara). In her essay, English is a metaphor for driving a vehicle. She titles it “The Most Difficulty in Driving My Vehicle,” and she begins with this statement:

“With the fast development of the world, English has become a necessary vehicle for communication.”

And on that point, she is quite accurate. English is indeed a necessary vehicle for communication.

Notes

1. David Crystal, *English: the Global Language*. A project sponsored by the U.S. English Foundation, Mauro Mujica, Chairman (Washington, D. C., 1996), p. 4.
2. Ibid, p. 18.

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