Application of Presupposition and Its Cognitive Interpretation to Translation Instruction for Non-English Majors

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Abstract. The paper attempts to find about whether application of presupposition and its cognitive interpretation to translating instruction is feasible and effective in arousing students’ interests in the introduction of presupposition to translating classes, enhancing their translating ability, and impacting positively their English acquisition on the basis of a teaching test, class observation and interviews with 120 non-English majors in Sichuan Agricultural University as the subjects.

Introduction
The prosperous globalization boosts China’s cultural, economic, technological and commercial communications and co-operations with other countries in the world, which makes it of great necessity for even non-English majors to have a good command of translation. But it is sometimes of enormous difficulty, even unlikely for them to understand the original text fully, let alone translate it properly. And their lack of the knowledge that the original readers have has posed a sticky problem for them to analyze and understand the original text, which eventually leads to the misunderstanding and mistranslation of the original. In order to make up for the lacking knowledge of the students, presupposition has been integrated into translation instruction and researches on the grounds of its positive influence on translating practice, which attests to the feasibility of application of presupposition to translation instruction. Furthermore, some experimental studies have been conducted check the effect of the presupposition on translation instruction and on students’ translating ability. In accordance with the previous researches in the field, the paper attempts to find out whether application of presupposition and its cognitive interpretation to translating instruction is feasible and effective in arousing students’ interests in the introduction of presupposition to translating classes, enhancing their translating ability, and impacting positively their English acquisition on the basis of a teaching test, class observation and interviews with 120 non-English majors in Sichuan Agricultural University as the subjects.

Introduction to Presupposition
Frege, a German philosopher, first proposed the concept of presupposition in his famous article On Sense and Reference in 1892. He explained presupposition with the remark “if anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have reference.” [1] He summarized the theory of presupposition as “Referring phrases and temporal clauses carry presuppositions to the effect that they do in fact refer; a sentence and its negative counterpart share the same set of presuppositions; in order for an assertion or a sentence to be either true or false, its presuppositions must be true or satisfied.” [1] According to Frege, the presupposition is a prerequisite of a sentence or an assertion. Approaching the presupposition from a different perspective, Bertrand Russell puts forward his famous theory of “definite descriptions” [2], which is dominant in the field until 1950s. He held that the original proposition is composed of a conjunction of the new assertions concerning a non-existence of the described individual and with true or false value. On the basis of Russell’s theory, Strawson, an English linguist, developed the notion of presupposition and differentiated “sentence” from “utterance”. In his opinion, a sentence has true or false value, but an utterance not. He broadened the scope of presupposition by declaring that some
other parts of an utterance, such as change-of-state words, and syntactic structures, such as a temporal clause, can generate presuppositions besides definite descriptions. Besides, he introduced the notion of context to the research of presupposition. A presupposition must be mutually known or assumed by the speaker and addressee for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context. It will generally remain a necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion, denial, or question, and can be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature (presupposition trigger) in the utterance. [3]

The presupposition is divided into semantic presupposition, which as its name suggest, is related to the meaning of the sentence or proposition without considering the context, and pragmatic presupposition, which “are best described as a relation between a speaker and the appropriateness of a sentence in a context”. [1] Pragmatic presupposition attempts to explore presupposition from the perspective of context. On account of the principle of communicative economy as balanced by the principle of clarity[4], much is unsaid in the discourse for the speaker assume that the listener shares the information. Therefore, pragmatic presupposition concerns the speaker’s assumptions concerning the listener, showing that it is sensitive to context. Consequently, it is of great significance to perceive the pragmatic presupposition in addition to the semantic presupposition when translation is done. Moreover, the process of decoding the meaning implied in a text is, in effect, the one of finding the presuppositions of the original text from the angle of cognitive psychology.

Presupposition triggers mean some particular words or constructions, which can produce particular presuppositions in a certain context. They are divided into thirteen types by Levison. The thirteen types refer to definite descriptions describing the existence of the entities named, and the possessive construction in English with association with existence and questions, factive verbs followed by presupposed information which can be treated to be a fact, implicative verbs such as forget, manage and avoid, change-of-state verbs altering the state of the proposition such as stop, begin, start, finish, carry on, cease, take, leave, go, arrive, enter, and come, iterative verbs denoting repletion such as restore, judging verbs showing judgment, such as accuse, charge and criticize, temporal clauses regularly and conventionally presupposing that part of the structure which is assumed to be true, cleft sentences constructed like “It is…that /who…”; implicit clefts with stressed constituents arising from the two cleft constructions with stress on constituent, comparisons and contrasts marked by particles like “too, back, in return” and by stress, or comparative constructions such as “superior to, as…as, not so…as”, non-restrictive clauses providing parenthetical information and not affected by the negation of the main verb which are outside the relative clause and thus giving rise to presupposition, counter-factual conditions meaning adverbial clause of counter-factual conditions, and questions sharing the presuppositions of their assertive counterparts.[5]

Cognitive Interpretation of Presupposition and Translation Instruction

The cognitive interpretation of presupposition approaches presupposition in the framework of cognition and accounts for the application of presupposition in discourse. Presupposition is of vital importance to the understanding of the original texts during the process of translation for misinterpretation of it can give rise to misunderstanding and mistranslating. Presupposition, especially pragmatic one, varies with culture. Specifically-speaking, what is explicit to language users in one culture is most likely to be what implicit in another culture, and hence the translator should tackle the presupposition from the cognitive perspective in the translation process for a good mastery of presupposition plays an important role in understanding the original and generating appropriate translations. As a result, it is of great necessity for instructors to introduce presupposition to their students in the process of teaching translation, which deepens their understanding of the different thinking modes between English and Chinese and foster their presuppositional thinking concerning cognitive relevance in translation practice.

Semantic presupposition is triggered by linguistic elements such as words and sentence structures, which boost the understanding of the literal information. In translation instruction, the cultivation of
presuppositional thinking on the level of semantic presupposition may assist students in improving the understanding of the original text and render a flexible translation without redundant information given the different contexts. Students should be trained to recognize and analyze presuppositions by means of specific presupposition triggers so as to achieve the consistency of cognitive relevance between the two texts.

But the recognition and analysis of semantic presupposition is not sufficient for semantic presuppositions are confined to the words and grammatical structures with no consideration of context factors. Therefore, it is of enormous necessity for students to be taught to understand pragmatic presupposition. Pragmatic presupposition is characterized by its appropriateness which means that the utterance must be appropriately employed. While translation is taught, various pragmatic presuppositions should be interpreted in order that students can deepen their understanding of the differences between the English and Chinese language and master the presuppositional thinking modes.

**Experimental Results and Discussion**

SPSS18.0 was adopted to analyze quantitatively the results of both pre-test and post-test, attempting to find out whether there is a significant difference between the Experimental and the Control Class before and after introducing presupposition and its cognitive interpretation into translation teaching practice in Experimental Class. The results gathering from class observation and interview results were analyzed qualitatively. The students are required to take the same pre-test to ensure that all the subjects in Experimental Class and Control Class are similar in their translation competence and English proficiency. The test was composed of two sections which included translation of a Chinese passage into English and English passage into Chinese with the number of words and difficulty of sentence structures strictly controlled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlled</td>
<td>79.12</td>
<td>4.997</td>
<td>0.669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>78.78</td>
<td>4.936</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Pre-test and post-test score comparison of EC.

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P(2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>78.78</td>
<td>4.936</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-test</td>
<td>85.67</td>
<td>4.982</td>
<td>0.003</td>
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Table 3. Pre-test and post-test score comparison of CC.

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P(2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>79.12</td>
<td>4.997</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>81.77</td>
<td>5.011</td>
<td>0.696</td>
</tr>
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Table 4. Post-test score comparison between EC and CC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>P(2-tailed)</th>
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<td>85.67</td>
<td>4.982</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CC: Control Class, EC: Experimental Class, M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

According to Table 1, the subjects in Experimental Class are similar to those in Control Class in terms of English translation proficiency before the experiment for the mean scores of the two classes are quite alike and the P value, which is more than 0.05, indicates there is no significant difference between the two classes. The same English teacher is adopted to instruct the subjects in the two classes to avoid the impact on the results caused by the elements of the teacher such as his or her English proficiency and teaching method.
According to Table 2, the subjects in Experimental Class have greatly improved their translating proficiency for there is approximately a difference of 7 scores between the pretest and posttest of the subjects. In consideration of the post-tests, it is apparent that students’ perception of the context has been bettered, especially their understanding of the meanings implied in the original text, which is of enormous significance to generate the accurate translation. And it is also demonstrated that introduction of presupposition and its cognitive interpretation to English translation instruction is effective in boosting the students’ translating competence. Although the P value of 0.003 (0.003<0.005) indicates a significant difference between the pretest and posttest of the subjects in Experimental Class, yet the influence of students’ diligence on the result cannot be deprived. Therefore it is necessary to check whether the influence is significant or not.

According to Table 3, the efforts of students do have an impact on the subjects’ performance for the mean score of the subjects’ post test is nearly 2 scores higher than that of the subjects’ pretest in the Control Class. But the P value of 0.696 is well above 0.005, indicating no statistically significant difference of the subjects in the Control Class at the two tests. And it is acknowledged that students’ efforts with the teacher’s instruction of translation contribute to the improvement of the students’ translating competence, but the improvement is not noticeable.

According to Table 4, the students in the Experimental Class improved more than those in the Control Class owing to the higher mean, lower standard deviation and the P value in the Experimental Class than in the Control class, which proves that it is feasible and effective to introduce presupposition and its cognitive interpretation to instruction of translation for Non-English majors.

During the whole process of the teaching experiment, students’ performance is observed and their feedbacks are recorded. The observation and the records demonstrate: 1) the subjects in Experimental Class do better and better in understanding the meanings implied by means of training pre-suppositional thinking and participate more actively in learning translation than those in the Control Class; 2) The students in Experimental Class gradually have more profound understanding of translation methods and strategies through learning presupposition and its cognitive interpretation than those in the Control Class, so they can more consciously and appropriately apply these translation methods and strategies.

The interview of the subjects in the Experimental Class has been conducted with the purpose of exploring students’ attitudes towards the instruction of translation combined with the introduction of presupposition and making sure whether the presupposition is of use in boosting the students’ overall English acquisition. Twelve students have been selected at random from the Experimental Class for this interview. The interviewees have not only pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching method, but also put forward precious suggestions about cultivating the students’ pre-suppositional thinking. Nine out of twelve students have supposed that it is of great assistance to improve non-English majors’ translation competence by introducing presupposition and its cognitive interpretation into translation instruction. Given their response in the interview, it is clear that they have acquired some knowledge of linguistics and gradually learn to apply their acquired translation methods and strategies to their translation practice. Seven students among the twelve have admitted that presupposition knowledge improve their text-understanding and word-memorizing. Besides, the subjects interviewed have offered some valuable suggestions concerning College English Instruction. Firstly, pre-suppositional thinking should be broadly applied to other aspects of English instruction besides translation; secondly, some knowledge about linguistics should be taught to boost the command and application of translating methods and strategies; and thirdly, more communication should be carried out between students and teachers to ensure the proper choice of translation practice and adjust the teacher’s instruction based on a deep understanding of the students. Lastly, the interview indicates that students have realized after the teaching experiment that translation is not just a matter of the language, but a complex communication activity concerning pre-suppositional thinking.
Summary

This teaching experiment has been designed to explore the feasibility and effectiveness of applying pre-suppositional thinking to translation instruction for non-English majors. Based on the data analysis, it is founded that: 1) students are interested in the introduction of presupposition and its cognitive interpretation to translation instruction, which is shown by their eagerness to learn relevant linguistic theories; 2) Students’ translation competence has been enhanced by acquiring relevant presupposition; 3) Acquiring presupposition and its cognitive interpretation have a positive influence on other aspects of English study.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that: 1) presupposition and its cognitive interpretation are suggested to be adopted in College English translation instruction to cultivate the students’ inferential abilities; 2) presupposition and its cognitive interpretation are suggested to be applied in other aspects of College English instruction; 3) Care option of presupposition and translation materials should be made in consideration of students’ interests and study ability so as to boost students’ learning interests; 4) presupposition triggers should be reminded students of so as to avoid literally stiff understanding of them.

Owing to the limited number of subjects, the limited experimental time of one semester and the limited research experience of the authors, more researches in the field are really essential to deepen the understanding of the issue.

Acknowledgement

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References

[3] Information on https://www.zybang.com/question/1ed3d1899080c8632bb7d76e3c759817.html