

A Constructivist Assessment of MTI Interpreting Curriculum

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Abstract

In recent years, Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program has witnessed increasingly greater development. MTI aims at cultivating students with comprehensive competency of translation and interpreting skills so as to meet social demand of present economic and cultural exchanges. However, MTI curriculum system is still underdeveloped and should be further improved. Constructivism is a philosophy concerning how to construct knowledge both in learning view and in teaching methodology. Taking MTI interpreting curriculum in NCEPU as an example, the article presents an assessment on MTI interpreting curriculum in North China Electric Power University (NCEPU). It is hoped that such discussions could offer a reference to policy makers when improving curriculum of MTI programs.

Key words: Constructivism; Interpreting courses; Curriculum; MTI

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INTRODUCTION

The theory of Constructivism maintains that the knowledge is not the reflection of the reality, and learners acquire knowledge through the interaction with their environment. Learners construct their new knowledge if the knowledge they are requiring is different from their prior knowledge. Five basic themes pervade the diversity

of theories expressing constructivism. These themes are: (a) active agency; (b) order; (c) self; (d) social-symbolic relatedness; (e) life span development (Wang, 2012).

Throughout the history, there are many philosophers and scholars who support some form of constructivism both in China and foreign countries, such as Lao Tzu (6th century BC), Buddha (560-477 BC), Heraclitus (540-475 BC), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933). In 1710, GiambattistaVico published the paper on the construction of knowledge. According to the dynamic view of learning by Johann Herbart (1776-1841), Jean Piaget (1896-1980) developed the model of cognitive development. Since then, the constructivism was put forward. With the effort of many psychologists and educationalists, the constructivism has been formed a complete theory system.

In recent years, there are increasingly more publication of relevant researches and it is obvious scholars were inspired by the theory of constructivism. Kiraly, a representative personage of the constructivism, is known as a social constructivist approach. One of his ideas is that people have no choice but to create or construct meanings and knowledge through participation in the interpersonal, inter-subjective interaction. In other words, knowledge is constructed both by social or interpersonal activities and through cognitive or personal thinking processes. According to social constructivism, Kiralyalso notices that the translation cultivation should be transformed from the traditional translation competence to translator competence (Kiraly, 2000). On the basis of social constructivism, Lin Wei expounds that the combination of interpreting contest and interpreting teaching can strengthen students' ability of interpreting learning and practice (Liu & Xu, 2014). There are other scholars who respectively argue that the constructivism should be applied to interpreting and translation teaching.

1. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that we, by reflecting on our experiences,

construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Learning is simply the process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences (Wang, 2012).

1.1 Cognitive Constructivism and Social Constructivism

There are two major aspects of the constructivism, namely cognitive constructivism and social constructivism.

For the cognitive constructivism, knowledge is constructed by the reorganization of learner's experiences and cognitive structures. For the social constructivism, knowledge is constructed in the practice through social interaction. There are characteristics in common between cognitive and social constructivism. D. H. Jonassen proposed that there are characteristics that mark constructivist learning environments. He expounded that constructivist learning environments should provide real-world environment with multiple representations. The learning environments encourage thoughtful reflection on experience and collaborative construction of knowledge through social interaction.

1.2 Constructivist Theory

There are two basic constructivist theories based on the constructivism, namely constructivist learning theory and constructivist teaching theory.

Constructivist learning theory shows that knowledge is constructed according to their prior experience by

information processing. Therefore, learners can construct knowledge by the active interaction with the world rather than passively receiving knowledge. In addition, the learning must be based on the individuals because of their different previous experience and knowledge.

There are four teaching thoughts according to constructivist teaching theory: (a) students-centered teaching; (b) teaching in real-world environment; (c) focusing on collaborative learning; (d) taking full use of the advantages (Yang & Jia, 2011).

2. MTI INTERPRETING CURRICULUM

With the increasing demand of interpreter, the United Nations has set up interpreter training class in Beijing Foreign Studies Institute—its current name is Beijing Foreign Studies University—who started the earliest professional interpreting teaching (Shi, 2015). In recent years, MTI (Master of Interpreting and Translation) has been set up in universities.

2.1 MTI Training Program

According to *Training Program for MTI*, there are required courses and elective courses, among which students must earn at least 30 credits. In addition, MTI students must do the interpreting practice for at least 100 hours. The duration of MTI students is 3-5 years. The courses can be listed as follows:

Table 1
Training Program for MTI

	Courses	Credit	
Public required course	Political theories	3	
	Chinese language and culture	3	
Compulsory course	introduction to translation	2	
	Fundamental interpreting	2	
	Fundamental translation	2	
	Specialized course	Consecutive interpreting (for interpreting)	4
	Simultaneous interpreting (for interpreting)	4	
	Literary translation (for translation)	2	
	Non-literary translation (for translation)	2	
	Elective course	Second foreign language	2
A brief history of translation		2	
translation appreciation and criticism		2	
intercultural communication		2	
A comparative study of Chinese and the western languages		2	
Introduction to stylistics		2	
International politics and economics		2	
Simulated conference interpreting		2	
Topic-based interpreting		2	
Sight interpreting		2	
Business interpreting		2	
Court interpreting		2	
Diplomatic interpreting		2	
Economic and trade translation		2	
Legal translation		2	
Translation of science English		2	
Media translation		2	
Computer-aided translation	2		
An anthology of Chinese masterpieces in English translation	2		
Internship		2	

2.2 MTI Training Program in NCEPU

According to *Training Program for MTI Interpreting* of NCEPU in 2015, there are also required courses and elective courses, among which students must earn

at least 38 credits. In addition, MTI students must do the interpreting practice for at least 400 hours. The duration of MTI students is 2-3 years.

Table 2
Training Program for MTI Interpreting of NCEPU in 2015

	Course	Cent
Public required course	Political theories	3
	Chinese language and culture	3
Basic theory course	Introduction to translation	2
	FundamenTAL INTERpreting	2
Compulsory course	Fundamental translation	2
	Scientific interpreting workshop (from Chinese to English)	2
	Scientific interpreting workshop (from English to Chinese)	2
	Energy and electric power interpreting	2
Specialized course	Comparison and translation between English and Chinese	2
	Simultaneous interpreting	2
	Consecutive interpreting	2
	Internship	
Elective course	A brief history of translation	1
	Intercultural communication	1
	International conference interpreting	1
	Second foreign language	2
	Sight interpreting	1
	Business interpreting	1
	Management of translation project	1
	Translation of science English	2
	Computer-aiDED TRAnSlation	2
	Literary translation	2
	Legal interpreting	2
	Finance translation	2
	Tourism translation	2
	Discourse analysis	1
	Introduction to international energy	1
	Stylistics and translation	1
Economic and trade translation	2	

Above all, it can be seen that there is little difference in basic courses between MTI national curriculum and MTI interpreting curriculum in NCEPU. There are more elective courses in MTI national curriculum than in NCEPU. In addition, scientific and technological translation and interpreting courses take the main part of all interpreting courses in MTI interpreting curriculum of NCEPU.

3. CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT

As discussed above there is quite some space for further improvement of NCEPU MTI interpreting curriculum because it seems that problems might occur due to the immature features of the present curriculum system. Seeing from the teaching theory of constructivism MTI interpreting curriculum has some problems in real practice. According to constructivism, the assessment of

the curriculum can be made as follows.

3.1 Viewing MTI Interpreting Curriculum From the Perspective of Constructivism

Constructivism maintains that learners construct new knowledge based on the knowledge gained from their previous experience. Therefore, what is significant for learners is their previous knowledge. However, most MTI students have very limited professional interpreting experience or received little training during the undergraduate years. In the case, there should be an opportunity in reviewing preliminary interpreting courses so as to help students to construct the knowledge or obtain required swiftness or readiness of interpreting.

Constructivist learning environments enable context-dependent and content-dependent knowledge construction (Wang, 2012). What is more, constructivism holds the promise of a remedy for an ailing school system and provides a robust, coherent and convincing alternative

to existing paradigms (Ibid.). Thus, MTI interpreting curriculum should be prearranged in an orderly way and step by step. In this way, students can develop new interpreting knowledge and experience based on the prior curriculum. Among MTI courses, there are core courses of interpreting, namely Fundamental Interpreting, Consecutive Interpreting, Simultaneous Interpreting and Sight Interpreting. There should be basic courses and advanced courses. Generally, basic courses are set up in the first and second semester while advanced courses in the third and fourth semester. These courses should be set up as follows (the number between brackets denote the semester): Introduction to Interpreting (1), Basic Sight Interpreting (1, 2), Basic Consecutive Interpreting (1, 2), Basic Simultaneous Interpreting (2), Advanced Sight Interpreting (3, 4), Advanced Consecutive Interpreting (3, 4), Advanced Simultaneous Interpreting (3,4), Simultaneous Interpreting with Text (3, 4). In addition, Basic Sight Interpreting and Introduction of Interpreting are suggested to start at the same time. Moreover, Advanced Sight Interpreting should be set up before all interpreting courses in the third and fourth semester (Yang, 2005).

Constructivism provides learners with real-world environment and authentic, challenging projects. In the learning process, individuals are active agents and students should be at the center of the process. Knowledge is constructed by the learners rather than simply transmitted by teachers to them. Therefore, the interpreting class should be students-centered and focus on the interpreting practice close to the real world. Only in this way can students reorganize knowledge based on his/her prior experience and gained knowledge. Besides interpreting courses, there should be more interpreting practices. After learning in the class, students can build a complete knowledge system about interpreting through the real interpreting practices.

3.2 The Assessment on the Curriculum of NCEPU

There are advantages and disadvantages on the interpreting curriculum of NCEPU. Based on Figure 1 and Figure 2, the advantages and disadvantages can be described as follows.

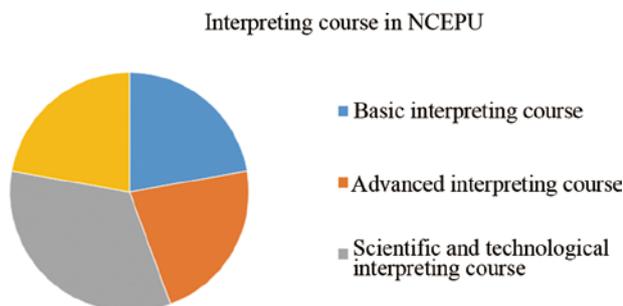


Figure 1
 Interpreting Courses in NCEPU

3.2.1 The Assessment on Interpreting Courses of NCEPU

The scientific and technological English and interpreting are well integrated, which is the distinguishing feature in NCEPU.

The proportion of each kind of interpreting course can be seen in the chart as above. The chart shows that scientific and technological interpreting course accounts for about 30%. Besides scientific and technological interpreting courses, there are also other scientific and technological English courses including Translation of Science English, Energy and Electric Power Translation and Scientific Translation Workshop (from Chinese to English and English to Chinese). All of scientific and technological courses provide students with good learning environment and coherent courses to gradually construct their knowledge in scientific and technological interpreting. All the relative courses can be selected to lay a good foundation for students. Furthermore, more professional interpreters in science and technology can be cultivated to meet the demand of the society.

Among all interpreting courses, basic interpreting courses such as Fundamental Interpreting Course are set in the first semester. In addition, the Consecutive Interpreting Course and Business Interpreting Course are also set in the first semester. Meanwhile, there are Sight Interpreting, Simultaneous Interpreting, Conference Interpreting and all scientific and technological interpreting courses which set in the second semester. According to the interpreting curriculum, Basic Interpreting, Consecutive Interpreting, Sight Interpreting and Simultaneous Interpreting Course are arranged in order while relative scientific and technological interpreting courses and Sight interpreting and Simultaneous Interpreting are simultaneously set in the second semester. By this means students can construct their knowledge step by step. Students can better learn new interpreting skills according to their prior interpreting knowledge learnt from the previous interpreting courses.

3.2.2 The Comparison Between National Training Program and the Training Program in NCEPU

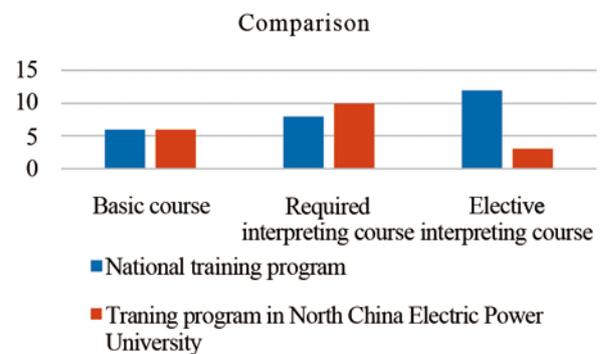


Figure 2
 Comparison Between National Training Program and Training Program in NCEPU

According to Figure 2, it can be seen that there are basic interpreting courses in NCEPU as with the national training program. Students can learn basic interpreting skills from these courses thus laying a good foundation to construct their new knowledge in the following advanced interpreting courses.

However, there are twelve elective interpreting courses in national training program while there are only three in NCEPU. Therefore, students have fewer elective interpreting courses to take, which can't provide students with opportunities to learn more interpreting skills and practice with enough interactions. In addition, the good environment and enough practice and interaction can help students to construct their knowledge better. Nevertheless, every interpreting course in NCEPU has fewer hours than the course required in national training program, which may lead to less interpreting practice for students. Thus, students could not have enough practice and constructed the previous knowledge well when they learn new interpreting courses.

Besides, students must do the interpreting practice in the second school year, which can provide students with social interaction and practice in real-world environment. Due to the social practice, students can apply what they have learnt to the interpreting practice and improve themselves at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Constructivism is a philosophy that learners construct their knowledge based on their previous knowledge rather than learning new things. Therefore, the interpreting courses should set step-by-step, by which students can construct interpreting knowledge basing on their basic interpreting skills. By this means, students can construct their own knowledge system further improving themselves according to their own conditions. In addition, the teaching must be students-centered in real-world environment simulation according to the constructivist teaching theory. Students can have more practice during

the student-centered teaching thus enhancing interpreting skills. Moreover, through the practice in real-world environment, students can not only use the previous interpreting skills in interpreting practice but meet social demand. In conclusion, high-quality interpreting talents can be trained by having interpreting courses based on the constructivism. However, there are fewer professional interpreting courses in almost universities because of the immature MTI curriculum system. Thus, MTI interpreting curriculum should be developed in more professional and practical way.

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