

Translation as a Method in Teaching ESP: An Example from the Secretarial English Course

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Abstract: Given that the core objective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is to enable students to effectively engage in specialized communication within their professional fields, it is crucial for ESP learners to become active participants in their professional discourse communities and to accurately use specialized terminology in various contexts. However, for students with average English proficiency, ESP teaching needs to be continuously adjusted, with the principle of adjustment being based on the overall improvement of students' English application ability. To truly enable students to participate in the learning process, integrating translation methods with ESP teaching has become a feasible teaching approach. To verify the feasibility of this method, this paper takes the Secretarial English course — offered by the College English Department of Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages — as a case study. By discussing task-oriented training activities (vocabulary, sentence patterns, dialogues, and translation) centered on practicing translation methods for Chinese Language and Culture majors, it illustrates how the use of translation methods enhances students' communicative competence in real-life scenarios, enables them to identify cultural effects, and fosters a cooperative learning environment. Such cooperation also represents an adaptable teaching mode that meets the demands of the contemporary ESP post-methods era. The effectiveness of the approach is evidenced by students' mastery of the relevant final-exam topics and by their relatively improved linguistic performance.

Keywords: ESP, Secretarial English, Translation methods, Cooperative learning, Post-method area

1. Introduction

Despite some scholars' (Fehaima, 2022; [1] Guo Yanling, 2014; [2] Kic-Drgas, 2014; [3] Mažeikienė, 2018; [4]) suggestions that translation should be used as a teaching method in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) due to its close relationship with the syllabus, its role in practical teaching contexts remains underexplored. In the current 'post-methods' era, ESP teaching is encouraged to creatively employ a variety of methods while maintaining unique advantages (Guo Yanling, 2014). However, the integration of translation methods into ESP teaching has received limited attention in the academic community. For example, in the study *The Application of Task-based Teaching Method in Secretarial English Instruction* (Xiong Yousheng, 2011), [5] translation is merely treated as an exercise item for students to practice, rather than a cooperative teaching strategy. Other works focus on modularized teaching methods, dividing courses into listening and speaking, reading, and integrated training to enhance students' professional capacity and English proficiency (Lin Lv, 2014:131). [6] Yet, discussions on specific embedded methods, particularly those related to translation, remain scarce. Given this gap, integrating translation methods into ESP teaching, especially for practical training in reading and expression skills, deserves further exploration.

This paper examines how translation methods can be systematically integrated into ESP teaching and evaluates their impact on the reading and speaking performance of non-English majors with average proficiency. Its central questions are: (1) Does such integration yield measurable gains compared with traditional grammar-focused EFL instruction? (2) What explicit differences emerge when translation is used as a core strategy in ESP courses?

To address these questions, the study uses a Secretarial English course at Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages as its case. It explores the feasibility of embedding translation tasks within task-oriented activities and documents the shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred classroom, offering insights for teachers, curriculum designers and researchers.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The first section discusses the current situation in the academic field, where the integration of translation methods into ESP teaching is rarely addressed. The second section explores possible reasons for the neglect of translation methods in ESP course design and suggests that such neglect may hinder students' language learning. The third section describes the ways of integrating translation methods into ESP teaching. Specifically, it combines task-oriented activities (mainly in the realms of reading and expression) with translation methods, using a Secretarial English

course at Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages as a case study. It aims to explain how a cooperative teaching mode can function effectively in the classroom. The last section concludes, based on the observation of students' final exam results, that integrating translation methods into ESP teaching is effective because of the commonality between the two: building a relationship between teachers and students as cooperative partners and co-learners. This mode indirectly counters the criticism that translation methods lack innovation. (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012).[7]

2. The Neglect and Marginalization of Translation Methods in ESP Teaching

Drawing on the translation-competence framework (PACTE, 2011),[8] this paper reconceptualizes ESP-oriented translation as a strategic, context-bound competence rather than a simple language-switching exercise. Yet translation's place in the classroom remains contested. Despite well-documented shortcomings of traditional translation exercises (Gong Wenli, 2012) [9] and the rise of modular, unit-based, task-oriented, and AI-driven alternatives, translation risks being pushed to the margins. This marginalization manifests in several ways.

For instance, when scholars discuss introduction methods, a common practice is to play songs or movie clips related to the topic during teaching (Li Lu, 2019:48).[10] While this approach allows students to enter a language-based environment, it often overlooks a fundamental question: What is the purpose of the introduction? Is it to improve students' listening or speaking abilities? If students are weak in these areas, how much help does this method actually provide? Indeed, research has shown that many students' English is fragmented, with broken structures, heavy use of Chinglish (Chinese-influenced English), and illogical word stacking (Cui Fenrong, 2014: 140).[11] The key issue is that the introduction, alongside unit module teaching, which relies heavily on digital techniques to guide students through individual units, assumes students' interest in this approach. This may further cause teachers to focus mainly on their teaching targets (Mo Chenli, 2022).[12]

Some may argue that with the continuous improvement of translation websites and software, and the ability to instantly obtain translations using mobile apps, AI-based translation has achieved the permeability of situational teaching and the instantaneity of text output (Wang Huan, 2020: 213).[13] It helps students with their individual study, to some extent. Yet, if AI translation becomes a crutch rather than a tool for enhancement and optimization, how can students truly refine their comprehension and expression skills?

The above issues reveal that teaching may overlook the overall integration of course content and neglect the need to emphasize specific skills that require attention. In the realm of ESP teaching, the emphasis is on cultivating and enhancing specialized skills (Lian Yiqing, 2021).[14] It is this skill development and enhancement that evokes the need for a new teaching module for ESP courses, and translation methods have significant potential for application.

Indeed, many researchers have already mentioned that using translation in foreign language teaching has many advantages. For example, Irina Gvelesiani (2023) [15] uses translanguaging during classroom activities to prevent students from teacher-led interactions. Amaria Fehaima (2022) claims that teachers will believe that incorporating translation into the classroom could lead to a significantly different experience compared to what is typically encountered in standard ESP classes. From these two major perspectives we can see that, transforming ESP courses into a 'learner-centered post-method' approach (Guo Yanling, 2014:41), which emphasizes the learning process of the language, could be a potential solution.

Importantly, using translation in ESP does not require students to master translation theory to the depth expected of translation majors. Nevertheless, the traditional practice of explaining grammar and drilling translation skills remains indispensable (Gong Wenli, 2012: 191). Several reasons account for this. First, students acquire most of their specialized knowledge in Chinese; transferring that knowledge into an English-medium classroom is challenging, and without explicit translation instruction their linguistic skills may remain under-exercised (Lian Yiqing, 2021: 188). Second, working with multimodal texts—photographs, diagrams, and other visual material—can heighten concentration and motivation (Kic-Drgas, 2014: 260). Moreover, bilingual settings make translation an ideal vehicle for addressing cultural norms, stylistic choices, and pragmatic appropriateness in both languages.

Within this framework, PACTE's three-tier model (2011)—micro (bilingual and instrumental dexterity), meso (extra-linguistic and strategic adaptation), and macro (knowledge-about-translation for genre-appropriate decisions)—is used diagnostically rather than prescriptively. By mapping students' current competence at each level, ESP instructors can embed targeted translation tasks that progressively raise language ability while compensating for limited oral fluency. Thus, translation methods become the vehicle for staged skill-building within the ESP curriculum, not a prerequisite for advanced proficiency.

Given this profile, the ESP courses shall foreground reading and speaking, making translation an ideal complement. To test the approach, this paper uses Secretarial English at Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages. Participants are 30 students from the School of Chinese Language and Culture; 67 % have passed CET-4, but fewer than 20 % have passed

the oral component.

3. An Translation Turn in Teaching ESP: The Theme of “Less Theory but More Practice”

Since 2023, the School of Chinese Studies has introduced a new course titled Secretarial English. This course is designed to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) through the daily work of a secretary, covering specialized topics such as secretarial office work, management efficiency, reception of guests, and contract signing. As an optional course, it attracts students motivated by the desire to prepare for their future careers. To engage students, the syllabus adopts a core teaching strategy of “Less Theory but More Practice,” emphasizing practical activities over theoretical instruction (Irina, 2023:32). Specifically, the course is divided into eight units, each lasting two weeks. The first week focuses on text study, while the second week is dedicated to practical language skill development under a modular theme of “English at Work”. This theme serves as a concrete manifestation of the broader strategy. Within this module, the main concepts and challenges of each chapter will be integrated into question types mainly for reading and speaking, with an emphasis on applying learned knowledge in real-world scenarios. The teaching approach integrates task-oriented activities, including vocabulary and sentence-making exercises, dialogue and translation practices, as well as sentence expansion exercises, all of which align with the ESP’s emphasis on fostering a cooperative atmosphere between teachers and students.

Unlike conventional EFL courses, which typically stop at controlled vocabulary drills, this task-stack advances through three mandatory stages—micro, meso, and macro—each evaluated with industry KPIs (Key Performance Indicator) such as task-completion rate and cross-departmental collaboration efficacy, metrics absent from standard EFL (English as a Foreign Language) rubrics.

3.1 Micro-level: Vocabulary and Sentence Expression Training Based on the Translation Method

Task-oriented teaching is a widely employed method that varies in application depending on specific goals. In the context of Secretarial English, each unit is accompanied by a “Words and Expressions” section, and learning new words as well as sentence-making with the learned words are basic training components of the course. To achieve this, vocabulary exercises are integrated into Warm-up Activities, which not only introduce the units but also assess students’ vocabulary accumulation and their grasp of word usage. Typically, the instructor lists the new vocabulary related to the unit in the language of instruction, and students are asked to provide the English equivalents verbally, with a particular focus on mastering the extended meanings of words.

3.1.1 The Use of ‘Polysemy’

For example, in Unit 1 titled Getting to Know Why We Wear What We Wear, the key vocabularies are related to workplace attire. Many of these words are compound words, such as ‘floor-length sable coat’ (及地貂皮大衣), ‘heavy-set woman’ (体态丰满的女人), and ‘three-quarter sleeves’ (半截袖). While these terms can be easily understood with brief explanations, some familiar words may change meaning based on context. For instance, the word ‘accent’ commonly refers to ‘the sound pronounced by a local’, but in the sentence ‘The lighter and brighter colors should be used as accents for smaller items such as blouses, sweaters, scarves, and accessories.’ (浅色和亮色应该用作小物件如衬衫、毛衣、围巾和配饰的点缀色), ‘accents’ refers to ‘accent colors’ or ‘highlight colors’. This illustrates the function of ‘polysemy’ in vocabulary.

While it is also a method of context analysis, related to translation methods, that enables students to identify the specific meanings of words within a given context based on the surrounding text. Similar examples include words like ‘secretary (秘书/部长/书记),’ ‘file (n.文件/v.归档/提交),’ ‘draft (n.草稿/汇票/v.起草),’ and ‘minute (n.分钟/会议记录),’ etc. If students practice more on changes in parts of speech and become familiar with the usage of polysemous words, they will be able to choose the most appropriate translation when understanding sentences or passages.

3.1.2 The Use of Communicative Translation

In addition to context analysis, communicative translation, which is commonly used, can also be applied in teaching Secretarial English. This is because the primary function of language is for communication and interaction, which also constitute a large part of secretarial work. Different expressions of the same sentence can convey different effects and intentions. For instance, the Chinese sentence ‘我带你到处转转, 见见将和你一起工作的同事’ can be interpreted in different ways. The literal translation is, ‘I’ll take you around and introduce you to the colleagues you’ll be working with.’ If the goal is to highlight the relationship among the colleagues, then the sentence can be phrased as, ‘I’ll take you around to meet your future colleagues.’ But if the focus is on the act of ‘taking/giving a tour (转转), then the sentence can be, ‘I’ll give you a tour and introduce you to your colleagues.’ Furthermore, the sentence can be expressed in a much more formal way: ‘I’ll conduct a tour for you and introduce you to the colleagues you will collaborate with.’

The variety of acceptable renderings highlights the creativity and flexibility inherent in translation, while also keeping sentence-making exercises engaging. Students are guided by two principles: adhere to target-culture conventions and preserve core meaning. At this micro-level, polysemy spotting and communicative rewrites are embedded in authentic secretarial texts, ensuring every lexical choice is KPI-relevant rather than an isolated, purely academic drill.

3.2 Meso-level: Cultural Adaptation and Translation Choice

For a long time, Secretarial English and foreign-related secretarial work have been equated. In other words, the teaching is likely to aim at cultivating college students with strong cross-cultural communication abilities and an international perspective (Xiong Yousheng, 2013: 73; [16] Lian Yiqing, 2021, 188). However, for students with relatively weaker English foundations, rather than focusing solely on the cultivation of communicative abilities, it would be more beneficial to incorporate translation methods into the curriculum (Chen Ruijuan, 2020: 170). [17] This approach can guide students to recognize the unique characteristics of expression in both Chinese and English, and to learn language expression through the comparison of linguistic and cultural differences.

3.2.1 The Applicability of Literal Translation and Domestication

Since the Secretarial English textbook is bilingual, instruction not only needs to focus on developing students' English knowledge and skills but also on enabling them to identify appropriate communication in cross-cultural contexts. In this sense, dialogue practice, especially creating scenarios for dialogue exercises, can better enable students to master the skills required in secretarial work.

There is a template that allows students to analyze and imitate for practice, which relates to the Unit 'How Does a Secretary Deal with Speeches?' There are two toasts written in the unit, one from the Chinese side and the other from the foreign side, each with a distinct style. Through comparison, students found that the Chinese toast and the foreign toast has one common purpose (making a contract) but differ in language style and mode of expression. The Chinese toast is more formal in language, employing traditional expressions and idioms, such as 'Confucius once said, "What a joy it is to have friends coming from afar."' It also uses more complex and formal vocabulary and sentence structures, like 'mutually beneficial (互利的)' and 'solid relationship (牢固的关系)'. In contrast, the language used by the American side is more casual, employing colloquial expressions such as 'Thank you very much' and 'joking aside'. The vocabulary and sentence structures are also relatively simple and consist of everyday words, like 'enjoyable experiences' and 'full of new ideas'.

In addition to the different cultural characteristics reflected by linguistic norms and colloquialism, such expressions often employ literal translation and domestication. These two basic translation methods are highly suitable for students to organize simple situational dialogues. Topics such as Office Reception (Unit 4), Phone Calls (Unit 5), Meeting Arrangement (Unit 7), etc., can be set in class, and relevant sentences shall be made in both literal translation and domestication type. For instance, the Chinese sentence "请在这里签到, 然后我会为您发放通行证。" can be translated literally as 'Please sign in here, and then I will issue your pass.' Alternatively, using domestication, it can be translated as 'Could you register here first? I'll get your visitor badge ready.' Another example "请稍等, 我帮您转接给张经理。" can be translated literally as 'Please wait, I will transfer you to Manager Zhang.' This can also be revised to 'One moment, please. Let me connect you to Mr. Zhang.'

Through progressive exercises from literal to domesticated translation, students gradually learn which expressions align more closely with English conventions and sound more natural, thus enhancing their ability to express themselves effectively.

3.2.2 Useful Expressions: From Formal Equivalence to Dynamic Equivalence

The two practical activities mentioned above (lexical and dialogical exercises) have explored the effectiveness of translation methods in helping students understand texts and practice speaking. This has revealed that the translation methods used in Secretarial English course normally focus on one keyword: 'equivalence'. Whether it is literal translation, communicative translation, or domestication, when it comes to the conversion between the source language and the target language, one essential element that cannot be ignored is 'equivalence'.

There is a chapter titled 'How Does a Secretary Interpret during Negotiations?' in the textbook. The key points of this chapter involve how a secretary represents the boss in negotiations with the other party while s/he must accurately convey the needs of the principal party during the process. Accordingly, students need to know not only the terms such as floor price (底价), D/P (Documents against Payment – 付款交单) or D/A (Documents against Acceptance — 承兑交单), FOB (Free on Board – 离岸价), CIF (Cost, Insurance and Freight – 成本加保险费及运费), L/C (Letter of Credit – 信用证), tariff barrier (关税壁垒) and the like relating to international trade, but also know each Chinese equivalence and its meaning at the same time.

In particular, when secretaries are involved in negotiations, the accuracy of the quotation is crucial, and the wording

must be extremely precise. Sentences such as “Our offer was \$16.80 for each blouse”, “Your first counteroffer was \$14.40”, and “That’s a 7% increase”, etc. can be seen as useful expressions.

Another point related to “useful expressions” is to encourage students to learn how to optimize sentences. Thanks to the emergence of AI devices, even though many teachers complain about students’ reliance on machines, it cannot be denied that some apps, when used appropriately, can significantly boost students’ learning habits. Therefore, in the curriculum design, it is possible to set aside 3 to 5 minutes for students to interact closely with AI and use it, aiming to guide them to revise their sentence expressions. For instance, the sentence “Frankly, I doubt if we can make any profit at this price” can be expanded as “Frankly, I doubt we can make any profit at this price, considering the current market conditions and our production costs.” And “I’ll take your word for it” can be enlarged as “I’ll take your word for it, but I would like to emphasize that this agreement is contingent upon a thorough review of all the terms and conditions.”

From the precision of terminology translation (such as contracts, quotations, technical documents, etc.) to expanding and optimizing dialogue sentence patterns through AI practice (making them more complete), this meso-level stage moves students beyond formal equivalence toward dynamic equivalence. Unlike general EFL courses that rely on single-culture dialogues graded solely for grammar, the module requires students to negotiate literal versus domesticated versions of authentic trade toasts and contract clauses, with performance measured against real-world KPIs: cross-cultural appropriateness and quotation accuracy.

3.3 Macro-level: The Use of Addition and Omission in Translation Practice

As the Secretarial English course covers not only the interpretation of the texts relating to secretarial profession, but also the integration of ideological and political education (IPE), The topics are serious, with official language and many four-character expressions, requiring splitting and combining, while they are suitable for translation practice.

For example, one chapter requires students to study Premier Li Keqiang’s keynote speech (2018) at the ASEAN Secretariat. The original Chinese texts are written as follows:

15年来, 我们讲信修睦、安危与共, 携手应对国际金融危机, 成功抗击重大自然灾害, 维护了地区和平、发展与繁荣。我们聚焦民生、深化合作, 共建“一带一路”, 深化人文交流、造福了地区国家和人民。

When the original sentence contains many four-character phrases, the first step in translation is to split or combine these phrases. For example, “讲信修睦” is translated into ‘nurtured good-neighborly relations and built mutual trust,’ which clearly conveys two layers of meaning. However, the phrase “发展与繁荣” is simply summarized as ‘common prosperity’. “携手应对”, on the other side, is translated as ‘We stood side by side during challenging times,’ with an added subject and adverbial phrase specifying the mutual assistance between China and ASEAN during difficult periods. In addition, the verb phrase “made tireless efforts” is added before the phrase ‘to promote regional peace’ (维护地区和平), used to balance the sentence structure and make the expression more complete. Likewise, “聚焦民生、深化合作” is transformed into the adverbial form “by deepening cooperation with a people-centered approach,” which gives the sentence a strong sense of depth and coherence to conveying the meaning of the entire text.

Unlike typical EFL courses, which drill sentence-level grammar through generic topics, this macro-level stage places students in high-stakes political discourse. They must decide when to add or omit whole clauses in authentic state-level speeches, aligning their translations with diplomatic register and policy nuance rather than mere grammatical accuracy. Through parallel exercises, students learn to reshape sentence patterns so that hierarchy and emphasis are preserved in the target language, while remaining alert to the structural and stylistic gaps between Chinese and English.

4. Outcomes and Conclusions

This paper explores the feasibility of applying translation methods in teaching Secretarial English course. As illustrated in the examples above, the teaching is organized around task-oriented exercises, including vocabulary, text study, dialogue, and translation. These practices subtly reflect the principle of ‘Less Theory but More Practice’ mentioned earlier and correspondingly create an equal and friendly classroom atmosphere: that is, they increase the participation of nearly all students and potentially prevent students from falling into routinized learning. Such transformations can be embodied as follows.

After the completion of the course, students’ academic performance has improved. Judging from the scores of different question types in their final exam, first of all, in the vocabulary test (15%) which involves synonyms and extended meanings, 80% of the students (24) scored full marks. In the reading comprehension section, which includes translation (25%) and question-answering (10%), students’ average score rates were maintained at 20% and 6.5% respectively. There is a dialogue section accounting for 14% of the score, focusing on sentence expansion. However, only 14 students scored in this section, with a significant number of students choosing to skip the questions. From these results, it can be seen that the application of

translation methods in the course has enabled students to attain ‘English at Work’ to some extent.

In addition, teaching with specific translation tasks can enhance students’ awareness of vocabulary, context, and the stylistic transfer between Chinese and English. From introducing the lexical features of the source text to understand their extended meanings; being guided through overall comprehension of the context by translation tasks, to evaluating drafting translations and optimized translations, students are able to reflect on what constitutes lexical mismatches between the source and target languages, what precision in translation entails, and why AI-optimized translations can become one of the reasonable solutions for their complex expressions. This awareness and reflection contradicts the long-held belief that using translation as a teaching method lacks innovation.

However, the sample size of this study is limited to one class within one term’s practical observations and statistics. The evaluation primarily relies on classroom observations and final exam results, without conducting interviews or questionnaires to gather firsthand student feedback. This lack of direct student input may affect the comprehensiveness and scientific nature of the teaching evaluation.

Second, the integration of translation advocated here is framed by cooperative learning. The classroom activities — translation-method instruction and student practice — align with the ESP “post-methods” shift from product to process (Guo Yanling, 2014: 42). Yet the current tasks — vocabulary drills, sentence expansion, dialogues, and translation — remain fairly conventional and may fall short of the “composite-type” talent goals (Lian Yiqing, 2021) or the pedagogies demanded by large-language-model contexts (Cui Fenrong, 2014; Marinov, 2019; [18] Wang Huan, 2020). Still, the approach offers practical guidance for students with average proficiency. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods design: quantitative pre-/post-tests with a control group and qualitative follow-up via interviews and learner journals. A longitudinal study spanning at least two semesters is also recommended to assess the retention and transfer of translation-mediated ESP skills to authentic workplace settings.

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