

## Translator Training: What Translation Students Have to Say

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Volume 47, Number 4, December 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/008034ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/008034ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Li, D. (2002). Translator Training: What Translation Students Have to Say. *Meta*, 47(4), 513–531. <https://doi.org/10.7202/008034ar>

### Article abstract

Following an earlier study by the same author on professional translators which appeared in *Target* 2000 (12:1 127-149), this article reports on an empirical study, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, on the learning needs of translation students, another major stakeholder in translator training. This study shows that contrary to a widely held assumption, the great majority of students taking translation did not and do not intend to be professional translators/interpreters. It is found that translation students prized training of both L1 and L2 before or during translation training, and that they preferred practice-oriented courses to theoretical courses. Also revealed in this study is that many students believe the current translation program does not reflect the market needs very well and that measures such as offering more practical courses, strengthening language training, teachers' providing more detailed comments on assignments, etc., must be taken in order to improve the program. Based on such findings, a comparison with the earlier study on professional translators is made and pedagogical implications are also drawn in relation to some of the focal issues in translator training.

# Translator Training: What Translation Students Have to Say\*

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## RÉSUMÉ

Suite à une étude du même auteur publiée dans *Target* 2000 (12:1 127-149), cet article décrit une étude empirique, basée sur des données quantitatives et qualitatives, sur les besoins d'apprentissage des étudiants en traduction. Cette étude montre que contrairement à ce que l'on peut croire, la majorité des étudiants en traduction ne prévoient pas devenir des traducteurs ou interprètes professionnels. De plus, les étudiants préfèrent les cours pratiques aux cours théoriques. Cette étude a aussi démontré que plusieurs étudiants pensent que les programmes actuels en traduction ne reflètent pas la demande du marché et qu'il faudrait prendre certaines mesures pour améliorer les programmes d'études.

## ABSTRACT

Following an earlier study by the same author on professional translators which appeared in *Target* 2000 (12:1 127-149), this article reports on an empirical study, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, on the learning needs of translation students, another major stakeholder in translator training. This study shows that contrary to a widely held assumption, the great majority of students taking translation did not and do not intend to be professional translators/interpreters. It is found that translation students prized training of both L1 and L2 before or during translation training, and that they preferred practice-oriented courses to theoretical courses. Also revealed in this study is that many students believe the current translation program does not reflect the market needs very well and that measures such as offering more practical courses, strengthening language training, teachers' providing more detailed comments on assignments, etc., must be taken in order to improve the program. Based on such findings, a comparison with the earlier study on professional translators is made and pedagogical implications are also drawn in relation to some of the focal issues in translator training.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

market needs, practice-oriented courses, translator training, Hong Kong, qualitative approach

## Introduction

Burnaby points out that "the curriculum content and learning experiences to take place in class should be negotiated between learners, teacher and coordinator at the beginning of the project and renegotiated regularly during the project" (Burnaby 1989: 20). To ensure that translation programmes best meet the constantly changing social needs and the needs of students, assessment must be carried out to ascertain the real needs of both students and professional translators (Li 1999a). A study of the needs of professional translators in Hong Kong conducted earlier in 1999 by the present researcher discovered noticeable differences between what translation

programmes offered and what professional translators required at work, and provided useful suggestions for curriculum innovation (Li 2000). However, the needs of translation students, who are tomorrow's professionals, have not been studied yet in the English vs. Chinese translation teaching context. It is therefore the intent of the present study to examine translation students' needs, followed by a comparison with the findings of my earlier study on professional translators (*ibid*). Pedagogical implications will then be drawn for translation teaching in general and translation programme development in Hong Kong in particular.

## **The Study**

### *The Research Setting*

This study was conducted with a group of translation students at the Department of Translation, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, during the period from January to May 2000. As in all bilingual societies, translation plays a very important role in the social, political, economic, educational and cultural sectors in Hong Kong. Since the early 1970s when Chinese was recognized as an official language in the former British enclave, along with English (Almberg 1997; Lai 1997), translation teaching has grown rapidly over the last three decades in response to the increasing demand for translators and interpreters. There are currently eight government-funded tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. Seven of them have translator training departments or programmes, where BA or BA(Hons), M.A. and M.Phil, and PhD degrees are offered<sup>1</sup> (Jin 1997; Liu 1997).

Among them, the Department of Translation of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is one of the leading local tertiary institutions offering a full-time undergraduate translation programme, with an annual intake of around thirty students. Despite the fact that it was designed as a three-year programme, some students may take four years to complete their programme if they choose to study at an overseas university for one year in their second or third year at this University. The programme offers five streams of courses, namely Translation Skills, Translation Studies, Specialized Translation, Interpreting and Chinese vs. Non-English Translation (see Appendix). Students are required to complete a minimum of 54 units of courses (3 units per course), with at least one course from each of the five streams (Chan 1999).

### *The Design of the Study*

Consisting of three parts, this study began with a focus group discussion, which lasted approximately 50 minutes. Eight students, two from each of the four grades, were invited to participate. Six guiding questions prepared by the present researcher and the project assistant were used to facilitate and focus the discussions. The purpose was to gather data to be used as the basis for generating a relevant questionnaire, which was to be administered later to more students of the same department.

The focus group discussion was recorded and later transcribed in summary form. In working out the questionnaire, the researcher and the project assistant read the transcripts while listening to the recording repeatedly and incorporated all the relevant data into the questionnaire.

The second part of the study was a questionnaire survey. While designing the

questionnaire, special attention was given to making the questions clear, precise and motivating (Dezin 1970). It comprised 26 questions altogether, which fell into three major categories, namely the respondents' personal information, their perception of translator training and their needs as translation students. The questionnaire included 22 multiple-choice questions and four open-ended ones. For the former, the respondents were asked to choose only one best or most appropriate answer or add their answer if it was not included in the provided list of choices. Seventy-five questionnaires were sent out and 70 completed and returned, with a return rate of 93.3%.

Following the questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews were carried out with 10 of the respondents to further explore their background, their understanding of being a translation student and their perceptions of translator and interpreter training in Hong Kong. The interviews used in this study were semi-structured, conducted in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewer was allowed sufficient freedom to digress and probe far beyond the answers to the prepared and standardized questions (Berg 1989: 17). All interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible afterwards.

#### *The Research Assistant*

A third year student was hired as a part-time research assistant for the project. Her provision of the "insider's perspective" was very helpful in designing a more comprehensive questionnaire. As I discovered before the study that the students would find it very uncomfortable to speak their mind directly to a teacher, which is typical of most Asian students, the assistant was assigned to conduct the follow-up interviews in order to safeguard the authenticity and reliability of the data.

#### *The Participants*

The participants of the study were 70 undergraduate translation students in the Department of Translation, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Fifty-nine of them were female (84.3%) and 11 male (15.7%), all in their early 20s. Among the participants, there were 23 first-year students, 21 second-year students, 22 third-year students and four fourth-year students. Ten of the 70 survey respondents were later chosen for interviews. They were selected according to Patton's "maximum variation sampling" (in Lincoln and Guba 1986: 200), which allowed for maximum variation in participants' age, sex, number of years studying translation and educational background. After balancing these factors, I was able to obtain a group representative of the 70 surveyed students. Table 1 summarizes the information of the participants of the study.

TABLE 1  
Information of the Participants

Sex of the Informants	No. of Informants	%
Female	59	84.3
Male	11	15.7
Grade of the Informants		
Year 1	23	32.9
Year 2	21	30.0
Year 3	22	31.4
Year 4	4	5.7

*Data Analysis*

Data analysis is not a simple description of the data collected but a process by which the researcher can bring interpretation to the data (Powney and Watts 1987). The themes and coding categories in this study emerged from an examination of the data rather than being determined beforehand and imposed on the data (Bogdan and Biklen 1992). The researcher, following the strategy of analytic induction (Goetz and LeCompte 1984; Bogdan and Biklen 1992), repeatedly read through the completed questionnaires and the interview transcripts during and after the study, identifying recurrent themes and salient comments for the final report.

**Findings of the Study**

As the result of my going through the data several times, the following emerged as the major themes of the findings. These themes centered around several major aspects of translation teaching: students' reasons for studying translation, their attitudes towards becoming translators and/or interpreters, language teaching in translator training, theory-oriented courses versus practice-oriented courses, market needs in translation teaching, and measures to improve translator training.

*Reasons for Choosing to Study in a Translation Programme*

To situate and contextualize this study and hence interpretation of the gathered data, the informants were first asked to give their reasons for choosing to study translation at university. Quite different from what was generally assumed, becoming translators and/or interpreters was not cited as the most important reason. Instead, interest in Chinese and English came out as the most important, followed by aspiration to enhance language competence in both English and Chinese. With the first two categories combined, 80% of the students took translation for a reason other than a clearly defined goal of becoming a translator and/or interpreter (Table 2).

TABLE 2

**Reasons for Choosing to Study in a Translation Programme**

Reasons	No. of Informants	%
Interest in Chinese and English	39	55.7
Enhancement of their language competence	18	25.7
Aspiration to be translators/interpreters	12	17.2
Learning of English as a second language	1	1.4

But why didn't they choose a department of Chinese or English since approximately 80% of the respondents wanted to improve their language abilities or satisfy their interest in Chinese and/or English? The most important reason, according to the respondents, was that they wanted to improve both Chinese and English rather than only either of them (Table 3). The following comment made by one of the informants was probably the most typical.

I wanted to study and improve both English and Chinese, not just either of them. I thought I could only do that in a translation department. I thought if I went to an English department, I would study and improve English but not Chinese.

Besides, I really don't like studying literature. For similar reasons I wouldn't choose a Chinese department.

TABLE 3

**Reasons for Not Choosing to Study in a Department of Chinese or English**

Reasons	No. of Informants	%
To improve both English and Chinese	47	67.1
Better career prospects for translators/interpreters	10	14.3
Not interested in literature	9	12.9
More job opportunities for translation graduates	3	4.3

*Attitudes towards Becoming a Translator/Interpreter*

By the time the present study was done, all the respondents had studied translation for a period of six months to three years. What did they want to be after graduation? To become a translator/interpreter was again not the first choice. Nineteen of the 70 surveyed students wanted to be executives in government departments, and 17 respondents chose to be executives in private enterprises. Only 15 students reported that they wanted to be translators/interpreters. Seven wanted to be primary or secondary school teachers and the rest wanted to be library assistants, book or magazine editors, journalists, etc. (Table 4).

TABLE 4

**Desired Jobs after Graduation**

Desired Jobs	No. of Informants	%
Executives in government departments	19	27.1
Executives in private enterprises	17	24.3
Translators/interpreters	15	21.5
Primary/secondary school teachers	7	10.0
Others	12	17.1

The number of students who still wanted to become translators/interpreters after six or more months of studying translation was 15, three more compared with the number of students who hoped to be translators/interpreters before coming into the translation programme. The number of students who were certain of becoming translators/interpreters after graduation stayed more or less the same.

*Language vs. Translator Training*

One theme that really stood out regarding students' expectations of learning in a translation programme was the role of language teaching in translator training. The overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that language training should be a major component and thus should be emphasized (Table 5).

TABLE 5

**Language vs. Translator Training**

Language vs. Translator Training	No. of Informants	%
Language training before translation training	36	51.4
Language and translation training equally emphasized	30	42.9
Translation training right away	4	5.7

Thirty-six surveyed students thought that they should build a solid foundation in both English and Chinese before learning translation. Students considered it unhelpful to require them to focus on translation immediately after they entered the programme. For them, it would be more appropriate that they were given an intensive training in both English and Chinese during their first year of study, and that only when they had acquired much better bilingual competence should they start to learn translation. As one student commented,

I had good scores in the entrance exams. But I really didn't think my English and Chinese were good enough to start to learn translation immediately. As the Chinese saying goes, 'a skyscraper must rest on a firm foundation,' we must build a firm foundation in the two languages if we want to do well in translation. So I think translation programmes should teach the two languages before teaching translation. (transcripts: 1)

In addition, a good number of students thought that language learning and translation training should be equally emphasized and language training must be provided throughout the translation programme although it might be advisable that more time be spent on it during the first year. They were quite disappointed that the current curriculum did not allow a strong component of language training.

I can say one of the problems with our programme is that it lacks a language training component. And that has hindered our performance and progress in learning translation. (transcripts: 7)

Only four of the respondents thought they should study translation as soon as they entered the programme and should focus on it alone throughout.

#### *Students' Perceptions of Their Language Proficiency*

##### *– Language Proficiency*

Closely related to the previous issue of language training is how students perceive their own bilingual competence. The respondents were asked to rate their English proficiency on a 5-point scale from poor to excellent. Thirty-nine students considered their English average, twenty-seven rated it as good, and four considered it inadequate (Table 6).

The respondents were also asked to rate their Chinese proficiency. Thirty-seven students considered their Chinese average, 28 considered it good and four considered it inadequate. The ratings were very similar to those of their English proficiency.

TABLE 6

#### **Students' Perceptions of Their English and Chinese Proficiency**

	No. of Informants		%	
	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
Excellent	0	1	0	1.4
Good	27	28	38.6	40.0
Average	39	37	55.7	52.9
Inadequate	4	4	5.7	5.7
Poor	0	0	0	0

– Taking English or Chinese Enhancement Courses

The respondents were also asked whether they had taken any enhancement courses to improve their English or Chinese proficiency. Fifty-one students reported having taken English enhancement courses from the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) and 20 reported taking Chinese enhancement courses from the Independent Learning Center (ILC) (Table 7).

TABLE 7  
Taking English or Chinese Enhancement Courses

	No. of Informants		%	
	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Chinese</i>
Yes	51	20	72.9	28.6
No	19	50	27.1	71.4

– Usefulness of the Enhancement Courses

The respondents were also requested to comment on the usefulness of the language enhancement courses they had taken. Among the 51 students who reported having taken English enhancement courses, 34 thought that such courses were not very helpful, 10 felt they were helpful and six believed they were not helpful at all (Table 8).

As for Chinese enhancement courses, 12 of the 20 respondents having taken Chinese language enhancement courses thought they were not very helpful, four considered them helpful, and three deemed them very helpful.

TABLE 8  
Usefulness of the Language Courses

	No. of Informants		%	
	<i>English Courses</i>	<i>Chinese Courses</i>	<i>English Courses</i>	<i>Chinese Courses</i>
Extremely helpful	0	0	0	0
Very helpful	1	3	2.0	10.0
Helpful	10	4	19.6	20.0
Not very helpful	34	12	66.7	60.0
Not helpful at all	6	1	11.7	5.0
Total	51	20	100	100

– Ways to Improve Language Training

The respondents also made suggestions regarding the best ways that might be employed to address their needs for more language training. Over half of them thought that the translation department should offer language training courses for its students, believing that such courses could better cater for their needs. For example, one interviewee said,

I have found that ELTU courses are generally not very useful to translation students. It'll be much more effective for our department to offer some language training courses as they can be more tailor-made to meet our needs. (transcripts: 8)



Seventeen respondents believed that it would be most helpful for ELTU and ILC to design language courses specially for translation students; 12 students thought that the most effective way to ensure that translation students would receive adequate language training was to make English and Chinese compulsory rather than elective courses. (Table 9).

TABLE 9  
Most Effective Ways of Enhancing Students' Language Proficiency

Most Effective Ways	No. of Informants	%
The translation department to offer language courses	37	52.9
ELTU/ILC to design language courses specially for translation students	17	24.3
To make Chinese/English compulsory courses	12	17.1
To leave language enhancement to students themselves	4	5.7

#### *Translation Theory vs. Practice*

Another major theme that emerged in the study pertained to the relationship of translation theory and practice in translator training. Forty-four respondents believed that translation practice should be more emphasized than translation theory and thus should obviously be the only focus. The remaining 26 respondents believed that theory should be part of translator training and should therefore be duly taught (Table 10).

TABLE 10  
Translation Theory vs. Practice

Theory vs. Practice	No. of Informants	%
Only practice	44	62.9
Both theory and practice	26	37.1
Only theory	0	0

#### *The Most Helpful Courses and the Least Helpful Courses*

Among the courses they had taken in the programme, which did the students think were most helpful to them? This was given as an open-ended question in the questionnaire. Forty-eight students chose interpretation courses as the most helpful. Twenty-six selected Film and Advertising, which was then followed by Commercial Translation, Legal Translation, Translation Project, etc. (Table 11). Although students from year one and year two might not have had the opportunity to take all the courses in the curriculum, which might accordingly affect the accuracy of their answers to this question, a trend can still be easily and unmistakably identified. Three of the five major streams of courses, i.e., interpretation, specialized courses and skill courses, were most popular among students.

TABLE 11

**Most Helpful Courses**

Most Helpful Courses	No. of Mentions*	%
Interpretation	48	68.6
Consecutive Interpretation	(25)	(35.7)
Simultaneous Interpretation	(17)	(24.3)
Introduction to Interpretation	(6)	(8.6)
Film and Advertising Translation	26	37.1
Commercial Translation	14	20.0
Legal Translation	14	20.0
Translation Project	12	17.1
Government and Public Administration Translation	9	12.9
Science and Technology Translation	7	10.0
Principles of Translation	6	8.6
Mass Media Translation	6	8.6
Writing Skills and Translation	5	7.1
Culture and Translation	4	5.7
Theory of Translation	4	5.7

\* Mention in Table 11 and Table 12 refers to the time that a course was referred to by the research subjects in the questionnaire. The maximum number of mentions for each of the courses is 70.

Which were the least helpful courses? This was also posed as an open-ended question to the students. Thirty respondents cited History of Translation as the least helpful, 28 referred to Principles of Translation and 20 mentioned Culture and Translation (Table 12). As with the previous question about the most helpful courses, the results of this question may not be accurate either but the trend is again unmistakable: theoretical courses were the least popular among the students.

TABLE 12

**Least Helpful Courses**

Least Helpful Courses	No. of Mentions	%
History of Translation	30	42.9
Principles of Translation	28	40.0
Culture and Translation	20	28.6
Film and Advertising Translation	6	8.6
Government and Public Administration Translation	6	8.6
Introduction to Translation Studies	5	7.1

*Translation Teaching and the Professional Reality*

The issue of translation programmes meeting social and market needs also came up in the initial focus group discussion. Therefore in the questionnaire the respondents were asked to comment on how well they believed their programme reflected market needs. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents thought that it did not reflect the market very well (Table 13).

TABLE 13

**Translation Programme Reflecting Translation Reality**

The Programme reflecting the Translation Market	No. of Informants	%
Very well	0	0
Well	3	4.3
Adequately	19	27.1
Not very well	41	58.6
Not at all	7	10.0

For the students, it is undoubtedly important that translation teaching must reflect market needs. They believed,

if the students are kept informed of the changes and needs of the translation market, we will be able to better direct our efforts in our study. For instance, with the development of the Internet, many companies are now hiring web translators and editors. If such changes are made known to us, we'll be able to adjust our study plan and take a personal interest in this kind of translation. (transcripts: 12)

According to the respondents, one way to keep students informed of the market changes could be inviting professional translators or editors to give talks to the students. Another method strongly recommended by the students was to incorporate internship into the training programme.

To place students with different employers during the summer holidays is a great idea... It will give them opportunities to get to know what it is like to work as a professional translator and also understand changes in the market. Besides, it is a great opportunity for students to build some sort of relationship with prospective employers. (transcripts: 3)

To reflect market needs in translation teaching also entails updating teaching materials. The students believed that the contents of some of the courses were outdated and could not reflect new development in the field. One student made the following remark on the course Scientific Translation while discussing this topic.

The course contents were really not up-to-date. Some of them may well still be taught, but to leave out translation related to computer technology was absolutely something that shouldn't have happened. (transcripts: 10)

*Improvement of the Programme*

What should be done to improve the translation programme? The respondents were given a list of choices compiled on the basis of the initial focus group discussion and were requested to choose the most important measure they believed should be taken to improve the programme. Twenty of the respondents believed that to offer more practical translation courses was most necessary, as such courses could be more effectively taught and they were more closely related to professional translation (Table 14). As one student said,

I would like to see more practical translation courses added to the programme, like translation of legal, economic and financial documents. I believe they are the most common form of translation in the Hong Kong translation market. Besides, they are difficult for students to learn by themselves and students can learn faster with the assistance of a teacher. (transcripts: 22)

There were also 20 students reporting that to offer more language training courses was most important, which was followed by teacher's provision of more detailed comments on students' assignments. According to the respondents, what they usually got on their assignments now was simply a grade, which did not help them very much in improving their translation skills.

When we got back our assignment, all we got was a cold grade. To me it was meaningless. I didn't know why I got an A or B-. That was really counterproductive. If the teacher provides more detailed comments about my work, I'm sure I'll learn a lot more. (transcripts: 9)

The respondents also suggested that some courses be split into two or more courses so that each part will get sufficient coverage in teaching. For instance, the course Film and Advertising can be subdivided into two courses, Translation of Subtitles and Translation of Advertisements.

TABLE 14  
Measures to Improve the Programme

Measures	No. of Informants	%
To offer more practical courses	20	28.6
To offer more language training courses	20	28.6
Teachers' providing more detailed comments on assignments	13	18.6
To split existing courses into two or more specialized courses	10	14.3
To give more exercises/assignments	4	5.7
To teach more translation skills and techniques	3	4.2

### Discussions and Implications

Aware of reservations and skepticism as to the validity and reliability of students' perceptions of their learning needs in curriculum design, the present researcher is, however, in favour of a student-centered curriculum and believes that students learn best when they are involved in developing learning objectives for themselves which are congruent with their current needs (Brundage and MacKeracher 1980, Nunan 1990, Tudor 1996). It is along this line that the following discussions are made.

#### *Language Training*

One perennial issue in research on translation teaching is the role of language learning in translator training. Some believe that translation students' bilingual competence can be assumed when they enter the programme and therefore translator training should be focused on teaching translation. Others argue that bilingual competence, as the most fundamental of all qualities of a translator, cannot be assumed, at least not at the undergraduate level. A debate branching out of this is whether translator training should be at the undergraduate or postgraduate level.

This study of translation students in Hong Kong seems to have provided empirical evidence for inclusion of bilingual training in undergraduate translator training programmes. In fact, a strong call was heard for more language training in both the foreign language and the students' native tongue. There are two reasons for the emergence of this request. First, as revealed in the present study, most students did not

seem to have a clearly defined goal before they entered the programme. They had little or no exposure to translation or interpretation before joining the programme. They might have heard about translation and a few well-known translators, but were obviously not sure whether they really wanted to or would have the ability to be translators/interpreters and thus simply wished to try out the programme while enjoying the flexibility that a good command of both English and Chinese can bring them. Therefore they did not expect the programme to be too narrowly focused on translation skills and methods only. Also, the number of students who wanted to be translators/interpreters before and after studying in the translation programme was really small compared with the number of those who wanted to be executives in government departments and private enterprises. For the latter, although translation might be part of their duties, they need mainly to perform their everyday duties in the two languages (Cheung, Xu, Chan & Yim 1993). Therefore, to them, it is probably more important for the translation programme to provide bilingual training than translation training.

Secondly, more than 80% of the students did not come to the Department of Translation to become translators/interpreters as many of us had assumed. Aware that they would be able to land lucrative jobs with good bilingual competence (Hyland 1997; So 1989), they simply wanted to improve their proficiency in both English and Chinese. To most of them, what made the translation department different from an English or Chinese department was that it would teach both Chinese and English besides translation, not just one of them. That probably also explains why the Department of Translation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong keeps getting top secondary school graduates over the years since the launch of its BA translation programme in 1995, even when job prospects for translators/interpreters suddenly turned grim in 1999 when the government, the largest employer of translators/interpreters in Hong Kong, decided to freeze recruitment of Chinese Language Officers<sup>2</sup> due to the amalgamation of government bodies and the economic turmoil of the Asian financial crisis.

Regarding language proficiency, nearly 95% of the respondents considered their English and Chinese average or good but only one rated his Chinese as excellent and none rated his English as excellent. Clearly, students were aware that they had much to improve in both languages despite the fact that they had obtained very high scores for both subjects in the Advanced Level Educational Examinations. Besides, students' realization of the much greater demand for bilingual competence in order to do a good job of translation after having entered the translation department might also have affected their perceptions of their proficiency in the two languages. The following remark made by one interviewee when asked to comment on his English proficiency speaks for many.

Well, it depends on who you compare with. I think my English is average if compared with other translation major students, but good if compared with students of other departments or students of other local universities. (transcripts: 8)

The differences were negligible in the respondents' ratings of their English and Chinese proficiency. However, the number of students having taken courses of English and Chinese differed tremendously. Although more than 70% of the students took English enhancement courses, less than 30% took Chinese enhancement courses.

Why was there such a big difference? One explanation might be that English is after all their second language, mostly learned in classrooms. They might have given similar ratings for the two languages, but deep inside they were not as confident of their English as of their mother tongue. Besides, they believed they would have many more opportunities to read and write Chinese in everyday life while English can be largely acquired only in classrooms as their monolingual life outside class offers limited opportunities to practice it (Littlewood & Liu 1996). Therefore many of them wanted to make use of the time in university to polish their English rather than Chinese. The following comment can help to enlighten us on this.

Well, I'm not that worried about my Chinese. I know I still need to work on it, but, you know, we read and hear Chinese every day and often have to write in it as well. That naturally gives me plenty of opportunities to use and improve it. But for English it is different. I rarely read English. I know it's out there too but I just don't read or listen to it that often. (transcripts: 5)

Unfortunately, most of the students who took ELTU English courses and ILC Chinese courses found them not very helpful on the whole. Among others, one major reason was that such courses were in general not challenging enough for translation major students as they were designed for all students of the university. Since translation students were the best in both English and Chinese proficiency among all Hong Kong university students according to the results of the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE), they found many of these courses 'too easy,' hence not very useful. In referring to one of the ELTU courses she had taken, one student said,

[...] It was really different from what I had expected. For example, the teacher taught very basic things, like how to change narrative sentences into interrogatives. Can you believe that? (transcripts: 4)

Another student made similar comments on ELTU courses.

What is taught was everyday English, not the kind I need to do translation. They are like English of two different worlds. (transcripts: 23)

The same problem was reported about the ILC Chinese enhancement Courses. For example, some of the courses were found to be mere repetition of courses taught at secondary schools.

I took a course of Business Chinese. All we did was write Chinese business letters that we had done so much at Form 6 and 7 at secondary school. So when the course was over, I didn't see much improvement in my Chinese. (transcripts: 11)

Two implications can then be drawn. First, translator training institutions must recognize and therefore cater students' needs for more language training. In strengthening bilingual training, efforts must be made to ensure that the language courses are tailor-made for translation students. Therefore, translation programmes may consider offering language courses themselves if resources permit. Alternatively, special requests can be made to the ELTU and the ILC that language courses be designed for translation major students (for a detailed discussion about language teaching for translation students see Li 2000). Of course, how to teach the course is always something important that needs to be considered.

*Students' Pragmatism*

Another perennial issue in translation teaching is the role of translation theory. Some believe that theory will help students learn faster and develop better problem-solving abilities, and thus should be taught (see for example, Delisle 1980, 1981; G  mar 1983; Gile, 1995; Juhel 1985; Larose 1985; Newmark 1988; Larson 1991; Vinay 1991; Viaggio, 1994; Friedberg 1997). Others contend that translation theory has little to offer to practice and should be kept out of a translator training curriculum (Nida 1981; Minford 1997). It is obvious that a good number of students in this study appeared very pragmatic in their learning orientation and skeptical of translation theory.

To start with, forty-four, or nearly two-thirds, of the respondents stated unequivocally that practical translation should be much more emphasized than theory. Students' pragmatism in learning preferences could also be seen in their choices of the most helpful courses. The first few courses considered most helpful by the respondents were all heavily practice-oriented, including interpreting, specialized translation and other skill courses, and the first few courses seen as least helpful were all theoretical courses or courses with a major theoretical component such as History of Translation, Principles of Translation, and Culture and Translation. Clearly many students were not interested in *knowing about* translation. They wanted to *know* translation.

Why did many students object to the inclusion of translation theory in translator training? Two reasons emerged in the study. First, they believed that translation was much more a craft or art than a science, which could only be learned through ample repeated practice. As one student commented,

Translation is a very special craft. It can only be learned through one's own repeated practice. Prescriptive rules of translation are useless. Only the rules you have gained from practice will help you later. (transcripts: 13)

The second reason was that many students found it impossible to naturally apply translation theory in practice. According to the respondents, they might have fully understood the theories in class but to use them automatically in translation practice was totally another matter. The following remarks made by two of the respondents were obviously pertinent.

To learn some theory will make you aware of different translation methods, that's for sure. But when it comes to actual translation, you will still do it your own way... Theory and practice just don't click. (transcripts: 9)

[...] in actual translation, you seldom think of any theories. When you're constantly meeting deadlines, you don't have time to think of any theory. You just do it. (transcripts: 22)

These respondents revealed a clear pragmatic orientation in learning translation. Some even referred to a few other local universities (which were upgraded to universities from vocational or liberal arts colleges) as good examples for providing students with predominantly practice-oriented courses and internship.

An obvious implication is that in order for students to change their perceptions of translation theory and really benefit from learning it, emphasis should be laid on the connection of theory and practice in teaching theoretical courses (Li 1998). Also students should be provided assistance in crossing the bridge between theory and

practice rather than left alone in this attempt, which will eventually fail for many (Li 1999b).

While many students held that translation programmes should focus on translation practice alone, more looked at the role of theory from a different perspective and thought that it should have its position in a curriculum of a university translation programme. Twenty-six students believed that translation theory and practice should both be duly emphasized.

As we're studying translation at a university not a vocational college, it is only right to have a theoretical component. Besides training in translation practice, we also need to learn some academic stuff. (transcripts: 7)

However, they believed a more balanced view on translation theory and practice would be helpful. To many of them, a proper combination would be 20 to 30% of theory plus 70 to 80% of practice. The following was a typical comment made by the respondents.

Translation theory and practice should be properly balanced and duly emphasized. Too much theory and insufficient practice will cause difficulty for students when they do actual translation. However, much practice with little or no theory will hinder their professional growth. (transcripts: 1)

For many informants, it is equally important that in incorporating the theoretical component into the curriculum, special attention should be given to the selection of curriculum content and time of teaching them. For example, one student remarked,

[...] and theory could very well be helpful later on. But to start, theories too difficult or too complicated should not be included. There's no point teaching them if we students don't understand. (transcripts: 5)

Another student requested that theory should not be "taught until the second year of the programme when students have had some exposure to translation practice" (transcripts: 13). Also it might be better absorbed and internalized when translation theory is taught as part of a practical course rather than offered as a separate course. As one student put it, "an independent course called Translation Theory could easily turn off students" (transcripts: 16).

#### *Comparison with Li's Study on Professional Translators*

As mentioned earlier, one of the purposes of the present study is to examine the similarities or dissimilarities of the findings between this study and my earlier study on professional translators. While rough comparisons can be made, the readers are cautioned to bear in mind the differences in the designs of the two studies. For instance, it turned out that most of the subjects of this study did not intend to be translators/interpreters after graduation, whereas those of my earlier study were all professional translators. Also, the subjects of this study were from the same department of translation while those of my earlier study were graduates of different departments or programmes of translation of local tertiary institutions. As the result of such differences in research subjects, some of the findings in the earlier study did not emerge in this study, e.g., challenges at work, changes in the translation world, plans for further in-service training. However, the two perennial issues, i.e., language



training vs. translator training and translation theory versus practice, were both highlighted in the two projects. For the first issue, both groups of respondents expressed need for more language training, though for somewhat different purposes: for professional translators, the purpose was to do better translation; for translation students in this study of whom 80% did not intend to be translators/interpreters, the purpose was to better prepare themselves in Chinese and English and enjoy the flexibility in job seeking that a good mastery of the two languages would bring them.

As for the second issue, i.e., theory in teaching translation, the study on professional translators found that the subjects had a mixed view on it, probably because they studied in different institutions where theory was taught in different ways. In this study, while two-thirds of the subjects were adamant that theory was useless and should be kept out of the translation curriculum, a third held a more balanced view that theory and practice should both be emphasized.

Regarding most helpful courses, the trends were similar in the two studies: both groups of participants preferred interpretation, specialized translation and other more practice-oriented courses, though interpreting was much more stressed in this study. One difference was that in my earlier study the two courses English Language and Literature and Chinese Language and Literature stood out as the most helpful courses, whereas in this study they were not mentioned at all. In fact, overall negative ratings were given of the two courses. The reason for this difference might be that the participants of the earlier study took these courses from departments of English and Chinese since auxiliary teaching units such as the English Language Teaching Unit or Independent Learning Center did not offer English or Chinese language and literature courses. If this is true, it also points towards another method of strengthening language training for translation students, that is, offering translation students access to courses of the two departments.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study has shown once again that needs assessment is important in translation curriculum planning and development. It can help us see things that otherwise would have been missed and incorrectly assumed, e.g., students' major reasons for choosing to study in a department of translation.

This study has also demonstrated that language teaching is needed and should be stressed in translation programmes, at least in Hong Kong, no matter whether the students really intend to be translators/interpreters or any kind of language personnel who simply perform their duties with the assistance of good bilingual competence. It follows that language training must be strengthened and better ways of organizing language courses are needed for translation students. However, whether this will also apply to translation teaching contexts in other parts of the world cannot be determined based on this study. Further research is therefore warranted in different teaching contexts.

Although this study cannot conclude whether translation theory should be taught in translation programmes, it has clearly shown that for such courses to be of help and meaning to students, better planning in terms of time arrangement and course materials is needed. In addition, perhaps more importantly, better ways should be worked out for teaching theory-oriented courses.

## NOTES

- \* This study was supported by RGC Earmarked Grant (No.).
1. See Liu (1997) for a more elaborated analysis of translation teaching curriculum in Hong Kong.
  2. Chinese Language Officer is the official title of Hong Kong Government translators.

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#### APPENDIX

##### Course List of the BA Translation Programme of the Department of Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Course Code	Title	Units
	Group A: Translation Skills	3
TRA1010	Principles of Translation	3
TRA1020	Basic Skills of Translation	3
TRA3020	Writing Skills and Translation	3
TRA3610	Computer and Translation	3
	Group B: Translation Studies	3
TRA1110	Culture and Translation	3
TRA1210	History of Translation	3
TRA3070	Introduction to Translation Studies	3
TRA4070	Language Studies for Translation	3
TRA4210	Translation Criticism	3
TRA4710	Special Topic in Translation	3
	Group C: Specialized Translation	3
TRA3170	Literary Translation Strategies: C-E	3
TRA3180	Genres in Literary Translation: C-E	3
TRA3270	Literary Translation Strategies: E-C	3

TRA3280	Genres in Literary Translation: E-C	3
TRA3620	Machine Translation	3
TRA3810	Government and Public Administration Translation	3
TRA3820	Introduction to Commercial Translation	3
TRA3830	Mass Media Translation	3
TRA3840	Legal Translation	3
TRA3850	Science and Technology Translation	3
TRA3860	Film and Advertising Translation	3
TRA4820	Advanced Commercial Translation	3
Group D: Interpreting		
TRA2030	Introduction to Interpretation	3
TRA2040	Basic Skills of Interpreting	3
TRA3050	Consecutive Interpretation: C-E	3
TRA3060	Consecutive Interpretation: E-C	3
TRA4150	Simultaneous Interpretation: C-E	3
TRA4160	Simultaneous Interpretation: E-C	3
Group E: Chinese and non-English Translation		
TRA2910	Fundamentals of French-Chinese Translation	3
TRA2920	Fundamentals of German-Chinese Translation	3
TRA2930	Fundamentals of Italian-Chinese Translation	3
TRA2940	Fundamentals of Japanese-Chinese Translation	3
TRA2950	Fundamentals of Spanish-Chinese Translation	3
TRA3910	Techniques of French-Chinese Translation	3
TRA3920	Techniques of German-Chinese Translation	3
TRA3930	Techniques of Italian-Chinese Translation	3
TRA3940	Techniques of Japanese-Chinese Translation	3
TRA3950	Techniques of Spanish-Chinese Translation	3
Required Courses		
TRA4510	Translation Project: E-C	3
TRA4520	Translation Project: C-E	3
TRA4530	Translation Workshop: E-C	3
TRA4540	Translation Workshop: C-E	3