

A Study on College English Translation Teaching from the Perspective of English–Chinese Lexical Contrast

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Abstract: The study of English–Chinese lexical contrast is an important bridge to connect linguistic research with translation-teaching practice. Based on the Expectancy–Value Theory, from three dimensions: intrinsic value, attainment value, and utility value, the study explores the application of English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge in college English translation teaching. Employing literature review, qualitative analysis, and empirical methods, the research collected data from undergraduate students and college English instructors at Ningxia Medical University through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The researchers extracted core themes by open coding and categorical analysis. The findings indicate that medical students generally recognize the positive role of lexical contrastive knowledge in improving translation accuracy; however, they face practical challenges regarding vocabulary acquisition, insufficient practice hours, and limited awareness of English–Chinese cognitive differences. Based on these findings, a four-stage teaching model—“theoretical introduction, contrastive analysis, practical exercise, and feedback revision”—is proposed, aiming to provide a reference for college English translation teaching reform at Ningxia Medical University.

Keywords: English–Chinese lexical contrast; College English; Translation teaching; Expectancy–Value Theory; Medical student

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1. Background

College English translation teaching has long faced a structural dilemma: although translation competence is listed as one of the five basic language skills in the “College English Teaching Guidelines”, it is often compressed into an ancillary component of intensive reading courses in actual curricular arrangements. Particularly noteworthy is that, in recent years, the score weight of the translation section in the College English Test Bands 4 and 6 (CET-4/6) has increased, yet students’ performance remains concerning. Taking the 2023 cohort of undergraduates at Ningxia Medical University as an example, their average scoring rate in the CET-4 translation section is significantly lower than that in reading comprehension and writing. This

practical predicament prompts us to ask: Where exactly does the problem lie?

Through preliminary investigation and classroom observation, we have identified a crucial yet long-neglected factor—students lack sufficient awareness of the systematic differences between English and Chinese at the lexical level ^[1]. English and Chinese belong to two fundamentally different language families; English is a morphologically rich language within the Indo-European family, whereas Chinese is the most typical isolating language in the Sino-Tibetan family. When students encounter difficulties in translation practice, they tend to habitually attribute the problem to “insufficient vocabulary,” and fail to resolve issues from the perspective of structural differences between the English and Chinese lexical systems. This study focuses on the Grade 2023 undergraduates and relevant college English instructors at Ningxia Medical University to conduct systematic research on the above issue.

The research on systematic English–Chinese lexical contrast carries triple significance as it was introduced into college English translation. First, the study of English–Chinese lexical contrast can help students master the essential characteristics of the two lexical systems in depth. Second, knowledge of English–Chinese lexical contrast can help students construct preliminary theoretical awareness of translation. Third, English–Chinese lexical contrastive research has unique applied value in college English vocabulary teaching.

2. Research design and methods

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study adopts Eccles and Wigfield’s Expectancy–Value Theory as the analytical framework ^[2] to assess medical students’ cognition and attitudes toward English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge and translation teaching from intrinsic value, attainment value, and utility value. “Intrinsic value” concerns whether students derive pleasure and satisfaction from learning English–Chinese lexical contrast and from engaging in translation practice. “Attainment value” involves whether students consider it has significance for their self-identity and academic achievement to master of English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge and translation competence. “Utility value” refers to whether students recognize the practical function of these knowledge and skills for their current academic studies and future career development.

2.2. Research methods

This study forms an interlinked and progressively deepening research path by integrating three research methods.

- (1) Literature review. The study systematically reviews some pieces of classic literature on English–Chinese lexical contrastive research, such as, Cai Jigang’s (2008) *A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Vocabulary* (Fudan University Press) is a groundbreaking monograph in this field ^[3], Zhang Weiyou (2010) published *A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Vocabulary* (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press), it constructs a multi-dimensional contrastive framework which encompasses morphology, semantics, and pragmatics ^[4]. In 2016, Feng Guoxin’s *A Contrastive Study of Chinese and English Vocabulary* (Tsinghua University Press) presented new explorations from the perspective of the Chinese character-based (zi-based) theory ^[5], core theories of contrastive linguistics, and relevant studies on the Expectancy–Value Theory. Those provide theoretical bases for the research framework construction and interview instrument design. Relevant monographs and journal articles were retrieved

and reviewed from academic databases including CNKI and Web of Science, using keywords such as “English–Chinese lexical contrast,” “contrastive linguistics,” “translation teaching,” and “expectancy-value theory.”

- (2) Qualitative analysis. Compared with questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, which can yield richer, more in-depth, and more personalized information ^[6]. The selection of interview participants followed the maximum-variation sampling strategy within purposive sampling. Student interviewees were 24 undergraduates from eight majors of the 2023 cohort at Ningxia Medical University. The eight majors included Clinical Medicine, Pediatrics, Preventive Medicine, Medical Imaging, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Acupuncture and Massage, Medical Laboratory Science, and Nursing. We selected three students from each major, including one with high English proficiency, one at intermediate level, and one with a weak foundation. Teacher interviewees were 6 college English instructors who teach the 2023 cohort. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 25 years. Formal interviews were conducted in a one- by- one and face- to- face format from March to May 2025. Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes. Data analysis employed categorical analysis. Data analysis employed open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to analyze interview transcripts systematically ^[7].
- (3) Empirical method. Based on the literature review and qualitative analysis, the study selected three classes—Clinical Medicine Class 1, Pediatrics and Nursing Class 2 of the Grade 2023—to conduct classroom practice integrating English–Chinese lexical contrast into translation teaching. The feasibility of the theoretical framework and the effectiveness of the teaching model were verified through teaching observation, analysis of students’ translation assignments, and collection of classroom feedback.

2.3. The design of the interview guide

According to the three dimensions of the Expectancy–Value Theory, the student interview guide was structured with eight core questions covering translation difficulties, perception of English–Chinese lexical differences, recognition of the value of contrastive knowledge, learning motivation, and suggestions for teaching improvement. The teacher interview guide focused on instructors’ cognition of the value of English–Chinese lexical contrastive teaching and the dilemmas encountered in teaching practice. The guide comprises six core questions including teaching awareness, the role of contrastive knowledge, class-hour arrangements, student problems, conditional support, and suggestions for improvement.

3. Research findings and analysis

3.1. Student interview results

Through the analysis of interview transcripts from 24 students, five core themes were extracted: multidimensional manifestations of translation difficulties, intuitive perception of English–Chinese lexical differences, recognition of the value of contrastive knowledge, multiple drivers of learning motivation, and practical demands for teaching improvement. The following presents a detailed analysis in light of the three dimensions of the Expectancy–Value Theory.

3.1.1. Intrinsic value dimension: confusion and epiphany in translation learning

From the intrinsic-value dimension, most students reported that “frustration” outweighed “sense of achievement” in the process of translation learning. However, those whom instructors had guided to attend

to English–Chinese linguistic differences reported more positive experiences. A student majoring in Clinical Medicine described: “My biggest headache in translation is that I know every single word, but when strung together, I do not know how to express it in Chinese. Later, the teacher explained that many normalization structures in English need to be converted into verbs in Chinese to sound natural. Once this contrastive point was explained, everything became clear to me” (S03).

This experience typically reflects the differences between English and Chinese in word-class conversion and syntactic function^[8]. Normalization is extremely common in English, and abstract nouns can flexibly serve as subjects, objects, and other components in sentences; Chinese, by contrast, tends to use verbal expressions, with sentence organization following a topic–comment structure^[9]. When students understand this systematic difference, they can actively perform word-class conversion in translation rather than rigidly translating word for word.

Another student majoring in Traditional Chinese Medicine shared an epiphany from the perspective of lexical motivation: “I used to memorize words by rote. Take “hepatitis” for example—I purely relied on repeated writing to remember it. Later, the teacher explained that medical English vocabulary mostly derives from Greek and Latin^[10], that “hepat-” means liver and “-itis” means inflammation. Now learning medical English vocabulary is no longer tedious” (S15).

This case reveals the significant differences between English and Chinese in terms of lexical motivation. Medical English terminology retains a high degree of morphological transparency from classical etymology, whereas Chinese medical vocabulary mostly adopts compounding, where the motivation of morpheme combination is equally high but manifested differently^[11]. Guiding students to conduct English–Chinese comparison from the perspectives of etymology and word formation can not only improve vocabulary-memorization efficiency but also cultivate their lexical analytical competence.

3.1.2. Attainment value dimension: construction of translation competence and self-identity

Attainment value concerns whether students view translation competence as an important component of self-identity and academic achievement. The results show that medical students’ cognition of the attainment value of translation competence exhibits obvious disciplinary differences. Students majoring in Preventive Medicine demonstrated a higher level of attainment-value recognition: “I think translation competence is particularly important for our Preventive Medicine major. We often need to read foreign epidemiological research reports and public health guidelines. If you cannot even perform basic English–Chinese translation well, how can you keep up with the frontiers of the discipline? Being able to translate an English professional paper into Chinese accurately is, to me, a manifestation of professional competence” (S08).

In contrast, some students majoring in Nursing and Acupuncture and Massage showed lower attainment-value cognition: “I do not think translation has much to do with my future career as a nurse. Learning English is mainly for passing CET-4 and CET-6. Whether I am good at translation or not has no impact on my work as a nurse” (S21).

This difference suggests that, when conducting translation teaching in medical universities, it is necessary to fully consider the career-development needs of students from different majors and connect translation competence with specific application scenarios of each major, thereby enhancing students’ perception of attainment value. For instance, for Nursing majors, practical application scenarios such as reading international nursing literature and cross-border nursing communication can be emphasized; for Acupuncture and Massage majors, the focus can be placed on the English translation norms of traditional Chinese medicine terminology

and translation needs in international academic exchanges.

3.1.3. Utility value dimension: dual drive of examination demands and professional development

The utility-value dimension concerns students' cognition of the practicality of translation learning. Almost all interviewed students mentioned the College English Test Bands 4 and 6 as the most direct utility driver: "The translation section in CET-4 accounts for 15%. Although the proportion is not the highest, it is particularly difficult to score. In the last mock exam, I only got 5 points out of 15 in translation. The teacher said many mistakes are caused by differences in English and Chinese expression habits. For example, English prefers passive voice whereas Chinese tends to use active voice; English uses one long sentence with several clauses, whereas Chinese needs to break it into several short sentences. If the teacher could spend more time explaining these English–Chinese differences in class, I believe it would definitely help with the exam" (S12).

Beyond examination demands, an increasing number of students are becoming aware of the long-term utility of translation competence for professional development. A student majoring in Pediatrics remarked: "I have already started reading some English pediatric case reports. Although I read slowly with the help of a dictionary, I can clearly feel that translation competence directly affects the speed and accuracy of my understanding of the literature. For example, in pediatrics, there are many words describing symptoms. One precise professional term in English may have several equivalents in Chinese. If you do not know which is the most normative translation, it will affect your understanding of the disease description" (S06).

This observation touches upon a core issue in medical translation—the normative translation of professional terminology. The medical field demands extremely high accuracy in terminology translation; a mistranslation of a term may lead to misunderstanding of a condition, diagnosis, or treatment plan. English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge has direct practical value in such scenarios: by analyzing the word-formation motivation and semantic correspondence of English and Chinese medical terminology, students can more accurately grasp the exact meaning of a term and select an appropriate translation.

3.1.4. Students' demands for teaching improvement

Regarding the improvement of college English translation teaching, students put forward three core demands. The first is to increase opportunities for translation practice. Existing courses focus mainly on intensive reading and listening and speaking, and translation exercises are often limited to a few sentences in after-class exercises, lacking systematicity and pertinence. The second is the hope that teaching content will be integrated with their majors. Students generally expect translation materials to involve medical-related content rather than general literary or cultural topics. The third is the desire for systematic guidance on English–Chinese linguistic differences rather than scattered tips.

3.2. Teacher interview results

Through the analysis of interview transcripts from six instructors, four core themes were extracted: fragmented practice of lexical contrastive teaching, high consensus on the importance of contrastive knowledge, the practical dilemma of insufficient class hours, and the pedagogical demand for professional integration.

3.2.1. Current status of lexical contrastive teaching practice

The results show that all interviewed instructors have, to varying degrees, guided students to attend to

English–Chinese lexical differences in translation teaching. However, such guidance is mostly improvisational and fragmented, lacking systematicity and theoretical depth. An instructor with 12 years of teaching experience described: “When I teach translation, I do remind students to pay attention to English–Chinese differences. For example, English emphasizes hypotaxis whereas Chinese emphasizes parataxis; English uses more conjunctions whereas Chinese relies on implicit semantics. But these contents are merely touched upon without systematic elaboration. First, class hours are tight; second, I am not a specialist in contrastive linguistics myself, so I am afraid of making mistakes if I go too deep” (T02).

A young instructor with only 3 years of teaching experience expressed a different kind of confusion: “I took some courses in contrastive linguistics during my graduate studies and know that English–Chinese lexical contrast is very valuable. But when it comes to how to operationalize it specifically in college English classrooms, I am actually not very clear. We use general English textbooks, which contain no dedicated lexical-contrast modules. If I supplement content on my own, I worry about deviating from the textbook, and students also lack matching practice materials” (T05).

The statements of the two instructors jointly reveal a crucial problem: there exists a “last mile” obstacle in translating English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge into teaching practice. Even when instructors recognize the value of contrastive knowledge, it is difficult to effectively integrate this knowledge into daily teaching without systematic teaching resources, guaranteed class hours, and professional support.

3.2.2. Consensus on the value of English–Chinese lexical contrastive teaching

Despite various constraints in teaching practice, all interviewed instructors gave high affirmation to the value of English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge in translation teaching. A senior instructor with 18 years of experience explained from a cognitive perspective: “The essence of translation is language transfer, and the premise of language transfer is understanding the essential differences between the two languages. The biggest problem with our students is not that they do not know words, but that they do not understand the different ways in which English and Chinese organize information and express concepts. For example, an English sentence can have five levels of nested clause structures, which Chinese would never use. If students can systematically understand these differences, they will consciously adjust their expression in translation instead of mechanically translating word for word” (T01).

Another instructor supplemented from the perspective of lexical semantics: “There is rarely a perfect one-to-one correspondence between English and Chinese words. The word “run” in English has dozens of meanings, which Chinese expresses with different words such as 跑 (run), 经营 (manage), 运转 (operate), and 流淌 (flow). If students only know that “run” = 跑, they will definitely make mistakes in translation. Through contrastive analysis, making students understand the phenomena of English polysemy and Chinese multiple words for one meaning can help them establish a more flexible awareness of lexical correspondence” (T04).

3.2.3. The dilemma of insufficient class hours and curriculum setting

Insufficient class hours is a high-frequency theme that repeatedly emerged in all teacher interviews. According to the talent-cultivation program of Ningxia Medical University, the college English course for the 2023 cohort totals 280 class hours, offered over four semesters—64 hours in the first semester and 72 hours in each of the remaining three semesters. Within these 280 hours, translation teaching is not set up as an independent module but is dispersed in reading and writing courses, with actual hours devoted to translation teaching and practice accounting for less than 10% of the total.

“Two hundred and eighty hours sounds like a lot, but 70 hours are online learning. The remaining hours are then distributed among the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, averaging only about 42 hours per skill, and in reality the proportion for translation is far below this average. We have to complete four units per semester, and each unit requires 6–7 hours just for text explanation and vocabulary review, leaving very limited time for translation practice” (T03). Instructor T06 further pointed out: “Insufficient class hours is one aspect; more critical is the inertia of the existing curriculum structure. The college English curriculum has basically followed the intensive-reading-plus-listening model for decades, with translation always being an add-on rather than a core component. To truly change this situation, adjustments need to be made at the level of talent-cultivation programs and curriculum design” (T06).

3.2.4. Pedagogical demand for professional integration

Given the particularity of medical universities, multiple instructors put forward the demand for integrating translation teaching with professional education. The translation of medical professional English vocabulary involves a large amount of terminology norms and professional knowledge, which general English translation teaching can hardly satisfy. “Students in medical universities have their particularities. They learn English not for literary appreciation but for accessing professional information and conducting academic exchanges. If we can integrate English–Chinese contrast of medical professional vocabulary into translation teaching—for example, the correspondence between the Latin etymology of anatomical terminology and Chinese translations, or the differences in English and Chinese disease naming—students will find translation learning more targeted” (T01).

4. Construction of the teaching model and implementation strategies

4.1. Construction of the four-stage teaching model

Synthesizing the interview results from students and instructors, this study proposes constructing a four-stage teaching model in college English translation teaching, that is, “theoretical introduction, contrastive analysis, practical exercise, and feedback revision”. The core idea of this model is to organically embed systematic English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge into every stage of translation teaching, enabling students to engage in translation practice on the basis of understanding English–Chinese lexical differences, and to continuously revise and improve their translation competence through the feedback stage.

The theoretical introduction aims to solve the problem of fragmented knowledge. Before each unit, the instructor systematically explains the knowledge points of English–Chinese lexical contrastive analysis, which are related to the unit’s theme, such as differences in word formation, semantic correspondence, and collocation habits, within 10–15 minutes. The theoretical introduction should proceed from the shallow to the deep, starting from concrete lexical examples and gradually introducing the general patterns.

Contrastive analysis emphasizes students’ active participation. The instructor selects typical English–Chinese translation cases (which may incorporate medical professional literature) and guides students to apply the contrastive knowledge to analyze the linguistic roots of translation difficulties. For example, when analyzing the Chinese translation of “The patient was diagnosed with pneumonia,” the instructor guides students to notice the habitual difference between English passive voice and Chinese active expression, as well as the similarities and differences in word-formation motivation between the medical term “pneumonia” (Greek etymology: “pneumon” = lung + “-ia” = disease state) and the Chinese term 肺炎 (“fèiyán”, lung +

inflammation).

Practical exercise focuses on the internalization of translation skills. On the basis of contrastive analysis, students perform translation exercises independently. Exercise materials should include general English and medical professional English as well. The tasks are designed with a progressive increase in difficulty. Given the constraint of class hours, some exercises can be assigned as after-class homework through online platforms. The instructors should concentrate on analyzing difficult points and typical errors with classroom time.

Feedback revision achieves spiral improvement of translation competence. When the instructor marks and provides feedback on students' translation assignments, the feedback should explain not only judgments of the translated text but also the blind spots in students' cognition of English–Chinese lexical differences. Guide students to change from “knowing what” to “knowing why”.

4.2. Teaching strategies based on the perspective of the Expectancy–Value Theory

Based on the three-dimensional framework of the Expectancy–Value Theory, this study formulates the following corresponding teaching strategies.

- (1) Enhancing intrinsic value. Instructors should emphasize the situationality and interestingness of teaching design. By selecting translation materials related to students' majors and close to clinical practice, students can experience a sense of achievement in applying knowledge during translation practice; by revealing the linguistic rules and cultural logic behind English–Chinese lexical differences, students' curiosity and desire for exploration can be stimulated.
- (2) Strengthening attainment value. Instructors should help students establish the connection between translation competence and professional identity. By presenting typical cases caused by translation errors in the medical field, such as mistranslation of drug instructions or deviation in medical-record translation, students can recognize that translational proficiency is an indispensable component of their professional competence; by organizing activities such as translation-achievement exhibitions and outstanding-translation selections, students' sense of achievement and self-efficacy can be enhanced.
- (3) Demonstrating utility value. Translation teaching should cater to the students' practical needs. Specialized training targeting the translation section of CET-4/6 can help students transform contrastive knowledge into test-taking skills; applying translation competence in professional literature reading and academic writing can help them personally feel the practical benefits of translation learning.

4.3. Guarantee conditions and implementation suggestions

To ensure the effective implementation of the above teaching model and strategies, the following guarantee conditions are required. At the curriculum level, it is recommended to set up an independent module or special topic for college English translation teaching in the talent-cultivation program, guaranteeing no fewer than 12 class hours for translation teaching per semester. At the textbook level, school-based textbooks or supplementary materials that combine English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge with medical professional translation materials should be developed or selected. At the faculty-training level, thematic training in contrastive linguistics and translation pedagogy should be organized for college English instructors to enhance their theoretical literacy and teaching competence. At the assessment-reform level, the weight of translation-competence assessment in formative evaluation should be increased to guide students to attach importance to the training of translation skills in daily learning.

5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in the Expectancy–Value Theory and employing literature review, qualitative analysis, and empirical methods, has deeply examined the attitudes, cognition, and needs of undergraduate students from various medical majors and college English instructors at Ningxia Medical University regarding the application of English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge in college English translation teaching. The findings are as follows. First, English–Chinese lexical contrastive knowledge has significant theoretical value and practical significance for improving medical students’ translation accuracy, and both students and instructors have reached a high consensus on this point. Second, current college English translation teaching suffers from prominent problems such as fragmented knowledge transmission, insufficient guaranteed class hours, and disconnection between teaching and professional needs. Third, from the perspective of the three dimensions of the Expectancy–Value Theory, medical students have positive motivation for learning English–Chinese lexical contrast and improving translation competence, but the motivational characteristics of students from different majors vary, requiring differentiated teaching strategies.

Based on the above findings, this study proposes a four-stage teaching model of “theoretical introduction, contrastive analysis, practical exercise, and feedback revision” and designs corresponding teaching strategies from the three dimensions of the Expectancy–Value Theory. These suggestions provide a reference path for college English translation teaching reform at Ningxia Medical University, yet their effectiveness remains to be verified through subsequent teaching experiments. Future research may further employ quantitative methods to measure the actual effect of this teaching model on the development of students’ translation competence and explore the application prospects of information-technology tools—such as corpus tools, AI-assisted systems, and translation-memory systems—in English–Chinese lexical contrastive teaching.

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