

## USE OF JOURNALS IN TEACHING TRANSLATION FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS OF NHA TRANG UNIVERSITY

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### SUMMARY

In the light of project-based language learning, this article describes a small study of 90 third year English-major students of Nha Trang University who were taking a translation course. One group was just encouraged to practise more after classtime. The other group was required to write translation journals as a kind of homework. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data for analysis. The study aims at investigating whether these journals help the students make progress in this subject. The results of the research show that translation journals can be an effective tool for the students to review their lessons and improve their translation ability.

**Keywords:** *project-based language learning, translation journals, translation course, third year English-major students at Nha Trang University, effective tool*

### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Vietnamese students who took translation courses followed this familiar procedure: read a given source text, look up for new words in dictionaries, translate, submit the target text and receive their teacher's feedback. This resulted in a boring classroom routine and students' passive attitudes when they were mostly dominated by their instructor. Recently, in the waves of education reforms, teaching and learning translation have got a lot of changes. Among many innovative methods, project-based language learning (PBL) is considered an appropriate approach. It helps students control their learning process and have many opportunities to experience difficulties and share knowledge in small groups. Depending on specific translation courses, students have to solve problems or respond to a big question or produce a product. In this study, translation journal writing was used in the hope that the students could reinforce their learning and get better results at the end of the course.

### BACKGROUND

#### What is project-based language learning?

Originally, project-based learning (PBL) is a pedagogical approach which dates back to more than 100 years ago. The Buck Institute

for Education (BIE) defined PBL as "a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge" [1, p. 1]. Moursund (n.d.) [2] stated that PBL is "an individual or group activity that goes on over a period of time, resulting in a product, presentation, or performance. It typically has a time line and milestones, and other aspects of formative evaluation as the project proceeds" (Section 1, para 1). As there have been a great variety of PBL research and development activities, Thomas (2000) [3] offered five criteria that a project must have in order to be an example of PBL: (1) centrality, (2) driving question, (3) constructive investigations, (4) autonomy and (5) realism.

PBL inspired educators to think of project-based language learning (PBL). The idea of PBL first appeared in an article entitled "The Project Method" by William Heard Kilpatrick (1918) [4]. This professor devised his classes in which learners had to do things with language like creating a written product or discussing a complex problem. Debski (2006) [5] suggested assessment in language learning through questionnaires, checklists and diaries for groups of students who created

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a website. Beckett and Miller (2006) [6] also pointed out that PBL aimed to "provide opportunities for language learners to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output". However, it has to be acknowledged that a comprehensive definition for project-based language learning has not been officially given yet.

#### **Why are translation journals used as project work in this study?**

Diaries and journals have been used for a very long time as a way to express one's thoughts and ideas. Diaries are often written to keep personal information whereas journals are considered a popular and valuable means of recording data at work or in school. According to Hopkins (2010) [7], one of the greatest things about journal writing was that it could take many forms, depending on specific purposes. Kerka (1996) [8] said that journals were a useful learning tool employed in different educational contexts for adults. According to their concrete learning targets, learners would choose to keep a certain kind of journal. Davis (2007) [9] mentioned 15 types of journals, among which project journal was recommended for those who are carrying out an activity and need keep all important information.

For English-major students of Nha Trang University, keeping journals is a familiar activity which started some years ago. For first translation courses, each student had to translate a half-paged text of their choice at home every day. However, contrary to the teacher's expectation, many students did not find journals helpful, but merely a tedious task. They preferred to translate texts from English into Vietnamese. For Vietnamese-English translation, they often produced more careless target versions. Especially, some students cunningly copied ready-translated articles from bilingual newspapers or books. Explanations to their laziness and cheating were insufficient motivation, lack of

background knowledge and vocabulary, grammatical challenges and little time.

With the hope to change students' negative attitudes toward translation learning into more positive ones and improve their translation ability, journal writing was used again last semester but in the light of PBL. Many innovations were made like altering students' working mode, focusing on students' problems, reducing the number of original texts, increasing interactions among students and teacher, offering students more control and freedom, fostering participation when making decisions relating to the project.

#### **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The study was carried out in Nha Trang University. The participants consisted of 90 third year English-major students who were taking a translation course, Translation 1, for the first time. The students of the controlled class were just encouraged to practise translating at home. In contrast, the ones of the experimental class were required to write translation journals in small groups of three. The project started at the beginning of week 3 and lasted 10 weeks. Every week, each group had to translate a 3-paged online text on a topic of their choice. They were requested to deal with both Vietnamese and English source texts alternately. In addition, to make sure that all groups received the same amount of work, an electronic form was delivered to be filled. It listed all instructions that the students had to follow including group number, date, internet link and format details like paper margins, font, size, spacing and alignment of text. The students were asked to carry their journals to every class meeting for the teacher's random checks.

To support the students with their project, mistake corrections were made 3 times in classroom, in weeks 3, 7 and 10. One week before each due day, each group sent the other ones and the teacher difficult sentences concerning the following challenges: word choice; idioms, proverbs, adages and

expressions; proper names of organizations, events, institutions, etc.; sentence structures and tenses. Therefore, the students had a period of time to translate their friends' sentences. Due to limited time, each group just chose two typical problems for each class session. Those who could offer correct responses would get bonus marks individually. Final feedback and corrections were given by the teacher. At the beginning of week 11, all groups submitted their journals for marking. The scores were included in the students' learning results of Translation 1.

The translation course were finished within 45-minutes daily period covered. The students of the two classes took the same examination then. The examination's scores and journals written served as the essential criteria to answer the research question: Are translation journals useful tools to improve students' translation ability?

#### METHODOLOGY

A quantitative and qualitative study was carried out to answer the above research question. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed from the journals' number of mistakes, the group leaders' records and class examination's scores while qualitative data were implied in class observation and questionnaires.

#### **Instruments for data collection**

Group leaders have recorded the following: The leader of each group kept a record to monitor his/ her members and assigned tasks to them. It contained the leader's detailed descriptions of the whole working process and the members' ideas, reactions or problems and solutions. The teacher would base on this record to mark the journals.

Class observation: The observations were mainly made during 3 meeting classes when the students' journals were corrected and their problems were solved. The number of questions, responses and the students'

learning attitudes were noticed and recorded for later analysis.

Questionnaires: Two questionnaires were delivered to the students at the end of week 2 and week 10, aiming at collecting data regarding the frequency of mistakes they made in terms of word choice, idioms and expressions, proper names, structures and tenses. Questionnaire 1 consisted of 5 questions, asking about kinds of mistakes. Questionnaire 2 also had the same questions but offered another 5 questions involving journal writing's helpfulness, the link between theories and practice, as well as the teacher's mistake correction method.

Students' journals: These journals included the groups' source and translated texts in both languages. They served as the evidence to prove if journal writing was effective and helpful. Moreover, these journals obviously pointed out the students' strengths and weaknesses, so that the teacher can adjust her teaching and focus more on common problems.

Examination's scores: Different from the above instruments which were only used for the experimental class, examination scores were taken from both classes. Comparisons were made to evaluate the effectiveness of translation journals.

#### FINDINGS

Most of group leaders were devoted to fulfill their duty. All the topics chosen were appropriate and authentic. The records also showed clear assignments for the members such as finding a source text, analyzing it, looking up for difficult words or expressions, translating, discussing and editing the final version. Usually, each student was mainly responsible for one part of the text and helped one another to perfect the whole target text. It was interesting to find out that most of students engaged in their tasks enthusiastically and jobs were divided rather equally among the students. There was just one student who was reported not attending

group work regularly. Other two groups were reminded that they should translate every day, not until the weekend. Many students claimed that they felt safer and more confident and were greatly encouraged in their groups while some complained that their partners were not helpful and competent.

Besides the records, observations were taken in 3 class meetings for journal corrections. It was clear that the students had more concern about their problems than the others' as they listened more attentively to the teacher and took notes carefully. Most of their difficulties related to word choice, expressions and structures. About two-thirds of the students participated in correction activities enthusiastically. They offered many translated versions in order to get bonus marks. Especially, they were eager and did much better with English- Vietnamese translation. A remarkable point was that at first many students did not know how to use dictionaries or Internet effectively when looking for new words or concepts or proper names, which resulted in word-for-word translation. When some useful tips were given, this weakness reduced gradually in the following weeks. Apart from asking questions about specific sentences, the students were also interested in techniques and skills. Although this kind of knowledge has just been covered in the previous sessions, the students were pretty confused and needed more illustrations.

Similar to the leaders' records and class observations, two questionnaires helped the teacher have a deeper understanding of the students' problems, opinions and expectations. The students were asked questions of their frequency of making mistakes at two points of time. At the end of week two, 22% students admitted that they sometimes had difficulties in choosing appropriate words and 60% ones said they usually did. At the end of week 10, these figures changed into 49% and 29% respectively. It meant that word choice was still a problem, but on a lower level. As for

translation of idioms, proverbs, adages and expressions, the students' answers showed a similar shift. In other words, at first, 22% students sometimes encountered this problem, 51% usually and 18% always but later 20% occasionally, 36% sometimes and 40% usually. However, the students' ability to cope with proper names was improved a little. Small differences were found in the students' responses. If at the end of week two, 29% occasionally did not know how to deal with proper names, at the end of week ten, 31% told this truth. For the same question, 31% used the option "sometimes" at the beginning of the project and 40% at the end; 27% first chose "usually" and then 22% did it. One explanation to this fact was that the students found different names in different texts and they did not have many opportunities to reuse old terms. When asked about difficulties with sentence structures, students provided more positive answers as follows: 13% occasionally and 38% usually had trouble in the first two weeks; 29% occasionally and 29% usually in the final week. For tense choice, the percentage of students usually wavering among tenses went down from 22% to 9%. It was obvious that the project increased the students' confidence and positive feelings to some extent. In part 2 of the second questionnaire, most of students were pleased and satisfied with journal writing when a large percentage circled the options "agree" and "absolutely agree". Specifically, 67% students agreed and 22% absolutely agreed that translation journals helped them put theories into practice, that is, the basic concepts were reviewed, many sentence structures and strategies were employed and typical errors were avoided in the project. 98% students asserted that translation journals provided them with opportunities to reinforce and practise translation skills more frequently while 96% considered this tool as a useful means to improve their translation ability. Last but not least, 83% students were in agreement on the

teacher's mistake correction method. Only two students said that they disagreed with it and one totally disagreed with an excuse that teacher did not have enough time to correct all translated texts for the whole class. In conclusion, journal writing was rather widely accepted as an effective and necessary mode which assisted the students in their learning process.

In order to compare students' subjective estimation with real mistakes they made, some calculations were done on the texts translated in weeks 1, 2 and weeks 9, 10. When the students translated from English into Vietnamese in the first two weeks, they made 117 word choice mistakes, 39 idiom and expression ones, 9 proper name ones, 48 structure ones and 21 tense ones. In the last two weeks, the figures were 62, 20, 3, 10 and 15 respectively. Positive results were also found in Vietnamese-English translations as follows: 108 word choice mistakes reduced to 59; 66 idiom and translation ones to 41; 9 proper name ones to 6; 108 sentence structure ones to 70; and 78 tense ones to 42. The data showed that the students had problems in dealing with word choice, idioms and expressions, structures and tenses, but not proper names. There was a mismatch between the students' answers and the real number of proper name mistakes. In other words, they thought that they were often puzzled by proper names but the reality showed the contrary. On the other hand, Vietnamese – English translation created more difficulties for the students with the surpassing number of mistakes. Interestingly, the students' tendency to choose "occasionally" or "sometimes" more often to describe their frequency of making mistakes in the last weeks corresponded with the numbers collected at the same time. In short, translation journals contributed to the students' progress thanks to regular practice and mutual learning.

The last instrument for journal evaluation was examination scores. 38% students of the controlled class had low marks (marks 4 and 5) while in the experimental class, this figure was 22%. Remarkably, one-thirds of above 38% students received a mark 3 whereas all 22% got a mark 4. 46% students of the first class and 33% of the second one passed the examination (marks 5 and 6). The number of students gaining good marks (7 and 8) in the first class was much lower than that of the second: 16% and 45% respectively. It was obvious that a number of students got profit from journal writing which provided them with chances to get familiar with and recycle language in terms of words, expressions, structures and tenses. However, within 45 periods in class and 10-week projects, the students couldn't achieve excellent results as no one got marks 9 or 10 was found.

#### CONCLUSION

The results showed that journal writing contributed to reducing the students' common kinds of mistakes and relatively raised their examination marks. Moreover, it helped them to consolidate and train translation skills more often. In addition, when put in this project, the students could develop their autonomy in many forms and involve in exploring new things. Not only did the student focus on translation techniques, but they also got used to other important skills like analyzing, synthesizing, summarizing, organizing and thinking critically. Noticeably, the project figured out that when the students were put under enough pressure, forced to follow certain disciplines and stimulated by bonus marks, they would develop their working capacity more fully.

It is believed that this project helps to build a good habit for the student by keeping a daily journal. Not only translation journals but also reading ones are essentially recommended as constant practice will lead to success. Finally, this project makes it easier for the students to

learn other subjects as their source of vocabulary increases and their use of structures and tenses is better.

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#### TÓM TẮT

#### SỬ DỤNG NHẬT KÝ TRONG DẠY BIÊN DỊCH CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGỮ ĐẠI HỌC NHA TRANG

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Với những hiểu biết về dạy và học ngôn ngữ qua đề án, bài viết này mô tả một nghiên cứu nhỏ về 90 sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ ba tại đại học Nha Trang đang học môn biên dịch. Một nhóm chỉ được khuyến khích luyện tập thêm ngoài giờ học trên lớp. Nhóm còn lại được yêu cầu viết nhật ký dịch ở nhà. Các phương pháp định tính và định lượng được sử dụng để thu thập dữ liệu cho việc phân tích. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khảo sát xem nhật ký dịch có giúp sinh viên tiến bộ hơn trong môn học hay không. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy nhật ký dịch có thể là công cụ hiệu quả giúp sinh viên ôn tập bài đã học và cải thiện khả năng biên dịch của họ.

**Từ khóa:** dạy và học ngôn ngữ qua đề án, nhật ký dịch, khóa học biên dịch, sinh viên chuyên ngữ năm thứ ba tại Đại học Nha Trang, công cụ hiệu quả

*Ngày nhận bài: 15/10/2017; Ngày phân biên: 29/10/2017; Ngày duyệt đăng: 13/12/2017*

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