Testing the Degree of Optimal Relevance by Way of Student Response: A Classroom-Based Examination

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ABSTRACT

In the light of Relevance Theory, contextual effect and processing effort are the two major indispensable conditions for yielding relevance with varying degree of strength. As it is, the pursuit of optimal relevance aims at yielding the largest contextual effect in return with the minimum processing effort. This principle of communication guides the message receivers to choose the acceptable contextual assumptions for interpreting speaker-intended meaning. But how does a translator judge what is or is not relevant to the target-text reader with different cognitive ability and expectation? How does a translator know the contextual assumption and the intended interpretation are capable of achieving adequate or appropriate contextual effect? What if the translator arrives at a contextual assumption but clashes with the target-text reader's expectation? These questions are worked out through a classroom-based testing on optimal relevance by way of student response generated from reading translated texts of different genres. It is suggested in this study that through this exercise student translator will get first-hand experience of confronting the real readers' taste and preferences, and learn to incorporate the responses into further revision.

1. Introduction

In light of relevance theory, an utterance interpretation is considered relevant if it yields adequate contextual effects without causing the target-language reader unnecessary processing effort. Thus contextual effect and processing effort are the two major indispensable conditions for yielding relevance with varying degree of strength. As it is, utterance interpretation selected by the translator will basically focus on what aspects of the original are communicated, how the original meaning is expressed in the target language, and to what effect with regard to the target-language reader's expectation. Guided by the principle of relevance, the message receivers are expected to choose the acceptable contextual assumptions for interpreting speaker-intended meaning. A given contextual assumption can be considered optimal relevant only when it produces contextual effect worthy of the message receiver's effort to process and then to construct a justifiable interpretation of an utterance.

But how an utterance can be relevant enough to be worth the message receiver's processing effort? According to Gutt (2000) who attempts to give explanation of the translator's style in terms of the principle of relevance, there are four circumstantial factors that could determine whether an utterance adequately achieve its relevance or not: (1) time in relation to the availability of information, (2) degree of intellectual alertness, (3) cultural difference in definition of relevance, (4) addressee's expectations of relevance. In this paper, the fourth factor will be the center of investigation. To detect the mismatch of the contextual assumptions used by the translator to guide the reader towards the intended interpretation, the method of reader response is used to explain the lack of correspondence between the translator and the target-text readers. This investigation will be worked out through a classroom-based testing on optimal relevance by way of student response generated from reading translated texts of different genres. Through this exercise, student translators will get first-hand
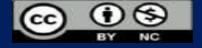
experience of confronting the real readers' taste and preferences, and are encouraged to incorporate the reader's responses into further revision with a purpose to enhance the degree of relevance in their translation.

2. The Principle of Relevance

In the current model of relevance theory, the correlation between processing effort and contextual effect is perceived as a distinct phenomenon in ostensive-inferential account of human communication. Gutt (2000) lays down the condition for successful communication: an interpretive use of a text or an utterance is intended to achieve relevance in virtue of its resemblance with the original, and utterance interpretation communicates the presumption of its relevance which can amount to the adequate contextual effects. Gutt (2000) states that "[t]he notion of 'cognitive environment' takes into account the various external factors but places the emphasis on the information they provide and its mental availability for the interpretation process" (p. 27). Theoretically speaking, relevance can be increased if the target-language receptor's cognitive environment and knowledge is sufficiently constructed and provided so that the contextual effects can be experienced by the receptor group without unjustifiable effort. That is to say, the target-language reader in effect would recognize what the translator intends to communicate with minimal processing effort.

Within this relevance-theoretic framework, the major criterion for assessing whether the translator's intended interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance is the processing effort the target-language reader put into intention recovery in the search for relevance. As Gutt (2000) claims, "In the pursuit of optimal relevance it turns first to highly accessible information, looking for adequate contextual effects; if the use of this information does yield contextual effects adequate to the occasion in a way the speaker could have foreseen, then it will assume that it has used the right, that is, speaker-intended, contextual information" (p. 33). There has not yet a case study in research concerning how a translator knows the contextual assumption and the intended interpretation are capable of achieving adequate or appropriate contextual effect. Since the translator and the readers are free to create their own contextual assumptions, it is not an easy task to scrutinize whether

the readers can arrive at the intended interpretation that is felt to generate satisfactory contextual effects with or without unnecessary effort. What if the translator arrives at a contextual assumption but clashes with the target-text reader's expectation?

In this study, quantitative analysis via reader-response questionnaire is conducted to better understand the reader's mental processing effort. When measuring the processing effort needed by the target-language reader, special attention must be paid to the causal relationship between the reader's cognitive context and their experience of the potential contextual effects. In an analytical situation, the conflicting intuitions may be detected as a problem in terms of discourse interpretation yielded by the reader, which may not coincide with what the translator intended to communicate.

3. Research Method

With regard to the natural intuition for relevance that needs a conscious and detailed account of how we make sense of particular texts in the way that we do, the *reader-response method was incorporated into* translation classroom to test the degree of relevance within different genre of translation. In this pedagogical study, r*eader response* served translator as a reflective tool during the translation and revision process. The objective of using reader-response method had two folds: (1) to test whether optimal relevance can be retained by way of reader response, (2) to raise students' awareness of the target-text readers' expectation and need. Taking an experimental stance with the *reader-response method,* the course "Introduction to Translation" taught in the spring semester of the 2015 academic year was selected to conduct this teaching experiment. This course was a required course for the third-year students in the undergraduate program of English Department at National Kaohsiung University of Science and Technology (NKFUST). This three-hour course ran through the whole spring semester, lasting for eighteen weeks.

The major concern of this teaching experiment was to discover whether reader response could serve as an effective reflective tool to help student revise their translation. I was interested in finding out whether students' translation showed the dimension of choices they made as they worked toward the readers' responses. The proposed teaching module was as follows:

Step 1 Source-Text & Audience Analysis → Translation (first draft)
Step 2 In-Class Exercise: Introduce the material selected for translation → Reader-Response (1)
Step 3 Analyze Reader-Response Analysis (1) → Revise Translation (second draft)
Step 4 In-Class Exercise: Reader-Response (2) → Revise Translation (Final version)
Step 5 Group Presentation: Decision making on revising translation

These five steps also recommend the most suitable translation procedure that indicates reader's response as a factor that needs to be taken into account during a decision-making process. In regard to the first step, students are required to complete a brief analysis of the source text in terms of the meaning and form. In addition, the student translators need to reflect carefully on how they should communicate their informative intention and what he can convey by means of his or her translation when addressing a wide or varied audience. In other words, student translators need to judge what is or is not relevant to the target-text readers with different cognitive ability and s/he should bear in mind the possible target-text readers' expectation. The following questions are provided for further reflection and discussion:

1. What is the writer's/source-text's informative intention?
2. What is the communicative purpose/function of the source text?
3. Who is your ideal reader?
4. What may be the target-text readers' expectation(s)?
5. What is the communicative purpose/function of the target text?

The second and fourth step proposed involves in-class reader response exercise that aims to acquire "real" readers' expectations and satisfaction. Students can use the following two-part of questions provided by the instructor to evaluate whether the translator's informative intention and the intended interpretation constructed by him/herself are able to meet the target-text readers' expectation and are capable of achieving adequate or appropriate contextual effect.

Reader-Response (1) Questions:
1. What is the communicative purpose/function of the translation?
2. What is the translator's informative intention?
3. What seem to be the translation problem(s)?
4. What is the target-text reader's expectation(s)?

Reader-Response (2) Questions:
5. Does the revised translation correspond to the readers' expectation(s)?
6. If yes, to what extent does the target text coordinate audience expectation(s)? Please give examples.
7. If not, what seem to be the translation problem(s)?
8. As a reader, are you satisfied with the revised translation? If not, please state the reason(s) or points out the part(s) you are not satisfied with.

For the first part of reader-response questions, students play the role of general reader who reads the translated text without the source text. When answering the second part of reader-response questions, students are provided with the original source text for reviewing the revised translation and evaluate the performance of their classmates.

After the assessment procedure, the student translators revise the translation according to the readers' demands or requirements. During the process of revising, the students act as a "dialectic revisers . . . [who] need to justify their changes to the target text" (Mossop, 2001, p.296). Each group is required to talk about their justification by giving a presentation on how they revise the first and second drafts in terms of their acceptance and rejection of readers' suggestions received from the first and second reader-response exercise.

After a nine-week period of practice, the 48 students who took this translation course were asked to fill out a response-based questionnaire where "respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms" (Patton, 1990, p.290). This questionnaire (see Appendix 1) is designed to know the students' attitude and perspectives toward reader-response method and to give instructor an insight into the effectiveness of reader-response implementation before, during and after the translation. Within this experimental teaching, we can also observe and examine whether the degree of relevance can be increased or even optimal relevance can be achieved if the translator aims to meet the target-text readers' need and expectation.

4. Results and Discussion

Since there are forty-eight students in total, the students were divided into ten groups. Each group was asked to choose a text of their preference. As a result, four groups selected literary texts, such as children's storybooks and suspense novel,
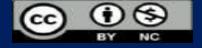
and the rest of groups chose non-literary texts, including travel guide, telephone manual, advertisement, menu, news, tips for applying for a job. The students needed to complete the steps mentioned in Section 3 within three weeks. After finishing two reader-response exercises and a group presentation, each student needed to fill out a response-based questionnaire. The following results are retrieved from 39 questionnaires.

In terms of the student translators' attitude towards the usefulness of peers' reading-responses exercise, the results were shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Student translators' attitude towards the usefulness of peers' reading-responses exercise

Percentage	Usefulness of Peers' Reading-responses Exercise
9 (23%)	1. Useful for designing the function of the translated text
12 (31%)	2. Useful for designing the translator's informative intention
36 (92%)	3. Useful for revising the translation

It is apparent that most students consider peers' responses are useful for revising the translation. One reason may be that the peers' responses often focus on how to improve translation fluency rather than on how to strengthen the communicative function of the target text or on how to manifest the translator's translation intention. In addition, there is no need to change the function of the target text or refine translator's translation intention when the students are reading the non-literary translated texts. Generally speaking, through this exercise, students understand "self-revision", a term coined by Mossop to distinguish the revision done by a third party, is an essential part of the translation process completed by the translator him/herself (2001, p.135). And the production of final translation can be potentially influenced by the one who reads and edits their translation work.

Besides the three useful aspects listed in the questionnaire, some students also add other useful aspects of doing reading-response exercise. Their opinions are listed in Table 2:

Table 2: Students' responses

Student	Useful Aspects
S1	Useful for choosing the right words.
S2	Translation accuracy is increased.
S3	Translationese can be avoided.
S4	Readers can see the translation problems ignored by the translator.
S5	The translation effect may be strengthened.
S6	Translation can be more accessible to the general reading public.
S7	Readers' opinions can give translators some ideas how/where to revise in order to make the translated text more informative.
S8	Know more about the readers' different needs and expectations.

Besides using readers' responses to help them revise the translation, several students point out readers' responses can be useful for them to identify language problems (i.e. smoothness), transfer problems (i.e. accuracy, checking for omissions or mistranslation, and presentation problems (i.e. layout). Among the three problems, language problems are considered by the students as the main revision parameters (see S1~S4) and the potential effects to be achieved (see S5~S8). Nevertheless, the expectation generated by the readers may clash with the translator's informative intention. Students point out several problems they encounter when taking part in the reader-response exercises:

Table 3: Problems students encountered while taking part in the reader-response exercises

Student	Problems
S9	Readers may easily misunderstand the translator's intention.
S10	Readers' backgrounds are different so the choice of words may vary a lot.
S11	It is hard to meet reader's expectation especially when the translator needs to be loyal to the original's style.
S12	Some responses are far-fetched.
S13	Some suggestions are not practical.

From Table 3, students suggest that readers of different backgrounds may not be able to grasp the translator's intention or they may see things from their perspective and thus fail to grasp the translator's particular linguistic means (i.e. word usage, text style). In reality, it is found that students choose not to compromise on readers' suggestions when encountering the aforementioned problems.

The entire students agree that the readers' satisfaction may increase if the revision is based on the readers' requests. In terms of contextual effect, 74% of students consider the revised translation generally provides better contextual effect. In terms of reader's processing effort, 44% of students feel that the processing effort is

reduced. This result suggests that even if the translation is revised according to the readers' expectations, the revision may not suit every reader's need. Therefore, it is still necessary for some readers to take extra processing efforts. In addition, it is interesting to find out that only 21% of students think that the revised translation provides better contextual effect and can be processed with less effort. This response indicates that it is quite difficult to achieve optimal relevance even if readers' responses are taken into account by the translator.

Nevertheless, in the aspect of translator taking reader's expectation into consideration, positive and negative effects are mentioned and listed as follows:

Table 4 & 5: Positive and negative aspect of translator

Student	Positive Effects
S1	Learn to justify the decision of taking and rejecting reader's suggestions.
S2	Feel respected as a reader.
S3	Readers' opinions are useful.
S4	Translators have a clear direction to work towards the goal meeting reader's expectation.
S5	This exercise helps me learn that the readers may have different expectations on a variety of genres.
S6	Translation can be revised for many times, which help to improve the translation quality.

Table 5

Student	Negative Effects
S7	Readers feel upset when their suggestions are not adopted.
S8	Some readers think that they do not have enough knowledge to correct the translation.

Several students feel respected when they know their suggestions are being taken into consideration by the translator. One student even states that "if the translation meets my expectation, I would think it a better translation." This can explain why the students feel sad when their suggestions are not adopted by the translator.

Finally, the effectiveness of reader-response exercise is investigated. 77% of students learn the significance of taking reader's expectation into consideration and incorporating readers' responses into the revision process. 72 % of students acknowledge the importance of audience analysis. Only 54% of students consider the

source-text analysis is also essential part of translation. Nonetheless, it is observed by the instructor that students rely mostly on the source text to justify their decision of accepting or rejecting the peer readers' suggestions. The other benefits includes: (1) learn about the process of translation, (2) readers' responses pose a challenge for the translator, (3) learn to think about not only translation fluency but also the function of the target text and its readers, (4) learn to design a translation according to the different factors (i.e. communicative purpose and the reader) outside the text.

Students also provide some suggestions to the instructor. Two comments are worth mentioning. The first comment suggests that the translation material should be the same so students possess the same background knowledge on the material they are working on. And the comments given to their peers' translation work can be more insightful. Otherwise, the comments may turn out to be superficial or not very useful for revision. The other comment suggests that the reader-response questions are not very clear; some questions are overlapping. The reader-response questions contain some jargons, such as communicative purpose, translation function, translator's informative intention, which might perplex the novice translators. Before proceeding to conduct reader-response exercise, it is indispensable for the instructor to explain as clearly as possible the meaning of each question and the purpose of giving two different set of reader-response questions.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether optimal relevance can be attained by way of student response in a classroom-based situation. A key finding in this study is that the two required conditions of optimal relevance, adequate contextual effect and minimal processing effort, may not be attained at the same time due to the readers' different backgrounds and expectations. Nevertheless, this study confirms that readers' responses may be useful in helping the student translators revise their works. When the revision is done based on the feedbacks provided by the readers, reader's satisfaction increases. All this reveals to student translators a general picture of revision reality – the revision process is normally repeated several times if there are readers involved.

Despite the benefits of using readers' responses for revision mentioned above, revision guide or checklist is not provided by the instructor. When the

students do not have the checklist to follow, it is noted that their comments tend to mainly focus on the transfer problems and language problems, in particular, translation accuracy and fluency as the top priorities in revision. Since some scholars who are also experienced translators (Graham 1983, Mossop 2001) have offered practical advices on how to revise the translation, it is suggested that a comprehensive set of revision parameters should be given during the revision process. Among the parameters along with their corresponding criteria, the instructor can customize the checklist according to his or her own teaching and training purposes. In doing so, student translators can better understand one's translation needs revision several times even if it has achieved high level of accuracy, and reflecting on their practices is necessary for improving translation quality.

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Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

1. As a translator, do you think the peers' reading responses useful? If yes, in what way it is useful?   If not, state your reason.

Yes. □1. Useful for designing the function of the translated text

Yes. □2. Useful for designing the translator's informative intention

Yes. □3. Useful for revising the translation

Other: _____

No. _____

2. As a reader, does your satisfaction increase when reading a translation that shows the translator takes your expectation into consideration or adopts your suggestion when revising their translation?

Yes. □1. The translation provides better contextual effect.

Yes. □2. Reader's processing effort may be reduced.

Other effects: _____

No. _____

3. What have you learned about translation from participating in this class activity?
   □1. Source-text analysis
   □2. Audience analysis
   □3. Taking reader's expectation into consideration
   □4.Incorporating reader response into the process of revision
   □5.Other _____

4. Do you have any suggestion for the instructor?