

Translating Education Discourse: Functional Equivalence in Theory and Practice

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Abstract: This study presents an English-Chinese translation of an education discourse “Education is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching”, which conceptualizes education as dynamic transformation and advocates collaborative, student-centered pedagogies. Addressing the language barrier that prevents Chinese educators from accessing its evidence-based strategies, the project applies Functional Equivalence Theory across three dimensions. At the lexical level, free translation and amplification convey specialized concepts. At the syntactic level, division and conversion restructure complex sentences to conform to Chinese norms. At the textual level, amplification and division reconstruct thematic progression and logical coherence. These strategies achieve equivalent transmission of meaning, logic, and style. The translated output enables Chinese education practitioners to comprehend core insights such as teachers’ transition from authority figures to collaborative partners and the co-construction of knowledge through cultural translation activities. By establishing an accessible bridge to international educational ideas, this project contributes practical references for pedagogical innovation and classroom interaction optimization in Chinese educational contexts.

Keywords: Education is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching, Functional Equivalence Theory, Education discourse, Pedagogical implications.

1. Introduction

As indicated on its title page, the book *Education is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching* (2006) claims to “offer the insights essential for crafting enriching, lifelong strategies to become a more effective teacher and a more proficient learner.” Drawing from an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses anthropology, literary studies, psychology, translation studies, and educational theory, the book conceptualizes education as a dynamic process of transforming knowledge, values, and ideas. With this lens, teaching and learning are inextricably intertwined. It posits that both teachers and students need to undergo evolution to attain transformative education. To delve into greater specificity, teachers ought to redefine their roles, transitioning from authoritative figures to collaborative partners. They should work hand-in-hand with students to co-construct knowledge. For instance, in a classroom setting, a teacher could lead discussions where students translate their own cultural practices into academic concepts. This not only fosters mutual respect but also encourages shared learning. Such a paradigm shift disrupts traditional hierarchical classroom structures and champions an inclusive, student-centered approach to education.

For Chinese education researchers and practitioners who are earnestly seeking effective ways to refine teaching methods and energize classroom interactions, the evidence-based and practical strategies outlined in this book are a veritable goldmine of invaluable cross-cultural insights. These strategies will not only assist them in reexamining the complex interplay between knowledge dissemination and learner autonomy but also provide them with innovative approaches to tackle the diverse challenges that arise in real-world teaching scenarios. However, since this work was originally published in English, language barrier has prevented most Chinese educational researchers and front-line teachers from accessing its core viewpoints and practical strategies. Given this situation, launching an English-Chinese

translation project for this book holds immense significance.

To guarantee high-quality translation, Functional Equivalence Theory was applied to guide an English-Chinese translation of this book. This theory places great emphasis on precisely conveying the original meaning in the target language. It empowers the translator to modify expressions so that they align with Chinese cultural and linguistic conventions, while preserving the core essence. Its application in this English-Chinese translation practice can ensure that the innovative educational concepts and interdisciplinary perspectives originally presented in English can be clearly and effectively communicated to the Chinese-speaking audience, thereby fostering cross-cultural understanding within the realm of education discourse.

2. The Functional Equivalence Theory in Translation Practice

2.1 Introduction to Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory, which was proposed by the American linguist Eugene Nida in 1969, serves as a cornerstone in modern translation studies (Nida, 1969) [1]. This theory underscores the importance of achieving functional equivalence between the source language and the target language, placing greater emphasis on the accurate transmission of the meaning and cultural essence rather than adhering to a strict word-for-word translation approach (Nord, 2001) [2]. In the sense of Nida’s “functional equivalence”, the primary objective of translation is to ensure that target-language readers can experience and understand the text in a manner similar to that of source-language readers, even when the specific wording may vary (Nida, 1986) [3]. For example, the English phrase “spring up like mushrooms” is translated into Chinese as “雨后春笋” (spring up like bamboo shoots after rain), a rendering that aligns with the cultural imagery and context familiar to Chinese readers.

The Functional Equivalence Theory guides the translators to seek the psychological response similarity between the readers of the target text and those of the source text (Li, 2014) [4]. It posits that translation should strive to attain equivalence across three interrelated dimensions, namely lexical, syntactic, and textual equivalence. Lexical Equivalence represents the most basic dimension, yet its scope far surpasses mere word-for-word substitution (Nida, 1964) [5]. It requires the careful selection of lexical items that closely match the source language in both semantic meaning and connotative implications. For example, the English metaphor “heart of stone” finds a precise and culturally congruent equivalent in Chinese phrase “铁石心肠”, which directly conveys the core meaning of emotional coldness and unfeelingness. Nevertheless, when addressing culture-specific terms (e.g., proverbs or unique cultural symbols), translation strategies including substitution and free translation ought to be employed. For instance, the English proverb “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” is not translated word for word, but rendered into the natural Chinese equivalent “入乡随俗” by means of cultural substitution and free translation. Additionally, the translation of the culturally specific English concept “individualism” into Chinese illustrates a notable case of cross-cultural semantic divergence. A literal rendering as “个人主义” is prone to significant misinterpretation, as this Chinese expression conventionally implies self-centeredness and a detachment from collective values, thereby carrying distinctly negative connotations. Actually, in the source text, individualism is used to convey the meaning of personal autonomy, self-reliance, and individual agency, representing positive values within its cultural framework. Consequently, a semantically adaptive approach translating “individualism” into “个体主义” or “个性解放”, is preferable. These two versions not only preserve the essential cultural semantics of the source concept but also mitigates potential pragmatic failure among target-language recipients via avoiding unintended negative associations (Zhang, 2025) [6].

Syntactic equivalence demands that the syntax of the translation text conforms to the target-language norm. English, a hypotactic language, favors long sentences packed with subordinate clauses; Chinese, a paratactic one, prefers brief clauses strung in sequence. Hence, in English-to-Chinese translation practice, the translator usually needs to dismantle the long and complex English sentences into shorter units that echo the rhythmic beat of Chinese. Specifically, syntactic equivalence in translation is typically achieved by breaking down complex sentences, making implicit information explicit, converting passive voice to active, and clarifying logical connectives, of the source language. For example, the English sentence “The assessment criteria were explained in detail by the instructor during the first class.” can be literally translated as “评估标准在第一节课上由教师详细解释了”. Although this version retains the English passive structure, it sounds awkward in Chinese. By switching to the active voice and rearranging the sequence of information, a more natural Chinese expression “教师在第一节课上详细讲解了评估标准” can be achieved (Chen, 2012) [7].

Textual equivalence operates above the level of words and sentences, focusing on global coherence and logical integrity. It requires that the target text form a self-consistent, tightly

knit unit: in argumentation, reproducing the original chain of reasoning step by step; in narration, maintaining consistent person, tense, and plot progression. Achieving this ensures the translation reads as a natural, fluent piece rather than a patchwork of loosely joined sentences. Textual equivalence thus prioritizes logical coherence and structural consistency over word-for-word correspondence. Sun Zhili’s translation of *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies this principle through strategic use of lexical chains and thematic progression. At the outset of the second paragraph of the book, the repetition use of the phrase “这条真理” establishes clear anaphoric reference, immediately connecting the neighbors’ social prejudice to the “truth” established in the prologue. This mirrors the lexical cohesion of the source text while ensuring logical flow. Furthermore, the rendering of “rightful property” as “合法财产” preserves the text’s ironic continuity. This choice creates semantic resonance with the earlier mention of “good fortune,” reinforcing the satirical theme of marriage as transaction. By maintaining these inter-paragraph thematic links, Sun ensures that target readers perceive the underlying social critique: viewing a wealthy bachelor as a commodity, with comparable clarity to the original audience, thereby achieving functional equivalence at the textual level.

Collectively, lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, and textual equivalence constitute a guiding framework for translation practice, wherein lexical selections facilitate syntactic congruity, syntactic configurations engender textual cohesion, and textual integrity substantiates holistic functional equivalence. These dimensions shift the translator’s focus from linguistic fidelity to authentic communicative equivalence, ensuring that the translated text elicits comparable cognitive and affective responses from target-language readers as the source text does from its original audience. This aligns with Nida’s principle that successful translation resides not in formal correspondence but in dynamic equivalence of communicative effect, where the receptor’s response constitutes the ultimate criterion for validity (Tan, 2013) [8]. Such a multi-dimensional approach acknowledges translation as a complex semiotic act requiring simultaneous attention to micro-linguistic precision and macro-textual functionality within the target cultural context (Guo, 2000) [9].

2.2 The Application of Functional Equivalence Theory to Translation Practice

Traditional translation, which clings to word-for-word equivalence, typically produces stiff, foreign-sounding text. Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory overturns this approach by evaluating translation quality according to the response elicited from target readers rather than formal correspondence to the source text. Consequently, translators may abandon rigid mimicry and reshape grammar and style to ensure that the target audience understands and responds to the message in a manner comparable to source-language readers. The criterion for successful translation, according to this framework, is not formal fidelity but natural, idiomatic language that achieves functional communicative effects.

Functional Equivalence aims to ensure that the target text communicates to its readers as the source text does to its original audience via conveying equivalent meaning and

impact. To achieve this, the theory provides a systematic framework applicable at three levels: lexical, syntactic, and textual. Empirical evidence demonstrates that this framework enables translators to produce functionally equivalent renditions across diverse text types, and its applicability has been extensively validated in translation studies scholarship. At the lexical level, Cao (2023) [10] developed a terminological database for heart-related diseases through a comparative study of traditional Chinese medicine classics, aligning traditional concepts with modern Western medical paradigms. Zhang (2025) [6] further demonstrated how strategic lexical choice enhances the efficacy of Chinese commercial advertisements in international markets. At the syntactic level, Chen (2012) [7] proposed four methods for translating long sentences: sequential translation, reverse translation, segmentation, and integrated translation. Zhai and Hu (2017) [11] examined syntactic form adaptation in political narratives, while Li (2014) [4] established applicable conditions for literal, free, and hybrid translation strategies in political news headlines. At the textual level, Xia (2025) [12] provided a frame-by-frame analysis of the film *Flipped*, systematically elucidating equivalence mechanisms in subtitling across lexical, grammatical, and textual dimensions. Extending this framework to animation, Ye (2025) [13] analyzed *Chang An* and constructed a three-dimensional evaluation framework encompassing formal correspondence, semantic equivalence, and cultural adaptation. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory across diverse genres and linguistic levels, validating its utility as a systematic framework for translation practice.

3. Case Analysis based on Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory provides translation studies with a systematic framework and practical methodological apparatus. Its fundamental principle is straightforward yet profound: at every linguistic stratum, the translation must elicit from target-language readers cognitive and affective responses comparable to those experienced by source-language readers (Liu, 1998) [14]. This theoretical paradigm emphasizes that the ultimate criterion for translation quality resides not in formal equivalence but in functional equivalence, wherein the target text achieves communicative efficacy and reader reception within its cultural context commensurate with those of the source text within its own (Zhang, 2025) [6].

3.1 Lexical Equivalence

Within Nida's functional-equivalence framework, lexical selection prioritizes the transfer of complete semantic units encompassing denotation, connotation, affective tone, and cultural framing over formal correspondence. The objective is to elicit from target-language readers spontaneous responses comparable to those of source-language readers. This process seeks not terminological equivalence but closest natural equivalents, lexical items that activate identical core concepts, convey equivalent emotive force, and integrate seamlessly into target-language discourse conventions. Nida thus privileges dynamic equivalence over formal similarity, permitting syntactic and structural reconstruction when such

adaptation serves to reproduce cognitive and affective effects. Lexical equivalence constitutes the foundation of this hierarchy. Failure at the lexical level compromises clausal coherence, textual integrity, and rhetorical efficacy, thereby preventing target readers from experiencing the intended effects of the source text.

Example 1

ST: I learned to write in color, but then the teachers taught me to write in black and white.

TT1: 我学会了用色彩写作, 但后来老师教我用黑白写作。
TT2: 我起初学会了用丰富的文字表达, 后来老师却教我用客观平实的风格写作。

At the lexical level, TT2 achieves a more natural and equivalent effect by applying several common translation techniques, including **free translation**, and **conversion**. In the source text, "write in color" and "write in black and white" are metaphorical expressions to describe vivid versus plain writing styles. **Literal translations** such as "用色彩写作" and "用黑白写作" (as in TT1) preserves the surface form but fails to convey the metaphorical meaning, resulting in weakened communicative effect. TT2 adopts **free translation** to render "write in color" as "用丰富的文字表达" and "write in black and white" as "用客观平实的风格写作". These expressions make the implied stylistic meaning explicit so that Chinese readers can immediately grasp the contrast intended in the ST. Meanwhile, the shift from abstract metaphors ("color" "black and white") to concrete descriptions of writing styles demonstrates the strategy of free translation. By converting the source text's imagery into its functional meaning, the translator ensures that target readers receive an equivalent conceptual message without cognitive barriers.

3.2 Syntactic Equivalence

Syntactic equivalence requires restructuring target-language sentences to align with target-syntactic norms and rhythmic patterns. English typically employs hypotactic structures with explicit logical connectors, whereas Chinese favors paratactic brevity and implicit semantic relations. In English-to-Chinese translation, rather than replicating source-language syntax, translators segment complex sentences, reorganize information flow, and adjust or omit connectives. These techniques produce target text that conforms to Chinese syntactic conventions while preserving grammatical functions, thereby facilitating reader comprehension and cognitive processing.

Example 2

ST: The fact that the course in which these students are enrolled is about explorations of selves, the biases selves have, and how those selves interact with others in various contexts according to those biases—not only makes it an ideal context for translation but also throws into relief the need for and the possibilities of translation.

TT: 学生们所修读的这门课程聚焦于“自我”探索、自我所持有的偏见, 以及个体如何基于这些偏见在不同语境下与他者互动。这不仅为翻译实践提供了理想的语境, 更彰显了翻译的必要性与可能性。

The source text employs a nominal clause introduced by “The fact that...” as a heavy subject, combined with a “not only... but also...” structure, forming a complex syntactic hierarchy typical of English academic discourse. Rather than retaining this nominalized construction, the target text uses division, breaking the lengthy English sentence into two cohesive Chinese units. Through category conversion, the translator recasts the complex subject into a topic-comment structure, thereby conforming to Chinese syntactic preferences. Furthermore, syntactic restructuring reorganizes the original nested clauses in a linear manner while preserving parallel semantic elements and logical progression. As a result, the translation achieves equivalence in both syntactic function and logical relations.

3.3 Textual Equivalence

Textual equivalence operates at the macro-structural level, ensuring that the target text exhibits logical coherence, clear organization, and informational completeness. This enables readers to follow the argumentation without obstruction. Operating above the sentence level, textual equivalence establishes inter-paragraph cohesion by tracing the author’s rhetorical relations, cause-and-effect, progression, and contrast, and subsequently reconfiguring connective devices, paragraph boundaries, and sequential markers to ensure these relations manifest naturally in the target language. Consequently, the translation preserves the logical sequence and informational hierarchy of the source text while enabling target-language readers to comprehend its overall structure and underlying meaning, thereby achieving functional equivalence at the textual level (Xia, 2025) [12].

Example 3

ST: ...Like a translation, then, a composition can seem as though it is complete and balanced, but it is really a partial representation, a selection, an interpretation, a rendering at a moment in time and in context.

The compositions upon which I focus in this chapter include formal and informal written analyses, spoken words, relationships, understandings, identities...

TT:因此，正如翻译一样，一段作品看似完整且平衡，实则仅是一种局部的呈现、一种选择、一种阐释，是特定时空与语境下的产物。

本章我所关注的这些作品包括正式与非正式的书面分析、口头表达、人际关系、认知以及身份认同.....

This case examines textual cohesion to explore the realization of textual equivalence within the functional equivalence framework. The source text exhibits a typical step-by-step progression: the first paragraph concludes with a philosophical definition of “composition” as the Rheme, which then becomes the Theme at the beginning of the second paragraph, thereby establishing a logical bridge between the two sections. In translation, the translator employs amplification by adding the demonstrative pronoun “these,” explicitly marking the anaphoric reference and reinforcing the lexical chain to ensure thematic continuity across the paragraph boundary. Furthermore, division is applied to the long, complex sentence at the end of the first paragraph,

decomposing intricate academic definitions into information units that sustain propositional clarity and facilitate the seamless flow of argumentation into the subsequent paragraph. Through these operations, the target text preserves the Thematic-Rhematic progression and information hierarchy of the source, achieving functional equivalence in narrative tone and argumentative structure. Target readers thus perceive textual coherence and logical organization comparable to those audience of the source text (Chen, 2012) [7].

4. Conclusions

This study examines the English-Chinese translation of the book *Education is Translation: A Metaphor for Change in Learning and Teaching*, adopting Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory as its analytical framework. It addresses practical challenges in translating interdisciplinary academic texts in education, focusing on three major issues: terminological ambiguity, syntactic disparity, and stylistic imbalance. The project aims to convey source-text educational concepts accurately to Chinese readers. To achieve this, the study applies translation strategies at three levels. At the lexical level, conversion and free translation convey specialized concepts and culturally nuanced expressions. At the syntactic level, division, conversion, and restructuring reorganize complex English constructions into natural Chinese sentences, ensuring clarity and logical coherence. At the textual level, amplification and division reconstruct the step-by-step thematic progression of the source text. By explicating inter-paragraph logical links and unpacking dense academic definitions, these strategies ensure smooth thematic transitions and preserve functional equivalence in textual coherence for target readers (Zhai & Hu, 2017) [11].

This study validates the strong applicability of Functional Equivalence Theory to the translation of educational academic texts. Its reader-oriented approach effectively addresses the limitations of formal equivalence, including rigid renderings and comprehension barriers. Furthermore, the research extends the application of Functional Equivalence, traditionally employed in literary and journalistic translation, to the specialized context of interdisciplinary educational texts. It also proposes tailored strategies for challenges such as conveying educational metaphors and balancing academic rigor with narrative accessibility, thereby enriching both the methodological framework and case repository of Functional Equivalence in academic translation.

Regarding practical implications, the translated output, characterized by standardized terminology, clear logic, and professional style, serves as an accessible bridge for Chinese education researchers and practitioners to engage with advanced international educational concepts. It particularly facilitates the cross-cultural communication of core metaphors such as education as translation, offering insights for pedagogical innovation and classroom interaction optimization. Moreover, the three-dimensional framework of Functional Equivalence Theory provides a replicable model for translating comparable educational academic texts, contributing to the localization of high-quality international educational resources and fostering dialogue between Chinese and global educational communities.

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