

Translators' education in question as interest in English studies falls

September 21, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

When I read the question that the freshman had written on a small piece of paper and put into my hand three days ago, a news report of last Monday came to mind. Full of idealism, the student's question was: "If I want to be an interpreter working abroad or a translator for a newspaper, what should I do at this university?"

First, the newspaper article. Its title was "Fewer students studying English at university: poll" (TT 9-15-14 p. 2).

The Global Education Association in Taiwan (GEAT, for our purposes) recently announced the results of a survey that indicated a university English Department shut down somewhere in Taiwan every year for the past 8 years. Nine other universities changed the focuses of their departments of English.

In addition, a flashing light threw attention on high school seniors choosing college majors. Nearly one-third (31.5 percent) of all English Departments reported they're having serious problems attracting new students. Not surprising news, but disturbing.

GEAT invited 126 universities to participate in the survey. The organization received 74 valid responses. Should the low percentage of responses temper our worry? No.

The press report was replete with figures, and far more worthwhile than many a local article on education. I say this despite the way its authors ended the piece. Actually, I should not grumble. The final words there are the gift that made this column possible.

"Fewer students" ended with a reference to advice that Vice Minister of Education Chen Der-hua proffered on the English Department problems. The reporters summarized: "If departments of foreign languages trained students to become professional translators, it would help retain students." Allow me to preface what follows.

After a hiatus of several years, I am itching to return to literary translation for a journal called "The Taipei Chinese Pen." When I was younger and blessed with greater stores of energy, not to say gumption, "the Pen" and I were pals. I am deeply grateful for the kindness of its former editor and best-selling author, Chi Pang-yuan. For 15 years she

and her successors made room in their pages for my humble work. With fewer responsibilities on my campus now, I hope to soon free myself for my former avocation of Chinese-English translation.

Now, back to our freshman. "If I want to be an interpreter ... or a translator, what should I do (now)?" I am sorry I am only qualified to speak as a translator.

First of all, weigh the idea of the Vice-minister of Education. Consider the notion of your department, in this case the English Department, "training" you to become a translator. This is a "mission impossible."

Becoming good at translation is like acquiring a new language. No one can do it for you, and I mean NOBODY. For all practical purposes, you have to do it all by yourself. Perhaps your department can walk beside you as you train yourself.

Many good people do not realize that mastery of impressive-sounding theories of translation does not make a translator particularly good or bad. In itself, book knowledge, especially the sort that luxuriates in obtuse, mind-boggling jargon, does little to develop translators.

I've taught translation courses on the undergraduate and graduate school level nearly every year of my career and, woe is me, this is my 30th year teaching. I've taught Chinese-English translation badly, I've taught it not so badly, and I sure have taught it often. I am quite certain that translators must have near native speaker language ability to be successful.

You want, my young friend, to be a translator, and you want to use English? Well, what are your patterns of error in English? Do you know them? Are your mistakes primarily with verb tense, with "a" and "the," tone, or register? How are you presently enriching your vocabulary? How much writing and revision are you doing for the cold eyes of an instructor to prepare for your future? Only you can answer these bothersome questions.

I hope to revisit this topic in the future. We've got work to do on language and translation, but also on the topic of Taiwan English Departments in general. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

**本文章僅供讀書會參考使用，非經原作者同意，請勿任意轉載。

師生互動與社會關懷
專欄讀書會