

# Exploring Strategies for Contemporary College Students to Improve English Translation of Classical Texts: A Case Study of “The Analects of Confucius”

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## Abstract

During the process of global integration and cultural interaction, translation, serving as an indispensable bridge for cross-cultural communication, has evolved from a mere linguistic conversion tool to a core driver of cultural mutual understanding. For College students, who are the backbone of future cultural communication, their competence in English translation of classical texts directly bears on the efficiency and effect of future's cultural exchange, playing an important part in boosting the influence of international communication. This article explores strategies for improving contemporary college students' competence in translating Chinese classics into English from a full-chain perspective and through cases study. With three dimensions of enhancing construction of source language culture, strengthening skills training and cultivating the competence of cross-culture communication, this paper summarizes a feasible and operable teaching system which can be carried out and few core teaching strategies such as the four dimensional improvement method of “theoretical construction-case appreciation-practical exercise-comparative reflection” have been explored.

## Keywords

translation teaching, college student, English translation of classical texts, “*The Analects of Confucius*”

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## 1. Introduction

The world today is witnessing the profound changes unseen in a century. Facing the background of globalization, the international situation has become more complex and the communication among the countries have grown more frequent. Translation plays a significantly important role in international communication serving as a bridge. While college students, as the new force in the future development of cultural exchanges, shouldering important responsibility of spreading China's voice, carrying forward splendid traditional Chinese culture and enhancing mutual trust and understanding among countries. Therefore, it is necessary to balance the two sides of “input” and “output” in translation teaching and guide students to improve their translation competence through translation practice (Fang, 2024).

The Chinese nation holds a long-lasting history and profound cultural connotations. Chinese classic works transcend time and space, covering various fields such as philosophy, culture, and history. They not only depict a clear trajectory of Chinese civilization but also embody the unique world view

and values held by Chinese people. “The Analects of Confucius” as an outstanding representative of Chinese classic works has significant enlightenment on improving college students’ cultural literacy and enhancing cultural confidence. Scholars have explored and attributed a lot college students’ English translation problems from multiple perspectives. However, when check the existing papers which delves into college students’ difficulties in translating it reveals that few of them focus on the whole process of transcending the source language to the target language from a full-chain process.

This paper aims to stress the value of the teaching of English translation of Chinese classics, focusing on the specific difficulties college students faced in their practice of translating. With the translation teaching of “The Analects of Confucius”, this paper explores the practical path to improve college students’ competence on translating Chinese classics.

## **2. The necessity of the College Students’ Translation Teaching of Chinese Classics and the Educational Significance of the Analects.**

College students serve as the main force to spread “China’s fine traditional culture” and as a key link in promoting the mutual communication and understanding of the world. Under the background of building a culturally powerful nation, it is the higher educational institutions’ responsibility endowed by the time to strengthen the translation teaching of Chinese classics received by college students. It is also a practical path to cultivate “interdisciplinary talents” who possess a solid understanding of Chinese culture and a global view.

“The Analects of Confucius”, as the paramount classic of Confucianism, recording the words and thoughts of Confucius and his disciples. It was compiled during the Warring States Period and covers the multiple fields of moral cultivation, educational philosophy, and the way of dealing with the world. From the perspective of global view, integrating “The Analects of Confucius” into the teaching translation of college students has a multidimensional value.

First, “The Analects of Confucius” as China’s fine traditional culture that spans millennia and a model prose of early Chinese quotation-style. It features concise language, skilled use of rhetoric devices and rich semantic connotations. Introducing “The Analects of Confucius” into the translation practice can improve students’ abilities in accurately grasping words’ meanings, flexibly transform sentence structures, and apply multi-dimensional translation strategies. It has profound significance in improving students’ English proficiency. Second, “The Analects of Confucius” contains abundant Chinese philosophical thoughts and wisdom. Integrating it into translation teaching can enhance students’ recognition and understanding of China’s fine traditional culture. At the same time, it can strengthen their cultural roots and deepen the cultivation of their cultural and moral attainment. Third, as a Chinese classic, “The Analects of Confucius” plays an important part in spreading China’s voice and promoting Chinese culture. Integrating it into translation teaching can facilitate the mutual learning of world civilizations and invite the world to experience the eternal charm of Chinese classics. Therefore, integrating the English translation of “The Analects of Confucius” into university teaching is not only an effective way to cultivate more talents, but also a vivid practice of fulfilling the mission of cultural inheritance and exchange in the context of globalization.

## **3. Analysis of Pain Points and Difficulties in Contemporary College Students’ Classic Translation Practice**

To explore strategies for improving contemporary college students’ competence in translating Chinese classics into English, one must base on a profound understanding and analysis of the problems themselves. Against the background of contemporary higher education, college students, the potential subjects and future vital forces in the English translation of Chinese classics. They still

face multiple dimensions of pain points and difficulties in translation practice. These problems stem not only from the inherent particularities of classic texts themselves, but also from college students, this group's close connection with the cultural literacy and professional skills.

From the perspective of understanding both the source culture and the target culture, contemporary college students lack a solid literary background and insufficient in cross-cultural communication competence. In 2022, the study "Exploration of Strategies for Improving Contemporary College Students' Ability to Translate Ancient Chinese Poems into English" conducted a questionnaire survey among second-year undergraduates of Shanxi University of Science and Technology. The survey results showed that 73.73% of the students believed that "inadequate understanding of the content" was a major difficulty in English translation (Zhang and Wang, 2023). Undoubtedly, a profound understanding of both the source culture and the target culture is the foundation for the accurate English translation of classics. If the translator fails to clarify the connotation of the classic text and consider the target cultural context. It will inevitably affect the accuracy of the text translation. Moreover, the content of "The Analects of Confucius" itself is highly characterized by classical style with relatively abundant meanings. It contains a large number of ancient Chinese vocabulary and allusions, which places high demands on the translator's own cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication transformation ability.

From the perspective of translation techniques, contemporary college students lack practical training in translation strategies which obstacle them to establish a relatively sound translation strategy system. Scholar Yang Gang once mentioned in his article "A Brief Discussion on Several Issues in College Students' "English-to-Chinese Translation" Learning". Students often fail to choose properly between literal translation and free translation and have an inadequate grasp of vocabulary and syntactic collocations. Furthermore, as a complex text, translation of "The Analects of Confucius" often requires the coordinated application of multiple techniques. However, college students generally lack the awareness of "technique combination" and tend to rely on a single technique to solve all problems.

It can be seen from the above two aspects that because of insufficient cultural literacy and the lack of practical training in translation strategies, students ultimately appeals weak in integrating and applying which in turn leads to difficulties in achieving the comprehensive transformation between the source language and the target language. "The Analects of Confucius" contains abundant ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts so during the process of translation cultural barriers are inevitable which require translators to possess high cross-cultural communication competence and strong comprehensive application ability. Therefore, there are bound to be many difficulties in students' translation practice.

#### **4. Exploration of Specific Strategies Based on College Students' Difficulties in English Translation of "The Analects of Confucius"**

##### **4.1 Focus on Enhancing Cultural Literacy and Emphasize Bidirectional Cultural Construction**

Translators play a crucial role in translation practice. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German hermeneuticist and translation theorist, once pointed out that translators possess "re-creative ability". He argues that translation is not mechanical reproduction but a creative transformation carried out by translators based on their understanding of the original text (Schleiermacher, 2002). This implies that a translator's cultural literacy ability, particularly the depth of their understanding of their native culture can directly determines the quality of their "creative" transformation. Therefore, in the teaching of English translation of classics, it is crucial to focus on enhancing students' native cultural

literacy and guide them to pay attention to the bidirectional construction of Chinese and Western cultures.

From a teaching perspective, enhancing students' mastery and understanding of native traditional culture, allusions, and idioms is important for improving their ability to translate the classic "The Analects of Confucius" into English. For example, when translating Confucian cultural concepts in Chinese culture such as "filial piety", "benevolence" and "virtue". Ku Hung-ming translated as "the duty of a good son", "a moral life" and "the moral sentiment" in his translation (Ku, 1996). Students can avoid obstacles in the translation process only when they have a thorough understanding of these cultural concepts. Scholar Xiong Shudi conducted a research report in 2022, which focuses on courses of Chinese cultural classics education in mainland Chinese universities. This report shows that universities have significant autonomy in setting such courses. The focus of these courses is not prominent enough, the content relate to Chinese classics learning is relatively superficial and most Chinese classic courses featuring original texts are offered as electives or extended courses (Di, 2023). Therefore, in current teaching practice, universities should adjust and reform their training programs while attaching importance to the establishment of relevant courses and evaluation systems. It also need to build a solid framework for the study of Chinese cultural classics. Teachers should focus on integrating fine traditional Chinese culture into classrooms and guide students to conduct in-depth learning of relevant cultural knowledge before translation while helping them understand the creative background, historical origin and philosophical concepts of "The Analects of Confucius". Meanwhile, teachers should integrate the explanation of relevant translation cases by famous scholars into their teaching. In this way, it can cultivate students' awareness of cross-cultural communication and enhance their ability to transform texts when facing cultural differences between China and the West. As Table 1 shows:

*Table 1: Comparison of Different Translation Versions of The Analects of Confucius Sentences Between Ku Hung-ming and James Legge*

Original Sentence	Translation	
子曰：“君子不器。”	James Legge's Translation: The Master said," The accomplished scholar is not a utensil (Sun, 2008).	Ku Hung-ming's Translation: Confucius remarked," A wise man will not make himself into a mere machine fit only to do one kind of a job."(Ku, 2011)

In teaching, teachers should guide students to recognize that the character “器” (qì) in the phrase “君子不器” (A gentleman is not a mere utensil) does not only refer to “utensils” or “tools” as it typically does in Western cultural contexts. In the Chinese context, it also has the meaning of “specialized talent” or “functional ability.” There, “不器” means that a person with virtue and wisdom will not limit their value to a single dimension. However, their abilities are versatile and applicable in various contexts. Western culture has been profoundly influenced by the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, when referring to concepts such as machines and utensils, it tends to use the term “machine” more frequently. Considering the cultural differences between China and the West, Ku Hung-ming chose the term “machine” for the core word in his translation rather than “utensil” which James Legge used to convey the original meaning of “器具” (Li and Li, 2022). Ku Hung-ming's translation recognized these cultural background differences and integrated the translation strategy of supplementary explanation. This approach clearly conveys the original meaning of the text and enable foreign readers to further understand the implied connotation behind the term “machine”.

## 4.2 Strengthen the Teaching of Translation Strategies and Emphasize Practical Skill Training

John Robert Anderson's Skill Acquisition Theory states that the acquisition of any complex skill follows a linear developmental path of “cognition → connection → automation” (Anderson,

1982). Translation as a typical cognitive-motor compound skill, follows this acquisition logic in terms of how the skill is developed. Based on this developmental path, translation teaching can explore four link parts from a full-chain perspective—theoretical construction, case appreciation, practical exercise, and comparative reflection.

#### 4.2.1 Theoretical Construction

This stage is the foundation for improving translation competence and it also the cognitive link in this chain. The prerequisite for application is a proficient understanding and mastery of the basic skills in this field. This is especially correct for complex texts like “The Analects of Confucius”, which involve a wide range of complex translation strategies, knowledge, and skills. It also include specific methods such as literal translation and free translation, addition and omission in translation, syntactic restructuring, and cultural compensation. Students must be sufficiently familiar with these [skills and strategies] and able to initially construct their own knowledge and theoretical framework. Meanwhile, teachers should consciously and systematically impart relevant knowledge in translation teaching practice and encourage students to conduct independent learning and exploration after class, guiding them to initially build their own knowledge and theoretical framework and continuously refine it.

#### 4.2.2 Case Appreciation

This stage is a crucial step to consolidate cognition and foster connections. Teachers can guide students to jointly appreciate translation cases of key sentences in “The Analects of Confucius” by famous scholars and analyze the translation strategies behind them. Teachers should help students to learn the specific application of various translation techniques and guide them to reflect on and summarize these cases and strategies. As Table 2 shows:

Table 2: Ku Hung-ming's Interpretation of the Sentence in Chapter 1 of Book 1 of “The Analects of Confucius”

Original Sentence	Translation
例 子曰：学而时习之，不亦说乎？ 有朋自远方来，不亦乐乎？人不知而不愠，不亦君子乎？（第一篇第一章）	Ku Hung-ming's Translation: Confucius remarked,” It is indeed a great pleasure to acquire knowledge and, as you go on acquiring, to put into practice what you have acquired. A great pleasure still it is when friends of congenial minds come from afar to seek you because of your attainments. But he is truly a wise and good man who feels discomposure even when he is not noticed of men.” (Ku, 1898)

It can be seen from the example sentence that Ku Hung-ming's translation comprehensively applies multiple translation strategies such as syntactic restructuring, addition and supplementary translation, and free translation. First, in terms of syntactic structure, it adjusts the original text from an interrogative sentence form to a declarative sentence form, which is more understandable for foreign readers. In terms of specific word choice, Ku Hung-ming's translation takes cultural differences into account and appropriately apply addition and free translation to the concise and profound classical Chinese words in “The Analects of Confucius”. For example, regarding the term “时习” (shí xí), he supplemented its full meaning as “as you go on acquiring, to put into practice what you have acquired.” When translating the sentence “有朋自远方来” (yǒu péng zì yuǎn fāng lái), he applied free translation and added an explanation: “friends of congenial minds come from afar to seek you because of your attainments.”

In translation teaching practice, integrating the exploration of relevant cases plays an important part in strengthening students' understanding of translation strategies and basic knowledge. At the same time, it promotes the transformation of their skills.

#### 4.2.3 Practical Exercise

This stage is a crucial transition to strengthen connections and drive progress toward the goal of automation. Merrill Swain proposed the “Output Hypothesis” in 1985, which points out that input alone is insufficient for language acquisition. Learners must though language output to drive the transformation of their language competence from “natural use” to “accurate use” (Swain, 1985). In translation practice, teachers should encourage and guide students to conduct practical training on

key sentences from The Analects of Confucius. Students then attempt to translate selected passages based on their own theoretical framework and understanding, which helps them further identify their sticking points and difficulties. Students attempting to translate based on what they have learned is exactly the practice of the “Output Hypothesis”: output exposes their shortcomings in language conversion and cultural communication. Therefore it can triggering in-depth attention to and reflection on difficult issue.

### Comparative Reflection

This stage focuses on further improving students’ competence in translating Chinese classics into English through self-examination and reflection, and facilitating their final transition toward achieving the goal of automation. In teaching practice, teachers should guide students to conduct a comparative analysis of their own practical translation results and the translations by famous scholars. Through comparative learning, students can resolve difficulties and refine their own translation strategies. Teachers can guide students to reflect following a three-step approach: “identify differences → analyze the reasons behind them and evaluate the actual textual presentation effects → explore ways to optimize”. Next, this paper takes the sentences from Chapter 3 of Book 1 of “The Analects of Confucius” as an example for detailed analysis. As Table 3 shows:

*Table 3: Comparison Between Students’ Translations and Xu Yuanchong’s Translations of the Same Sentence from The Analects of Confucius*

Original Sentence	Translation	
子曰：巧言令色，鲜矣仁！（第一篇第三章）	Students’ Translation: Confucius said:” A man who likes to say rhetoric is not a virtuous people.”	Xu Yuanchong’s Translation: ‘A good man, said the Master,’ would rarely say what he does not believe, or pretend to appear better than he is.’(Xu, 2005)

The student’s translation generally clarify the main idea of the original text and uses a clause to connect the two parts. However, it still has problems such as incomplete meaning expression and rigid word choice. In contrast, Mr. Xu’s translation is more in line with the foreign language context and more understandable. Breaking away from traditional structural paradigms, he integrates “子曰” into the sentence, making the overall sentence structure more flexible. Meanwhile, to help foreign readers understand the specific connotations of the text, he adopted daily expressions and broke down classical Chinese words into simpler parts for translation. This approach made the overall language style concise and accessible and become easier to spread. Under the guidance of teachers, students conduct comparative analysis following the above approach. They can learn from the handling methods of renowned translators and continuously refine their own translation strategies. This process helps them develop more solid translation competence.

### 4.3 Refining Comprehensive Transformation Competence and Adjusting Translation Approaches and Styles

Enhancing cultural literacy and intensifying skill training lay the foundation of students’ English translation competence. However, to fully achieve the transition from the source language to the target language, students also need to possess comprehensive transformation and application capabilities. They also need to learn how flexibly adjust their translation approaches and styles based on the context and translation purposes.

In translation teaching practice, teachers should guide students to analyze such comprehensive translation cases by renowned translators, gain insight into the reasons behind them, and encourage students to independently explore more suitable translation approaches in the current context. As Table 4 shows:

*Table 4: Ku Hung-ming’s Translations of Sentences from The Analects of Confucius-Ba Yi*

Original Sentence	Translation
子闻之，曰：“成事不说，遂事不谏，既往不咎。”（《论语·八佾》 第三）	Ku Hung-ming’s Translation:” It is useless to speak of a thing that is done; to change a course that is begun; or to blame what is past and gone.”(Ku, 1996)

In this translation case, Mr. Ku Hung-ming comprehensively considered the characteristics of both China and the West. He flexibly applied a variety of translation techniques and ultimately achieved the goal of spreading the excellent traditional Chinese culture while ensuring understanding among

foreign readers. On the basis of a profound understanding of the original text's connotations, Ku's translation disassembles and expands the concise and condensed Chinese expressions. It converts them into expressions easily for foreign readers to understand through free translation and supplementary translation. For example, in handling the phrases “成事” (chéngshì), “遂事” (suìshì), and “既往” (jìwǎng) in the sentence, Mr. Ku Hung-ming converted them into “thing that is begun”, “course that is begun”, and “what is past and gone” respectively, thereby helping foreign readers grasp the connotations. Meanwhile, English emphasizes the principle of end weight (placing important information at the end of a sentence). Ku's translation adjusted the sentence structure by adopting a “formal subject + postpositive infinitive” structure. Therefore it can highlight the three core points intended to be conveyed in the Chinese context. At the same time, considering the original text's characteristics of neat, rhythmic short sentences, Ku's translation also intentionally used similar and parallel infinitive structures. This deliberate choice aimed to recreate the sense of rhythm and momentum of the original Chinese sentences. Mr. Ku Hung-ming's translation of this sentence is a model of comprehensive and integrated application. It holds significant significance for exploring the external translation strategies of excellent traditional culture (Zhang and Zhu, 2025). In teaching, guiding students to analyze such comprehensive cases helps improve their comprehensive translation competence and develop a translation style that fits the translation context.

## 5. Conclusion

Against the background of the surging global tide and increasingly in-depth cultural exchanges, “The Analects of Confucius” as a model for spreading China's fine traditional culture plays an increasingly important role. Only by attaching great importance to translation teaching practice in higher education, formulating improvement strategies from a full-chain perspective, and enhancing students' translation competence from three dimensions, local cultural construction, integration of skill training, and improvement of cross-cultural communication ability can we fundamentally enhance their competence in translating classical Chinese texts into English. This will enable us to better promote excellent classical works represented by The Analects of Confucius to the world, allowing the world to hear China's voice and witness China's culture.

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