

# **Training Validity of Project-based Translator Competence: A Case Study of China Three Gorges University**

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## **Abstract**

Compared with the traditional way of cultivating translational competence, the project-based translator competence training mode highlights the interaction between translator's cognitive space and the translational environment in the problem-solving process, thus enjoys certain theoretical preferences among researches. However, with the help of Multidimensional Quality Metrics (MQM), based on sampling, tagging and analysis of bilingual data left by China Three Gorges University (CTGU) students who have participated in China-Yichang English Web Site Translation Project, this paper finds that project-based training mode can partly improve participants' translation quality, cross-culture communication ability and professionalism, but has less or even negative effect upon less-motivated students and cannot improve participants' bilingual competence and translation skills. To change this situation, more efforts should be made to differentiate various developing stages of translator competence and provide timely help for those under heavy pressure.

**Keywords:** Translator competence; Translational competence; MQM evaluation system

## **1. Introduction**

The cultivation of high-level and practice-oriented translators has always been the goal of many professional translation training programs at the post graduated level. Since 1990s, researchers in this field have gradually shifted their attentions from "naturalistic, multi-componential, minimalist and cognitive" (Li, 2011, p 46) modes of developing translation competence to translator competence, and began to explore effective training ways by integrating environment stimulation with translators' cognition improvement. Kussmaul (1995), Mackenzie & Nieminen (1997) and Risku(2002) think that the cultivation of translator competence should be carried out under teacher's guidance in real or nearly real translation practice and tasks. Starting from a social constructivist perspective, Kiraly proposes that translation teaching would better to be re-oriented "from practice to praxis" (2003, p 20) in scaffolded, collaborative and authentic project-work setting, which "will not only confirm the inestimable value of such projects for the development of translator competence, but will also shed light on the cognitive and social aspects of the translation process itself" (2005, p 1099). Inspired by these propositions, many Chinese scholars start to apply social constructivism actively to MTI (Master of Translation and interpreting) program. They not only advocate that "the cultivation of translator competence must be proceeded by students' active involvement in authentic translation setting and subsequent construction of their knowledge structure in task-completing process"(Mo et al. 2015, p 69) , but also put forward seemingly applicable teaching modes based on authentic project (Wang & Bi, 2008) and translator competence cultivating modes supported by task-based reading and group discussion, skills-based translation workshop and project-based translation practice (Tao, 2012). Compared with traditional ways of cultivating translation

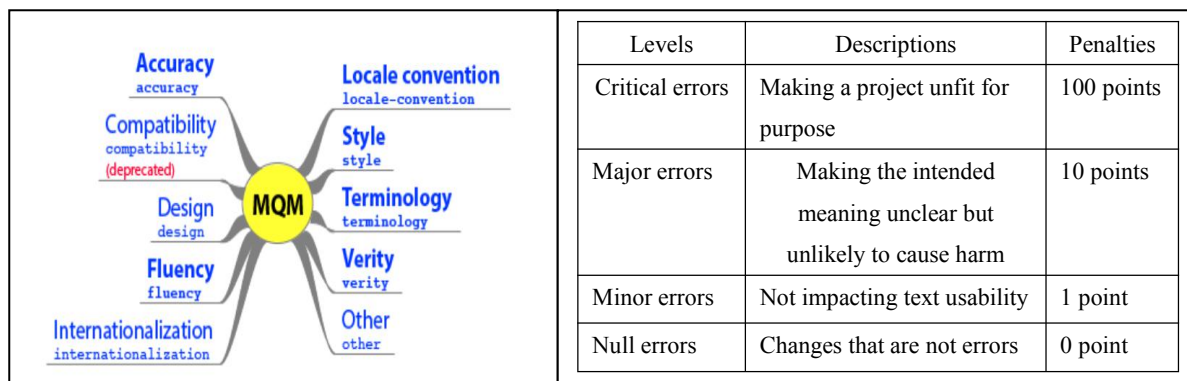
competence, project-based modes can partly overcome the stereotyped disadvantages of rigid objectification, abstraction and idealization in old modes. But can it really improve participants' translator competence effectively and "meet the training demands of professional translator in MTI education" at last (Yu & Zhang 2013, p 44)? If so, how can it be examined or measured on actual performances of individual translator or translator group(s)? To answer these questions, with the help of Multidimensional Quality Metrics (MQM) and real bilingual translation data left by China Three Gorges University (CTGU) students who have participated in China-Yichang English Web Site Translation Project since 2014, this paper attempts to explore the influence of project upon translator competence training, and offer some help for MTI education in the future.

## 2. Translator Competence and MQM Evaluation System

The crucial aspect in "translator competence", as the phrase itself indicates, dwells in competence ---"the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills but also practical skills, as well as social and behavior components such as attitudes, emotions, and values and motivations" (Rychen, 2003, p 3). Translator competence, therefore, can be regarded as a dynamic structure immersed in a cognitive space continuously shaped by translational environment, or as advanced thinking skills formed in the translational problem-solving process. In terms of scope, it goes far beyond the limits of bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, psycho-physiological, strategic competence and knowledge about translation, the six sub-competences described by the famous Spanish PACTE group when defining the concept of translation competence (2005, pp 69-73). When describing the difference between translation competence and translator competence, Kiraly himself also confirms that translator competence "does not primarily refer to knowing the correct translations for words, sentences or even texts" but "knowing how to work co-operatively within the various overlapping communities of translators and subject matter experts to accomplish work collaboratively; to appropriate knowledge, norms and conventions; and to contribute to the evolving conversation that constitutes those communities" (2000, pp 13-14). Later, based on Kiraly's ideas, Tao gives a further detailed explanation about the implications of translator competence as communicative competence, professional competence, and translational competence with several sub-categories in each branch such as teamwork with other translators, collaborative learning, expertise, professionalism, knowledge about the market, linguistic sub-competence, instrumental sub-competence etc. (2012, p 295). All of these provide a map of translator competence and offer frameworks for researchers to face the challenge of assessing participants' translator competence. But how?

Since translator competence is a set of advanced thinking skills formed in the problem-solving process and a dynamic structure built in the intangible subjective world, it is nearly impossible to describe exactly what happens in the "black box", but possible to set several crucial evaluative components according to the specific translation task and observe how participants "perform" in the authentic setting. Though the cognitive progress in the translator's mind cannot be examined directly at present, the final result of interaction between environment stimulation with translators' cognitive improvement---the translated text can be studied. This is the place where MQM can play its effective role in translator competence evaluation. Different from translation quality assessment (TQA) in ivory tower which usually take TQA as "the heart of any theory of translation" such as psycho-social, response-based, text and discourse-oriented approaches etc (House, 2015, p 1), MQM, as one of the three major evaluation systems in translation industry, is developed by Arle Lommel and his colleagues at the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence on the basis of customer needs, translation error typologies, post-editing and manual translation comparison. Among these components, translation error typology is the crucial one, which follows the principles of a flexible catalogue of error type, compatibility with

existing specifications and tools, a hierarchical and specifications-based approach (Lommel, 2015, pp 113-114). Embraced by a functionalist perspective and error severities and weights, the whole system is composed of 8 dimensions (see figure 1)<sup>1</sup>, which is further divided into 4 hierarchies and 114 evaluating issues.



**Figure 1 Eight Dimensions, Error Severity Levels and Default Penalties of MQM (Lommel, 2015, p 117)**

According to the hierarchical list of issue types in MQM, all the dimensions are mainly addressing the important components of translator competence. For instance, “accuracy” and “fluency” in DQM, which deal with “the relationship of meanings conveyed by the source and target content text” and “linguistic well-formedness of the content” such as improper exact TM match, mistranslation, coherence etc, cover the most important parts of translational competence described by Tao such as linguistic sub-competence, thinking sub-competence and instrumental sub-competence etc. Meanwhile, “design”, “internationalization” and “locale convention” stress the accepting possibilities and suitability of text in the target system, which calls forth translators’ responsibility, teamwork collaborative learning, and knowledge about the markets etc., covering the crossing points of communicative competence and professional competence in Tao’s terms. All of these suggest that MQM can basically satisfy researcher’s demand to evaluate translator competence in general, which is further strengthened by its consideration of how severe the error types are, how important they are for the task at hand and how many points would be deducted from the total sum. In default condition, evaluator just takes each error, multiplies it by severity value and its weight to general penalty points, then gets the final score by following the formula “Score = 1 – Penalties/Wordcount”. (Lommel, 2015, p 117). Though this type of score is an indicator of TQA, it also mirrors the translator competence of participants in one task. If this evaluation process is extended to tens, even hundred times of translating within one or more project running for weeks, months and years, the final result with different scores accumulated will lead to a statistically detailed description of translator competence development. This is one of strong points in MQM.

### 3. Application of MQM in Testing Validity of Project-based Translator Competence among CTGU Students

#### 3.1 Project, Participants and Material

From the discussion above, we can find that the key point in project-based translator competence cultivation is to improve participants’ communicative competence, professional competence and translational competence in authentic settings. Therefore, the testing of its validity is heavily dependent upon the project, participants and translational material they produced.

The project to be discussed in this paper, “China-Yichang English Web Site Translation Project”, was

<sup>1</sup> A detailed explanation can be found at <http://www.qt21.eu/mqm-definition/issues-list-2015-12-30.html>

initiated in January, 2012 and continues to run till today with Yichang Municipal Government as the Party A who requests that, in the coming 10 years, Party B, the Translation Center of CTGU, should provide all-around translation services for the China-Yichang English Web Site with faithful, accurate and readable translations, and should complete five rounds of translating tasks every week at least for the purpose of publicizing the local culture of Yichang City and re-shaping its international image. To meet the demands of Yichang Municipal Government and keep the smooth running of this project, the Translation Center has set up a large collaborative translation team, with MTI student as the main body and experienced translation teacher as scaffolding force in the light of social constructivist mode. All students are separated into several groups with 2-4 members after they pass the selective examination. When completing their task each time with translation tools such as SDL Trados and Wordfast after an intensive discussion among group members, they will submit their translation to teacher who usually offer help at various translation workshop at first stage, and will check, revise and polish students' translation, and then submit it to English editor who is responsible for the distribution of translation task and the quality of final translation and will submit it again to the foreign publicity expert recommended by Yichang Municipal Government for news issuing on website. If any problem is spotted at any stage, it will be fed back for improvement. After one year's operation, the Translation Center will collect all translational materials at various stages, especially the ones left by MTI students who will leave the team because of graduation and new job-hunting, and recruit new members for a fresh round of translation.

### 3.2 Sampling and Tagging of Research Data

The translational materials left by MTI students offer a chance for us to examine the expanding process of translator competence. However, due to 8 years of running and 98 MTI students' participation in the "China-Yichang English Web Site Translation Project", the accumulated bilingual materials have exceeded 8,000,000 words, covering a wide area of politics, economics, culture and tourism etc. In view of the large number of the project participants, it is impossible to trace every student's translator competence development. Hence, we just sample randomly 5 groups of students guided by different teachers as the investigating objects. The basic information is showed as the figure below:

Group Number	Participants	Working Period	Task accepted	Acting as Chief Translator	Total Translation (word as unit)	
					Individual	Group
1	Student A	From Sep. 2017 to Aug. 2018	51 times	28 times	33613	67427
	Student B	From Sep. 2017 to Aug. 2018		23 times	33814	
2	Student C	From Sep. 2016 to Aug. 2017	45 times	14 times	11733	34948
	Student D	From Sep. 2016 to Aug. 2017		14 times	12174	
	Student E	From Sep. 2016 to Aug. 2016		17 times	10941	
3	Student F	From Sep. 2015 to Aug. 2016	44 times	22 times	23744	41385
	Student G	From Sep. 2015 to Aug. 2016		22 times	17641	
4	Student H	From Sep. 2014 to Aug. 2015	60 times	16 times	15263	60181
	Student I	From Sep. 2014 to Aug. 2015		17 times	16994	
	Student J	From Sep. 2014 to Aug. 2015		11 times	9601	
	Student K	From Sep. 2014 to Aug. 2015		16 times	18323	
5	Student L	From Sep. 2013 to Aug. 2014	83 times	31 times	42508	99771
	Student M	From Sep. 2013 to Aug. 2014		29 times	32061	
	Student N	From Sep. 2013 to Aug. 2014		23 times	25202	

**Figure 2 Basic Information of Random sampling**

To investigate the details of translator competence changes among 5 groups of students, we try to tag all translation errors in sampled data according to MQM specifications: use "[1]" to symbolize the "accuracy" error in MQM, use "[2]" to correspond to "design" error, "[3]" to "fluency", "[4]" to "internationalization", "[5]" to "locale convention", "[6]" to "style", "[7]" to "terminology", "[8]" to "verity", "1" to "critical error", "2" to "major error", "3" to "minor error" and "4" to "null error". Taking the 308-words translation completed on June 11th, 2018 as an example, all translation errors spotted by teachers, English editor and foreign publicity expert can be tagged as the following:

Segment ID	Segment status	Source segment	Target segment	
1	Translated (0%)	1.玉泉山风景名胜區 (4A 级)	Yuquan Mountain Scenic Spot (4A Class) [7]3	删除的内容: Level
2	Translated (0%)	国家森林公园、省级风景名胜區。	It is a National Forest Park and provincial scenic spot. [3]3	
3	Translated (0%)	位于当阳市中部，距当阳城区 12 公里，是一处人文景观与自然景观相结合的综合性景区。	Situated at the middle part of Dangyang and 12 kilometers away from its urban area, Yuquan Mountain Scenic Spot is a comprehensive scenic spot integrating cultural landscape and natural landscape into a whole.	
4	Translated (0%)	玉泉山方圆 69 平方公里，以森林景观为基础，宗教文物为特色，三国遗迹为依托，素有“三楚名山”称誉。	Known as "Famous Mountain in Three Chus (Western Chu, Eastern Chu and Southern Chu)" [1]2, Yuquan Mountain is characterized by religious relics, forest landscape and relics in the Three Kingdoms Period, covering 69 square kilometers.	删除的内容: Famous Mountain 删除的内容: and rested on
5	Translated (0%)	景区内山水奇特，花木珍稀，气候宜人，文化深厚，拥有“植物三宝”、“文物三宝”、“神秘三怪”等旅游精品，主要景观有覆船山、珍珠泉、关公显圣处、五百罗汉堂、舍利宫、北宋铁塔、隋代铁镬、吴道子作观音像、隋代千瓣莲、唐代银杏、明代月桂、仙人掌茶等 20 多个。	With unique mountains and rivers, rare plants, pleasant climate and profound culture, this scenic spot boasts of [1]3 myriads of high-quality tourism products such as "Three Treasures of Plants", "Three Treasures of Cultural Relics" and "Three Mysterious and Strange Things". There are more than 20 main landscapes, including the Fuchuan Mountain, the Pearl Spring, the Apparition Site of Guangong, the Hall of 500 Arhats, the Sarira Palace, the Iron Pagoda in the Northern Song Dynasty, the Iron Wok in Sui Dynasty, the Bodhisattva Pictured by Wudaozi (a famous artist in Tang Dynasty), the Lotus with Thousands of Petals, the Gingkos in Tang Dynasty, the Monthly-flowered Osmanthus in Ming Dynasty and Cactus Tea, etc. [3]3*11	删除的内容: boasts 删除的内容: T 删除的内容: P
6	Translated (0%)	玉泉寺为智者道场，天台宗祖庭之一，曾与栖霞、灵岩、天台并称为“天下丛林四绝”，是全国重点文物保护单位 and 对外开放的重要宗教文物场所。	As the ashram of wise men and one of the ancestral temples of Tiantai Sect, Yuquan Temple was renowned as one of "the Four Wonders of the Jungle [3]3 in the World" together with Qixia Temple, Lingyan Temple and Tiantai Temple. It is a key cultural relic site under the state protection and a major religious relic place open to the public.	删除的内容: J
7	Translated (0%)	内有北宋铁塔、隋代铁镬、唐代观音像等文物古迹，有月月桂、并蒂莲、银杏等奇花异木。	Inside the temple are some cultural relics such as Iron Pagoda in the Northern Song Dynasty, Iron Wok in Sui Dynasty and Bodhisattva in Tang Dynasty and rare plants like Monthly-flowered Osmanthus, Lotus with Thousands of Petals, Gingko, etc.	

Figure 3 Tagging of a Sampled Text

In the picture above, the tag combination "[7] 3" means that this student has committed one "minor" error in "terminology", therefore losing 1 point; "[3] 3" signifies a "minor" error in "fluency", losing 1 points; "[3]3\*11" represents 11 "minor" errors in "fluency", losing 11 points; "[1]2" represents 1 "major" mistake in "accuracy", losing 10 points. With focus on error typologies and frequency, the entire text can be simplified to a string of characters as "[7] 3, [3] 3, [1] 2, [1] 3, [3] 3 \*11, [3] 3, [3] 3, [3] 3". According to the penalty system of MQM, it can be found that this student mainly errors in "fluency", causing a penalty 27 points. Using MQM evaluating formula "Score = 1 - penalties/wordcount", we can get the value of TQA as 0.913 points. If applying this method to all sampled data, after a careful calculation and tabulation at last, we get the following figures to depict the changing process of students' translator competence (TC), error types, and error frequency.

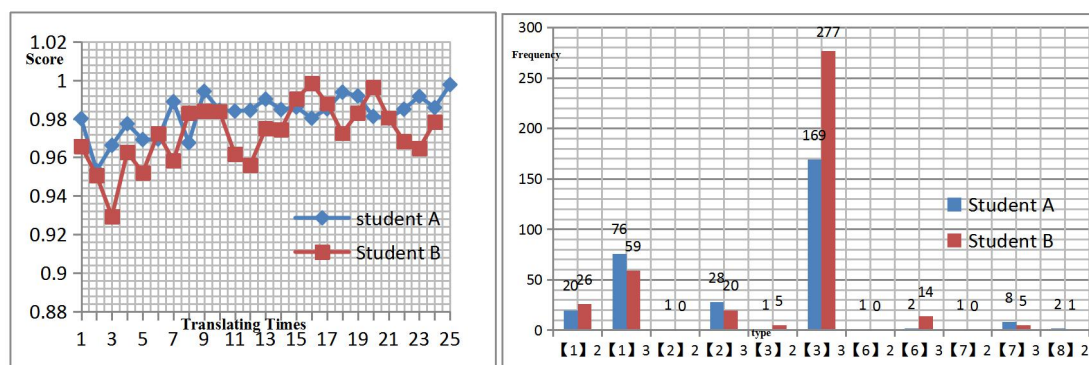


Figure 4 TC Development, Error Types and Frequencies of Group 1

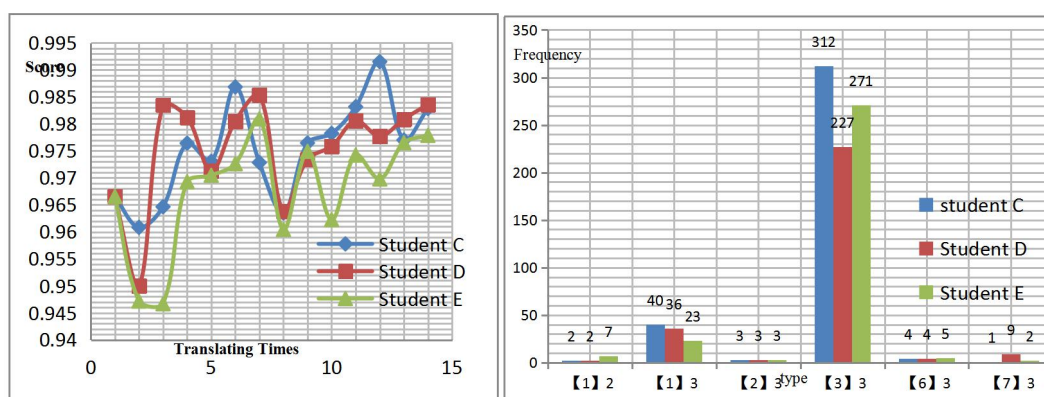


Figure 5 TC Development, Error Types and Frequencies of Group 2

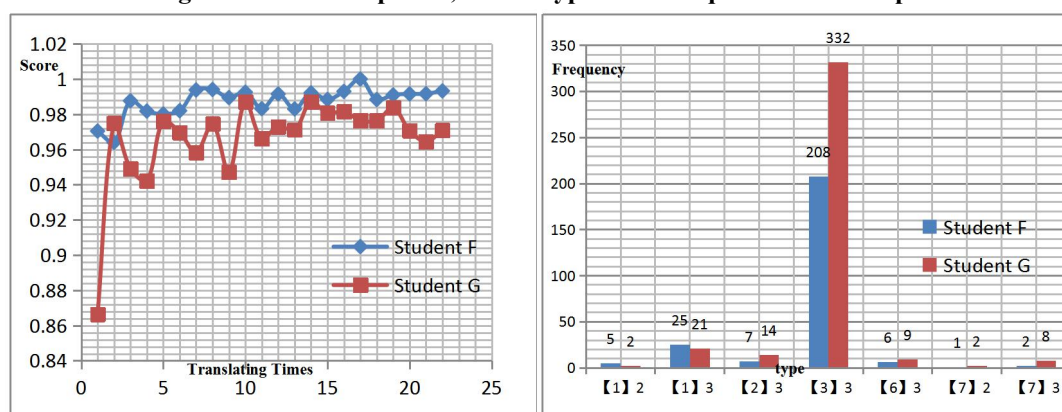


Figure 6 TC Development, Error Types and Frequencies of Group 3

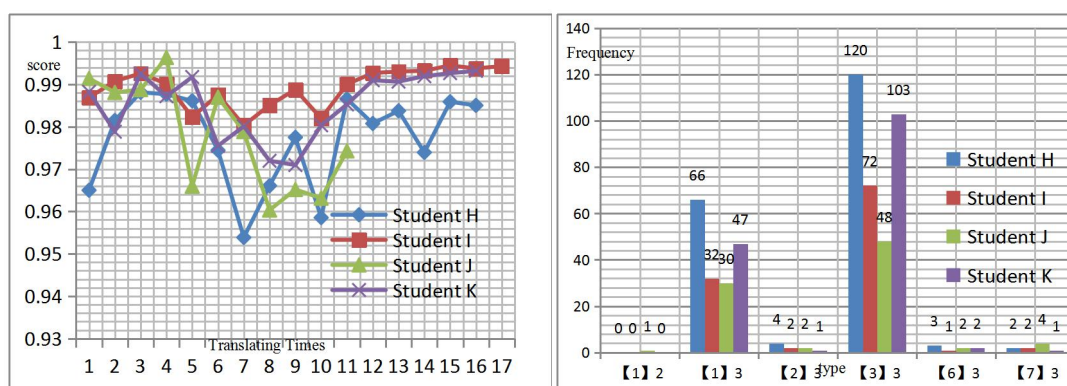


Figure 7 TC Development, Error Types and Frequencies of Group 4

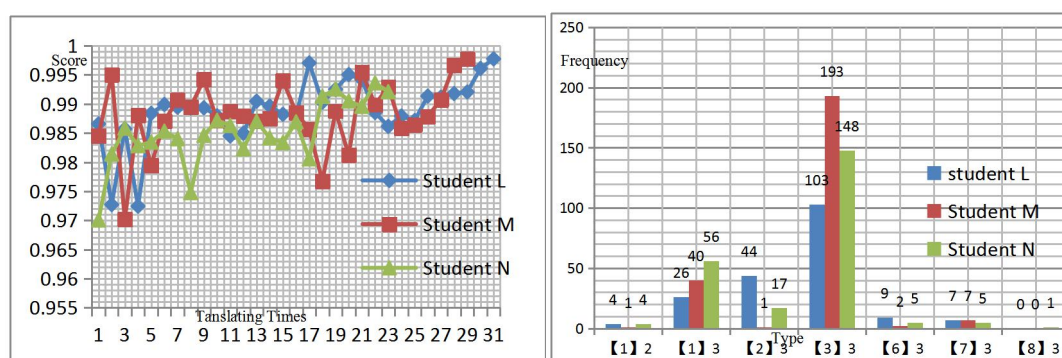


Figure 8 TC Development, Error Types and Frequencies of Group 5

### 3.3 Analyzing and Findings

From the line charts in figure 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, we can find that 78.57% of the students (11 among 14) maintain an undulant ascending trajectory in general, which proves that an authentic project-based environment can really improve most participants' translator competence. At the very beginning, 92% of the students start well with an average score of 0.964 because all of them have a good translation foundations and have passed the selective examination hosted by the Translation Center. However, with project running on, they face two or more drops or setbacks consecutively, one at the second or third time of translating due to "unfamiliarity with the operational rules and collaborative environment posed the project", another in the middle of the project due to "the application of Trados and Wordfast in translating activity" as we are informed by the participants in private interviews. Fortunately, the majorities of them can overcome these difficulties and co-operate well with group members, achieving an average ending score of 0.9852, an improvement of 2.21% at last. Examining the bar charts in figure 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, we can further discover that most students can avoid the "[4]" type of "internationalization" error, the "[5]" type of "locale convention" error, and the "1" type of "critical" error, seldom err in the "[2]" types of "design", "[6]" types of "style", "[7]" types of "terminology", "[8]" types of "verity". This indicates that an authentic project-based environment can partly improve participants' communicative competence, professional competence and translational competence, because "internationalization", "local convention" and "design" etc. demand for a teamwork to look for resources, to be acquainted with target system conventions and to labor creatively while observing the professional ethics.

Nevertheless, this general rising tendency does not deny discrepancies between different groups and among group members. In the actual task assignment process, the English editor, who is responsible for actual management in this project, does not distribute equally among groups, but follows a dynamic quality-based mechanism, which means that groups who translate with good quality and high efficiency are more likely to get more training opportunities. After receiving tasks, under the guidance of translation teachers, students with stronger organizational skills and higher willingness to translate are more likely to act as chief translators than others who remain as coordinators. Therefore, just as what has been revealed in figure 3, the frequency of task accepted and acting as chief translator between different groups and among group members are totally different, with group 5 and student L performing the best, and students in group 2 and 4 getting less chance to translate individually. This mechanism actually influences the motivation and psycho-physiological aspect of the participants. Those who translate more can build up their confidence in an earlier stage, and are much steadier in their performance, hence displaying a narrow amplitude spectrum in their way of progress such as student A in group 1, student C and D in group 2, student F in group 3. Those who translate less efficiently are prone to be less-motivated and face the challenge of anxiety. If translation teachers, who are responsible for the task-division and text revision among group members, cannot handle well the relationship between translation quality and efficiency, and offer timely help for those under pressure, the whole group will be trapped in vicious circle of low motivation, low efficiency, or low translation quality, which usually results in a big fluctuation even down-grade in their performance such as student J and B, and quit of the project in advance such as student B, J and N. When asked why quitted so early in a private interview, these three students either said frankly that they did not like this competitive way of translating, or admitted that they joined the project just out of curiosity, which was overrun by a sense of boring and even horror by the thought of becoming a professional translator in the future.

There is another overt fact calling for researchers' attention---the frequent error occurrence of "[1]" and "[3]" types of error in bar charts of figure 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, which has become an obstacle hindering the further improvement of student's translator competence. For instance, in group 1 student A has made 169 times of "[3] 3" errors, accounting for 55% of the whole, 96 times of "[1]3" and "[1]2" types, accounting for 31% of the

whole. In group 2, student E has made 271 times of “[3]3” errors, accounting for 87% of the whole, and [1] 3 errors 23 times, accounting for 7%. Even for the best student L, the “[3]3” type of errors have reached 193, accounting for 53% of the total, and “[1]3” type of errors have gotten to 26 times, accounting for 13% of the whole. According to the specifications of MQM, errors in “influence” ([3] type) mainly cover 18 issues such as coherence, cohesion, grammar, duplication, spelling, typography etc.; the errors in the category of “accuracy” ([1] type) includes 7 issues such as mistranslation, over-translation, under-translation etc. The frequent appearance of [3] and [1] type of errors indicates that those students either could not fully re-express the content of the source language due to insufficient target language training, or could not fully understand the original message accurately, and unable to use appropriate translation skills to convey the message. This seems to contradict with the assumption held by the scholar who advocates that an authentic translation project “can improve participant’s translator competence effectively and meet the training demands of professional translator in MTI Education” (Yu & Zhang, 2013, p 44). If a translator could not perfect his bilingual competence and improve his translating skills, how can he become a professional translator? The solution of this problem does not lie in the translation project itself, but outside of it, such as setting up some translation-skill training course and literacy improvement course for those who are willing to learn and make up their disadvantages.

## 4. Conclusion

Compared with the traditional way of cultivating translation competence, the project-based translator competence mode is theoretically more effective in its forming a dynamic cognitive structure or advance thinking skills of translation, because it pays more attention to the interaction between the translator's cognitive space and the real translational environment. However, from this practical case study of CTGU students in light of MQM frame, it is found that an authentic project can only partly change most participant’s translation quality, improve their communicative competence, professional competence and translational competence in general, but has little or even negative effect upon a small part of less-motivated students, resulting in different translational performances. Meanwhile, it has also been found in this study that a project-based mode itself has little influence upon the cultivation of bilingual competence and improvement of translation skills, the core of traditional translational competence which has been internalized in the earlier language training process before joining the post-graduate program. To improve students’ translator competence effectively, it will be more reasonable to differentiate various stages of translator competence development. For those who are highly motivated in professional translator training, a project-based mode would be an ideal one. However, for those who are less-motivated or insufficiently-prepared, a traditional way of fostering will be more effective.

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