
Enhancing Discipline-Specific Translation Competence: A Comparative Analysis on the Master of Translation and Interpreting Curriculum among Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Translation is essential for effective communication among nations with diverse languages. In the context of globalization, it acts as a powerful tool for spreading information, promoting exchanges, and driving progress in global politics, economy, culture, science, technology, and education. In order to cultivate high-level, application-oriented, and professional translation talents to meet the needs of translation in different areas of expertise, Chinese universities have successively established Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) programs since 2007. As the core of MTI programs, the MTI curriculum plays a vital role in achieving this goal. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the MTI curriculum among five different types of Chinese universities, examining their instructional objectives, course credits and structure, and

course content. Through qualitative comparative analysis, the study identifies the strengths and challenges of MTI curriculum and offers recommendations for improvement. The findings indicate significant differences in curriculum structure among these five Chinese universities. A common shortfall is the insufficient inclusion of specialized translation courses within compulsory offerings, limiting the development of students' translation competence in specific disciplines. To address this gap and better fulfill the objective of cultivating versatile translation talents, augmenting specialized translation courses within compulsory courses is necessary. The findings have significant implications for MTI students, teachers, researchers, and curriculum reformers. It provides valuable insights for enhancing translation education and meeting the evolving demands of the translation industry.

Keywords: translation, MTI, curriculum, Chinese universities, translation competence

1. Introduction

Translation is a significant tool in communication as it serves as a bridge to enable the exchange of ideas and information across different cultures. China for example attaches importance to translation, expecting to bring Chinese culture, science, and technology to other countries. Each industry needs versatile translation talents. To send more translation talents to every sector, the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) was approved by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council of China in 2007 (Ma, 2017). MTI cultivates translation talents with strong language competence, proficient translation skills, and broad knowledge, who are competent for advanced translation work required in different professional fields (Mu, 2020).

Based on the training goals of MTI, the curriculum should help MTI students better develop their translation competence, especially discipline-specific translation competence, to provide versatile translation talents to various translation-related industries. However, through the comparison between the MTI curriculum at 20 Chinese polytechnic universities and the recruitment criteria for 1,096 translation jobs over the past two years, Xu et al. (2022) find that many MTI students do not meet the demands of the translation industry, and only a small fraction go on to work as translators after graduation, which suggests MTI students may not possess translation competence to deal with translation work in real practice. This suggests that the MTI curriculum in Chinese universities has its shortcomings and does not effectively develop students' discipline-specific translation competence.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the strengths and challenges of the MTI curriculum by comparing the curriculum from instructional objectives, course credits, course structure, and course content among five different universities in China. Some guidelines are also proposed to improve the MTI curriculum.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Curriculum

The term "curriculum" originates from the Latin word "currere", meaning "to run" or "to race," and historically referred to the course of actions and experiences that help children mature into

adults. Over time, the concept has evolved to include a wide range of educational practices and ideas. In his seminal work “Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction” (1949), Ralph W. Tyler defined curriculum as all the learning experiences planned and directed by schools to achieve their educational goals. Taba (1962) affirmed and refined Tyler’s definition of curriculum, describing curriculum as a learning plan that includes aims, specific objectives, the selection and organization of course content, and specific teaching and learning strategies. Zais (1976) viewed curriculum as a written plan of studies that outlines learning content, teaching and learning activities, learning outcomes, and assessment methods. David Pratt (1994) described it as an organized set of formal education and training intentions designed to bring about specific changes in learners. Greeno et al. (1996) defined curriculum as a set of instructional objectives and activities planned to facilitate students’ development toward those objectives. In higher education, curriculum is seen as a holistic, dynamic process that includes content, learning experiences, the educational environment, and interactions among students and faculty. Barnett and Coate (2005) argue that curriculum should foster personal and professional growth, integrating knowledge, skills, and values.

In translation studies, the curriculum encompasses the specific knowledge and skills required for professional translation and interpreting. This includes linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, subject-specific expertise, and practical translation techniques (González Davies, 2004). Components of translation curriculum include course content, practical training, and technological tools essential for modern translation practice (Pym, 2013). MTI programs often adopt an integrated curriculum approach, combining theoretical instruction with practical application to help students develop a comprehensive understanding of the translation process and the skills needed for professional practice. Many MTI programs follow a competence-based framework, aiming to develop specific competencies such as linguistic, cultural, thematic, research, and technological skills (Kelly, 2005). One of the key challenges in translation curriculum design is balancing theory and practice, ensuring that curricula provide a solid theoretical foundation while offering ample opportunities for practical application (Király, 2000). Another challenge is keeping up with evolving industry needs, necessitating flexible and responsive curriculum design to prepare graduates for the professional landscape (Gouadec, 2007).

2.2 Past Studies on MTI Curriculum in China

Since its establishment in 2007, the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) has emerged as one of the most rapidly expanding professional degrees in China. This swift growth has spurred extensive research on various aspects of MTI curriculum, with a particular emphasis on the courses offered. Among these studies, investigations into course structure and content are especially prominent. Surveys assessing student satisfaction with MTI courses have revealed that the courses tend to be overly theoretical and suffer from poor time management. As a result, some researchers have suggested better planning of course schedules (Yang, 2019) and the introduction of more practical, market-driven courses (Liu, 2020). Additionally, Xiong (2020) identified a mismatch between certain MTI courses and student needs, recommending that the curriculum be more aligned with both student and market demands. Furthermore, some scholars have pointed out that the MTI curriculum is highly uniform and lacks distinctiveness.

To address this, they have proposed tailoring the MTI courses to reflect the unique characteristics of individual schools or regions. Examples include integrating aerospace content into MTI courses (Gao & Zhu, 2020), incorporating a science and engineering focus in polytechnic schools (Jiang & Chen, 2017), and aligning courses with local cultural and tourism features in Gansu province (Cao & Jin, 2016). Moreover, some Chinese researchers have sought to identify issues within the MTI curriculum by comparing programs across different regions or countries and have offered suggestions for improvement. Zeng (2017) compared the MTI training models in mainland China and Taiwan, finding a disconnect between theory and practice, and that the proportion of compulsory courses was relatively low. To address these concerns, the researcher has suggested revising course design and balancing the relationship between compulsory and elective courses.

The review above reveals a lack of qualitative comparative studies focused on specific instructional objectives, course content, and their impact on students' translation competence in previous studies. This indicates that research on how specific course designs can effectively develop students' translation competence in the specialized disciplines—especially regarding the variations and outcomes of these designs across different types of universities—is still relatively scarce. Therefore, this study fills the gap in previous research by thoroughly exploring how MTI curriculum enhances students' discipline-specific translation competence, with particular emphasis on the effectiveness and impact of such course designs across various types of universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

This study employs the qualitative-comparative analysis (Ragin, 1984) to compare the current MTI curriculum in five different types of universities in China: Hunan University, Shanghai International Studies University, Beijing Normal University, Guilin University of Technology, and Sichuan Agricultural University. The criteria for data selection are elaborated in section 3.2.

The research method utilized in this study is document review. Documents related to the programs and curriculum plans are obtained from the official websites of these five universities.

The comparison aims to recognize the strengths and common challenges of the MTI curriculum and provide suggestions for MTI curriculum improvement. To identify the criteria for comparing the MTI curriculum, this study has examined the literature on curriculum comparison. According to Tauseef et al. (2015), the first and second important components of the curriculum are the goal and content of courses. Samir and Motallebzadeh (2023) also take course objectives and content into account in their comparative study on the components of the revised M.A. English translation curriculum. In addition, their study also includes the number of credits and the length of the program as well as required and elective courses. Through the adaption and modification, the criteria of curriculum comparison in this study have been created, including instructional objectives, course credits and structure, and course content.

3.2 Criteria for Data Selection

To select the universities to be examined in this study, a set of criteria for selection was carefully devised. The three criteria utilized for the selection of universities are outlined in Table 1 which are i) Types of university, ii) Establishment Cohort, and iii) Geographical Area.

Table 1. Five Different Types of Universities for MTI Curriculum Comparison

Names of Universities	Types of University	Establishment Cohort	Geographical Area
Hunan University	Comprehensive university	2	Middle area
Shanghai International Studies University	Foreign studies university	1	Eastern area
Beijing Normal University	Normal university	2	Northern area
Guilin University of Technology	Polytechnic university	8	Southern area
Sichuan Agricultural University	Agricultural university	11	Western area

The first criterion is the type of university. In China, there are nine types of universities offering the MTI program, including comprehensive universities, polytechnic universities, normal universities, agriculture and forestry universities, political science and law universities, medical universities, finance and economics universities, communication universities, and sports universities. According to Mu (2020), MTI is mainly offered in polytechnic universities, comprehensive universities, normal universities, foreign studies universities, and agriculture and forestry universities, respectively accounting for 38%, 21%, 17%, 4.8%, and 4.8% of the total. Thus, the MTI curriculum in these five types of universities were selected for analysis in this study.

The second criterion is the establishment cohort of the MTI programs. Since universities have varying levels of qualifications, their MTI programs were initiated at different times. An earlier establishment typically indicates that a university received authorization to offer the MTI program sooner. Universities with earlier MTI cohorts are often assumed to possess greater capability in fostering students' translation competence. Therefore, this study includes universities with MTI programs from various establishment cohorts to ensure a more comprehensive and representative sample.

The third criterion is geographical. China is roughly divided into five geographical divisions, namely the middle, eastern, northern, southern, and western areas. This study selects one university from each geographical area separately to ensure the comprehensive representation of universities from all the geographical areas.

4. Results

4.1 Instructional Objectives

This section addresses the question: What are the instructional objectives of the MTI curriculum in different types of universities in China? Hunan University's MTI curriculum focuses on providing students with a solid theoretical foundation and a broad spectrum of professional knowledge. The objectives emphasize developing strong bilingual and bicultural competencies, mastering various translation skills, and fostering professional ethics and entrepreneurial spirit. Graduates are expected to independently handle translation tasks across different fields, contributing to China's economic development and enhancing international competitiveness.

The instructional objectives at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) center on engaging MTI students in critical thinking and discussion about translation within a limited timeframe. The curriculum is designed to cover the essence of translation, including the basic methods of interpretation and translation, translation theory and criticism, translation technology, management, market dynamics, and localization. This problem-centered approach integrates both macro and micro perspectives, providing students with an initial understanding of their future profession. SISU's focus on practical and theoretical aspects ensures that students are prepared for the complexities of the translation industry.

Beijing Normal University aims to meet the urgent demand for translation professionals driven by China's social, economic, and cultural development. The MTI curriculum is established to enhance the translation talent cultivation system, innovate training models, and improve the quality of translation education. The primary goal is to prepare graduates who can adeptly address the growing need for skilled translators, supporting various sectors with high-quality translation services.

Guilin University of Technology tailors its MTI curriculum to align with the strategic needs of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, Guangxi's role as a pivotal point in the Belt and Road Initiative, and Guilin's development as an international tourist destination. The curriculum prioritizes the cultivation of high-level, application-oriented translation professionals, particularly in tourism and fields such as geology, environment, and materials science. This specialized focus ensures that graduates possess the necessary skills to support regional development initiatives, emphasizing practical translation expertise in key economic and scientific areas.

Sichuan Agricultural University's MTI curriculum is designed in response to the national agricultural modernization strategy and the socioeconomic development needs of Sichuan Province. The curriculum aims to produce well-rounded, high-level, professional, and application-oriented translation talent capable of handling general translation tasks and meeting

the specific demands of agriculture, biology, and business fields. Students are required to master the English-Chinese discourse system in agricultural and biological domains, understand international trade laws and regulations for agricultural products, and develop strong language application and translation skills. Additionally, the curriculum includes training in modern translation software, project management, and evaluation, ensuring that graduates can tackle practical translation challenges and contribute to various sectors effectively.

4.2 Course Credits and Structure

This section aims to address the question: What are the course credits and structure of the MTI curriculum in different types of universities in China? Table 2 indicates the total course credits and course structure of MTI programs in the five universities.

Table 2. MTI Course Length, Credits, and Structure

Universities	Total Credits/Hours	Course Structure			
		Required Courses		Elective Courses	
		Number	Credits/Hours	Number	Credits/Hours
Hunan University	32 credits	11	14 credits	17	18 credits
Shanghai International Studies University	288 hours	9	288 hours	/	/
Beijing Normal University	48 credits	8	18 credits	15	30 credits
Guilin University of Technology	42 credits	10	20 credits	11	22 credits
Sichuan Agricultural University	50 credits	8	20 credits	17	30 credits

The MTI courses at Hunan University requires a total of 32 credits for completion. The curriculum is divided into required and elective courses. Students must complete 11 required courses, amounting to 14 credits, and 17 elective courses, totalling 18 credits. This balanced approach between core and elective courses allows students to gain a broad foundation in translation studies while also pursuing specific areas of interest through electives.

The MTI curriculum at Shanghai International Studies University includes 9 core courses, each spanning 32 hours of instruction, amounting to a total of 288 hours. All nine courses are compulsory for MTI students. This design ensures that students receive thorough training in essential competencies, supporting balanced and systematic development in translation and interpreting skills.

Beijing Normal University offers an extensive MTI courses, requiring a total of 48 credits. The program includes 8 required courses, accounting for 18 credits, and 15 elective courses, amounting to 30 credits. This structure emphasizes a comprehensive educational experience, allowing students to delve deeply into both required subjects and a broad array of electives, thus fostering well-rounded translation professionals.

The MTI courses at Guilin University of Technology requires students to earn a total of 42 credits. The courses are composed of 10 required courses totalling 20 credits and 11 elective courses making up 22 credits. This arrangement ensures that students receive a robust foundation in essential translation skills while also providing flexibility to explore various specialized topics through elective courses.

Sichuan Agricultural University's MTI curriculum is one of the most credit-intensive, requiring 50 credits for graduation. The curriculum includes 8 required courses which account for 20 credits and 17 elective courses which account for 30 credits. This structure reflects a significant emphasis on both core competencies and a wide selection of elective courses, enabling students to tailor their education to their specific interests and career goals within the translation field. Table 4.1 shows the MTI course length, credits, and structure of these five different types of universities.

4.3 Course Content

This section focuses on the question: What is the course content of the MTI curriculum in different types of universities in China? Hunan University's MTI curriculum emphasizes a balanced approach between foundational translation skills and specialized knowledge areas. The core courses include essential subjects such as Chinese Language and Culture, Introduction to Translation, Basic Interpretation, and Basic Translation. These courses provide students with a strong grounding in both the theoretical and practical aspects of translation. Furthermore, the curriculum integrates specialized courses like English-Chinese Literary Translation, Non-Literary Translation, and Machine-Aided Translation, ensuring students develop specific competencies in various translation fields. Elective courses such as Chinese Classical Texts Translation, Legal Translation, and Film Translation allow students to further tailor their education to their interests and career goals, thus enhancing their expertise in niche areas of translation.

Shanghai International Studies University's MTI curriculum offers a comprehensive set of compulsory courses that cover the essential areas of translation and interpretation. The core subjects include Introduction to Translation, Translation and Interpretation Techniques, Literary Translation, and Non-Literary Translation. Additionally, the curriculum emphasizes practical translation skills through courses like Computer-Aided Translation and Simultaneous Interpretation. This focus on both the theoretical foundations and practical application of translation ensures that students are well-prepared for the diverse challenges they will encounter in professional settings. The inclusion of courses such as History of Chinese and Foreign Translation provides a broader cultural and historical context, enriching the students' understanding of the translation discipline.

Beijing Normal University offers an MTI curriculum that is broad in scope, combining cultural studies with advanced translation practices. Required courses include Comparative Culture Between China and the West, Basic English-Chinese Translation, and Advanced Translation for both directions (English to Chinese and Chinese to English). The elective courses provide students with opportunities to delve into specialized topics such as Modern Translation Technology, Conference Interpretation, Technical Writing and Translation, and Translation Criticism and Appreciation. The inclusion of workshops, project management, and seminars further supports a practical, hands-on approach to translation education, preparing students for the complexities of the translation industry.

The MTI curriculum at Guilin University of Technology is particularly tailored to the needs of regional industries and focuses on both general and specialized translation skills. The required courses include Chinese Language and Culture, Introduction to Translation, and Advanced Translation, with a special focus on Tourism Text Translation—reflecting the university's strategic focus on tourism and regional development. Elective courses such as Legal English Translation, Scientific English Translation, and Engineering Text Translation allow students to gain expertise in specific fields, aligning their skills with industry demands. This targeted approach ensures that graduates are well-equipped to contribute to the economic and scientific sectors in their region.

Sichuan Agricultural University's MTI curriculum is designed with a focus on agriculture and related fields, reflecting the university's specialized mission. Required courses include Chinese Language and Culture, Introduction to Translation, and Translation Theory and Techniques for both interpreting and translating. The curriculum also emphasizes Applied Translation and Literary Translation, ensuring that students are versatile in various types of translation tasks. The elective courses are particularly tailored to the university's agricultural focus, with offerings such as Agricultural Literature Translation, Agricultural Translation Criticism and Appreciation, and Business Translation. Additionally, courses like Job-hunting Strategy and Career Progression Guide and Creativity and Innovative Talents highlight the university's commitment to preparing students for professional success in specialized fields.

5. Discussion

The results of the study revealed significant diversity in the MTI curricula across different types of Chinese universities, each with a distinctive focus and approach to translation education.

This diversity reflects the varying regional and institutional priorities, the needs of specific industries, and the universities' missions to prepare students for specific career paths. This section discusses how the differences in course content, structure, length, and credits align with the overarching instructional objectives and the implications for translation education in China.

5.1 Alignment with Instructional Objectives

Each university's MTI curriculum demonstrates an alignment between its course content and instructional objectives, which are influenced by the university's strategic focus and regional demands. This finding is consistent with one of the results of the study done by Feng and Fu (2017). They found that the MTI curriculum is insufficient as it does not adapt to the objectives of cultivating versatile translation talents. On the other hand, Guilin University of Technology and Sichuan Agricultural University have curricula tailored to meet regional needs—tourism and agriculture, respectively. Their specialized courses, such as Tourism Text Translation at Guilin and Agricultural Literature Translation at Sichuan, are direct responses to the regional economic priorities, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the specific skills required by local industries. This specialization reflects a clear alignment with the universities' instructional objectives to develop application-oriented professionals who can contribute to local economic development.

In contrast, Hunan University aims to cultivate high-level professionals capable of contributing to China's global competitiveness. This broad objective aligns with the university's aim to develop versatile translators proficient in various fields. Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) and Beijing Normal University (BNU) offer broader, more comprehensive curriculum that emphasize both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. SISU's inclusion of courses like Simultaneous Interpretation and Computer-aided Translation reflects its objective to produce highly skilled translators who can operate at the highest levels of the profession. Similarly, BNU's focus on cultural comparison and advanced translation techniques highlights its commitment to cultivating translators who are not only proficient in language but also culturally adept and critical thinkers.

5.2 Course Structure and Credit Distribution

The analysis of course credits and structure reveal significant differences in the design of MTI curriculum across universities, reflecting varying educational philosophies and priorities in different universities. Hunan University and Guilin University of Technology offer balanced curriculum with a nearly equal distribution of required and elective courses, allowing students to gain a broad foundation while also pursuing specialized interests. This structure supports the development of both general and specific translation competencies, catering to the diverse needs of the translation industry.

On the other hand, Shanghai International Studies University's MTI curriculum is more focused and intensive, with a heavier emphasis on required courses and a lack of electives. This design suggests a curriculum aimed at ensuring all students acquire essential translation skills and theoretical knowledge, potentially at the expense of discipline-specific specialization. In contrast, Beijing Normal University and Sichuan Agricultural University offer more

extensive curricula with significant elective components, allowing for a high degree of customization and specialization. These curricula are well-suited for students seeking to develop deep expertise in specific areas, such as technical translation or agricultural translation.

5.3 Implications for MTI Curriculum

The MTI curricula show a strong alignment with regional and industry needs, particularly in specialized courses at Guilin University of Technology and Sichuan Agricultural University. These courses prepare students for specific fields like tourism and agriculture. However, while specialization equips students with targeted skills, it may limit their adaptability to broader translation roles. Conversely, universities like Beijing Normal University offer more generalized curricula, producing versatile graduates, but potentially at the cost of deep specialization.

The study also highlights the varying availability of elective courses across different MTI programs. Elective courses are crucial as they provide students with the opportunity to tailor their education to their personal interests and career goals. Programs like those at Beijing Normal University and Sichuan Agricultural University offer a wide range of electives, which allows students to explore different aspects of translation, from technical translation and media translation to translation project management and translation criticism. In contrast, Shanghai International Studies University presents a curriculum with fewer electives, focusing heavily on core translation skills. While this approach ensures that all students acquire essential translation competencies, it may limit their ability to develop specialized skills or explore emerging areas of translation, such as localization, multimedia translation, or translation technology. This limitation could hinder students' ability to compete in an industry that increasingly values specialized knowledge and the ability to work across various media and contexts.

The regional focus of some MTI curriculum, such as those at Guilin University of Technology and Sichuan Agricultural University, reflects a broader trend of aligning higher education with regional development goals. The curriculum plays a vital role in producing professionals who are equipped to support key regional industries, such as tourism and agriculture. This alignment not only benefits the local economy but also contributes to national strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative, which requires a workforce skilled in translation and intercultural communication. However, this regional focus also raises questions about the portability of the skills acquired in the curriculum. While graduates may be highly effective within their specialized areas, they might face challenges if they seek employment in other regions or sectors that demand different translation competencies.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has provided a detailed investigation of the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) curriculum across various Chinese universities, with a particular focus on enhancing students' discipline-specific translation competence. The analysis reveals significant variation in how different universities structure their MTI curriculum, reflecting diverse regional priorities, institutional missions, and industry needs.

To enhance the discipline-specific translation competence of MTI students, universities should first increase specialization within their curriculum by offering more required courses tailored to the specific needs of regional industries. Expanding the range of discipline-specific translation courses, such as those focused on tourism, agriculture, legal, and technical translation, will allow students to develop deeper expertise in areas that align with regional and national economic priorities. This approach would not only sharpen students' translation skills but also improve their competitiveness in the job market.

In addition to specialization, there is a need to expand elective offerings within the MTI curriculum. By providing a broader selection of electives, including courses in emerging fields like localization, multimedia translation, and translation technology, students can explore diverse areas of interest and better prepare themselves for the evolving demands of the translation industry. A more flexible and customized learning experience will enable students to tailor their education to their career goals and the specific needs of the industry.

Moreover, practical training should be a core element of the MTI curriculum. MTI curriculum should include more hands-on workshops, internships, and project-based learning opportunities that allow students to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. Each industry has its own specific translation knowledge needs. Collaborations with industry partners can further strengthen these practical components and enhance students' industry-specific knowledge translation competence, providing students with valuable insights into professional translation practices and helping them bridge the gap between academia and the industry.

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