

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE NEW UNDERGRADUATE TRANSLATION CURRICULA: THE CASE OF HONG KONG UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

In recent years, more attention has been paid to undergraduate translation programmes, but students in these programmes are often found to lack the necessary background knowledge to carry out translation tasks effectively and efficiently. The research focus of this paper is Hong Kong, a cosmopolitan city in which there has been a constant demand for bilingual talents. In 2012, the four-year undergraduate programmes were introduced, and general education has become a significant component. Through a curricular analysis of the undergraduate translation programmes offered by five Hong Kong universities, it was found that general education courses account for about 20% of the total course credits and cover

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

areas like ethics, science and technology, business and social science. This paper concludes that these courses may act as a scaffold for other specialised translation courses and help students develop soft and transferrable skills. There are implications for universities in other regions, because four-year undergraduate translation programmes with a significant general education element are unique on an international level.

Key words: Hong Kong, translation syllabus, transferrable skills, undergraduate translation education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, there has been spectacular growth in the number of translator training institutions all over the world. In some countries (e.g. Britain and the United States), translator education tends to be at post-graduate level but recently more attention has been paid to translation in undergraduate degree programmes (Malmkjær, 2004). Of course, there are some distinct differences between teaching undergraduate and postgraduate translation students. As González Davies (2004),

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

a translation trainer in Spain, remarked, “Students with a degree who later follow a postgraduate course in translation have a greater command of the terminology and concepts of a given field” (p. 71). This observation has been echoed by Kim (2006) who stated, “More often than not, [undergraduate] students are equipped with neither the proper level of linguistic ability nor *the appropriate amount of general background knowledge to carry out translation tasks* in an efficient manner” (p. 329; emphasis mine). Curriculum reform or fine-tuning is a possible remedy to this problem.

The focus of this paper is the new undergraduate curricula in Hong Kong. In 2013, the 3+3+4 education reform was introduced in Hong Kong. The traditional seven-year secondary school education was reduced to six years (three years of junior secondary education plus three years of senior secondary education), and the undergraduate curriculum was extended by one year to four. The extra year is mainly devoted to the teaching of General Education (GE), generally

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

understood as a wide range of integrated learning experiences structured across subject disciplines to provide the set of skills and knowledge for students to function in society. This paper aims to describe and analyse the new curricula in the undergraduate translation programmes in Hong Kong and examine the implications for translation teaching and learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

2.1. Background Knowledge in Second Language Acquisition and Translation

The importance of background or cultural knowledge has been quite extensively researched in second language acquisition (particularly reading comprehension). More technically, linguists use the term “schemata” to refer to “the underlying connections that allow new experiences and information to be aligned with previous knowledge” (McCarthy, 1991, p. 168). The stronger these connections, the easier it is for

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

the readers to decipher the text. Usually, language students fail to make good sense of the text because they cannot effectively activate their schemata. According to Carrell (1988), “students’ apparent reading problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge (content, formal, and linguistic)” (p. 245). There is indeed some evidence to support the existence of this problem. For example, in an ethnographic study of a group of 30 first-year Hong Kong Chinese students by Flowerdew and Miller (1992), the authors found that failure to comprehend certain concepts is sometimes due to the fact that “the subject was a new one for students and that they had limited background knowledge of the subject” (p. 72).

The importance of subject or thematic knowledge has been well recognised in translation teaching and learning as well. For example, in 2006, the European Commission introduced EMT (European Master’s in Translation), a partnership project with the higher-education institutions in the EU offering master’s-level translation

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

programmes. The aim is to enhance the status of the translation profession. One of the deliverables of this project is a quality label for the university translation programmes that meet agreed professional standards and market demands. In the EMT reference framework for competences applied to translation professions, one of the competences listed is “thematic competence”: translators have to find information which helps them better understand the themes of a document. In South Korea, Kim’s experimental study (2006) on the influence of background information on translation quality found that having access to background information does have an effect on translation quality.

2.2. Hong Kong as the Research Focus

Despite having an area of only about 1,100 square kilometres, Hong Kong Special Administration Region (Hong Kong) is one of the premier financial centres in Asia and the world. Therefore, the demand for translators and bilingual talents has been great since the time Hong Kong became

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

a British colony in the mid-19th century. Therefore, in 1928, the then Department of Chinese (renamed the School of Chinese in 2006) at the University of Hong Kong started to offer courses in English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation (Liu, 2001). Other institutes of higher learning followed suit in setting up translation programmes. In particular, the development of undergraduate programmes in translation and interpreting flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, as Chinese gained official language status under the Hong Kong Basic Law in 1990 (though Hong Kong was a *de facto* bilingual colony during the 154 years of British rule), and important legal government documents had to be translated into Chinese in the run-up to the handover in 1997.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Curriculum is important because it “give[s] teachers a basis for planning lessons and evaluating students, and administrators a basis for supervising teachers and holding them accountable” (Posner 2004, p. 12). Though the

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

importance of curriculum may be well recognised, to offer a proper definition of the term “curriculum” is not that straightforward. According to Posner (2004), there are different types of curriculum, for example, official curriculum, operational curriculum, hidden curriculum, null curriculum (consisting of subject matter not taught) and extra curriculum (comprises planned experiences outside school subjects). For the purpose of this paper, we concentrate only on “official curriculum” or “written curriculum”, understood as containing the “scope and sequence charts, syllabi, curriculum grades, course outlines, standards, and list of objectives” (ibid).

As Calvo (2011) observed, research in the field of translation and interpreting studies seems to make little effort to ground studies in state-of-the-art curriculum research. And in the case of Hong Kong, there have been few systematic studies on the design and planning of translation curricula despite the fact that curricula most directly affect the quality of translators trained by translation programmes (Li, 2001). In 2005, in assessing the

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

quality of existing translation training programmes in Hong Kong, Li (2005) made a curriculum analysis on the seven local undergraduate translation programmes. His focus was on specialised translation courses. This paper focuses on how the recent GE reform has affected the official translation curricula in a number of Hong Kong universities.

The sample in this study includes the translation curricula in five institutes of higher learning in Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong (CU), City University of Hong Kong (CityU), Hong Kong Baptist University (BU), Lingnan University (LU) and University of Hong Kong (HKU). All of them offer a bachelor of arts (honours) degree in translation and/or interpreting and are publicly funded universities overseen by the University Grants Committee (UGC), the central body governing higher education in Hong Kong. The other three public universities, Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

are not included: PolyU offers a BA (Hons) in Chinese and Bilingual Studies, and Translation is only offered as a minor. HKIEd predominantly offers teacher education programmes though it is in the process of setting up a minor programme in Translation. The mission of HKUST is to advance learning and knowledge through teaching and research in science, technology, engineering, management and business studies. Only some basic concepts of translation and interpretation are taught in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering.

In 2005, the UGC mandated a change from a three- to four-year undergraduate programme and the first cohort of students in this new programme was admitted in 2012. The additional year is to allow for the development of a GE curriculum. In the *Learning for Life, Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* published by the Hong Kong Education Commission (2000), it was recommended that undergraduate education should “in addition to helping students master the

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

necessary knowledge and skills for specific professions/disciplines, give them exposure to other learning areas and help them develop ... important generic skills” (p. 9). This has affected the structure of undergraduate translation programmes as well.

In the past, GE was given a back seat in the undergraduate translation programmes. For example, in Liu’s (1998) survey of translation syllabuses at the seven tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, when comparing the translation programmes offered by the different universities, he deliberately omitted GE. He said, “Some courses, like study tours, physical education, and general education, are excluded ... because of their irrelevance” (p. 38).

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES IN TRANSLATION SYLLABUSES

4.1. Chinese University of Hong Kong

CUHK was formally established in 1963 with three constituent colleges, Chung Chi, New Asia and United. The institution was founded by scholars from mainland China who fled to Hong Kong after 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party won the civil war in the mainland, and it “has assimilated the Chinese tradition of ‘humanism’ and Western tradition of ‘liberal education’” (Leung 2007, p. 4). Though a university-wide GE programme did not come along until 1986, different colleges designed and managed their own GE programmes, which had slightly different focuses.

The Department of Translation at CUHK was established in 1972 (for a detailed discussion about the development of the department, see Jin, 1999 and the department website). For the new

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

four-year BA in Translation programme launched in 2012, students are required to complete 108 units of courses in order to obtain the award. Of these courses, a minimum of 69 units from translation or translation-related courses (9 units from Faculty Package, 15 units of Required Courses and 45 units of Elective Courses from the Translation Department) are needed to satisfy the major programme requirement. For GE courses, students have to take 21 units: 6 units of College GE, 6 units of Foundation GE and 9 units of other GE. University GE is offered to all undergraduates. Each college has its own College GE, and students are required to fulfill the College GE requirements as specified by the respective colleges. Here, we can see that GE courses make up 19.44% of the students' programme of study.

According to the *Undergraduate Student Handbook* for students admitted in 2013–14, in order to satisfy the requirement for Foundation GE, all students (except those who study for a degree in law) have to take two compulsory courses, “In Dialogue with Humanity” and “In Dialogue with

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

Nature”, which are delivered in a seminar format and accounts for 3 units each. For the College GE, students are required to complete a minimum of 6 units of College GE in accordance with the requirements of their respective colleges. For the 9 units of other GE, all students should complete at least one course (2–3 units) from each of the following four areas of GE: (1) Chinese Cultural Heritage; (2) Nature, Science and Technology; (3) Society and Culture; and (4) Self and Humanity. Examples of the courses in these areas are: Chinese Culture and Its Philosophies, Great Discoveries in Life Sciences, Chinese-Japanese-Korean Movies: Appreciation and Comparison, and Individual Mental Health and Healthy Families.

4.2. City University of Hong Kong

City University of Hong Kong was founded in 1984 as City Polytechnic of Hong Kong and became a fully accredited university a decade later. Currently, the university offers MA, M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes in Translation and

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

Interpretation in addition to its four-year BA programme. According to the website of the Office of Education Development and Gateway Education, GE “augments and rounds out the specialised training students receive in their majors by enabling them to achieve a breadth of knowledge through exposure to multiple disciplines” (www.cityu.edu.hk/edge).

The minimum units required for the award of a BA (Honours) in Translation and Interpretation at CityU is 120. In addition to 6 credit units of English and 3 credit units of Chinese Civilisation – History and Philosophy, translation students have to satisfy the area requirements of 21 credit units. A minimum of three credit units has to be earned from each of the three areas: Arts and Humanities; Study of Societies, Social and Business Organisations; and Science and Technology. We can see that GE courses make up 20% of the students’ programme of study, if we include Chinese Civilisation.

Examples of the GE courses in the three areas of

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

study include: (1) Arts and Humanities – Ethics for Professionals: An Interaction between Ethics and Professional Knowledge, Animals and Animal Welfare: An Interdisciplinary Approach; (2) Study of Societies, Social and Business Organisations – Green Economics; The Asian Century: Exploring the Rise of Asia As a Global Powerhouse; and (3) Science and Technology – Ironman: The Art and Science of Robots in Our Society; The World of NANO: The Next Big Thing is Really Small.

4.3. Hong Kong Baptist University

Established as Hong Kong Baptist College with the support of American Baptists in 1956, Hong Kong Baptist University is the only publicly-funded Christian university in Hong Kong. HKBU is famous for its “whole-person education” which can be defined as “a holistic approach, broad-based, creativity-inspiring, inculcating in all who participate a sense of human values, and maintaining strong links with the community” (Tan, 2008, p. 596). BA (Hons) in Translation is

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

distinctive in that after three years of study, the undergraduates are placed in a public organisation or commercial firm to work as translators or translated-related employees. They return to university for their final year of study.

To fulfill the graduation requirements for a BA (Hons) in Translation, students are required to take 128 units in total, 38 of which have to be GE courses. They have to complete both the core and distribution requirements. The courses included in the core requirements are: University English (6 units); University Chinese (3 units); Public Speaking (3 units); Information Management Technology (3 units); Numeracy (3 units); Physical Education (2 units); History and Civilization (3 units); Values and the Meaning of Life (3 units). Those included in the distribution requirements comprise five areas: Business (3 units); Communication/Visual Arts (3 units); Social Sciences (3 units); Sciences/Chinese Medicine (3 units); and Interdisciplinary (3 units). As the Translation programme belongs to the Faculty of Arts, students are not required to take

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

GE course in the area of Arts. The GE courses make up 29.69% of the students' programme of study.

Examples of courses in the different areas of study include: (a) Business – Law for Hong Kong Business, Developing a Successful Business; (b) Communication/Visual Arts – Advertising and Society, Critical Perspectives on International News, Encountering World Art; (c) Social Sciences: Internet Identities, New Media Literacies and Ethics; The World of Contemporary Europe; (d) Sciences/Chinese Medicine – Nano Living: Impact of Nanoscience & Nanotechnology, Health Maintenance and Food Therapy in Chinese Medicine; and (e) Interdisciplinary – How Ideas Spread; Music, Science, and the Sublime.

4.4. Lingnan University

Lingnan University (LU) (formerly known as Lingnan College) is a public liberal arts university in Hong Kong. It was granted full university status in 1999. According to the university website, the

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

university is “committed to the provision of quality education distinguished by the best liberal arts traditions. It adopts a whole-person approach to education which enables its students to think, judge, care and, ultimately, act responsibly in the changing circumstances of Hong Kong, the region and the world”. LU is one of the institutions participating in the creation, development, and implementation of Hong Kong General Education Initiative, a project which aims to support Hong Kong universities’ efforts to develop exemplary GE curriculum as they prepare to introduce the new four-year undergraduate degree programmes.

For students taking the BA (Hons) in Translation, the core GE requirements consist of a Common Core and 5 Clusters. All students are required to take all 4 courses (Logic and Critical Thinking, The Making of Hong Kong, Understanding Morality, and World History and Civilisations) in the Common Core, and a total of 7 courses from the 5 clusters (Creativity and Innovation; Humanities and the Arts; Management and Society; Science, Technology and Society; and

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

Values, Cultures and Societies). The total number of credits for GE is 33, or 27.5% of the students' programme of study.

Examples of the courses in these clusters include: Creativity and Innovation – Be Your Own Boss – Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Individual Difference: Theories and Applications; Humanities and the Arts – Food, Culture and Identity, An Introduction to Chinese *Kunqu* and Peking Opera Appreciation; Management and Society – Getting to Yes through Negotiation, Stress Management, Health and Life Balance; Science, Technology and Society – Personal Security in Cyberspace; Nutrition and Health: Challenging obesity; and Values, Cultures and Societies: Rethinking Global Issues; Reading Great Social Thinkers.

4.5. University of Hong Kong

The University of Hong Kong is a public research university founded in 1911 during the British colonial era. It is the oldest tertiary institution in

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

Hong Kong, and its BA programme has the longest history in the territory. According to Liu (2001), the translation curriculum at HKU used to emphasise classical Chinese literature (e.g. *The Book of Songs*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BCE) and canonical English literary works (*Hamlet*). There was a shift to more practical translation starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The BA programme is currently offered at the School of Chinese.

To obtain a BA (Hons) in Translation, students have to complete 72 course credits related to Translation. The total number of credits for graduation is 240. Apart from the Translation courses, 36 credits have to be on common core courses. They are categorised under 4 Areas of Inquiry (AoI): Scientific and Technological Literacy; Humanities; Global Issues; China: Culture, State and Society. Students are required to complete at least 1 and not more than 2 courses from each AoI during their BA studies. They are advised to take 2–4 Common Core courses in Year

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

1 and the rest in Years 2–3. The GE courses make up 15% of the students' programme of study.

Examples of the courses in the four AoIs offered in 2013–2014 include: (1) Scientific and Technological Literacy: Biomedical Breakthroughs in a Pluralistic World, Science and Science Fiction; (2) Humanities: Girl Power in a Man's World, The British Empire in Text and Image; (3) Global Issues: Local Cultures and Global Markets; Sports Culture under Global Capitalism; (4) China: Culture, State and Society – Chinese Mythology, People, Propaganda and Profit: Understanding Media in China. There are also non-credit-bearing GE courses which usually take the form of seminar or local study tour.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. General Education as a Scaffold

We can see that in the new translation syllabuses at the tertiary level, GE takes up a significant

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

portion of the credits and is no longer said to be “irrelevant”. For the five universities in our sample, the percentage of GE courses in the new Translation programmes accounts for 15% (HKU) to about 30% (HKBU). These courses, despite “significant variations ... across institutions in the specific common core requirements, all retain, in one form or another, the traditional division among the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences” (Jaffee 2012, p. 195). This curricular demarcation between art and science may not be desirable to educational studies scholars who prefer an interdisciplinary curriculum which can reflect the integrated nature of knowledge. However, because the courses in translation are still usually subject-based (e.g. Business Translation, Translation of Texts in Social Sciences, Translation for Science and Technology offered at CityU), the GE courses mentioned above, if properly sequenced and delivered, may act as a scaffold for the general and specialised translation courses undergraduate translation students will take later in their academic career. According to the educational theory of

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

constructivism, when students are given the support they need early on when they are learning something new, they stand a better chance of using that material independently.

5.2. Development of Soft Skills and Transferrable Skills

In a survey carried out within the framework of the POSI project on Translator Training sponsored by the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT), Mauriello (1999) found that translation buyers and translator employers in Italy, although largely satisfied with recent graduates' language and translation skills, were dissatisfied not only with their preparation for dealing with specialised translation, terminology management and information technology, but also with their ability to organise themselves autonomously or work together in teams, solve problems or establish and effectively manage interpersonal relations on the job. Mauriello suggests that this phenomenon is likely to be pervasive in other countries as well. Although it seems that there have not been any

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

systematic studies on the employers' perception of the translation graduates in Hong Kong, according to *Thoughts for Hong Kong: Public Engagement Exercise on Population Policy* (2013), a public consultation document issued by the Hong Kong government, two of the more common areas of concern among employers regarding university graduates are language and communication skills. These GE courses may be useful for students to develop team work and organisational skills, because a lot of the assessment involves group work. As Kiraly (2000) points out, it has become increasingly important for practising translators "to work co-operatively within the various overlapping communities of translators and subject matter experts to accomplish work collaboratively" (pp. 13–14).

Many scholars have discussed the importance of soft skills in translator training. For example, Kiraly (1995) points out that more emphasis should be "placed on the complex nature of the professional translator's task and the nonlinguistic skills that are required" (p. 16). Tao (2012)

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

suggests using group discussion, translation workshop and project-based translation practice to develop students' in negotiation and collaboration.

More specifically, Torres-Hostench (2012) states that there is a need “to help students develop specific skills and attitudes for finding a job in translation”. As a predominant percentage of translators are freelancers, there are other important skills such as project management (Dunne & Dunne 2011); “marketing and interpersonal skills, time management, a positive professional image, social skills—cooperation, customer service” (Mackenzie 1998, p. 217). Although Pym (2003) quite rightly points out that “there is no neat definition of all the things that translators need to know and will be called upon to do” (p. 488), with courses like Stress Management, Getting to Yes through Negotiation and Developing a Successful Business, the new GE programmes offered at the Hong Kong universities should give a broad coverage of the soft skills that prospective translators should possess.

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

However, as Li (2005) and Tan (2008) point out in their research on the translation programmes in Hong Kong, higher-order skills like problem solving are far more important than merely the teaching of translation methods and skills. When commenting on the teaching of specialised translation courses in Hong Kong, Li (2005) states that “little attempt has been made at development of learner autonomy and their problem-solving abilities. This has seriously affected students’ readiness and professional confidence upon graduation” (p. 71). Integrative thinking skills are required for continuous learning and problem solving needed in our ever-changing society.

5.3. Ethics for Translators and Interpreters

Ethics is an important part of our modern society, more so in the field of TS. This is evident in the publication of various special journal issues on this topic (e.g. *The Translator*, 2001; *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 2011) and

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

monographs (e.g. *On Translator Ethics: Principles for Mediation Between Cultures* by Anthony Pym). Therefore, not surprisingly, almost all GE programmes in the above universities include courses on ethics (e.g. *Ethics for Professionals: An Interaction between Ethics and Professional Knowledge*, offered at CityU; *New Media Literacies and Ethics*, offered at CU). Interpreters and translators encounter a variety of ethical issues and questions in the course of their work. According to *Ethics of Interpreting and Translating* published by NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) (2013), the translator and interpreter accreditation body in Australia, the general principles contained in the different codes of ethics require translators and interpreters to: respect their clients' right to privacy and confidentiality, disclose any real or perceived conflicts of interest, decline to undertake work beyond their competence or accreditation levels, relay information accurately and impartially between parties, maintain professional detachment and refrain from inappropriate self-

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

promotion, and guard against misuse of inside information for personal gain” (p. 2). And many of these issues (e.g. privacy) have been dealt with in the GE courses mentioned above.

Künzli (2007) and other scholars have pointed out that translators and language professional encounter a number of potential loyalty conflicts and ethical dilemmas. A look at the course outline at an exemplary GE course on ethics shows that it is of great relevance to the work of translators. According to the website of EDGE (www.cityu.edu.hk/edge), “[u]pon completion of this course, students should be more sensitive to moral issues; to be able to develop rational arguments, and to make sound judgments in defending their positions in responding to ethical questions”.

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

After looking at the analysis of the GE courses offered at five Hong Kong universities, we can see

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

that GE now takes up a greater percentage of courses in undergraduate translation programmes. The courses account for at least 20% of the total credits. Students now take GE lessons from different domains, and many of them are related to contemporary issues that are of great relevance no matter whether students work as translators/interpreters or in other professions. However, would these GE course be just “icing on the cake”, a metaphor that a monograph on GE in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China (Xing, Ng & Cheng 2013) has used? Do the graduates of the new undergraduate translation programmes find these GE courses relevant to their work and careers? We may have to wait a few years before the new cohort of graduates leave the school to find the answers.

As mentioned, this paper just looks at the official curricula of five Hong Kong universities. Can the new undergraduate translation programmes, “apart from imparting academic knowledge, ... also enhance students’ personal qualities and nurture their professional ethics” (Hong Kong

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

Education Commission, 2000, p. 114)? How are the curricula implemented in practice? In other words, we have to look at the “operational curriculum” as well, and operational curriculum is defined as one consisting of “what is actually taught by the teacher and how its importance is communicated to the student – i.e., how students know that it ‘counts’”? (Posner 2004, p. 13) Do students like these courses and perceive them as useful to other translation courses they take? Do they find them relevant to their future career and personal development? These are questions future research may seek to answer.

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

GE is not something new for American colleges and universities but there are very few undergraduate translation programmes offered in the US. In Canada, although there are relatively more undergraduate translation programmes due to its two official languages of English and French, GE plays a far less important role in the undergraduate education. According to MacDonald (2003), “At present, very few Canadian universities have general education or core curriculum programs comparable in ambition and scope to the various models which American colleges and universities have introduced in the past twenty years”. As for Europe, after the Bologna process, the first-cycle degree (the bachelor’s programme) usually requires three years and undergraduate education in Europe tends to be more vocational and specialised than education in the US. In short, this means that the experiment of GE in Hong Kong’s four-year undergraduate translation and interpreting programmes is unique on an international level. It may offer some insights for educators and curriculum planners in Europe, North America

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

and elsewhere who are thinking about introducing or improving on undergraduate translation programmes.

Chan, A. L. J. (2015). General Education in the New Undergraduate Translation Curricula: The Case of Hong Kong Universities. *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 2. 97–138.

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