

Exploration of the Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English Translation Teaching

Wang Shuang

Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, Dalian, Liaoning, 116052, China

Abstract: This paper focuses on the application of Functional Equivalence Theory in BE translation teaching. First, it elucidates the core tenets and translational significance of the theory. Then, it analyzes the unique characteristics and pedagogical requirements of BE translation. Followed by this, it explores specific application pathways for the theory in setting teaching objectives, organizing teaching content, and innovating teaching methodologies. Concluding with an analysis of the challenges encountered during application and proposing corresponding strategies, the paper aims to provide theoretical references for enhancing the quality of BE translation teaching and cultivating translation talents who meet practical demands.

Keywords: Business English translation teaching; Functional Equivalence Theory; Application pathways

DOI: 10.62639/ssperi17.20250108

1. Introduction

At present, there are still many problems in business English translation teaching. For example, excessive emphasis is placed on linguistic form equivalence while ignoring functional equivalence; teaching content is disconnected from business practice; and students have a weak awareness of cross-cultural communication. These issues make it difficult for students to cope with complex business translation scenarios. Therefore, applying Functional Equivalence Theory is pivotal for reconstructing pedagogical logic, optimizing instructional processes, and enhancing students' practical translation competence. This paper will systematically examine the application value and implementation strategies of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English translation teaching through multiple dimensions: theoretical connotation, pedagogical suitability, application pathways, and practical challenges.

2. Core Connotation of Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory originates from the translation studies of Eugene Nida, and its theoretical evolution has undergone a deepening process from "Dynamic Equivalence" to "Functional Equivalence." This theoretical shift marks a transition in translation studies from linguistic structure to communicative function, providing more practical guiding principles for translation practice. The core connotation of Functional Equivalence Theory can be interpreted across three dimensions. First and foremost, equivalence in meaning takes precedence over equivalence in form. Nida argued that linguistic form serves meaning, and strictly pursuing formal equivalence may lead to distorted meaning or ineffective communication. In translation, the primary goal should be to ensure the accurate transmission of the core meaning of the source-language information in the target language, while forms may be appropriately adjusted according to the linguistic conventions and cultural background of the

(Manuscript NO.: ERI-25-8-113001)

About the Author

Wang Shuang (1977-), female, Han ethnicity, native of Dalian, Liaoning Province. Associate Professor at the Department of English, Liaoning University of International Business and Economics. Primary research interests: Business Culture and Intercultural Communication, Business Translation.

target language. Furthermore, equivalence in communicative effect stands as the central objective. Translation is fundamentally an act of cross-cultural communication, and its ultimate purpose is to enable target-language readers to understand and accept the message in a manner similar to that of source-language readers, eliciting comparable responses. This equivalence in effect extends beyond the semantic level to encompass pragmatic and cultural dimensions, including the conveyance of tone, emotion, and cultural imagery. Finally, equivalence is relative rather than absolute. Due to linguistic and cultural differences, complete equivalence is difficult to achieve. Translation can only strive for the "closest natural equivalent"—that is, selecting translation strategies that best fulfill communicative functions while fully considering the cognitive background of target-language readers.

3. Characteristics of Business English Translation and Pedagogical Requirements

As a vital branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) translation, Business English (BE) translation exhibits distinct industry-specific traits and a pragmatic orientation. Its practice extends beyond linguistic conversion to encompass information transmission and relationship coordination within cross-cultural business contexts.

(1) Textual diversity

BE translation covers a broad spectrum of text types, including commercial contracts, product manuals, marketing copy, business correspondence, meeting minutes, financial reports, and more. Each text type possesses unique linguistic features and communicative functions: commercial contracts demand terminological precision and logical rigor, emphasizing equivalence in legal enforceability; marketing materials prioritize linguistic appeal and cultural adaptability to maximize promotional impact; business letters require a courteous and appropriate tone to maintain positive commercial relationships. This textual diversity necessitates flexible translation strategies tailored to the communicative purpose of each document—a principle that aligns closely with the "functional adaptation" concept emphasized by Functional Equivalence Theory.

(2) Linguistic features

BE translation is characterized by three key linguistic attributes: specialization, conciseness, and cultural sensitivity. Specialization manifests in the extensive use of industry-specific terminology (e.g., "hedging" in finance, "FOB" in international trade), where accurate conceptual translation is critical to prevent financial losses stemming from semantic deviations. Conciseness arises from the efficiency demands of business communication; texts typically prioritize brevity and avoid redundancy, requiring translators to maintain completeness of meaning while achieving linguistic economy. Cultural sensitivity stems from the inherently cross-cultural nature of business activities, where interpretations of numbers, colors, and metaphors vary across cultures (e.g., the divergent symbolic meanings of "dragon" in Eastern and Western contexts). Translations must ensure cultural adaptability to prevent communicative breakdowns caused by cultural conflicts.

(3) Pedagogical requirements

These characteristics generate specific demands for BE translation pedagogy. Firstly, teaching objectives must transcend foundational language skills, focusing instead on cultivating practical translation competencies. These include the ability to accurately convert specialized terminology, precisely grasp textual functions, and flexibly navigate cross-cultural differences. Furthermore, teaching content should move beyond traditional "pure linguistic training" by integrating business knowledge and industry contexts. This enables students to understand communicative needs across diverse business scenarios—such as legal risk awareness in contract translation and consumer psychology considerations in marketing translation. Additionally, the teaching process must emphasize the integration of theory and practice. By simulating authentic business situations, instructors should guide students in discerning the dialectical relationship between "formal equivalence" and "functional equivalence," learning to

select strategies based on communicative purposes. For instance, when translating cultural metaphors in marketing copy, abandoning literal translation in favor of target-culture expressions with equivalent associative power achieves functional equivalence in promotional impact.

4. Application Pathways of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English Translation Teaching

The application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English (BE) translation teaching is not a simple transplantation of theory. Rather, it requires integrating its core principles into every facet of teaching objectives, content, and methodology, thereby constructing a "functionally equivalent"-oriented pedagogical system. This shift guides students from a focus on "linguistic form" to a concentration on "communicative effect."

(1) Teaching objective design

Functional Equivalence Theory provides a clear competency framework for setting BE translation teaching objectives. Objectives based on this theory should be structured across three progressive tiers. The foundational tier targets semantic equivalence, ensuring the accurate transmission of business information—such as the unbiased conversion of specialized terminology, data, and logical relationships. The intermediate tier pursues pragmatic equivalence, requiring translations to conform to target-language business communication conventions—like the use of polite formulas in business letters or appropriate language in negotiations. The advanced tier aims for cultural equivalence, eliminating cultural barriers in cross-cultural contexts so that the translation evokes the same emotional response and behavioral orientation in the target culture as the original does in the source culture—exemplified by the equivalent substitution of cultural imagery in international marketing copy. This tiered objective structure reflects the progressive nature of Functional Equivalence Theory while aligning with the practical demands of business translation, moving from "accurate transmission" to "effective communication."

(2) Teaching content organization

Teaching content organization must adopt "functional equivalence" as the criterion for selecting and sequencing materials, moving beyond traditional textbooks graded by linguistic difficulty towards classification by "textual function type." For instance, content can be divided into three modules: "informative texts" (e.g., product manuals, financial reports), "operative texts" (e.g., contract clauses, order instructions), and "appellative texts" (e.g., advertising copy, brand narratives). Each module centers its pedagogical focus on "how to achieve functional equivalence." Informative texts emphasize semantic accuracy, guiding students to master standardized terminology translation and techniques for making logical relations explicit. Operative texts highlight pragmatic enforceability, training students to enhance the clarity and authority of directives through syntactic adjustments. Appellative texts focus on cultural adaptability, cultivating students' sensitivity to cultural metaphors and emotional symbols, and teaching them to employ localization strategies for equivalent persuasive impact.

(3) Teaching method innovation

Applying Functional Equivalence Theory necessitates moving beyond the unidirectional "teacher lecture – student practice" model towards creating interactive, scenario-based learning environments. One approach involves the Contrastive Translation Analysis method, where typical business texts (e.g., Chinese slogans of international brands) are presented alongside their target-language versions. Students analyze how translators sacrificed literal correspondence (e.g., abandoning rhyme structures) to pursue functional equivalence (e.g., preserving promotional appeal), propose alternative translations through group discussions, and compare the merits of different strategies. Another technique is the Business Scenario Simulation method, setting up contexts like import-export negotiations, international exhibition presentations, or cross-cultural contract signings. Here, students must consider the cultural

background, positional hierarchy, and communicative intent of the audience during translation. For example, when translating product descriptions for clients from different countries, language style must be adapted to business cultural preferences—such as favoring conciseness and directness for European/American clients, while employing greater formality and deference for Japanese/Korean clients. Additionally, implementing Function-Oriented Assessment replaces traditional evaluation based on "similarity to reference translations" with a three-dimensional assessment of "accuracy of information transmission," "appropriateness in business context," and "degree of communicative goal achievement." This encourages students to flexibly adapt linguistic forms while preserving core meaning to achieve functional equivalence, fostering their autonomy in selecting translation strategies.

5. Challenges and Countermeasures in Applying Functional Equivalence Theory to Business English Translation Teaching

While Functional Equivalence Theory offers significant guidance for Business English (BE) translation pedagogy, its practical application faces multiple challenges constrained by factors such as the teaching environment, student cognition, and instructor expertise. Targeted countermeasures are essential to ensure the effective realization of the theory's value.

(1) Challenges

The challenges in applying Functional Equivalence Theory to Business English translation teaching are intricate and multi-dimensional, influencing different aspects of the teaching-learning process. They can be mainly categorized into three aspects.

1) Student-level challenges

The primary challenges at the student level revolve around establishing and flexibly applying a functional equivalence mindset. On one hand, influenced by traditional translation pedagogy, students often prioritize "formal equivalence" as the foremost criterion, resisting the concept of "adapting form to achieve function." They may perceive such adaptations as "unfaithful to the original." On the other hand, insufficient business knowledge and cross-cultural experience hinder students' ability to accurately discern a text's communicative function. For instance, when translating international marketing copy, they may fail to assess the acceptability of source-culture imagery in the target culture, thus struggling to select appropriate equivalence strategies.

2) Instructor-level challenges

Challenges for instructors center on integrating theory with practice. Applying Functional Equivalence Theory demands not only solid grounding in linguistics and translation theory but also rich practical experience in business contexts to accurately grasp communicative needs across diverse scenarios. However, many instructors lack industry exposure, resulting in a theoretical rather than practical understanding of functional characteristics in business texts. Consequently, they struggle to provide targeted guidance when helping students analyze "how to achieve functional equivalence." Simultaneously, misinterpretations of the theory may arise—such as oversimplifying it as "licence to freely alter original forms"—potentially leading students toward "overly liberal translation." This risks neglecting semantic equivalence as the essential prerequisite, ultimately compromising the accuracy of business information.

3) Teaching resource challenges

Limitations in existing textbooks and materials present further obstacles. Most BE translation textbooks remain focused on linguistic points, lacking in-depth analysis of textual functions and communicative contexts. While case studies may be included, they are typically presented as "standard answers" without demonstrating the selection

process for functional equivalence strategies. Moreover, materials often lag behind commercial practices, failing to address translation demands in emerging fields like cross-border e-commerce or digital trade. This disconnect leaves students with equivalence strategies ill-suited to real-world scenarios. Compounding this issue is the scarcity of systematic, function-oriented exercises designed to develop specific skills.

(2) Countermeasures

To address the aforementioned challenges, a tripartite strategic approach is proposed.

1) Reinforcing functional equivalence mindset cultivation

The strategy entails implementing a structured pedagogical framework comprising theoretical exposition, comparative case analysis, and reflective synthesis. Through systematic deconstruction of functional equivalence principles, juxtaposition of successful and failed cross-cultural marketing translations, and guided critical reflection, students internalize the necessity of functional equivalence. Concurrently, integrating business knowledge with cross-cultural communication courses via industry lectures, corporate site visits, and live projects expands students' practical awareness, significantly enhancing their capacity to discern textual functions in authentic contexts.

2) Developing dual-qualified instructor expertise

This dimension focuses on bridging the theory-practice divide through two synergistic initiatives. Firstly, facilitating faculty immersion in commercial translation projects and university-industry partnerships provides firsthand industry experience. Secondly, institutions should organize specialized workshops on Functional Equivalence Theory application, equipping instructors with methodologies to transform theoretical constructs into classroom-ready pedagogical practices, thereby ensuring accurate and contextually relevant guidance for students.

3) Optimizing teaching resource architecture

Resource optimization involves a comprehensive redesign of teaching materials and activities. Core textbooks must prioritize functional equivalence through explicit textual function analysis and transparent demonstration of strategy selection processes. Dynamically updated business cases—such as recent global brand campaigns and cross-border e-commerce copy—should be systematically incorporated. Furthermore, applied exercises require students to produce culturally adapted translations of a single product manual for distinct target markets, mandating written justifications of equivalence strategies to solidify strategic decision-making capabilities.

6. Competency Cultivation Dimensions in Functional Equivalence-Based Business English Translation Teaching

The profound value of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English (BE) translation pedagogy extends beyond guiding translation strategies; it lies in constructing a multi-dimensional competency cultivation system that equips students with comprehensive translation literacy adaptable to complex business environments.

(1) Contextual awareness and intent recognition

Contextual awareness and intent recognition form the prerequisite for realizing functional equivalence. BE translation is not an isolated linguistic act but a communicative activity embedded within specific business situations, where textual function and meaning can only be accurately interpreted within their context. Teaching based on this theory should cultivate students' sensitivity to business contexts, including elements such as the communicative scenario (e.g., formal negotiation vs. routine communication), participant relationships (e.g., superior-subordinate, partners, competitors), and communicative purpose (e.g., information dissemination, partnership solicitation, dispute resolution). For instance, when translating business correspondence, students must discern whether the intent is to "seek cooperation" or "address a complaint." The former requires humility and

sincerity, while the latter demands firmness balanced with politeness. Misidentifying intent—such as rendering the serious tone of a complaint letter into casual language—violates the fundamental requirement of functional equivalence. Instruction can involve comparing decontextualized versus context-rich versions of the same text, guiding students to recognize context's influence on meaning interpretation. They learn to extract implicit information from context, industry background, and cultural conventions, laying the groundwork for functional equivalence.

(2) Cross-cultural business communication competence

Cross-cultural business communication competence embodies functional equivalence at the cultural level. Functional Equivalence Theory requires translation not only to convey linguistic meaning but also to reconcile cultural differences, ensuring the translated text achieves equivalent communicative effects in the target culture. Teaching must therefore develop students' ability for cross-cultural comparison and adaptation. This involves systematically studying the business cultural norms of major trading partners—such as communication styles (direct vs. indirect), time perceptions (monochronic vs. polychronic), and etiquette (forms of address, gift-giving). Simultaneously, students need training in translating culture-bound terms, metaphors, and imagery, employing strategies like cultural substitution (replacing source-culture images with target-culture equivalents), explication (adding cultural background), or omission (removing conflict-prone expressions) to ensure cultural differences do not impede core functions.

(3) Text-type adaptation competence

Text-type adaptation competence addresses functional equivalence at the stylistic level. Teaching should cultivate students' ability to recognize and adapt to various BE text types. For informative texts (e.g., market research reports), an objective and concise style prioritizes clarity of data and logic. Persuasive texts (e.g., tender proposals) demand compelling language highlighting advantages and value. Legal texts (e.g., contracts) necessitate precise, rigorous terminology to prevent ambiguities and loopholes. This competence can be fostered through a "text function analysis → stylistic feature extraction → translation strategy matching" training model. For example, guiding students to compare syntactic differences in Chinese and English contracts (short sentences in Chinese vs. complex clauses in English) helps them understand stylistic adjustments made to achieve "equivalence in legal enforceability," mastering the skill of selecting styles based on textual function.

(4) Strategic selection and reflective capacity

Strategic selection and reflective capacity represent the advanced application of Functional Equivalence Theory. Functional equivalence is not a singular method but a mindset for flexibly choosing strategies based on context—the same text may require different equivalence strategies in different situations. Teaching must develop students' strategic awareness, enabling them to make reasoned choices between "literal" and "free" translation or "foreignization" and "domestication" according to textual function, cultural background, and communicative purpose, while also reflecting on the rationale for their choices. For instance, the brand name Coca-Cola exemplifies a strategic blend of transliteration and semantic translation, preserving phonetic similarity while conveying the "delicious and enjoyable" brand function—a choice worthy of student analysis and emulation.

7. Conclusion

Functional Equivalence Theory provides a systematic theoretical framework and practical guidance for BE translation teaching. Its core principle—pursuing equivalence in communicative function between source and target languages, rather than mechanical formal correspondence—profoundly aligns with the pragmatic orientation and cross-cultural nature of BE translation. This paper has analyzed the theory's connotation, the characteristics

of BE translation, and its pedagogical demands. It has explored the theory's application pathways in setting teaching objectives, organizing content, and innovating methods, examined challenges and countermeasures in implementation, and ultimately constructed a multi-dimensional competency cultivation system grounded in the theory.

References

- [1] Nida E A. Towards a Science of Translating[J]. *Language Learning*, 1964, 14(3): 483-498.
- [2] Bassnett S. Translation Studies and Professional Practice[J]. *The Translator*, 2020, 26(1): 3-18.
- [3] House J. Translation Quality Assessment: Linguistic Description versus Social Evaluation[J]. *Meta*, 2001, 46(2): 243-257.
- [4] Huang Shaojuan, Xu Peng Business English Translation Teaching from the Perspective of Conceptual Integration [J]. *Journal of Honghe University*, 2020(6): 147-149.
- [5] Li Dandan Business English Translation Teaching from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor [J]. *Journal of Hubei Open Vocational College*, 2020(7): 177-179.
- [6] Ma Hongjuan Construction of a Business English Translation Teaching Model Driven by Bilingual Parallel Corpora [J]. *Journal of Taiyuan Urban Vocational & Technical College*, 2020(3): 97-99.
- [7] Baker M. In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation[M]. London: Routledge, 2018: 10-30.