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Chinese Translated IEPs: Do They Do More Harm than Good?

Lusa Lo and Joseph Wu

Abstract

Among culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students comprise the third-largest group. In order to address the diversity of the special education student population and ensure that parents are involved in the decision-making process, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires schools to translate students' Individualized Education Program (IEP) into their parents' native language. The quality and accuracy of translated IEPs is a critical concern for limited-English-speaking parents who rely on such document for information that they miss in meetings. Discrepancies in the poorly translated documents prevent families from accurately understanding their child's IEPs and knowing when they should advocate for their children for appropriate services and placement. This article exposes existing problems of translated IEPs and highlights the importance of hiring high-quality translators to help bridge the communication gap between schools and linguistically diverse parents of children with disabilities.

Introduction

In the United States, regulations, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children (P.L. 94-142) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), were enacted to ensure that free and appropriate public education is provided to the children with disabilities from ages three to twenty-one and that their individualized needs are being met. These federal regulations clearly mandate specific procedures that professionals must follow to support these children and their families.

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) team is formed when a child is diagnosed with a disability. This IEP team must include all the individuals who serve and support the child, in-

cluding the parent(s) of the child, special education teacher, service providers such as speech therapist and psychologist, and, whenever appropriate, the student with disabilities (34 CFR 300.321(a)). For a student who receives instruction in an inclusive setting, the general education teacher who serves this child must also be a member of the team. The IEP team meets formally to discuss what educational program is most suitable for the student and in which least restrictive environment she or he should be placed. Based on discussion at this team meeting, an IEP—a legally binding document—is drafted by the school professionals. Information such as the student’s current academic performance, annual measurable goals and benchmarks/objectives, required accommodations and modifications in classrooms and during testing, types of services, how often these services are offered, and locations where student receives these services are described in details in the IEP (34 CFR 300.320(a)). This drafted document is then sent to the parents of the child for review. The parents decide if they want to accept the IEP, reject all the information on the IEP, or reject portions of it. If parents reject anything, the team will meet again and attempt to address the parents’ concerns. If an agreement cannot be reached, the child’s parents have the right to due process. The IEP is reviewed annually until the child is no longer eligible for special education services. The purpose of the IEP is not only to hold the school accountable for the education of all students with disabilities but also to provide a system and structure for families to collaborate with schools, advocate for their children, and be involved in the development of special education programs that address their children’s unique individualized needs.

Since 1980, the rate of increase in the number of people from diverse cultures has been dramatic: 41 percent for blacks, 198 percent for Hispanics, and 270 percent for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) (US Census Bureau, 2006), and minorities are expected to be majorities by 2042 (US Census Bureau, 2008). Such demographic changes greatly impact the US student population. In 2007, culturally and linguistically diverse students comprised 44 percent of the student population (US Department of Education, 2008a) and 42 percent of the special education population ages three through twenty-one years old (US Department of Education, 2008b). However, the demographics of general and special educators (grades K–12) do not mirror the diversity of the student

population, with less than 17 percent coming from similarly diverse backgrounds (US Department of Education, 2006). The use of interpreters and translators, therefore, becomes imperative as an essential means of bridging the communication gap between schools and families who don't speak and read English. For example, in order to ensure that non- and limited-English-speaking families understand the content of their child's IEPs and can be actively involved in the development of these documents, the current federal special education regulation, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004), requires schools to translate the IEP into the parents' native language. This guarantees that non- and limited-English-speaking parents have the same rights as parents who are fluent in English.

Much attention by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners in the field has focused on African American children with disabilities because of their disproportionate representation in special education programs. Since 1998, however, the number of AAPI students with disabilities has increased by 50 percent, while the number of African American children with disabilities has grown by only 10 percent (US Department of Education, 2008b). Previous studies that focus on AAPI families of children with disabilities indicate that these families struggle to advocate for their children due to their limited English proficiency (Lo, 2005, 2008; Park and Turnbull, 2001; Park, Turnbull, and Park, 2001). Furthermore, a recent study found that among the Parents' Rights documents from forty-nine states (not including Ohio) and the District of Columbia, more than half were written at the college reading level (Fitzgerald and Watkins, 2006), while public documents should be written at a fifth- to sixth-grade reading level (Paasche-Orlow, Taylor, and Brancati, 2003). The author of this article randomly checked the reading level of five of the English IEPs and found that all of them were at the high school level. If the reading level of English IEPs is high, one can assume that this affects the translation of IEPs as well.

In my own research, Chinese parents often express that they have difficulty comprehending their child's IEPs, even when they are translated. Additionally, their understandings from discussions in IEP meetings about their child's services often differ with what they find in the resulting IEP documents. The following study, then, examines this issue more fully, based on a careful analysis of twenty Chinese-translated IEPs from a variety of grade levels

in a predominantly urban metropolitan area. Results suggest that much of the information in the Chinese-translated IEPs differs from the content in English IEPs.

Interpreters and Translators

In the field of education, the terms *interpreter* and *translator* often are used interchangeably. However, these two terms have distinct meanings. Interpreters are those who have the ability to convert oral messages from one language to another (Rodriguez, 1991). Translators are those who have the skills to replace written messages in one language with the same messages in another language without distorting the original meaning (Heiderson, 1994). Few professionals excel at both of the tasks because of the highly developed language skills that each requires (Heiderson, 1994).

Similar to translators in any specialized field, translators who work in the field of special education should not only possess highly developed language skills in English and the target language(s), but they must also have knowledge of terms and concepts that are used in the field (Plata, 1993). Additionally, professional translators need to be able to match the comprehension level of the translated materials with the targeted audience (Santos et al., 2001). Because many of the terms and concepts that are used in special education may not exist in the target language(s), these translators are required to know how to convey the written information without distorting its original meaning. However, translators who possess all these skills are rarely available in school districts. Often, school districts seek assistance from local cultural centers or community organizations where staff members may not have sufficient background knowledge in special education (S. Gannon, personal communication, April 3, 2008). From parents' perspectives, receiving an IEP with inaccurate information may prevent them from determining whether their children will receive appropriate special education services. This may impede students' progress and result in unnecessary conflicts between home and school.

Problematic Uses of Chinese Writing Systems

The Chinese language is comprised of seven spoken-language groups, including Putonghua (Mandarin), Kejia (Hakka), and Yue (Cantonese). Each language group includes a large number of dialects, likely totaling more than three hundred. However,

the written language of Chinese is common, albeit with two writing systems known as “traditional” versus “simplified.” Although some Chinese characters are the same in both the traditional and simplified writing systems, other characters that are written in the simplified writing system have fewer strokes. For example, *door* can be written as 門 using the traditional system or 门 using the simplified system. Both characters convey the same meaning. The traditional writing system is used in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan (and typically in diasporic Chinese communities such as Chinatowns in the United States), while the simplified system is used in mainland China, such as in Beijing and Guangzhou.¹ Individuals who learned Chinese through the traditional system may not be able to read passages that are written in the simplified system, and vice versa.

Among the twenty evaluated Chinese-translated IEPs in this study, two were written in the simplified system, six were written in the traditional system, and the remaining twelve were written using a combination of traditional and simplified character forms. Parents who had emigrated from Hong Kong, for example, reported having difficulty understanding their children’s translated IEPs because many of the words (characters) were written in the simplified system. One parent had to ask a neighbor who knew the simplified system to assist her. However, she was reluctant to ask for help because she felt very uncomfortable letting her neighbor know too much about her child’s poor academic performance in school. When asked if she had expressed this concern with the school, she said she did not because she would have felt bad to ask the translator to rewrite the entire document, which was seventeen pages in length. The IEP is a legal document that includes private information about the child and his or her family, such as family background, the child’s learning strengths and weaknesses, and academic evaluation results. Asking outsiders, such as a neighbor, to review such a private document would be culturally dissonant for many Asian families. Furthermore, returning the IEP and requesting the translator to rewrite the document might also be culturally difficult for many Asian families who expect the school to have unquestionable authority (Chan and Lee, 2004). As in the preceding case, making such an “unreasonable” request would be considered disrespectful to school officials.

Serious Errors in Chinese Translated IEPs

In addition to identifying the problematic use of Chinese writing systems, this study also found a large amount of information in the Chinese-translated IEPs that was inconsistent with the information presented in the English IEPs. Many of these errors were considered severe. Table 1, for example, shows examples of words and phrases incorrectly translated in the Chinese-translated IEPs.

Furthermore, many technical terms were used in the English IEPs that were directly translated into Chinese. The translators did not consider whether or not these terms existed in the Chinese vocabulary and if they would be comprehensible to parents. For example, in typical elementary school practice, the term *circle time* refers to an instructional activity involving the entire class of students sitting in a circle. Teachers often utilize circle time to read a book aloud or have a whole-class discussion about a particular issue or event. In the translated IEPs, this term was directly translated to 圓型時間 (*circle and time*), which provides the Chinese readers with no meaning or context. Another phrase commonly found in the Chinese-translated IEPs and directly translated was “wh-questions.” “Wh-questions” refer to questions that began with *who*, *where*, *why*, *which*, *when*, or *how*. Chinese parents without a background either in English or in education would not understand what “wh questions” meant. Table 2 presents additional examples of inaccurately translated terminology.

Furthermore, information was missing in the Chinese-translated IEPs, such as types of difficulties in learning, frequency and duration of services, subject areas in which the disability impacted, types of instructional accommodations and testing accommodations, and IEP objectives. In one English IEP, under the methodology/delivery of instruction section, the writer stated:

ASL/voice off [American Sign Language/voice off] should be used during Literacy block no more than 45 minutes per day and in the Social Studies block no more than 45 minutes per week.

However, the Chinese-translated IEP only stated:

ASL/voice off should be used.

The absence of specific information regarding when such supports would be provided could prevent parents from fully un-

derstanding when their children would receive expected interventions and required services.

Moreover, faulty information also appeared in many sections of the translated IEPs. In one English IEP, for example, one of the objectives stated:

[The student's name] will produce blends (fl, bl, pl, etc.) at the sentence level with 70% accuracy, with a model.

This objective was translated into:

[學生名字]會答對70% 基本的問題。]

([The student's name] will answer basic questions with 70% accuracy.)

In another IEP, the school reduced the child's speech therapy services from one hour a week to thirty minutes a week. However, the translator wrote in the Chinese-translated IEP that the frequency of the services was still one hour per week. This faulty information led the parents to accept the proposed IEP with the belief that their child would continue receiving the same amount of speech services rather than a 50 percent cut.

Minor Errors in Chinese-Translated IEPs

In addition to the serious errors noted, this study also found numerous minor errors such as awkward sentence structure, typographic errors, and inconsistent use of translated terms. For example, all written Chinese characters are characterized by having one or more radicals (stroke patterns). Radicals provide Chinese readers with hints for pronunciation and meaning. When radicals are missing or used incorrectly, the meaning of the word changes. For example, the word 冰 refers to *ice*. When the radical 冫 is removed, the word becomes *water*, 水. In all twenty IEPs analyzed for this study, numerous typographic errors were found. These included incorrect use of radicals and incorrect use of words due to the similarity of sounds. For example, the Cantonese pronunciation of 座 (*seat*) and 坐 (*to sit*) are very similar. The translators often mixed up these and other characters.

Furthermore, the study found that translators did not appropriately address or consider the cultural or migration background of the specific families for whom the translation was required. Certain vocabulary is not used universally throughout all the cities or re-

gions of China. For example, in Hong Kong, the translation of *spelling* is 串字. In other parts of China, such as Guangzhou, its translation is 批寫. In Hong Kong, the word *stickers* is translated as 貼紙. However, this term is unfamiliar to people in mainland China.

Finally, many acronyms in the English IEPs such as *DRA*—the Developmental Reading Assessment, which is an informal assessment commonly used in schools—and *DTVMI*—the Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration, which is an assessment used to determine individuals' visual motor integration abilities—were impossible to translate into Chinese. Thus, the translators simply copied them without explanation in the Chinese IEPs. Given that none of the parents in this study were professionals or specialists in the field of special education and psychology, however, these terms in their children's IEPs were foreign and meaningless to them.

Practitioner Implications

An essential factor in the development of collaborative relationships between schools and culturally diverse families is communication, particularly when important constituencies do not share the same spoken or written language. Recognizing that parent rights and accountability are core principles of federal education and disability rights legislation, the policy rationale for requiring that school districts provide limited-English-speaking parents with translated IEPs is to ensure their direct involvement in reviewing and determining that specific special education services and placements proposed by educational teams are fair and appropriate in addressing their children's unique needs.

Findings from my study, however, suggest that such policy intentions are not implemented in practice for immigrant parents who communicate predominantly or exclusively in Chinese. Based on a careful evaluation of the written content of Chinese-translated IEPs, this study exposes many errors—severe (e.g., missing and faulty information) and minor (e.g., typographic and contextual)—that compromise the integrity of these official, legally binding documents. Given most Chinese immigrant parents' own lack of technical expertise in the special education field, combined with internalized cultural values that expect their deference to official school authority, parents may not know which specific knowledge goals and skills their children should work on in school or practice and reinforce at home—especially when their understandings are

informed by error-ridden officially developed educational plans. Thus, when unqualified translators produce inaccurately translated IEP documents that are accepted by all parties, then the legal rights of immigrant families of children with disabilities are undermined. The effects of such patterns of errors over the course of a child's educational experience can easily lead to ongoing distrust and miscommunication between home and school, as well as fewer services or less effective support for students, as was the case for the child whose speech therapy services were reduced by half in the English version of the IEP but maintained at 100 percent level in the Chinese-translated IEP referred to by the parents in giving their review and approval.

In order to address the rights and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities and their families more effectively in accordance with policy, the following issues should be addressed, particularly at the local and state levels. First, on the home language survey used by schools and school districts, parents should be asked to identify whether they require written materials to be translated and what their primary written-language system is. Choices of major spoken dialect and distinctions between traditional and simplified written Chinese should be provided. Specialists hired to translate IEPs can then refer to such information in order to ensure that the most appropriate written-language system will be used to communicate with parents.

Second, if the translators hired by schools and school districts do not have sufficient knowledge regarding the special education system and professional terminology that is commonly used within the field, then educators who write IEPs in English must avoid using unfamiliar jargon and acronyms. If certain terms must be used, a glossary of these terms and their definitions should be provided for translation into lay terms. If these terms do not exist in the target language(s), then translators need to provide contextualized explanations rather than direct translation. As is widely recognized in the public health field, individuals must have specific training and expertise, beyond simply being bilingual, in order to play effective professional roles as interpreters and translators of formal documents related to children's education and healthy development (Flores, 2005; Green et al., 2005). School districts serving large immigrant communities should invest in hiring and training a pool of interpreters and translators in order to ensure consistent,

high-quality interpretations and translations over time (Ku and Flores, 2005; Prendes-Lintel and Peterson, 2008).

Third, the reading level of English IEPs is often above fifth-grade level. One can assume that if the translations are accurate, the readability of the translated IEPs will also be high. The purpose of IEPs is to record information regarding the students' special services, placements, and supports. When the readability level of the document is too high, however, parents will have difficulty comprehending important information, such as knowing what goals and objectives are set for the child and what instructional methods are being used to support their child.

Fourth, many terms used in the twenty IEPs reviewed for this study were translated inconsistently. For example, the term *accommodation* was translated as 修正, 修改, or 修訂, which meant *revision*, *amendment*, or *correction*. The term *manipulative* was translated as 教具 (*teaching tools*), 手算 (*calculated by hands*), or 手勢 (*hand signals*). Such variations in vocabulary and meaning can easily cause confusion and miscommunication. With leadership from the US Department of Education, however, commonly used terms in the field of special education could be standardized across multiple languages, including Chinese. Translators, parents, and other specialists at the state and local levels would then have greater shared understanding through reference to a common multilingual core vocabulary.

In addition to these four implications for practitioners that emerge directly from my findings, I also wish to highlight three related domains of research and policy that reach beyond the scope of my study but deserve further attention.

First, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners working in the special education field with Chinese immigrant children and families in US K–12 education settings can benefit from developing linkages with professional peers working in Chinese linguistic contexts, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as other Chinese diasporic community settings, such as Toronto and Vancouver. The development of these kinds of local/global, long-term collaborative and comparative relationships will facilitate increased access to linguistically appropriate assessment tools, culturally responsive models of parent engagement, and recruiting opportunities for professionally trained personnel who have much-needed bilingual literacy.

Second, it is critical to recognize that Chinese linguistic resources and community capacities in the United States are more robust

than those of other AAPI groups, such as Vietnamese, Pakistani, Lao, Hmong, or Koreans. Although the focus of this article is on problems of translation and communication between schools and Chinese immigrant parents related to their children's IEPs, it is reasonable to assume that translations of IEPs into less common and less frequently taught AAPI languages, such as Khmer, Urdu, or Tagalog, might be even more problematic than what is documented in my study. The special education profiles and needs of AAPI groups other than the Chinese need far greater attention from researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Hwa-Froelich and Westby, 2003; Yu, Huang, and Singh, 2004).

Finally, the shortage of bilingual special educators continues to be a national concern (American Association for Employment in Education, 2007). Although populations of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities comprise almost half of the special education student population, less than 17 percent of the special education teaching force comes from comparably diverse backgrounds (US Department of Education, 2006). Successful models of recruitment and support for culturally and linguistically diverse populations to go into the fields of special education and disability studies need greater investment within universities as well as school districts and other training institutions (Frattura and Capper, 2007; Hosp and Reschly, 2004). The recently authorized American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, for example, will allocate approximately \$12.2 billion in grants for special education, some of which should be invested specifically in strategies and structures that will recruit and retain highly qualified culturally and linguistically diverse special education teachers.

Table 1: Sample Inaccurate Translated Words/Phrases

Words/Phrases in English IEPs	Translations in Chinese IEPs
Analyze	解釋 (explain)
Puzzles	砌積木 (block building)
Disability	醫療問題 (medical issues)
Occupational therapist	技能訓練 (skill training)
Screw eyes up	螺絲眼 ("metal screw" "eyes")
She doesn't want him at the [name of the school] for extended year.	她不希望他加長學年。 (She doesn't want him to have extended school year.)
Hands-on tasks	輕鬆簡單的任務 (simple and relaxing tasks)

Table 2: Sample Inaccurate Translated Terminology

Terminology in English IEPs	Translated Terms in Chinese IEPs
Hunter syndrome	精神病 (mental illness)
Mental retardation	心理落退 (psychologically regressed)
Standard accommodations	正規要求 (standard requests)
Positive reinforcement	正確支援 (correct support)
2nd percentile	百分之二 (2%)
Graphic organizers	圖畫幫助 (picture support)

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Notes

1. Simplification of the traditional Chinese written form took place in China as a way to facilitate basic literacy for the masses.

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