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PBL meets Translation – Emigrant Letters as Case Studies



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Abstract: Three innovative approaches to teaching translation are presented in the following article: Cooperative Translation, Cooperative Text Analysis and Cooperative Research. These methods proved to be successful when analyzing and translating historical emigrant letters.

Keywords: translation process; *Problem-Based Learning*; emigrant letters; historical letters; immigration to America; Cooperative Translation; Cooperative Text Analysis; Cooperative Research

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1 Translating Historical Immigrant Letter Collections

German immigration to North America peaked in the 19th and early 20th century with more than 5.5 million Germans immigrating to the New World in search of a better life. Pushed out of their homeland by poverty, wars or religious persecution, and pulled to America after hearing success stories of immigrants living the American Dream, Germans mainly settled in the New York area, in Texas and in Midwestern regions ([Helbich et al. 1988](#)).

As a main means of communicating with the people they left in the old country, German immigrants exchanged letters with their family members and friends who remained in the

Old World. Historian Wolfgang Helbich estimates that between 1820 and 1920 approximately 280 million letters were sent to Germany by newcomers to the United States (Helbich et al. 1988).

Today, these letters are a valuable source of information on the American immigrant experience for historians, social scientists and linguists alike. Emigrant letters provide insights into assimilation and integration processes and illustrate historical events as experienced by the immigrants. Immigrant letter collections serve as sources for linguistic text analysis and are authentic evidence of language changes and everyday language and letter writing in the 19th and 20th centuries (Elspaß 2007).

Published collections of “everyday letters” written by “everyday people” are rather scarce. Throughout history mostly letters written by well-known individuals like politicians or famous writers have been published rather than letters written by ordinary people. Private letters written by immigrants speak for themselves and tell about the immigrant’s lives in the New World in a personal and unique way.

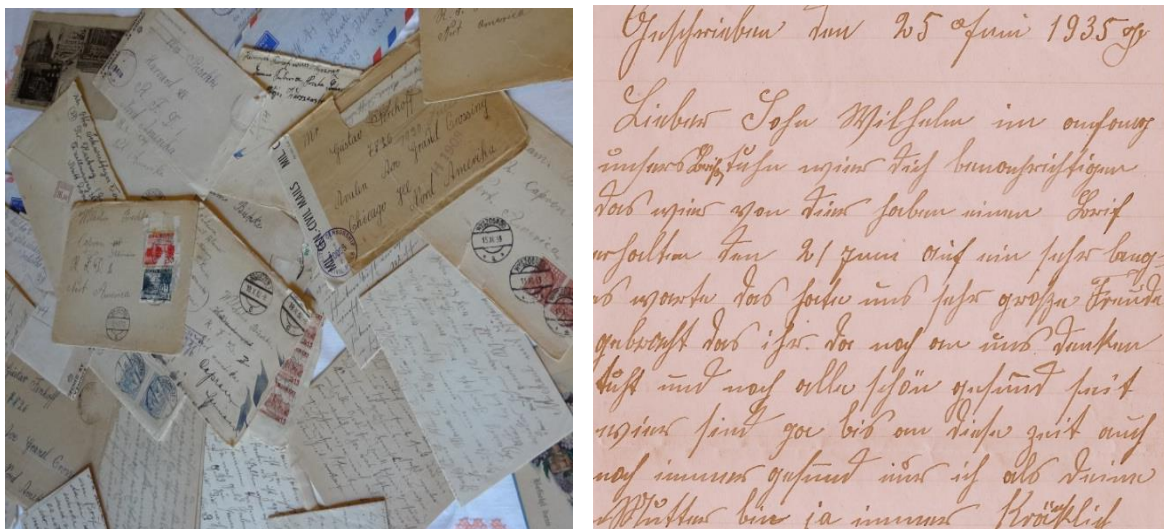


Figure 1: Emigrant letter collection written to Wilhelm Bischke

Translating emigrant letter collections as part of cultural studies projects in translation presents challenges for the translator since it involves a wide variety of tasks necessary prior to translation. These include archiving, transcription, and text analysis, as well as in-depth research to decode letter content. The field of cultural studies has gained increasing

significance in modern translation theories. Since language and culture are inextricably linked, a translator represents more than a mediator between languages, he serves as a cultural bridge-builder. Accordingly, translators must be both language experts and cultural mediators (Snell-Hornby 1998).

Problem-Based Learning methods offer a new approach that allows efficient management of the multiple tasks that modern translation requires. Translating historical letter collections provided valuable insights into this method.

2 Constructivist Approaches to Teaching Translation

The modern practice of translation requires a high proficiency in both the source and target languages along with a well-developed expertise in translation technology and *Computer-Assisted-Translation tools* (CAT). The traditional model of the solitary translator working in isolation is no longer relevant to the modern practice of professional translation. Within the new model, teamwork represents a significant element of the process, and projects involve a close interaction with both colleagues and clients.

In accordance with this new reality, educational programs for translators must adapt to these changes in the practice of translation and equip students and future translators with the skills that are crucial in the professional world. These competencies include professional and social skills alike. In addition to a high-level language proficiency in both source and target languages, translators are called upon to act as cultural mediators with competence in both source and target cultures. Their expertise encompasses both translation tools and online resources. Social competencies are a vibrant part of the modern translator's competency profile: teamwork, accepting criticism and a willingness to compromise count alongside problem-solving skills (Austermühl 2001, Orbán 2008).

Translation Studies Programs in Europe have been subject to curricular reforms as a consequence of the Bologna Process (1999), and these aim to standardize higher education programs throughout Europe. Traditional German degree programs have been replaced by internationally recognized Bachelor and Master programs.

In line with these curricular reforms, Translation Studies programs have placed more emphasis on practical orientation by including modules on translation technology and modern terminology management tools in their curricula. Furthermore, social skills and the ability to work in translation project teams have increased values as professional competencies. Innovative translation education shifted toward student-centered learning approaches and constructivist learning theory, a parallel development to the successful method used at the Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM).

Constructivist teaching methods focus on the active role of students in the learning process and their individual construction of knowledge. The constructivist theory of *Problem-Based Learning* specifically is a student-centered teaching method in which learners take a collaborative role in solving learning tasks. First introduced by Canada's McMaster University in the 1960s and further developed at medical schools throughout North America, the PBL method is widely used today within medical education and beyond.

At Indiana University medical students are presented with authentic medical cases and work in small groups of six to eight students to independently solve these case studies. The instructor assumes the role of a tutor or mentor who encourages the learners to collaborate, but stays in the background to allow students to actively solve medical cases. Through this process, students are able to acquire the communication skills that are key competencies in professional life. At Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) these skills are listed in the *Competency Curriculum Handbook* and include the following:

- *Communication*
- *Basic Clinical Skills*
- *Using Basic Science as a Guide to Diagnosis*
- *Lifelong Learning*
- *Self-Awareness, Self-Care, Personal Growth*
- *Social and Community Aspects of Medicine*
- *Ethics*

- *Problem-Solving*
- *Professionalism*

(Bankston 2011)

At IUSM medical students work on solving complex medical cases that are based on real-life scenarios. While solving such tasks, medical students have access to medical literature and use online sources to conduct their research on medical issues.

Since 2004 the Indiana University School of Medicine and the English Department at the Institute of Translation and Interpreting at Heidelberg University have collaborated in an academic research project named *TMT - Teaching Medical Translation*, which has evolved in various stages during the past decade. Initially focused on medical terminology and the creation of a medical terminology database, constructivist learning methods used in medical education have been an additional research focus in recent years, and the PBL method has been successfully adapted to the translation process (Orbán 2008).

3 *Problem-Based Learning* meets Translation Studies

The PBL method allows students to acquire soft skills, media skills and organizational skills that are essential in a wide range of fields, including both the medical and translation professions. Applying the PBL method to translation studies is an innovative approach to teaching translation in a way that approximates the authentic working contexts of modern professional translators. Known as *Cooperative Translation*; this method has been successfully used in translation didactics since 2008, and has been further developed and enhanced since its introduction as a student-centered translation technique (Orbán 2008, Bilić 2013).

Adapting constructivist teaching methods to translation education resulted in the creation of three didactical methods that were derived from the learning theory of *Problem-Based Learning*: Cooperative Translation, Cooperative Text Analysis and Cooperative Research (Orbán 2008, Bilić et al. 2009, Bilić 2013).

3.1 The Method of Cooperative Translation

The collaborative approach to *Translation Didactics* aims at teaching competencies that are crucial for the practice of translation. The cooperative translation technique moves away from the traditional and outdated model of the isolated translator toward a team-spirited, collaborative translation process. This didactically innovative approach focuses on the active role of students who work independently on solving translation tasks. During this process they learn to organize the translation workflow independently using translation tools and research tools that are typical in modern professional translation: high-speed Internet access, CAT tools, terminology databases, project management tools and online sources for translators, such as dictionaries and corpora.

In Cooperative Translation, small groups of three to four students translate texts, working as a team. An online platform designed for this specific translation course allows students to access the source text as well as additional materials relevant to the translation text. For letter translation, original letter scans were provided. Their academic tutor supervises the translation process and allows the students to independently work on an authentic translation task or project. Students then translate the text in a manner that calls for the active participation of each individual translation team member. Group discussion focuses on the text type and function as well as specific translation problems that might be encountered in the text as a whole, such as the text style and specific phrases, idioms or collocations. Individual team members then contribute translation proposals for each translation unit. Compromises must be reached before a satisfactory final translation solution is selected by all members of the student team. Since the goal of Cooperative Translation is to develop communication skills and the ability to negotiate, all students are expected to be vitally involved in the entire translation process.

scenario, students are more likely to make bold translation decisions and to learn independent critical judgment. More significantly, the cooperative translation process is highly dynamic and approximates the real translation scenarios faced by a modern translator in professional life.

Each student team creates a written protocol of their experience, which is submitted along with the final source text translation, thus providing the tutor with further insights into the translation process. This also allows for a reconstruction and an evaluation of the translation process.

The focus collection of letters written to German immigrant Wilhelm Bischke consists of 31 letters, mainly written in the time period between 1913 and 1949. Wilhelm Bischke immigrated to America in 1910, settling as a farmer in the rural region of Harvard, Illinois. He left his relatives in Germany and Poland at an early age in search of better opportunities in the *land of freedom*. The letters written to him by family members speak of their historical times and the conditions Germans faced before and after WWII.

Using a special notation system to analyze student translation work allows insights about which translation units pose challenges ([Orbán 2010](#), [Bilić 2013](#)). The sample letter analyzed below was written to Wilhelm Bischke by his mother Juliana Borau on April 13, 1929.

Source Text = Letter dated April 13, 1929, taken out of the German Emigrant Letter Collection written to Wilhelm Bischke

Cooperative Translation Project summer semester 2012

Translation Course Übersetzen V: Texte der Alltagskommunikation aus A-Sprache in B-Sprache (Deutsch-Englisch), B.A. Übersetzungswissenschaft, 6. Semester

Student translation teams:

T1 = Translation proposal by team 1, 4 students

T2 = Translation proposal by team 2, 4 students

T3 = Translation proposal by team 3, 4 students

T4 = Translation proposal by team 4, 3 students

T5 = Translation proposal by team 5, 4 students

T6 = Translation proposal by team 6, 4 students

ST = |Lieber Sohn| |im Anfang teile ich dir mit| |das ich noch am leben aber nicht gesund. |
|Lieber Sohn| |es tuht mir weh das ich von euch euch kein wissen krieg| |ich schreibe so
oft und krieg keine antwort| |ich weiß nicht ob ihr noch lebt|

T1= |Dear Son| |first of all I am letting you know| |that I am still alive but not healthy. |
|Dear Son| |it hurts that I don't hear anything from all of you| |I write to you so often and
you never respond| |I don't even know if you and your family are still alive.|

T2= |Dear son,| |First, I want to tell you| |that I'm still alive but not feeling well. | |My dear
son| |it hurts so much that I don't hear anything from you.| |I keep writing but never get an
answer.| |I don't know if you are still alive.|

T3= |Beloved son,| |at first I would like to tell you| |that I am still alive, but not healthy|.
|Beloved son,| |it hurts that I do not receive any information from you.| |I write so often
and never get an answer.| |I do not know if you are still alive|

T4= |Dear son,| |In the beginning I want to tell you| |I'm still alive but not in good health.|
|Dear son,| |it hurts not to know anything about you,| |I write to you often but I never get a
reply.| |I don't even know if you are still alive.|

T5= |My dear Son,| |First of all, I need to tell you| |that I am alive but unwell.| |My dear
Son,| |my heart is aching because I haven't heard from you.| |I have written many times but
have not yet received an answer.| |I don't know if you are still alive.|

T6 = |Dear son,| |First, I want to let you know| |that I am alive but not well.| |Dear son,| |
it hurts not to hear a word of you.| |I write to you that often and still do not get a response.|
|I cannot be sure whether you are still alive or not.|

Figure 3: Comparing translation units using a special notation system (Bilić 2013)

As put forth by Katharina Reiß and Hans J. Vermeer in their Skopos theory, the translation process is purpose-oriented (Reiß and Vermeer 1984). The purpose of a target text determines the way a particular text is translated, and cultural distinctiveness and characteristics of the target culture must be taken into consideration. Accordingly, the Bischke letters were translated by approximating the author's writing style and the illiterate character of the source letter material.

Close analysis of student letter translations underlined the importance of in-depth research especially when translating historical letters that illustrate only fragments of people’s lives. Thoroughly understanding the source text and the culturally-specific elements contained in them represented considerable translation challenges for students.

3.2 The Methods of Cooperative Text Analysis and Cooperative Research

A deep understanding of the source culture is a prerequisite for translation (Vermeer 1986). The translation process is dynamic, comprised of reception, transfer and text production (Kornelius 2004). Since translation is more than the transfer of text from one language into another: Understanding a text includes its significance in the target culture. Thus, decoding texts involves in-depth research, since the art of translation bridges worlds as well as cultures. Recent studies have shown that the method of Cooperative Translation inspired by the constructivist *Problem-Based Learning* approach can be successfully applied to the reception phase of the translation process, namely to text analysis and research (Bilić et al. 2009, Bilić 2013).

The reception phase lays the groundwork for translating and is thus a decisive part of the translation process. In this initial phase translators decode the source text, a document that is embedded in its source language and culture. As Friedrich Schleiermacher points out in his article “*Ueber die Methoden des Uebersetzens*” (1813) a deepened understanding of the source text and culture is decisive in translation. Translation scholars, such as Hans J. Vermeer (1986), as well as representatives of *Translational Hermeneutics* (Cercel 2012, Stolze 2003, Paepcke 1986) have also underlined the importance of fully comprehending texts before any attempt is made to create a faithful translation. In *Translational Hermeneutics*, the art of interpreting texts is often described as a dynamic procedure, a “hermeneutic circle” (Stolze 2003).

At the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (University of Heidelberg) Cooperative Text Analysis has been incorporated in cooperative translation projects focused on transcribing and decoding historical American and German letter collections.

Since historical letters offer us limited insights into the lives of their writers, it is helpful for translators to visualize, explore and analyze source text content using mind-maps and content maps. The Bischke immigrant letters were mostly written in the *Sütterlin* script, the historical form of German handwriting used from 1911 until well into the post-war period.

The Cooperative Text Analysis method begins with carefully reading the source text in the group setting. Transcription of letters required deciphering *Sütterlin* before essential information about letter content and individuals could be extracted. The next phase centered on visualizing this data using mind-and concept-mapping techniques. Team members collaborated to make sense of letter content and put letter-derived data in cultural and historical contexts. After thoroughly reading the source letter, the Lasswell formula of communication provides an initial question. The source text is then further analyzed regarding its cultural and historical context and the letter writer's style and language.

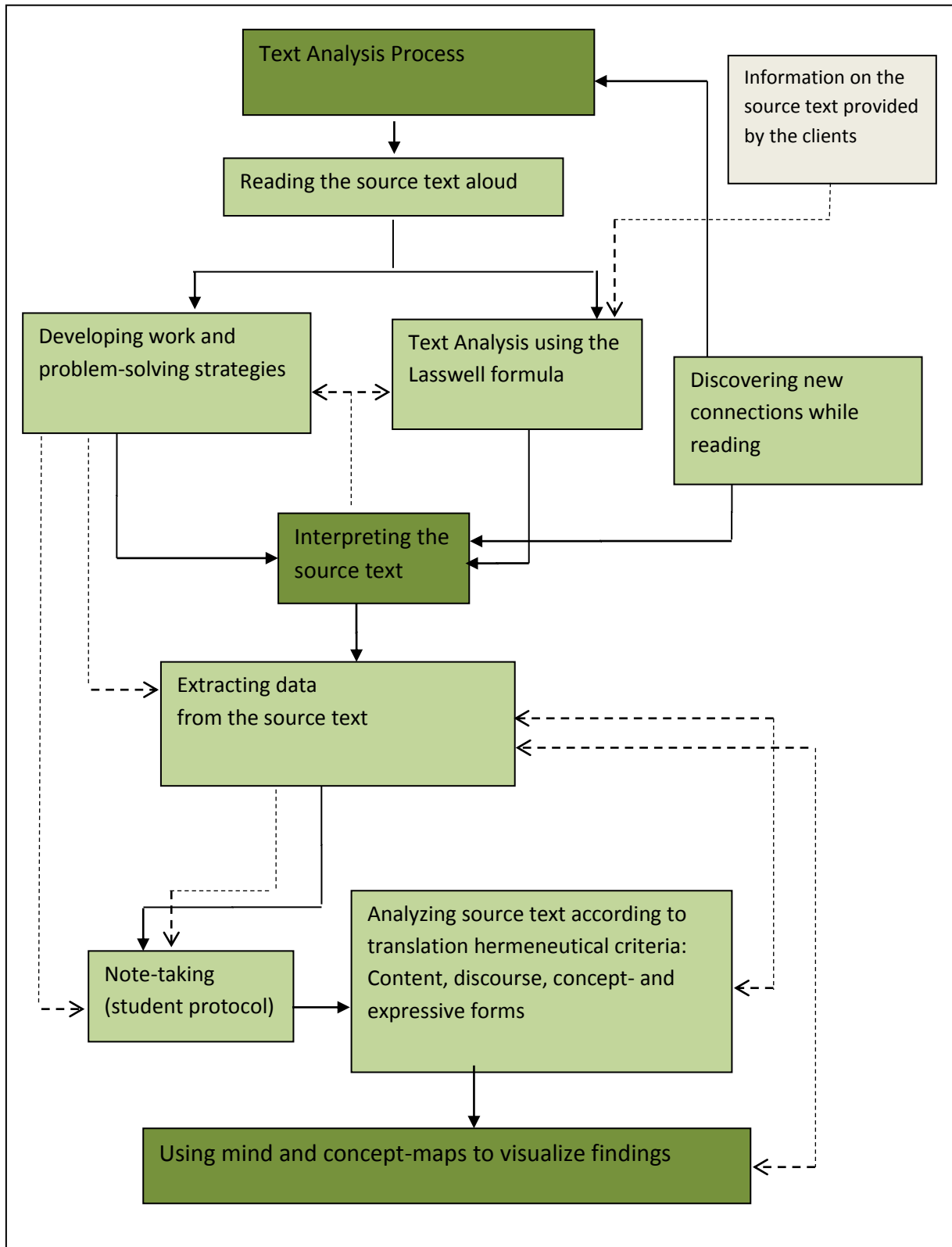


Figure 4: The Process According to the Cooperative Text Analysis Model (Bilić 2013)

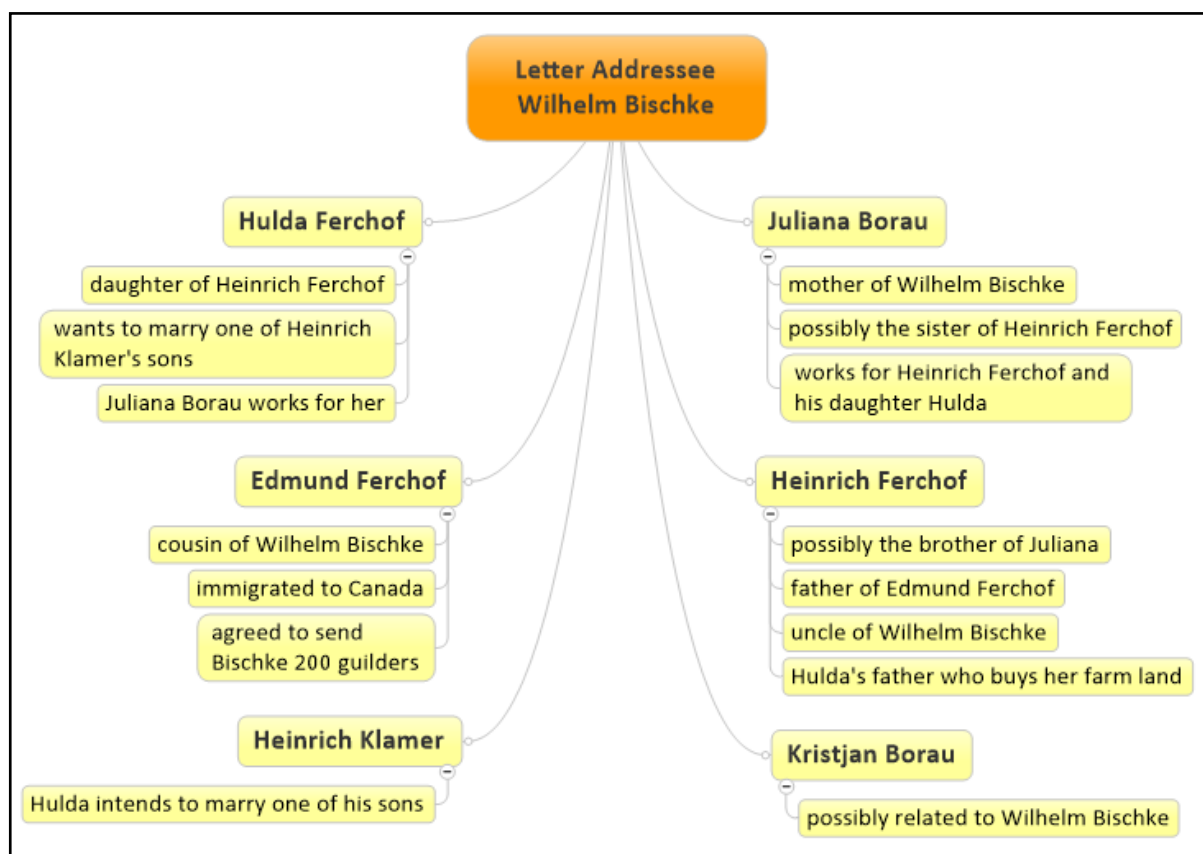


Figure 5: Mind-Mapping the contents of a sample letter dated April 13, 1929

The Method of Cooperative Research allows translators to focus on locating biographical information about the letter writers. According to Wolfgang Helbich, this phase is crucial because emigrant letters are such intensely personal texts (Helbich 2006).

Problem-Based Learning involves small, cooperative peer groups, and can be effectively incorporated for general, literary and specialized text translation alike. Student researchers collaborate in researching information extracted from letters, and then archive their findings using applications such as *Zotero* (Add-on for the Firefox web browser) or similar programs for archiving online findings. The researched data is then visualized using mind-maps.

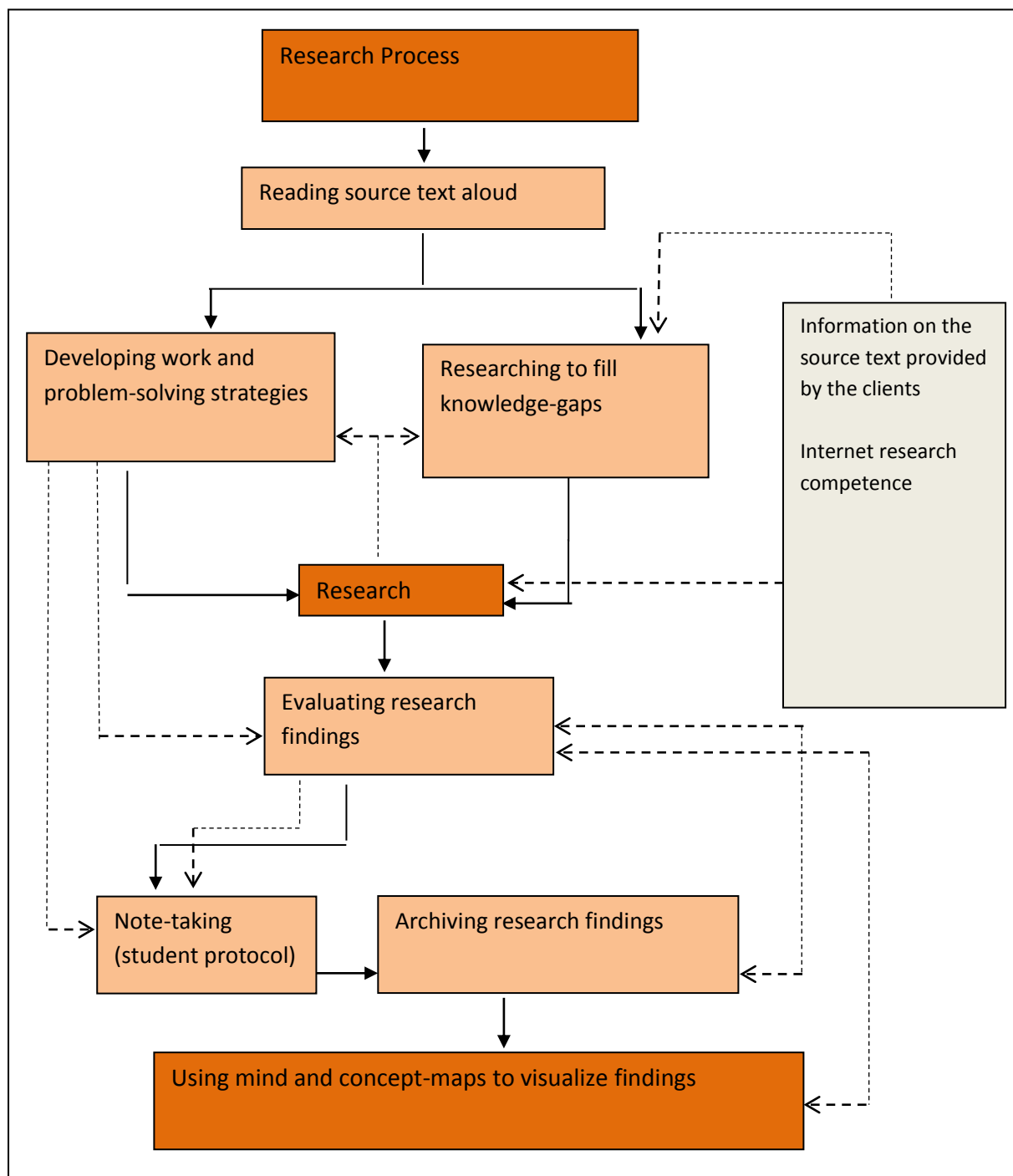


Figure 6: The Process According to the Cooperative Text Analysis Model (Bilić 2013)

Biographical data on letter-addressee Wilhelm Bischke could be accessed in online databases found at *Ancestry.com* and *EllisIsland.org*. These resources provide original immigration records as well as family background data.



Figure 7: Passenger Record of Wilhelm Bischke as found on *EllisIsland.org*

As a result, a *Bischke Family Tree* was created that visualizes family relationships and includes all those individuals mentioned in the letter collection.

4 Collaborative Methods in *Translation Didactics* - Future Prospects

Constructivism and *Problem-Based Learning* promise new avenues for teaching university-level translation courses. Case studies were carried out in translation courses incorporating technical, medical, literary and cultural studies texts, and the results clearly indicate the advantages of cooperative teaching and learning. A broad range of text types were analyzed and translated in small peer groups of students, including technical translation within the fields of software localization and instruction manuals (Bilić), medical texts (Kimmes and Kornelius 2011), African-American musicals (Williams-Holzhausen 2012), Native American narratives (Flynn-Diez 2013), literary texts and the prose of American artist Gwen Frostic (Rouzbehani 2013), as well as historical letters and diaries (Bilić 2013, Thanner 2013).

Implementing the cooperative learning method in a virtual classroom scenario holds promising results. In virtual collaborative translation classes students could collaborate by using modern Internet communication technology. During the reception phase, online mind-

mapping tools, such as *Bubbl.us* and *mind24.com* could be integrated into an online environment. In the production phase of translation, virtual student translation teams would translate source texts by using online word processing programs, such as *Google Docs* and *ZohoWriter*. Mind-mapping and text processing tools could also be integrated in University online learning platforms.

The cooperative learning method could also be applied to teaching modern translation technology tools, such as computer-assisted translation tools, software localization tools, terminology databases and terminology management programs. These software solutions are programmed to enable various translators to work on the same translation project and access the same terminology databases. The use of CAT tools like *Trados*, *Across* or *memoQ* could be taught in an online environment, where students can work on translation projects collaborating entirely via the Internet.

5 Appendix

Sample Letter written to Wilhelm Bischke:

Briefumschlag, Vorderseite: *Wilhelm Bischke*
Harvard Ill. (Harvard, Illinois)
R.F.D. 5. (Rural Free Delivery 5.)
Nort Ameryka
Stempel: WYSZOGROD, 16 IV 29

Briefumschlag, Rückseite: *Heinrich Ferchhof*
wies Miszory (Dorf Miszory)
Gmina Tułowice Poczta Lochaszew(?) (Gemeinde
Tułowice, Poczta=Post)
Woje = Warszawska (Wojwodschaft = Warschau)

Briefempfänger (Ort): *Wilhelm Bischke (Harvard, Illinois, Rural Free*
Delivery 5., Nordamerika)

Briefsender (Ort): *Juliana Borau und Edmund Ferchhof (Miszory, Polen,*
Gmina Tułowice Poczta Lochaszew?) (Gemeinde
Tułowice, Poczta=Post)
Woje = Warszawska (Wojwodschaft = Warschau)

Geschrieben den 13. April 1929

Lieber Sohn im Anfang teile ich dir mit das ich noch am leben aber nicht gesund. lieber Sohn es tuht mir weh das ich von euch kein wissen krig ich schreibe so oft und krig keine antwort ich weis nicht ob ihr noch lebt ~~Schreibt~~

Schreibt mir doch ob ich euch wo mit beleidigt habe dan bite um Verzeihung und bite schreibt mir doch wenigstens den ihr wist doch das ich euch nur alleine habe nur ein einziges Kint ich habe niemand wo ich mich beklagen kan den du weist ~~dan~~ das ich für die Hulda arbeiten ich mus arbeiten und meinem Kinde kann ich niemals die hant reichen er kauft nur seine Tochter lant und ich sol drauf arbeiten es werden schehme stuben sachen angeschafft alles für die Tochter sie sol doch jetzt Heiraten liebes kint ich weis noch nicht wie es mit mir werden wird ich will nicht immer auf andren arbeiten und euch kan ich niemals die hant reichen wen er wird wollen die Hulda ~~alles~~ alles einstecken alles geben dan wil ich mich mit ihm Teilen und dan mus ich wo bei jemanden hin der wird mir für meine Leistungen essen geben. lieber sohn schreib mir doch antwort wie es euch geht ~~of~~ ob ihr auch was zu ~~Essen~~ essen habt ob ihr auch gelt habt. liebes Kint ich schike mit Edmund Ferchof 200 gulden mit nach Kanada er wird es dir gleich schiken liebe Kinder sonst ist nicht so was neues dem Kristjan Borau seine Kinder sind noch ale zu hause, ich will auch noch was berichten das es diesen winter sehr kalt war. und berichte euch das die Enkel Ferchofs noch gesund sind. liebe Kinder es ist noch nicht jeman ~~bewst~~ bewusst mit dem Heiraten mit die Hulda sie will fon die Heinrich Klamer seine Kinder einen Heiraten ich werde es euch s zweite mal beschreiben mit den Heiraten und mit den allen wie es mir wird gehen liebe Kinder wen ihr schreibt zu mir dan Adressiert den Brief an onkel Ferchof. und schreibt mir den deutz und deutlich das ich ihn lesen kan schreib von allen recht viel wie es euch geht in der wirtzschaft von allem den ich bin neugierig. ja schreib mir doch ob du denkst noch mal zurik zu komen ich dir auch schon reisegelt besorgen und so viel geben wie ich werde kennen Liebe Kinder seit Herzlich gegriest von mich ich winsche euch viel glik und segen und einen grus von Onkel Ferchof

Juliana Borau

E. F.

auch ich grise euch lieber Kosien Edmund Ferchof

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