In an increasingly globalised society, to translate language is to transcend communicative differences between cultures. Whereas human translators used to be the sole means of distilling meaning from foreign languages, advances in technologies such as natural language processing software have made it possible to interpret words spoken or written in another tongue.

Yet, as anyone who has used a translating software can testify, some terms and nuances in language still cannot be adequately captured by machines. For now, at least, human translators retain their functional edge, but they cannot afford to be complacent.

To help Singaporean translation and interpretation (T&I) practitioners further develop their capabilities and attain mastery of their skills, the National Translation Committee, formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Communications and Information in 2014, has set up the Translation Talent Development Scheme (TTDS).

This is a co-sponsorship programme where successful recipients can use the grant to subsidise 90 percent of the fees (capped at S$10,000) for translation-related courses, workshops, seminars and certification examinations. T&I practitioners from the private sector with at least three years of combined experience in translation and/or interpretation are eligible for the grant.

“A translator is not unlike a painter who must patiently work on the artwork to get it as close to perfection as possible.”

– Mr Yuen Kum Cheong
Mr Yuen Kum Cheong, a TTDS recipient, first became interested in T&I when he was the Director of Public Outreach and Public Relations at the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore. There, he improved his command of English and Mandarin in legal matters, also translating media articles and interpreting at briefings to overseas Chinese visitors.

“A translator is not unlike a painter who must patiently work on the artwork to get it as close to perfection as possible,” he quipped. As he became more skilful and confident, he eventually decided to start his own translation company, and appreciates how TTDS enables him to develop and deepen his skills, as well as expand his business networks.

“Finding local, regional and international networks to tap into becomes both an opportunity and a challenge,” said Mr Yuen, who holds a Master of Arts in Translation and Interpretation from NTU. “By attending international seminars and conferences, I keep myself abreast of the latest developments in my industry. My business horizon has broadened through meeting like-minded professionals and experts,” he said.

Another TTDS recipient, Ms Lim Xiangyun, who has a Master of Arts in Literary Translation from the University of East Anglia and a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Communication Studies from NTU, said that her experience at The Select Centre’s ‘The Translator’s Lab’ was her first step into the field of translation. When Ms Lim applied for TTDS, she was looking to deepen her skills and experience in applied translation. She strongly believes that language is a dynamic reflection of society and the human condition.

“The hyper-connectedness of our world today will require solutions to potential linguistic and cultural differences, and translation is a wonderful and essential bridge for these gaps,” she said.

Through TTDS and literary translation collaborations, Ms Lim hopes to shine an international spotlight on Singaporean literature and the stories of the Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. “Translating remains one of the most challenging and engaging crafts I have been exposed to,” Ms Lim said.

Interested applicants may visit the TTDS website at www.mci.gov.sg/ttds for more information. Any queries related to this scheme may be emailed to MCI_NTC_Secretariat@mci.gov.sg with the subject line ‘TTDS Enquiry’.

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