English language students' perspectives on the difficulties in translation:

Implications for language education

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Abstract

This study investigates the difficulties in translation and factors influencing the translating process from foreign language students' perspectives at a private university. This work also aims to find out the reasons why foreign language students encounter the difficulties in the process and learn about the different ways in which students majoring in English translate a text into their first language of Vietnamese. Using the mixed method (quantitative and qualitative), the study analysis is based on descriptive statistics using SPSS programme and individual interview results. The results showed that salient findings emerged from the data concerning the relationships between four factors namely *lexis, grammar, culture*, and *existing knowledge* under student's viewpoints. Those elements affected students hierarchically in their process of translation, in which *lexis* was the most difficult factor while *grammar* seemed to be less remarkable. Therefore, based on the findings, it is suggested to adjust, modify, and select appropriate translation materials in the curricula in higher education to well equip students with those elements to compete in the translation industry.

Keywords: translation; language student; difficulties; perspectives; factors

1. Introduction

Since the advent of translation, people have high expectations for positive interaction between different languages. For that reason, translation has always been an area that focuses on developing in education in general, and other fields in particular.

Vietnamese and English are languages from the Eastern and the Western, so there are many differences in their structures of grammar, vocabulary, and culture. These factors in general might affect students' translation ability. Thus, the concern is that students would encounter some difficulties to have a good translation. Larson (1998) noted that in a good translation, meaning is key when translators use any techniques to translate a text from one to another language. The importance of translation has always been manifesting through each stage of civilized development, however, there are still certain obstacles for students to approach this subject and to an extent those difficulties affect students' translation performance.

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1.1.   Literature review

1.1.1 Definition of translation

The term *translation* is a broad category and defined differently according to academic fields. Bell (1991) described translation as a process of transferring meaning between two languages, and it is also preserving semantic equivalencies. In addition, translation is the replacing of a document's presentation in a target language shows its equivalence with a source language.

In the book "A textbook of translation", a language could be rendered persistently according to the author's perspectives when translating a word into another language (Peter, 1998). Hartmann & Stork (1972) had some points in common with Peter (1988) when they stated that the consequence of converting a material text from one language into another constitutes a translation.

Nida (1991) stated that translation is as the procedure of selecting words for a target language to meet the closet natural equivalent meanings of a source language while Conway (2012) defined translation is as a competitive concept between two main academic disciplines including anthropology/ethnography and cultural/postcolonial studies. It showed differences in cultural formats as explained by people in different cultures and by movement (asylum, political migration). Also, it represented the integration of the language in the fields of information, knowledge, and others. Additionally, Larson (1998) indicated that the term is the structural component of language which is literally seen in print or heard in speech.

1.1.2 Influence of lexis (vocabulary)

Vocabulary constitutes to create opportunities for students in learning translation subjects and translating texts well. Arono & Nadrah (2019) supported that most students have faced difficulties in the translation process due to the lack of vocabulary.

Most English words have many meanings, so the exact meaning of a word can be appropriately expressed only in a particular context. Therefore, translators have to be aware of the meaning of words in different situations (Larson ,1998).

1.1.3 Influence of grammar

English and Vietnamese indeed have considerable differences in grammatical structures, vocabulary, and cultures. Tichelaar (2002) explained that English belongs to the Germanic language family while Vietnamese belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. These two languages are inherently different in characteristics leading to the differences in words and grammar.

If compared to other languages, English goes by very tightly bound within the sentence structures while Vietnamese language is much more flexible by the way it does not always use articles. Baker (2018) revealed that an incorrect grammatical structure is not acceptable in most contexts, especially in translation, so it forces the translator to follow a certain process.

1.1.4 Influence of culture

Culture is considered difficult for translators, so to overcome linguistic barriers when they translate a text, they need to deal with cultural barriers (Komissarov, 1991). Larson (1998) detailed that a word or a phrase that has a constructive connotation in one culture may have a destructive implication in another.

Additionally, it is indicated that what is considered related to translation is evenly difficult to convert with any accuracy (Burke & Hsia, 2007). Nida (1991) analysed deeply the cause of cultural formation, and at the same time made an objective comment regarding the translators' styles while Peter (1988) noted that the difficulties involved using obscure terms where a literal translation would distort meanings.

1.1.5 Influence of existing knowledge

A professional translator ensures that there are enough necessary skills, so translators need the complete knowledge that original sentences in the text should be always judged in the context of their societies (Asad, 1986). Gerding-Salas (2000) emphasized that translator knowledge covering a deep cultural scope is the key to becoming a professional translator.

However, understanding too much of the subject matter also can lead to difficulties for the translators. As a matter of fact, translators lack the inefficiency for imagination which leads to common translating over the heads because they unconsciously assume the audiences know all what they translate (Nida, 1991).

1.2. Research questions

The following questions will be answered in this study:

1. What are the most and the least difficult factors affecting students' translating process?
2. To what extent do English-majored students perceive the difficulties in translation?

2. Method

2.1. Sample/Participants

The number of participants is 125 English-majored students at a private university in Vietnam. There would not be a selection based on age or gender. At the time of conducting the questionnaire, all of the students had finished their translation courses. Their translation skills were graded at the intermediate level with translated texts of various fields namely culture, tourism, education, technology, medical, and so forth. The participants for interviews included in the research were 16 students out of 125, who represented the highest and lowest mean scores for each factor out of four factors namely lexis, grammar, culture, and existing knowledge.

2.2. Instrument(s)

To provide a complete understanding of the research problems and address the research questions, the researchers used a descriptive study mixing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Particularly, the instruments included a 5-point-Likert-scale questionnaire and individual interviews. The data gathered were used to utilize levels of difficulty in translation, its relations, and continuum between four factors that contribute to the measures of finding solutions.

The quantitative method was conducted through structured questions with 16 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = extremely easy, 2 = easy, 3 = neutral, 4 = difficult, 5 = extremely difficult) to find out students' perspectives on the difficulties in translation. Sixteen items were categorized into four domains namely *lexis, grammar, culture*, and *existing knowledge*. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from Arono & Nadrah (2019). The Cronbach's Alpha value of the questionnaire (α = .864) was considered reliable.

The qualitative method was of individual interviews. The interviewees were asked 18 sets of questions related to the questionnaire.

2.3. Data collection procedures and data analysis

The questionnaire was utilised on the platform of Google Form and written in Vietnamese language in order to avoid misunderstandings because the participants are all Vietnamese.

Sixteen participants who perceived the highest and lowest in the mean scores according to the total results attended the interviews in order to figure out the reasons why English-majored students perceived the difficulties in translation courses at different levels. Face-to-face interviews were carried out at the arranged time with participants. The interviews were recorded, then transcribed and translated into English language. The data of interviews were interpreted and analysed by using a manual coding system.

The data were analysed by the (IBM) SPSS Statistics version 20 software. Descriptive tests were used to find out the frequency and level of difficulties from student's perspectives.

3. Results

3.1 Results collected from the questionnaire

A descriptive test was used to analysed the general description of difficulty level students perceived
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Table 1. Mean scores of participants' perspectives on difficulties in translation

Domains	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Lexis	125	2.00	5.00	3.94	.58
Grammar	125	1.00	5.00	2.89	.79
Culture	125	1.00	5.00	3.64	.80
Existing knowledge	125	1.75	5.00	3.82	.73
General Mean	125	1.63	4.75	3.57	.53

As shown in Table 1, the overall mean score of the participants performed in the questionnaire presented was at a high level (M = 3.57). The computed mean score was significantly higher than the average mean of the 5-point Likert scale (M = 3.00). The result indicated that participants' perspectives of translation was nearly at a difficult level. The results were in line with the findings of Arono & Nadrah (2019). The level of difficulty could be arranged as follows: lexis (M = 3.94), existing knowledge (M = 3.82), culture (M = 3.64), and grammar (M = 2.89).

3.1.1 Lexical analysis

Table 2. Mean score of participants' perspectives on lexical difficulties in translation

Categories	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Technical terms	125	2.00	5.00	4.09	.81
Idioms and proverbs	125	2.00	5.00	3.96	.79
Metaphors and metonymies	125	1.00	5.00	4.00	.85
Ancient to modern words/phrases	125	2.00	5.00	3.71	.93
General Mean	125	2.00	5.00	3.94	.58

Table 2 shows that the overall mean score of the participants performed in the questionnaire presented was at a high level (M = 3.94). The computed mean score was significantly higher than the average mean of the 5-point Likert scale (M = 3.00), which meant vocabulary was graded at a difficult level. The results were in line with the findings of Arono & Nadrah (2019) related to vocabulary factor in translation. The level of difficulty could be arranged as follows: non-specialized stems (M = 4.09), conveying words, phrases using metaphors and metonymies from the original text to the translated text (M = 4.00), transmitting idioms, proverbs from the original text to the translated text (M = 3.96), translating words and phrases from ancient to modern styles (M = 3.71).

3.1.2 Grammar analysis

Table 3. Mean score of participants' perspectives on grammar difficulties in translation

Categories	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Subject-verb agreement	125	1.00	5.00	3.02	.88
Syntax	125	1.00	5.00	3.02	.90
Articles	125	1.00	5.00	2.98	1.00
Singular/plural Countable/uncountable nouns	125	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.06
General Mean	125	1.00	5.00	2.89	.79

As can be seen in Table 3, the overall mean score of the participants performed in the questionnaire presented in the table was at a low level (M = 2.89). The computed mean score was not significantly lower than the average mean of the 5-point Likert scale (M = 3.0). The results were in line with the findings of Arono & Nadrah (2019). They believed that the participants got some problems in translation because of grammatical factors, but grammar was considered a relatively easy for them. The level of difficulty could be arranged as follows: subject-verb agreement and tenses (M = 3.02), article (M = 2.98), and countable, uncountable nouns; singular and plural nouns (M = 2.57).

3.1.3 Culture analysis

Table 4. Mean score of participants' perspectives on cultural difficulties in translation

Categories	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Local culture	125	1.00	5.00	3.50	.90
Regional culture	125	1.00	5.00	3.70	.89
National culture	125	1.00	5.00	3.66	1.0
International culture	125	1.00	5.00	3.71	1.0
General Mean	125	1.00	5.00	3.64	.80

As can be noticed, the overall mean score of the participants performed in the domain presented in Table 4 was at a high level (M = 3.64). In other words, participants found culture was nearly difficult. The computed mean score was significantly higher than the average mean of the 5-point Likert scale (M = 3.00). The level of difficulty could be arranged from the highest to the lowest as follows:

international element (M = 3.71), regional element (M = 3.70), national element (M= 3.66), and local element (M= 3.50).

3.1.4 Existing knowledge factor analysis

Table 5. Mean score of participants' perspectives on existing knowledge difficulties in translation

Categories	N	Min.	Max.	Mean (M)	SD
Broad knowledge	125	2.00	5.00	4.06	.90
Social knowledge	125	2.00	5.00	3.78	.94
Interdisciplinary knowledge	125	1.00	5.00	3.92	.97
Scientific knowledge	125	1.00	5.00	3.55	1.01
General Mean	125	1.75	5.00	3.82	.73

The questionnaire presented on the existing knowledge factor was at a nearly high level (M = 3.82). The computed mean score was notably higher than the average mean of the 5-point Likert scale (M = 3.0). As in Table 5, the maximum mean value of 4.06 states that out of 125 respondents who felt quite difficult when accessing and translating texts that required a deep and broad knowledge of a culture or multi-culture that slightly higher mean scores than the other domains. The results were in line with the findings of the researchers. The level of difficulty could be arranged as follows: cultural or multicultural knowledge (M = 4.06), social knowledge (M = 3.78), scientific knowledge (M = 3.92), and interdisciplinary knowledge (M = 3.55).

3.2 Results collected from the interview questions

With the desire to make the study more reliable, the researchers interviewed and recorded sixteen participants. The interviews revealed that all interviewees (100%) agreed that translation plays an important role in English- majored students. Over half of the interviewees agreed that translation was difficult to translate. However, some interviewees said that translation was not quite difficult because of supportive tools. The only student P said that translation was not difficult.

Besides, to create a perfect translation, *lexis* and *grammar* constituted a good translation as many of the participants confirmed. To improve these difficulties in translating, the students also had some ways depending on different conditions and specifications in their learning context. There were 6 participants looking up on Google Translate and dictionary. While others said that they needed to improve more vocabulary while the other participants gave the different solution that the translators needed to prepare difficult words in advance or kept the words and explained details. Therefore, participants did not share the same opinion about solutions.

In the interviewing process, when interviewees were asked among the four elements *grammar*, *vocabulary, culture,* and *existing knowledge*, which one played the most important role in performing a perfect translation. The data revealed that many of the interviewees of the total said that vocabulary was the most important as stated.

"Translators with a rich source of vocabulary will be able to access and translate easier with the source text. Without vocabulary, it is impossible to finish a text or a task. A good piece of translation depends most on the meanings for words." (Participant C)

Moreover, most of the participants acknowledged that they lacked vocabulary about specialized words related to politics, medical care, or health that made them feel difficult in the translation process. However, the participants also shared some solutions to improve these difficulties such as using a dictionary, learning new words online, using Google Translate, studying on trusted sources (BBC, or VOA). The most effective way that most students chose to solve their difficulties was to read more translated articles like newspapers, magazines, and books.

"I can learn vocabulary on the Internet such as video clips on YouTube. Sometimes, Google Translate can help. Reading more English newspapers can increase number of specialized vocabulary words as BBC news." (Participant N).

Except for lexis, the results revealed that most interviewees agreed they regularly had difficulties in grammar, but many of them supported that the grammar was not a big problem as they can ask for help from grammar checking tools.

"Grammar is also a factor affecting translation, but I can handle these grammatical errors thanks to Grammarly or Google Translate. Checking grammar after translation can help improve my accuracy next time, so I rarely make grammatical mistakes then." (Participant D)

More interestingly, based on the analysis of the interview data, it is explicit that cultural translation is one of the factors that strongly impacts the student translating process. It relies profoundly on translators' understanding of the various cultures of different countries. Especially, without the support of translation tools, it becomes even more challenging to approach culture through translation. When being asked queries associated with cultural elements, the interviewees had numerous similarities in their answers, thereby showing that cultural factors actually affected their learning process of translation. They also gave some suggestions for improvement as getting more exposure to cultural aspects from various sources on the Internet or books before translating a text.

"Having not been exposed to a certain culture, I can only understand its cultural words to a certain extent, it is not completely accurate in comparison with the meaning that the original text is aiming at. I think it is important to get more knowledge about the cultures in which the text is involved by reading books about cultures or do some search online." (Participant J)

Existing knowledge is the factor that most participants encountered during their translating process. They reported that some scientific and specialized fields required much knowledge to understand before translating a text. Although vocabulary and grammar were not a big problem, the participants also felt very challenging to have a good translation in a field of study that they were not familiar with. Some participants suggested that they needed more reading comprehension or support from experts from those specialized fields.

"Before translating a scientific text, it is stressful because more time and searching are required to understand some technical terms or language use so that a good translation can be processed. Sometimes, asking for support from some experts or lecturers is a good idea, but self-searching and learning by self is faster. (Participants E and G)

More importantly, participants all agreed that four factors (grammar, vocabulary, culture, and existing knowledge) were essential in their translating process if they wanted to become a professional translator. Many of them thought that a good translation was impossible to be made if one factor was missed. Therefore, the only way to become an expert in translation was to improve their competency in many fields as well as their language skills.

"I'd say that all those factors are important for me to become a master in translation industry. It takes a long time to learn many skills and get knowledge about many areas so that I can translate accurate information as required in a test or in my future work. (Participant M)

4. Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire and data analysis focused mainly on four factors namely lexis, grammar, culture, and background knowledge. Firstly, it can be seen from the findings that the difficulty in lexis was rated high, which was considered the most difficult factor in translation such as specialized terms; idioms and proverbs; metaphors and metonymies; ancient words, were also scored high index when they were analysed individually. According to the analysis results, the terminology was the leading factor making it difficult for students to translate, which was similar to the results from Arono & Nadrah (2019). The following were idioms and proverbs. This result was in accordance with the study in the book of Baker (2018) when he analysed that student had the most difficulty translating specialized words, followed by idioms and proverbs.

The second most difficult factor was existing knowledge as specified social knowledge, scientific knowledge, and interdisciplinary knowledge. The result was in line with Asad (1986), which pointed out a target text should be judged correctly in the social context and culture. Additionally, the second remarkable aspect of the existing knowledge factor was scientific knowledge that was similar to Montgomery (2010).

The third most influential factor after the analysis was culture-related, which was accorded with Komissarov (1991) and Larson (1998). Specifically, the international culture accounted for the highest difficulty standard since international culture was quite extraneous and difficult to access if they did not have enough cultural knowledge. Another point worth mentioning was regional knowledge. Therefore, the research results showed that regional elements had a significant influence. Besides, the factors of local culture and national culture were also influential. The result was similarly discussed by Burke & Hsia (2007) in the book "Cultural translation in early modern Europe".

As for grammar, students generally felt quite confident because they had a solid foundation in grammar during their access to English. The mean score of grammar reached M = 2.89, which was still at the easy level (near average). However, there were still a few participants mentioning some grammar points such as run-on sentences, plural and singular verbs, type 3 of conditional sentences, misconception of past simple and present perfect, which made it difficult for them to translate a document.

In addition to the difficulties that students encountered in translation, they also offered solutions to improve those difficulties themselves including using Google Translate and dictionaries, studying on YouTube, reading more articles, newspapers, books, learning on Quizlet. However, most students relied on Google (80%) and technology (applications check grammar and vocabulary) that is also the main reason causing difficulties for students when translating because, without the help of the translation tools, over 90% of interviewees cannot translate correctly the text. Based on the result of the interviews, students showed some elements that translators needed to equip in translation work. Besides, the results also illustrated that there was a relationship between four factors that influenced students' performance in translating. Furthermore, they supported that mistranslation of a factor (grammar, lexis, culture, or existing knowledge) in the translation might lead to the errors of the rest. The reasons were shared by most students that a good translation needed a harmonious combination of four factors.

5. Conclusions

Analytical results of both questionnaires and interviews are compatible. It is clear that translation is a difficult course faced by the students of English-majored students in university. The results showed that the level of difficulty was hierarchical as *lexis, existing knowledge, culture* and *grammar*.

Specifically, *lexis* was the most difficult factor and *grammar* seemed to be less difficult to students in doing translation courses. Lack of vocabulary caused student's failure in their translating process. In addition, students were also influenced by terminologies (political or medical terms) and idioms that caused their translation to become rough and not accurate as required. Furthermore, poor existing knowledge about various fields resulted in mistranslation or misunderstanding the original texts. Therefore, it is suggested to improve students' vocabulary range as well as existing or cultural knowledge to perform the highest-quality translation. More importantly, it is also an implication for language educators and translators to select appropriate teaching and learning materials along with the curricula in higher education in order to assist students in the translation industry.

6. Acknowledgements

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