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Translation Error Analysis of EFL Students: Identifying Challenges and Strategies for Improvement

تحليل أخطاء الترجمة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: تحديد التحديات واستراتيجيات تحسينها

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Abstract:

Pedagogical translation plays an important role in honing students' communicative skills, and enhancing their abilities to convey a meaning from a language (source) to another (target) and to decipher the morphological, syntaxical and semantic differences between them. This study examines translation errors committed by a sample of third-year Bachelor students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Ghardaia, Algeria. 50 students were required to translate a 92-word text from Arabic into English. Content analysis was adopted to investigate translation errors made by students and the errors were classified according to Liao's (2010) taxonomy of translation errors. The study revealed a prevalence of language errors (47.44%), followed by rendition errors (37.22%) and miscellaneous errors (15.33%). It emphasizes the need to enhance students' spelling skills, improve grammar instruction to address language-related errors, and expose students to a wide array of text types to enhance their lexical competence.

Keywords: Translation Studies; Pedagogical Translation; Translation Errors; EFL learners; Error Analysis; learning needs.

الملخص:

الملخص تؤدي الترجمة البيداغوجية دوراً هاماً في صقل المهارات التواصلية لدى الطلاب، وتعزيز قدراتهم على نقل معنى من لغة مترجم منها إلى لغة مترجم إليها، وفك رموز الاختلافات الصرفية والنحوية والدلالية بينهما. وتبحث هذه الدراسة في أخطاء الترجمة التي ارتكبتها عينة من طلاب السنة الثالثة (ليسانس) تخصص لغة إنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بجامعة غرداية، الجزائر، حيث طُلب من 50 طالباً ترجمة نص صحفي مكون من 92 كلمة

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من العربية إلى الإنجليزية، وقد اعتمدنا على تقنية تحليل المحتوى لتقصي أخطاء الترجمة التي ارتكبها الطلاب، وقمنا بتصنيف الأخطاء وفقاً لتصنيف لياو" (Liao, 2010) لأخطاء الترجمة. وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى سيطرة للأخطاء اللغوية (47.4%)، لا سيما الأخطاء القواعدية والإملائية، تليها أخطاء الصياغة (37.22%)، ثم أخطاء متنوعة (15.33%) .وأكدت على ضرورة تعزيز مهارات الهجاء لدى الطلاب، وتحسين تدريس القواعد لمعالجة الأخطاء اللغوية، وتعريض الطلاب لمجموعة واسعة من أنواع النصوص لتعزيز كفاءتهم المعجمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: دراسات الترجمة، الترجمة التعليمية، أخطاء الترجمة، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تحليل الأخطاء، الاحتياجات التعليمية.

Introduction

There has been controversy among language teachers and practitioners regarding the usage of translation as an instrument for learning and a medium of instruction in language classroom. After the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) fell in disuse, owing to its incapacity of developing learners' communicative skills, and in which translation had a central role in foreign language Teaching and learning. The ineffectiveness of this teaching method resulted in the widespread belief that both the mother tongue and translation should be avoided in Learning a foreign language (Leonardi, 2010). The emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 20th century, led to the discardment of translation from the teaching process, as this approach relied on authentic communication and the leveraging of the foreign language as a means of communication in real-life settings (cook, 2010). Recently, there has been a regain of interest towards using translation as a pedagogical tool, and considering it as a fifth skill that foreign language learners need to develop along with the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (cook, 2010)

It is worth noting that using translation as a pedagogical tool differs from teaching translation for professional purposes; pedagogical translation aims to enhance learners' language skills, compare and contrast linguistic structures between source and target languages, and to explore cultural differences and similarities embodied in language (Duff, 1989; Cook, 2010; Kramsch, 1993). However, professional translation zooms in on ensuring that the original text's intended meanings are preserved in the target one (Munday, 2016). Moreover, some scholars advocate that exploiting real-world texts in pedagogical translation would make the learning process more engaging and serve as a springboard for students seeking careers in professional translation (Kiraly, 2000; Carreres, 2006; Gonzalez-Davies, 2004).

Although the words "mistake" and "error" are sometimes used interchangeably, they convey different meanings; errors are typically described as consistent deviation from the target language grammatical and syntactic rules, often stemming from a lack of knowledge—for instance, not knowing the rule of subject-verb agreement in English. In contrast, mistakes are considered to be unintentional, momentary lapses caused by carelessness or forgetfulness (Botley, 2015).

Translation errors account for the errors committed in the process of translation, whether by translators, trainee translators, or students in translating a message from a language (source) to another (target), and can be linguistic, cultural or technical, depending on the translation context. Identifying errors in translation, mainly in language classroom, is very important in language teaching process. Errors in translation often reflect deeper issues, such as misunderstandings of grammar, vocabulary, or pragmatics

(Baker, 2018), therefore, analysing foreign language learners' translation errors is very effective in identifying the learners' gaps and weaknesses, and design courses to bridge those gaps.

Researchers have suggested several taxonomies of translation errors, Pym (1992) assumed that translation errors stem from language, pragmatics or culture, and distinguished between two types of translation errors; binary and non-binary errors. Binary errors are language-related, and they are either correct or wrong, whereas non-binary errors are translation-related and are not completely wrong but can be enhanced .

Nord (1997) classed translation errors into four categories; Pragmatic errors, which are linked to the communicative function of the source text and the inability to interpret its message; cultural errors, which derive from the singularities of the source culture and the target culture and occur when the translator fails to convey culture-specific items properly; linguistic errors, which are related to grammar, lexis and syntax; and text-specific errors, which depend on the type of the text and its conventional norms.

Conversly, Liao (2010) grouped translation errors into three categories; language errors (grammatical mistakes, awkward expressions, inappropriate register, excessive free or literal translation, and Incorrect character, improper punctuation marks or inconsistency in term translation), rendition errors (misinterpreting the source text, insufficient rendering, which differentiates the translation from the original text, excessive rendering, which differentiates the translation from the original text, subtle difference of meaning between the source and target texts; insufficient accuracy, and misinterpretation due to unawareness of terms.), and miscellaneous errors (missing parts in the target text; omission).

Popescu (2013) distinguished between three types of translation errors; linguistics errors, committed at the morphological and syntactic levels, comprehension errors, stemming from the misunderstanding of the words of the original text, and translation errors, consisting in failing to convey the exact meaning by means of omissions, additions and inaccurate translations.

It can be noted, from the aforementioned taxonomies, that translation errors can occur at the language level (grammar, lexis, syntax), the translation process level (mistranslation, omission, over-translation) and the cultural level (inability to convey cultural elements contained in the source text). This study aims to highlight the translation errors made by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with a main focus on a case study of students of English at the University of Ghardaia, Algeria. This study is significant in terms of identifying learners' translation errors may help us identify their language lacks and recommend solutions to address them.

1-Literature Review

Several studies have addressed translation errors committed by EFL learners. Yusuf et al. (2023) explored translation mistakes made by 15 students after translating texts from English to Malay. The study revealed that 69.3 % of the errors were language related, 27% of the errors were rendition errors, and 3.7% were miscellaneous errors .

Cúc (2017) investigated translation errors among 36 Vietnamese students of English, and found that translation and language errors were the most frequent ones among students. The researcher attributed the source of these errors to intra-lingual or inter-lingual interference between English and Vietnamese .

Ababneh (2019) studied translation errors made by a sample of Saudi students and concluded that unfamiliarity with English knowledge and some cultural and religious terms related to the target culture, as well as literal translation are the main causes of translations errors committed by students.

Notwithstanding the plethora of studies on translation errors among EFL learners in different academic contexts and settings, scarce research works were dedicated to investigate translation errors made by students of English in the Algerian context, while bearing in mind that Algerian EFL learners navigate a multilingual environment involving Arabic, French, and English. The present study endeavors to bridge this gap in literature and highlight translation errors made by case study of Algerian EFL learners and their pedagogical implications.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis and descriptive statistics to examine translation errors. It adopts a case study design, focusing on 50 third-year undergraduate students of English at the University of Ghardaia, who participated in a translation test from Arabic to English. The students were required to translate a journalistic text of 92 words, from Arabic into English, about the impact of Trump's second presidential term on the Palestinian cause, without being allowed to use dictionaries. The test responses were analyzed using Liao's (2010) error taxonomy. The analysis combined content analysis for error categorization with descriptive statistics to quantify the frequency and percentage of errors, providing insights into common translation challenges faced by students.

3. Results and Discussion

The content analysis method was used to compile the translation errors committed by EFL learners at the University of Ghardaia, Algeria. The errors were categorized, as pointed out supra, according to Liao's (2010) taxonomy. The percentage of each category of errors was calculated using the following formula :

$$\frac{\text{Number of errors in each category}}{\text{Total number of errors}} \times 100$$

Table 1: Frequency of Translation Errors

Type of errors	Number	Percentage
Language errors	297	47.44%
Rendition errors	233	37.22%
Miscellaneous errors	96	15.33%
Total	626	100%

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the translation errors made by the EFL students at the University of Ghardaia, Algeria. The data collected show that language-related errors account for 47.44% of the 626 errors identified. This high frequency suggests that a significant portion of the students' difficulties stems from a lack of mastery over the target language structures rather than a misunderstanding

of the source text itself. Rendition errors ranked second with 233 (37.22%) out of the total number of errors, indicating challenges in transferring the intended meaning accurately across linguistic boundaries, whereas miscellaneous errors constitute 15.33 % (96 errors). Therefore, it is revealed that language errors dominate other types of errors and the main focus should be put on students' language proficiency. It is crucial to note that while these linguistic lapses are prevalent throughout the analyzed corpus, they represent the raw output of the student participants; as such, they reflect the learners' current interlanguage rather than the author's academic style. These categories of errors will be broken down into sub-categories in order to have a clear idea about common patters and error trends, offering a more accurate view of the specific syntactic and morphological hurdles these students face.

Table 2: Sub-categories of Language Errors

Sub-category of language errors	Number	Percentage
Grammatical Mistakes	225	75.7%
Awkward Expressions	64	21.5%
Inappropriate Register	1	0.3%
Excessive Free or Literal Translation Mistakes:	7	2.3%
Incorrect character, improper punctuation marks or inconsistency in term translation.	0	0%

The breakdown of the sub-categories of language mistakes shows a prevalence of grammatical mistakes (75.5%) followed by awkward expressions (21.5%), inappropriate register (0.3%) and excessive free or literal translation mistakes (2.3%). The overwhelming dominance of grammatical errors suggests that students struggle significantly with the formal mechanics of the English language, which undermines the structural integrity of their translations.

Grammatical mistakes comprise spelling mistakes, the most frequent of which are; decisions misspelled as "desisions/ disesions", especially misspelled as "espicilly/ specially/ spacialy", and "Washington" misspelled as "Washton, Washenton, and Washinton". These orthographic lapses indicate a reliance on phonetic spelling rather than a mastery of English spelling conventions. Grammatical mistakes include also conjugation errors such as "he discrib/ descript/" and "he describe her" instead of "He described it", and "decisions effecting" instead of "decisions affecting". They also include mistakes related to subject-verb agreement (such as "Washington policies plays" instead of "washington policies play") and incorrect choice of grammatical category (palestine forces" instead of "Palestinian forces" and "presedent/ presidency election" instead of "presidential elections"). Such errors highlight a fundamental deficit in morphological awareness, where students fail to distinguish between nouns and adjectives in a functional context.

Awkward expressions comprise unnatural phrasing such as “The killed of Yahia Sinwar” instead of “The killing of Yahia Sinwar” and “The big role that played Washington policy” instead of “ The big role played by Washington’s policy”. These instances reflect a lack of "translational competence" where the student understands the vocabulary but fails to organize it into a stylistically acceptable sequence in the Target Language (TL).

We have identified one phrase as inappropriate register in which the student used “big hitter” to express the meaning of “fierce opponent”. While creative, such a choice demonstrates a mismatch between the informal tone of the expression and the formal academic or journalistic nature of the source text. Excessive free or literal translation mistakes account for 7% and may stem from the impact of the mother tongue structure (Arabic) on the English translation delivered by the students. This interlingual interference, or "negative transfer," often leads students to map Arabic syntactic patterns directly onto English, resulting in non-standard constructions. Excessive free or literal translation mistakes include “The big role of Washington policies that play on” which is a literal translation of “الدور الكبير الذي تلعبه سياسات واشنطن ”, as well as “ group of weapons” as a translation of “ميليشيات مسلحة ”. These findings underscore the need for pedagogical interventions that emphasize the distinct syntactic differences between the two languages to prevent such direct calques.

Table 3: Sub-categories of Rendition Errors

Sub-category of rendition errors	Number	Percentage
Misinterpreting the source text.	50	21.5%
Insufficient rendering, which differentiates the translation from the original text.	45	19.3%
Excessive rendering, which differentiates the translation from the original text.	35	15%
Subtle difference of meaning between the source and target texts; insufficient accuracy.	55	23.6%
Misinterpretation due to unawareness of terms.	48	20.6 %

Table 3 shows that insufficient accuracy constitutes 23.6% of the sub-categories of rendition errors, followed by 21.5% for misinterpreting the source text, 20.6% for misinterpretation due to unawareness of terms, 19.3% for insufficient rendering, and 15% for Excessive rendering. The statistical distribution suggests that while students may grasp the general gist of a passage, they frequently fail to capture the precise semantic nuances required for a professional translation.

Examples of insufficient accuracy include translating ” فصائل المقاومة “ into « revolutioners » instead of « resistance factions », translating « نقل السفارة الأمريكية“ into « transition of ambasad » instead of « moving the American embassy to Jerusalem”, as the word ” نقل“ can convey different meanings in different contexts, and translating it into “transition” in this context is insufficient. Another example is translating استقرار“ ” المنطقةinto “ country peace” instead of “stability of the region” as the word منطقة “ region ”, in this context, refers to the Middle East and is broader that “country”. These inaccuracies reflect a lack of terminological precision, where students settle for "near-equivalents" that ultimately distort the geographical or political scope of the original message .

Examples related to the misinterpretation of the source text include translating ” فصائل المقاومة “ into “resistance chapters” instead of “resistance factions” as the ”فصل“ in Arabic can mean faction or chapter,

therefore, “resistance chapters” misinterprets the meaning of the source text. Another example include the rendering of ”الساحة الدولية“ into « the international yard » instead of the « international arena » as there is no such thing as “international yard” and this represents a misunderstanding of the source text which addressed the big role played by Washington on the international arena or field. This particular error highlights a failure to recognize collocations and idiomatic expressions, leading students to produce awkward and semantically incorrect literalisms .

48errors have been identified due to unawareness of terms, as unfamiliarity with the meanings of the original text’s words leads to wrong translations in the target language. Among the errors that fall within this sub-category, we identified the translation of « ميليشيات مسلحة“ into « mellichia millitery » and « milichyat arms » instead of « armed militias »; students used transliteration to translate the word “militia” into “milichyat” as it is pronounced in Arabic. This reliance on transliteration serves as a clear indicator of a linguistic "dead end," where the student lacks the requisite Target Language (TL) vocabulary and resorts to phonetic borrowing to fill the gap. On the other hand « انتخابات رئاسية“ ,was translated into « Prisedent options » instead of « presidential elections », and we can notice here a language-related mistake (misspelling of the word president) and a rendition error due to the unawareness of how to render the word « انتخابات“into English .

Insufficient rendering accounts for 19.3% of rendition mistakes, examples of this sub-category include the translation of « استقرار المنطقة“ into « region establishment instead of “region stability”, the translation of « تصريحات“ into « interview” instead of “declarations”, and the translation of « تأثير“ into « reflection » instead of « effect or impact”. In these cases, the student provides a translation that is too weak or tangential to the source meaning, effectively diluting the author’s original intent.

Excessive rendering accounts for 15% of the rendition errors identified and consist of over-translating meanings in the translated text. Examples of this sub-category comprise the translation of « أعلن ترامب فوزه في الانتخابات »into « Trump posted his win in the elections » instead of “Trump announced his win in the elections” as it is not specified in the source text that Trump announced his victory in the elections by making a post on social media. Such errors demonstrate an over-reliance on extralinguistic assumptions, where students inject personal interpretations or modern context into the text that does not exist in the source material.

Miscellaneous errors consist of omitted parts in the target texts and account for 15.33% of the translation errors identified. Students may resort to omitting certain words in the target texts because of unawareness of their equivalents in the target language. The most omitted words were Embassy (12 times), resistance factions (10 times), presidential elections (07 times) and armed militias (06 times). This strategy of avoidance suggests that when students encounter complex political terminology, they prefer omission over the risk of committing a visible error, which significantly reduces the informational value of the translation output.

Conclusion

This study adopted a mixed-method research approach to explore translation errors committed by a sample of students of English at the University of Ghardaia, Algeria, in translating a journalistic text from Arabic into English. The categorization of these translation errors followed Liao’s (2010) taxonomy. The analysis identified 626 errors, 47.44% of which are language-related errors, with a prevalence of grammatical mistakes such as spelling mistakes, and subject-verb agreement mistakes. Rendition errors

accounted for 37.22% and were due to misinterpretations of the source, insufficient or excessive renderings, or inaccuracy of conveying the appropriate meaning in the appropriate context. Miscellaneous errors accounted for 15.33%, and included missing parts in the target text, and students may resort to omission because of unfamiliarity of equivalent words in the target language .

The dominance of language errors depicts shortcomings among students in terms of language proficiency and requires solutions to address them, such as to reinforce instruction in English grammar and syntax, and activities to improve students' spellings skills .

Conversly, rendition errors refer to the necessity to use comparative stylistics as a means to raise students' awareness of stylistic and syntactic nuances between Arabic and English, as well as drilling students about the challenges of translating polysemous words from Arabic into English and vice versa. In addition, exposing students' to a wide array of text types helps enrich their vocabulary and lexical competence .

Notwithstanding this study revealed the significance of translation as a pedagogical tool to highlight students' language shortcomings, its limitations include the small sample of students and the focus on the translation of a journalistic text. Further research may explore other types of texts, a larger sample and the errors made by students in English to Arabic translation.

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