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Translation Challenges Among English-Majored Students: A Case Study at Thu Dau Mot University

Nguyen Van Hung

Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam

hungnv.nn@tdmu.edu.vn

Abstract. Translation is a compulsory subject in Thu Dau Mot University's English Language curriculum and is considered the most difficult subject of all the language skills, requiring students to have extensive knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. In fact, Thu Dau Mot University's English-majored students face many challenges in the process of practicing English - Vietnamese and Vietnamese - English translation. The article points out the factors affecting students' development of translation skills and suggests some effective ways to help students improve their translation skills. The survey was conducted with the participation of 108 fourth-year English majors at Thu Dau Mot University. The results show that most students have difficulties with vocabulary, grammar and structure due to the differences in the two languages.

Keywords. Challenges in translation, English-majored students, Thu Dau Mot University

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid globalization and international integration, translation has become an indispensable tool for communication and information exchange across nations and cultures. It plays a vital role in various fields such as economics, politics, health, education, culture, and technology. The ability to translate accurately and effectively is therefore increasingly important, especially for learners of English in non-native contexts like Vietnam.

At Thu Dau Mot University, translation is a compulsory subject in the English Language program, introduced in the first semester of the third year. It is a foundational component that helps students bridge linguistic and cultural gaps between English and Vietnamese. The course aims to equip students with practical translation strategies and an understanding of the structural, lexical, and semantic distinctions between the two languages, particularly in real-world contexts such as business, media, and education.

Despite the subject's importance, many students encounter significant challenges in developing translation competence. Translation is a cognitively demanding task that requires extensive knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, idiomatic expressions, and cultural contexts. Moreover, it demands discipline, precision, and confidence. As noted by Dang (2024), effective translation must remain faithful to the source meaning while ensuring linguistic naturalness in the target language. Similarly, Craigie and Pattison (2018) point out that language-specific complexities—such as idioms, compound words, and onomatopoeia—often

hinder accurate translation. In addition, translating phrasal verbs, humor, jargon, and technical terms requires deep cultural and contextual awareness.

These observations reflect the realities faced by many English-majored students at Thu Dau Mot University. Through informal observations and discussions with peers, it has been noted that numerous students struggle with low vocabulary range, misunderstanding of cultural references, unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions, and lack of confidence or strategic approach in translation tasks. Many translate word-for-word without considering context or nuance, which often leads to unnatural or inaccurate renderings of the original message.

Given the recurring nature of these challenges, it is essential to investigate the specific difficulties students face in learning translation and to explore practical solutions for improvement. Although previous studies (e.g., Lucito (2020)) have explored similar issues and identified factors such as insufficient vocabulary, confusion over multi-meaning words, phrasal verbs, and cultural mismatch, further research is needed to contextualize these findings within the learning environment of Thu Dau Mot University.

In response to this gap, the present study was conducted to examine the translation difficulties experienced by English-majored students and propose feasible solutions to enhance their translation competence. It is hoped that the findings will contribute valuable insights for learners, teachers, and curriculum designers alike.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition

The term “translation” covers a broad category, and its definition varies in different academic fields. Translation is defined as the process of changing a text in the source language into another language (Munday et al., 2022). It involves studying the meaning of the source text in terms of vocabulary, grammar, communicative context, and cultural context. According to Salam et al. (2017), translation is the process of conveying a message from a source language into a natural language closest to the target language's terminology and style.

Since English and Vietnamese differ significantly in many linguistic aspects, English learners encounter difficulties translating between the two languages. According to Huynh (2012), one main challenge is using tenses. In English, there is a clear and systematic distinction between tenses, with specific verb forms and structures corresponding to different periods of time. In contrast, Vietnamese rely more on contexts, adverbs of time or other linguistic cues to indicate time relationship.

Combining sentence forms is essential to understanding Vietnamese and English better. Knowing the differences in sentence structure between Vietnamese and English helps improve students' translation competence, avoid misunderstandings, and ensure accuracy on translating between the two languages. Bassnett (2013) argues the differences in the structure of the two languages create many difficulties in translation.

Vocabulary is an important part of any language, and it is important that speakers have a certain amount of vocabulary to express their thoughts, ideas, and concepts easily. Vocabulary is the most crucial communication tool in creating clear and compelling exchanges, especially for students involved in translation activities. Accordingly, vocabulary mastery is essential for language transferring competence (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). The richness and depth of vocabulary directly affect the ability to convey ideas clearly and accurately. However, in English and Vietnamese, most words do not have equivalent meanings. Roger (1991) refers to word-level equivalence; she points out that there is no word equivalence between languages because even within the same language, there are no absolute synonyms. Among many

challenges translators face is translating single words or phrases of multiple meanings depending on their context (Putri, 2019). Students often rely on dictionaries to understand the meaning of words, but the real meaning is not always precisely the definition. It is not easy for learners to understand a text just by looking at each word's definition, but need to know the detailed words in contexts of a text (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021).

2.2. The translation process

According to Nababan (2016), translation can be understood as the process of transferring messages from the source language to the target language through a series of deliberate actions performed by the translator. This process consists of three core stages: analysis, transfer, and reconstruction.

2.2.1. Analysis

Wulan Shabitah (2020) emphasizes that the first step in translation is analyzing the source text by carefully reading and understanding it. This includes both linguistic elements—such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax—and extralinguistic elements, such as cultural or contextual references. Analysis is performed at various levels: sentence, clause, phrase, and word. For instance, analyzing a complex sentence helps identify main and subordinate clauses, while phrase-level analysis helps distinguish between heads and modifiers. These steps enable the translator to simplify and restructure complex expressions more effectively in the target language.

2.2.2. Transfer

The second stage involves transferring the meaning or message of the source text into the translator's mental representation. As Shabitah (2020) notes, this is an internal cognitive process where the translator identifies equivalent expressions in the target language. A deep understanding of the source language's syntax and semantics is essential to convey the original message accurately.

2.2.3. Reconstruction

At this final stage, the translator reconstructs the message in the target language, taking into account the text type, audience, and communicative purpose. As Shabitah (2020) asserts, selecting the most appropriate linguistic structures and stylistic features is critical to producing a natural and accurate translation.

2.3. Translation methods

2.3.1. Word-for-word translation

Newmark (1987) describes this method as interlinear translation, where each word is translated in isolation, preserving the original word order without context. While this method is often used in pre-translation stages for language learning, it usually results in unnatural or incorrect expressions.

2.3.2. Literal translation

According to Newmark (1988), literal translation converts grammatical structures into their nearest equivalents while translating words individually. Like word-for-word translation, it often overlooks context, but helps outline structural issues.

2.3.3. Idiomatic translation

This method preserves the meaning of the original text while using idioms and colloquial expressions from the target language to make the translation sound natural. Although it may risk altering subtle nuances, it enhances fluency and readability (Newmark, 1987).

2.3.4. *Communicative translation*

Kuiper (2012) defines communicative translation as a method that seeks to convey the full meaning of the source text in a manner that is clear and acceptable to the target audience. The focus is on effectiveness and comprehensibility.

2.3.5. *Semantic translation*

According to Hasanah (2019), semantic translation prioritizes the aesthetic and stylistic features of the source text. It may involve compromises on literal meaning to maintain tone, rhythm, or figurative language, especially in literary contexts.

2.3.6. *Adaptation*

Uyen and Hang (2021) explain that adaptation involves re-creating the content by replacing cultural references with their closest counterparts in the target culture. This method is often used in poetry, drama, or humorous texts.

2.3.7. *Free translation*

Newmark (1987) states that free translation does not follow the form of the original text. Instead, it paraphrases the content to convey the intended meaning, often resulting in a much longer but clearer version.

2.4. Difficulties in English-Vietnamese translation

Mastering translation is a complex process. Students typically undertake translation courses in their third and fourth years, when they are expected to have acquired sufficient linguistic and cultural competence. However, significant challenges remain.

2.4.1. *Grammar*

Grammar plays a crucial role in creating coherent and accurate translations. Haegeman and Gueron (1999) define grammar as the system of rules that enables the construction of well-formed sentences. Due to structural differences between English and Vietnamese, students often struggle with tenses, passive voice, and countable/uncountable nouns. For example, while English requires the use of future tense markers (e.g., 'will'), Vietnamese can imply future actions without explicit markers. Similarly, Vietnamese tends to favor active voice, whereas English frequently uses passive constructions.

2.4.2. *Idioms*

Idioms are culture-bound expressions that often lack direct equivalents in other languages. As Baker (2018) notes, idioms are fixed expressions that cannot be interpreted by analyzing individual words. Translators must find culturally appropriate equivalents, which requires not only linguistic skill but also cultural familiarity.

2.4.3. *Terminology*

Terminology refers to domain-specific vocabulary. A lack of familiarity with specialized terms can lead to literal translations that confuse readers. Translators must possess knowledge not only of the languages but also of the subject matter to ensure precision.

2.4.4. *Multiple-Meaning Words*

Many English words are polysemous, meaning they carry different meanings depending on context. For instance, the word 'get' can mean 'receive', 'become', or 'undergo', depending on usage. Misinterpreting such words leads to inaccurate translations.

2.4.5. *Collocations*

Collocations are word combinations that are commonly used together. According to Nguyen, Anh, and Khanh (2021), many students are unaware of standard English collocations, resulting in unnatural translations. For example, 'heavy rain' is preferred over 'big rain'. Correct use of collocations is vital for fluency.

2.4.6. Culture and Background Knowledge

Anderson (1999) emphasizes that background knowledge—including life experiences, cultural understanding, and familiarity with both source and target languages—is essential for accurate translation. Translators must grasp cultural nuances to avoid translation loss. For example, translating ‘ao dai’ merely as ‘a dress’ omits its cultural significance. Cultural references like food, symbols, and clothing often require explanation or adaptation to preserve meaning.

Overall, the translation process demands not only linguistic knowledge but also a deep understanding of cultural, contextual, and disciplinary factors. Addressing these challenges is key to improving students' translation competence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the linguistic challenges faced by English-majored students in translating between English and Vietnamese. A survey approach was adopted to gather measurable data from a relatively large sample, allowing for the identification of common difficulties and underlying linguistic factors that affect students' translation performance.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were 108 fourth-year English-majored students from the Institute of Foreign Languages Training at Thu Dau Mot University, who were enrolled in the Translation course during the second semester of the academic year 2024–2025. Among the respondents, 45 were male and 63 were female, representing a diverse range of language learning experiences and translation competence levels. These students were considered suitable for the study as they had completed several translation-related modules and possessed adequate background knowledge of both English and Vietnamese.

3.3. Data collection instrument

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 close-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to identify specific linguistic difficulties encountered in both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation. The items covered various linguistic aspects such as vocabulary limitations, grammatical differences, syntactic structures, idiomatic expressions, and lexical equivalence. The questionnaire used a Likert scale format, allowing students to rate the degree of difficulty they experienced with each aspect.

3.4. Data collection procedure

The data were collected in April 2025 during a scheduled class session with the cooperation of course instructors. Prior to administering the survey, students were informed of the research purpose, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and invited to participate voluntarily. The questionnaires were distributed in paper form and completed within 20 minutes. All responses were collected immediately after completion to ensure a high return rate and data integrity.

3.5. Data Analysis

After data collection, the responses were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were used to identify the most common translation challenges reported by students. The analysis focused on highlighting which linguistic factors—such as grammatical structure, word choice, or sentence construction—were perceived as most problematic. The results were then interpreted in light of translation theory

and language learning research to draw meaningful conclusions and propose pedagogical recommendations.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Grammar differences make translation difficult

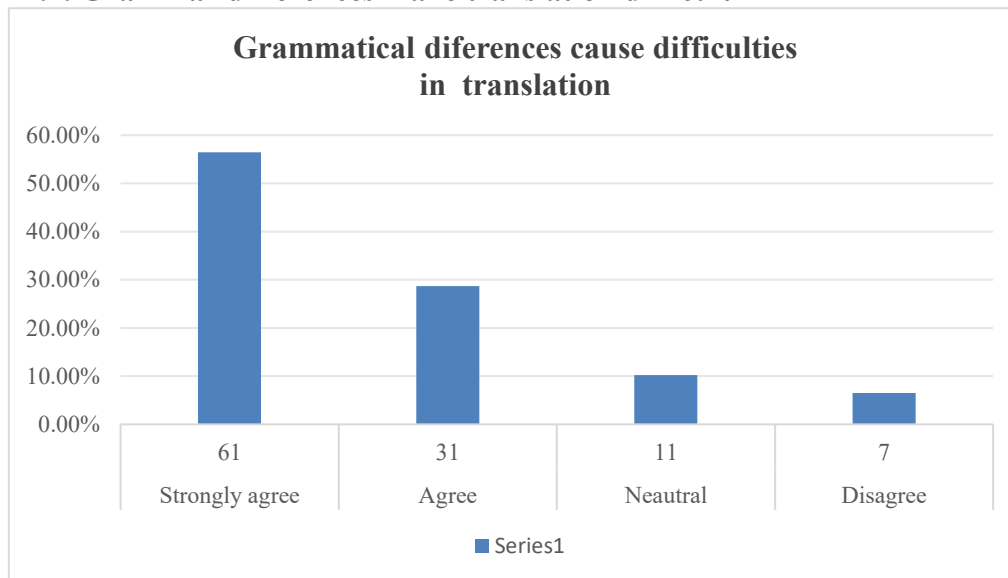


Figure 1. Grammar differences make translation difficult

According to Figure 1, 61 students (56.48%) chose *Strongly agree* and 31 students chose *Agree* (28.70%), showing that most of the students participating in the survey found that the sentence order *Subject + Verb + Object ...* and the verb conjugation according to tenses in English are completely different from the structure *Subject + Predicate* and no verb conjugation according to tenses in Vietnamese. The above results indicate that 85.20% of the respondents found the difference in grammar between English and Vietnamese is a big challenge in English - Vietnamese and Vietnamese - English translation. On the other hand, 11 students occupying just 10.19% had a neutral opinion on this issue. This shows that they did not have difficulty with the difference in grammar between Vietnamese and English in the translation course. A smaller portion of the respondents, 07 individuals (6.48%) *disagreed* with this issue.

4.2. Difficulties in converting between structures when practicing translation

Figure 2 reflects the opinions of 108 students surveyed on whether they encountered difficulties in converting sentence structures in translation activities. 58 participants, equivalent to 53.70%, *strongly agreed* and 29 out of them, accounting for 26.90% *agreed* with the above statement. The survey results also showed that 12 participants, occupying 11.10%, had a neutral attitude, and 9 students (8.30%) *disagreed* that they coped with the very difficulties in converting sentence structures. Overall, the results prove that most respondents confronted challenges in converting sentence structures, and just a minority of them did not have the difficulties in practicing English - Vietnamese and Vietnamese - English translation.

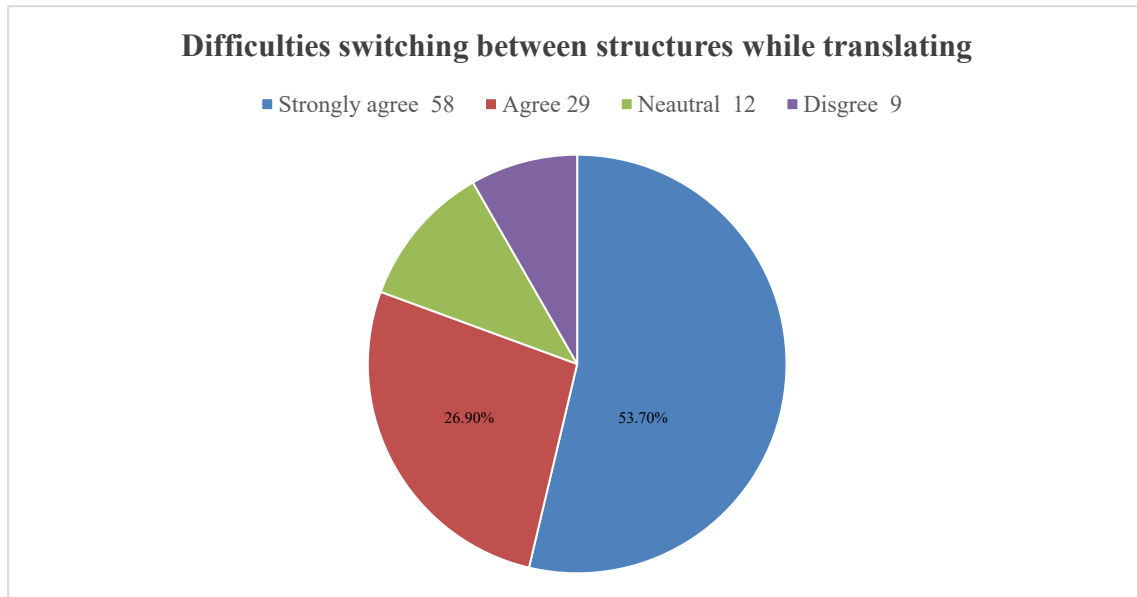


Figure 2. Difficulties in switching between structures while translating

4.3. Difficulties in translation due to students' limited vocabulary

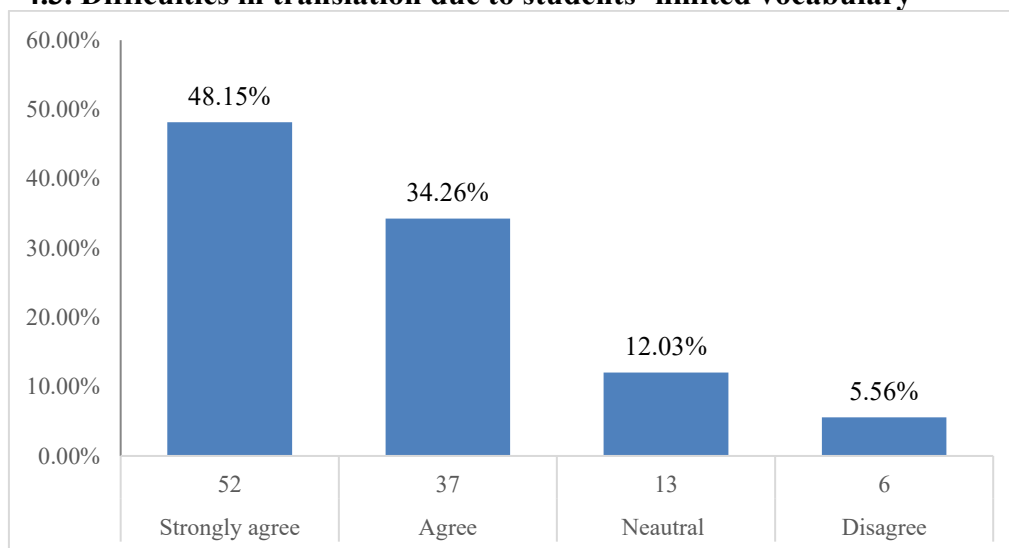


Figure 3. Difficulties in translating due to limited vocabulary

According to the results in Figure 3, students' lack of vocabulary makes translation difficult. 52 out of the surveyed students (48.15%) *strongly agreed* and 37 (34.26%) *agreed*. This indicates that most of them admitted translation became significantly difficult due to their limited vocabulary stock. It is apparent that vocabulary plays a crucial role in translation and lack of vocabulary is considered one of the most pressing challenges that adversely affect the quality and accuracy of the translation and make the process more difficult. Of all the respondents, only a small proportion, namely 6 students, equivalent to 5.56% *disagreed* with the statement. There were 13 students (12.03%) who expressed a *neutral* attitude.

4.4. Difficulties in translation due to lack of lexical equivalence

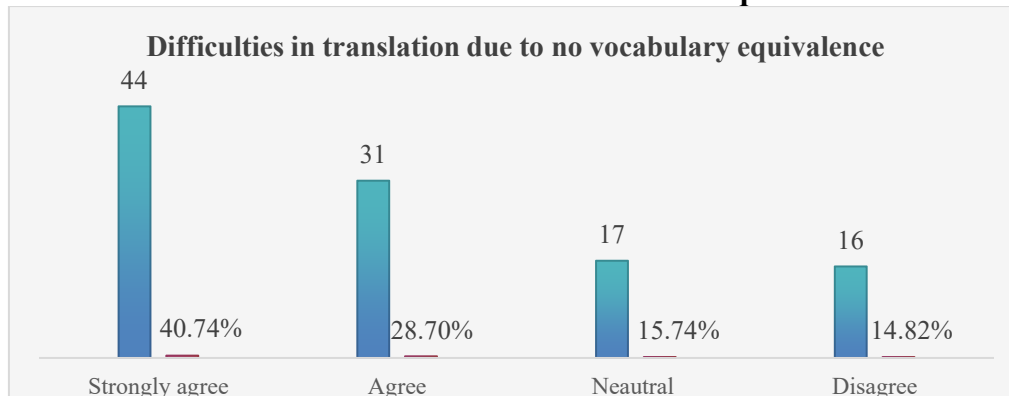


Figure 4. Difficulties in translation due to no vocabulary equivalence

Based on the survey results, the majority of the population *agreed* that many English words do not have equivalent meanings in Vietnamese and they need to rephrase them to keep the original meaning. According to Figure 4, 44 students (40.74%) *strongly agreed* and 31 (28.74%) *agreed*, proving that nearly 70% of m found no equivalence in the two languages an obstacle in translation activities. These students had difficulty deciding on the right words in English and Vietnamese. Only 15.74% chose Neutral and 14.82% *disagreed*.

5. Conclusion and suggestions

The article aims to identify the factors affecting Thu Dau Mot Universality's fourth-year English majors' development of translation skills and suggests some measures to help them enhance their translation competence.

Firstly, students encounter two main problems in terms of vocabulary: lack of vocabulary and no vocabulary equivalence between Vietnamese and English. Grammar and sentence structure are also factors that limit the students' English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English translation. In terms of grammar, the students notice a big difference related to word order, the way of expressing time that is completely different between the two languages. The remaining factor is the different in English and Vietnamese sentence structures, a major obstacle to expressing ideas while still ensuring a coherent style.

To help students overcome difficulties in practicing translation skills, we propose some measures.

First, students need to expand their vocabulary by reading reference books. To understand the meaning correctly, they need to pay attention to the context when transferring words, avoiding translating literally or depending entirely on the definition in the dictionary. In addition, students use paraphrasing to explain difficult words or words that have no equivalence in the target language. In terms of grammar and structure, students practice by dividing long sentences into shorter, easier-to-understand sentences when practicing translation. In addition, students can rearrange the sentence structure appropriately to express the correct style of the target language.

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