

An Investigation into the Strategies Used by the English-Majored Students at Tay Do University in Translating Vietnamese-English Cultural Expressions

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Abstract: *Translation is a useful skill in linguistic learning. However, it is not easy for students to master this skill due to the cultural differences. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to focus on some difficulties of English majored students in Vietnamese - English cultural translation. Specifically, this study is to figure whether English majored students at Tay Do University encounter difficulties in translating cultural expressions from Vietnamese into English. In the study process, the translation test and interview were used as the instruments to collect the data. The participants were 60 English majored freshmen and seniors at Tay Do University. The results of the study pointed out that the English-majored students had difficulties in Vietnamese-English translation. It is hoped that this research can be helpful for not only students but also teachers in the process of learning and teaching translation.*

Keywords: Translation, translation strategies, cultural expressions

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and internationalization, the importance of English in lives and social development is undeniable. Actually, English is now playing an indispensable role that connects people from different countries around the world in almost all fields of society such as international communication, science, education, entertainment, tourism and so on. We again cannot deny the advantages that English brings us, especially in the 21st century - the era of information and technology. Nowadays, using English fluently is not only a big

advantage but also a compulsory demand of a job requirement if we want to get a dream job with high salary in an international company, or communicate more effectively with the people who speak English around the globe.

Therefore, to be successful in transferring information among languages, people really need the help of translation. Among English skills, translation is also a necessary skill that plays an essential role in a lot of communicative aspects such as economics, politics, education, cultural exchange, etc. According to Dingwaney and Maier (1995), translation is defined as “a method of cross-cultural teaching”. Besides, Duff (1994) stated that “translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning; accuracy, clarity and flexibility”.

However, it is not very easy for Vietnamese to master translation. Actually, a lot of learners still encounter many difficulties in translating one language into another language because each language has its own culture, characteristics and values in marked differences. To be a good translator, a person needs to be equipped with knowledge of not only languages but also cultures. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2009) stated that “people are now sensitive to the truism that culture affects communication in subtle and profound ways”.

From the reasons above, the researcher decided to conduct this study on “An investigation into the strategies used by the English-majored students at Tay Do University in translating Vietnamese-English cultural expressions”. It is expected this research will provide an overview of difficulties for learners in the translating process, especially Vietnamese-English cultural translation as well as help students to overcome the obstacles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of translation

Translation has been variously defined. The following definitions are selected because they are typical in some senses. According to Wilss (1982), “*translation is a transfer process, which aims at the transformation of written source language text into an optimally equivalent target language text, and which requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the source language*”.

Besides, Bell R. (1991) stated that translation is the expression in another language (target language) of what has been expressed in one language (source language), preserving semantic and stylistic equivalencies. Furthermore, Hatim and Mason (1997:1) consider translation as “*an act of communication which attempts to relay, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, another act of communication.*” In most cases, according to Houbert (1998:1), “*translation is to be understood as the process whereby a message expressed in a specific source language is linguistically transformed in order to be understood by readers of the target language*”. From a different view point, Nogueira (1998:1) asserts that,

"translation is a service business". Moreover, Hatim and Mason (1990:1) affirm that, *"translation is a useful case for examining the whole issue of the role of language in social life."* In addition, observing translation as a form of cross-cultural communication, Tianmin (2000:1) asserts that *"translation is simultaneous decontextualization and recontextualization, hence is productive rather than reproductive"*.

From these views, it can be concluded that translation is not simply the way to rewrite the source language into the target language, it requires the translators to be proficient in both the source language and the target one so that they can fully transfer the culture to the readers as well as keep the style and meaning of the author as much as possible.

Definitions of cultural translation

According to Wikipedia, cultural translation represents the practice of translation, which involves cultural differences. Cultural translation can be also defined as a practice whose aim is to present another culture via translation. This kind of translation solves some issues linked to culture, such as dialects, food or architecture. The main issue that cultural translation must solve consists in translating a text as showing cultural differences of this text, in respecting the source culture. Besides, Bhabha (1994) defined *"translation is the performative nature of cultural communication"*.

Possible strategies for translating cultural expressions

Using synonymy

Synonymy is a kind of semantic relation among words. Technically, it occurs when two or more linguistic forms are used to substitute one another in any context in which their common meaning is not affected denotatively or connotatively. For example, words such as *"healthy"* and *"well"*, *"sick"* and *"ill"*, *"quickly"* and *"speedily"*, *"quickly"* and *"rapidly"* may be viewed as examples of synonymy, simply because they share most of the characteristics with one another.

In an article entitled *"Translating Cultures: a Light-Hearted Look at the Pitfalls of Communication through Translation"*, Shaw (2003) states that *"human beings can differentiate between the nuances and/or fine distinctions of meanings between one object and another"*. Shaw exemplifies this by saying that, within our own language, *"a show"* can be a play, a drama, a musical, or a movie. The word *"show"* can even be *"a display of talent"*, i.e. a talent or a variety show.

Translating by cultural substitution

This strategy involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression with one of the different meanings but similar impact in the translated text. The strategy of translation by cultural substitution involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression in the source text with a target language item which describes a similar concept in target culture and thus is likely to have a similar impact on the target readers.

For example: In England, “a pound” is a unit of weight measurement which corresponds with 453.59237 grams. However, Vietnamese unit of weight measurement is kilogram. Thus, the sentence “The boy weighs sixty pounds” (thằng bé nặng 60 cân Anh) should be translated as “thằng bé nặng khoảng 27 kí”. Or “The two store are 200 yards apart” (Hai nhà cách nhau 200 mã Anh) will be translated as “Hai nhà cách nhau chừng 200 thước”.

Translating by using a loan word plus explanation

This strategy is often used when there is no cultural equivalence between the source language and the target language. Translator will keep using the loan word in the target language and then add the explanation right after the term. For example, the sentence “áo bà ba là trang phục truyền thống của người dân Nam bộ Việt Nam” can be translated as “ao ba ba, the loose-fitting blouse, is the popular costume of Vietnamese southerners”. In this sentence, the translator keeps using the word *áo bà ba* and then adding explanation so as to make sure that the meaning of the source text remains unchanged and readers can understand it.

Retention

Retention is the most source language oriented strategy, as it allows an element from the source language to enter the target text. Sometimes the retained culture-bound term is marked off from the rest of the target text by quotes and occasionally by italics. In translation, retention is an effective way, especially in translating proper names or places. For example: the sentence “Lễ Vu Lan là một ngày để vinh danh những người mẹ” can be translated into English as “*Vu Lan festival is a day to honor mothers*”. In this sentence, the word *Vu Lan* is kept as the source language since it is a proper name of Vietnamese traditional festival, which cannot be found in the target language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research participants

The participants of this research were 60 English majored students at Tay Do University and they were equally divided into two groups. The first group was 30 English freshmen who were randomly chosen. There were 18 males and 12 females and their ages ranged from 18 to 20. Besides, the participants had been learning English for 8 years and they were in the elementary or pre-intermediate level. Moreover, they had not studied any translation skills.

The second group was 30 English majored seniors including 13 males and 17 females. All of them were also randomly selected. Unlike the freshmen, all of them got the level of intermediate or upper intermediate. Furthermore, they had been learning English for 11 years and their age ranged from 21 to 24. In addition, the students had learned the books of the Translation theory since they were in the third year and Practical translation 1, 2, 3 for their current course. Therefore, they could get more experience of translation than the freshmen.

Instruments**Translation test**

The test was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of two items which asked about background information of the students who participated in the study. The first item (question 1) asked about the time they learnt English. The second item (question 2 and 3) asked about their attitude towards the translation subject. The second part consisted of 15 sentences with the requirement of translating sentences from Vietnamese into English. The test aimed to find out the problems that the students were facing in Vietnamese – English translation.

Table 1: Translation test

Cultural translation	Sentence	Example
Collocation	1-5	Tôi thường thức dậy vào lúc 5 giờ sáng, sau đó dọn giường và đi đánh răng.
Idiom and proverb	6-10	Múa rùa qua mắt thợ
Cultural term	11-15	Đường chéo của chiếc tivi này là 53,34 cm

Interview

In order to make the study more reliable, the researcher interviewed six English freshmen and six English seniors at Tay Do University with 6 open-ended questions. The purpose of the interview was to find out the reasons why the participants had difficulties in translating collocations, idioms and proverbs as well as cultural terms from Vietnamese to English. Besides, the researcher also wanted to know the students' attitude towards Vietnamese – English translation as well as their ideas about the relationship between culture and translation. The purposes of the interview were clarified in the below table.

Table 2: Interview

Questions	Purposes
1	Students' attitude towards Vietnamese – English translation
2,3,4	Students' difficulties in translating collocations, idioms and proverbs, and cultural terms.
5,6	Student's ideas about the relationship between culture and translation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Results from the translation test**

The total number of translated sentences collected from the two group was 900 sentences which consisted of 450 sentences from English majored freshmen and 450 sentences from the English majored seniors. Within the group, the number of translated for collocation was 150 sentences, for idioms and proverbs was 150 and for cultural terms was also 150 sentences.

The results from the translation tests showed that the participants had difficulty in translating cultural expressions including collocations, idioms and proverbs as well as cultural terms. The results also indicated that the participants the participants had a lot of mistakes related to the cultural knowledge.

Translation strategies used by the English majored freshmen

Frequency of translation strategies

The following table showed the frequency of translation strategies applied by the English majored freshmen.

Table 3. Translation strategies used by the English majored freshmen

Strategies		Tokens	Percentage	Example
<i>Collocation</i>	Synonymy	71	47,3%	Dọn giường và đi đánh răng : Clean / tidy up the bed and brush my teeth
	Word for word translation	43	28,7%	Cô ta nói dối bác sĩ của mình rằng mình vẫn uống thuốc đều đặn: She told her doctor a lie that she still drank medicine regularly
	Correct use of collocation	36	24%	Cô ấy có mái tóc vàng: She has blonde hair
<i>Idiom and proverb</i>	Word for word translation	103	68,7%	Múa rìu qua mắt thợ: Dancing axe through the mechanic's eyes
	Using equivalent idioms or proverbs	47	31,3%	Hiền như cừu bột: As gentle as a lamb

<i>Cultural term</i>	Cultural substitution	16	10,7%	Đường chéo của chiếc Tivi này là 53,34cm: The diagonal of this Tv is 21 Inches
	Retention	134	89,3%	Thằng bé nặng chừng 2 kí 7: The boy approximately weights 2,7 kg

As can be seen from the Table 3, five translating strategies including using synonymy, word for word translation, using equivalent idioms or proverbs, cultural substitution and retention were variously used by the English majored freshmen.

Regarding collocation translation, synonymy was most applied by the freshmen with the rate of 47,3 %. Besides, 28,7% of them employed word-for-word translation to deal with this kind of translation. In addition, the proportion of the freshmen who could translate collocations correctly was just 24%.

In term of idiomatic and proverbial translation, over two- thirds of the participants translated word-for-word with the rate of 68,7%. In contrast, only 31,3% of them was able to find out equivalent idioms or proverbs.

With respect to cultural terms translation, the strategy of using cultural substitutions just made up 10,7% while the majority of the students applied retention method with the rate of 89,3%.

The above results showed that the English majored freshmen really had difficulty in translating cultural expressions due to their word-for-word translation and misuse of translation strategies.

Examples from students' translations

For collocation translation, the phrase “*dọn giường*” in the sentence “Tôi thường thức dậy lúc 5h sáng, sau đó *dọn giường* và đi đánh răng” was translated by the students as follows:

- *Clean the bed*
- *Tidy up the bed*

Although both *clean* and *tidy up* could be used with the meaning *dọn dẹp* in Vietnamese, it was more natural to translate “*dọn giường*” into “*make the bed*”. Clearly,

only the word *make* could collocate with *the bed* to produce this meaning In English. The example above showed that it was not easy for the students when encountering collocations in the sentences because they could have been affected by Vietnamese literature style. Moreover, English collocations were so various that most of the Vietnamese found that confused in choosing suitable words in sentences.

With respect to idiomatic and proverbial translation, the idiom “*Múa rìu qua mắt thợ*” which was translated by most of the participants as “*Dancing axe through the mechanic’s eyes*” instead of “*Never offer to teach fish to swim*” in English. Through this example, it could be clearly seen that the freshmen tended to translate word for word to idioms that they did not really exactly know equivalent ones in the target language (English).

In term of translating cultural terms, the sentence “*Đường chéo của chiếc Tivi này là 53,34cm*” was translated as “*The diagonal of this TV is 21 cm*”. In this case, most of the participants kept the original concept “cm” instead of finding any substitutional terms in English as “inch”. The example above might indicate that English majored freshmen were lacked of cultural knowledge, so they made mistakes in translating cultural terms.

Translation strategies used by the English majored seniors

Frequency of translation strategies

The following table showed the frequency of translation strategies applied by the English majored seniors

Table 4. Translation strategies used by the English majored seniors

Strategies		Tokens	Percentage	Example
<i>Collocation</i>	Synonymy	37	24,7%	Một đàn sư tử hung hăng : A flock of aggressive lions
	Word for word translation	14	9,3%	Cô ta nói dối bác sĩ của mình rằng mình vẫn uống thuốc đều đặn : She told her doctor a lie that she still drank medicine regularly
	Correct use of collocation	99	66%	Cô ấy có mái tóc vàng: She has blonde hair

<i>Idiom and proverb</i>	Word for word translation	21	16,3%	Múa rìu qua mắt thợ: Dancing axe through the mechanic's eyes
	Using equivalent idiom or proverb	129	83,7%	Hiền như cừu bột: As gentle as a lamb
<i>Cultural term</i>	Cultural substitution	20	16,67%	Đường chéo của chiếc Tivi này là 53,34cm: The diagonal of this Tv is 21 Inches
	Using loan word plus explanation	5	3,33%	Áo bà ba là trang phục phổ biến của người dân Nam bộ Việt Nam: ao ba ba , the loose-fitting blouse, is the popular costume of Vietnamese southerners
	Retention	125	83,4%	Nhà tôi cách siêu thị gần nhất khoảng 100 thước: My house is about 100 m apart from the nearest super market

Table 4 presented six strategies that the English majored seniors applied in cultural expressions translation including using synonymy, word for word translation, using equivalent idioms or proverbs, cultural substitution, using a loan word plus explanation and retention.

In term of collocation translation, using synonymy and word for word translation were two ways that the English majored seniors used to deal with this kind of translation. Specifically, using synonymy made up 24,7% of the number of participants. Besides, the rate of the seniors translating word for word was just 9,3%. Lastly, most of the English seniors

translates collocations correctly with the rate of 66%, which meant that they had the ability to recognize and had wide knowledge of collocations.

Regarding translating idioms and proverbs, a large rate of the participants was able to equivalent idioms or proverbs with 83,7%. On the other hand, just a low rate of them (16,3%) employed word for word translation as they could not find equivalent idioms or proverbs.

With respect to cultural terms translation, retention occupied the largest proportion of the three strategies that the participants applied with 83,4%. In addition, the strategies of cultural substitutions and using a loan word plus explanation just made up 16,67% and 3,33% respectively.

The results revealed that the English majored seniors didn't have difficulties in translating collocations and idioms. However, in translating cultural term, the seniors tended to use retention strategy. In other words, they kept the cultural terms in an unchanged form of the source language when translating them into the target language.

Examples from students' translations

In term of collocation translation, the phrase “*Một đàn sư tử hung hăng*” in the sentence “*Một đàn sư tử hung hăng đang tấn công con trâu già*” was translated by the seniors as follows:

- A flock of lions
- A herd of lions

Although both *flock* and *herd* of lions were acceptable and shared the same meaning as *đàn/bầy* in Vietnamese, they could not be used interchangeably in all situations. In English, “*Một đàn sư tử hung hăng*” had to be translated as “*A pride of aggressive lions*” because it was a collocation. The example above indicated that that it was not easy for even the seniors in translating collocations. Due to the wide variety of collocations, the students could not remember or learn all of them that caused challenges in choosing suitable collocations.

Regarding idiomatic and proverbial translation, the idiom “*Hiền như cục bột*” which was translated by most of the participants as “*As gentle as powder*” instead of “*As gentle as a lamb*”. In English, people considered *lamb* as a gentle animal. Thus, this idiom was used to describe a person who was calm and gentle. Through this example, it could be concluded that the seniors still faced difficulties in translating idioms due to cultural differences.

Regarding translating cultural terms, the sentence “*Đường chéo của chiếc Tivi này là 53,34cm*” was translated as follows:

- (i) The diagonal of this Tv is *21 Inches*.
- (ii) The diagonal of this Tv is *53,34 cm*.

In this case, only one senior could use the cultural equivalence substitution (ii). On the other hand, most of the participants did not change the unit of length “centimeter” to “Inch” (i), which was used in Imperial system and the United States customary system (1 inch = 2,54 cm). This made native people confused in understanding the context. The examples above might indicate that English majored seniors still had problems in finding equivalent terms in their translation.

RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEW

After the translation test was done, twelve students from the two classes (six English majored freshmen and six English majored seniors) were invited to interview. After the interview had been analyzed, it was seen that most of students met cultural problems in Vietnamese-English translation. The reasons why students encountered these difficulties were clarified in this section. The participants also gave their points of view about translation practice and skills that a translator had better get when translating cultural terms in Vietnamese – English translation.

Question 1. It is said that practicing Vietnamese - English translation is difficult. Do you agree? Why and why not?

From the student responses, one hundred percent of the students agreed that Vietnamese – English translation was difficult for them and their difficulties included lacking vocabulary, translating collocation, idioms and finding cultural equivalent words in the target language. The participants said that Vietnamese is more various, so it was hard for them to choose appropriate English words to translate, and when they encountered new words and phrases in Vietnamese – English translation texts, there were many ways to choose such as guessing from the context, asking friends, looking up in dictionary, etc. and they usually combined those methods together.

Question 2. Is collocation one of your mistakes that you encountered in the translation test? Explain?

For this question, all of the interviewees (12/12) had problems with collocations in Vietnamese – English translation. All of the freshmen (6/6) were not clear about what collocation is, so they translated word by word instead of using collocations in the test. In contrast, 3 out of 6 seniors could not translate the sentences related to collocations correctly due to lack of knowledge related to them. Furthermore, only one of them could not recognize collocation translation, so this participant used word for word translation. Besides, there were 5 out of 12 students who were confused in distinguishing collocations with idioms.

Question 3. Do you encounter any difficulties in translating idioms and proverbs? What do you do to overcome them?

In terms of this question, 4/6 freshmen said that translating idioms and proverbs was always a challenge for them. When facing strange idioms or proverbs, two of them looked up the

dictionary, then they translated word for word. The others said that they had to search for the answers on the Internet. Only two participants (2/6) felt confident with their idiomatic and proverbial translation because they rarely made mistakes related to idioms and proverbs. The same results occurred with the seniors, most of them had challenges when translating idioms and proverbs because of not being able to find the similar expressions in English.

Question 4. Are you confused in translating cultural terms from Vietnamese into English? Why?

For this question, 12/12 students shared the same problem in translating cultural terms. Most of them said that they had difficulties because cultural translation not only required them good background knowledge, but also forced them to respect the meaning of the source text. One of the participants said “Cultural translation represents the practice of translation, which involves cultural differences”.

Question 5. In your opinion, do cultural differences affect translation? Why or why not?

Responding to this question, one hundred percent of the participants agreed that cultural differences affected translation. According to them, cultural differences influenced the translation process in many ways. First of all, they thought that each culture had its own customs and habits which causes cultural gaps. One of the freshmen said that “Cultural differences affect translation because each country has its unique things. If you do not know or even master other cultures, mistakes and misunderstandings in translating are unavoidable”. In addition, different countries had different geographical features, environment and beliefs. Thus, people certainly could not master cultures of other countries. One participant from class English 9 said that “Cultural knowledge helps us a lot not only in understanding a culture, but also in translating correctly what the source text conveys (English)”.

Question 6. Does a translator need to have good cultural knowledge? Why?

For this question, all participants agreed that good cultural knowledge helped translators a lot in the translation process. A senior answered that “Yes, if translators do not have good cultural knowledge, they cannot understand the text clearly”. Most of the students stated that translators needed good cultural knowledge. With such knowledge, they knew how to find suitable cultural equivalences for readers to understand easily. Besides linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge played an indispensable role in translation. A freshman from class English course 12 said that “Cultural knowledge helps translators eliminate cultural barriers, so they can easily transfer the message”.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate whether English majored students at Tay Do University had to face any difficulties related to cultural expressions in Vietnamese – English translation. Based on data collected from the translation test and interview, the study

revealed that the freshmen had problems including collocations, idioms and proverbs as well as cultural terms in Vietnamese - English cultural translation. On the other hand, the seniors mainly met problems with translating cultural terms.

For the English majored freshmen, the first problem was that the freshmen had difficulties in recognizing and using collocation as only 24% of them translated collocation accurately. One possible explanation to this problem might come from that they lack vocabulary as well as they did not have enough collocations. Actually, they did not know which words would collocate with others because the number of collocations was very various. Thus, they often tended to use word-for-word translation as a replacement when facing collocations. In contrast, the seniors had less difficulties in this kind of translation. Clearly, the results indicated that two-thirds of them could translate collocations correctly. The reason for the results might be explained as that the seniors had learned strategies relevant to translation, so they got better outcomes.

The next problem that the freshmen faced was idiom and proverb translation. Idioms and proverbs might be recognized, understood and analyzed before appropriate translation methods could be considered. To achieve that, cultural knowledge also played a vital role in this kind of translation. A translator with good cultural knowledge could use appropriate methods or figure out equivalent idioms and proverbs in the target language so that the translation could be more natural and precise. However, most of the freshmen could not produce natural and correct translation due to lack of knowledge related to culture. As a results, they were not able to find cultural equivalent idioms in the target language. On the contrary, 83,7% of the seniors could employ equivalent idioms and proverbs because they had experienced eight semesters and met a lot of idioms and proverbs during their course.

Finally, based on the results, it was not difficult to recognize that cultural terms translation was the problem that both of the seniors and freshmen was encountering in Vietnamese – English cultural translation. More than 80% of them could not recognize that they were translating Vietnamese terms into English, so they did not use cultural substitutions to make their translation familiar and natural to the native. The reason for this problem was due to the cultural differences between Vietnamese and English, which caused troubles for the participants

CONCLUSION

After conducting this research by analyzing the important information collected from the freshmen and seniors, the researcher finally figured out the English majored students had difficulties in Vietnamese-English cultural translation including collocations, idioms and proverbs as well as cultural terms.

As can be seen in chapter 4, collocation was one of the challenges for students, especially for freshmen. Regarding the freshmen, they could not remember all of the pairs of collocations, so 76% of them tended to use synonyms and word-for-word translation to deal with collocation translation. In contrast, only one-thirds of the seniors met problems about collocation as they translated word-for-word or used synonymy strategy.

For translating idioms and proverbs, it was not difficult to see that a lot of freshmen were confused when encountering this kind of translation. Specifically, word-for-word translation appeared with the frequency of 103 times per 150 in comparison with just 21 times of the seniors. The problem was probably elucidated as idioms and proverbs were usually fixed expressions, students would find them difficult if they did not equip themselves enough idiomatic and proverbial knowledge.

The last obstacle to both freshmen and seniors was translating cultural terms. According to the results, the frequency of the freshmen who could not apply suitable strategies to deal with cultural terms was up to 134 and that of the seniors was 125 times. This finding showed that cultural differences were a challenge for students in understanding and translating the terms correctly.

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