

Common Errors in Arabic–English Translation among Students

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Abstract:

Arabic – English translation presents significant linguistic and cultural challenges due to fundamental differences in syntax, morphology, semantics, and pragmatic conventions between the two languages. This study investigates the nature, frequency, and underlying causes of translation errors among students engaged in Arabic–English translation. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted with a sample of 25 undergraduate students enrolled in a translation course at a higher education institution in Sri Lanka. Data were collected through a controlled translation test and a structured questionnaire designed to capture learners' linguistic background, translation strategies, and perceived difficulties.

The analysis categorizes errors into four major types: grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and cultural/contextual. Findings indicate that grammatical errors (particularly tense usage, agreement, and article omission) account for the largest proportion of errors, followed by lexical errors involving inappropriate word choice and literal translation. Syntactic errors reflect negative transfer from Arabic sentence structure, especially in word order and clause formation. Cultural errors are evident in the mistranslation of idiomatic expressions and culturally bound terms, resulting in semantic distortion and loss of pragmatic meaning.

The study identifies first language interference, limited proficiency in English, inadequate exposure to authentic language input, and lack of cultural competence as the primary factors contributing to translation inaccuracies. Furthermore, the findings highlight that students tend to rely heavily on word-for-word translation strategies rather than meaning-based approaches, indicating insufficient training in translation techniques.

This research contributes to translation studies by providing empirical insights into learner difficulties in Arabic–English translation within an ESL context. It also underscores the need for pedagogical interventions that integrate contrastive linguistic analysis, task-based translation practice, and cultural awareness. The study recommends the incorporation of technology-enhanced translation tools, corpus-based learning, and explicit error analysis in the curriculum to improve translation competence. These findings are expected to inform educators, curriculum designers, and researchers aiming to enhance translation teaching and learning outcomes in multilingual educational settings.

Keywords — Arabic–English translation, translation errors, linguistics, students, language learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation is a fundamental activity that facilitates communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Within the field of linguistics, translation studies serve as a bridge between theoretical frameworks and real-world language use. It enables individuals to access knowledge, literature, and information beyond their native language, thereby promoting global understanding.

Arabic–English translation is particularly challenging due to significant structural, lexical, and cultural differences between the two languages. Arabic, a Semitic language, differs from English, a Germanic language, in terms of syntax, morphology, and stylistic conventions. These differences create obstacles for learners, especially students who are still developing proficiency in the target language.

Students engaged in translation often rely heavily on their first language (L1), leading to errors that affect meaning, clarity, and communicative effectiveness. These errors are not merely linguistic mistakes but reflect deeper issues related to

language processing, cultural interpretation, and cognitive strategies.

Understanding translation errors is essential in educational contexts. It helps educators design effective teaching methods, improve curriculum content, and develop appropriate assessment strategies. Moreover, analyzing errors provides insight into learners' interlanguage development and their progression toward language proficiency.

This study aims to:

- 1) Identify common types of errors in Arabic–English translation
- 2) Analyze the underlying causes of these errors
- 3) Provide pedagogical recommendations to improve translation teaching

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Translation

- A. Translation studies are grounded in several theoretical frameworks that explain how meaning is transferred between languages.
- B. Equivalence Theory emphasizes the importance of maintaining semantic and functional equivalence between the source and target texts. According to this theory, a successful translation conveys the same meaning and effect as the original text (Nida, 1964).
- C. Skopos Theory, introduced by Vermeer, focuses on the purpose of translation. It argues that translation strategies should be determined by the intended function of the target text.
- D. Contrastive Linguistics examines differences and similarities between languages, providing insights into potential areas of difficulty for learners. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing translation errors, as it highlights structural mismatches between Arabic and English.
- E. Newmark (1988) further distinguishes between semantic and communicative translation, emphasizing the need to balance accuracy and readability.

2.2 Types of Translation Errors

- A. *Previous studies have identified several categories of translation errors:*
 - **Grammatical Errors:** Incorrect use of tense, agreement, articles, and prepositions
 - **Lexical Errors:** Inappropriate word choice or misuse of vocabulary

- **Syntactic Errors:** Problems with sentence structure and word order
- **Semantic Errors:** Misinterpretation of meaning
- **Cultural Errors:** Failure to convey culturally specific meanings

2.3 Challenges in Arabic–English Translation

B. Arabic and English differ significantly in several linguistic aspects:

- **Word Order:** Arabic typically follows a Verb–Subject–Object (VSO) structure, whereas English follows Subject–Verb–Object (SVO).
- **Morphology:** Arabic uses root-and-pattern morphology, while English relies on linear word formation.
- **Tense and Aspect:** Arabic tense systems differ from English in usage and interpretation.
- **Articles:** English uses definite and indefinite articles, while Arabic has different rules.

Cultural differences also play a critical role. Idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and pragmatic norms vary greatly between the two languages, making literal translation ineffective.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

- This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, allowing for an in-depth analysis of translation errors within a real educational context.

3.2 Participants

- The participants consist of 25 students enrolled in Arabic–English translation courses at a higher education institution in Sri Lanka. The students represent varying levels of English proficiency.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

- Data were collected using:
 1. **Translation Test:** Students translated Arabic passages into English.
 2. **Questionnaire:** Gathered information on students' language background, learning experience, and perceived difficulties.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

- Errors were classified into four categories:
 - Grammatical
 - Lexical
 - Syntactic
 - Cultural
- The analysis focused on:
 - Frequency of errors
 - Patterns of occurrence
 - Impact on meaning

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Grammatical Errors

- Grammatical errors were the most frequent. Students struggled with:
 - Verb tense consistency
 - Subject–verb agreement
 - Use of articles
- Example:

Arabic sentence translated incorrectly due to tense confusion.

4.2 Lexical Errors

- Students often selected incorrect words due to:
- Limited vocabulary
- Direct translation from Arabic
- Example:
Using “big” instead of “great” in abstract contexts.

4.3 Syntactic Errors

- Sentence structure errors were common, including:
- Incorrect word order
- Fragmented sentences
- These errors reflect interference from Arabic syntax.

4.4 Cultural Errors

- Students had difficulty translating:
- Idiomatic expressions
- Cultural references
- Literal translations often resulted in loss of meaning.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that translation errors are influenced by both linguistic and cultural factors. First language interference plays a significant role, as students tend to transfer Arabic structures into English.

Limited proficiency in English further exacerbates these issues, preventing students from selecting appropriate vocabulary and constructing grammatically correct sentences.

The study also highlights the importance of cultural competence. Without understanding the cultural

context, students are unable to produce accurate translations.

These findings align with previous research (Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988), reinforcing the need for improved translation pedagogy.

VI. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings, several implications emerge:

- Translation teaching should emphasize practical application rather than theory alone
- Students should be exposed to authentic texts
- Instruction should integrate cultural awareness
- Technology, such as translation tools, should be used effectively

VII. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of common errors in Arabic–English translation among students. It highlights the complex interplay between linguistic structures, cultural factors, and learner proficiency.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines linguistic training, cultural education, and practical experience. By implementing effective teaching strategies, educators can significantly improve students’ translation skills.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Incorporate **task-based translation activities**
- Focus on **error analysis in classrooms**
- Enhance **vocabulary development programs**
- Provide **cultural training modules**

- Use AI and digital translation tools responsibly

IX. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Small sample size (25 students)
- Limited to one institution
- Focus on qualitative analysis

Future research should include larger samples and quantitative approaches.

X. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- Comparative studies across institutions
- Impact of AI tools on translation learning
- Longitudinal studies on student progress

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