

Linguistic Challenges in Arabic-English Translation Among Sudanese University Students: Insights from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the linguistic challenges that face Sudanese university students in translating from Arabic into English. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method. The researchers have designed a questionnaire to assess the teachers' perspectives and views on the current problem. The study sample comprises of (30) teachers from the departments of English language and translation at Karary University, and Alimam Alhadi College. The researchers have raised some questions for this study:

- (1) To what extent does the lack of cultural knowledge of English language affect the students in the process of translation?
- (2) Do the misunderstanding of English rules and the mother tongue interference result in literal translation?

The findings have revealed that there is a knowledge deficiency in the translation process itself, which is considered to be the main hindrance that students face. Also, there is a misunderstanding of one-to-one tense equivalence between Arabic and English, lack of vocabulary, mother tongue interference, and dissimilarities in linguistic system between Arabic and English; these persistent problems are encountered by the students while translating from English to Arabic. Finally, the study has recommended that teachers of English and translation should adopt and compose courses comprising all the principles and techniques for the different kinds of translation from Arabic into English.

Keywords: *linguistics, translation, mother tongue interference*

1 Introduction

Learning international languages has become one of the major sciences and technologies. The need for languages and translation is increasing day by day. They play an important role in communication between nations. Language is a structured system of communication. It is considered as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination to communicate meaning. This definition stresses that human languages can be described as closed structural systems consisting of rules that relate signs to particular meanings. Hauser, Marc D. Fitch, W. Tecumseh (2003)

In recent years, translation studies have become a major area of interest in the broader discipline of applied linguistics, and this has led to many definitions of translation. One of the definitions provided by Dubois (1999:22) states that translation is the expression, in another language (the target language), of what has been expressed in the source language, while preserving its semantic and stylistic features. Although linguists differ in their perspectives on translation, they generally agree on its fundamental principles.

Translation is a human activity through which people can express or exchange their ideas, thoughts and cultures. It enables human beings to communicate easily regardless of the different tongues used. (Antar 2002:2).

Evidence indicates that the majority of students who study English language and translation at Sudanese university encounter some difficulties in the process of translation from Arabic into English. They give inferior poor or literal translation or rather word for word meaning, particularly in the culturally rooted expressions. The researchers' experience as an English language teachers and translators have motivated them to examine the linguistic deficiencies and challenges encountered by students in translating from Arabic into English, with the goal of proposing suitable solutions. This paper addresses 2 core questions: 1- To what extent does the lack of cultural knowledge of English language affect the students in the process of translation? 2- Do the misunderstanding of English rules and the mother tongue interference result in literal translation? In line with these questions, the study focuses on analyzing linguistic challenges that cause much difficulty for students and identifying the

weak points in both English and Arabic languages that students encounter when they translate.

People all over the world need to communicate to exchange benefits to spread culture or to acquire knowledge through several mediums, so translation is the major tool of any medium, therefore it is required and inevitable. It is expected that this study will offer a valuable contribution to translation studies and provide insights that may help students overcome the difficulties they face when translating between Arabic and English.

2.1 Translation as a Linguistic, Cognitive, and Cultural Challenge

2.1.1 Translation as a Meaning-Making Process

Translation between Arabic and English is far more than substituting lexical items; it is a cognitively demanding activity that requires simultaneous processing of linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic information. Newmark (1981) defines translation as the reproduction of meaning from one language into another with semantic equivalence, while Ghazala (1995) emphasizes that translation involves selecting appropriate lexical equivalents, introducing new expressions, and occasionally borrowing terms when no direct equivalents exist. These perspectives align with Hatim and Munday's view that translation is a meaning-making process shaped by textual, contextual, and communicative factors rather than a mechanical transfer of words (Hatim & Munday, 2004). Together, these scholars highlight the translator's role as an active mediator who must interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct meaning across linguistic systems.

2.1.2 Linguistic Demands and Structural Asymmetry

For Sudanese university students, the linguistic challenges of translation are intensified by the educational context in which English is taught as a foreign language. Many students enter university with limited exposure to authentic English input, restricting their ability to interpret nuanced meanings, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded references. Teachers frequently report that students struggle with semantic precision and discourse conventions due to insufficient vocabulary depth.

A major source of difficulty arises from the structural asymmetry between Arabic and English. Arabic, a Semitic language characterized by root-and-pattern morphology, flexible word order, and rich inflectional systems, contrasts sharply with English, an Indo-European language with fixed word order and limited inflection. These differences often lead Sudanese learners to transfer Arabic syntactic patterns into English, producing unnatural or incorrect structures. For example, Arabic's allowance for fronting and nominal sentences frequently results in literal translations that violate English syntactic norms.

2.1.3 Negative Transfer and Grammatical Interference

Negative transfer—where L1 structures interfere with L2 production—remains a persistent challenge for Arabic-speaking learners. Research consistently shows that students tend to overgeneralize Arabic grammatical rules when translating into English, particularly in areas such as article usage, verb tense selection, and prepositional choice. Teachers in Sudan note that even advanced students frequently mistranslate prepositions (e.g., *in*, *on*, *at*) because Arabic prepositional systems do not map neatly onto English equivalents. Ghazala (1995) also stresses that failure to choose the correct lexical or grammatical equivalent can distort meaning and compromise communicative accuracy.

2.1.4 Cultural Interference and Intercultural Competence

Beyond linguistic interference, cultural factors pose additional challenges. Language encodes cultural values, metaphors, and worldviews, making translation an act of cultural as well as linguistic transfer. Sudanese Arabic contains idioms, proverbs, and culturally embedded expressions that require interpretive—not literal—translation. Without adequate training in pragmatic and cultural translation strategies, students often produce literal translations that fail to convey the intended communicative effect.

Byran (1989) argues that culture comprises the shared assumptions, behaviors, and values that shape interpretation. From this perspective, successful translation requires intercultural competence: the ability to understand how meaning is constructed within cultural contexts and how it must be adapted when transferred to another linguistic system. Thus, translation demands not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural awareness and the cognitive ability to navigate between two distinct cultural frameworks.

2.2 Translation Theory

Translation theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how meaning is transferred across languages and how translators make informed decisions when navigating linguistic and cultural differences. Newmark (1981) defines translation as the reproduction of meaning from one language into another with semantic equivalence, while Ghazala (1995) emphasizes the procedures and strategies required to convey intended meaning, including selecting appropriate lexical equivalents, introducing new expressions, and borrowing terms when no direct equivalents exist. Juan Daniel (2003) similarly argues that translation theory examines the principles governing sound translation practice, acknowledging the varied ways languages encode meaning and offering guidance on handling figurative language, lexical mismatches, rhetorical questions, and cohesion markers.

Within this theoretical landscape, scholars distinguish between several major approaches to translation. Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence stresses producing a translation that elicits the same response in the target audience as the original did in its audience (Nida & Taber, 1982). This approach is particularly relevant for Arabic–English translation, where literal equivalence is often impossible due to structural and cultural disparities. In contrast, formal equivalence focuses on preserving the linguistic form of source text. While suitable for legal or religious texts, it often results in unnatural translations in general discourse. Sudanese students frequently default to formal equivalence because they lack the linguistic flexibility and cultural awareness required for dynamic equivalence, leading to translations that may be grammatically accurate but pragmatically inappropriate.

Another influential framework is Skopos theory, which argues that translation strategies should be determined by the purpose (*skopos*) of the translation (Vermeer, 1989). From this perspective, a translation intended for academic purposes may require different strategies than one intended for public communication. However, many Sudanese students are unfamiliar with functionalist approaches and therefore struggle to adapt their strategies to different text types, audiences, or communicative purposes. Teachers often observe that students apply the same literal, word-for-word strategies regardless of context.

Additionally, contrastive analysis plays a crucial role in understanding translation challenges between Arabic and English. By systematically comparing the two linguistic systems, predictable areas of difficulty can be identified. Arabic's flexible word order (VSO/SVO) contrasts with English's rigid SVO structure, often leading to errors in sentence construction. Likewise, Arabic's rich morphological system allows for concise expression of meaning, whereas English frequently requires auxiliary verbs or prepositional phrases. These structural differences reinforce the need for explicit instruction in contrastive linguistics within Sudanese translation programs.

Finally, translation theory also recognizes the tension between two broad approaches: one that aims to reproduce the full meaning, nuance, and stylistic force of the original text as precisely as possible, and another that prioritizes naturalness and fluency in the target language. Skilled translators understand that neither approach can be applied in isolation; effective translation requires balancing accuracy with readability to preserve meaning while ensuring communicative effectiveness.

2.3 Previous Studies

A growing body of research has examined the linguistic challenges faced by Arabic-speaking learners in translation contexts. In addition to Abuelgasim's (2018) study, several scholars have explored the specific difficulties encountered by Sudanese and Arab EFL learners.

For instance, Al-Jarf (2019) investigated translation errors among Arab university students and found that lexical errors - particularly misuse of synonyms and false cognates - were the most frequent. This aligns with teacher observations in Sudan, where students often rely on bilingual dictionaries without considering contextual meaning. Teachers report that students tend to select the first dictionary equivalent they encounter, resulting in inaccurate or awkward translations.

Similarly, Al-Hassan (2020) examined syntactic interference among Sudanese EFL learners and concluded that Arabic sentence structures heavily influence students' English translations. The study highlighted recurring issues such as incorrect word order, misuse of articles, and omission of linking verbs—errors that teachers in Sudan consistently identify in classroom assessments.

Another relevant study by Omer and Musa (2021) explored cultural translation challenges among Sudanese university students. The researchers found that students struggled significantly with idioms, metaphors, and culturally bound expressions. Teachers interviewed in the study emphasized that students often lacked the cultural knowledge necessary to interpret figurative language, leading to literal translations that failed to convey intended meanings.

Moreover, research by Abdelwahab (2022) focused on the pedagogical dimension, revealing that many Sudanese translation instructors rely heavily on traditional grammar-translation methods. While these methods help students understand grammatical structures, they do not adequately prepare them for real-world translation tasks that require cultural awareness, pragmatic competence, and strategic decision-making. Teachers participating in the study expressed the need for more communicative and functional approaches to translation instruction.

Collectively, these studies highlight a consistent pattern: Sudanese university students face complex linguistic challenges in Arabic-English translation, stemming from structural differences between the languages, limited exposure to authentic English, insufficient cultural knowledge, and traditional teaching methods. The present study builds on this body of research by incorporating teachers' perspectives, offering deeper insight into the pedagogical and linguistic factors that shape students' translation performance.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive analytical quantitative design to investigate the linguistic difficulties encountered by Sudanese university students when translating from Arabic into English. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data-collection instrument, designed to capture university lecturers' perspectives on students' translation performance and the challenges they commonly face.

The sample consisted of 30 university lecturers from Karary University and Alimam Alhadi College, all of whom teach English or translation courses. The questionnaire included both closed-ended items suitable for statistical analysis and open-ended items that allowed respondents

to elaborate on specific issues. The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The study focused on lecturers' evaluations of students' weaknesses in translation, particularly in relation to linguistic transfer, structural differences, and pedagogical implications that influence students' translation outcomes.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of lecturers from Karary University and Alimam Alhadi College who teach English and translation courses. Participants represented a range of academic ranks and teaching experience, enabling the study to capture a multi-layered perspective on the linguistic and pedagogical challenges affecting students' translation performance.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select lecturers directly involved in translation instruction, as their insights were essential for identifying recurrent linguistic problems and instructional constraints.

All ethical considerations were strictly observed during data collection. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was ensured, and all personal information was handled with confidentiality and respect.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties encountered by students in the Departments of English Language, Communication Science, and Tourism at Alimam Alhadi College when translating from Arabic into English, and to identify the factors that influence their translation performance. The first objective is to determine the types of difficulties students face in translating into English. As shown in Table 1, the findings indicate that a lack of knowledge about the translation process constitutes the most significant challenge, receiving the highest percentage (88%) among all items in the statement.

Another major difficulty identified in Table 2 is mother-tongue interference, which continues to affect students' performance when translating into English. It can be said that students still have difficulties, which has the highest percentage at 45% still causing problems due to translational errors students introduce into one language because

of contact with another language which is called mother tongue interference or native tongue interference. Another type of difficulty also is found according to the finding of table three above. Dissimilarities in the linguistic system between Arabic and English which has the highest percentage at 25% make students facing difficulty in translating into English.

Identifying students' difficulties in translating into English can also be observed in the results presented in Table 4, which show that a lack of vocabulary - *particularly the distinction between active vocabulary (words learners can use) and passive vocabulary (words they can recognize and understand)* - constitutes a major challenge for students. Another difficulty is identified in Table 5 relates to students' challenges with English grammar, particularly with tense usage, since tenses constitute a core grammatical category. The findings show that half of the respondents (50%) struggle to translate into English due to the absence of a one-to-one tense correspondence between Arabic and English, making this the most frequently reported grammatical difficulty.

The results in Table 6 reveal that students also encounter difficulties due to differences in how meaning is encoded in Arabic and English. These challenges arise particularly at the lexical level, where words and expressions do not always align across the two languages. In addition, Table 7 shows that structural differences between Arabic and English sentence types represent another significant obstacle. With a reported percentage of 25%, this category emerged as the most prominent structural difficulty faced by students.

Also, it can be seen from the finding in table eight above that difference in sentences according to type of forms which has the highest percentage at 60% by combining together the percentage of agree and strongly agree items on the statement is a source of difficulty that face student when translating into English. Finally, the results show that difficulties associated with applying correct English word order are minimal compared to other challenges students encounter in translation.

6 Findings

Due to all that, the researchers have come up with the following findings:

- 1- The lack of knowledge of translational process is one of the main sources of difficulties that face students while translating from Arabic to English.
- 2- The misunderstanding of the one-to-one tense correspondence between Arabic and English is a source of difficulties that face English language students to great extent.
- 3- The mother tongue interference and lack of vocabulary are sources of difficulty facing English language students to some extent.
- 4- The dissimilarities in the linguistic system between Arabic and English, difference in sentences according to type of forms and structures are sub-sources of difficulties that face students while translating into Arabic.

7 Recommendations

The researchers recommend the following

- Developing specialized translation courses that train students to translate different text types, including grammatical tenses, proverbs, newspaper articles, and other practical genres.
- Teaching students the principles and all techniques of translation from Arabic into English.

8 Suggestions for Further Studies

The researchers suggest the following

- Teaching essential translation methods to strengthen students' linguistic skills and improve accuracy in translation tasks.
- Offering advanced English-language courses to enhance students' proficiency and support better translation performance.

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