

THE REALITY OF TRANSLATION COMPETENCE PERFORMED BY ENGLISH MAJORS AT HUNG VUONG UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the translation competence of English major students at Hung Vuong University and inform some implications of pedagogy to improve the translation ability of the students. To this end, 68 Vietnamese students, who at the time of the study were studying English as their major, were subjected to a translation test (English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English). Translation competence was analyzed using ATA Translation Competence Evaluation Rubric assessing the four dimensions of translation competence. Findings showed that the students' translation competence was rated at low level (10.22) and the transfer and terminology competence got the lowest score (2.41 and 2.44, respectively). Results were discussed and implications for the improvements of translation ability were presented.

Keywords: *Translation competence, transfer competence, terminology competence, idiomatic writing, target mechanic.*

1. Introduction

The tendency of development of the world in the 21st century now is based on the integration and globalization. It is a common knowledge that people depend on each other for the survival, for the existence, and for the development of their own. The need for communication and information exchange among countries and people is more and more increasing, which fuels the ever-growing demand for efficient translators and interpreters.

Translation is not an easy work to do as it is not merely the substitution of words in

one language by another language, but the transfer of meaning and sense that the author wants to convey in the most natural way. It, therefore, requires the cautious training of prospective translators in order to produce efficient translators.

As a teacher of translation subjects, it has been the observations of the researcher that English major students are not really confident in their translation competence as their translations still commit lot of errors and they are not able to naturally and accurately transfer the source texts into the target ones. Feedback from labor users of

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the English graduates reveals dissatisfaction, complaining that graduates show less competency and they have to spend time retraining those students to help them be able to meet the requirements of the work.

Any pedagogical treatments to help improve translation competence of the students should come from the understanding of their competence first. According to [1], translation competence is defined as the ability to apply knowledge and skills in rendering a written text into another language in the way that the author intends in the text. It refers to the professional translator communicative competence consisting of the grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence and transfer competence.

Grammatical competence refers to knowledge of the rules of both languages, including vocabulary and word formation, pronunciation, spelling, and sentence structure - that is, the knowledge and skills required to understand and express the literal meaning of utterances

Socio-linguistic competence mentions the knowledge of and ability to produce and understand utterances appropriately in the situational context of both cultures - that is, as constrained by the cognitive context, the general socio-historical context, the mode, the field, the tenor, the status of the participants, the purposes of the interaction, the skopos of the translation, etc...

Discourse competence emphasizes the ability to combine form and meaning to achieve unified spoken or written texts in different genres in both languages. This unity depends on cohesion in form (the way in which utterances are linked structurally to facilitate interpretation of the text) and coherence in meaning (the relationships

among the different meanings in a text: literal meanings, communicative functions or social meaning, inter-textuality)

Transfer competence refers to the mastery of communication strategies that allow transfer of meaning from the source language to the target language and may be used to improve communication or to compensate for breakdowns (caused by limiting factors in actual communication or insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communicative competence).

In the literature review, there has been a tendency on researching the learners' translation competence. Different groups of researchers have been building up translation competence models, suggesting translation quality assessment by introducing criteria for translation evaluation or analyzing translation errors [2-4]. In Vietnamese context, many have been conducting researches on the field of translation, translation assessment, translation teaching methodology,...[5-7].

The issue of translation competence in general, and of English majors at tertiary level, however, is still highly questionable, therefore, an investigation on the English majors' translation competence is highly necessary to obtain acceptable understanding of how to improve students' translation competence. The study is an attempt to unearth the level of translation competence performed by English majors and on the bases of the translation competence reveal, some pedagogical implications are proposed to enhance the translation competence of the students.

2. Methods

The research question that was raised in the study is as followed: "What is the translation competence level of the students?"

The respondents involving in the study were the 68 English major students, Department of Foreign Languages, Hung Vuong University, Vietnam. At the time of the study, they were in the third and fourth year of an English linguistic course in the academic years of 2020-2021.

Data collection tool utilized in this study includes a translation test, which aimed to get the information about the translation competence of the respondents. There were two sections in the test, the first requiring English-Vietnamese translation and the second involving Vietnamese-English translation. The translation text was about 300 words each, themed in tourism and economy, which the participants studied in their translation courses 1 and 2. The translation test was evaluated using the ATA Translation Competence Evaluation Rubric [8] assessing the four dimensions: Usefulness/transfer, Terminology/style, Idiomatic writing and Target Mechanic which are the output of Transfer competence,

Socio-linguistic competence, Discourse Competence and Grammatical competence as described by [1]. The translation test went through the piloted process to ensure the validation, involving two steps of ‘informal pilots’ with the support of translation teachers and ‘accompanied pilots’ with the support of eligible respondents.

SPSS, Version 20.0 was used to analyze the data. Frequency count, percentage, mean score, weighted means and standard deviation (SD) were used to validate the data.

The students’ scores in the translation competence elicited by the rubric-scoring guide consisting of five levels and four dimensions were interpreted by using the following categories:

Total Score	Description
18 - 20	Very High Level
15 - 17	High Level
11 - 14	Moderate Level
08 - 10	Low Level
04 - 07	Very Low Level

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. The Level of Translation Competence of the Students

Table 1. Translation Competence Score of the Students

Dimension	Lowest Score Earned	Highest Score Earned	Mean Score	SD	Adjectival Description
Usefulness/transfer	1.0	4.0	2.41	0.76	
Terminology/ style	1.0	4.0	2.44	0.66	
Idiomatic Writing	1.0	5.0	2.56	0.76	
Target Mechanics	1.0	4.0	2.81	0.72	
Total Score	5.0	17.0	10.22	2.44	Low Competence

Table 1 presents the levels of translation competence of English major students. The translation competence level of the students is generally described as “low” as the average total score is at mean of 10.22. Of the four areas, target mechanics obtains the highest mean score of 2.81, followed by idiomatic writing with mean score of 2.56, terminology/style with mean score of 2.44 and usefulness/transfer with the lowest mean score of 2.41.

Table 2. Distribution of Students by Level of Translation Competence

Category	Frequency (n=68)	Percent
Very High Level (18 - 20)	-	-
High Level (15 - 17)	03	4.41
Moderate Level (11 - 14)	24	35.30
Low Level (08 - 10)	34	50.00
Very Low Level (04 - 7)	07	10.29

Table 2 which presents the distribution of students by level of translation competence further confirms the findings about students’ translation competence. As indicated in the table, more than 60 percent of the students (41 students out of 68) falls in the “Very Low” and “Low” level of translation competence. 25 students or 35.30 percent are ranked at ‘Moderate’ level. The number of students at “High” level is only 3 or 4.41 percent and there are no students at “Very High” level. The general view of the table shows that most of English linguistic students obtain a moderate level backward.

3.1.2. Translation Competence along Different Dimensions

Students generally performed the best in the area of target mechanics. It is expected as students are third and fourth year students,

they are able to master the rules and conventions of target language mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.).

The example cited hereunder is the clear evidence for the deficiency in English grammar of the students as they were unable to analyze the sentence structure.

Source text: But there is another dimension of Madagascar little known to the world outside and even to most of Malagasy people...

Translated text: Nhưng có một nơi khác của Madagascar nhỏ bé mà thế giới và mọi người Malagasy đều biết đến..

Back Translation: But there is another place of little Madagascar which is known by the world outside and most of Malagasy people..

In this case, the students fail to understand the function of the phrase ‘little known to the world outside and even to most of Malagasy people...’ as a modifier to the noun ‘dimension of Madagascar’. Thus, most of the students understood that the word ‘little’ modifies Madagascar so they translate into “little Madagascar”. In the informal interview, almost all students admitted that they could not recognize the reduced relative clause in this case, which caused the misunderstanding and mistranslation of the sentence. If the sentence had been written in the form “But there is another dimension of Madagascar which is little known to the world outside and even to most of Malagasy people...”, they would have not committed such an error.

Students performed the lowest in the areas of usefulness/transfer. This area has been considered difficult as the transference decides the utility of the translation product. There exists the question of whether the

translation is usable, i.e. the translated text transfer meaning in a manner fully usable for the purpose specified in the translation instructions. The general assessment of the translation outputs produced by the students shows that most of the translations cannot be used to serve the purposes specified in the Translation Instructions. In An example of the translation performed by students indicates that that the deficient translations cannot be used as a traveler's guide to Madagascar for an interested reader who is planning a trip to Madagascar. Most of the translated texts are not able to transfer the sense that the author wants to convey about Madagascar which is fantastically beautiful, still so unspoiled, and nothing comes easy. These things make Madagascar so unique and that is the reason why tourists, especially those who are interested in exploring things, 'must' visit the place to experience its beauty.

Whether the meaning of the source text has been fully and appropriately transferred to the translated text is worthy 'putting on the scale' to decide the success of the translation. The translation test evaluation using ATA framework showed that most of the translations have one or another problem in transference, the meaning may be changed. Take the translation of the following sentence as an example:

Source text: On the other hand, in that remaining forest cover (including the dry spiny forest of the island's southeast) the fauna and flora are truly rich, and an excursion to any of the country's protected areas is likely to reward the visitor with breathtaking encounters with lemurs, chameleons, and other species found nowhere else on earth.

Translated text: Bằng cách khác, duy trì độ bao phủ rừng (bao gồm rừng cận kiệt ở đảo Đông Nam) hệ động thực vật thực sự rất

phong phú và đây như là một chuyến tham quan đến bất kỳ đất nước nào để được bảo vệ vùng này giống như là sự thưởng cho các khách du lịch bằng cuộc chạm trán thực sự với các loài cáo, tắc kè hoa và các loài khác được tìm thấy ở bất kỳ nơi nào trên trái đất.

As seen in the given example, the meaning of the whole sentence is not fully transferred as intended. Furthermore, the meaning of some phrases is changed, for example, the word group 'an excursion to any of the country's protected areas' is translated into một chuyến tham quan đến bất kỳ đất nước nào để được bảo vệ vùng này (an excursion to any countries to protect this area) or the phrase 'found nowhere else on earth' is translated into 'được tìm thấy ở bất kỳ nơi nào trên trái đất' (found everywhere on earth), 'breathtaking encounter' into 'cuộc chạm trán thực sự' (real encounter), 'the island's southeast' into 'đảo Đông Nam' (South East island).

Transfer competence can also be seen in the following example cited from students' translation work.

Source text: People have been there less than 2,000 years, and have been largely responsible for the removal of some 85% of the original forest.

Translated text: Con người đã ở đây gần 2000 năm và đã làm ảnh hưởng đến 85% rừng nguyên sinh.

Back Translation: People have lived here for nearly 2,000 years, and they have affected 85% of original forest).

In the example given, what the writer wants to convey is that although people have lived there not for a long time (less than 2000 years, and the phrase 'in a short time' in the previous sentence), they destroyed most of the original forest. The intention of the writer

in this case is to blame people - human beings for the runout of the forest. However, the translations produced by the students are not able to make that point clear. The translated text cannot clearly express the intention of the author when the phrase ‘less than 2000 years’ is translated into Vietnamese ‘gần 2000 năm’ (for nearly 2000 years) and the phrase ‘largely responsible for the removal of’ is only translated into ‘làm ảnh hưởng’ (have affected). The translated text seems not able to express the strong idea that is included in the source text.

Terminology/style is the second lowest among the four areas of translation competence. According to [8], the standard translation requires appropriate terms and style/register choices. Results of the translation tests and the informal interviews with the teachers of translations and English majors revealed that in this dimension the most challenging problem in the translation process is the choice of word and word collocation. The word the students choose may not be appropriate in terms of the context of that word and of the target language. This finding strongly supports the research results conducted by [9] stating that in written translation, vocabulary is the biggest challenge for English major students as they are not able to choose suitable words to apply in the translated text depending on their shapes of meaning and context.

The following example presents word choice errors in translation. The verb “rao bán” is translated into ‘introduce’, “sell”, “buy”, “offer for sale”, while the best choice for the word is “advertise”.

Source text: Tất cả đều được rao bán trên mạng....

Translated text 1: All are introduced through Internet...

Translated text 2: All are sold through Internet...

Translated text 3: All are bought through Internet...

Translated text 4: All are offered for sale through Internet...

Possible translation: All are advertised through Internet...

Idiomatic writing or the naturalness of the translation is the third area evaluated. The translations provided by the students are often too literal (word by word translation) or too free writing that cause the incoherence, unnaturalness and rough of the translation. The translation from English into Vietnamese is not idiomatic Vietnamese like the writing by a Vietnamese and vice versa, the translation from Vietnamese into English is not idiomatic English. This finding is similar to the research conducted by [10] claiming that the unnaturalness of the translation does not only completely ruin the whole work, it may confuse or puzzle readers of the target language. Take the following case as an example to illustrate this point:

Source text: Và dường như doanh nghiệp nào sớm áp dụng thương mại điện tử thì sớm thành công.

Translated text 1: Seemly, enterprises early apply electronic commerce then early succeed. (Literal translation)

Translated text 2: It seems to be early of the enterprise that soon applying electronic commerce. (Free translation).

Possible translation: It seems that the sooner enterprises apply electronic commerce, the greater success they will get.

3.2. Discussion

Findings about the students’ translation competence through translation test within

the present study reveal the insights about translation competence of the students.

The translation competence of the students, the ability to translate from English into Vietnamese and vice versa, is still limited. As earlier discussed, competent translators are those who are able to comprehend the meaning, sense and the purpose of writing of the source language and able to transfer the source text in such a way that they rewrite the source text in the target language using their own way of target language use. In addition, they take into consideration the implication of the author, the relating factors affecting the understanding of the source text. Translations by that way can fully satisfy the target reader. However, the deficient competence in translation of the English linguistic student-respondents in the present study causes the failure in doing these things.

It is observed in the study that, in translation, most of the students find difficulties in comprehending the meaning and sense of the source text. Students committed a great number of errors in understanding the source text, what the author wants to convey through the text. As the researcher's experience, this is mostly due to the students' ability in reading comprehensions skills in both English and Vietnamese languages, as there is a correlation between translation performance and reading comprehension.

Findings showed further that translation competence along such dimensions as transfer, idiomatic writing or target mechanic are subjected to the limited ability of students in their language proficiency. This is strongly supported by studies by [5, 7]. In terms of word level and word-group level (phrases and word collocations), students find difficulties in deciding the right words to use in shape of meaning and context,

which word goes together with which, or how they go together, how to express them in the target language to make natural translations. Regarding sentence-level (clause structures and sentence structures) students meet difficulties in analyzing the clause and sentence structure, in identifying the subjects and predicates, the main clauses and subordinate clauses, and in expressing them in the target language to make the translation naturally and smoothly.

Although grammar posts the highest mean in this area, it is noted that the mean of 2.81 does not reflect high competence in this area. This result strongly supports by [9] investigation claiming grammar is one of the challenges in written translation.

3.3. Pedagogical Implications for Translation Competence Improvement.

The research findings imply that the quality of the translation teaching instruction the English linguistic students receive depends largely upon the focus on improving students reading comprehension of texts in both source and target languages.

The reading comprehension courses should aim to upgrade students' vocabulary and structures, helping them cope with the denotational and connotational meaning conveyed in the texts. As reading comprehension has been identified as one of the steps in translation, the teaching of translation should start with the stage of making sense of the translation text, identifying the main idea, working out the hidden ideas that the author wants to convey through the choice of words and structures.

One effective way to improve the comprehension is the facilitation of background knowledge related to the translation text. It is highly recommended

that students are introduced and encouraged by the translation teachers to engage in further reading of authentic texts available on reliable websites such as voanews.com, ted.com, itunes.stanford.edu, or other reading sources. It is further proposed that teachers can adapt these authentic texts into reading comprehension exercises to help improving students' comprehensibility.

In order to boost the language efficiency of the students, the training course at universities should be redesigned with a more emphasis on developing students' language competence. Firstly, grammatical system should be well-equipped to the would-be translators. Students would be taught with grammar rules, how words change and how they are put together into the sentences (word-group level and sentence level). It is further noticed that the instruction of grammar should not be done only theoretically, but practically, in contexts, as the rules have no value if they are not properly applied in the language used in a particular situation, where lots of exceptions occur.

Secondly, vocabulary acquisition must not be ignored in the translation training courses as the more vocabulary students have, the more successful they are in translation. The teaching vocabulary should pay more attention to the ways to deduce the meaning of the words in different situations, the uses of words in contexts, how to choose the words that ensure the collocational rules and best express the connotational and denotational of the given ideas. It is strongly recommended vocabulary teaching be engaged with the teaching of every subject in the training course and be evaluated on a regular basis. The translation modules themselves are also subjected to the role of teaching vocabulary to students.

4. Conclusions

The investigation has revealed plenty of information about the translation competence of the English majors. Basing on the calculation and analysis of translations performed by students in both English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese English, some implications for the translation course training and translation teaching have been suggested. It is highly recommended that more studies in translation competence viewing the issue from various aspects using different translation competence models are conducted.

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THỰC TRẠNG NĂNG LỰC DỊCH CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN TIẾNG ANH TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC HÙNG VƯƠNG

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu năng lực dịch của sinh viên chuyên tiếng Anh trường Đại học Hùng Vương, trên cơ sở đó đề xuất một số gợi ý sự phạm nhằm nâng cao năng lực dịch của sinh viên. 68 sinh viên chuyên tiếng Anh tham gia một bài kiểm tra dịch (Anh-Việt, Việt Anh). Năng lực dịch được phân tích sử dụng bảng đánh giá năng lực dịch đề xuất bởi Hiệp hội dịch Hoa Kỳ đánh giá bốn bình diện năng lực dịch. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy năng lực dịch của sinh viên được đánh giá ở mức thấp (10.22), năng lực về chuyển ngữ và từ vựng được đánh giá thấp nhất (2.41 và 2.44). Nhóm nghiên cứu đã thảo luận các kết quả thu được, đồng thời đưa ra các đề xuất để nâng cao năng lực dịch của sinh viên,

Từ khoá: *Năng lực dịch, năng lực chuyển ngữ, từ vựng, chuyển ngữ tự nhiên, quy tắc ngôn ngữ.*