

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSLATION COMPETENCE AND LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

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### Abstract

The present study aimed to correlate the translation competence and language background of perspective translators, then inform some pedagogical implications for the training of English prospective translators in order to enhance the translation quality performed by the students. To this end, 68 English linguistic students, HVU, participated in the study. Translation test, surveys on students' language background including exposure to English, knowledge about translation, English language competence were administered to the students. Data was analyzed using the Pearson Correlation, SPSS version 20.0. The coefficient correlation of students' translation competence and their English reading skill and writing skill was 0.413 and 0.467, respectively and all at the significant level of 0.01. It can be concluded that translation competence is closely related to English reading and writing skill while other factors do not affect. The results were discussed, and implications for translation training taking into account the related factors to enhance translation performance were presented.

**Keywords:** *Translation competence, exposure to English, reading comprehension skill, writing skill, knowledge about translation.*

### 1. Introduction

Without language, there will be no information to be conveyed. No one can deny the indispensable role of language in people's life and social development. However, with the multiplicity of languages the world has, it is not easy for the communication and information exchange. At present, there are 196 independent countries recognized in the world with the existence of approximately 6000 languages. As each country has its own

right to use at least a language as its native language, different people from different parts of the world speak different languages.

This emerging situation sets for the development of translation and interpretation as it is demanded that there should be professional translators and interpreters whose job is to help link people in the world together, make people understand each other; with the assistance of translation and interpretation, people can negotiate and

cooperate for mutual benefits. According to Newmark [1], there will be “no global communication without translation” and the professional translators and interpreters will be the connectors serving for that need, enhancing the fruit of the activities people do.

The high demand for professional employees in the field of translation and interpretation has led to the training of perspective translators at universities in Vietnam. The future translators are usually trained as English majors through a training course with the aim that they will be able to work as professional translators in offices, companies or organizations. As a teacher of translation subjects, it has been the observations of the researcher that English linguistic 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 the English linguistic 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.

According to Beeby [2], 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.

PACTE [3] raised in their studies several factors of perspective translators' language background that are assumed to be related to their translation competence. Firstly, exposure to English language refers to the contact that the learner has with English, the language that they are trying to learn, either generally or with specific language points. It means exposure to both printed materials and people they communicate with using the English language. These include newspapers, TV programs, or Internet, English-speaking people, Vietnamese people speaking English, and the like. Secondly, knowledge about translation is the awareness and understanding of the learner about translation and the aspects of the profession. It comprises mastery about how translation functions and apprehension about professional translation practice, i.e., knowledge about how translation functions: types of translation units, processes required, methods and procedures used (strategies and techniques), and types of problems; knowledge related to professional translation practice: knowledge of the work market (different types of briefs, clients and audiences, etc.). Thirdly, English language competence is the performance of English language in terms of four macro-skills in English communication: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

So far, in the literature, there has been a long discussion on the correlation between translation competence and other factors such as exposure to English, knowledge about translation, and English language competence which are under the umbrella of language background. While a great number of researchers accept the relationship [2, 3],

other ones still raise a question of whether these factors are always correlated [4, 5].

In the light of these above reviews, a research question was raised in the present study “Is there a relationship between the perspective translators’ translation competence and their language background factors?”. Data will be collected and analyzed, then pedagogical implications will be suggested.

## 2. Methods

The respondents involving in the study were the 68 English linguistic students, Department of Foreign Languages, Hung Vuong University, Vietnam. At the time of the study, they were in the fourth year of an English linguistic course.

Data collection tools utilized in this study includes survey questionnaire and test. The first was a questionnaire which was researcher-made or adapted and re-developed to get factual information about the language background of the students in terms of exposure to English language, knowledge about translation, and English language competence. The second data-gathering tool was the translation tests which aimed to get information about the translation competence of the respondents. There were two translation tests, the first requiring English-Vietnamese translation and the second involving Vietnamese-English translation. Both tools went through the piloted process to ensure the validation. The translation tests were evaluated using the Translation Competence Evaluation Rubric 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. Moreover, the English language competence skill grades were collected from the department’s academic office.

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. Correlation analysis (Pearson Product Moment Correlation) was used to test the relationship between translation competence and factors relating to language background. All the hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Results

In this section, results about language background of students, translation competence and their relationship will be analyzed and presented.

#### 3.1.1. Language background of the students

##### a) Exposure to English language

Table 1 presents the modes of exposure and the extent of exposure of the English linguistic students to the English language. The table indicates that the students are exposed to varied modalities of learning English language. Books, social media, and TV are the major modes of exposure that have the highest percentage of 100, 97.1, 97.1, respectively. Comics and radio are the

types with the lowest percentage of exposure with 32.4 percent for comics, and 45.6 percent for radio. The high exposure of the students to social media can be attributed to the development of social networks, which

easily attracts the young students because of their easy usage and continuous updates. In addition, TV and books are becoming more popular among the young while radio is more popular to elderly people.

**Table 1. Students' exposure to the English language**

Mode of Exposure	Percent of those Exposed	Frequency of Exposure	
		Weighted Mean	Description
1. TV	97.1	3.54	High
2. Radio	45.6	1.81	Low
3. Social Media	97.1	3.69	High
4. Books	100	3.57	High
5. Newspapers	80.9	2.78	Moderate
6. Magazines	61.8	2.07	Low
7. Comics	32.4	1.44	Very low
8. English speaking foreigners	85.3	2.71	Moderate
9. Vietnamese who speak English	80.9	2.87	Moderate
Overall Weighted Mean		2.72	Moderate

Legend:

1.00 - 1.79	Very Low
1.80 - 2.59	Low
2.60 - 3.39	Moderate
3.40 - 4.19	High
4.20 - 5.00	Very High

Also, Table 1 reveals the frequency of exposure to the English language. The overall weighted mean for frequency of exposure is 2.72, an adjectival value of "moderately" exposed. This finding means that the students have no adequate opportunity to be exposed to the English language.

Perusing the data reveals that students are highly exposed to English language through social media, books, and TV, as shown in the weighted means of, 3.69, 3.57, and 3.54, respectively. They are moderately exposed to Vietnamese who speak English (2.87), newspapers (2.78), and English-speaking foreigners (2.71). On the other hand, the

students have limited exposure to magazines (2.07) and radio (1.81). Noticeably, English comic mode has registered a 'very low' exposure, as shown with a weighted mean of 1.44.

#### b) Knowledge about translation

Table 2 shows that the students are highly aware of the knowledge about what translation is and the aspects of the profession. The overall weighted mean for the students' knowledge about translation is 3.56, which reflects their high awareness about how translation functions and of knowledge related to professional translation practice.

Among the indicators of translation knowledge, the highest means were obtained by the statements 12, 11, and 5, with weighted mean of 3.87, 3.85 and 3.79, respectively. The high translation knowledge of the students on the first statement (Statement 12) implies that they consider contextual translation rather than just merely literal translation of the words or sentences. In short, they believe that contextualizing the translation is better than just strictly translating the words or sentences verbatim.

Furthermore, students are aware of the importance of meeting the requirement/criteria in translation in order to produce the best translation versions (Statement 11). It is very important to the professional translators whose work is to serve clients in

the translation field. The finding on students' knowledge about translation also reveals their understanding of varying the translation depending on who will read it (Statement 5). Word choice, transferring and language style should be adjusted when translating in order to make it suitable for different types of readers.

On the other hand, the lowest mean was obtained by the statements 6 with weighted mean of 2.97. The low scores in these statements, however, demonstrates the deeper understanding of students about translation. They are aware that terminology/ or lexical choice is one of the challenges when translating, particularly the specialized text. In other words, they admit that terminology is their problem in translation.

**Table 2. Level of translation knowledge of the students**

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Description
1. As you read the source text, you are already thinking about how you are going to translate it.	3.57	High
2. The client conditions how the translators translate a text.	3.38	Moderate
3. When you translate a text you must satisfy target reader expectations.	3.53	High
4. If the characteristics of the source text are very different from those of the target culture, you should adapt the target text accordingly.	3.68	High
5. A text should be translated in different ways depending on who the target reader is.	3.79	High
6. When translating a specialized text, terminology is not the biggest problem.	2.97	Moderate
7. One of the biggest problems when translating a novel is cultural references	3.74	High
8. When you translate, you must bear in mind the text conventions of the target language.	3.49	High
9. It is not enough to know two languages well to be able to translate well.	3.29	Moderate
10. When you translate an essay you must ensure that target readers react to the text in the same way as the source text readers.	3.50	High
11. If you begin translating a text with certain criteria, these should be kept to throughout the translation.	3.85	High
12. If you find a word in a text you don't understand, you should try to work out its meaning from the context.	3.87	High
Overall Weighted Mean	3.56	High

Legend:

1.00 - 1.79:	Very Low
1.80 - 2.59:	Low
2.60 - 3.39:	Moderate
3.40 - 4.19:	High
4.20 - 5.00:	Very High

c) English language competence

Table 3 presents the results of the general English ability in four macro skills of the students. Including: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Skills. The mastery of the four skills is assessed at ‘average’ level with 9/12 subjects registering an average grade at this level. In addition, the average mean of 6.52 and SD equals to 0.59 manifest a limited linguistic competence.

**Table 3. English language competence of the students**

Subjects	Lowest Grade Earned	Highest Grade Earned	Mean Grade	SD	Adjectival Description
Listening 1	5.3	9.0	7.28	0.66	Good
Listening 2	3.0	8.4	5.99	1.20	Average
Listening 3	3.0	8.9	5.78	1.14	Average
Speaking 1	4.8	9.0	7.22	0.81	Good
Speaking 2	3.3	9.7	6.35	1.45	Average
Speaking 3	4.0	8.6	6.08	1.18	Average
Reading 1	4.5	8.1	6.63	0.77	Average
Reading 2	4.5	8.9	6.99	0.88	Average
Reading 3	3.2	9.0	6.63	1.07	Average
Writing 1	4.6	9.0	7.07	0.81	Good
Writing 2	3.5	8.8	6.42	1.35	Average
Writing 3	3.5	8.0	5.75	0.93	Average
Average English Grade	5.25	7.91	6.52	0.59	Average

Legend:

- Below 4.00: Poor/Weak
- 4.00 – 5.49: Below Average
- 5.50 – 6.99: Average
- 7.00 – 8.49: Good
- 8.50 – 10.00: Very Good

*3.2.2. Levels of translation competence of the students*

Table 4 presents the levels of translation competence of English linguistic 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 4. 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 5 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.

**Table 5. Distribution of students by level of translation competence**

Category	Frequency (n=68)	Percent
Very High Level (18 – 20)	-	-
High Level (15 – 17)	3	4.41
Moderate Level (11 – 14)	24	35.30
Low Level (8 – 10)	34	50.00
Very Low Level ( 4 – 7)	7	10.29

### 3.2.3. Relationship between translation competence and language background

The study hypothesized that there is no relationship between translation competence and the students' language background variables. Correlation analysis results show that the coefficients for the average grades of the students in Reading (0.413), Writing (0.467) have probability values that are lower than 0.05 level of significance, thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

**Table 6. Relationship between the translation competence of the students and selected variables**

Variables	Correlation Coefficient	Prob.	Statistical Decision
Exposure to English language	-0.005	0.968	Not significant
Level of exposure to the English language	0.032	0.794	Not significant
Knowledge of translation	0.030	0.807	Not significant
Listening average grade	0.168	0.170	Not significant
Speaking average grade	0.045	0.714	Not significant
Reading average grade	0.413	0.000	Significant at 0.01
Writing average grade	0.467	0.000	Significant at 0.01

## 3.2. Discussion

On the light of data analysis, some issues can be posed for discussion in this section.

Firstly, the finding of moderate exposure to English can be attributed to the reality that these types of exposure are not available to the students. The media may be easily found in Vietnam

now but it is not easy for the students to access as most of them stay in bedsits during their studies at the university. In addition, as Vietnam is a country speaking English as a foreign language, English is not used as a medium of everyday communication, thus there is limited exposure for the students to get into an English-speaking environment. Observations and conversations with the students show that students do not spend much time getting exposed to the English language as they are attracted by other activities such as chatting on facebook, playing games on the internet, and socialization in their own language.

Secondly, the high translation knowledge of the students can be explained by the following two reasons: First, in the English linguistic training course, students study a two-credit subject namely Theory of Translation and Interpretation which provide students' knowledge about types of translation units, processes required, methods and procedures used (strategies and techniques), types of problems in translation, and knowledge of the work market (different types of briefs, clients and audiences, etc.). Second, the students are fourth year students, thus, they have been trained in three translation practice subjects. They have been trained in the requirements for the translation and have been able to draw their own experiences in translation.

Thirdly, the average score of English language competence of the students may be attributed to the limited English background in high school where the teaching and learning of English do not emphasize on communicative competence of the learners.

On the other hand, the students learn the macro skill subjects at the first three semesters of the training course, they do not have suitable techniques and strategies to learn a foreign language at the university level. More importantly, it is attributed to the limited competence of the students enrolling in the university because of a fact that the students with higher competence have chosen to study in more famous universities in big cities.

It is observed in the study that in Listening 1, Speaking 1 and Writing 1 subjects, students are described with 'good' adjectival values while for the others, they just get 'average' rank. It is noted that all three subjects are in the first semester of the course. Not surprisingly, students get higher results as at this basic level, the requirements for language use are low, and language use involves familiar topics with the students.

Fourthly, reading and writing average grades are significantly related to the translation competence of the students at 0.01 level. This finding means that reading and writing skills affect the translation competence of the students. Thus, the more competent the students are in reading and writing, the more competent they are in translation ability. Writing skill and reading comprehension skill are the two vital skills involving in the translation process. Writing skill has been considered as one important skill needed for a competence professional translator. Pactrans [6] claims that of the four essential translation skills and abilities, the first and foremost skill that translators must have is excellent writing skill. In addition, Interagency Language Roundtable [7] gives



three abilities needed in which reading and writing ability are the two. According to ILR, a weakness of these abilities will influence translation performance and have negative impact on the utility of the product. The findings of the present study also support Nitaya & Tipa's claim [8] that one of the two major sources of translation errors is the translators' poor reading skill as one of the major and foremost components in the translating process is that the translator has to read the original and interpret it in the target language. The findings support Rahemi and his research team [9] that reading comprehension skill strongly influences the translation ability of the learners. The findings also support Galina and Ligija's assertion [10] that the problem of translation is closely confined to the two skills of reading and writing. Moreover, this study disproves Rahma's investigation [4] that there is significant but negative correlation of students' writing skill and translation ability.

### ***3.3. Pedagogical implications***

The English language macro skills should be highly paid attention as they serve as the background for the translation competence building-up. Aside from the enhancement of all macro skills, the mastery of English reading and writing skill should be particularly considered in the training of perspective translators.

The training courses should give a priority to the facilitation of reading and writing skill of the students, taking into account these two skills as the base for the improvement of their translation profession. 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. In addition, it is vital that writing skill teachers equip students with English writing style, word choice and complex structures which are the common errors of linguistic students.

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. In order to check the comprehension of the texts, translation teachers can design a variety of reading comprehension exercises and discuss them with the students before asking them work with the translation. The other stages taking places in translation classes will certainly run smoothly if students can fully comprehend the text and translation process itself also plays an important role in improving the comprehension.

Writing is a dispensable factor in the translation process. The translation teachers can provide students with a number of pre-translation tasks to help them translate better. These tasks can be in the form of choosing the best words, rearranging the words to form the correct structures, identifying the sentence structures, combining simple sentences into complex ones, etc. Once students are able to successfully complete these tasks, they will be able to provide relevant translation performance.

## 4. Conclusions

Basing on the analysis of students' translation competence and their language background with such factors as exposure to English language, knowledge about translation and English language competence, the study unearths the relationship between translation competence and language background factors. These findings, as mentioned above, assume that reading comprehension and writing skill are an inevitable stage in the translation process. Some implications for the translation course training and translation teaching have been suggested with the focus on reading and writing skill facilitation and combination with the translation. Getting students exposed to the reading and writing activities on the base of the source text would be a perfect technique to enhance the translation quality.

It is highly recommended that more studies focusing on the relationship of translation competence and knowledge of translation as well as exposure to English language would be conducted to set a firm base for these relationships.

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## MỐI QUAN HỆ GIỮA NĂNG LỰC DỊCH THUẬT VÀ CÁC YẾU TỐ NGÔN NGỮ NỀN TẢNG

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### Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích xác định mối tương quan giữa năng lực dịch và nền tảng ngôn ngữ của các sinh viên đang theo học làm biên dịch, từ đó có một đề xuất sư phạm đối với việc đào tạo các sinh viên ngành ngôn ngữ Anh nhằm nâng cao chất lượng dịch thuật của sinh viên. 68 sinh viên ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Hùng Vương tham gia làm các bài kiểm tra dịch Anh-Việt, Việt-Anh, và trả lời bảng khảo sát về nền tảng ngôn ngữ của sinh viên bao gồm mức độ tiếp xúc với tiếng Anh, kiến thức về dịch thuật, và năng lực tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được phân tích bằng Pearson Correlation, SPSS phiên bản 20.0. Hệ số tương quan giữa năng lực dịch thuật của sinh viên với kỹ năng đọc và viết tiếng Anh lần lượt là 0,413 và 0,467 và tất cả đều ở mức có ý nghĩa là 0,01. Có thể kết luận rằng năng lực dịch liên quan chặt chẽ đến kỹ năng đọc và viết tiếng Anh trong khi các yếu tố khác không ảnh hưởng. Các kết quả đã được thảo luận và ý nghĩa đối với việc đào tạo biên dịch có tính đến các yếu tố liên quan để nâng cao năng lực dịch của sinh viên được trình bày trong nghiên cứu.

**Từ khoá:** *Năng lực dịch, tiếp xúc tiếng Anh, kỹ năng đọc hiểu, kỹ năng viết, kiến thức dịch thuật.*