

# Difficulties of Vietnamese - English translation experienced by English majors in a tertiary educational context in Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

*In the global economy and cultural interchange with other countries, English translation has steadily become a necessary and pressing tool that paves the way for the integration of individuals, organizations, and corporations. Therefore, English majors in Vietnam need have experience and knowledge in translation skills which can be considered an advantage for them in the labour market. However, in reality, Vietnamese-English translation skills are not easy to master, then learners cannot avoid mistakes in their translating practice. A wide array of issues related to translation has been highlighted in recent years and translating Vietnamese into English is one of the most striking matters which should be adequately addressed. The study provides the deeper insight into difficulties of Vietnamese – English translation experienced by senior English language students at Thai Nguyen University of Sciences in Vietnam. The data are collected through online survey questionnaires with the participation of 25 students majoring English For Tourism there. The study's findings show that the challenges can be classified into three major categories, namely language, cultural, and background knowledge. Furthermore, some possible recommendations are proposed to overcome the difficulties in Vietnamese-English translation.*

**Key words:** Difficulties; Translation; English majors; Thai Nguyen University of Sciences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential component of our society's cultural diversity in particular and of the world's in general. However, in order to stay up with global standards in today's world, which is known as the international community, people must be able to communicate in English, which is an international language. Countries are able to have mutual understanding and a sense of global citizenship in this multilingual environment thanks to their English translated versions. Translation can be regarded as a bridge to link countries to countries, and societies to societies. It does help those who can come from the different culture and education backgrounds on the planet to learn about each other. Stuart Campbell (1998) states translation as the product of language learning projected onto an interlanguage framework. Yet, it seems to be difficult to overcome the language barrier and the cultural restriction to get a good translation.

On the ground of linguistics, the most crucial factor on which a translation is assessed as good or bad is unnaturalness. This aspect can be broken down into three levels: word level, phrase level, and sentence level. Perfect equivalency between two languages, no matter what levels are examined, especially when English and Vietnamese belong to two completely distinct language system cause certain difficulties in linguistic aspect. To deal with the non-equivalence, translators adopt a variety of solutions. Some succeed, while others fail, resulting in strange translations. In fact, common challenges concerning linguistics are likely to relate to proper names, loan words, abbreviations and acronyms, and word choice. Besides, English majors tend to tackle grammatical issues such as incomplete sentences, voice and tenses. Evidently, linguistic aspects are so complicated and not easy to master. It

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requires the learners to find an effective way of learning to study and practice more if they want to limit errors in using English in general and specifically in translation subject as skilled translators.

As regards cultural aspects, it could be said that translators will not convert from this to that language perfectly unless they know its relation to its culture. Toury (1978) emphasizes that translation is a kind of activity which inevitably involves at least two languages and two cultural traditions. As this statement implies, translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in a source text and find the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language. These problems may vary in scope depending on the cultural and linguistic gap between the two (or more) languages concerned. Specifically, translation of idioms and fixed expressions is indeed a great challenge for translators. The structure of the idiom is, to a large extent, fixed and unchangeable. Every language has a set of idioms and fixed expressions of its own, which has been created and developed throughout history. It is profoundly influenced by the geographical position, natural and social conditions of the culture in which the language is used. Thus, the sets of idioms and fixed expression in different languages vary in many ways. Idioms and fixed expressions can be dealt with in ways similar to those discussed above. With idioms, however, there is the added difficulty that the translator may not realize that she is dealing with an idiomatic expression, since more idioms may make sense when translated literally.

In terms of background knowledge, Vahid Rafieyan (2016) investigates that translators who are more familiar with the cultural characteristics of the target language can translate the rendering more efficiently than those who are not. In the construction of a successful translation, Nigel J. Holden and Harald F.O. Von Körtzfleisch (2014) demonstrates that levels of accuracy are highlighted. Some situations may occur with translators such as they do not know anything about the topic or do not understand a small amount of general information. As a consequence, translators cannot deal with ambiguity, misunderstanding and obscurity in the translation in general as well as in news items in particular. There is no doubt that a translator cannot complete his/her products without background knowledge. With good general information, he/she at times does not only render, but explain in detail events so as to ease the readership to grasp all information in news items. As a matter of fact, not all words and phrases in the SL have their equivalents in the TL, translators can attract readers and send messages in the source texts in their own explanations or interpretations. Also, the mistakes of unnaturalness, misunderstanding, ambiguity and obscurity are considerably minimized. Background knowledge accordingly makes a translation accurate and informative as well as highlights the style of translators.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted on 25 English majors due to convenience and time constraint. They are from Course 16 of English for Tourism at Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Thai Nguyen University of Sciences (TNUS). Their age ranges slightly between 21 and 22. The majority of participants are female. With regard to overall study result of Translation subjects, there is 01 participant achieving distinction grade of 8.5, 16 others gaining the Credit grade of over 7.00, and 08 other students achieved the total average mark below 7.0, accounting for 32%.

The instrument used to collect the data for the study is *Survey questionnaire*. Survey questionnaire is administered to the 25 informants of Course 16 of English for Tourism at TNUS.

The survey questionnaire in this study consists of two main parts, namely personal information and questionnaire. Part one aims to obtain personal data of the respondents (gender, number of years experienced in learning English and learning translation). Part two is to get students' opinions on Vietnamese – English translation with 10 questions. These questions require the participants to answer by choosing the options or expressing their ideas in the blank. Most questions are multiple choices with several options due to the grounds that they were used to explore the students' difficulties in learning the translation. They were carefully designed and grouped to find out the students' attitude towards translation subject, whether they find translation easy or difficult, interesting or not. In addition, these questions are aimed to seek the methods that the students usually apply to improve their translation skills. The results of such questionnaire can examine the basic understanding of students on Vietnamese-English translation. By means of this, the participants can show the real difficulties in translating from Vietnamese into English.

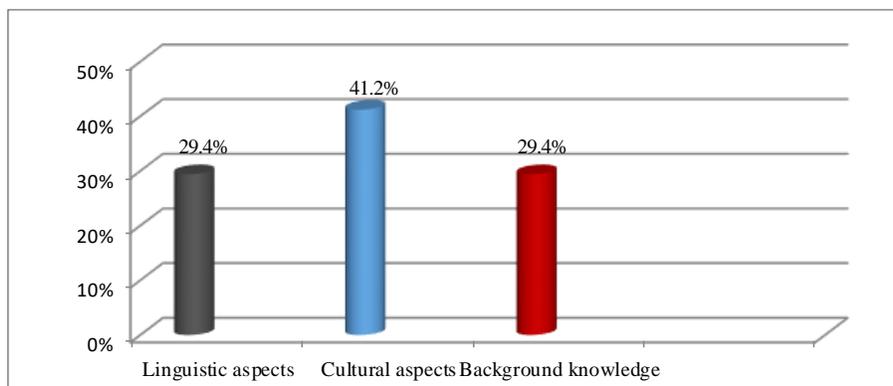
In conclusion, the methodology of the study has been displayed as the guidelines for the researcher to follow during the implementation of the study. In the next part, the analysis of the data and the findings are identified in details.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 The identification of the key factors in translation of Vietnamese - English

It can be seen from Figure 1 that 41.2% of the students consider cultural aspects a necessary section, and this represents the highest percentage among the factors affecting the translation of Vietnamese - English. This may be

partly due to the nature of culture which consists of very special features of a place or a country throughout the world and partly because of culture which is often too difficult for translators to understand comprehensively. This can be also accounted for their expectation, awareness and high evaluation of the value of cultural aspects in the process of translating Vietnamese - English items.



**Figure 1:** The essential factors affecting qualities in Vietnamese - English translation

Figure 1 reveals that both linguistic aspects and background knowledge seem a crucial component that can have remarkable influence on the quality of the translation. About 29.4% of the students found the role of the linguistic aspect and background knowledge in the process of translation of Vietnamese - English. And no one has other the answer outside of cultural, linguistic aspects and background knowledge

To sum up, there is no big gap among the three key factors, namely cultural aspect, linguistic aspect and background knowledge in the translation Vietnamese - English according to the students' points of view. Most of the English major students at TNUS acknowledged the importance and requisition of these influential elements in contributing a good Vietnamese – English translated version. However, such factors are also supposed to be the most common difficulties in the translation that the students have to resolve.

**3.2 Difficulties in the translation of Vietnamese - English in terms of linguistic aspect**

The majority of the students in the survey identified the difficulties in the translation of Vietnamese - English in terms of linguistic aspect such as vocabulary, types of sentences or grammar. To them, language competence was very critical and necessary in doing their job. As a matter of fact, different ideas about problems in linguistic aspect were reported by the students. 41% of the students met the difficulties in grammar when they practice the translation of Vietnamese - English items. "Vocabulary" is considered a second difficult factor by 35.9% of the respondents. Last but not least, the students think that "Types of sentences" is difficult, which makes up 23.1%

In brief, most of the students highly appreciated the value of language and raised their awareness about the significance of this feature in their process of translation. Followings are vocabulary problems that the students have to face with.

Linguistic aspect	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	14	35.9
Types of sentences	9	23.1
Grammar	16	41

**Table 1:** Difficulties in linguistic aspect in the translation of Vietnamese – English

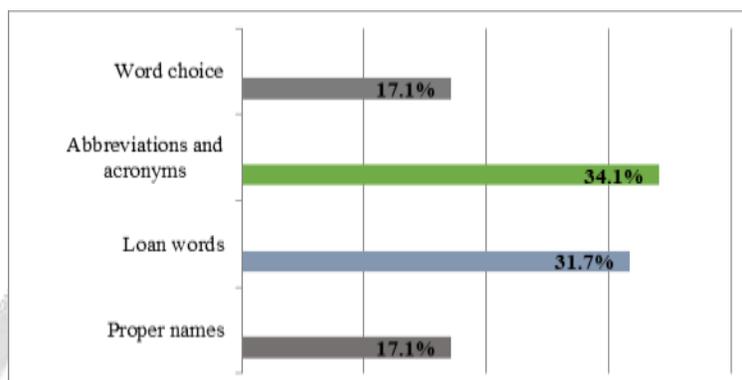
**3.3 Difficulties in vocabulary in the translation of Vietnamese – English**

Figure 2 shows that the most common vocabulary problems for most of the students in the translation were abbreviations and acronyms which are reported by 34.1% of the sample size. It is interesting to realize that 31.7% of the students supposed loan words are one of the biggest problems to tackle. Abbreviations and acronyms as well as

loan words frequently contain words or phrases which are untranslatable or difficult to translating. Even though they only account for a small percentage of the text, it is impossible for translators to ignore them since they are the key words of the text. Therefore, they caused not only the English major students at TNUS, but also the translators in the world a myriad of troubles.

Additionally, 7 students (17.1%) in the survey found that word choice made them confused. For proper names, also 17.1% of the students believed that they met difficulties in translating them from Vietnamese into English.

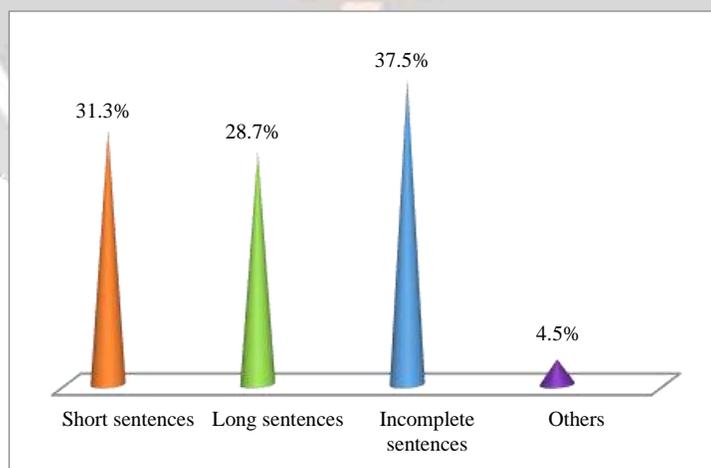
To conclude, the quality of a translation was affected by many different factors, namely proper names, loan words, abbreviations and acronyms, as well as word choice. Among them, abbreviations and acronyms as well as loan words were factors of profound and far-reaching influences.



**Figure 2:** Difficulties in vocabulary in the translation of Vietnamese – English

### 3.4 Difficulties in sentences in the translation of Vietnamese - English

Figure 3 below illustrates the striking troubles in sentences once students translate from Vietnamese into English. 12 out of 25 students (37.5%) found incomplete sentences so complicated to surmount. The most common sentence problems for most of the students in the translation were short sentences as well as long sentences which were respectively reported by 31.3% and 28.1% of the sample size. Short sentences as well as long sentences frequently were very hard to work out once they did the translation of items. The only one student (3.1%) had other answers that she found difficulties in translating complex sentences from Vietnamese into English.



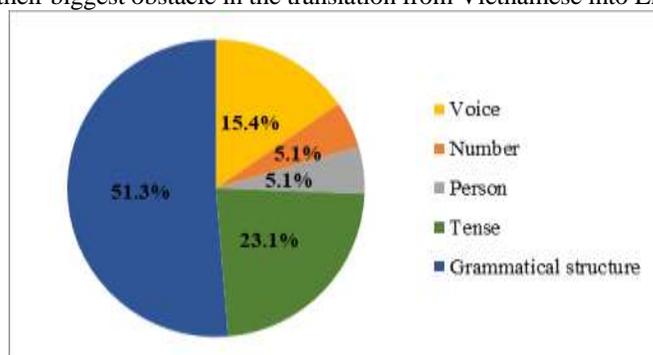
**Figure 3:** Difficulties in sentences in the translation of Vietnamese - English

### 3.5 Difficulties in grammar in the translation of Vietnamese - English

The obstacles in grammar in the translation from Vietnamese into English are presented in Figure 4 below. In general, number and person were of the lowest percentages, at 5.1%. The quite bigger issue presented in the pie chart is the voice accounting for 15.4% of the total. It is evident that the English prefer to use passive voice, while the

Vietnamese frequently use the active voice instead. As the consequence, the students found certain difficulties to translate from Vietnamese into English when it comes to voice.

Meanwhile, 9 out of 25 students (23.1%) supposed that tense caused them some troubles. Grammatical structures are apparently used differently between Vietnamese and English, so most of the students (51.3%) believed that grammatical structure was their biggest obstacle in the translation from Vietnamese into English items.



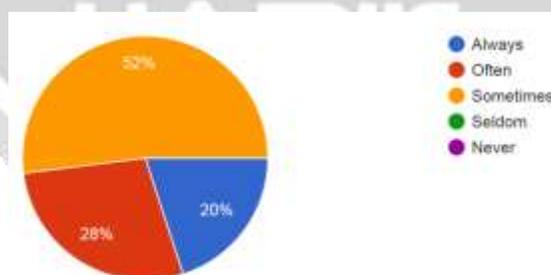
**Figure 4:** Difficulties in grammar in the translation of Vietnamese - English

### 3.6 Difficulties in the translation of Vietnamese - English in terms of cultural aspect

#### • *Students' frequency of difficulties in terms of cultural aspect*

Figure 5 presents the levels of frequency that the students encounter the difficulty in Vietnamese – English translation with regard to cultural aspect. About 20% of the students 'always' had certain difficulty in resolving cultural terms. If the topic is completely unknown to the students, they should consult complementary literature. In other words, before beginning the transfer process, they should resort to various documentation sources, especially parallel texts (those which are similar in nature and style) in the language of the original. This allows them to achieve a deeper understanding of the topic. The pie chart also indicates that the highest percentage of 52% belonged to 'sometimes' group. If the topic is already quite familiar to the students, they do a preliminary translation. As this is the first approach to the text, it will probably lack naturalness, since students tend to transfer SL units of translation to TL units of translation. This first approach can often be made orally and suggested annotations may be written in the margins.

Furthermore, the students who 'often' considered cultural words an impediment made up 28% of the sample size. Last but not least, none of the students chose 'never' and 'seldom' levels of frequency 'when they tackled problems of Vietnamese – English translation in terms of cultural competence.



**Figure 5:** Students' frequency of difficulties in terms of cultural aspect

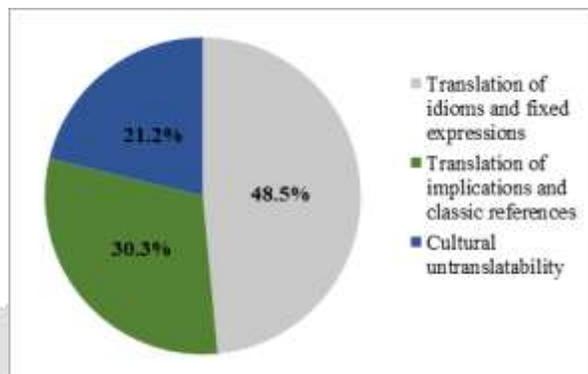
#### • *Problems of cultural terms that students often face*

According to the results shown in Figure 6, the most popular problem of cultural terms that the students were confronted with is translation of idioms and fixed expressions because it represents the largest proportion of the pie chart, at 48.5%. Indeed, idioms and fixed expressions frequently contain words or phrases which are untranslatable or difficult to translate.

Besides, 10 out of 25 students accounting for 30.3% stated that translation of implications and classic references was a difficult type of cultural words in the translation from Vietnamese into English. Cultural words or phrases in terms of archeology, history, and geology... were not popular with them and not easy to convert from Vietnamese into

English. Because most of the students got accustomed to the social culture in the present, translating cultural terms related implications and classic references often made them confused.

21.2% of the students found that cultural untranslatability was their real complicatedness. Translation is not simply a linguistic transformation of texts, but it is also a rendering of cultural concepts from one language to another. Asian culture in general and Vietnamese ones in particular shares some similarities with Western and American cultures.



**Figure 6:** Problems of cultural terms that students often face

### 3.7 Difficulties in terms of background knowledge in the translation of Vietnamese - English

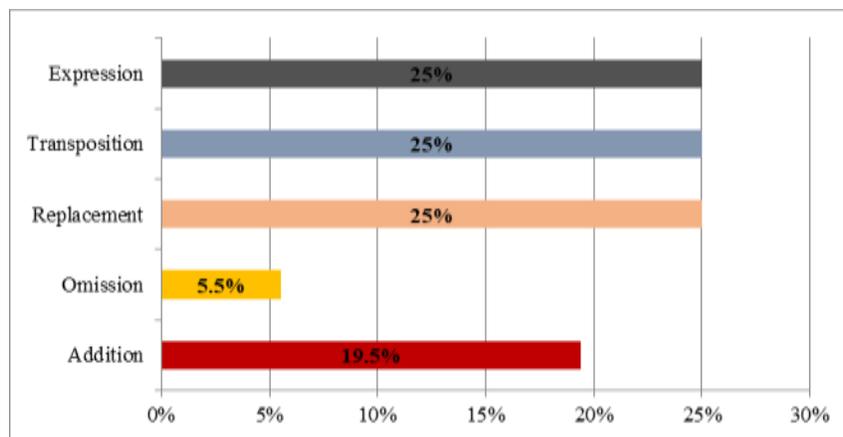
It is clear from Table 2 that there were still 28.6% of the students who deal with the area of the topic in a broad sense but did not touch upon the topic. The little relationship with the topic and corresponds with the topic in a broad sense categories were reported by 20% and 25.7% of the sample size respectively. Meanwhile, only 5 students (14.2%) had no relationship with the topic but there were only 4 students (11.4%) who only deal specifically with the topic in the translation from Vietnamese into English.

Problems of background knowledge	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Have no relationship with the topic	5	14.3
Have little relationship with the topic	7	20
Deal with the area of the topic in a broad sense but does not touch upon the topic	10	28.6
Correspond with the topic in a broad sense	9	25.7
Only deal specifically with the topic	4	11.4
Others	0	0

**Table 2:** Difficulties in terms of background knowledge

To tackle with the difficulties above, some approaches to improve Vietnamese-English translation skills are suggested in the questionnaire. The result shows that the students paid much attention to improving their translation skills and applied many different ways to be more professional in translating. As it can be seen from Figure 7, about 19.5% of the students used an addition approach to improve Vietnamese - English translation skills.

Besides, about 5.5% of the students used omission word while the others improved their translation skills by applying three ways mentioned namely replacement, transposition, expression which had the same percentage for 25%.



**Figure 7:** Techniques to improve Vietnamese-English translation skills

In summary, the tables and figures shown above present the data obtained from the survey questionnaires and then the difficulties in terms of linguistic aspect, background knowledge and cultural aspect in Vietnamese - English translation of the English major students at TNUS are discussed. Based on the above matters of facts, some suggestions are made to deal with such obstacles mentioned.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Thanks to the results collected from students' opinions through the questionnaires, the researcher finds out some basic following problems to discuss:

Vocabulary and grammar structures are two basic problems that most students have to confront in translation from Vietnamese into English. They acknowledge that they are lack of vocabulary in translation of Vietnamese - English text. For this reason, they usually encounter with so many new words, and it makes them feel difficult in understanding the whole meaning of the translation text. Besides that, even when they dominate the meaning of Vietnamese words, they do not know how to convey it into English and how to use suitable word in each certain context. Therefore, in performing translation, students cannot express exactly the original meaning of the text or express a wrong meaning from the original one.

Grammar errors are unavoidable mistakes for most students learning translation. The poor grammar has a bad effect in translation practicing. Virtually, there are many complicated structures being inserted in Vietnamese - English text, which sometimes make students confused. If students do not know about these structures, they cannot translate its exact meaning into another language. This is the reason why students should be proficient in the use of grammar in order to study translation well.

Students express that the differences between culture and region make they feel translating a text from Vietnamese is more difficult that they cannot translate exactly the clues related to cultural parts from the original document. Obviously, every country has their own unique so students in any way need to have enough knowledge and information about some certain cultural fields in order to do translation well.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Translation has been considered to co-exist with the internationalization and globalization of every country on Planet. This may be the reason why translators are extremely needed in many areas like economics, politics, and tourism. Translating has become one of the common occupations in our society. However, every aspect always includes its own advantages and disadvantages, challenges as well as difficulties, the translation from Vietnamese into English is not an exception. Therefore, English majors need to be equipped the necessary skills to become translators in the future.

This study investigates the difficulties in the most common aspects, namely, linguistic aspects, cultural aspects and background knowledge. These have been regarded as the most influential factors in the process of translation. It is very interesting that most of the students were aware their roles and the difficulties that they have had to deal with,

thus there is no big gap among the three factors. The biggest obstacles in vocabulary turned out idioms and fixed expressions as well as terminology. Besides, incomplete sentences were claimed to be the hardest among the three types of sentences that the students often met. The biggest problem in grammar in doing the translation referred to grammatical structures. In general, the students have to deal with the most popular difficulties within their linguistic aspects.

Some students did not correspond with the topics which they often translated in broad sense. Nearly half of the students could not deal with the area of the topics in a broad sense, but could not touch upon the topic. Generally speaking, background knowledge did cause a lot of troubles for the students of English for Tourism.

Last but not least, most of the students had to face cultural terms once doing the translation. Issues of social culture also included some certain cultural words which were common for them to translate from Vietnamese into English. Cultural terms are frequently considered to be an obstacle to overcome for not only the students but the professional translators in the world as well.

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