



Cultural Challenges in English–Arabic Translation: University Students’ Perspectives at the University of Benghazi

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of cultural differences on the translation of literary texts from English into Arabic, focusing on fourth-semester students in the Department of English at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 40 students. The study aims to identify the main cultural challenges encountered in translation, assess their effect on translation quality, and explore the strategies employed to address these challenges. The findings reveal that cultural competence is essential for effective translation and that literal translation often fails to convey culturally embedded meanings. Idioms, proverbs, social customs, and religious references were identified as the most challenging elements. The study concludes that successful translation requires cultural awareness alongside linguistic proficiency.

Keywords:

Cultural Translation, English–Arabic Translation, Cultural Competence, Translation Strategies, University Students

التحديات الثقافية في الترجمة من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية:

دراسة ميدانية من وجهة نظر طلبة جامعة بنغازي

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى بحث أثر الاختلافات الثقافية على ترجمة النصوص الأدبية من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية، مع التركيز على طلاب الفصل الدراسي الرابع بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة بنغازي – فرع الأبيار. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الكمي، حيث جُمعت البيانات من خلال استبيان مُهيكل طُبّق على عينة مكوّنة من 40 طالبًا. وتسعى الدراسة إلى تحديد أبرز التحديات الثقافية التي تواجه الطلاب في عملية الترجمة، وقياس أثرها على جودة الترجمة، والكشف عن الاستراتيجيات المتبعة للتعامل معها. وأظهرت النتائج أن الكفاءة الثقافية عنصر أساسي في الترجمة الفعّالة، وأن الترجمة الحرفية غالبًا ما تعجز عن نقل الدلالات الثقافية الكامنة. كما تبين أن التعابير الاصطلاحية، والأمثال، والعادات الاجتماعية، والإشارات الدينية تُعد من أكثر العناصر صعوبة في الترجمة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الترجمة الناجحة تتطلب وعيًا ثقافيًا إلى جانب الكفاءة اللغوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة الثقافية، الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية، الكفاءة الثقافية، استراتيجيات الترجمة، طلاب الجامعة

1.Introduction

Cultural competence has become an essential skill for translators in an increasingly interconnected world. In English–Arabic translation, this competence is not merely an added advantage—it is fundamental to ensuring accuracy, preserving meaning, and maintaining the cultural integrity of the text. Translation is far more than the mechanical transfer of words; it is an act of intercultural communication in which the translator serves as both a linguistic mediator and a cultural interpreter.

When translating from English into Arabic, translators encounter differences in idioms, metaphors, religious references, and social customs that may have no direct equivalents. These challenges are especially pronounced in literary texts, where meaning is often embedded in cultural nuance and context. Without cultural awareness, even grammatically correct translations risk distorting the original message or alienating the target audience.

Scholars such as Nida (1964), Venuti (1995), and Baker (1992) emphasize that effective translation requires both linguistic proficiency and an understanding of the socio-cultural frameworks of source and target languages. In the Arabic context, factors such as religion, social norms, and historical traditions add further complexity, making literal translation alone insufficient.

This study investigates the impact of cultural differences on the translation practices of fourth-semester English department students at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. By examining their perceptions, strategies, and challenges, the research aims to highlight the role of cultural awareness in producing translations that are accurate, meaningful, and culturally appropriate.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the linguistic proficiency of many translators, the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) between English and Arabic remains a significant challenge that often leads to communicative failure or semantic distortion. The core of the problem lies in the fact that translation is not merely a linguistic substitution but a complex process of cultural mediation.

1.2 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What cultural challenges do fourth-semester English department students encounter when translating literary texts from English into Arabic?
2. How do cultural differences affect the quality of students' English–Arabic translations?
3. To what extent do student translators rely on cultural adaptation strategies rather than literal translation?
4. What types of culturally bound expressions do students find most difficult to translate?

1.3 Research significance

This study is to identify the major cultural challenges faced by undergraduate students in English–Arabic literary translation and to examine the impact of cultural differences on the quality of translated texts and to investigate the translation strategies employed by students to handle culturally specific elements also, to assess students' awareness of the importance of cultural competence in translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Translation between English and Arabic transcends the mere act of linguistic transfer; it is a profoundly cultural process. Words embody not only denotative meanings but also values, beliefs, and social conventions. Idioms, proverbs, metaphors, religious expressions, and culturally bound terms frequently lack direct equivalents in the target language, thereby creating substantial challenges for translators.

Scholars in translation studies have consistently emphasised that cultural competence is a prerequisite for effective translation. Translators must take into account the socio-cultural background of the target audience and employ strategies such as cultural substitution, domestication, foreignization, and explanatory additions in order to achieve both accuracy and cultural appropriateness. This reviews the most influential literature on the role of cultural differences in English–Arabic translation, focusing on key challenges and the strategies proposed to address them.

2.2 Cultural Gaps in Translation

El Zeiny (2008) examined the cultural gaps that emerge in literary and religious translation, (جزاك الله خيراً) arguing that literal translation often distorts meaning. For instance, the Arabic phrase cannot be accurately conveyed as 'May God reward you with good', as this sounds awkward in English. Instead, cultural or interpretive equivalents such as 'Thank you very much' are preferable.

2.3 Translating Culture-Specific Items

According to Alhihi (2015), translating culturally specific elements such as food, customs, and traditions poses significant challenges. For instance, the concept of “Thanksgiving” has no direct equivalent in Arabic, and is therefore translated with an explanatory note as “عيد عيد to preserve its cultural and contextual meaning.

2.4 Cultural Encounters in Translation

According to Faiq (2004), translation functions primarily as an act of intercultural communication. Accordingly, the Arabic expression “البر بالوالدين” cannot be adequately rendered through a literal translation such as “kindness to parents,” but is more effectively conveyed by the term “filial piety.”

2.5 Translatability of Cultural References

According to Al-Kharabsheh (2003), idiomatic expressions often resist literal translation. Consequently, the idiom “break a leg” is better translated into Arabic as “بالتوفيق” rather than the literal but misleading rendering “اكسر ساقك.”

2.6 Newmark's Framework

In his seminal work *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark (1988) categorized cultural words and proposed strategies such as literal translation, transference, and descriptive equivalence. His framework remains foundational in addressing cultural terms across ecological, religious, social, and material domains.

2.7 Baker's Contributions

Baker (1992), in *In Other Words*, provided a practical approach to translation, stressing the importance of context and cultural awareness. She showed how a word like 'home' could be

depending on the cultural and emotional undertones (الدار) or (المنزل) translated into Arabic as of the text.

2.8 Idioms and Proverbs

According to Abu-Ssaydeh (2004), idiomatic expressions pose significant challenges in translation due to their resistance to literal interpretation. Accordingly, the idiom “the ball is in your court” is best translated into Arabic as “القرار بيدك الآن”, which preserves the communicative intent of the original expression.

2.9 The Role of Context

According to Hatim and Mason (1997), effective translation requires a high degree of contextual and pragmatic sensitivity, especially in political and legal texts. While the expression “freedom of speech” can be translated literally into Arabic as “حرية التعبير”, its meaning cannot be fully understood in isolation from the legal and cultural systems governing the target society.

2.10 Domestication and Foreignization

According to Venuti (1995), translation strategies can be broadly categorized into domestication and foreignization. Domestication refers to adapting the source text to conform to the cultural norms of the target audience, whereas foreignization emphasizes maintaining the cultural specificity of the source text. For example, “Christmas pudding” can be rendered into Arabic as “كعكة تقليدية في الأعياد” (foreignization) or “حلوى عيد الميلاد التقليدية في بريطانيا” (domestication).

2.11 Summary

The literature demonstrates that translation between English and Arabic is fundamentally a cultural act. Effective translation requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands cultural sensitivity, contextual awareness, and ethical responsibility. Strategies such as domestication, foreignization, cultural substitution, and explanatory additions are repeatedly identified as essential tool.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of cultural differences on English–Arabic translation from the perspective of undergraduate students. The quantitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data related to students’ perceptions of cultural challenges and translation strategies.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 40 fourth-semester undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. The sample consisted of both male and female students who had previously been exposed to translation-related courses as part of their academic program. The participants were selected through convenience sampling due to accessibility and relevance to the objectives of the study.

3.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed by the researchers. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including gender, age, previous exposure to translation courses, and self-assessed cultural awareness. The second section comprised ten close-ended statements measured on a

four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). These statements focused on cultural competence, cultural challenges in translation, and the strategies used to handle culturally specific expressions.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were developed based on relevant literature in translation studies and reviewed by specialists in translation and applied linguistics. Minor revisions were made to enhance clarity and relevance. Reliability was established through internal consistency, and the questionnaire demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability for the purposes of the study.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the participants during regular class sessions. Responses were collected anonymously to ensure objectivity. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies and percentages, in order to identify patterns in students' responses and address the research questions.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the results of the study based on the analysis of data collected through the structured questionnaire administered to fourth-semester students in the Department of English at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. The collected data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to interpret participants' responses and address the research questions.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Female	32	80%
	Male	8	20%
Age	Under20	6	15%
	20-25	22	55%
	26-30	8	20%
	Over 30	4	10%
Academic background	Studied translation courses	20	50%
	Did not studied translation courses	20	50%

4.2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study sample consisted of 40 students, of whom 80% were female and 20% were male, reflecting the gender distribution within the department. Regarding age, the majority of participants (55%) were between 20 and 25 years old, followed by those aged 26–30 (20%), under 20 years (15%), and above 30 years (10%).

With respect to academic background, half of the participants (50%) reported having previously studied translation courses, while the remaining 50% had not. Despite this variation, most students (80%) rated their translation experience as good. Only 10% considered their experience excellent, while 5% rated it as fair and 5% as poor.

In terms of cultural awareness, 60% of the participants assessed their knowledge of English culture as good and 15% as excellent, whereas 25% rated it as fair or poor. In contrast, a higher level of confidence was reported in relation to Arabic cultural knowledge, with 85% of participants rating it as good or excellent.(as shown in table 1).

Table 2 :Students' Perspectives on Cultural Differences in Translation

No.	Statement	Agree/Strongly agree
1	The translator's cultural background significantly influences translation quality.	90%
2	Literal translation often fails to convey culturally embedded meanings.	90%
3	Many English cultural expressions lack direct equivalents in Arabic.	95%
4	Translators should adapt texts to fit the target cultural context.	85%
5	Differences in social traditions necessitate modifications in translated texts.	90%
6	replacement of cultural elements that may be unsuitable for the Arabic audience.	85%
7	misinterpreting cultural symbols could lead to misunderstanding by the target reader.	90%

4.3 Students' Perspectives on Cultural Differences in Translation

The analysis of questionnaire responses revealed a strong consensus among participants regarding the role of culture in translation:

A large majority of students (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that the translator's cultural background significantly influences translation quality. Similarly, 90% of the respondents acknowledged that literal translation from English into Arabic often fails to convey culturally embedded meanings.

Furthermore, approximately 95% of participants agreed that many English cultural expressions lack direct equivalents in Arabic, highlighting the need for adaptive translation strategies. The majority of students (85%) emphasised that translators should adapt texts to fit the target cultural context, while 90% confirmed that differences in social traditions often necessitate modifications in translated texts.

Additionally, most respondents (85%) supported the omission or replacement of cultural elements that may be unsuitable for the Arabic audience. Nearly all participants (90%) agreed that misinterpreting cultural symbols could lead to misunderstanding by the target reader(as shown in table2)

4.4 Summary of Results

Overall, the results demonstrate that students are highly aware of the cultural challenges inherent in English–Arabic translation. The findings indicate a clear preference for culturally adaptive strategies over literal translation and reveal a disparity between students' knowledge of Arabic culture and their comparatively limited familiarity with English culture. This imbalance may have a direct impact on the quality of students' translations and underscores the importance of enhancing cultural competence in translation education.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the pivotal role of cultural competence in English–Arabic translation. The high level of agreement among participants regarding the importance of cultural background supports Nida's (1964) concept of dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes the transmission of meaning rather than the reproduction of form. The students' acknowledgment that literal translation often fails to convey culturally embedded meanings further aligns with Newmark's (1988) assertion that culturally bound expressions require adaptive rather than literal strategies.

The difficulties reported in translating idioms, proverbs, and religious references are consistent with previous research indicating that such elements are deeply rooted in cultural and ideological contexts (Baker, 1992; Al-Kharabsheh, 2003). These findings reinforce the argument that linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for successful translation and that translators must possess an informed understanding of both source and target cultures.

Moreover, students' preference for cultural adaptation strategies reflects Venuti's (1995) discussion of domestication and foreignization as effective approaches for managing cultural differences. The tendency to omit or replace culturally inappropriate elements suggests an awareness of the target audience's expectations and sociocultural norms, which is a fundamental aspect of professional translation practice.

The disparity observed between students' confidence in Arabic cultural knowledge and their comparatively limited familiarity with English culture highlights a significant pedagogical issue. This imbalance may negatively affect translation accuracy and cultural appropriateness, indicating the need for greater exposure to authentic English cultural materials within translation curricula.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cultural competence is a decisive factor in producing accurate and meaningful English–Arabic translations. The results reveal that literal translation is often inadequate when dealing with culturally bound expressions, particularly idioms, proverbs, social customs, and religious references. Students overwhelmingly recognized the necessity of adapting translations to suit the cultural norms of the target audience.

The study concludes that effective translation requires more than linguistic knowledge; it demands cultural awareness and the strategic application of appropriate translation techniques. Accordingly, integrating cultural components into translation training programs is essential to enhancing students' translation performance and preparing them for professional practice.

7. Recommendations

To enhance the quality of English–Arabic translation and bridge the gap between linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness, this study proposes several pedagogical interventions. First, it is essential to integrate dedicated cultural studies modules into translation curricula to foster deeper cross-cultural understanding. Educational programs should increase students' exposure to authentic English cultural materials and prioritize the teaching of practical translation strategies, such as domestication and foreignization. Furthermore, fostering a collaborative learning environment through joint translation projects can encourage the exchange of cultural perspectives among students. Finally, incorporating real-world case studies and simulations

into training sessions is highly recommended to prepare student translators for the complex socio-cultural challenges they will encounter in professional practice.

8. Limitations

Despite the contributions of the present study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is limited by its relatively small sample size of 40 participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to wider populations. Second, the study relies on self-reported data collected through a structured questionnaire, which may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions. Third, the research adopts a descriptive quantitative approach and does not include experimental or inferential statistical analysis, which limits the depth of causal interpretation. Finally, the study focuses on students from a single academic context, which may not fully represent English–Arabic translation practices in other educational settings.

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Data Collection and Analysis: Author (2)

Initial Draft Writing: Author (1)

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Research Ethics

The authors confirm full adherence to recognised ethical standards in scientific research, including academic integrity, voluntary participation, confidentiality of participants' responses, and transparency in data analysis and reporting.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Part One: Personal Information

1. Gender:

☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Age:

☐ Under 20 ☐ 20–25 ☐ 26–30 ☐ Over 30

3. Have you studied translation courses?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you have experience translating texts from English into Arabic?

☐ Yes ☐ No

5. How would you rate your understanding of English culture?

☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

6. How would you rate your understanding of Arabic culture?

☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

Part Two: Main Questions

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

1. The translator's cultural background is essential to the quality of translation.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

2. Literal translation from English to Arabic often fails to convey cultural meaning.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. Some English cultural expressions have no direct equivalent in Arabic.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

4. The translator should adapt the text to fit the target (Arabic) culture.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. Good translation requires deep knowledge of both cultures, not just languages.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

6. Jokes and sarcasm in English texts are difficult to translate into Arabic.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

7. Social traditions differ between the two cultures, requiring text modifications.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

8. Cultural adaptation strategies are better than literal translation.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

9. It is acceptable to omit or replace cultural elements that are not suitable for the Arabic audience.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

10. Misinterpreting cultural symbols may lead to misunderstanding by the reader.

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

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