

## English-majored Students' Perceptions of the Translation Course at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Translation, translation course, students' perceptions, students' perspectives, difficulties

The purpose of this study is to examine the efficacy of the 'Translation' course at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry from the English-majored students' perspectives via in-depth interviews. From the interviews data of 12 students, a critical evaluation was carried on to find out students' perceptions on different aspects of the course, including how they felt about the translation course, the difficulties they encountered throughout the course, what they thought about the teaching activities applied in the course as well as their expectations to improve the course. This study discovered that the lack of vocabulary, weak grammar and sentence structures, and not understanding the implied meaning of different contexts were their biggest challenges. In most students' opinions, they supposed that group work and e-portfolio were effective activities. The students were generally satisfied with the quality of the subject and suggested some viable recommendations to improve this course in the future.

### Introduction

'Translation' is a subject that equips English-majored students with not only translation methods and translation techniques but also the awareness of mistakes needing to be avoided when translating. The translation is also a mandatory subject in the English curriculum of many universities in Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry (HUPI). On the one hand, it was observed that English-majored students at HUPI normally had different perceptions of the efficiency of understanding and applying translation knowledge after completing this subject. On the other hand, lecturers who teach the translation subject also inquire about meaningful feedback from the students in order to self-reflect on their own teaching activities. The central purpose of this paper is to discover English-majored students' perspectives on the translation course, which is currently implemented at HUPI's Faculty of Foreign Languages. From the collected data, fundamental analysis is carried out to determine

the students' difficulties as well as which aspects need to be adjusted to meet their learning expectations.

## Literature review

Catford (1965) defines translation as the replacement of textual material of one language (source language) with equivalent textual material in another language (target language). Sharing the same viewpoint, Bell (1991) describes translation as the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in another source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences. In other words, translation is rendering a written text into another language in the way that the author intended the text (Dang & Bui, 1999).

In more detail, translation is a transfer process that aims at the transformation of a written source language text into an optimally equivalent target-language text and which requires the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the source language text (Wilss, 1982). The translation process can be illustrated by Nida's (1975) model in the following figure.

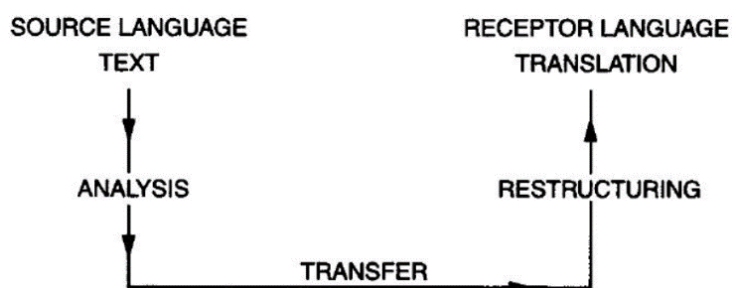


Figure 1. Nida's Process of Translating (adapted from Nida, 1975).

According to Nida (1975), the process of translation begins with an analysis of the source language text. At this initial stage, the translator's linguistic competence to properly comprehend and interpret the source language text is decidedly required. The next stage in the translation process is transferring the text from the source language text into the target language text. The capability to select the suitable equivalent in the target language text is a mandatory requirement to make sure that the text is appropriately presented in the target language text. The last stage is the restructuring process which can also be considered an editing stage. In addition to being required to be linguistically accomplished in understanding the source language, the translator will need to make a decision on which equivalent terms to use or which translation strategy to apply.

Combining core ideas from various scholars, translation can be generally described as a transferring process from an original language into a different language in the expression of the same information. It is obvious that translating is a complicated process because 'it involves many problem-solving and decision-making tasks which seem to strike the translator's mind simultaneously during the translating process' (Hoang, 2005, p. 106). There are four main

problems related to translation: technical terms or terminology, special expressions, syntactic ambiguity in long and complex nominal groups, and grammatical metaphor (Hoang, 2005). To teach grammar efficiently in translation as well as other English subjects, grammar knowledge should be integrated into specific contexts instead of teaching separate sentence structures (Ly, 2020).

In the Vietnamese context, Pham (2017) analyzes translation errors made by Vietnamese EFL students to identify the source of errors. By letting 36 Vietnamese English-majored students take a Vietnamese-English translation test, the researcher learns that translation errors and linguistic errors related to lexical choice, syntax, and collocation are the most frequent errors. In another research conducted at Tay Do University in Vietnam, Phan et al. (2022) discovered the most popular errors that English-majored juniors have frequently made are word order, grammatical errors, and lexical errors. The researchers found out that word order errors are related to noun phrases and adjective order. In terms of grammatical errors, they are linked to negative structures, passive voice, and pronouns. Regarding lexical errors, they are connected to collocation and idioms.

Translators and researchers are still studying to discover more comprehensive methods and better criteria systems for translation (Tran, 2022). Working with translating activities can facilitate learners' language ability of new languages in different language features, including lexis, grammar, reading comprehension, and new cultures (Nguyen & Ngo, 2021). In order to enhance students' ability in translation, a wide variety of techniques can be applied in teaching and learning activities in class. One of the most practical methods that can be mentioned is group work translation. Setiani (2020) applies this technique with the participation of groups of 3 to 4 students to translate a text provided by the lecturer. After finishing the translation, the lecturer checks the groups' products by showing the model answers, followed by some discussions. From Setiani's observation and evaluation, the author discovers that the students became more dynamic, motivated, and enthusiastic while doing translation together. Additionally, they advanced their mastery in translating activities when they supported each other as groups. Group work in translation activities can bring a lot of benefits to the learners not only in direct classrooms but also in an online studying environment. Oraif and Elyas (2021) use breakout groups in an online learning application called Blackboard to let the students collaborate with their classmates and assist each other in translating given texts. Their results reveal that breakout groups on Blackboard were beneficial to the students in many ways. Oraif and Elyas's students expressed their positive views of collaborative groups by sharing that they could accomplish translation tasks faster, did not feel embarrassed about making errors, and would freely exchange solutions to any translation problems.

In the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred in the last few years, a useful method that can be implemented effectively for teaching online translation classes is the e-portfolio. In addition to group work, the author also applied an e-portfolio to assess students' progress in translation ability. After studying each unit, students were required to submit one translation paper of a provided text with the theme of that unit into Google Classroom. These submitted papers would

be reviewed and provided a score based on the quality of the translation works. In the next meeting in class, the model answer would be shown to the students so that they could understand their mistakes as well as whether their translation products were qualified to receive a high mark or not. Besides, they were asked to find one bilingual article (having English and Vietnamese versions of the same text) with the same theme of that unit from the Internet and submit it with the main translation paper. This activity aimed to help them self-study translation from the open sources on the Internet by looking at useful words or phrases in both Vietnamese and English language. Also, the students could find out which grammar point or sentence structure to be used when translating a sentence from English to Vietnamese and vice versa. Most of the articles were collected from official well-known online newspapers or government websites in Vietnam.

Regarding the translation process, an e-portfolio assists students in tracing back their progress, providing and obtaining feedback from different peers, and having a virtual room to sort their translation works, which can be accessed conveniently (Rahmawati & Hakim, 2018). Handayani et al. (2021) evaluate the students' translation skill using an electronic portfolio and reports that students get a more favorable reaction. Because their sensitivity to creating better translation products increased, and their mistakes can straightforwardly be understood by accessing their e-portfolio archive, the students have become more motivated, consequently leading to improved translation outcomes.

Although there have been a wide variety of research papers reporting students' frequently-made errors when learning translation, very few studies have listened to the students' voices about their problems, expectations, and thoughts about their studying effectiveness. This study would put an effort to let students raise their viewpoints and investigate them to understand their problems deeply, self-reflect on current applied teaching and learning activities, as well as suggest viable solutions to enhance students' performance in translation ability.

### *Research Questions*

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the interview was seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties that the Vietnamese students have encountered when studying the translation course at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry?
2. What are English-majored students' attitudes towards the translating activities applied in the translation course?

## **Methods**

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

The target participants aimed to collect data for the study involved 12 Vietnamese English-majored students having studied the translation course in the first semester of the school year

2021-2022. All participants were third-year students of HUFU's Faculty of Foreign Languages. The participation of these students is on a voluntary basis. Half of them (50%) were male, and another half were female.

### *Design of the Study*

With the aim of listening to the problems of the students as well as appraising the effectiveness of the Translation course in the English Linguistics curriculum from the students' perspectives, qualitative data were collected by means of open-ended interviews. This technique of data collection was selected in this study because the author would like to explore the profound opinions of the students about different features of the course.

### *Data collection & analysis*

The instrument used to collect data was a focus group open-ended interview provoking students' thoughts. The interview sessions would be carried out in groups in order to help students avoid being reluctant to share experiences in one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, the questions asked in the interviews were open-ended to gather more detailed information on the students' experiences from their studying interactions.

All interview meetings consisted of 8 open-ended questions, which were asked in the same sequence. In order to make the interviewees feel comfortable and relaxed, they were allowed to respond to the interview questions in the Vietnamese language. Using their mother tongue also encouraged them to deliver further comments and to exchange views conveniently with each other. The interview content included the following questions:

1. What benefits do the subject 'Translation' bring to you?
2. In your opinion, between translating from English to Vietnamese and translating from Vietnamese to English, which one is more difficult? Why?
3. What are the difficulties you have to face when translating a text from English to Vietnamese?
4. What are the difficulties you have to face when translating a text from Vietnamese to English?
5. What do you think about group work in learning translation? (Is it effective? Why or why not?)
6. What do you think about the method of weekly collecting translation articles from the Internet?
7. How do you feel after learning translation?
8. What are your expectations from the lecturer to help you learn translation better?

There were three meetings with the contribution of twelve volunteered participants randomly divided into three focus groups of four. Each session lasted about fifteen minutes and was conducted via Google Meet video conferencing software. The content of the interviews was

fully recorded with the awareness and authorization of all interview takers.

The interviews' content was fully transcribed into word files and then translated from Vietnamese into English. In the next step, the gathered data was prudently coded and examined line by line with the support of the available functions of Microsoft Word software. Following that, the analyzed data were categorized into five main themes: *benefits, difficulties, learning activities, attitudes, and expectations*.

The interviews' transcripts were coded by identifying and labeling keywords or phrases related to the core themes. Next, all coded terms were counted for their frequency of appearance. Finally, the qualitative data was intensely analyzed to prepare for the inductive findings in light of the research questions.

## Findings and discussion

The subsequent findings were the result of analyzing and interpreting the coded segments from the focus groups' replies to the interview questions.

### *Benefits the subject 'Translation' brought to the students*

Regarding the first questions of each interview, the participants were asked to share what they gained after studying the subject 'Translation' in their semester. Boosting word power, enhancing sentence structures, advancing translation techniques, and understanding implicit sense were the main benefits that the interviewees mentioned in their answers. One male student from group 1 shared his experience:

*The 'Translation' subject brought me many benefits like reading more, experiencing more about how to write sentences in different ways, learning new sentence structures, and knowing good vocabulary.*

In addition to being learned new words and expressions from various topics, the students were taught how to choose proper equivalent words or phrases in the target language and how to apply them appropriately in different contexts. Another female student from group 2 also had the same view as the abovementioned one:

*There were three benefits that I could clearly be aware of. First, this subject supported me in understanding word choices. Secondly, it helped me think more wisely when looking at a sentence instead of being affected by one single style of translation. Third, it made my grammar improve a lot.*

Besides the mentioned advantages, one male student from group 3 told his deep thoughts about his learning experience. He was impressed by the underlying implication behind the literal meanings when translating a sentence from the source language to the target language. He forcefully explained that:

*I could find out more deeply about the source of the Vietnamese language by translating from English to Vietnamese, and understanding its implied meaning was very*

*interesting. This subject helped me understand that translating not only polished the way of thinking as well as writing techniques regarding the literal meaning but also had to show literature knowledge and ability to comprehend the implicit meaning of a reading passage to translate more accurately and beautifully in the readers' eyes.*

In comparison to the previous study by Nguyen and Ngo (2021), this study shares the same results regarding the benefits that learners gain after studying the subject of translation. Those good effects involve cultivating lexical resources, improving grammar structures as well as understanding cultural differences through being aware of the implicit meanings of each text.

#### *Difficulties students encountered when learning translation.*

The second, third, and fourth questions of each interview helped to answer the first research question. When being asked whether translating a text from English to Vietnamese or translating a text from Vietnamese to English was more difficult, most of the participants thought that the latter was more challenging for them. Ten out of twelve participants supposed that translating from Vietnamese to English was tougher than the opposite side because they believed that many Vietnamese words or phrases had no or very few similar equivalents in English. Consequently, they found it very hard to select suitable phrases or expressions to exactly describe the Vietnamese meaning in English. One female student from group 2 clarified that:

*I think this is a two-way process, so both kinds of translation have the same difficulty level. However, in comparison between them, translating from Vietnamese to English has more trouble because I can consult various sources in my mother tongue surrounding me for references. In contrast, there is limited support when it comes to using English.*

In another question regarding difficulties that students had to deal with when translating a text from Vietnamese into English, lack of lexical resources in English equivalents was still their biggest problem. Understanding Vietnamese folks and proverbs, as well as how to transfer those meanings into the English language, was not an easy task for the learners. Moreover, choosing correct tenses and compound and complex sentences were also other challenges to the students. One female interviewee from group 3 said that:

*About translating from Vietnamese into English, the most difficult thing for me was finding a similar sentence structure and the most scrupulous adherence to the sense of the original texts. In Vietnamese, it is unable to transfer some sentences into Vietnamese if we keep their initial literal meanings. Instead, we need to understand the implied messages of those Vietnamese sentences. That is the reason why we need to find out and practice a lot in order to translate well.*

On the other hand, having too many difficulties when translating from Vietnamese into English did not mean that the students did not meet any problems when translating in a reverse way. The participants were also interviewed about what challenges they had to face when translating



from English into Vietnamese. Inadequacy of vocabulary and grammar structures, as well as not correctly recognizing the contexts, were the main issues mentioned in the feedback. Furthermore, some English texts used metaphor, slang, similes, and idioms, which made the learners become confused when trying to understand the figurative sense or implicit meaning of the ideas inside those texts. As a result, they usually just translated the text based on the verbatim words and phrases because they did not get the true intention of the author of the text. One male student from group 1 added:

*I think the difficult thing here is the author's way of using metaphor or implication in comparison. Due to cultural differences, instead of interpreting a text's hidden figurative sense, wrongly thinking about its literal sense sometimes makes me irrelevantly translate off the subject.*

Compared to prior studies by Pham (2017) and Phan et al. (2022), translation learners share the most frequent mistakes when doing translating activities. These common errors consist of lexis (word order, word choice, collocation, idioms), syntax (sentence structures), and grammar (tenses, passive voice, pronouns). In addition to similarities, the results of this study add that comprehending the figurative sense of a text is a challenging mission for the students. Because if they do not accurately recognize the implicit meaning of the source text, they may simply translate it into the target language with its literal meaning.

#### *Students' perceptions of the learning activities*

During learning interaction, the author applied group work activities in translation assignments by using the breakout rooms function on Zoom, a cloud-based video communications application officially used by HUFU during the online studying semester of the school year 2021-2022. Students were divided into groups and assigned to virtual breakout rooms to work together in translating given texts. After collaborating to complete the translating tasks, each group would present their work and compare the result with other works from other groups.

The fifth and sixth questions in the interview sessions assisted the author in partly answering the second research questions. In terms of using group work in translation assignments, most of the students supposed that it was effective because they could divide the translation process into different steps, and each step was in charge of one student, which boosted the speed of work. They recalled that working together as a group helped them find necessary words or phrases more quickly, correct mistakes from each other, and receive more varied ideas to select the best ones for their translation products. One student from group 1 said:

*Working in groups would be helpful when members could receive proficient support from each other. Because of having groups, we had a variety of ways to translate a text. I believe that group work in translation is a good point. However, suppose all members in a group have the same level of language proficiency. In that case, I am afraid that we cannot solve some difficulties which I have mentioned in the previous questions.*

The above findings are similar to the discoveries of Setiani (2020) as well as Oraif and Elyas



(2021). It is obvious that group work activities let the students support each other in order to complete translating tasks. Students seemed to be more active, interested, and supportive while helping each other to translate a text. Collaborative work also allowed them to be more confident in exchanging ideas without fearing embarrassment.

As a matter of fact, not all the students agreed that collaborative work in translating activities was a good idea. Two interviewees claimed that translating in groups was not as efficient as translating individually because of some reasons. First of all, each teammate had his or her own style of expression, so the whole text could not have a strong connection. In addition, due to learning through an online platform, some teammates were still rather negative in communication and reluctant to speak out when discussing. One participant raised her concerns:

*I have no idea. Because when we studied online, some of my friends showed very bad behavior in terms of connecting and communicating. They were shy to say their ideas verbally, so we had to type messages to chat. When working in a group at home, we couldn't agree on a suitable schedule to meet. Everyone has his or her own reasons for being absent, like 'My house is very noisy,' etc. In general, I cannot judge the effectiveness of group work activities at the moment.*

An overwhelming number of opinions agreed that the method of weekly collecting translation articles from the Internet was good and deserved to have long-term application in the next translation course. They thought that this activity could help them read more, learn more about difficult or technical terms as well as learn how to write sentences accurately. One student from group 3 explained:

*This activity made me widen my knowledge about the lesson as well as collect more new vocabulary from the article and practice the translation skills learned in class and become more skillful in applying those skills. Next, reading bilingual articles from online newspapers is a good habit in the translation industry because these updated information sources are quick and easy to access. However, it is quite boring to read them.*

There was only one disagreement with this method. She told the truth that some of her friends and she rarely read nor analyzed the content they collected.

Although the format of applying the e-portfolio of this study is a little bit different from the ones applied by Rahmawati and Hakim (2018) and Handayani et al. (2021), the core effectiveness of this method is similarly viable. Most of the students from these studies showed a positive attitude towards using electronic portfolios in the subject of translation.

#### *Students' expectations and level of satisfaction after studying translation*

The last two interview questions helped to find out students' attitudes toward the translation course as well as their expectations over the course, which were mentioned in the second question. After raising their concerns, the students were expected to tell their feeling after studying this subject. They all thought that translation was a difficult but very fascinating

subject to study. In their opinion, it was hard because this subject required a stable foundation of grammar and vocabulary as well as various knowledge and skills from other subjects such as reading, writing, theory of translation, and so on. On the contrary, translation was also an interesting subject in the students' views because they felt that this subject was very useful in helping them learn the steps of translating a text most finely and accurately.

In terms of students' expectations from the course, their ideas were quite varied. One male student from group 1 expected that the lecturer should give more time for the students to think and translate. Furthermore, he suggested that more games should be added to translation activities. Additionally, one female student from group 3 raised that:

*If possible, I still would like my translated works to be reviewed and revised by the lecturer so that I could be aware of all of my mistakes as well as could know how to translate a text in more different ways.*

Another student wanted to be provided full answer keys after each translation topic so that the students could review old lessons in case they forgot to record the lecture's presentation on Zoom. Regarding teaching attitude, it was recommended that the lectures continue to keep the sense of humor during class time in the next translation courses as they extremely preferred those humorous moments created by the lecturer. Moreover, one student shared:

*I hope we can collect more translation articles from the Internet and translate them by ourselves to practice. Also, I expect that the lecture will continue to answer students' questions concerning translation even though the course has been over.*

Finally, when being asked about the students' satisfaction level after studying this translation course, most of them felt pleased or moderately pleased with the quality of the course. Although there were still some minor shortcomings throughout their learning experience, the students confessed that their core expectations were satisfied. One student commented:

*I felt that everything was fine with the translation course in the last semester, so I did not expect more than that. I just hope that the lecturer will still maintain that interesting and effective teaching method.*

## Conclusion

It can be clearly seen that translation is a critical subject in an English Linguistics curriculum. English-majored students at HUFU were well aware of the importance of learning this subject. Increasing word power, improving grammar and sentence structures, developing translation techniques, and recognizing an implicit sense of different texts' contexts were three main advantages that the translation course brought to the students. Despite the benefits, the findings from the study exposed that the major challenges that the students had to encounter throughout the translation course were the shortage of abundant lexical sources in both Vietnamese and English languages, weakness in grammar and sentence structures, and being unable to understand figurative meanings of a text when translating it into the target language, especially

from Vietnamese into English. Besides traditional activities like translating individually, group work and e-portfolio were implemented. Most of the students believed that collaborative activities were effective because they could assist each other and exchange ideas without feeling embarrassed. In addition to working in groups, weekly collecting bilingual articles from the Internet helped the students widen their knowledge, boosted their reading ability, and learn to write sentences more accurately. Although most of the interviewed students were satisfied or moderately satisfied with the course, some suggestions were raised for the lecturers to consider to enhance the quality of the similar courses in the future.

Because of time constraints, the major limitation of this study was that it mainly focused on interview data from a small-scale population. To gather more valuable data, further research can be carried on by getting a more significant number of volunteer participants from more classes. Besides, the qualitative data was just based on students' perceptions. Further research can also be done by investigating the lecturers' perspectives as well.

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