

Vietnamese – English Translation Errors Made by Second Year Translation-Major Students: An Initial Step towards Enhancing Translation Standards

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Abstract: Coming along with the rapid development of translation throughout the world, the University of Languages and International Studies, VNU also strives to train high-qualified translators who are able to meet social demands. With deep concern about the situation, the researchers carried out this study in order to identify common Vietnamese – English translation errors made by 2nd year students majoring in Translation and Interpreting and proposing suggestions for the improvement of the current practice. The major instruments utilized in the study included document observations, questionnaires and interviews. The combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the researchers to triangulate the data in order to attain the most reliable findings. It is expected that the study will be of benefits to not only would-be translators but also translation teachers at FELTE, ULIS, VNU.

Keywords: Translation, translation quality assessment, translation error.

1. Introduction

From the very first days of their profession, translators have been entrusted with the role of facilitating communication and understanding between people who come from various cultures and speak different languages [1]. This role is even more pivotal in the 21st century when nations around the world have come together in tremendous vigour to address global challenges and promote socio-economic

development. Coming along with this trend, University of Languages and International Studies, VNU also strives to train high-qualified translators to meet the demand of the whole society.

Reasoning that Vietnamese - English translation poses considerable challenges for 2nd-year Translation and Interpreting major students who are at the initial training process and not truly alert to translating-related theories and skills, the researchers carried out this study with the aim of identifying common Vietnamese-English translation errors made by

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these students and thereby, proposing suggestions to improve the current practice.

The study aims at addressing the following questions: (1) What are the common errors in the Vietnamese - English translations made by 2nd year students majoring in Translation and Interpreting? (2) What are the possible causes of these common errors? and (3) What are the suggestions to rectify these errors?

2. Literature review

Prior to conducting empirical evaluation on the quality of translation, it is indispensable to identify the translation errors and their classifications as Schiaffino [2] assumes that it is easier to agree on what constitutes an error rather than on what constitutes quality in the abstract, and that an important factor in quality is the absence of errors.

Mossop [3] describes translation errors as “a given rendering will be deemed to be non-translation if it fails to conform to the concept of translation predominant in the target culture”. He identifies translation errors in terms of cultural norm and formal equivalence. It means that the definition of translation error by Mossop [3] includes the achievement of formal equivalence but excludes other critical factors such as smoothness, readability and consistency in translational product. Besides, formal equivalence, as defined by Nida and Taber [4], is a method of translating literally and protecting rhythm, special stylistic forms, expression in syntax and lexis, metaphor, word play and so on; therefore, formal equivalence is mainly used in translating poems and songs, not all kinds of texts.

A more thorough notion of error is proposed by Pym [5]. This scholar supposes

that translation errors may be attributed to lack of comprehension, misuse of time, inappropriateness to readership, language, pragmatics, culture, over-translation, under-translation, discursive or semantic inadequacy. Compared to the definition by Mossop [3], Pym [5] suggests a large number of translation errors. However, these errors are not systematically classified.

Ten years later, Aveling [6] illustrates a more comprehensive and systematic notion of translation errors. According to Aveling, translation errors occur when translator fails to gain equivalence, adequacy and accuracy. This definition is more comprehensive as it stresses that equivalence covers many different types. Besides, it is more systematic because Aveling emphasizes that translation errors can be divided into two categorization including “dumb mistakes” and “deliberate mistakes”. The former is due to the lack of translator’s competence, and the latter occurs when translator poses a purpose to recreate the text.

Classification of translation errors

Not only the definition but also the classification of translation errors has attracted a myriad of efforts from scholars and researchers. Nevertheless, due to the complexity of this practice, it remains intricate to establish a single comprehensive list of all the translation errors observed.

Krzysztof [7] divides translation errors into four main types: errors of syntagmatic surface translation, errors of mistaken interpretation, realization errors and meta-translation errors. The first type includes equivalents, false friends, calques and unjustified borrowings. The second type covers misreading syntagms and wrong interpretation of verb frame, misinterpret scenes and scripts and misreading

the text modality. The third type covers TL errors, wrong evaluation of recipients' knowledge and insufficient of knowledge of subject-matter. The final type comprises translation technique, additions, omissions, two versions, too many or too few footnotes, a wrong translation strategy, corrections and changing the text's intertextuality. Nevertheless, this approach is complicated and troublesome for researcher to figure out translations errors of professional translators in general and undergraduates in particular.

Three years later, translation errors were categorized more logically by the Newmark [8] in which translation errors consists of two main types that are referential errors and linguistic errors. "Referential errors are about facts, the real world, propositions not words" [8: 189]. Linguistic errors involve mistakes due to the lack of translator's competence such as the use of articles, prepositions, punctuations, tense, voice, subject-verb agreement, word choice, spelling collocations, idioms and so forth. The second categorization of Newmark [8] is logical and appropriate to evaluate the quality of translations in general, especially the translations of undergraduates as they are at the early stage of training. Thus, the lack of competence is completely understandable.

While somewhat agreeing with Newmark's discussion, Nord [9], nevertheless, suggests further that translation errors should be classified into four main types. Firstly, pragmatic translation errors are due to the lack of recipient orientation. It means that the translator has no specific targeted readers in his mind; therefore, he has no orientation when translating. Secondly, cultural translation errors occur with regard to cultural-specific conventions or equivalence. Nida stresses: "Since no two languages are identical, either in

the meaning given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no correspondence between languages" [10: 126]. Therefore, the failure in translating cultural equivalences is unavoidable. The next type is linguistic translation errors which Newmark [8] also mentions. The final type is entitled text-specific translation errors and it refers to the text-specific translation problem. The translator has to deal with various problems in different texts.

On the other hand, Schiaffino [11] classifies translation errors into three principle categories. Firstly, errors of meaning occur if the meaning of translation becomes different from the meaning of source language (SL). Secondly, errors of forms involve an error of grammar, spelling, and other formal error that does not change the meaning of the translation with respect to the SL. In this aspect, Schiaffino [11] shared the same viewpoint with Newmark [8]. The third categorization includes errors of compliance. Although meaning and form are accurate, the translator fails to convey the style guide, preferred terminology, and other customer requirement which can cause unnaturalness, lack of readability and inconsistency in a translation.

The classification of translation error remains diverse; however, most scholars agree with Wang Baorong [12]. Baorong arrives at a mutual conclusion that translation errors should be classified into three main types including pragmatic translation errors, cultural translation errors and linguistic translation errors. Pragmatic translation errors are caused by practical issues such as a lack of receiver orientation and background knowledge. Cultural translation errors are related to equivalent problems and methods to deal with

cultural words. Linguistic errors occur due to the lack in the proficiency of the translator. As Newmark [8] points out, linguistic errors involve grammatical mistakes, punctuations, collocations, idioms and so forth. Consented by most translation scholars as the most comprehensive way of classifying translation errors, this method will be used throughout this study to analyze errors made by translation major students.

3. Methodology

The researchers attempt to address the research questions from *both qualitative and quantitative approach*, via which they can compare, contrast, supplement and especially produce the most adequate outcomes ([13], [14]).

3.1. Data collection instruments

3.1.1. Document observation

81 Vietnamese-English translations by 2nd-year translation and interpreting major students were collected for analysis of errors. This was aimed at obtaining quantitative data to answer **Research question 1** and triangulate with questionnaire findings to produce the most reliable statistics.

3.1.2. Questionnaires

The questionnaire was aimed at finding out students' view of the most frequent translation errors they made, the possible causes as well as their suggestions for avoiding these errors in future translation. Participants included the whole 81 students majoring in translation and interpretation of QH.2011. The questionnaire was designed in the form of *Numerical rating scales* and *Multiple-choice items* and comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

3.1.3. Interview

As interview insights into the nature of issue and the individual respondent's behavior, attitudes, experiences through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, the researchers decided to conduct an interview with an experienced teacher (coded as **T**) who was the only teacher in charge of all the three translation classes. Besides, interviews were also carried out with **three students** majoring in Translation and Interpreting who expressed their interest in participating in the interview. The students were coded as S1, S2 and S3. The interviews were aimed at achieving in-depth answers to all the three research questions.

3.2. Data analysis methods

The data analysis from questionnaires was mainly based on calculation of frequency, the mean, the median and the mode. Regarding document observation, the researchers examined 81 Vietnamese-English translations with expert consultancy to detect errors and compare with findings from other instruments. Meanwhile, the interview transcription was **coded** into three main categorizations to answer research questions.

4. Major findings and discussion

4.1. Major findings and discussion from questionnaire

4.1.1. Common translation errors

Linguistic errors

Participants were asked to rate the level of frequency for such errors from their own translating experiences. The following table summarizes the related descriptive statistics:

Table 1. Linguistic errors made by students from their own perspective

Error in ...	Mean	Median	Mode
1. The use of articles	2.33	2.5	2
2. Capitalization	1.38	1.5	1
3. Parts of speech	1.34	1.5	1
4. Preposition	2.23	2	3
5. Punctuation	3.05	3	3
6. Spelling	2.92	3	3
7. Singular and plural forms	1.90	2	2
8. Subject-verb agreement	1.32	1.5	1
9. Tense	1.89	2	2
10. Lexical choice	3.08	3	3

As clearly seen from the table, the most common errors students make was lexical choice, while they rarely had problems with subject-verb agreement, part of speech and capitalization. The findings were totally comprehensible as students specializing in English, especially 2nd year students could virtually master fundamental such aspects of

grammar as parts of speech, subject verb agreement and so forth. However, lexical choice belonged to a broader field of vocabulary, which seems more challenging.

Translational errors

The detailed statistics are as follows:

Table 2. Common errors made by students from their own perspective

Errors in ...	Mean	Median	Mode
Lengthy and awkward expression	3.26	3.5	3
Accuracy	3.02	3.5	3
Naturalness	3.21	3.5	3
Consistency	3.00	3.5	3
Readability	3.03	3.5	3
Terminology	3.21	3.5	3

Translational challenges seemingly posed more challenges to 2nd students than linguistic ones. More notably, lengthy and awkward expressions were by far the most common errors made by students, with the highest mean of 3.26 and high median and mode of 3.5 and 3 respectively. It was understandable as these above-mentioned errors in general were unfamiliar concepts to 2nd year level.

4.1.2. Possible causes

The largest number of students, 87.5% made errors due to the lack of accessibility to translation theories. It is comprehensible as students majoring in Translation at ULIS only learn Translation Theories in the 3rd and 4th

year. Besides, above 50% of students regarded poor command of vocabulary and a lack of translation skills as main possible causes, making them some of the most aching problems faced by 2nd year trainees.

4.1.3. Suggestions

Firstly, it came as a surprise that 100% participants valued teacher's in-class checking session as the most helpful method to further develop their translations, showing that they still remained passive in improving their translation skills. Nonetheless, more than two-thirds of students questioned regarded online dictionary and Internet searching as useful tools, which was an indication that students

were gradually better aware of shifting from teacher-centered based learning method to learning autonomy. On the other hand, other suggestions such as paper dictionary aid, peers' comments, revision of peers' comments, and revision of teacher's suggestions were not appreciated by students in translation class. It should be concluded that in order to enhance students' translation skills, it is essential for them to utilize various means of practice.

4.2. Major findings and discussion from document observations and interview

For illustrative purpose, data achieved from document observations and interviews were combined so that information could well supplement each other.

4.2.1. Common translation errors

The following table presents the most common errors students made when translating a text from Vietnamese into English.

Table 3. Common errors seen from document observation

	Categorization	Number of errors	Percentage (%)
Linguistic Errors	Lexical choice	171	24.85
	Punctuation	45	6.54
	The use of articles	56	8.14
	Prepositions	81	11.77
	Singular and plural forms	21	3.05
Translational Errors	Lengthy and awkward expressions	197	28.63
	Terminology	95	13.81
	Inconsistency	22	3.20
Total		688	100

Strikingly, the most common linguistic errors were lexical choice, accounting for 24.85% of all errors identified. This goes well with the finding from student questionnaire and therefore, helps enhance the reliability of the information. Similarly, lengthy and awkward expressions proved the most popular type of translation errors (28.63% of all errors made). The following part will illustrate the information in greater detail.

Linguistic errors

Lexical choice: As could be seen from document observation, lexical choice was the most serious problem in students' translation, accounting for 24.85% of all errors made. Document analysis revealed that the most noticeable pairs of misused words included *extend – stretch*, *plains – lowlands*, *create enormous pressure – put/exert enormous*

pressure, *kinds – species*, *marine time – marine*, *create the country – found the country*, *feudalist – feudalism*, *colonist – colonialist*, *domain/ region/ zone – part*.

In the same line with the abovementioned finding, Teacher T stressed that lexical choice posed the most serious problem for students. This was once confirmed by S1, S2 and S3, who highlighted their strains in determining proper words. S2 shared, "Word choice!!! I made the most frequently. For example, I wrote "a comprehensive war" instead of "a full-scale war", and "littoral are" instead of "coastal area", or "marine resource" instead of "sea resource". Like S2, S3 reported, "I used "vast ocean" instead of "vast sea area", "mountains" – "highlands", "total war" – "full-scale war" and so many, many others".

Meanwhile, *misuse of articles, punctuation and plural/singular forms* were not a serious problem for students, with just 56, 45 and 21 mistakes identified in their translation respectively. This explained why the use of articles, punctuation and plural/singular forms were not indicated clearly in the interview conducted with Teacher T as well as Students S2, S2 and S3.

Translational errors

Lengthy and awkward expressions: It came as a surprise that a significant number of 197 expression-related errors were detected. This signified that expression was among the most problematic aspect of students' translation. The examples will be presented as follows:

Original text	Students' translation	Suggested version
Việt Nam tuyên bố độc lập ngày 2/9/1945, nhưng sau đó lại lao vào cuộc chiến tranh chống âm mưu của Pháp nhằm biến Việt Nam một lần nữa thành thuộc địa của chúng. Cuộc chiến tranh này kéo dài thêm 9 năm nữa. Chiến tranh kết thúc năm 1954, đất nước bị chia làm 2 miền tại vĩ tuyến 17.	Vietnam declared <u>to be independent</u> on 2 nd September 1945, but right after that <u>it was involved</u> in another war to prevent the plan of French army from <u>making Vietnam to be their colony once again</u> . The war lasted for 9 <u>more years</u> . It ended in 1954; The country was divided into 2 regions at the 17 th of parallel.	Vietnam declared <u>independence</u> on the 2 nd September 1945 but right after, <u>plunged into</u> the war against French's scheme to <u>recolonize Vietnam</u> . The war lasted for 9 more <u>years and ended</u> in 1954 <u>when the country was divided</u> into 2 regions at the 17 th of parallel.
Tính chung rừng của Việt Nam có khoảng 800 loài cây gỗ, 60 loài tre nứa và hơn 1500 loài thảo dược.	Overall, Vietnam's forests contain about 800 <u>species of trees, 60 species of bamboo and more than 1500 species of medicinal plant</u> .	Overall, Vietnam's forests contain <u>about 800 tree, 60 bamboo and more than 1500 medicinal plant species</u> .

Expression-related errors were prevalent for various reasons, of which, low competence in English and interference of mother tongue were the most possible causes. As indicated by S1, "I find expression the most challenging part in translating any text from Vietnamese into English. I don't have enough language to express myself naturally in English." Similarly, S2 reported, "I haven't created a professional

style in my translation yet. Sometimes, I added unnecessary words in the sentence, and expressed the original idea in such a lengthy way."

Terminology: Up to 95 cases of misuse terminologies were identified. Among those, common terminological errors are illustrated in the following table:

Table 4. Terminology errors

Source text	Inappropriate use of terms	Suggestions
Vựa lúa	Granary	"rice basket"
Tỷ lệ tăng dân số hàng năm	Annual population increasing rate	Annual population growth rate
Thực dân Pháp	French colonialism	French colonialists
Cuộc chiến tranh toàn diện	Total/ comprehensive war	Full-scale war
Chính sách đổi mới kinh tế	Economic innovation policy	Economic renovation policy
Thảo dược	Herbs	Medicinal plants

Also from students' perspectives, terminology caused even "obsession" inside "a newbie" like S1. S2 and S3 also thought that terminology posed huge challenges to them. Since these students are "still at 2nd year level, especially mainstream students" (S1), the lack of terminology as well was totally understandable.

Naturalness and readability: The errors are interrelated with each other; one error can cause another and vice versa. For instance, the terminology errors are directly related to consistency, readability and then naturalness in a good translation. In other words, the inconsistent use of terminology can cause inconsistency, the lack of readability and unnaturalness. Therefore, no redundant discussion is provided in this part in order to avoid repetition.

4.2.2. Possible causes

As pointed out by teacher T, "**The inability to overcome the negative influence of the mother tongue in language learning**" was the main possible causes of students' common errors.

Besides, it should be noticed that S1, S2 and S3 all were "obsessed" by mother tongue because their property was merely a "**poor language competence**" (Teacher T). Poor language competence means both grammatical aspect and lexical aspects. S1 recounted sometimes he felt "extremely embarrassed" to "give up" because "the lack of technical terms

and not-yet-good grammar, though I did receive vital terms from teacher beforehand".

It was particularly interesting to find out that **lack of motivation** could exert great impact on students' psychology. Unlike S2, S1 was fully conscious that "Vietnamese-English translation poses much more challenges to me than English-Vietnamese translation. Thus, whenever facing difficulties, I leave it out". He sincerely admitted that "I felt so ashamed to admit that". S3 also thought that because of all the deadlines, he only had time to look over the translated text once and made some minor adjustments. "If I had spent more time on this, I would have produced a better text.", S3 regretted. Totally different from S1 and S3, S2 attributed her errors to **the lack of concentration** while translating, which led her to transfer the message inappropriately.

S3 added one more cause - **misuse of dictionary** – which tends to deter him from making a good translation. "The information given by such online website could be misleading and inaccurate because it is free and there is often nobody to take care of them, correct and update the data. Though I have a huge hardbound dictionary, I rarely use it because the sheer weight turns opening the dictionary into a pain."

4.2.3. Suggestions

From possible causes proposed by teacher T and participating students, some suggestions are presented as follows:

Table 5. Suggestions by both teacher and students

SUGGESTIONS TO OVERCOME COMMON ERRORS	
From teacher T's perspective	From students' perspectives
- Practice more to continually improve their language competence (learn grammar systematically and learn vocabulary by topic)	- Fully attend the classes held by lecturer and actively involve in checking session with lecturer.
- Expose themselves to authentic language	- Revise and memorize the knowledge teacher provided in class
- Develop sense of language	- Read more references, newspapers, magazines, etc. and listen to more news, background knowledge.
- Try to overcome the negative influence of the mother tongue in Vietnamese-English translation.	- Overcome the lack of motivation

5. Conclusions

A combination of both quantitative and qualitative method via three instruments, namely document observation, questionnaire and interview, helped reveal interesting points of similarities and disparities in order to triangulate and produce most profound and reliable information. Outstanding outcomes could be summarized as follows:

5.1. Common errors made by 2nd year students

Regarding linguistic errors, both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that **lexical choice** posed the biggest challenges to students. When analyzing questionnaires, lexical choice received the highest mean of 3.08, proving that all students agreed lexical choice posed a real aching obstacle among them. Similarly, classroom observations when combined with calculation revealed that 145 cases among 81 translations made lexical errors. More importantly, from the perspective of lecturer T and students S1, S2 and S3, lexical errors were also the most common ones among 2nd year level, showing that the findings from the instruments were consistent and reliable. Besides, it was all agreed by the instruments that grammatical aspects, including articles, punctuations, prepositions, singular and plural forms students needed being worked on more by students.

Likewise, **lengthy and awkward expressions** was consistently regarded as the most common problem by both the students and lecturer. It can be revealed from the questionnaires that lengthy and awkward expressions were by far the most frequent errors committed by students with the highest mean of 3.26 followed by an extremely high median and

mode of 3.5 and 3. Similarly, observations combined with statistics showed a dramatically high total number of 197 errors, which also repeatedly stressed among interviewed students. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that students face the most difficulties concerning lengthy and awkward expressions.

5.2. Suggestions for improving students' performance

The suggestions from questionnaires and interviews were synthesized for further improvement of 2nd-year students majoring in Translation and Interpreting.

First and foremost, **grammar and vocabulary enhancement** plays a pivotal role in the language competence enrichment. Sufficient grammar and vocabulary enable 2nd-year students as translators-to-be to process the ideas more easily, succeed in conveying targeted texts' ideas and particularly avoid lengthy and awkward expressions. The enrichment of language competence is not a matter of days or weeks but a practice of a life time; thus, it is vital for students to enhance language competence on daily basis. Strikingly distinguished from the normal practice of writing skill, translation is more acute as it requires students to register and convey with absolute accuracy such details as terminology, author's tone, naturalness and so on. Thus, vocabulary is undoubtedly an important factor. According to teacher T, an effective method to improve language competence for translation discipline is *learning grammar systematically and learning vocabulary topic by exposing to authentic language*. What's more, developing sense of language to overcome the negative influence of the mother tongue in Vietnamese – English translations is of great importance.

Likewise, **background knowledge enrichment** also greatly contributes to the success of translators. The enrichment of background knowledge is also needed to be carried out on daily basis. Background knowledge represents our glimpse of the world. Our world continuously changes and evolves; hence, our understanding and knowledge about it undeniably needs constant updating. Through reading about various subjects and keeping oneself informed of the latest happenings by reading references, journals, magazines and newspapers. Besides, just like a cook who has to take full consideration of the ingredients, it is “a must” for students to gain background knowledge about the kind of texts they are going to translate. Texts are of various types, including narrative, descriptive, or argumentative and so on. Each kind has its own features which require students to utilize appropriate language (formal or informal language), tone and register.

Moreover, autonomy also requires that students fully attend the translation class at university and actively involve in pre-class, during-class and post-class activity. Prior to translation class, a careful preparation of translation assignment is a prerequisite for students to follow what teacher checks in class. During checking session, it is time for students to raise their voice, receive peers’ comments and teacher’s feedback in order to learn from mistakes. Note-taking during checking session is strongly recommended. Revision and memorization of key notes, new terminologies are of great benefit.

In summary, the techniques suggested in this part have been proposed by both teacher and students in Translation and Interpreting Division at FELTE, ULIS, VNU. Some of them were even considered to be very useful tools in addressing students’ translation errors. So as to

truly master these techniques, students need persistent practice and constant efforts to enhance their language competence and knowledge.

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Các lỗi dịch Việt – Anh thường mắc của sinh viên chuyên ngành Dịch: Bước đầu hướng tới việc nâng cao chất lượng bản dịch của sinh viên

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Tóm tắt: Cùng với xu hướng phát triển mạnh mẽ của hoạt động dịch thuật trên toàn thế giới, trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ - ĐHQGHN cũng đang nỗ lực đào tạo các cử nhân dịch chất lượng cao, đáp ứng được nhu cầu của xã hội. Người nghiên cứu thực hiện đề tài này nhằm tìm hiểu các lỗi dịch Việt – Anh phổ biến mà sinh viên chuyên ngành Dịch năm thứ hai thường mắc phải và gợi ý các đề xuất nhằm nâng cao chất lượng bản dịch của sinh viên. Các công cụ nghiên cứu chính bao gồm phiếu điều tra, phân tích bản dịch và phỏng vấn. Việc kết hợp phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính và định lượng giúp người nghiên cứu thu được nguồn thông tin đa chiều đáng tin cậy. Đề tài nghiên cứu này hy vọng sẽ hữu ích không chỉ với những người muốn làm nghề dịch thuật mà cả với các giảng viên đang dạy kỹ năng dịch thuật ở trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ - ĐHQGHN.

Từ khóa: Dịch thuật, đánh giá chất lượng bản dịch, lỗi dịch thuật.