

## **Pre-service Challenges in the Preparation of EFL Students in Faculties of Languages & Translation in KSA**

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigated current challenges for EFL students enrolled in Arabic-English and/or English-Arabic programmes in colleges of languages and translation in Saudi Arabia before they embark on the labour market. Qualitative and quantitative data analyses revealed several patterns of challenges that impede the quality of pre-service translation preparation programmes in Saudi Arabian universities. These patterns of challenges fall into three major categories: language proficiency defects; insufficiency in intercultural knowledge; and curriculum design issues. Findings indicate a number of critical issues that require a systemic reform of the curriculum in these colleges.

## تحديات إعداد طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في برامج الترجمة قبل الخدمة بكليات اللغات والترجمة بالمملكة العربية السعودية

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### ملخص:

استقصت هذه الدراسة التحديات الراهنة التي تواجه إعداد طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في برامج الترجمة بكليات اللغات والترجمة بالمملكة العربية السعودية قبل الخدمة في سوق العمل. وقد كشفت التحليلات النوعية والكمية عن وجود عدة أنماط من التحديات التي تحول دون تحقيق جودة برامج الإعداد قبل التحاق الطلاب بالخدمة في كليات اللغات والترجمة بالمملكة العربية السعودية. وهذه الأنماط من التحديات تقع في ثلاث فئات هي: ضعف الكفايات اللغوية، وعدم كفاية المعارف بين الثقافية لدى الطلاب، والقضايا المتعلقة بتصميم المناهج. وقد أشارت النتائج إلى وجود عدد من القضايا الخطيرة التي تتطلب إصلاحاً جوهرياً في مناهج تلك الكليات.

## **Introduction**

Providing translation training programmes to prepare and qualify potential translators for the market has become a professional necessity in a globalising world. In Arab universities, especially in Saudi Arabia, a substantially growing interest in professional translation has clearly and focally crystallised in designing specialised programmes and courses in translation education and training at both undergraduate and graduate levels. This newly-emerging awareness of the need for both translation courses and translation programmes called for more rigorous research in translation (e.g. Al-Hamdalla, 1998; Al-Mijrab, 2005; Gadacha, 2006; Hashim, 1996; Saeed & Fareh, 2006; Shehab, 2005). However, current translation training and practice programmes have been prone to criticism as being ineffectively fraught with shortcomings.

Prior research on the status and quality of translation education programmes reported a palpable state of dissatisfaction with the quality of these programmes in higher education institutions (Gaber, 2001; Stejskal, 2003). This research revealed a dissatisfied attitude perceived by translation students because of the low quality of translation training classes they attended. Noticeable challenges that hinder their progress and development in a professional way were perceived and reported. Participants in these studies reported that they typically receive highly theoretical foundations in translation, interpretation, language skills, and more theoretical linguistics, but very little practice in translation and interpretation (Al-Dabbagh, 2013; Cseh & Short, 2006).

In this way, prior research on translation programmes has proposed insights and recommendations to explain translation-training barriers; however, these attempts have not fully diagnosed the problems and

difficulties as perceived by translation students. Reviewing databases, no study in Saudi Arabia has been launched to examine translation preparation challenges from the viewpoints and perceptions of Saudi translation and interpretation college students, where the pedagogical environment is enormously rooted in language skills development. The gestalt picture shows that translation courses are short of adequate practical considerations and are mainly rooted in the theoretical aspects of translation, let alone the weakness of the students' academic standards and insufficiencies in their proficiency levels. The present study aimed to examine the major challenges that face these students enrolled in Arabic-English and/or English-Arabic programmes in colleges of languages and translation in Saudi Arabian universities.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Regardless of the presence of intensive and extensive training programmes in Saudi universities, research showed that translation students are still underprepared as they encounter a variety of problems along their way of getting prepared for the market. These issues are linguistic, cultural and pedagogical. Jaback (2007) surveyed the views of 200 Arab students to identify the problems they come across when translating Arabic into English. The findings reported that 55% were linguistic problems, including grammatical, lexical, morphological, and stylistic. In this vein, Al-Darawish (1983) identified four important linguistic barriers to good translation, namely the mismatches in phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic features of the SL and the TL, sentence arrangement and structure, stylistic differences, and the need for copy-editing and post-editing work on the TL version by specialized scientific committees (Al-Hamdalla, 1998). Relevantly, El-Zeini (1994) identified six main translating problems for Arab students; these are lexicon, morphology, syntax, textual differences, rhetorical differences, and pragmatic problems. Further to this, Bahameed (2007) recognized these difficulties/problems and dubbed them as 'hindrances' to practicing

Arabic-English translation; these hindrances could be lexical, prosodic, structural, and/or cultural.

By the same token, Moharram (2004) conducted a study on student's errors upon translating Arabic into English or English to Arabic and came across a considerable variety of linguistic and meta-linguistic errors attributable to the inappropriate use of vocabulary, prepositions and gender, meaningless use of words, incorrect use of grammatical forms, use of long and incorrect sentences, stylistic mismatches, let alone orthographic and writing mechanics pitfalls. Moharram (2004) contended that these linguistic and metalinguistic issues could be ascribed to interlanguage and interference due to differences between Arabic and English; Arabic is a Semitic language while English is a Germanic language, which suggests that there are substantial lexical, syntactic and structural differences that influence the translatability of these languages. Word etymologies and syntax differ drastically across these language families, thus causing diverse translation problems such as the lack of lexical and cultural equivalents concerning concepts and values. Khoshafah (2008) confirmed those findings of Moharram (2004), revealing similar problems in translation practice due to linguistic, meta-linguistic and intercultural problems. In this vein, Bassnett (1980) believed that intercultural variations stand out as significant barriers to both novice and veteran translators. In this regard, Nida (2001) confirmed Bassnett's assumptions, suggesting that cultural differences can produce palpable intricacies and noticeable problems in translation more than languages structures may do.

However, in non-native English countries where English is taught and learnt as a foreign language, very few opportunities are available for EFL students to get acculturated to English as a linguistic/cultural system (Larson, 1984). This indeed poses several problems not only for translation education but also for learning and practicing the target languages. In this regard, Catford (1965) explicates that untranslatability of some esoteric terminology/concepts occurs when a situation feature, functionally

relevant for the SL text, is totally absent from the culture of the TL. Therefore, the role of the translator appears to work like a mediator between the different cultures in order to appropriately “mould what is said in one language to the convention of another” (Cook, 2003, p. 55). This opinion resonated with Attar’s (2005) belief when he argued that "what is seen outrageous in one culture ... is considered normal in another culture" (p. 138).

To sum up, language, culture, and related paralinguistic features manifested in cultural variations play a vital role in the processes and across the different steps of translation. Therefore, training programmes of translators should be enriched to develop an interlingual, intercultural awareness of L1 and L2 in practice. This intercultural, interlingual awareness can be achieved only when translators are linguistically equipped with sufficient knowledge of the SL and TL in terms of language skills preparation, cultural/linguistic awareness, and translation skills; any lack thereof, according to Larson (1984), could often be challenging. Therefore, Cook (2003) aptly observes “translation cannot be conducted at a purely linguistic level but must incorporate cultural and contextual factors too” (p. 55). Finally, this brief review of prior research indicates that the translation issues in translation training programmes can be classified into three broad categories, namely, language proficiency defects; insufficiency in intercultural knowledge; and curriculum design issues.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative and quantitative data analyses using a descriptive methodology were applied to collect data on potential/current patterns of challenges that impede the quality of pre-service translation preparation programmes in Saudi Arabian universities. In this way, the researcher gathered data through different tools: classroom observation, a questionnaire to glean the perceptions of the participants in the study on issues not pre-selected by the researcher... [and as a result, led to explore]

unsuspected things" (Hannan, 2007, p. 1). The questionnaire was personally handed over to the participants at the beginning of the second semester. The participants of this study were 100 students randomly. The participants were enrolled in highly specialized courses including linguistics (phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics), language skills courses and two Arabic/Islamic language courses plus three graded courses in translation. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were collected via the questionnaire. The responses were coded and analysed for identifying several themes and sub-patterns.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Qualitative and quantitative analyses gave rise to the identification of three distinct patterns that describe the prominent challenges participants in this research perceive in the education and training programmes provisioned in colleges of languages and translation. The following is a discussion of these most important patterns.

### **LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY DEFICIENCY**

Overall, participants showed that they encounter problems with language preparation. Though the first four levels of the programme are dedicated to language skills learning, they are still backward on having attained an advanced level of proficiency that can enable them to practice translation in a proficient way. Part of the problem is attributable to the low level of pre-tertiary education in foreign languages. Partially also, it can be attributed to the weak lexical and grammatico-syntactic knowledge they possess. Indeed, they stressed the fact that their limited vocabulary range is a strong reason they cannot practice translation well. This is congruent with some researchers' emphasis that "the most important language component for learners" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 449). Developing a mental lexicon in foreign language learning is not only essential to translation training, but is so for second language

acquisition/foreign language learning as Laufer (1997) assumes learning lexicons is the first essential step for L2 learners. In addition, lexical use is an important area where translation students can make mistakes, correct and learn from lexical errors more effectively compared to the other components of the language system (Bahameed, 2007; Moharram, 2004). Insufficient lexical knowledge not only can be conducive to lexical use errors in second language acquisition/foreign language learning, but can also hinder the basic steps in the translation process. This eventually forces the students to over-rely on dictionaries in translation assignments or exams – a very time-consuming and ineffective method, especially when keywords are lost and they cannot practice any guesswork (Gass and Selinker, 2008). There are several studies that show how important vocabulary learning is for error correction and efficient translation work, given that problems in vocabulary use are the most serious of all (Politzer, 1978; Levenston, 1979). Several studies also show that vocabulary training in translation work is more essential for students than grammatico-syntactic training (Meara, 1984; Blaas, 1982), thus indicating that lexical errors are more numerous than grammatical one by the third in a specimen text. For native speakers, too, lexical errors were perceived to be more troublesome than grammatical mistakes could be (Johansson, 1978; Meara, 1984).

These studies suggest that translation educators and learners should emphasise the presentation of sufficient lexical knowledge in classroom training. In the same way, the present study emphasizes the issue of insufficient lexical knowledge being a real barrier to the translation process. Table 1 below demonstrates that there are many lexical problems. The most common problem is the students' lack of both English and Arabic lexicons. Respondents indicated that both Arabic and English lexicons constitute a major problem they continuously encounter. Eighty-one of their responses (97%) indicate another sub-problem related to this issue, i.e., the lack of knowledge of English abbreviations, acronyms, and idioms. This is followed by the difficulty of forming

grammatical sentences in the target language, including grammatical mistakes, incorrect syntactic structures, and inappropriate word usages, phraseology, and stylistic mismatches.

**Table1. : Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to problems with linguistic competence**

Statements	Freq.	%
1- Students suffer from an insufficiency in both target and source language lexicons.	81	97
2- Students demonstrate insufficient knowledge of grammatico-syntactic competencies in English.	65	98
3- Students find it difficult to build grammatical sentences, phrases, and clauses that match the standards of English syntax and stylistics.	64	77
4- Students demonstrate an inappropriate use of the English words.	63	75
5- It is difficult for students to translate specialised jargon and terminology, especially scientific terms.	62	74. 7
6- It is difficult for students to make good use of affixes.	51	61
7- It is difficult for students to find suitable equivalence in the dictionaries of both target and source languages.	42	50
8- It is difficult for students to find an acceptable/ appropriate meaning of words in context due to obsolescence, connotative meanings, polysemy, or flowery language rich in figurative expressions.	40	38
9- It is difficult for students to translate compound words, or to restructure compound and complex sentences from Arabic into English and vice versa.	29	34
10-It is difficult for students to translate terms and expressions related to religious, political, economic and social sciences.	28	29

Moreover, results show that it was difficult for the participants to find appropriate equivalents in both L1 and L2 dictionaries due to polysemy, figurative usages, obsolescence or nuances in word usage according to context. It was also revealed that students find it highly difficult to get an acceptable meaning of vocabulary in religious, political, economic, or scientific contexts due to ignorance of equivalent expressions. In addition, students perceive a difficulty in forming compound words, and expressions that contain a lexicon whose meanings are loaded with cultural content. These findings are congruent with those of Baker (1992) who stated that "Errors and problems in translation mostly result from the non- equivalence between the source and target languages" when training programmes fall short of satisfying these needs (pp. 20-21).

## **CULTURAL DEFICIENCIES**

To speak and understand a language well, one must have an adequate competency and awareness of the culture of the target language. For translators and translator trainers, it is more important to have and provide a sufficient body of knowledge of the culture of the target language; any absence of cultural awareness will result in serious issues in translational output.

The participants of the present study perceive the understanding of culturally loaded words and idioms to be one of the main problems they face when they render culturally loaded texts. A lack of cultural background of the TL and the difficulty of translating of some proverbs are, according to the study participants, one of the major problems that may hinder an appropriate translation of a text or part of it. Items in the questionnaire demonstrate a high percentage of agreement to items corresponding to these issues ranging between 85% and 62%. This consensus denotes the importance of teaching the target language culture to the students as agreed by almost all participants in the present study.

**Table 2.: Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Lack of Cultural Competency**

Statements	Freq.	%
Students lack in cultural awareness of English.	71	85
Translation of proverbs, idioms, and culturally loaded phraseology of the target language and the source language is clear when they translate texts with such usages.	64	77
Students are less aware of the connection of some idioms when they occur in context in translation texts.	52	62

These findings further support the literature related to the significance of teaching culture in translation programmes; this finding is commensurate with findings in the study of Jabak (2007) which suggested that 45% of the problems that faced the participants (N=200) upon translating texts from Arabic into English related to cultural problems. Translating proverbs is difficult for students because the meaning of proverbs is culture-bound. Finding equivalent proverbs in English and Arabic can be rare due to the fact that these languages belong to different families and their cultures are, to a large extent, different too and such differences bring about a barrier between L1 and L2 (Newmark, 1981; Nida, 2001).

## **TEACHING METHODOLOGY& CURRICULUM ISSUES**

Teaching atmosphere and methodology are essential for achieving the main purpose of the teaching process. In other words, they are necessarily needed in the teaching of translation, a field that demands lots of expertise on the part of trainers and lots of practice on the part of trainees. This expertise will help the trainers critically think of which method is more suitable for which trainees. However, an obstacle appears before these trainers; the great numbers of trainees during one class that prevent the

trainers from implementing their thought-of-best method. Therefore, it can be stated that teaching methodology lives on the atmosphere of the class especially in teaching translation. The analysis in table 3 shows that the attendance of many students in one class (97% of the subjects' responses) is a real problem for practicing translation that has the percentage of 78%.

**Table3.: Frequencies & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Teaching Methodology and Curriculum Issues**

Statements	Freq	%
1- Large populated classrooms is a big impediment.	81	97
2- Lack in or absence of sufficient practice in translation in the classroom leads to having difficulties in translation.	65	78
3- The absence of specialist instructors in the field of translation is problematic.	63	75
4- Translation is not taught systematically and sufficiently in the programme.	51	61

Apart from these two issues, the absence of specialists in the field of translation creates, according to the study participants, a problematic situation for learning the translation processes systematically. To put it differently, students are given texts as homework without practicing them in the classroom. As this procedure is not followed by classroom discussion with either the trainer or the trainees themselves, the trainees do not get appropriate feedback to be aware of the quality of their translation (i.e. appropriate, poor or wrong).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has revealed some major issues and challenges Saudi students enrolled in colleges of languages and translation encounter during the course of their study. Qualitative and quantitative analyses gave rise to three categories of the issues and patterns problems and challenges that exist in the translators' education and training programmes. Such analyses, furthermore, assisted in finding out which issue is more problematic. Findings indicated that lexical knowledge insufficiency; inadequate grammatical and communicative competence, and inadequate cultural competence were important challenges that should be addressed in the curriculum of these colleges. Furthermore, inappropriate teaching methodology and curricular provisioning issues were amongst the main problems. These major challenges point to the dire need for conducting systematic reforms of the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the class sizes in Saudi universities.

In planning translation programmes, educators need to show concern about teaching and learning, such as focusing on developing learners' proficiency levels and facilitating their acquisition of basic translation skills. In addition, practice must be shored up with theory to help them learn effectively. Learners' perceptions of translation practice should be nurtured by developing their knowledge about the tools and strategies that the teachers use in their translation processes, and consequently, translation trainees should be motivated to become autonomous learners and to rationalize naturally their translation choices just as their teachers or professional translators do.

To keep up with the demands of the translation industry market, trainers/teachers of translation must customize their courses to help their students raise their competencies to near the levels of professional translators. One of these is to approach translation not as an authentic writing but "as a form of target language writing" (Gross, 2003, p. 91).

In addition, translation training could be enhanced by blending practice with computer literacy so that the students learn basic computer skills that they need to complete translation tasks.

### ***Suggestions for Further Research***

Findings reached in the present study are mainly perceptual, and they were restrained by the time, length, size, and scope of this investigation. More themes and topics in different areas of translation instruction could be considered for further investigation. One of these would be to investigate how the acquisition of translational competence in current programmes can be acquired in the classroom in light of the context where these skills increase as the translation industry becomes sophisticated in its methods as in holding partnerships with the private sector or the translation labour market.

Another useful research theme could be to investigate how an interdisciplinary pedagogy could be structured to maximize the training of translators and the teaching of translation skills and processes in specialised disciplines or subjects. It would also be helpful to conduct more investigative research on the nature of interdisciplinarity applied to teaching translation courses as this concept is viewed differently by different teachers examined in this study to propose new directions for translation teachers/trainers.

As findings showed the students had ambiguous perceptions about the translatability of English into Arabic and vice versa due to differences in language families and language history, our language and translation programmes should adopt contrastive analysis techniques in translation pedagogy. The idea of Arabic/English or English/Arabic translation, as a contrastive approach, rather than a comparative one, should rather be tackled from not only a cross-cultural analysis, but also, from a multi-disciplinary perspective. This shift in thinking about the etymology of languages needs to be considered in prospective research agendas.

To keep pace with the fast development in computer science and computer software, research to determine what it is that translation trainees need to know about computer skills and computer software that will enable them to carry out translation tasks is necessary and how those skills will be integrated into translation courses, especially in e-learning settings.

Furthermore, a translation teaching approach illuminated by communicative translational competence and social constructivist ideas can effectively facilitate learning and acquisition of competences and skills needed by novice translators in translation programmes.

Finally, empowering both translation teachers and student translators should be at the core of teaching translation courses/programmes to help translation trainees become critical, autonomous, and independent thinkers in their fields.

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