

CHALLENGES OF ARABIC-ENGLISH TRANSLATION: THE NEED FOR RE-SYSTEMATIC CURRICULUM AND METHODOLOGY REFORMS IN YEMEN

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the current major challenges (2011-2012) of Arabic-English translation and vice versa. The use of both qualitative and quantitative analyses revealed several challenges that impede the translation process quality in Yemen. We have categorized these major challenges into four main patterns: lexical knowledge insufficiency; inadequate knowledge and practice of grammar; little cultural backgrounds; and inappropriate teaching atmosphere and methodology. Within each pattern, there are a number of critical issues that need a remedy. The findings necessitate a re-systematic reform of the curriculum, the teaching method, and the students' admission processes in higher education institutions in Yemen.

Keywords: Arabic-English translation, translation challenges, and re-systematic reform in Yemen

INTRODUCTION

This age of globalization necessitates the inexorable existence of translation training programs wherein translator candidates are prepared and qualified for attending and performing this inescapable translation role in this world. This necessity of translation has enabled the translation training programs outputs to establish translation services that have become of a daily use all over the globe. As the Arab world is concerned, a substantially growing interest in translation has remarkably manifested in the teaching courses of translation at both undergraduate and graduate levels in several Arab universities. These translation courses have led to the emergence of translation programs in almost all Arab countries. This newly-emerging awareness of both translation courses teaching and translation programs/centers establishment have resulted in an augmentation of research on this area of translation (e.g. Al-Hamdalla, 1998; Al-Mijrab, 2005; Gadacha, 2006; Hashim, 1996; Saeed & Fareh, 2006; Shehab, 2005). Nonetheless, translation training and practice have always been criticized to be ineffective in the Arab world. For instance, Gaber (2001) reported that Egyptian trainees expressed their strong sense of dissatisfaction with the classes of translation they had in their respective faculties. Moreover, Stejskal (2003) found a similar dissatisfactory attitude in the minds of Kuwaiti translators who additionally demonstrated their disappointment in the translation classes they attended. Our experience as translation courses takers and givers (Author 1) helped us sense that Yemeni students have serious issues in translating from L1 (Arabic) into L2 (English) and vice-versa. As a result, the students started to conceive the belief that translation is difficult; more unfortunately, they tended to be passive and hesitant to participate in the class. Such a tendency, pedagogically speaking, should not be ignored at all and must be remedied as fast as possible. Although translation

research has proposed insights and theories related to the issue of translation barriers; it seems that it has not fully diagnosed the problems and difficulties from the viewpoints of the students. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted to explore the translation challenges from the Yemeni students' viewpoints, where the pedagogical environment is enormously different. To word it differently, the translation courses are taught in very crowded classes and the attention is paid mainly to the theoretical aspect of translation. Therefore, our study aimed at exploring the major challenges that face Yemeni students in translating Arabic into English and vice versa and then classifying those translation issues into appropriate patterns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation process is necessarily needed and encompasses sub-processes and methods that help in conveying the meaning of the L1 to the L2 (Ghazala, 1995). As a result, this process of translation needs special skills so that the intended meaning is conveyed well. Despite the intensive or extensive training the translator candidates go through, there are still many translation issues that face those candidates. Based on our analysis of the related literature, we have classified the translation issues into two broad ones: a) *General Issues*, and b) *Linguistic Issues*. General problems are attributed to the difficulty in choosing the exact equivalent word/term in both languages or related to the different languages settings and families as it is the case of translating English sentences into Arabic and vice-versa. Linguistic issues, on the other hand, are posed by grammar including lexicons, style or sound (Ghazala, 1995). Jaback (2007) conducted a study on 200 Arab students to identify the problems they face in translating Arabic into English. The findings reported that 55% were linguistic problems, distributed as follows: 1) 69% of these problems were grammatical, 2) 50% lexical, and 3) 46% were morphological. These results, furthermore, clearly show the main area of linguistic issues from which Arab learners of English suffer, that is grammar.

Al-Darawish (1983) stated four main difficulties in any translation: a) no two languages have exactly identical phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic features, b) languages differ in terms of sentence arrangement, c) a translator is forced to front or move backward certain items, and d) the impossibility for a translator to completely master two languages; however, this problem can be resolved through specialized scientific committees (as cited in Al-Hamdalla, 1998, p. 24). A decade later, El-Zeini (1994) identified six main problems in translating from Arabic to English and vice versa: lexicon, morphology, syntax, textual differences, rhetorical differences, and pragmatic problems. Another decade later, unsurprisingly Bahameed (2007) terms these difficulties/problems as 'hindrances' [for they hinder translators from moving forward and stating in the same spot] and classifies these hindrances of Arabic-English translation into lexical, prosodic, structural, and cultural hindrances.

In Yemen, the place of this present study, Moharram (2004) conducted a study on student's errors while translating Arabic into English and found a considerable number of errors attributed to the inappropriate use of vocabulary, prepositions and gender; meaningless use of words; incorrect use of grammatical forms; use of long and incorrect sentences, and incorrect use of spelling. Moharram (2004) argued that these problems might be due to the interference of the mother-tongue, lack of vocabulary items and cultural differences in terms of concepts and values. Very recently, Khoshafah (2008) confirmed those findings of Moharram (2004) when he analyzed six business documents translated by 20 Yemeni translators.

Bassnett (1980) believed that differences between cultures stand as a barrier before translators. Nida (2001) substantiated Bassnett's belief when she stated that cultural

differences engender severer intricacies than languages structures differences do. Culture for Larson (1984) is "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share (p.431)", and this is really hard to achieve in non-native English countries. Catford (1965), furthermore, argues that the cultural type of untranslatability 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 so as to appropriately, in the words of Cook (2003) "... mould what is said in one language to the convention of another" (p. 55). Attar (2005) showed the same belief when he argued that "what is seen outrageous in one culture ... is considered normal in another culture" (p. 138). As a result, one of several tasks a translator must achieve well is, conveying this outrage sense experienced in the source text through enabling a reader in the targeted text to make a difference between various attitudes and voices (Attar, 2005, p. 138).

To sum up, we can state that culture plays a very vital role in translation and translators critically need to develop substantial awareness of L1 and L2 cultures. This cultures awareness, however, is achieved only when translators are linguistically equipped with sufficient knowledge of the SL and TL; otherwise, finding equivalent words, according to Larson (1984) could often be challenging. This culture awareness is also verified in the following statement of Cook (2003) "translation cannot be conducted at a purely linguistic level but must incorporate cultural and contextual factors too" (p. 55). In short, this analysis of the previous studies has helped us in classifying the translation issues into two broad categories mentioned in the first paragraph of this section.

STUDY BACKGROUND

The Setting

We conducted this study on the level four English Department students, Faculty of Arts, Ibb University that exists in the Republic of Yemen. The study took place during the two semesters of the academic year 2011/2012.

Research Design

In this study, we gathered data through different tools. The first data-gathering tool is *Observation* that has been going on during the first semester. This instrument helped us prepare an open questionnaire which allows participants "to state their opinions in ways 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 in the beginning of the second semester. The participants of this study were 100 students selected at random. These participants have already studied many specialized courses including linguistics (phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics), language skills courses and two Arabic language courses. They have also completed three courses in translation. All these courses were traditionally instructed. These students can be described as fairly advanced students of English as they are senior students majoring in English and have studied English for about ten years (six years at school and three and a half years at the university). Though the questionnaire was distributed to 65 students, forty seven (47) students gave back their responses. Getting back the responses, we started reading through all the texts very carefully, marking, and coding critical words, phrases, and sentences. The process of coding helped in identifying several themes and sub-patterns. This analysis further helped in preparing the open-ended questionnaire. This questionnaire was given to three different professors at three different higher institutions for validity and reliability. Taking their comments into consideration, we prepared the final draft and distributed it to the students. Out of a hundred subjects, only 83 give back the responses this time. After collecting the

data, we used simple descriptive Statistical analyses of Frequency Accounts and Percentages. Below is a discussion of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The processes of both qualitative and quantitative analyses have resulted in the presence of several major patterns which underscored the main challenges the study participants face in the process of translating Arabic into English and vice versa. The following is a discussion of the most important patterns.

Insufficient Lexical Knowledge

Lexical knowledge might be "the most important language component for learners" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 449). Moreover, Laufer (1997) believed that learning lexicons is the first essential step for L2 learners. Lexicons use is, furthermore, the first area in which students commit a lot of errors compared to the other language components (Bahameed, 2007; Moharram, 2004). Insufficient lexical knowledge, as a result, will lead to lexicons errors that are the most serious ones in any language acquisition. The following extract from Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 449) shows several studies and the reasons behind the seriousness of lexicons errors:

Of all error types, learners consider vocabulary errors to be the most serious (Politzer, 1978, as cited in Levenston, 1979, p. 147). Additionally, large corpora of errors consistently indicate that lexical errors are the most common among second language learners. Meara (1984, p. 229) cited Blaas (1982) as indicating that lexical errors outnumbered grammatical errors by 3:1 in one corpus. Moreover, native speakers find lexical errors to be more disruptive than grammatical errors (Johansson, 1978, as cited in Meara, 1984, p. 229).

Based on the above discussion and the given (extract) studies, it can be stated that teachers and learners should have a great deal of lexical knowledge. They should seriously pay greater attention to lexicons than any other language component.

Similarly, our study points out the issue of insufficient lexical knowledge which is considered as a real barrier to the translation process. Table 1 shows that there are many lexical problems. The most common problem is the students' lack of lexicons in both English and Arabic. Most students have written that lexicons insufficiency is one of the major problems they continuously suffer from. Eighty one of their responses (97%) highlight this issue. Another sub-problem related to this issue, which also scored quite a high percentage (78%), is the lack of knowledge of English abbreviations. This is followed by the difficulty of translating acronyms, the inappropriate use of the English words, translating: medical terms, affixes, and political and economic terms and these issues emphasize the general issue/pattern we have coded like: Insufficient Lexicons Knowledge. Moreover, the analysis points out that it is difficult for the participants to find appropriate equivalents in both L1 and L2 dictionaries; get an acceptable meaning of the word according to the context; and translate the religious expressions, the compound words, and the texts full of English expressions that contain words whose meanings are culturally marked. Our findings similarly verify those of Baker (1992) who stated that "Errors and problems in translation mostly result from the non-equivalence between the source and target languages" (pp. 20-21).

Table 1. Frequency Accounts & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Insufficient Lexical Knowledge

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Vocabulary insufficiency in both target and source languages.	81	97
2. Insufficient knowledge of abbreviations in the English language.	65	78
3. It is difficult to translate abbreviations and acronyms into Arabic.	64	77
4. Inappropriate use of the English words.	63	75
5. It is difficult to translate medical terms.	62	74.7
6. It is difficult to translate affixes.	51	61
7. It is difficult to translate the political and economic terms.	48	57
8. It is difficult to find suitable equivalence in the dictionaries of both target and source languages.	47	56
9. It is difficult to find an acceptable/appropriate meaning of the word according to the context.	42	50
10. It's difficult to translate the religious expressions.	42	50
11. It is difficult to translate the compound words.	29	34
12. It is difficult to translate texts which are full of language expressions.	25	30
13. It is difficult to find the exact words which fit the meaning in the L2.	20	24
14. It is difficult to translate words which have more than one meaning.	15	18
15. Less awareness of the connotative meaning of lexical items in the source language.	15	18
16. It is difficult to translate the old English words which are not currently used.	12	14

Inadequate Knowledge and Practice of Grammar

It is highly remarkable that grammar is one of the important language components translator candidates/students must apprehend and practice well. Although grammatical errors might not hinder the communication process while lexical ones may do so and the structural errors are less than those of lexicons (Meara, 1984, P. 229, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008, P. 455), the grammatical errors are still disruptive and problematic. Our study highlights that insufficient knowledge of the grammatical rules in both L1 and L2 might impede in the effectiveness and quality of translation.

The analysis of this pattern, as given in Table 2 shows that 95% of responses have stated that the most common and confusing issue is the translation of prepositions. This is due to the fact that prepositions get different meanings in different contexts and this might explain why the study participants ranked them first. Another difficulty the study participants encountered in the process of translation is translating sentences in the passive voice which might be attributed to the participants' inadequate knowledge either L2 or L1 or both languages passive

voice rules. Ordering adjectives while translating is rated to be the fourth grammatical problem facing the participants (59%) and this is related to the different ordering rules of both Arabic and English languages. These findings support those of the researchers (e.g. Zughoul, 1979; Mukattash, 1976; Khampang, 1974; Tahaineh, 2010) who stated the existence of such difficulties in translation. Here it is highly important to mention the fact that word order in English, according to Baker (1992), is fixed whereas in other languages such as Arabic is not fixed. The differences between Arabic and English structures as well as the difficulty of breaking Arabic sentences into small English ones constituted the fifth grammatical problem. These findings posit that grammar is not taught in context by which students, according to Azzar (1999), can understand and use grammar well. As shown in Table 2, forty-eight percent (48%) find it difficult to use appropriate English tenses when they translate from Arabic to English or vice versa. This could be due to the fact that Arabic has mainly three tenses: present, past and future whereas English has various aspects of tenses.

Table 2. Frequency accounts & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Inadequate Knowledge and practice of Grammar

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Translating prepositions is confusing.	79	95
2. It is hard to translate sentences in the passive voice.	55	66
3. It is difficult to order adjectives while translating.	49	59
4. The difference of the structures in both languages makes it hard to translate well.	42	50
5. It is difficult to break down Arabic sentences in order to make them short in English.	41	49
6. It is hard to make links between sentences by using for example, 'in addition; moreover' correctly.	40	48
7. It is difficult to appropriately use the English present and past perfect tenses while translating.	19	22
8. The translation of questions is difficult.	9	10
9. It is confusing to translate negations such as: does not, did not, never, neither, nor.	10	12

Little Cultural Backgrounds

To know a language well goes without saying that a learner, whatever his purpose of learning that language is, must have adequate knowledge of the culture of that targeted language. It is, however, more important for translators to have a very sufficient body of knowledge of the targeted language; otherwise, they will face serious issues.

The participants of our study have regarded culture as one of the main problems they face when they translate. 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 harden the process of translation. This is shown from the high percentages of the responses (85% and 62%) given to these points. This, on one hand, denotes the importance of teaching the target language culture to the students as agreed by almost all researchers. It, on the other hand, further supports the literature related to the culture and translation which asserts the

difficulties caused by the this factor. For example, in the study of Jabak (2007) it was found that 45% of the problems that faced the participants (N=200) of that study while translating from Arabic into English were 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).

Table 3. Frequency accounts & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to Little Cultural Backgrounds

	<i>Statements</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Lack of cultural background of the English language.	71	85
2	Translation of some proverbs of the target language.	52	62
3	Less awareness of the connection of some idioms.	19	22

Inappropriate Teaching Atmosphere and Methodology

Teaching atmosphere and methodology are essential for achieving the main purpose of the teaching process. They, in other words, 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. These lots of expertise will help the trainers critically think of which method is more suitable for which trainees. But an obstacle appears before these trainers; the great numbers of trainees on one class that prevent the trainers from implementing their thought-of-best method. Therefore, we can state that teaching methodology lives on the atmosphere of the class especially in teaching translation. Our analysis shown in table 4 demonstrates 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%. 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 systemically and 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 realize the quality of their translation (i.e. appropriate, poor or wrong).

Table 4. Frequency Accounts & Percentages of Participants' Responses Related to the Inappropriate Teaching Atmosphere and Methodology

	<i>Statements</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	The large number of students in the class is a barrier.	81	97
2	The absence of practicing 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 at the university.	51	61

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have explored the major challenges that face Yemeni students in translating Arabic into English and vice versa. The qualitative analyses helped in classifying those translation issues into appropriate patterns in which several translations sub-issues exist. The quantitative analyses, furthermore, assisted in finding out which issue is more problematic. The results show that lexical knowledge insufficiency; inadequate knowledge and practice of grammar; inadequate cultural backgrounds; and inappropriate teaching atmosphere and methodology are the main problems. These major challenges point to the dire need for re-systematic reforms of the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the class sizes in Yemen.

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