LANGUAGES AND CULTURE

INVESTIGATING ENGLISH -VIETNAMESE TRANSLATION OF CULTURE-BOUND EXPRESSIONS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigates the difficulties due to variations in linguistic patterns and cultural norms for Vietnamese undergraduate students to translate culture-bound expressions across Vietnamese and English. On the specific focus of analyzing strategies employed by 30 English-major undergraduate students at Binh Duong University- Ca Mau Campus to translate culture-bound expressions, the procedure of data collection includes an administration of questionnaire and translation task. Findings of the study highlight a range of problems confronting undergraduate students in translating culturally specific expressions including (1) linguistic and cultural differences between Vietnamese and English; (2) challenges in conveying idioms and proverbs with cultural connotations, and (3) ambiguity in cultural expressions further complicates the translation process. Furthermore, various translation methods such as paraphrasing, functional equivalence, and adaptation are examined as potential approaches to deal with culture-bound expressions. The study also provides teaching implications for instructors and translators by emphasizing the essential role of linguistic and cultural knowledge in the translation process.

KEY WORDS*:* Culture-bound expressions; translation strategies; undergraduate students; English; Vietnamese

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1. Introduction

The definition of culture-bound expressions is derived from Wray's (2002) concept of formulaic sequences, which are prefabricated units stored and retrieved as complete expressions rather than being generated through grammatical rules. Therefore, culture-bound expressions can be regarded as formulaic expressions that carry strong cultural significance. They range from individual words, such as *bobby, hooligan*, and *beefeater,* to fixed multi-word expressions, including *cream tea*, *trick or treat*, and as *the crow flies*, each reflecting specific cultural concepts and practices. It can be said that cultural elements play a decisive role in influencing the overall meaning of individual words and word combinations. This influence is deeply rooted in cultural images, traditions, and customary practices.

Culture-bound expressions in both English and Vietnamese embody distinctive cultural and ideological characteristics that significantly affect meaning; therefore, achieving accuracy in translating these conventional expressions presents certain challenges, considering linguistic and cultural issues as well as implicit cultural connotations that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. The cultural gap between the source and target languages also makes it difficult for translators to comprehend and express the perspectives embedded in the source text. According to Maitland (2017), cultural translation encompasses traditions, inscriptions, cultural institutions, and social practices. Diverse ideologies, lifestyles, behaviors, and modes of existence are more visible and frequently contribute to social division and conflict. Since culture-bound expressions remain problematic in translation due to their figurative meanings and formulaic structures, translators should possess extensive knowledge of both the source and target languages as well as perception of cultural awareness. In other words, they should carefully address both linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target languages.

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The relationship between culture and translation has become increasingly prominent in the era of globalization and mass media expansion. This development reinforces the notion that translation serves as a communicative bridge capable of facilitating intercultural interaction and enhancing mutual understanding across cultures. Producing a meaningful translation in the target language requires a thorough understanding of its cultural context. Supporting this view, Gerding-Salas (2000) suggests that translators function as bilingual or multilingual agents of cross-cultural communication whose role is to interpret concepts and discourse in various texts as accurately and faithfully as possible.

Since culture is an indispensable aspect of translation, this reason requires translators to demonstrate bicultural competence in addition to bilingual proficiency (Martínez-Sierra , 2010). Bicultural competence enables them to understand the norms, customs, and beliefs of the target culture and produce translations that are culturally appropriate and free from misunderstanding. However, according to Armellino (2008), culturally specific words and idiomatic expressions cannot simply be replaced with equivalent lexical items in another language because their meanings are deeply embedded in the cultural environment in which they originate or which they attempt to reconstruct.

The translation of culture-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese presents considerable challenges because each language reflects distinct cultural and historical backgrounds. English idioms often derive from Western traditions, including Christianity and classical literature, while Vietnamese idioms are deeply influenced by Confucian and Buddhist philosophies, folklore, and rural life (Vuong & Hoang, 2020).

Metaphorical differences further complicate translation. English idioms often employ animal or action-based metaphors, such as “raining cats and dogs” or “let the cat out of the bag”, which may confuse Vietnamese audiences unfamiliar with these cultural references (Baker, 2018). In contrast, Vietnamese idioms frequently draw on agricultural imagery which reflect rural traditions and Eastern philosophies. These metaphorical differences highlight the need for translators to interpret not only literal meanings but also the cultural imagery embedded within idioms.

Semantic mismatches also pose difficulties. Idioms often carry figurative meanings that differ from their literal words. Zarei and Rahimi (2020) emphasize that semantic gaps between languages hinder equivalence, as many idioms lack counterparts with identical connotations. This forces translators to prioritize meaning over form and creative adaptation.

Pragmatic considerations add another layer of complexity. Wray (2018) notes that idiomatic meaning is context-dependent, requiring translators to consider communicative settings. For example, an idiom used in casual conversation may not suit formal discourse. Translators must therefore possess intercultural competence to preserve both meaning and pragmatic appropriateness.

Finally, syntactic differences between English and Vietnamese idioms complicate translation. English idioms often use concise phrasal verbs, while Vietnamese idioms employ parallelism and repetition, reflecting poetic traditions. For example, “có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim” (with effort, iron can become a needle) conveys perseverance through rhythmic repetition (Nguyen & Pham, 2021). Translating such expressions into English risks losing stylistic elegance and cultural resonance.

Although translation theories and professional practices have evolved considerably over recent decades, the translation of culture-bound items (CBIs) remains a major challenge due to their culturally specific meanings and the lack of direct equivalents across languages (Baker, 2011). The translation of CBIs, including idioms, proverbs, metaphors, and similes, can pose significant challenges even for professional translators, despite their advanced proficiency in the languages involved. In many Vietnamese universities, translation programs and courses tend to place limited emphasis on the cultural aspects of translation, resulting in the marginalization of culture as an

essential component of translator training. Accordingly, the translation of culture-bound expressions is expected to constitute one of the most persistent challenges encountered by EFL students.

Considering the aforementioned background, the main aim of the study is to examine specific challenges that university students encounter when translating culture-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts. Two research questions for this paper are as follows: 1/What difficulties do Vietnamese undergraduate students encounter when translating culture-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese?; 2/What translation strategies are adopted by Vietnamese undergraduate students to deal with culture-bound expressions?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants comprised 30 third-year students from Binh Dương University – Ca Mau Campus who completed translation-related courses and gained experience with culture-bound expressions in both English and Vietnamese. The participants were regarded as novice translators and were randomly selected to complete a translation test consisting of culture-bound expressions.

2.2. Research design and instrument

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to collect and analyze the data in order to achieve the study's objectives. The primary research instruments consisted of questionnaire and translation task which was designed to obtain data on students' translation difficulties and recommended translation strategies.

The design of questionnaire was divided into four parts: (1) an introductory section outlining the study's objectives, (2) a demographic section collecting participants' general background information, (3) a section featuring eight statements on translation difficulties associated with cultural knowledge, and (4) a concluding section containing open-ended questions.

The translation task included carefully selected expressions representing various cultural categories, such as idioms, customs, social practices, and culturally specific references. Participants translated each expression into natural and accurate Vietnamese while preserving its intended meaning. The translations were analyzed based on the strategies proposed by Newmark (1988) and Baker (2018), including paraphrasing, functional equivalence, cultural substitution (adaptation), literal translation, and omission.

2.3. Data analysis

The questionnaire data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine participants' perceptions of translation challenges for translating culture-bound expressions, with the results presented in tables. Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis by coding and grouping them into recurring themes related to translation challenges, influencing factors, and effective translation strategies.

The data collected from the translation test and questionnaire were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges involved in translating culture-bound expressions from English into Vietnamese. The translations were categorized based on the translation strategies employed, and their frequencies were analyzed using tables and percentages to identify the most commonly used approaches.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Difficulties in translating culture-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese

The data, which were collected through questionnaires were presented and analyzed descriptively as follows. The mean scores of 8 items are in the range from 3.78 to 4.62, which demonstrated a higher agreement of students while recognizing the difficulties in translating culture-bound expressions.

Items	M	SD
1. Culture-bound expressions are among the most difficult linguistic	3.89	.843

elements to translate		
2. Lack of cultural knowledge negatively affects translation accuracy	3.91	.891
3. Differences between source and target cultures create significant translation challenges.	4.62	*.918*
4. Idioms and proverbs are difficult to translate due to cultural specificity.	4.15	*.853*
5. I struggle to find equivalent expressions in the target language.	3.96	*.825*
6. Translating references to customs and traditions is challenging.	3.78	*.873*
7. I need additional contextual information to translate cultural expressions effectively.	4.12	*.738*
8. Some culture-bound expressions are impossible to translate directly.	3.95	*.855*

First of all, statement 1 indicated that most of the students strongly agreed that Culture-bound expressions are among the most difficult linguistic elements to translate (M=3.89, SD=.843). It is then followed by the second statement, most respondents also admitted that using lack of cultural knowledge negatively affects translation accuracy (M=3.91, SD= .891).

With regard to statements 3, the respondents concurred that differences between source and target cultures create significant translation challenges (M=4.62, SD= .918). Additionally, the fourth statement regarding idioms and proverbs are difficult to translate due to cultural specificity, the majority of the participants gave a positive response to this statement (M=4.15, SD= .853). Similarly, many participants perceived that students struggle to find equivalent expressions in the target language (M=3.96, SD= .825).

Besides, a great number of participants agreed translating references to customs and traditions is challenging (M=3.78, SD= .873). Regarding the seventh statement, the findings show that students need additional contextual information to translate cultural expressions effectively (M=4.12, SD= .738). Lastly, the final utterance was notified that some culture-bound expressions are impossible to translate directly (M = 3.95, SD = .855)

3.1.2. Translation strategies for English–Vietnamese culture-bound expressions

The findings indicate that participants relied primarily on paraphrasing, functional equivalence, adaptation, and omission when translating expressions that lacked direct Vietnamese equivalents. Among the four strategies, paraphrasing was the most frequently used. Twenty-five out of the thirty participants (83.3%) successfully used paraphrase to explain the meanings of culture-bound expressions instead of translating them literally. This strategy was particularly common when translating slang, idioms, and colloquial expressions such as spill the tea, ghost someone, and it's giving. The translations were generally accurate and easy for Vietnamese readers to understand, although some of the original stylistic and metaphorical effects were inevitably lost.

***Table 2**. Translation Strategies used by the participants (N = 30)*

Translation strategy	Number of participants	Percentage
Paraphrasing	25	83.3%
Functional equivalence	21	70.0%
Adaptation	20	66.7%
Omission	15	50.0%
Literal translation	22	73.3%

Functional equivalence was the second most common strategy, adopted by twenty-one participants (70%). Participants frequently replaced English expressions with Vietnamese expressions that conveyed the same communicative meaning. For example “Break a leg!” was translated as “chúc

may mắn!", while "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" was rendered as "Đừng nói trước bước không qua". Although the cultural imagery differed, these translations successfully preserved the intended message and produced a similar effect on Vietnamese readers.

Omission was the least frequently employed strategy but was still evident in fifteen participants' translations (53.3%). Participants tended to omit minor cultural references or redundant details when these elements were not essential to the overall meaning of the text. This strategy was most effective in dialogue translation and subtitle-like texts where brevity and readability were important. However, excessive omission occasionally resulted in the loss of cultural nuances or stylistic effects.

In contrast, literal translation frequently produced inaccurate or unnatural translations. Twenty-two participants (73.3%) made at least one literal translation error when translating unfamiliar culture-bound expressions. Typical examples included translating "spill the beans" as "làm đổ hạt đậu" and "break a leg" as "gãy chân", both of which failed to communicate the intended figurative meanings.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Difficulties in translating culture-bound expressions

First, the quantitative findings revealed that undergraduate students encountered considerable difficulties in understanding and accurately translating culture-bound expressions, with most participants struggling to identify appropriate Vietnamese equivalents for English cultural terms. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about appropriate translation strategies and techniques made it difficult for students to translate culture-specific items effectively. This finding is consistent with previous research by Salamah (2012), Dweik and Suleiman (2013), and Rakhieh et al. (2014), which similarly reported that students had difficulty achieving equivalence and selecting suitable techniques for translating cultural expressions.

The content analysis of the open-ended responses revealed several concerns about key obstacles how linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation of cultural-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese. One of the most prominent issues identified was the difficulty in distinguishing between the literal and figurative meanings of cultural expressions. As one student noted: "Sometimes, the vocabulary is familiar to me, yet the overall meaning is entirely different from my expectations, creating difficulties in translation". For example, the English idiom *"spill the beans*" may be translated literally as *"làm đổ hạt đậu,"* which is meaningless in Vietnamese. Its actual meaning is *"tiết lộ bí mật"* (to reveal a secret). Similarly, *"break a leg"* might be misunderstood as *"gãy chân,"* whereas it is actually a way of wishing someone good luck before a performance (participant 5).

Many participants stated that the lack of direct equivalents for English culture-bound expressions in Vietnamese presented a major translation challenge. They further explained that differences in sentence structure between the two languages complicated the translation process. One participant explained, "English culture-bound expressions are often written as fixed phrases that do not fit Vietnamese sentence patterns, making the translation sound less natural" (participant 8). Students also reported difficulties with English expressions that reflect culture-specific institutions and traditions. For instance, terms such as *"black Friday," "Thanksgiving,"* or "prom" have no exact counterparts in Vietnamese culture. Translating *"black Friday"* as *"thứ sáu đen"* or *"prom"* as *"dạ hội"* only provides a partial understanding because Vietnamese readers may not associate these terms with their cultural significance.

Additionally, expressions related to customs such as "baby showers, homecoming, or pub culture" are difficult because these traditions do not exist in the same form in Vietnamese culture. One student expressed that "I find religious expressions difficult because they are deeply rooted in Christian beliefs and biblical stories. Without understanding the religious background, it is hard to produce an accurate and natural Vietnamese translation" (participant 9). Moreover, modern slang and colloquial expressions are difficult because they change quickly and are closely connected to the culture of

native speakers. It is often hard to find Vietnamese expressions with the same meaning and tone. For example, the slang expression *"ghost someone"* does not refer to ghosts in the literal sense. Instead, it means to suddenly stop responding to someone's messages or to cut off communication without explanation. Expressions such as *"low-key," "salty," "cringe," "flex,"* and *"simp"* present similar challenges.

In general, undergraduate students in this study encountered considerable difficulties in understanding and accurately translating culture-bound expressions, with most participants struggling to identify appropriate Vietnamese equivalents for English cultural terms. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about appropriate translation strategies and techniques made it difficult for students to translate culture-specific items effectively. This finding is consistent with previous research by Salamah (2012), Dweik and Suleiman (2013), and Rabab'ah (2014), which similarly reported that students had difficulty achieving equivalence and selecting suitable techniques for translating cultural expressions.

3.2.2. Translation strategies for culture-bound expressions

Second, in terms of translation strategies, the results from the questionnaire also noticed that it is important to raise students' awareness of cultural-bound expressions as part of daily communication and encourage them to read in both source language and target language. Participant 12 expressed his thought that "I believe cultural awareness is essential when translating culture-bound expressions because understanding the words alone is not enough. Translators also need to understand the cultural background and intended meaning behind an expression to produce an accurate and natural translation". This finding is in line with those of Al Nakhal (2017), Banikalef and Abu Naser (2019), and Dweik and Suleiman (2013).

Findings from this study particularly suggest that meaning-oriented translation strategies were considerably more effective than literal translation. Participants who consistently employed paraphrasing, functional equivalence, and adaptation achieved higher translation quality in terms of accuracy, naturalness, and cultural appropriateness. Omission also proved useful when applied selectively and only to non-essential cultural elements. These results support the view that translating culture-bound expressions requires translators to prioritize communicative meaning and cultural accessibility rather than lexical correspondence.

Furthermore, the findings also demonstrated that students regularly adopted different translation strategies, including paraphrasing with related words, using more general expressions, employing neutral language, omitting certain cultural elements, incorporating illustrations, and using loan words with explanatory information when appropriate. The findings further confirm the study by Bin-Hady et al. (2023), which emphasized that differences in semantics, syntax, and pragmatics between the two languages make the translation of cultural items difficult for students. Additionally, ambiguity in some source-language cultural expressions often prevents students from conveying their intended meanings accurately in the target language.

To strengthen the adoption of translation strategies for culture-bound expressions, most of the respondents suggested that it is important to incorporate cultural-bound expressions in curriculum and encourage students to learn them as well. Students should be encouraged to read in both source and target language to gain and build up a good linguistic basis and cultural knowledge. "Teaching culture-bound expressions alongside cultural knowledge in translation courses can enhance students' translation skills and increase their confidence in translating diverse cultural expressions" (participant 8). Furthermore, this finding is consistent with the recommendations of Banikalef and Abu Naser (2019), who emphasized the importance of incorporating cultural differences, cultural awareness, and cultural knowledge into translation programs.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the study found that students encounter various obstacles when translating culture-specific expressions between English and Vietnamese. The major challenges include reliance on

literal translation, inadequate knowledge of cultural contexts, and difficulty adapting syntactic structures. The results further indicate that linguistic competence and cultural understanding are key factors influencing the translation of culture-specific expressions.

In terms of teaching implications, the study suggests that translation teaching should integrate linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and strategic translation skills to help students effectively translate culture-bound expressions between English and Vietnamese. Translation courses should emphasize cultural knowledge, provide systematic training in strategies such as paraphrasing, functional equivalence, adaptation, addition, and omission, and incorporate authentic materials and practical translation activities. In addition, curriculum designers should include cultural studies and intercultural communication in translator training programs to enhance students' cultural competence and improve the accuracy and appropriateness of their translations.

In terms of research implications, future research could explore the relative effectiveness of different educational approaches to cultural translation and investigate the role that cultural immersion plays in improving the comprehension of culture-specific expressions. When translators strengthen both their linguistic competence and cultural knowledge, they are more capable of handling the complexities of cultural translation and producing English–Vietnamese translations that accurately reflect cultural meanings.

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Dịch Anh-Việt các cụm từ đặc trưng văn hóa: nghiên cứu trường hợp

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát những khó khăn do sự khác biệt về cấu trúc ngôn ngữ và chuẩn mực văn hóa gây ra cho sinh viên đại học Việt Nam khi dịch các thành ngữ mang tính văn hóa giữa tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh. Tập trung cụ thể vào việc phân tích các chiến lược được 30 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại Trường Đại học Bình Dương – Phân hiệu Cà Mau sử dụng để dịch các thành ngữ mang tính văn hóa, quy trình thu thập dữ liệu bao gồm việc thực hiện khảo sát bằng bảng câu hỏi và bài tập dịch thuật. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra một loạt các vấn đề mà sinh viên đại học gặp phải khi dịch các thành ngữ mang tính văn hóa đặc thù, bao gồm: (1) sự khác biệt về ngôn ngữ và văn hóa giữa tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh; (2) những thách thức trong việc truyền đạt các thành ngữ và tục ngữ có ý nghĩa văn hóa; và (3) sự mơ hồ trong các thành ngữ văn hóa làm phức tạp thêm quá trình dịch thuật. Hơn nữa, các phương pháp dịch thuật khác nhau như diễn giải lại, tương đương chức năng và chuyển thể được xem xét như những cách tiếp cận tiềm năng để xử lý các thành ngữ mang tính văn hóa. Nghiên cứu cũng đề xuất một số giải pháp thực tiễn cho giảng viên và người dịch về vai trò thiết yếu của kiến thức ngôn ngữ và văn hóa trong quá trình dịch thuật.

Từ khóa: Diễn đạt mang tính văn hóa; chiến lược dịch thuật; sinh viên đại học; tiếng Anh; tiếng Việt.