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Students' Challenges and Strategies in Translating English Idioms into Arabic

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Abstract

Students encounter a number of challenges when translating idioms due to linguistic, cultural, and structural differences between English and Arabic. This research investigates the difficulties faced by Arabic-speaking translation students when dealing with English idioms in terms of recognition, comprehension, and translation. It aims to identify the strategies students employ to translate idioms into Arabic and enhance their ability to produce accurate idiomatic translation. The study uses a descriptive mixed-methods approach, with a structured questionnaire administered to undergraduate students in the translation department at the Faculty of Languages of Misurata University. The questionnaire included sections on idiom recognition, translation, strategy use, and perceived difficulties. The findings revealed that a lack of cultural knowledge, limited exposure to idiomatic expressions, and syntactic differences contribute to students' struggles. The study concludes that there is a need for context-based learning in translating idioms by applying suitable translation strategies to convey the same intended idiomatic meaning while preserving the same effect, i.e., translation equivalence, and an increased focus on cultural competence through literary readings in Arabic and English

Key words: Arabic; Cultural Differences; English; Idioms; Translation strategies

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تحديات الطلاب واستراتيجياتهم في ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية

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ملخص البحث

يواجه الطلبة عدداً من التحديات عند التعامل مع التعابير الاصطلاحية في الترجمة، وذلك نتيجة للاختلافات اللغوية والثقافية بين اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية، يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب الناطقون باللغة العربية في التعرّف على التعابير الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية وفهمها وترجمتها، كما يسعى إلى بيان الاستراتيجيات التي يمكن أن تسهم في تيسير فهمهم لهذه التعابير وتنمية قدرتهم على إنتاج ترجمة اصطلاحية دقيقة. تعتمد هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي المختلط باستخدام استبيان مهيكل استهدف طلبة الليسانس بقسم الترجمة بكلية اللغات بجامعة مصراتة، وتضمن الاستبيان محاور تتعلق بمدى التعرف على التعابير الاصطلاحية وطرق ترجمتها والاستراتيجيات المستخدمة والصعوبات التي يواجهونها، ووفقا لنتائج هذه الدراسة؛ فإن ضعف المعرفة الثقافية، ومحدودية التعرض للتعابير الاصطلاحية سواء في استخدامها أو ترجمتها، وكذلك الاختلافات النحوية بين اللغتين هي أبرز العوامل التي من شأنها عدم قدرة الطلاب على فهم هذه التعابير وترجمتها إلى العربية. وتوصي الدراسة بضرورة تحسين كفاءة الطلبة في ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية من خلال توظيف التعلم القائم على السياق، وإتاحة مزيد من فرص التدريب والممارسة على ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية، وكذلك التركيز على الاختلافات الثقافية بين اللغتين من خلال حث الطلاب على القراءات الأدبية باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :استراتيجيات الترجمة، التعابير الاصطلاحية، الفروق الثقافية، اللغة الإنجليزية، اللغة العربية

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Introduction

Idiomatic expressions are a fundamental component of any language, reflecting cultural heritage and linguistic uniqueness (Baker, 2011). They are closely tied to culture, which makes them difficult for students to understand and translate accurately. However, translating idioms from English to Arabic poses challenges for students due to semantic and structural differences (Newmark, 1988). This paper investigates the difficulties translation students encounter when translating English idioms and explores their strategies to tackle these issues.

Statement of the Problem

Many studies and research on dealing with English idioms in translation by EFL students have been conducted. This proves that translating idioms is not an easy task. The problem is that when students do not recognize and fully understand the English idiom, they may wrongly render their figurative meaning, particularly in Arabic since the two languages have totally different cultures and grammatical structures.

Aim of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Investigate the students' ability to recognize and understand the meaning of idioms, as they have different figurative meanings from their literal meanings.
2. Explore how the students approach idioms in translation. i.e., to identify the strategies that students could use to overcome translation problems in order to produce the same meaning and effect of the English idiom in Arabic.

Literature Review

An idiom is an expression whose overall meaning differs from the meanings of its individual components, making it difficult for non-native speakers to recognize the intended meaning when it is used (Baalbaki, 2013). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an idiom is "a group of words whose meaning considered as a unit is different from the meanings of each word considered separately." Research indicates that idioms cannot be translated literally without losing their meanings (Fernando, 1996). A number of studies highlight the impact of

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cultural background on the comprehension of idioms (Kövecés, 2010) and emphasize the necessity of context in translation (Venuti, 2017). Furthermore, scholars argue that a functional rather than a literal translation approach is essential for conveying idiomatic meanings accurately (Nida & Taber, 2003).

Types of Idioms

From a semantic perspective, idioms are usually classified according to the relationship between their literal meaning and their figurative meaning. According to Fernando (1996), idioms may be categorized as transparent, semi-transparent, or opaque depending on the extent to which their figurative meanings can be understood from their individual components.

(i) Transparent Idioms

In this type of idiom, there is a clear relationship between the literal and intended figurative meanings, which makes them relatively easier for language learners and translators to understand as well as to translate. For example, *break the silence* refers to ending a period of silence, and the literal meanings of the words provide clues to the intended meaning.

(ii) Semi-transparent Idioms

Semi-transparent idioms are expressions in which the connection between the literal and figurative meanings is only partially visible. Although the words may provide some indication of the intended meaning, interpretation requires contextual knowledge and familiarity with the expression. For example, *add fuel to the fire* means to make a difficult situation worse; the figurative meaning is related to the literal image but cannot be understood completely without recognizing the metaphorical association.

(iii) Pure Idioms

Pure idioms are expressions whose figurative meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of their individual components. The literal interpretation provides little or no indication of the intended meaning, making these idioms the most difficult for non-native speakers and translators. For example, *kick the bucket* means "to die," and its meaning must be learned as a fixed expression rather than inferred from the individual words themselves.

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In translation studies, Fernando's (1996) classification is particularly significant because it suggests that the degree of semantic transparency influences the difficulty of idiom comprehension and translation. Transparent idioms are generally easier to be understood and translated, whereas opaque idioms often require greater reliance on context, cultural knowledge, and appropriate translation strategies.

Approaching Idioms in Translation

Translating idioms from English into Arabic represents a significant challenge for EFL students because idioms are not merely combinations of words, but rather, they represent culturally determined expressions whose meanings are interpreted within the context of a particular language community (Fernando, 1996). Because idioms are closely connected to the cultural and social contexts in which they are produced, their translation often requires more than linguistic substitution; it requires interpretation of the underlying cultural meaning (Baker, 2011). She emphasized that the primary difficulty in translating idioms lies not only in recognizing them, but in understanding their subtle nuances, register, and appropriate context of use in both languages. Newmark (1988) noted that successful idiom translation relies on knowing the function of an expression rather than focusing solely on dictionary definitions.

The first step in idiomatic translation involves identifying and comprehending the meaning of idioms before their translation into the target language. Even though it might be possible to learn some hints through the literal meaning of the words used in an idiom, the meaning of idioms mostly lies in the conventions of their use. According to Fernando (1996), idioms vary in their degree of semantic transparency; some expressions allow their figurative meanings to be inferred from their components, whereas others are highly opaque and require knowledge of their conventional meanings. Therefore, context plays a crucial role in identifying the intended meaning of an idiom and avoiding misinterpretation.

As idioms are culture-bound expressions, they can be quite challenging during the process of translation. Many idiomatic expressions are deeply rooted in the culture and history of a language. Newmark (1988) argues that cultural elements often present translation problems because they may lack direct equivalents in the target language. However, Baker (2011) emphasizes that the absence of an equivalent idiom does not mean that the expression

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cannot be translated; rather, translators must employ alternative strategies, such as using an idiom with a similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, or explaining the meaning of the expression.

Therefore, when an idiom has no equivalent in the target language, literal translation is inappropriate because it may preserve the literal meaning of its individual components while losing the intended figurative meaning. Instead, translators should focus on conveying the figurative meaning of the idiom. This approach is consistent with Nida's (1964) concept of dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes producing a target-language message that produces the same intended effect on the target audience rather than maintaining formal similarity with the source text.

Furthermore, idioms may have more than one possible translation depending on the context in which they occur. Different target language equivalents may convey slightly different shades of meaning, levels of formality, or emotional effects. Therefore, translators must consider contextual factors when selecting the most appropriate equivalent. As Baker (2011) notes, successful idiom translation requires not only linguistic knowledge but also awareness of pragmatic meaning, cultural conventions, and the communicative purpose of the expression.

Baker's Approach to Idiom Translation

According to Baker (1998; 2011; 2018), idioms can be translated using different translation strategies.

(i) Translation by using an idiom of similar meaning and form: using a target language idiom that matches both the exact figurative meaning and the lexical structure of the source idiom. "To shed crocodile tears" and "يذرف دموع التماسيح" are considered equivalents to each other. This idiom is used to avoid a harsh sentence.

(ii) Translation by using an idiom of similar meaning and different form: using a target language idiom that conveys the exact meaning but uses different words. "To buy a pig in a poke", "يشتري سمكاً في بحر". In Arabic Islamic culture, 'pig' has a negative symbolic meaning. A direct translation of the idiom is often offensive.

(iii) Paraphrasing: when no equivalent idiom exists, the meaning of the idiom is explained using non-idiomatic words. "To kick the bucket, وافته المنية". A literal

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translation of the idiom makes no sense in Arabic. Therefore, the idiomatic meaning is paraphrased.

(iv) Translation by omission: when no match exists, or the idiom cannot be easily paraphrased, the entire idiom is omitted. Here, the decision of omitting the idiom depends on the context, as in "If you *read between the lines*, his letter shows he is not happy, تُظهر رسالته أنه غير سعيد بتاتاً". The idiom and the idiomatic meaning are completely lost in the Arabic text.

There is another strategy Baker calls 'Translation by compensation'. It means dropping the idiom while recreating the idiomatic effect or tone elsewhere in the text if it cannot be translated directly in the exact spot.

Related Studies

A number of research papers focusing on the translation of idioms involving Arabic show a distinct focus on cultural adaptation to handle figurative language. Ennebati (2026) tracked how 50 students handle English idioms when rendering them into Arabic. She revealed that most students failed to grasp the underlying cultural context, leading to awkward literal translations. Mohammed and Al-Azzawi (2025) found out that literal translations fail heavily in conveying the meaning of idioms especially in news contexts. They emphasize that translators must transform the idiom entirely to match the cultural expectations of an Arabic-speaking audience rather than trying to find exact word-for-word equivalents. On cultural nuances in translating idioms, Mohammed (2025) mapped out the distinct cultural gaps between Western and Arab metaphors. The study strongly recommends contextual adaptation and paraphrasing as the most effective strategies when direct equivalents do not exist in Arabic. Another study was conducted by Alharbi (2013), which investigated the role of teaching idioms and culture in foreign language translation classes, with a specific focus on the Arabic-speaking EFL context. She proposes a comparative translation methodology in the classroom to enhance students' cultural awareness. Idiomatic competence is essential for achieving natural, pragmatic communication in a second language. The study revealed that language learners often struggle with idioms because they view translation merely as a literal word-for-word replacement, ignoring underlying cultural nuances.

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Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive mixed-methods approach. Students of the Translation Department at the Faculty of Languages at Misurata University were selected as the study sample because they are specialized in translation and have completed a number of courses in theoretical and practical translation. Therefore, they have a greater opportunity for exposure to idioms, perhaps in more than one course. Twenty participants were chosen randomly during Spring Semester 2025/2026.

A structured questionnaire was designed to explore the students' knowledge of how figurative meanings of English idioms can be rendered into Arabic. It included some questions about their ability of recognizing, understanding and translating English idioms into Arabic. It also contained three open-ended questions asking the students about the degree of difficulty and the strategies used to translate English idioms into Arabic.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was designed to distinguish performance (students' ability) from the perceptions and strategies (the answers and explanations of the students). The responses have been statistically analyzed first, and then interpreted and discussed in light of the theories of Peter Newmark and Mona Baker. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the core findings: frequencies and percentages were utilized to analyze the strategic choices made by participants (Table 4) and to evaluate participant responses regarding translation difficulties encountered during the translation process.

Table 1: Types of idioms presented in the questionnaire.

Type	Number of Idioms	Purpose
Transparent	4 items	Measure basic idiom recognition and comprehension
Semi-transparent	5 items	Test contextual interpretation
Pure	5 items	Test advanced idiom competence and translation strategies

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Table 2: Perceived Difficulties in Translating Idioms into Arabic

Difficulty	Frequency	Percentage
Understanding Idioms without Context	17	85%
Cultural Differences	19	95%
Finding Arabic Equivalent	15	75%

According to Baker (2011), recognizing an idiom represents merely the preliminary phase of translation; full comprehension of its figurative meaning is essential for an accurate target rendering. However, translators often encounter contextual and cultural barriers that hinder this process. To evaluate these challenges within the current context, participants completed a questionnaire rating the three primary difficulties encountered when translating English idioms into Arabic, with the option to select and evaluate multiple obstacles. As shown in Table 2, the highest-rated difficulty was awareness of cultural differences between English and Arabic, followed by finding an Arabic idiom that has the same meaning as the English idiom. These two difficulties were the most common issues among the participants. However, to see the students' ability of idioms recognition, they were asked to identify some commonly used idioms without context, e.g., *hard nut to crack, spill the beans*. Results showed that 85% of students reported difficulty understanding idioms presented without context. On the other hand, they managed to recognize idioms when presented in full sentences to be translated into Arabic, such as: *break the ice, once in a blue moon, cost an arm and a leg*.

Students' translations were evaluated by the researcher using a 0-3 scale detailed in Table 3. An answer key was established prior to scoring, including acceptable target-language equivalents and paraphrases.

Table 3: Evaluation Criteria for Idioms Translation

Score	Criterion
3	Accurate equivalent idiom in the target language.
2	Intended meaning is accurately paraphrased.
1	Multiple translations provided with lexical weaknesses.
0	Incorrect translation that fails to convey the intended meaning/No translation provided.

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Table 4: Students' Use of Translation Strategies with Idioms.

Strategy	Percentage %
Paraphrasing	85%
Literal Translation	10%
Equivalent Idiom	3%
Omission	2%
Total	100%

Although 75% of participants believe that using an equivalent idiom in Arabic for the English idiom is the most effective strategy, the results showed a high use of the paraphrasing strategy among the participants (See Table 4). Because some idioms cannot be translated directly into Arabic, paraphrasing or explaining the meaning is often preferable to a literal/word-for-word translation. Indeed, 85% of the presented idioms were paraphrased rather than matched with an Arabic equivalent. Nevertheless, when asked about the most effective strategy to translate idioms, students still viewed finding a target-language equivalent as the ideal strategy. For instance, the idiom in *"The new phone cost me an arm and a leg"* was translated by the students as "كلّف ثمنا باهضًا/كلّفني كل ما لدي". Here, the students recognized the idiom and understood that it was used to emphasize the high price. An alternative Arabic translation for this idiom is "دفعت فيه من دم قلبي", which captures both the figurative meaning and the literal elements, conveying heart and blood in Arabic, equivalent to the organs in English. One participant succeeded in finding an accurate Arabic equivalent, translating the idiom as "كلفني الغالي والنفيس".

However, in case of non-equivalence, the translator needs to paraphrase the sense rather than use a mismatched target-language idiom, because a 'false friend' idiom substitution can mislead the reader. It is believed that idioms require both linguistic and cultural understanding before being translated into the target language (Baker, 2011).

The figurative meaning of idioms is deeply rooted in culture. Cultural differences may pose more serious challenges for translators than linguistic differences (Nida, 1964). The current study found that 95% of students considered dealing with culture to be difficult. English and Arabic cultures differ significantly. Hence, using word-for-word translation is not

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recommended for maintaining idiomatic meaning across the two languages. The English idiom "*break the ice*" was translated literally by 50% of the participants as " يكسر الجليد/يكسر الحواجز/يكسر الجمود". The idiom expresses the meaning of initiating a conversation to help people feel comfortable in a social setting. In such cases, the students should provide functional equivalents instead of formal equivalents; expressions such as "يمهد الحديث" or "الحديث يستهل", "يكسر حاجز الصمت" or "حاجز الخجل", offer the same intended meaning in plain, non-idiomatic language.

Omission was scored by 5% of the participants as a translation strategy. They omitted the idiom altogether in their translations, making the target text less effective. The English idiom "*to burn the candle at both ends*", "يصل الليل بالنهار" was omitted by 96% of the participants. However, the omission strategy in translation of idioms can be only used: (1) when no close match is found in the target language; (2) for stylistic reasons without altering the intended meaning of the message; or (3) in audio-visual translation and simultaneous interpreting where space and time are extremely limited. The translator should use it as "The Last Resort" (Baker, 2011); i.e., translators often choose to omit the idiom after exhausting all preferred strategies, and when its removal causes no loss of informative content (Newmark, 1988).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Translating idioms into Arabic involves a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of the languages' linguistic and cultural elements. As the participants were specialized in translation, recognizing and understanding idioms was not an obstacle for them. However, most students struggled to find an equivalent idiom in Arabic. In addition, the current study found that participants heavily relied on paraphrasing as a translation strategy. They explained the meaning of the idiom instead of looking for an Arabic equivalent to maintain the same effect. This means that translation department students are aware of the limitations of literal translation. They should be careful when using literal translation in order not to lose the intended figurative meaning and effect of using the idiom. However, a few students adopted literal translation without preserving the intended meaning. This reflects that there is a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. According to

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Newmark (1988), translating the components of the idiom literally should be done only if the literal image has an acceptable equivalent idiom in the target language. Therefore, literal translation could be chosen as a translation strategy when there is a similar equivalent meaning with the same form and intended meaning of the English idiom. e.g. *stab in the back*; in Arabic "يطعن في الظهر". The two idioms have the same form and the same figurative meaning, which is "to betray", "يخون" in Arabic.

The study recommends that students should have more practice in using and translating English idioms through authentic texts in different contexts. They should be taught how and when to use the right translation strategy to achieve equivalence in their translations.

Moreover, as they are learning the English language through reading, writing, speaking, and literature, translation students should have readings in Arabic as well, especially about literature in order to be able to understand cultural differences and make comparisons between English and Arabic idioms. Literary readings, such as short stories and newspapers, would help students learn and understand idioms in both languages: English and Arabic. Through such readings, they can identify the Arabic expressions that carry cultural wisdom and imagery.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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