

Errors in Arabic-English Translation among Saudi Students: Comparative Study Between Two Groups of Students

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to identify the translational errors made by Arab natives. The study is an Arabic to English translational skills' comparison between two Saudi groups in two separate areas of Saudi Arabia: Tabuk and Hafr Al Batin. The study investigated how Arabic cultural, religious, and other factors influenced the production of such errors by the two groups. Each group consisted of selected female students majoring in the English language and attending two regional universities. The students were all of the Saudi nationality and they had obtained their school education within their region before joining a public university. A newly designed quiz was attempted by the students in each group to translate words and phrases categorized into four parts: syntax, spelling, word choice, and singular/plural. It was concluded that lack of English knowledge, unfamiliarity with some English terms, cultural and religious factors, and literal translation are the leading causes of wrong translations. Also, the Tabuk students slightly performed better than Hafr Al Batin students; and this is maybe due to better literacy infrastructure in the city of Tabuk, vibrant cultural diversity in the city with more expatriates working and residing in the region and having more private schools.

Keywords: Arabic, English, Saudi Arabia, Translation

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Introduction

One must know the appropriate context of various situations to transfer the correct meaning of sentences and phrases from one language to another. The use of selected words in their right meanings distinguishes translations of phrases and expressions. The content, conventions, grammar, idioms, context, and style must be transferred from one language to another. Therefore, some terms and words might be confined to a specific field. The translator must be aware of the various vocabularies and terms to contextually translate phrases from a source language into a target language. Also, a translator must be very familiar with a specific culture to transfer cultural meanings from a source language into a target language. Hermans (1999) stressed that translation is considered as a cultural practice. Later, Gaber (2005) states that culture-bound words are translated using five techniques:

- Cultural equivalence: equivalences of words and phrases translated to a target language.
- Functional equivalence: words and phrases translated to a target language using the same function in the source language.
- Paraphrasing: words and phrase meanings are translated from the source language.
- Glossing: additional information included in a footnote or within the text to explain the cultural words and expressions.
- Borrowing: a word or phrase is borrowed from the source language and included into the target language.

Savory(1968) explains that translation can be achieved by the equivalence of thought that lies behind its different verbal expressions. Newmark (1981) states that translation is a craft that consists of an attempt to replace a written message or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in some other language. Later, Newmark (1988) explains that foreign cultural expressions include ecological, material, and social cultures, social organizations expressions, political, religious, artistic, gestures and habits. He elaborates that cultural expressions can be found in collocations, proverbs, phrasal verbs and figures of speech including metaphors. On the other hand, Catford (1965) defines translation as merely the replacement of textual content in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. This research highlights the Arabic cultural factors influencing students' English translations. The study aims to present the translations by two Saudi students groups and gives the numerical percentages of errors in translations in several categories.

Literature Review

In making cultural connections, various researchers around the world have affirmed that translation is culturally related. Qurashi (2004) states that translation plays a vital role in transferring knowledge from one culture to another. Akan (2018) says that unlike translation between two languages from the same origin, translation from English to the Semitic Arabic or vice versa is difficult because the two languages are of "different and distant origins". Nida (1964) states that the role of a translator is to facilitate the transfer of messages and their meanings, with the cultural elements from one language into another one, and create an equivalent response to the receivers. Specifically, in the Arab world, many researchers have contributed to the study of how the Arabic

culture is influencing the translations of English into Arabic and vice versa. Many of the researchers have asserted that translation of Arabic terms and expressions to the English language should take into account the Arabic cultural context. However, not all researchers think that culture must be considered when tackling translation aspects.

Bahumaid (2006) used a translation test with contextualized collocations of different types. The test included thirty sentences attempted by four Arab university instructors. The results indicated poor participants' performance. Similarly, in this study, two groups of students' translations are investigated.

Dweik and Abu-Shakra (2011) create a translation test of forty-five short religious sentences to study the mistakes made by thirty-five master of art students in three Jordanian universities. The test is based on verses and expressions that came from the Quran, Hadith, and the Bible. The researchers showed that the students had difficulties in lexical and semantics collocations of items related to the Arabic culture. Also, the study revealed that there were disparities between Arabic concepts and metaphors when compared to Western ideas and metaphors.

Alousque (2009) investigated the difficulties in translating cultural items that have different meanings/implications both in the source and target languages. He also studied the range of translation procedures used to explain cultural meaning through the analysis of the lexis from the French cultural domain of cooking. The study revealed that there are some cultural translation challenges and constraints in the translation strategies used to transfer the meaning of cultural items into the target language (loan, functional equivalence, descriptive equivalence, approximate equivalence).

Badawi (2008) uses a cultural bound expression test and a translation strategy awareness questionnaire to study how forty-three Saudi fourth year EFL students translated cultural phrases and expressions. The study revealed that the students tended to give literal translations of the cultural phrases rather than attempting to give their equivalent meanings. The study also concluded that the students used wrong strategies for translating cultural expressions.

Abdel-Fattah and Zughoul (2003) use a two-form test (Multiple choices and free translation forms) to study how sixteen graduate and undergraduate English students translated English collocations and rendered their meaning. The researchers concluded that the learners faced problems in translating collocations with cultural expressions in the two form translation test.

El-Nashar and Mohamed (2016) investigated the explicitation techniques employed while translating from English into Arabic. The researchers used the official document of "Policies and Procedures Manual for Support Staff" (Office of Human Resources, the American University in Cairo, April 2012) (21,937 words). They devised an eclectic 10-tool explicitation framework and concluded that explicitation does not necessarily lead to longer translations.

Al Shehab (2013) chose six English legal sentences validated and entered them into Google Translator to be translated into Arabic. He concluded that Google English translation of legal sentences partially gives their Arabic equivalence. But, it poses several problems in translating archaic English terms, in dealing with passive voice, and, in translating the "modal shall." In short, Google translation provides a quick translation from English into Arabic, but it is not as good as "professional translators." Therefore, there is a lack of studies in culturally closed tribal societies such as in the ones in Saudi Arabia. This study will shed some light on translation errors by native Arabic students in their natural environments.

Method

A large number of researchers in the field of translational research adopt the method of distributing a translation test of some phrases and expressions among some groups of students; then they try to analyze the results based on the collected answers. Similarly, this research employs a custom-designed quiz administered to Saudi students majoring in English to investigate their translational errors. Uniquely, the quiz questions are based on translational errors observed on printed material such as signs and documents of establishments in the city of Tabuk. Some of those phrases were also confirmed to exist in other cities in Saudi Arabia including the city of Hafr Al Batin. Thus, the quiz questions reflect some existing problems in the translation of specific terms and phrases. Also, the study is mainly a quantitative study where the students are given a translation test, and the quantitative results are obtained and compared among the two groups without investigating the backgrounds of the students.

Sample

The research selected one hundred students in the Department of Languages and Translation at the University of Tabuk and one hundred students at the Department of Languages and Translation at the University of Hafr Al Batin in their 3rd and 4th-year levels to take the newly designed translation quiz. The test was conducted in the academic year 2016/2017 in Tabuk while it was administered in the academic year 2018/2019 in Hafr Al Batin. The age of the students is between 20 and 25 years. Also, the gender of the students is female since the universities in the two areas are segregated into only male and only female sections as required by the Ministry of Education in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All students selected are of tribal Arabic Saudi background who have always lived in their local areas all their lives and have never or rarely visited other countries. Also, almost all students have never been to any western native English-speaking country. The students have studied in the Tabuk region or Hafr Al Batin region for their elementary/secondary education attending public or private schools and have never joined any international school. Thus, the students in these two areas of Saudi Arabia have only learned English skills during English classes in their secondary school years; and sometimes they have acquired some new English skills from their university courses.

Regions

The two areas where the students live, and study are far from each other in distance and have mainly different Arabic tribes of people, but with similar Arabic tribal customs and ways of Bedouin lives. The Tabuk area tends to have more people with exposure to expatriates from other

countries working as doctors, university professors, or industry engineers. Both areas have large military bases and facilities and therefore a large number of the local people work as servicemen, police, or army officers. Also, a good number of those people are government employees or school teachers.

Data collection

A newly designed quiz was compiled by observing common errors posted on shops, universities, hospitals, and other establishments' signs in the region of Tabuk for two years. The quiz also included errors identified in printed material such as newspapers, magazines, flyers, and other written documents within the city of Tabuk. Then problematic phrases and expressions were compiled, printed on paper, and distributed to the students inside a classroom within a university campus environment. The students' identities remained anonymous by not writing their names or any other identifying information on the quiz papers. The students were allocated enough time to write down their English translations to all parts of the quiz. The investigated errors were tabulated and categorized into four types:

- Singular/Plural: using singular/plural nouns in place of one other.
- Syntax of sentences: dividing a word, mixing verbs and nouns, possessive errors, wrong nouns, mixing adjectives and adverbs, and improper word order.
- Word choice: incorrect word use, the substitution of antiquated forms for more common ones, using words together that do not typically appear with each other.
- Spelling: wrong writing of words.

Data Analysis

The answers of the students were collected and analyzed. Each section of the quiz was evaluated separately. Each item of the quiz was marked with two scores: score one was given for providing somewhat correct translation and score two was allocated for providing accurate equivalent Arabic translation. For example, in the singular/plural section, translating the word "التقارير" as the singular form "Record" was accepted for score one even though only the English translated word "Records" was recognized as the correct plural translation for score two. Similarly, in the Syntax part of the quiz, the phrase "الأحذية المخفضة" was translated with "discount shoes" or "discounted shoes" but only "discounted shoes" was recognized as the correct syntactic translated form. The score averages were calculated for each section and each group of students.

Results and Discussion

Overall, there were many translational mistakes that reflected the students' poor skills and lack of understanding of various language elements. Based on the analysis and categorization of the errors, the students made mistakes in singular/plural nouns, the syntax of sentences, spelling, and picking the wrong religious and cultural English phrases for their Arabic equivalents. Tables 1-4 give the comparative percentages of students who correctly translated each item of the three types of translation errors (Singular/Plural, Syntax, and Word choice) by the students in the Tabuk area and Hafr Al Batin area. The tables also show the average percentages of the correct translations in each category.

Similar translational errors were spotted based on the answers of the students in the two regions of Saudi Arabia and there were many mistakes in each category of the quiz. Surprisingly, a large number of the students in the two groups could not translate many of the phrases and expressions are given in the quiz; and many of them made a lot of spelling mistakes. Finally, spelling mistakes were not taken into account when other errors were investigated.

singular/plural

Many of the students confused singular with plural nouns and vice versa. Table 1 shows the percentages of the students who gave the correct singular/plural noun translations for each item. The table demonstrates that the students in Tabuk performed slightly better than the students in Hafr Al Batin in selecting appropriate translation of singular/plural nouns. The table also shows some examples of the students' errors. Additionally, even though approximately 68% of the students in Tabuk wrote down somewhat acceptable translation for all seven items in table 1, only 37% of the students selected the proper singular/plural noun for all words. Similarly, 60% of the students in Hafr Al Batin wrote down somewhat acceptable translations, but only 33% of them gave the right singular/plural noun for all seven items. Therefore, a good number of the students knew how to translate simple common words but failed to give the correct singular/plural form. For example, for the word "التقارير", many students failed to include the plurality indicator "s" letter and translated the word as only singular "report". Similarly, a large number of the students could not give the correct plural translation form for the word "الحوادث" and they wrote down only the singular form "emergency". Besides, for the simple word "الزبائن", many of the students gave the wrong singular translation as "customer" and not "customers". Many students gave the plural "services" in translating "customer services". Expectedly, the majority of students in both regions failed to give any translation for the unfamiliar word "الحوالات". Finally, it was observed that the students translated familiar plural Arabic words into the single English nouns; for example, a good number of the students translated the familiar plural Arabic word "الشيكات" into the singular English word "check".

Table 1. *Singular/Plural correct percentages [Overall accepted translation: (Tabuk =68%, Hafr =60%)]*

Arabic	English	Example of errors	% correct - Tabuk	% correct Hafr
للعائلات	Families, For families	Family, fymaly	61	56
التقارير الطبية	Medical records	Record midical	40	30
الحوادث	Accidents	Accident, eccidents	51	46
الطوارئ	Emergencies	Emergency, emargence	36	29
خدمة الزبائن	Customers Service	Customer services	14	20
الحوالات	Remittances, transfers	Sendings	19	18
الشيكات	Drafts or checks	Check, chacks, cheek	38	34
Averages			37	33

Syntax

Table 2 shows the percentages of students who demonstrated acceptable English grammar in their translations. Minor spelling and word choice errors were ignored. Many students could not translate the phrases or wrote completely inappropriate translations. Table 2 shows that only 45% of the students in Tabuk gave a correct syntactic structure of the six items in this section while 40% of the students in Hafr Al Batin wrote down acceptable syntactic translations. Unfamiliar words and phrases such as "إغتتموا فرصة" were the most difficult for students to translate.

Table 2. *Syntax percentages of errors*

Arabic	English	%correct Tabuk	%correct Hafr
القسم النسائي في مستشفى الولادة	Women section(department) at the maternity hospital	43	35
مركز العمليات و الموظفين في الجامعة	Center of Operations and Staff (employees) at the University	37	25
إغتتموا فرصة الأحذية المخفضة	Seize (grab) the opportunity of discounted shoes	19	21
إتجه إلى قسم المواليد والاطفال	Go to the department (section) of Infants and Children	68	70
سوق ابو ريال في مدينة تبوك	One rial market in Tabuk	47	42
حفلة افتتاح البنك السعودي الهولندي	Saudi Dutch Bank opening ceremony	35	25
Averages		45	40

There were many structure errors in the syntax section. Table 3 shows the percentages of errors within the syntax category. As table 3 illustrates, the syntactic errors were analyzed and fell into six subcategories: dividing a single word into two, using possession (s) wrongly, mixing nouns with verbs, mixing adjectives with verbs, wrong word order, and propositions. Most of the errors were in the subcategory of "word order". For example, for the phrase "مركز العمليات و الموظفين" some students mixed the order of the words such as "employ center and operation" or "center process" or even the students failed to give the equivalent English meaning such as writing "newborn and children center"; many students had difficulties with their spellings such as translating "مركز العمليات و الموظفين" into English as the "senter employ and operation". Also, there were many errors in other syntactic subcategories. For example, a good number of the female students in both regions translated the phrase "قسم المواليد والاطفال" using the possessive "s" as "infant's and children's section". Similarly, many students translated the phrase "القسم النسائي" as "ladies section" or "women's section"; both words "women" and "ladies" were accepted as a translation of "النسائي". In addition, some students could not give the full propositional phrase such using "front of" instead of "in front of". There were some students who misplaced the nouns in a phrase or used the wrong noun; for example, some students translated the phrase "قسم المواليد والاطفال" as "child and new birth section". Additionally, there were problems of misusing adjectives; for example, some students translated "حفلة افتتاح البنك السعودي الهولندي" as "opening Saudian Holandi Bank party". Finally, many students tried to "Arabacize" some terms such as translating "الهولندي" as "Holandi" and translating "ابو ريال" as merely "Abo rial"; and thereby, avoided coming up with English equivalent terms.

Table 3. *Syntax subcategories and their percentages of errors with examples*

subcategory	% errors		Examples of errors
	Tabuk	Hafr	
Dividing-word	7	4	every thing, Every thing 1 Riyal
Possessions	9	8	sale's shoes, women's section, Ladie's hospital section, baby's and children's section
verb/noun	27	30	speed the sale, is open, sell shoes, now opened, shopping one, shopping rial, shoes is on sale, bank saudi open party
Adjectives - Adverbs	8	6	discount shoes, run shoes, low pricing shoes, Saudian Holandi Bank, offer shoes
Word-order	32	36	Bank Saudi Holandi, section women, section the babies, the shoes discoun, Saudi Bank Holandi, centre operation, level women, part the kids and child, part baby and children, Operation center and employment, shop one rial, the shoes discount
Proposition	17	16	shopping of the one riyal, part of the women, the section of the women, shoes with sales, the shoes, operation centre on university, shoes in sale, shop for ryial, store of ryial

wrong word choice

The students had most of their translational difficulties in the category of "wrong word choice". It was clear that a good number of the students in both regions attempted to use direct word for word transfer and not contextual meaningful translations. As table 4 shows, 44% of the students in Tabuk and 39% of the students in Hafr Al Batin wrote down acceptable and appropriate English equivalences for the phrases. The table illustrates some examples of inappropriate translated words. For example, some students translated the phrase "اقتضت طبيعة البحث" as "forced to research ". Expectedly, almost all the students in the two regions could translate complex familiar terms from their curriculum but had major difficulties with less complex unfamiliar phrases; for example, a large number of the students gave the correct translation for "الجملة و اساليبها" as "sentence and its styles" but all of the students could not translate the word "المحور3" and only a few students could translate the phrase "سلامه المنشأة". Most notably, the students had problems with English names of countries and English religious terms; for example, many students in both regions translated the word "الهولندي" as "Holandi" and not as "Dutch" and many translated the religious term "السور المكيه" as "Meccan suras" instead of "Meccan verses". It might be understandable that Muslims would recognize the meaning of "sura" as a "verse," but this term might not be well understood by those of non-Muslim faith.

Similarly, a good number of students translated the religious phrase "الى يوم الدين" as "until day of Al-deen" and not as "until the day of judgment". Many students chose various translations of "الى يوم الدين" that reflected their religious understanding of the term and generally a Mulism's own faith such as "until the final day", or "to religion day", or "the end of the world". The students also had difficulties with medical terms; for example some students translated "ما هي الوصفة الطبية" as "what is the recipe" using "recipe" instead of "prescription." Additionally,

few students translated the phrase "العيادات الخارجية" appropriately as "outpatient clinics" and variably the students translated the phrase using simple vocabulary such as "outside department", "foreign clinics", "outdoor clinics", or "external hospital". Finally, the students described positive and negative phrases in a positive or negative way but they did not always choose the appropriate English words; for example many students translated the phrase "افخر انواع الحلويات" positively as "great sweets" or "fancy sweets" and they translated the phrase "البيت الانيق" as "nice house" or "beautiful home" or "classic home" or "unique home". Similarly, some students translated "ممنوع الوقوف امام المنزل" as relatively negative but not appropriate phrases such as "forbidden to stay in front of home".

Table 4. *Word choice correct percentages [Overall accepted translation: (Tabuk =44%, Hafr =39%)]*

Arabic	English	Example of errors	% correct Tabuk	% correct Hafr
قسم اللغة العربية	Department of Arabic Language	Servise arabic, part of Arabic, Arab level, chapter of Arab, Arab unit	77	68
اقتضت طبيعة البحث	The nature of the research required	Search warrant-nature, forced to research, research nature rolled	46	28
الجملة و اساليبها	Sentence and its methods (Styles)	Wholesale and methods, sentences and techniques, whole sales with thier styles, sentences and its forms, nature of the event, sentences and its ways, sentences and chracter	55	46
المحور 3	Theme III; Axis III	part3; the main-center; the third source; scale three; hub-point	6	4
الوقوف على اسراره	Stop at some of its secrets	Stand on some of its secrets, standing on his walls	34	36
البنك السعودي الهولندي	Saudi Dutch Bank	Saudi Hollandi Bank, Saudi Holland	55	60
ما هي الوصفة الطبية	What is the prescription	What is the Recipe, medical paper	29	22
العيادات الخارجية	Outpatient clinics	Out patient department, clinical out, hospital outside, foreign clinics	20	24
افخر انواع الحلويات	Finest kinds of sweets	I am proud types of Desserts, Royal sweets, kind of sweets, nice sweets	58	52
الى يوم الدين	Until day of judgment	On the debt, day islam, day final	35	26
السور المكية	Meccan verses	Fence Meccan, alsoar, The royal lines, holy quran, the meccan wall	17	14

أنا لا أكل لحم الخنزير	I do not eat pork	I do not eat porker, I not eat meat	81	64
الدور الثالث	Third floor	Third round, three floor, third role, third stairs, high 3	51	36
ممنوع الوقوف امام المنزل	No parking here	No parking hear house, not drive here, no stop front home, barking no	66	58
سلامه المنشأة	Establishment safety	Safety of origin, The saftey of starting, the safty of passengers, facility safty, help for us	20	12
Averages			44	39

spelling

Unfortunately, the students made a significant number of spelling mistakes in all sections of the quiz; Table 5 shows words and examples of writing errors. The spelling problems were in two vowel words, names, unfamiliar terms, silent letters in words..etc.

Table 5. Words and examples of writing errors

Words	Examples of errors
Children	"cheldren", "Ghildren", "childrn", "childrean", "chalderan", "childeren"
Women	"wemon", "wamen", "womeen"
Check	"chek", "sheak", "shakes", "cheeik", "sheacks", "shecat"
Shoes	"shous", "chooes", "choses", "shoas", "shose", "chosses"
Employees	"empoles", "emploeys", "emploies"
Family	"femali", "famliy", "famely", "famailys"
Saudi	"soudi", "Sawdy", "suid", "sudie", "sudia"
Customer	"custmer", "costomer", "cosutm"
Service	"serves", "serrvec", "servese", "sirves", "serve", "serveis"
Emergency	"emargence", "imarjancy"
Accident	"accedent", "accedint", "acident", "acacedent", "eccidents", "accedant", "excedent"
Medical	"midecin", "midical", "madcal", "madecal"
Report	"reboret", "rebarts"
Babies	"bibyes", "babys", "beaby"
Third	"thered", "thierd",
Behind	"behiend",
Security	"securit",
House	"Howes", "Haus",
Floor	"floore", "flaor"
Safty	"Safity", "Saft",
Home	"Hom",
Sentence	"sentense", "sentens", "sintins", "sentes"
Judgment	"judjment", "judment"
Section	"Sekction", "sexchen", "cection", "sextion", "sacshen"
Building	"Bilding",
Level	"Livel", "Leavel",
Department	"Dipartment", "debartment"
Sale	"seul"

Bank	"pank"
Style	"stayls"
Female	"famele", "femail"
Discounted	"discaon"

One reason that the students made many spelling mistakes is due to their incorrect pronunciation of English words; for example, the word "medical" is mispronounced with an "i" sound instead of an "e" sound resulting in "midical". Also, two vowel words were of difficulty such as the confusion between the word "hear" and "here". Additionally, the students had difficulties to in the use of the "b" letter or the "p" letter; and that is due to not having a "p" sound in the Arabic language. Some students translated "الوقوف" that means "stop or park" with "barking". A number of the students translated "التقارير" as "reports" instead of "reports"; or translated "العمليات" as "operation". Furthermore, a good number of students confused using similar-looking words; for example, writing "customs" in place of "customers" or "incident" instead of "accident". Additionally, the students had difficulties in the with silent letters; for example, writing the "g" in "judgment". Numerous students used some Arabized English translations; for example, translating "الشيكات" with "shakes".

Limitations

The results of this study are only applicable to the sample of the female students in the two areas of the study and not necessarily a reflection of students' translational skills of all regions in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia; even though the results can identify the specific problems with translating Arabic phrases and terms into English by students who might become English teachers in public and private schools. The study can be extended by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia to include more male and female students in various regions of the country, and only then a general statement can be made on the current status of university students' English translational skills in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

In this study, the students in both regions of Saudi Arabia made numerous translational errors: incorrectly used singular/plural nouns, wrongly used nouns and verbs, inappropriately used English words, used Arabized words, and made numerous spelling mistakes. The students made most of the errors in the word choice part, which reflected some Arabic cultural and Islamic influences that resulted in the tendency to pick inappropriate English vocabulary in translations. Also, it can be deduced that students fail to translate contextually as long as they do not use English for their communication on a daily basis. Even though some students knew a lot of vocabulary, they failed to appropriately use it in the right context. In general, it can be concluded that translation failures are due to various reasons: not having enough English vocabulary, Arabic and confusing Islamic terms, unfamiliarity with English names of countries and cultural terms, lack of knowledge of correct sentence structures, and the inability to distinguish singular from plural nouns.

About the author:

Islam Ababneh is currently an assistant professor in the department of English at the University of Hafr Al Batin where she is teaching various courses in the department. She has more than six years of experience in teaching and research activities. Currently, she is working on research projects of English errors for Arab university students and Arabic cultural influencing factors that affect acquiring English at the university level.

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