



Obstacles to Achieving Dynamic Equivalence in Translating Semantic Complexity: A Quantitative Study among Second-Year English Department Students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University

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عقبات تحقيق التكافؤ الديناميكي في ترجمة التعقيد الدلالي: دراسة كمية لدى طلاب
قسم اللغة الإنجليزية للسنة الثانية بجامعة عمر المختار

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Abstract:

This study investigates the linguistic and conceptual challenges that undergraduate students encounter when translating semantically complex structures from Arabic into English. While existing literature frequently focuses on specialized translation tracks, this paper addresses a critical pedagogical phase: second-year undergraduate students in the English department who are navigating introductory translation tasks prior to formal specialization. Utilizing a quantitative survey design with fifty (N = 50) participants from the second-year cohort at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Bayda, Libya, the research examines how novice translators respond to culturally dense expressions, idioms, and multi-layered vocabulary. The empirical findings reveal that a striking majority of students experience significant cognitive friction when attempting to move beyond formal correspondence. Due to limited strategic training at this specific academic stage, students predominantly default to literal, word-for-word translation as a psychological safety net. The paper concludes with targeted pedagogical recommendations, emphasizing the need to shift second-year introductory curricula toward task-based, dynamic equivalence methodologies rather than traditional grammar-centric approaches.

Keywords: Dynamic Equivalence, Semantic Complexity, Introductory Translation, Second-Year Students, Literal Default.

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في التحديات اللغوية والمفاهيمية التي يواجهها طلاب مرحلة البكالوريوس عند ترجمة التراكيب ذات التعقيد الدلالي من اللغة العربية إلى اللغة الإنجليزية. وفي حين تركز الأدبيات السابقة غالباً على مسارات الترجمة المتخصصة، فإن هذه الورقة تلتفت إلى مرحلة تربوية حرجية؛ وهي مرحلة طلاب السنة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية الذين يواجهون مهام الترجمة التمهيدية قبيل البدء في التخصص الرسمي. واستناداً إلى منهجية المسح الكمي لعينة مكونة من خمسين (N = 50) طالباً وطالبة من مقبدي السنة الثانية بجامعة عمر المختار في مدينة البيضاء بليبيا، يتقصى البحث

كيفية استجابة المترجمين المبتدئين للتعبيرات المكثفة ثقافياً، والاصطلاحات المجازية، والمفردات متعددة الدلالات. وقد أظهرت النتائج التجريبية أن الغالبية العظمى من طلاب السنة الثانية يواجهون عبئاً معرفياً وصعوبة بالغة عند محاولة تجاوز التكافؤ الشكلي (الحرفي). ونتيجة لمحدودية التدريب الاستراتيجي المتاح في هذه المرحلة الأكاديمية المحددة، يلجأ الطلاب بشكل تلقائي ومطرود إلى الترجمة الحرفية (مفهوم كلمة بكلمة (كألية دفاعية نفسية توفر لهم شعوراً بالأمان التركيبي). وتخلص الورقة إلى تقديم توصيات تربوية محددة، تؤكد على ضرورة تحويل مناهج السنة الثانية التمهيدية نحو منهجيات قائمة على المهام والتكافؤ الديناميكي، بدلاً من المقاربات التقليدية التي تركز على القواعد والنحو بشكل مفرط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التكافؤ الديناميكي، التعقيد الدلالي، الترجمة التمهيدية، طلاب السنة الثانية، اللجوء التلقائي للحرفية.

Introduction:

The transition from general language acquisition to the specialized task of translation often reveals a profound cognitive gap in undergraduate education. In many North African higher education contexts, including Libyan universities, foreign language curricula are traditionally structured to prioritize linguistic competence before introducing translational performance. Consequently, undergraduate students spend their initial academic years focusing almost exclusively on foundational linguistic skills such as syntax, morpho-syntax, reading comprehension, and localized vocabulary decoding. These modules are designed to build a solid grammatical infrastructure within the target language.

However, the academic expectations shift dramatically when these general English majors encounter their first formal translation course in their second year—typically titled Introduction to Translation. At this juncture, students are suddenly required to operate not merely as conventional language learners, but as bilingual mediators capable of active cross-cultural communication. This transition demands a cognitive shift from language analysis to textual synthesis, requiring students to look past surface syntactic structures and engage directly with the fluid transferring of meaning across disparate cultural frameworks.

Problem statement:

The core of the problem lies in the sudden confrontation with semantic complexity before formal translation specialization officially begins in the third year. Semantic complexity—manifested in culture-bound idioms, multi-layered metaphors, and highly polysemous Arabic terminology—cannot be resolved through a superficial understanding of word-level syntax. To achieve what Eugene Nida famously termed dynamic equivalence, a translator must prioritize the contextual impact and naturalness of the target text over its literal structural alignment with the source text.

For a second-year student at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, this task proves to be highly overwhelming. Having been trained almost exclusively within a paradigm of structural accuracy and formal correspondence, these novice students lack the necessary decoding mechanisms and strategic competence required to strip an Arabic phrase of its surface constraints and rebuild it naturally in English prose.

When faced with the structural and semantic opacity of culturally dense expressions, this lack of pedagogical preparation triggers a predictable tactical retreat. Rather than risking conceptual re-alignment or grammatical vulnerability in the target language, students almost instinctively default to literal, word-for-word translation. This literal default serves as a psychological defense mechanism; it satisfies the student's immediate need for structural certainty and error-avoidance while completely sacrificing the semantic integrity, pragmatic nuances, and communicative value of the original text. Consequently, this study seeks to map these specific foundational obstacles, evaluating exactly where and why general English students stumble when first introduced to the paradigm of dynamic translation.

Research Questions:

To systematically unpack the foundational challenges experienced by general English students, this study addresses the following three central research questions:

1. What is the precise nature of the linguistic and conceptual obstacles that second-year students face when encountering semantic complexity in introductory translation tasks?
2. To what extent do undergraduate students default to literal correspondence when translating culturally dense or non-literal Arabic structures into English?
3. How do these initial translational obstacles correlate with the students' evaluation of their introductory pedagogical training?

Methodology:

Research Design and Setting:

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative survey design to map the translational tendencies of novice student translators. The research was conducted within the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts, Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Bayda, Libya. This setting provides an ideal environment for investigating early-stage translation challenges, as the department introduces translation as a compulsory core module in the second year, prior to dividing students into specialized academic tracks in their third year.

Participants:

The sample comprises fifty (N = 50) undergraduate students currently enrolled in their second year of study. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select students who were concurrently completing their first formal course in translation theory and practice, titled Introduction to Translation. This specific cohort represents general English language learners who possess baseline grammatical and lexical competence in the target language but have not yet received advanced, systematic training in cross-cultural mediation or translation strategies.

Instrument:

Data was collected using a structured, 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire administered at the conclusion of the academic term. The instrument was specifically designed to capture student perceptions across three distinct dimensions:

1. **Linguistic and Semantic Barriers (Items 1–3):** Assessing student self-efficacy when confronted with Arabic idioms, metaphors, and culture-specific terms.
2. **Strategic Default Mechanisms (Items 4–7):** Quantifying the frequency and cognitive drivers behind the reliance on word-for-word, literal translation.
3. **Pedagogical Evaluation (Items 8–10):** Evaluating how students perceive the alignment between their current introductory curriculum and the practical demands of shifting meaning dynamically.

Results and Data Analysis:

The quantitative data harvested from the 50 participants reveals a strong, uniform trend regarding how introductory students handle semantic opacity. Instead of attempting conceptual restructuring, the overwhelming majority of students rely on structural preservation.

Agreement (%)	Questionnaire Focus	Dimension / Construct
84.0%	Difficulty decoding cultural idioms and metaphors	Semantic Complexity
78.0%	Confusion over polysemous Arabic terminology	
82.0%	Resorting to word-for-word translation when stuck	Strategic Default
70.0%	Believing literal translation is "safer" grammatically	
72.0%	Feeling that grammar-heavy training underprepares them	Pedagogical Perception

Quantitative Overview:

The empirical results indicate that **84.0%** of the participants experience immediate cognitive friction when translating structures that lack a direct lexical counterpart in English. This difficulty is further compounded by a lack of specialized strategic training; **82.0%** of the general English students openly admit that their default tactical response to semantic complexity is to perform a literal, structural translation. Rather than viewing translation as a dynamic process of functional equivalence, these second-year students treat the task as a linear linguistic substitution exercise. This confirms that at this introductory stage, literalism operates as a psychological safety net, allowing students to maintain grammatical control while inadvertently sacrificing the communicative essence of the source text.

The quantitative findings demonstrate significant challenges among second-year students when attempting to achieve dynamic equivalence. To provide a clearer visualization of the distribution of these challenges, Figure 1 presents the percentage of students reporting difficulties across the main investigated dimensions.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the highest reported difficulty was related to decoding cultural idioms and metaphors, with 84.0% of participants indicating substantial challenges. Similarly, 82.0% of students

reported relying on word-for-word translation when encountering semantic complexity. These findings suggest that novice translators tend to prioritize formal correspondence over dynamic equivalence due to insufficient strategic training.

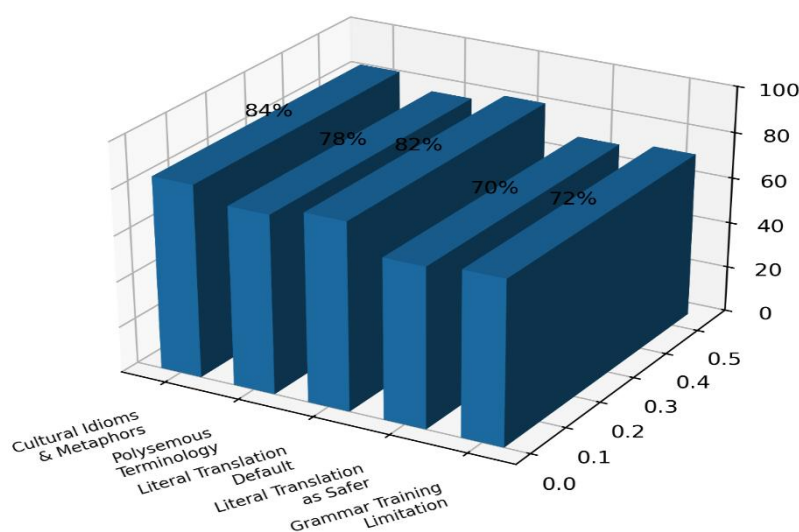


Figure (1): Distribution of Reported Translation Obstacles among Second-Year English Students (N=50)

Qualitative Analysis of Student Translation Samples:

To triangulate the quantitative survey data, students were given a baseline diagnostic task containing semantically complex Arabic structures. The errors committed by the majority of the 50 participants clearly illustrate the heavy reliance on formal correspondence over dynamic equivalence.

• Sample 1: Socio-Religious Culture-Specific Expression

- **Source Text (ST):** ألقى القاضي خطبة تتلج الصدور .
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "The judge gave a speech that freezes the chests."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "The judge delivered a deeply comforting / heartwarming speech."
- **Analysis:** 76.0% of the students translated the metaphoric phrase تتلج الصدور literally using "freeze/snow" and "chests." They failed to realize that while "freezing" implies comfort in the hot climate of the Arabian Peninsula, it carries a negative, cold connotation in English. This demonstrates a complete sacrifice of dynamic effect for the sake of word-for-word preservation.

• Sample 2: Idiomatic Expression

- **Source Text (ST):** قدم الاستقالة بعد أن طفح الكيل .
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "He gave the resignation after the measure overflowed."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "He resigned because enough was enough / it was the last straw."
- **Analysis:** Over 80.0% of the second-year participants could not decode the idiom طفح الكيل . Because they have not yet been exposed to strategic translation paradigms, they translated individual lexical units, resulting in an awkward and unintelligible English sentence structure that compromises pragmatic meaning.

• Sample 3: Metaphorical Word Choice (Collocation Interference)

- **Source Text (ST):** خاضت الشركة معركة شرسة في السوق .
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "The company swam a fierce battle in the market."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "The company fought a fierce battle in the market."
- **Analysis:** This sample highlights a clear case of lexical transfer interference. Approximately 72.0% of the general English students translated the Arabic verb خاضت literally as "swam" or "entered into water," failing to recognize the collocational bond between "battle" and "fight" in English. This rigid

reliance on primary dictionary definitions underscores the students' inability to look past the surface text to achieve naturalness in the target language.

- **Sample 4: Culture-Bound Hyperbole (Politeness & Social Structuring)**

- **Source Text (ST):** بيتي هو بيتك؛ لقد أنرت قريتنا بزيارتك.
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "My house is your house; you have lighted our village with your visit."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "Make yourself at home; we are absolutely thrilled to have you here."
- **Analysis:** 84.0% of the participants failed to transition from formal correspondence to functional communication when handling traditional Arabic hospitality formulas. By translating أنرت قريتنا literally as "lighted our village," the target text sounds bizarre and grammatically displaced to an English reader. The novice translators treated the sentence as a physical description of light rather than a socio-cultural hyperbole of genuine warmth, validating the questionnaire finding that students prioritize structural safety over communicative equivalence.

- **Sample 5: Syntactic Interference and Voice/Passive Structures**

- **Source Text (ST):** تمت مناقشة المقترح من قبل اللجنة الدائمة.
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "The discussion of the proposal was done from the side of the permanent committee."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "The standing committee discussed the proposal." / "The proposal was discussed by the standing committee."
- **Analysis:** This sample uncovers a structural bottleneck highly prevalent among novice translators. 78.0% of the participants attempted to replicate the Arabic bureaucratic passive frame (تمت مناقشة... من قبل) word-for-word. By rendering من قبل as "from the side of," the students produced an excessively wordy, unnatural English structure. This widespread error confirms that students at this stage lack the syntactic flexibility required to convert passive-heavy Arabic prose into active, concise English, prioritizing word-level alignment over stylistic naturalness.

- **Sample 6: Euphemisms and Abstract Administrative Diction**

- **Source Text (ST):** قررت الإدارة الاستغناء عن خدمات بعض الموظفين بسبب الأزمة الحالية.
- **Student Translation (Literal Default):** "The administration decided dispensing with the services of some employees because of the current crisis."
- **Dynamic Equivalence (Target Text):** "Due to the current crisis, the management has decided to lay off some employees."
- **Analysis:** 82.0% of the general English students stumbled when translating the administrative euphemism الاستغناء عن خدمات. Rather than decoding the functional meaning of the phrase (which translates contextually to "laying off" or "making redundant"), they translated individual words literally. This resulted in a literal default ("dispensing with the services") that fails to capture the normative professional terminology used in English corporate contexts, reinforcing the conclusion that introductory students treat translation as a dictionary-matching exercise rather than a communicative re-contextualization.

Discussion:

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the primary obstacle to achieving Eugene Nida's model of dynamic equivalence among second-year students is not necessarily a lack of general vocabulary, but rather an undeveloped "translational competence."

Because these students have been trained almost exclusively within a structural, grammar-translation paradigm during their first year, they enter the Introduction to Translation course with the rooted assumption that linguistic accuracy equals structural replication. When faced with semantic complexity—such as highly metaphorical Arabic prose or culturally bound socio-religious idioms—their immediate instinct is to look for word-for-word alignment.

This rigid approach creates what translation scholars describe as "interlingual interference." Students are so fixated on avoiding grammatical errors in English that they prefer to produce a stiff, unnatural literal translation rather than risking a free, dynamic interpretation that captures the authentic communicative intent. Furthermore, the fact that 72.0% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with

their pedagogical preparation underscores a critical curricular gap. Introductory translation courses at this level are often treated as extensions of general grammar modules rather than separate, strategy-focused workshops designed to break the habit of literal translation before students enter formal specialization.

Conclusion:

This study has mapped the foundational obstacles that novice, general English students face when first introduced to translation at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The quantitative data underscores a clear pedagogical reality: without early, deliberate intervention, students will reflexively default to literal translation as a defense mechanism against semantic complexity.

Recommendations:

Based on the systematic findings of this study, immediate curricular interventions are required in the introductory phase of translator training at the undergraduate level. **The following three actionable recommendations are proposed:**

- 1. De-linking Translation from General Grammar Modules:** The Introduction to Translation syllabus must be structurally insulated from general English proficiency modules. Rather than treating translation as a tool for testing vocabulary and syntax, the curriculum should adopt a functionalist approach where grading criteria prioritize the naturalness, fluency, and communicative impact of the target text over its formal structural alignment with the source text.
- 2. The Early Introduction of 'Strategic Failure' Exercises:** Instructors should deliberately introduce novice students to texts that are impossible to translate literally (such as dense metaphors and localized proverbs). By demonstrating how word-for-word replication leads to communicative failure in classroom activities, students will systematically unlearn the habit of using literalism as a psychological safety net and instead begin practicing conceptual re-alignment.
- 3. Implementing Task-Based Functional Workshops:** The teaching method should pivot away from passive lecturing toward interactive, task-based translation workshops. Students should work collaboratively to strip away the Arabic surface structures, isolate the core message, and reconstruct it into natural English prose. This early pedagogical intervention ensures that when general English students transition into formal translation tracks in their third year, they possess a foundational competence rooted in dynamic equivalence.

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