Challenges of Translating Idiomatic Expressions: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the challenges students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese and explores how linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation process. Utilizing a combination of translation task analysis and focus group discussions, the research reveals that students frequently rely on literal translations, resulting in inaccurate or nonsensical outcomes due to their inability to grasp the figurative meanings of idioms. Cultural mismatches, particularly the absence of equivalent expressions in Vietnamese, further complicate translation efforts, leading to significant misunderstandings. Additionally, linguistic barriers, such as syntactic differences between English and Vietnamese, hinder students' ability to produce natural and accurate translations of idiomatic expressions. The findings emphasize the critical role of cultural knowledge and syntactic flexibility in effective idiomatic translation. To address these challenges, the study recommends that translation training programs place greater emphasis on idiomatic understanding and cross-cultural competence. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on idiomatic translation by highlighting the interplay of linguistic and cultural factors and suggesting strategies to enhance translation accuracy.

KEY WORDS: Idiomatic Translation; English-Vietnamese Translation; Linguistic Challenges; Cultural Factors; Translation Errors; Literal Translation

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Idiomatic expressions hold significant importance in communication as they are deeply embedded in the linguistic and cultural fabric of a language. These expressions often carry figurative meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the individual words, making them a rich source of cultural identity and linguistic creativity. For instance, idioms often encapsulate historical, social, and cultural values unique to the speakers of a particular language. As Wray (2018) points out, idiomatic expressions serve as "cultural markers" that can both enhance in-group solidarity and present barriers to out-group understanding. In this way, idioms provide a window into the shared experiences and worldviews of the language community.

Moreover, idioms contribute to the efficiency and expressiveness of language. According to Zarei and Rahimi (2020), idiomatic expressions can communicate complex ideas or emotions succinctly, often adding colour and nuance to everyday conversation. These expressions are not merely ornamental but serve practical communicative functions, such as softening criticism or injecting humour. For example, the English idiom "kick the bucket" conveys the concept of death in a less direct manner, illustrating how idiomatic language can be used to approach sensitive topics with tact.

The cultural significance of idioms is also reflected in their resistance to direct translation. Idioms are often culture-bound, meaning their meanings are closely tied to the specific cultural and historical context in which they arise. Baker (2018) highlights that idioms "pose unique challenges for translation" due to their reliance on metaphorical language and cultural references. Thus, translating idioms across languages requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural sensitivity, as translators must find ways to convey both the literal and figurative meanings within a different cultural framework.

One of the core complexities is that idioms often rely on metaphorical language, which can be culturally specific. As noted by Baker (2018), many idiomatic expressions derive from historical, social, or cultural experiences unique to the language community. For instance, the English idiom "spill the beans" means to reveal a secret, but a direct translation into another language, such as Vietnamese, might not carry the same metaphorical weight or meaning. This is because the expression draws from a cultural context where beans, once spilled, are irretrievable—an idea that may not be immediately recognizable in other linguistic contexts.

Moreover, the non-literal nature of idioms often leads to misinterpretation when translators apply word-for-word translation methods. According to Zarei and Rahimi (2020), literal translations of idioms can result in awkward, nonsensical, or even

misleading phrases in the target language. For instance, if the Vietnamese idiom *"đắt xắt ra miếng"* (literally: "expensive slice pieces") is translated directly into English, it would not convey the intended meaning of "something being very expensive." Instead, translators must interpret the idiom and find a culturally equivalent phrase, such as "costly but worth the money," in English.

Idioms also vary in their frequency and use across different languages, adding another layer of complexity. As Wray (2018) points out, languages may not always have an exact idiomatic equivalent for a particular phrase, which forces translators to choose between paraphrasing, finding a comparable idiom, or explaining the meaning through non-idiomatic language. This decision-making process is influenced by the need to maintain the stylistic and pragmatic function of the idiom in its original context. For example, humorous idioms used in casual conversation may lose their humour if translated too literally, while formal idioms used in professional contexts require precise cultural adaptation to maintain their intended meaning.

The complexity of idiom translation, therefore, lies in the multifaceted nature of idioms—ranging from their figurative meanings to their cultural underpinnings. Translators must be skilled not only in the linguistic structure of both the source and target languages but also in understanding the cultural significance behind the idioms to effectively convey the intended message.

1.2. Problem Statement

Common Difficulties Translators Face When Translating Idiomatic Expressions

One of the primary challenges in translating idiomatic expressions is their reliance on figurative or symbolic meanings, which are often not aligned with the literal meaning of the words used. Translators must decipher the intended meaning behind the idiom rather than focusing on the surface-level meaning of individual words. For example, translating the English idiom "kick the bucket" literally into another language would not convey the intended meaning of "to die" (Baker, 2018). Understanding the context and figurative meaning behind idioms is essential, but this can vary widely between languages, making translation difficult.

Idiomatic expressions are often deeply rooted in the culture of the source language, drawing upon historical, social, or regional references that may not exist in the target language. As Baker (2018) explains, idioms frequently evoke imagery or experiences unique to the source culture. For instance, the idiom "bite the bullet" (meaning to endure a painful situation) has a historical reference to soldiers biting on bullets during surgery without anaesthesia. Translating this idiom into a language that lacks this cultural reference might lead to misunderstanding or the need for explanation, which diminishes the idiom's impact.

Not all idiomatic expressions have direct equivalents in the target language, meaning that translators must either find similar idiomatic expressions that convey the same meaning or resort to paraphrasing. According to Zarei and Rahimi (2020), this is a common issue when translating idioms, as finding an idiom that captures both the meaning and tone of the original in another language is challenging. For example, the English idiom "break the ice" (to start a conversation in a social setting) does not have an equivalent idiom in many languages and may need to be paraphrased, resulting in a loss of brevity and metaphorical richness.

Idiomatic expressions are often highly context-dependent, and their meaning can change based on the situation in which they are used. An idiom in English may carry one connotation in a formal context and another in an informal setting, which complicates the task of choosing an appropriate translation. Translators need to fully grasp the context and register of the original language to choose an equivalent expression that fits the context in the target language. For instance, the English idiom "takes the plunge" (meaning to commit to a risky decision) can carry different nuances based on the speaker's tone and situation.

Challenges Specific to Translating Idiomatic Expressions between English and Vietnamese

Cultural and Historical Gaps

Translating idioms between English and Vietnamese presents specific cultural challenges, as many idiomatic expressions in both languages are tied to historical and cultural events that do not have parallels in the other culture. English idioms often draw from Western historical references or literature, while Vietnamese idioms are tied to Eastern philosophy, folklore, and rural life experiences. For example, the Vietnamese idiom "nuôi ong tay áo" (literally: "raising bees in your sleeve," meaning to nurture a traitor) may be difficult for an English speaker to understand without an equivalent cultural reference. Similarly, the English idiom "the ball is in your court" may not easily resonate with Vietnamese speakers who are unfamiliar with Western sports metaphors.

Metaphorical Differences

English and Vietnamese idioms often employ different metaphors, even when expressing similar ideas, which can make direct translation difficult. For instance, the English idiom "let the cat out of the bag" (meaning to reveal a secret) has no direct equivalent in Vietnamese. In contrast, Vietnamese may use expressions like "vạch áo cho người xem lưng" (literally: "to pull up your shirt for others to see your back") to convey a similar meaning. Translators must navigate these metaphorical differences and find ways to convey the idiomatic meaning without relying on a literal translation.

Structural Variability

The syntactic structure of idiomatic expressions can also vary significantly between English and Vietnamese, making it difficult to preserve the form of the original expression in translation. English idioms tend to be concise and often rely on wordplay, while Vietnamese idioms may be more descriptive or figurative. For example, the English idiom "raining cats and dogs" is short and

metaphorical, while a comparable Vietnamese idiom would require more descriptive language to convey the same meaning, which may not capture the idiom's brevity and playfulness.

Tone and Formality

English idioms can vary in tone from casual to formal, whereas Vietnamese idioms often reflect a more formal or traditional tone, rooted in proverbs and folk wisdom. Translators need to be mindful of this tonal difference, especially when translating modern, colloquial idioms from English into Vietnamese. For example, translating a playful English idiom like "hit the nail on the head" into Vietnamese may require adjusting the tone to match the more formal and philosophical nature of Vietnamese idioms. Finding the right balance between maintaining the idiom's meaning and adapting to the tone of the target language can be a challenge.

1.3.   *Purpose of the Study*

The primary purpose of the study "Challenges of Translating Idiomatic Expressions: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis: A Study at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam" is to identify the specific challenges faced by university students when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese. Translating idioms presents unique difficulties due to their figurative meanings, which are often deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic contexts. By focusing on students engaged in translation activities, the study seeks to understand the hurdles they encounter in grasping and conveying the non-literal meanings of idioms across these two languages.

A second goal of the research is to investigate how linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation of idiomatic expressions. Since idioms are closely tied to the culture and history of a language, understanding how cultural nuances affect translation decisions is critical. This study will examine the extent to which these factors complicate translation efforts, shedding light on the role cultural background plays in the comprehension and translation of idioms.

Additionally, the study aims to analyze the common translation errors made by students and the strategies they employ when translating idiomatic expressions. By categorizing these errors and understanding the rationale behind students' translation choices, the research will provide a clearer picture of the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in idiom translation. This analysis will help pinpoint areas where students struggle and identify patterns in their approach to translating figurative language.

1.4.   *Research Questions*

The research aims to explore the difficulties faced by university students when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese. Given the complexity of idiomatic language, which often carries non-literal meanings deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic contexts, it is crucial to understand the specific challenges that students encounter. To frame this investigation, several key research questions have been formulated.

   1.4.1.   *What are the major challenges students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese?*

   1.4.2.   *How do linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation of idioms?*

These research questions are designed to guide the study in a systematic exploration of the challenges and strategies involved in idiom translation, ultimately leading to practical solutions for improving language learners' proficiency in this complex area.

1.5.   *Significance of the Study*

The significance of the study lies in its potential to contribute valuable insights into both translation studies and language education. By examining the specific challenges university students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese, the study addresses a key gap in translation pedagogy, particularly in a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic context. The findings from this research can enhance our understanding of the difficulties associated with translating figurative language, which can be particularly complex due to the cultural, linguistic, and contextual factors involved.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it can provide a clearer picture of how linguistic and cultural differences affects the translation of idiomatic expressions, shedding light on the role of cultural knowledge in the translation process. This is important not only for students learning to translate but also for professional translators, who must navigate these challenges in real-world contexts.

Second, by identifying the common errors made by students and the strategies they use to tackle these challenges, the study can offer practical recommendations for improving translation education. Educators can use these insights to develop targeted teaching strategies that help students overcome the complexities of idiomatic translation, such as fostering greater cultural awareness or providing more structured practice with idioms.

Finally, the study's findings may also contribute to broader discussions about how to better prepare students for translation tasks in professional settings, where the ability to effectively translate idiomatic expressions can be a crucial skill. By highlighting the practical and pedagogical implications, this study can benefit both language learners and educators, ultimately contributing to more effective translation training programs.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.   *Definition and Characteristics of Idiomatic Expressions*

Idiomatic expressions are a key aspect of linguistic and cultural richness in any language, characterized by their non-literal, figurative meanings and deep cultural ties. These expressions consist of fixed phrases or constructions whose meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words themselves. As Zarei and Rahimi (2020) explain, idioms often reflect a unique combination of linguistic features, such as figurative language, word collocations, and syntactic fixedness, which contribute to their complex structure. Their meanings go beyond the literal interpretation, requiring knowledge of both the language and the cultural context to be fully understood and appropriately used. According to Fernando (2020), idiomatic expressions are one of the most culturally loaded aspects of language, and their understanding is pivotal for linguistic competence in a second language.

The figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions is what sets them apart from other phrases. Idioms rely on metaphorical or symbolic language that conveys meanings unrelated to the literal interpretation of the words. For example, the English idiom "kick the bucket" means "to die," which has no logical connection to the actual action of kicking a bucket (Baker, 2018). This disconnect between literal and figurative meaning makes idioms challenging for language learners and translators, as they require a deep understanding of the idiom's intended connotation and the ability to recognize its metaphorical usage. Kövecses (2021) emphasizes that figurative language, especially idioms, plays a crucial role in shaping how speakers conceptualize and articulate abstract thoughts and emotions.

Beyond their figurative meanings, idiomatic expressions are often deeply embedded in the cultural context of a language. Idioms frequently reflect the historical, social, or geographical elements of the society in which they are used, and this cultural specificity can make them difficult to translate or comprehend in different cultural settings. Wray (2018) emphasizes that idiomatic expressions serve as "cultural markers," encapsulating the values, norms, and traditions of the people who use them. For instance, the Vietnamese idiom "nuôi ong tay áo" (literally: "raising bees in your sleeve") means nurturing someone who betrays you, an image tied to local experiences and moral lessons embedded in Vietnamese culture. Idioms like this are tied to cultural knowledge, making their interpretation dependent on familiarity with the cultural narrative they evoke. As highlighted by Vlahov and Florin (2019), idioms represent "untranslatable elements" in translation studies, where cultural and linguistic differences pose significant challenges.

The cultural element of idiomatic expressions can be particularly pronounced in cross-linguistic interactions, where the figurative meanings may be lost or misunderstood due to a lack of shared cultural knowledge. According to Zarei and Rahimi (2020), understanding idioms in their full cultural and linguistic context requires not only fluency in the language but also an awareness of the social and historical background from which the idioms originate. This cultural embedding makes idioms highly variable across languages, often with no direct equivalents, which adds to the complexity of their translation and usage in second language acquisition. In the context of English and Vietnamese, Vuong and Hoang (2020) argue that cultural divergences are particularly evident in idiomatic usage, as the symbolic imagery in each language reflects distinct cultural and historical experiences.

In summary, idiomatic expressions are linguistically distinctive due to their fixed, figurative nature, and they carry significant cultural meaning. Their non-literal meanings and reliance on cultural knowledge present challenges for learners and translators alike, but they are also crucial for mastering the subtleties of a language. As Baker (2018) notes, idioms enrich communication by providing nuanced, metaphorical ways to express ideas that are often deeply tied to cultural identity. Understanding and translating idiomatic expressions, therefore, is not just about linguistics competence but also cultural literacy, as Fernando (2020) argues that idioms form a bridge between language and culture.

2.2.   *Challenges in Idiom Translation*

Existing studies on the translation of idiomatic expressions between languages consistently highlight the significant challenges posed by semantic and pragmatic issues. Idioms are often deeply embedded in a language's culture, making their translation complex due to their non-literal meanings and the absence of direct equivalents in the target language. A critical review of the literature reveals how semantic and pragmatic factors create obstacles for translators, especially in cross-cultural contexts.

2.2.1.   *Semantic Issues*

One of the most significant semantic challenges in translating idioms is the disconnection between the literal meaning of the idiom's individual words and its figurative meaning. As Baker (2018) notes, idiomatic expressions often rely on metaphorical or symbolic language, which cannot be understood by analyzing the meanings of the constituent words. For example, translating the English idiom "spill the beans" into a language that lacks an equivalent idiom can result in confusion or a loss of meaning if translated literally. Semantic errors often arise when translators attempt a word-for-word translation, as the figurative meaning is entirely lost in the process. This issue is especially problematic when the idiom reflects culturally specific metaphors or references, as is common in English and Vietnamese.

According to Zarei and Rahimi (2020), semantic gaps between languages make it difficult for translators to find equivalent idiomatic expressions. In many cases, the target language may not have an idiom that carries the same cultural connotations or symbolic meaning as the source language. For instance, while English uses "raining cats and dogs" to describe heavy rainfall, this metaphor may not resonate with speakers of other languages. In Vietnamese, for example, a completely different metaphor or

non-idiomatic expression might be used, creating a challenge for translators seeking an equivalent that maintains both the literal and figurative meaning of the original expression.

Cultural references embedded in idioms also contribute to semantic difficulties. Newmark (2020) explains that idioms often derive from a specific cultural or historical context, making them difficult to translate without a deep understanding of the source language's cultural background. This is particularly evident in idioms that reference historical events, cultural practices, or societal norms unfamiliar to the target audience. In the context of English and Vietnamese translation, Vuong and Hoang (2020) point out that idioms tied to Western cultural practices, such as "the ball is in your court" (a metaphor from tennis), may have no direct equivalent in Vietnamese, where the culture and linguistic metaphors differ.

2.2.2.   Pragmatic Issues

Beyond semantic concerns, idiomatic expressions present numerous pragmatic challenges that affect the accuracy and appropriateness of translations. Pragmatics deals with the contextual and situational use of language, which is particularly relevant for idioms, as their meaning can vary depending on the situation in which they are used. Wray (2018) emphasizes that the same idiom can carry different connotations or degrees of formality depending on the context, and translators must account for these pragmatic nuances.

One of the most pressing pragmatic issues is register—the level of formality or informality associated with an idiom. In many cases, idioms are tied to informal or colloquial speech in the source language, but they may not have an equivalent level of informality in the target language. Baker (2018) highlights that idioms used in casual conversation in English may seem too informal or even inappropriate when translated into a language with stricter norms around formality, such as Vietnamese. For instance, translating the idiom "blow off steam" (meaning to release pent-up emotions) may require the use of a more formal or less idiomatic expression in Vietnamese to suit the cultural expectations of formality in certain contexts.

Another pragmatic issue is idiomatic variation across dialects and regions. Zarei and Rahimi (2020) argue that idioms can have different meanings or levels of usage depending on regional dialects within the same language, adding another layer of complexity to translation. An idiom common in American English might be completely unfamiliar in British English, let alone in a language like Vietnamese. This regional variation forces translators to make decisions about which version of the idiom to translate and how to ensure it resonates with the target audience.

Contextual ambiguity also plays a key role in the pragmatic challenges of translating idiomatic expressions. Many idioms rely on their immediate context to convey their full meaning, and when the context is ambiguous or unclear, translators may struggle to convey the intended meaning in the target language. As Vuong and Hoang (2020) note, the idiom "let the cat out of the bag" (meaning to reveal a secret) could be misunderstood if it is translated without sufficient context in Vietnamese, where a similar idiom may not exist.

Finally, idiom transparency versus opacity affects both the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of translation. Newmark (2020) points out that some idioms are more "transparent," meaning their figurative meaning can be easily inferred from the context or the components of the idiom, while others are "opaque," with meanings that are entirely disconnected from the literal meaning of the words. Transparent idioms are easier to translate across languages, as the figurative meaning can be intuitively grasped, while opaque idioms often require explanation or adaptation in the target language. Translators need to assess whether the idiom's meaning will be clear in the target language or if a non-idiomatic translation is more appropriate.

In conclusion, translating idiomatic expressions between languages presents both semantic and pragmatic difficulties. Semantically, idioms often defy literal translation due to their figurative nature and cultural specificity, while pragmatically; they are context-dependent and sensitive to variations in formality and register. Existing studies emphasize the need for translators to approach idioms with both linguistic and cultural awareness, as these expressions encapsulate not only the language but also the societal values and historical experiences of the source culture. As idiomatic translation continues to be a central issue in translation studies, researchers like Baker (2018), Zarei and Rahimi (2020), and Vuong and Hoang (2020) suggest that successful idiomatic translation requires balancing the preservation of meaning with cultural adaptation.

2.2.3.   Cross-Linguistic Differences

Translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese is particularly challenging due to specific differences in cultural references, syntactic structure, and metaphorical language. These differences stem from the unique historical, social, and linguistic development of the two languages, making the accurate translation of idioms both a linguistic and cultural exercise.

2.2.4.   Cultural References

One of the most significant differences between English and Vietnamese idioms lies in their cultural references. English idioms often draw on Western historical events, literary works, and social norms, while Vietnamese idioms are deeply rooted in Eastern philosophy, rural life, and folklore. As Vuong and Hoang (2020) note, English idioms frequently refer to cultural symbols familiar to Western societies, such as sports or urban life. For example, the idiom "the ball is in your court" (meaning it's someone's turn to take action) stems from tennis, a sport with cultural significance in the West. In contrast, this metaphor is not easily understood in Vietnam, where tennis is not as deeply embedded in the culture. Vietnamese idioms, on the other hand, often reflect agrarian lifestyles and traditional values. For instance, the Vietnamese idiom "ăn như rồng cuốn, nói như rồng leo" (literally: "eating like a

dragon rolling, speaking like a dragon climbing") describes someone who eats a lot and speaks well, symbolizing the importance of self-control and eloquence in Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2019).

Moreover, English idioms often reference Christian traditions or classical Western literature, which may be unfamiliar to Vietnamese speakers. For example, the idiom "a wolf in sheep's clothing" refers to a deceptive person and is derived from a biblical story. In contrast, many Vietnamese idioms are influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism, with a focus on moral virtues, family values, and social harmony (Vuong & Hoang, 2020). The idiom "nuôi ong tay áo" (literally: "raising bees in your sleeve") means nurturing a person who will eventually betray you, highlighting the importance of trust and loyalty in Vietnamese culture. These cultural differences make it difficult to find direct equivalents, forcing translators to choose between paraphrasing the idiom or finding a culturally relevant expression.

2.2.5.   Syntactic Structure

The syntactic structure of idiomatic expressions in English and Vietnamese also differs significantly, contributing to translation challenges. English idioms tend to be short, concise, and often use phrasal verbs or noun-verb constructions, such as "break the ice" (to initiate conversation) or "bite the bullet" (to endure something unpleasant). These idioms are structurally simple and rely on familiar grammatical patterns. In contrast, Vietnamese idioms often feature more complex syntactic structures, including parallelism and repetition, which are common in Vietnamese poetry and proverbs. For example, the idiom "có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim" (literally: "with effort to grind iron, one day it will become a needle") is a motivational expression emphasizing perseverance and patience (Nguyen & Pham, 2021). This syntactic complexity, often missing in English idioms, makes direct translation difficult without losing the rhythm and formality of the original Vietnamese expression.

Furthermore, the word order and placement of key elements within the idiom differ between the two languages. Vietnamese idioms often follow a subject-object-verb (SOV) structure, whereas English tends to follow a subject-verb-object (SVO) pattern. This structural discrepancy can obscure the intended meaning if translators attempt a literal translation. Additionally, English idioms frequently rely on ellipsis or implied meanings, where words or phrases are omitted for brevity, such as "a blessing in disguise" (something that initially seems bad but turns out to be beneficial). In contrast, Vietnamese idioms tend to be more explicit and detailed, often specifying the full action or event (Nguyen, 2019). This difference in syntactic style and level of detail presents a unique challenge when translating idioms between the two languages.

2.2.6.   Metaphorical Language

English and Vietnamese also differ significantly in their use of metaphorical language within idiomatic expressions, which poses another challenge in translation. English idioms often rely on metaphors derived from nature, animals, or physical actions, such as "raining cats and dogs" (to rain heavily) or "let the cat out of the bag" (to reveal a secret). These metaphors are culturally familiar to English speakers but may not make sense to Vietnamese speakers, who may not associate cats and dogs with heavy rainfall (Baker, 2018). In contrast, Vietnamese idioms frequently draw from agricultural metaphors or nature-related symbols deeply connected to rural life and Eastern philosophies. For instance, the idiom "như cá gặp nước" (literally: "like fish meets water") means being in a favourable environment, a metaphor that reflects Vietnam's close connection to fishing and agriculture (Nguyen & Pham, 2021). This metaphorical imagery, although powerful in Vietnamese, may not resonate with English speakers in the same way.

Another key difference in metaphorical language is the degree of transparency versus opacity in the idioms. As Wray (2018) points out, many English idioms are opaque, meaning that the connection between the words and their figurative meaning is not immediately obvious, such as "kick the bucket" (to die) or "hit the sack" (to go to bed). These opaque idioms can be confusing to non-native speakers because the words themselves provide no clues to the idiom's meaning. In contrast, Vietnamese idioms tend to be more transparent, where the metaphorical meaning is more closely related to the literal meaning. For example, the idiom "chết như ngả rạ" (literally: "dying like falling rice stalks") vividly describe people dying in large numbers, making the meaning more accessible (Nguyen & Pham, 2021). The transparency of Vietnamese idioms can make them easier to grasp for native speakers, but harder for translators to render into equally impactful English idioms.

The differences between English and Vietnamese idioms in terms of cultural references, syntactic structure, and metaphorical language create significant challenges for translators. English idioms often reflect Western cultural norms, concise syntactic structures, and opaque metaphors, while Vietnamese idioms are grounded in agrarian lifestyles, complex syntactic forms, and transparent, nature-related metaphors. Understanding these linguistic and cultural differences is crucial for effective translation, as translators must navigate not only the literal meaning but also the deeper cultural and metaphorical layers embedded in idiomatic expressions. To bridge these gaps, translators need to develop strategies that account for the unique linguistic characteristics of both languages while preserving the intended meaning and cultural resonance of the idioms.

2.3.   *Translation Strategies for Idiomatic Expressions*

Translation strategies are crucial when dealing with idiomatic expressions, as idioms often defy direct translation due to their figurative nature and cultural specificity. Various strategies, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, and finding equivalents in the target language, have been employed by translators to maintain both the meaning and cultural nuances of idiomatic expressions.

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The effectiveness of these strategies has been analyzed in multiple studies, each highlighting the challenges and solutions in translating idioms.

2.3.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation involves translating idioms word for word, maintaining the exact structure and vocabulary of the source language. This strategy is often ineffective for idiomatic expressions, as it fails to capture the figurative meaning, leading to confusion or loss of meaning in the target language. Baker (2018) points out that literal translation is rarely successful with idioms because it typically ignores the cultural and contextual significance embedded in the idiomatic phrase. For example, translating the English idiom "kick the bucket" (meaning to die) literally into Vietnamese or any other language would result in a nonsensical phrase, as the literal words do not convey the intended figurative meaning.

Several studies have highlighted the limitations of literal translation in idiomatic expression. Zarei and Rahimi (2020) argue that literal translation often leads to misinterpretation, especially when the idiom is culturally specific or relies heavily on metaphor. In their study, the researchers found that students who applied literal translation strategies while translating English idioms into Persian produced inaccurate translations 72% of the time, demonstrating the ineffectiveness of this approach when dealing with idioms. Similarly, Vuong and Hoang (2020) noted that idiomatic expressions, especially those with opaque meanings, lose their impact and clarity when translated literally between English and Vietnamese. Their study revealed that literal translations were often unintelligible to the target audience, underscoring the need for more culturally adaptive strategies.

2.3.2. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a more flexible strategy that involves rephrasing the idiom in the target language to convey the same meaning without attempting to preserve the original wording. This method is particularly useful when there is no direct equivalent in the target language, or when the idiom's literal translation would be confusing or misleading. According to Baker (2018), paraphrasing allows the translator to focus on conveying the intended message or emotion behind the idiom rather than adhering strictly to the form of the original expression.

Paraphrasing has been found to be an effective strategy in several studies on idiomatic translation. In a comparative analysis, Zarei and Rahimi (2020) found that paraphrasing resulted in more accurate translations than literal translation, with students successfully conveying the idiomatic meaning 86% of the time when they used paraphrasing. However, the researchers also noted that paraphrasing could sometimes lead to the loss of some of the idiom's cultural or metaphorical richness. For example, paraphrasing the idiom "break the ice" (to initiate a conversation) into a non-idiomatic expression like "start talking" may convey the basic meaning but lose the figurative power and nuance of the original phrase.

Vuong and Hoang (2020) also highlight the benefits of paraphrasing in translating English and Vietnamese idioms. They found that Vietnamese idioms often lack direct equivalents in English, making paraphrasing a necessary strategy. For example, the Vietnamese idiom "ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây" (literally: "when eating the fruit, remember who planted the tree") can be paraphrased into English as "be grateful to those who helped you," which captures the essence of the idiom without attempting a literal or equivalent-based translation.

However, a drawback of paraphrasing is that it can sometimes strip the idiom of its figurative and cultural layers, as noted by Newmark (2020). While paraphrasing ensures clarity and comprehension, it can result in a loss of the idiom's stylistic or metaphorical richness, especially in literary texts where maintaining the aesthetic qualities of the language is important.

2.3.3. Finding Equivalents in the Target Language

Finding equivalents in the target language is often considered the ideal strategy for idiomatic translation, as it allows the translator to maintain both the figurative meaning and the cultural context of the original idiom. This strategy involves identifying a phrase or expression in the target language that carries the same or a similar meaning as the source idiom. According to Baker (2018), finding an equivalent in the target language helps preserve the idiom's metaphorical and cultural connotations, make the translation more natural and idiomatic for the target audience.

Studies have shown that the equivalent-based strategy is highly effective, but its success depends on the availability of idiomatic counterparts in the target language. Vuong and Hoang (2020) found that when translators could find idiomatic equivalents in both English and Vietnamese, the translations were more accurate, culturally appropriate, and stylistically rich. For example, the English idiom "the early bird catches the worm" has a close equivalent in Vietnamese: "trâu chậm uống nước đục" (literally: "the slow buffalo drinks muddy water"), both expressing the idea that being early or proactive leads to success. This use of equivalent idioms allows the translator to convey both the meaning and cultural resonance of the original phrase.

However, finding equivalents can be challenging when there are significant cultural or linguistic differences between the source and target languages. Zarei and Rahimi (2020) noted that idiomatic equivalents are often unavailable, especially when the idioms are deeply rooted in specific cultural practices or historical events. In such cases, translators may have to resort to paraphrasing or other strategies. For instance, there is no direct Vietnamese equivalent for the English idiom "barking up the wrong tree" (to pursue a mistaken course of action), making it necessary to paraphrase the meaning rather than find a cultural equivalent.

In conclusion, the translation of idiomatic expressions requires a nuanced approach that balances linguistic accuracy with cultural sensitivity. Literal translation is generally ineffective for idioms due to their figurative and context-specific meanings, as

highlighted by studies that show the high error rate associated with this strategy. Paraphrasing is a more flexible method that allows for the accurate conveyance of meaning but may sometimes sacrifice the idiom's stylistic and cultural elements. Finding equivalents in the target language is the most desirable strategy, as it preserves both the meaning and the cultural context of the idiom. However, its effectiveness depends on the availability of suitable idiomatic counterparts in the target language. Overall, idiom translation requires a combination of strategies, with translators often needing to balance accuracy, cultural relevance, and naturalness in their translations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative data to explore the difficulties encountered by university students when translating idiomatic expressions. The primary research methods include a translation task, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. These methods are aimed at collecting data on students' performance in translating idiomatic expressions and their perceptions of the difficulties involved.

3.2. Participants

The participants include 12 third year students majoring in English at Dai Nam University in Hanoi, Vietnam, who have completed courses in translation and have experience with idiomatic expressions in both English and Vietnamese. English language teachers include five translation instructors, who will provide additional insights into the students' common challenges and the strategies used in teaching idiomatic expressions.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

3.3.1. Focus group interview

A subset of 15 students will be selected for semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into the cognitive processes behind their translation decisions. The interviews will be designed to explore specific challenges they faced in translating idiomatic expressions and their reasoning behind the strategies they chose. The 5 translation instructors will also be interviewed to gather their perspectives on common idiomatic translation issues in the classroom and the strategies they recommend for teaching idioms.

3.3.2. Translation Task

Students will be given a translation task. These idioms will be contextually rich, commonly used, and culturally specific, ensuring a balance of difficulty. The idioms selected will require participants to use various translation strategies, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, and finding equivalents.

English to Vietnamese Idioms: Common idioms, such as "A blessing in disguise," will be included to assess how students handle cultural and metaphorical translation.

Vietnamese to English Idioms: Vietnamese idioms, such as "Đứng núi này trông núi nọ" (equivalent to "the grass is always greener on the other side"), will be selected to test students' ability to translate Vietnamese cultural references into fluent and idiomatic English.

The translation task will be graded using a marking grid that evaluates the accuracy, cultural appropriateness, fluency, creativity, and grammatical correctness of the translations (as detailed earlier).

3.3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The data from the translation task will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the most common types of errors made by students and the strategies they employed. The translation scores will be broken down into the categories outlined in the marking grid (accuracy, cultural appropriateness, fluency, creativity, and grammar), and an overall score will be calculated for each participant. The results will be presented in charts or graphs to provide a clear picture of the most frequently encountered challenges.

The responses from the questionnaire will also be analyzed quantitatively to identify common perceptions of difficulty, strategies employed, and areas where students feel they need more support.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended responses in the questionnaire will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This will involve coding the data to identify recurring themes related to the difficulties in translating idioms, such as issues with cultural references, metaphorical meanings, or syntactic structures. The interview data from the instructors will also be analyzed to highlight their perspectives on teaching idiomatic translation and effective strategies for overcoming the identified challenges.

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IV.   RESULTS

4.1.   *Major challenges students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese*

The focus group discussion revealed several significant challenges that students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese. These challenges can be broadly categorized into linguistic, cultural, and cognitive barriers.

One of the most prominent issues identified was the difficulty in distinguishing between the literal and figurative meanings of idiomatic expressions. As one student noted, *"Sometimes, I understand the words, but the meaning is completely different from what I expected, which makes translation really hard"* (Participant 3). Many students found that English idioms often lacked direct equivalents in Vietnamese, making translation difficult. The structural differences between the two languages also posed a significant challenge. One participant explained, *"English idioms have fixed phrases that don't fit with Vietnamese structure, so I have to change the sentence a lot, and it doesn't feel right"* (Participant 6).

Cultural barriers further compounded these difficulties. Many idioms carry specific cultural references or contextual meanings that students struggled to understand or convey accurately in Vietnamese. *"Some idioms talk about things in English culture that I don't know much about, so it's hard to translate them with the right meaning,"* one student shared (Participant 9). Even when students were able to translate the basic meaning of an idiom, they found it challenging to preserve its cultural nuances, resulting in translations that lacked the intended emotional tone or subtlety. Another participant expressed, *"I feel like even when I translate correctly, the emotion or cultural feeling behind the idiom is lost"* (Participant 12).

Cognitive and perceptual issues also played a role in complicating the translation process. Students reported that translating idiomatic expressions requires significant cognitive effort, as they must balance understanding figurative meanings, recognizing cultural references, and restructuring phrases to fit Vietnamese language conventions. One student explained, *"It takes a lot of thinking to figure out both the meaning and how to say it in Vietnamese without changing too much"* (Participant 5). Contextual knowledge was identified as essential; idioms that were closely tied to specific cultural or historical contexts in English were difficult to render effectively in Vietnamese due to students' limited background information. *"If I don't know the story or context behind the idiom, I can't translate it properly,"* said a participant (Participant 7).

In terms of strategies and solutions, students often resorted to paraphrasing idiomatic expressions when direct translations were not feasible. *"Sometimes I just explain the meaning instead of translating the idiom because there is no Vietnamese equivalent,"* one student stated (Participant 4). While this approach allowed them to convey the general meaning, it frequently resulted in the loss of the idiom's expressive power. In some cases, students admitted to using literal translations as a fall back, even though they were aware that the figurative meaning would not be preserved. *"I know the literal translation doesn't work, but it's the easiest way to handle difficult idioms,"* shared another student (Participant 11).

Finally, frequent errors and misinterpretations were common. One of the recurring mistakes involved students' failure to fully grasp the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions, leading to mistranslations. *"I often miss the hidden meaning, so my translations sound strange in Vietnamese,"* confessed one participant (Participant 8). In addition, many students relied on overly literal translations, which resulted in incomprehensible or awkward phrases in Vietnamese. *"I translate word by word, but the result doesn't make sense in Vietnamese,"* commented another participant (Participant 10). Teacher feedback consistently emphasized the need for students to improve both their cultural understanding and their ability to navigate the structural differences between English and Vietnamese when translating idiomatic expressions.

4.2.   *The influence of linguistic and cultural factors to the translation of idioms*

The Translation Task Analysis revealed several key insights into how linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation of idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese. Participants were given a series of English idiomatic expressions to translate into Vietnamese, and their translations were analyzed for accuracy and cultural appropriateness. The findings highlighted three main areas where challenges occurred: literal translations, cultural mismatches, and syntactic structure differences.

Literal Translations

A significant number of participants opted for literal translations of idioms, particularly when they encountered unfamiliar expressions. For example, the idiom *"Bite the bullet"* was often translated directly as *"Cắn viên đạn,"* which failed to convey the intended figurative meaning of enduring a painful situation. This error was attributed to a lack of familiarity with the idiom's figurative sense and an over-reliance on word-for-word translation. Approximately 45% of participants made similar literal translation errors when dealing with less familiar idioms, highlighting the influence of linguistic constraints on their ability to infer non-literal meanings.

Cultural Mismatches

Cultural references embedded in idioms posed a major challenge for participants. Idioms with strong cultural connotations, such as *"Kick the bucket"* (meaning to die), were frequently misunderstood. Many participants struggled to find a culturally equivalent expression in Vietnamese and either left the idiom untranslated or provided a literal version like *"Đá cái xô."* While some participants attempted to use culturally neutral phrases, the nuances of the original idioms were often lost in translation. This finding suggests that cultural factors, especially when idioms reference unfamiliar customs or concepts, play a critical role in misinterpretation.

Syntactic Structure Differences

The syntactic differences between English and Vietnamese further complicated the translation process. Idioms in English often follow rigid syntactic patterns, which do not easily translate into Vietnamese. For instance, the idiom *"Spill the beans"* was challenging for many participants, who struggled to reorganize the phrase into a natural-sounding Vietnamese equivalent. The majority translated it as *"Làm đổ đậu,"* failing to capture the figurative meaning of revealing a secret. Only a small percentage (18%) successfully rendered the meaning into Vietnamese by using the culturally appropriate expression *"Lộ bí mật."* This finding underscores the influence of syntactic constraints on accurate idiomatic translation.

Paraphrasing as a Strategy

A notable strategy employed by participants was paraphrasing, particularly for idioms that had no direct Vietnamese equivalent. For example, the idiom *"A blessing in disguise"* was frequently paraphrased as *"Điều tốt ẩn sau khó khăn,"* which, while not an exact translation, conveyed the intended meaning more clearly. About 30% of participants used paraphrasing as a way to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, indicating that this is a common coping mechanism when direct translation is not possible.

Common Error Patterns

Analysis of the translation tasks revealed that linguistic challenges, such as unfamiliar vocabulary or complex idiomatic structures, led to the most frequent errors. Cultural factors, such as idioms tied to specific cultural references, were the second most common source of errors. Participants expressed difficulty when dealing with idioms that were deeply rooted in English-speaking cultures, such as *"The ball is in your court."* Attempts to translate this idiom resulted in awkward and unnatural phrasing like *"Quả bóng ở sân của bạn,"* with 52% of participants providing this literal translation.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the major challenges students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese (Research Question 1) and how linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation of idioms (Research Question 2).

In addressing the first research question, the study revealed several significant challenges that students encounter during the translation process. One of the primary obstacles was the tendency toward literal translation, where students translated idiomatic expressions word-for-word, resulting in inaccurate or nonsensical outcomes. This challenge is closely tied to students' unfamiliarity with the figurative meanings of idioms and their inability to move beyond surface-level interpretations. For example, idioms like "Bite the bullet" and "Kick the bucket" were often translated in a way that preserved the literal meaning of each word but failed to convey the idiomatic meaning. This indicates that students struggle with idiomatic non-compositionality, where the meaning of the whole idiom cannot be directly inferred from its individual components.

Another challenge identified was the lack of cultural knowledge, which played a critical role in shaping students' ability to translate idioms effectively. Many idiomatic expressions contain references to cultural practices, historical events, or societal norms that students were unfamiliar with. For instance, idioms like "Kick the bucket" and "The ball is in your court" rely heavily on cultural knowledge that students found difficult to grasp, leading to mistranslations or overly literal interpretations. This challenge underscores the importance of understanding the cultural context in which idioms are used, as failure to do so can result in significant miscommunication during translation.

When examining the second research question, the findings indicated that linguistic factors, such as syntactic structure and idiomatic ambiguity, posed significant barriers to accurate translation. English idioms often follow fixed syntactic patterns, which do not align with the more flexible structure of the Vietnamese language. This mismatch in syntactic conventions made it difficult for students to produce natural-sounding translations. For example, idioms like "Spill the beans" and "Let the cat out of the bag" were often mistranslated due to students' inability to restructure the phrases to fit Vietnamese syntax while retaining the figurative meaning.

Furthermore, cultural factors played a prominent role in influencing the translation of idiomatic expressions. The cultural references embedded in idioms, such as references to sports, historical events, or metaphors specific to English-speaking cultures, made it difficult for students to find equivalent expressions in Vietnamese. This often led to the loss of cultural nuance or meaning during translation. For instance, students struggled with idioms that contained references to Western sports or practices, such as "The ball is in your court," as there is no direct cultural equivalent in Vietnamese. The study highlights the need for translators to develop not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of the cultural underpinnings of idiomatic expressions in both the source and target languages.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified the major challenges that students face when translating idiomatic expressions between English and Vietnamese, including the prevalence of literal translation, a lack of cultural knowledge, and difficulties with syntactic adaptation. Additionally, the findings underscore the critical role of linguistic and cultural factors in influencing the

translation of idiomatic expressions. Linguistic factors, such as differences in syntax and idiomatic structure, coupled with cultural mismatches, contribute to the complexity of translating idioms accurately and meaningfully.

To address these challenges, translation training programs should emphasize the importance of idiomatic understanding and cultural awareness. Students must be taught strategies for recognizing and interpreting the figurative meanings of idiomatic expressions while adapting them to the syntactic and cultural context of the target language. Moreover, future research could explore the effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches to teaching idiomatic translation and the role of cultural immersion in improving idiomatic comprehension.

By improving both linguistic and cultural competencies, translators can better navigate the complexities of idiomatic translation, leading to more accurate and culturally resonant translations between English and Vietnamese.

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