

Common students' translation errors: a case study in felte, ulis, vnu

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Abstract: The study aims to identify the common errors made by students in their third year at Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), University of Foreign Languages and International Studies (ULIS) during translation tasks. On the base of findings from an error analysis of 25 students' translation assignments, the study has reached a conclusion of three major types of error groups including linguistic, comprehension and translation errors. Further, some pedagogical suggestions have been recommended for teachers in order to apply in their translation classes.

Keyword: Errors, lexical, comprehension, translation

1. Introduction

1.1. In Foreign Language Teaching, translation has often been mentioned as a major component of the Grammar Translation Method of Language Teaching (Howatt, 1984). According to Biçer (2002:69), translation is still necessary for students in either language or translation classes. At Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), third year students take a short translation course which can not be considered official and professional training. The main aim of this course is to consolidate students' lexical and grammatical knowledge and provide students with some basic translation skills through authentic learning material. Students are required to carefully prepare for the translation tasks in the textbook and actively contribute to the class discussion. Their progress is assessed through their translation assignments and the final test. During the course, FELTE students have achieved some basic translation skills; however, it is clear that they also have some problems while translating English into Vietnamese and vice versa. The students' translation errors urged me to conduct this study in the hope that an error analysis of the kinds of errors made by students may help teachers to identify the areas that need to be a focus for teaching.

1.2. This paper attempts to identify the common errors that students made when translating, thus suggested some practical implications to teachers so that they can apply in their translation class.

The participants of the study included 25 third-year students who took a short translation course at FELTE, ULIS- VNU. During the course, they were

provided with grammatical and lexical issues related to translation as well as basic translation skills through translation practice and class discussion. Their progress was assessed through one final test and three translation assignments in which they were required to translate English short and long texts into Vietnamese and vice versa. The main tool of the research was error analysis. This methodology helped to detect and categorize the errors made by students in their three translation assignments.

2. Data Analysis and Discussion

All the errors were firstly detected, and then classified into three main types: linguistic errors, comprehension errors and translation errors.

2.1. Linguistic Errors

Wrong alternate meaning of a word

E.g.(1) *I don't think a **single** person believed me when I maintained that the pork factor was not the reason my husband and I chose to procreate in 2007.*

Student's translation: *Tôi không tin một **người độc thân** sẽ tin tôi khi tôi quả quyết rằng vợ chồng tôi quyết định sinh con vào năm 2007 không phải vì đây là năm Hợi.*

Possible translation: *Tôi nghĩ, nếu tôi nói rằng vợ chồng tôi sinh con năm 2007 không phải là vì chọn năm Hợi thì có lẽ sẽ **chẳng ai** tin.*

The above example shows the student's problem in using the dictionary. Probably, she/he hurriedly selects the first definition of a word without considering the possibility of another alternate meaning which would better fit the context. The student does not realize that the word "single" must be rendered together with the word "not" in

the phrase: “I don’t know”. Therefore, the student chooses to render “single” as the opposite meaning of married while it must be “not a single person” which means “nobody”.

Misuse of Synonyms

Even though the students have full use of the dictionary, they still have problem selecting the most appropriate words among several with similar but not identical meanings. Wrong lexical choice has been specified as inaccuracy in the choice of a lexical item that slightly distorts the intended meaning. This occurs when the student had to choose one among many synonyms or words of similar meaning.

E.g.(2) Về chính sách tài chính, chính phủ đã cắt bỏ bao cấp đối với các doanh nghiệp nhà nước để giảm chi ngân sách và tiến hành cải cách thuế để tăng nguồn thu.

Student’s translation: In *fiscal* policies, the government has cut off subsidy to state-owned enterprises in order to reduce government spending and reformed taxation to increase *national income*.

Possible translation: In *financial* policies, the government has cut off subsidy to state-owned enterprises in order to reduce government spending and reformed taxation to increase *revenue*.

Both financial and fiscal can be translated into “tài chính”; however, the word fiscal is defined as connected with government or public money, especially taxes. Therefore, if ‘fiscal’ is used in this context, the government’s first action of cutting off subsidy to state-owned enterprises is out of the scope of the fiscal policies. Similarly, the word “revenue” defined as the money that a government receives from taxes is more suitable in the context of the sentence than the word “national income.”

Structural Errors

In English there is a tendency of using more nominal structures while verbal structures are used more in Vietnamese. Some students keep the same structures when translating, leading to vagueness in target language text.

E.g.(3) *There is over-fishing and destruction of important marine habitat; expansion of infertile soils due to inappropriate farming practices.*

Student’s translation:

Hiện đang tồn tại tình trạng đánh bắt cá quá mức, sự phá hủy môi trường quan trọng của biển; sự mở rộng đất bạc màu vì canh tác không hợp lý.

Possible translation:

Hiện nay đang xảy ra tình trạng khai thác quá mức và phá hủy môi trường sống của các loài thủy sản quan trọng; diện tích đất bạc màu tăng lên do canh tác nông nghiệp không đúng cách.

The students tend to focus only on the surface structure and translate each word or sentence from the source text. As can be seen from the example mentioned above, some students focus on the structures of source language so much that their translations do not sound Vietnamese, therefore lack the coherence and smoothness.

2.2. Comprehension Errors

Comprehension errors occur when the translation is grammatically correct, but back translation from the target language text shows that the students have misread a word or misunderstood the syntax of a sentence in the source text. That is to say, the translation is wrong, not because of the students’ lack of linguistic competence, but because of their carelessness or inability to decipher the meaning of one word or one sentence in the source text. (Pham Thu Quynh Na(2005: 51)

E.g.(4) *For someone not used to strangers rubbing my tummy, the attention was a little overwhelming.*

Student’s translation: *Đối với một số người không quen nhìn thấy những người lạ xoa bụng tôi thì sự chú ý lại càng tăng lên.*

Possible translation: *Người nào không quen với việc để người lạ sờ vào bụng sẽ thấy hơi khó chịu với sự quan tâm kiểu này.*

The reason why this sentence is misinterpreted seems that student misunderstands the reference of the phrase: “the attention”. He/she intends that the attention mentioned here belongs to the person who is not used to strangers rubbing my tummy while it refers to the attention of Vietnamese people expressed in the preceding text – “Strangers would reach out and pat my belly for good luck. One lady poring over the financial pages of the local paper asked my opinion of the Vietnamese stock market, convinced that my bump could somehow divine the following day’s big winners on the Ho Chi Minh Stock Exchange”

2.3. Translation Errors

These are the errors which show the inability of the students in expressing the meaning of the source text in the target text, or some distortion of the source text, even though the sentences may be grammatically correct. In this paper, translation

errors include: pragmatic errors, omission of some parts of the source text and inaccurate renditions of individual lexical items in the source text.

Pragmatic errors

According to Pham Thu Quynh Na (2005), pragmatic errors refer to errors which occur when learners produce a grammatically and semantically correct phrase/sentence, but the use of the phrase/sentence is not appropriate for the communicative situation. Examples of pragmatic errors include using technical or informal terms for the translation of a journalistic style, or using culturally inappropriate expressions. In other words, if the register of the source text is not preserved in a certain chunk or item of the translation, that chunk or item is considered a pragmatic error.

E.g. (5) *Awaiting a Pig, But Is It Gold or Fire?*

Student's translation: Ước mong một Bé **Ỉn**, nhưng là **Ỉn** mệnh Kim hay Hỏa?

Possible Translation: Đợi sinh con tuổi **Hợi**, nhưng **Lợn** Vàng hay **Lợn** Lửa?

While translating the title of the article, the student fails when coming across the unfamiliar styles due to being unaware of degrees of formality (informal or formal style), and the usage of vocabulary (informal, colloquial or formal). The informal word "Ỉn" is not suitable for the translation of an article.

- Omissions of some parts of the source text

In the following example, the student fails to comprehend or is unable to interpret part of the text; thus decides to omit that part. This omission has an influence on the meaning of the source text and impedes the comprehension of the readers.

E.g. (6) *I explained that in the West, the reputation of pigs is not quite as stellar as it is in East Asia. Westerners, I said, tend to stereotype pigs as either lazy layabouts or Animal Farm dictators.*

Student's translation: Có thể lý giải rằng, ở phương Tây hình ảnh con lợn không được coi trọng như ở Đông Á. Như tôi đã nói những người phương Tây xem lợn là biểu trưng cho những kẻ lười biếng, vô công rồi nghề hay là những kẻ hống hách.

Possible translation:

Có thể lý giải rằng, ở phương Tây hình ảnh con lợn không được coi trọng như ở Đông Á. Như tôi đã nói những người phương Tây xem lợn là biểu trưng cho những kẻ ăn không ngồi rồi hay đơn giản là loài xuất hiện nhiều nhất ở các trại nuôi gia súc.

In the example, the student fails to render the phrase "Animal Farm dictators"; therefore she/he decides to translate only one part of the phrase, that is "dictators" only, which distorts the meaning of the source text.

3. Pedagogical Implications

The following are some recommendation of the teaching methods that should be applied in a translation class of Vietnamese students.

1) Consolidate students' syntactic knowledge related to translation; especially caution them of the important syntactic differences between English and Vietnamese including nominal structure versus verbal structure and passive versus active.

2) Establish a data bank of idioms and terminology to help students with limited knowledge of social backgrounds and special fields. Remind them of the different meaning a word may have and of different parts of speech that may affect propositional meaning.

3) Enhance extensive reading among students so that their background knowledge can be formed to assist their training ability. Different sources of information like documentaries, songs and articles are recommended for exposing students to a great variety of language use and style.

4) Initiate the discussion work and team work in class so that students will be given more chance to approach and exchange different versions of the source text and can learn from each other.

5) Use error analysis exercises in translation classes. Some wrong translations of the same source text could be distributed to the students for group analysis and discussion.

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