

# Students' Difficulties in Translating English Text at Tadulako University: A Qualitative Study

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## A B S T R A C T

This study explores the difficulties experienced by students in translating English texts at Tadulako University and identifies the factors influencing these difficulties. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method involving fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program who had completed a translation course. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and analysis of students' translation assignments. The findings show that students encounter several major problems in translation, including limited vocabulary mastery, grammatical errors, and difficulty interpreting homonyms. Vocabulary limitation was identified as the most dominant challenge because students often struggled to understand word meanings and determine appropriate equivalents in the target language. In addition, differences in grammatical structures, especially the use of the simple past tense, frequently caused inaccurate sentence construction. Students also faced difficulties in identifying the correct meaning of homonyms based on context. Furthermore, the study reveals that affective factors, such as boredom and low motivation, significantly contribute to students' translation problems. These findings suggest that translation difficulties are influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by students' attitudes toward learning. Therefore, translation teaching should emphasize vocabulary development, contextual understanding, and more engaging instructional strategies to improve students' translation abilities effectively.

**Keywords:** *Translation Difficulties, EFL Students, Vocabulary, Grammar, Homonyms, Qualitative Study*

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## INTRODUCTION

Translation plays an important role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in higher education where students are required to understand academic texts written in English. For students of English education programs, translation is not only a supporting skill but also an essential academic competence that enables them to transfer meaning accurately between languages. In addition to vocabulary knowledge, students must also understand grammar, discourse, and cultural aspects in order to produce appropriate translations. (Hatim & Munday, 2019) state that translation is a complex process involving the relationship between linguistic forms and contextual meaning rather than merely translating words directly.

Nevertheless, many students still experience difficulties in translating English texts into Indonesian. In classroom practice, students often apply word-for-word translation methods without considering the overall context of the text. Consequently, the translations they produce are frequently inaccurate and unnatural. (Chen, 2020) explains that EFL learners commonly encounter problems in conveying the intended meaning because they have limited contextual understanding and lack effective translation strategies. These problems demonstrate that successful translation depends not only on linguistic competence but also on students' ability to interpret meaning contextually.

One of the most prominent difficulties lies in vocabulary mastery. Students often struggle to understand unfamiliar words, particularly those with multiple meanings. As a

result, they tend to select inappropriate equivalents without analyzing contextual usage. (Wang & Wang, 2021) argue that insufficient vocabulary knowledge significantly affects students' ability to achieve semantic equivalence in translation. This limitation leads to misinterpretation and reduces the overall quality of the translated text.

In addition to lexical challenges, grammatical differences between English and Indonesian present further obstacles. English grammatical features such as tense and aspect do not always have direct equivalents in Indonesian. Students frequently experience difficulty in interpreting and translating verb forms, especially in narrative texts that predominantly use the simple past tense. (Mustathirah & Amin, 2023) highlight that grammatical errors are among the most frequent issues found in students' translation output, often resulting in distorted meaning.

Another critical issue involves the interpretation of homonyms. Words that share identical forms but carry different meanings pose a significant challenge for students. Without careful attention to context, students may assign incorrect meanings to such words, leading to inaccurate translations. (Zheng, 2024) emphasizes that the interpretation of homonyms requires strong contextual awareness, as meaning is determined by the surrounding linguistic environment.

Beyond linguistic factors, non-linguistic aspects also influence students' translation performance. Affective factors such as low motivation, lack of engagement, and boredom during learning activities contribute to students' difficulties. (Putra & Rullyanti, 2023) demonstrate that students' attitudes toward learning significantly affect their ability to perform translation tasks effectively. These findings indicate that translation difficulties are shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by students' learning behavior.

Preliminary findings from informal observations and initial interviews conducted with students at Tadulako University reveal consistent patterns of difficulty. Most students report challenges in understanding vocabulary, identifying appropriate grammatical structures, and interpreting contextual meaning. They also admit to relying heavily on machine translation tools, particularly Google Translate, without critically evaluating the output. This reliance reduces their opportunity to develop independent translation skills and limits their analytical engagement with the text.

Although previous studies have addressed translation difficulties among EFL learners, many of them focus on general contexts and do not specifically examine students in English education programs at the university level. This gap is significant because these students are expected to develop not only language proficiency but also pedagogical competence related to translation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the types of difficulties faced by students and the factors influencing those difficulties in the context of Tadulako University. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and context-sensitive translation instruction.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate students' difficulties in translating English texts. The design was selected because it allows the researcher to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth within their natural academic context. Qualitative research is suitable for identifying patterns of difficulty and understanding how and why these difficulties occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University who had taken a translation course. They were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, including their experience in translating English texts and their willingness to participate. This approach ensured that the data were relevant and information-rich.

Data were collected through three main instruments: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore students' translation experiences, challenges, and strategies in detail while maintaining flexibility in questioning (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaire combined Likert-

scale items and open-ended questions to capture both measurable tendencies and descriptive responses regarding students' difficulties. In addition, students' translation outputs were analyzed to identify actual errors related to vocabulary, grammar, and contextual meaning. The use of multiple instruments allowed for data triangulation, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Miles et al., 2014).

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures. The researcher began by transcribing interview data and organizing all collected information systematically. The data were then coded to identify significant patterns and categorized into key themes such as vocabulary limitation, grammatical problems, and contextual misunderstanding. Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively using frequency and percentage to support qualitative interpretation (Sugiyono, 2019). Finally, the findings were interpreted by connecting the emerging themes with relevant theories in translation studies. To ensure validity, the researcher conducted member checking by confirming selected interpretations with participants, as recommended in qualitative research practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings present and discuss the answers to the research questions on the students' difficulties in translating English texts. The researcher elaborated the research findings according to the interviews and questionnaires as follows:

### **What difficulties do the students encounter in translation?**

The researcher found that the students' difficulties derive from linguistic factors such as poor grammar and vocabulary mastery. The students got difficulties in recognizing words that have the same writing but have different meanings (homonyms).

#### *Vocabulary*

Vocabulary is one of the factors causing the students' difficulties in translation. Being unable to recognize the meanings of the words hinders them from translating the texts. When translating the narrative text, the students got difficulties due to the use of regular and irregular verbs. For example, the word 'agreed' by the students is translated as 'keserakahan'. This shows that the students' vocabulary knowledge is poor. Another example like 'a suspicious merchant' are not translated because they do not know the meaning. Result of the interview with one of the students supports the findings.

*SS01: "I have difficulty in translating English narrative texts because my vocabulary is still lacking. I have just heard that makes me confused in translating it, I am also afraid of translating it because it could be later when I translate it, the meaning might be wrong."*

#### *Grammatical*

Another difficulty relates to grammar mastery. Narrative text talks about past events in which forms of activity use simple past tense. The students' ability in the simple past tense is not good. For example, a sentence 'Aladin agreed to do it' is translated into 'Yang disetujui Aladin untuk dilakukan'. Result of the interview conforms this finding as shown below.

*SS01: "Apart from my lack of vocabulary, grammar is also a difficulty for me in translating narrative texts. I have difficulty translating it, because the narrative text uses simple past tense, right? Well, I also find it difficult to translate, there are words that apparently were used in the past, like the word "came" is from the word come, right? I'm having a bit of difficulty with those words. There is also the word "went" which means to "pergi" and I think only the word "go" is what "pergi". And there are many more words that use simple past that I don't understand."*

#### *Homonyms*

Researchers found some difficulties that students experienced in translating English texts, the last difficulty students faced was the presence of words that had the same writing but had different meanings or homonyms. Homonym is a word that has a different meaning relationship but is similar in term of phonology or orthography (writing). If the pronunciation is the same it is called a homophone, but if the spelling is the same then it is called a

homograph. Examples of homonyms are whether homographs or homophone, are more common in English than in Indonesian. To distinguish words that are similar in writing or pronunciation but have different meanings, pay attention to the context of the sentence as a whole, not just focus on the words. Through the context of the sentence as a whole, it will be easy to understand the meaning of the word in question.

The fact that context can determine the specific meaning of a homonym word illustrates the dynamic nature of language. Homonym words are therefore words that have multiple, related meanings. Homonym may be words with identical pronunciations but different spellings and meanings, such as to, too, and two. Or they may be words with both identical spellings but different meanings, such as quail (the bird) and quail (to cringe). The use of homonyms is tied to context. In other words, different contexts have meanings. Thus, the meaning of homonyms is contextual.

This is also supported by researchers who analyzed the students' translated documents, regarding words that are written the same but have different meanings, and it is true, there are words used that are not properly placed, such as the word "wizard" students translate it into "jagoan", even though the word is actually is a "penyihir." Likewise the word "like," students translate it into "menyukai" even though the correct word according to the sentence is "seperti". Then the researcher also found that the word "sneaked" students translated into "pengecut" even though the correct word was "menyelinap". The last, researcher found an error in homonym, namely the word "stole" which the students translated into "syal/selendang" while the correct word for the sentence was "mencuri".

Actually this word is not wrong, but the placement of words that are not in accordance with the context of the existing sentence makes the sentence incorrect or wrong. When translating English texts, students find words that are written the same but when translated have different meanings so that students have difficulty determining which words are suitable to be combined in the sentence. This finding was reinforced by interviews conducted by researchers with students. A clearer explanation of the researcher will provide a series of interviews with students.

*SS01: "Yes, I find it difficult to distinguish between words that have the same spelling but different meanings, because there are several words in the narrative text that I myself have a little difficulty matching which word fits the sentence, for example there is the word "fetch" there are several meanings when translated like "mengambil, menjemput, mendapat", and I don't know what they are anymore. I find it difficult to match the words, and there are also other words that have the same spelling but different meanings, but I've forgotten them all."*

### **What factors do affect students difficulties in translating English text?**

There are two factors causing the difficulties. First, cognitive factors, and second, affective factors including laziness and boredom. Based on the formulation of second problem related to the factors that affecting students' difficulties in translating English texts. Researchers have found results from student interviews and questionair . The following are some of the factors that make it difficult for students to translate English texts.

#### *Laziness*

Learning English is fun for some students, but some others feel lazy for some reason. They were not good at sentence patterns, and this made them lazy and not interested in learning English as shown in the excerpt of the interview below.

*SS01: "What I feel when learning English, sometimes it's fun, sometimes it's boring, I'm usually lazy about learning English because I don't really understand the sentences, and I also lack motivation to learn, plus the teacher who teaches just gives assignments and finishes. So I think my English is just normal because I'm also a lazy person when it comes to learning English."*

#### *Boredom*

The students found English boring because the teacher's method failed in sparking their interest to learn further. The teacher always gave translation assignments to the students and rarely interacted with them as shown in the following excerpt of the interview.

SS02, " I just learned normal English, because from the 10th grade on, the teacher just came in, gave me assignments, and was asked to translate normally, that's all. Then when I was in grade 11 the teacher only came in once every few weeks, so in one semester you can count how many times the teacher came in."

### Discussion of Data Analysis

This study aims to specify the types and the causes of the difficulties produced by the students in Palu class Tadulako University in translating English text. Data analysis shows that there are 3 types of difficulties experienced by students as follows. Difficulties related to not understanding words (vocabulary) are the first priority that students experience in translating English texts. In this study, 11 out of 12 students experienced difficulties in understanding English vocabulary or with a percentage of 91.67%. This is in line with the findings of (Roswati et al., 2024), which state that students with limited Vocabulary mastery tend to have difficulties in translating in transferring meaning during translation. This is one of the difficulties students have in translating narrative texts, where there is a lot of vocabulary that they do not know and have not memorized, which hinders them in carrying out the task of translating narrative texts.

Other previous studies reported that lack of vocabulary mastery was one of the most frequent mistakes students made in translating English texts. One example of an error found in this research was in the word "Palace" where students translated it as "*tempat*", this word was incorrect because it had the wrong meaning. Therefore, the word must mean "*istana*". This shows that students do not master vocabulary well.

Grammar is the second most common mistake students make in translating narrative texts. In several studies carried out in the field of translation, one of the things found was grammatical errors. This is in line with the finding of (Mustathirah & Amin, 2023), stating that when translating English (SL) texts into Indonesia (TL), errors are often found in the translation result. These translation errors mainly lie in grammatical factors. In translating narrative texts, students translate English into Indonesian without paying attention to the grammar used. This is found in the sentence "Aladdin agreed to do." This sentence is translated as "yang disetujui Aladdin untuk dilakukan", even though the correct sentence is "Aladdin setuju untuk melakukannya."

The term homonym is derived from Greek, where *homo* means same and *onoma* means name (Zheng, 2024). This is in line with (Gayratova, 2024), stating that homonymy refers to words that have the same pronunciation or spelling but different meanings. Difficulties related to understanding words that have the same spelling but different meanings (homonym) are the third priority that students experience in translating English texts. In this research, it was found that students had difficulty in translating homonym words in a narrative text, for example the word "wizard" students translated into "*jagoan*", even though the correct word was "*penyihir*". Then there is the word "Like" which is translated as "*menyukai*", even though the correct word according to the context is "*seperti*." The homonym relationship is one of the meaning relationships that are quite complicated in the translation process because it is difficult for a translator to translate the meaning of a word correctly without looking at the context of the sentence as a whole.

Although many studies regarding the difficulties of translating English to Indonesian have been discussed, previous research can only be considered as a first step towards a deeper understanding of the difficulties of translating English narrative texts and explaining the mistakes students make in translating English. Therefore, this research is present to fill the literature gap. The findings of this study provide several implications. First, the mistakes made by students tell the teacher about the student's learning progress as well as weaknesses or problems in learning English, especially the translation part that needs to be corrected by the

teacher. Second, researchers obtained information about students' difficulties or errors in translating English texts

## CONCLUSIONS

Students encounter several difficulties when translating narrative texts, particularly those related to linguistic aspects. One major problem is limited vocabulary mastery, which makes it difficult for students to understand unfamiliar words in English texts. In addition, many students struggle with grammatical structures, especially the use of the simple past tense that is commonly found in narrative texts, causing errors in sentence interpretation and translation. Another challenge involves homonyms, where students find it hard to determine the correct meaning of words that have the same spelling but different meanings depending on the context. Furthermore, this research revealed that students' translation abilities are also influenced by non-linguistic factors such as laziness and boredom, which reduce their motivation and concentration during the translation process.

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