

Student Challenges in Translating Literary Works

Salwaa Ulayya Laily Cholifah¹, Eko Heriyanto², Anjar Setiawan³
^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

DOI:

[10.30595/pssh.v24i.1632](https://doi.org/10.30595/pssh.v24i.1632)

Submitted:

June 14, 2025

Accepted:

July 06, 2025

Published:

July 23, 2025

Keywords:

Translation Strategies, Literary
Translation, Cultural Context

ABSTRACT

Literary translation is a challenging process that requires linguistic skills, cultural sensitivity, and creative interpretation. The distinctive characteristics of literary writings, including figurative language, cultural references, and the emotional profundity of a literary work, maybe diminished throughout the translation process into another language. This study seeks to identify and examine translators' challenges in maintaining meaning across languages in literary texts. The study employed a descriptive quantitative methodology, with 30 professional literary translators as participants. Data were gathered via surveys targeting particular translation challenges associated with idiomatic language, cultural context, and stylistic fidelity. A structured questionnaire comprising closed and scaled items was utilized as the instrument. The results indicate that the predominant challenges faced pertain to sustaining cultural relevance and achieving stylistic similarity. This study finds that good literary translation necessitates a meticulous equilibrium between literal fidelity and creative adaptation to maintain the original work's meaning and emotional resonance.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Corresponding Author:

Salwaa Ulayya Laily Cholifah

Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang

Jl Kedungmundu Raya No. 18, Kedungmundu, Tembalang, Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah 50273

Email: blueberrycheese810@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation plays a crucial role in bridging cultures and making literary works accessible to a global audience. However, translating literature is not a simple process of converting words from one language to another, it involves capturing the essence, emotions, and cultural nuances embedded in the original text. Unlike technical or scientific translation, literary translation requires creativity, deep cultural understanding, and linguistic sensitivity to maintain the artistic and emotional impact of the work. One of the major challenges in literary translation is preserving the author's unique style and voice. Each writer has a distinct way of expressing ideas, using metaphors, idioms, and rhetorical devices that many not have direct equivalents in the target language. Translators must make critical decisions about whether to remain faithful to literal meaning of a text or to adapt it for better comprehension by the target audience. This process often leads to debates on the balance between fidelity and fluency in translation.

Another significant issues is the translation of culturally specific elements, such as historical references, proverbs, humor, and wordplay. What may be easily understood by readers of the original language might lose its significance or even become meaningless in another cultural context. Translators must find creative ways to convey the elements without altering the essence of the work. This article explores the complexities of literary translation, examining various strategies and approaches used to address linguistic and cultural challenges. By

analyzing case studies from different literary works, study aims to highlight the intricate relationship between language, culture, and meaning in the process of translation.

The challenge of untranslatability is another major concern in literary translation. Some words or expressions are so deeply rooted in the cultural or emotional landscape of the source language that they have no direct counterpart in the target language. These “untranslatables” often carry connotations, emotional undertones, or cultural significance that are difficult to replicate. In such cases, translators are often faced with a dilemma of choosing between a literal translation, which may obscure the intended meaning, and a more dynamic approach that may deviate from the original but better captures the spirit and context. For example, translating poetry or religious texts often requires careful negotiation between the sound, rhythm, and semantics of the original and the stylistic expectations of the target language. In addition, the translator must consider the expectations and reading practices of the target audience. Literary traditions, genre conventions, and narrative style differ significantly across cultures. A text that resonates with one audience might appear confusing or inaccessible to another if not carefully adapted. Yet, over-adaptation may lead to a loss of authenticity or the reassurance of important cultural markers. This delicate balancing act requires a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures, as well as a sensitivity to the political, historical, and social dimensions embedded in language.

Technology advancements have also introduced new dynamics into the field of literary translation. While machine translation and translation memory tools can assist with consistency and terminology, they fall short when it comes to interpreting figurative language, cultural references, and emotional nuance. Literary translation remains a profoundly human endeavor, reliant on the translator’s intuition, experience, and creative instincts. This study seeks to delve into these multifaceted challenges by reviewing relevant literature, examining translation theories, and analyzing real-world examples from various literary genres and languages. The research focuses on how translators navigate the tension between fidelity and creativity, how they deal with cultural-bound expressions, and how their choices impact the reception and interpretation of the translated work. The goal is to illuminate the complex processes behind literary translations and to appreciate the translator’s role as both a cultural mediator and creative artist.

In conclusion, literary translations are not merely an act of linguistic transfer but a transformative process that involves reimagining a work within a new cultural and linguistic framework. It is a dynamic interplay between preserving the integrity of the original and adapting it to resonate with a new audience. By exploring the challenges and strategies involved in this process, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the art and ethics of literary translations, and the vital role it plays in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding in translated English.

2. METHOD

The methods section describes the primary techniques employed in literary translation, each with uses a quantitative approach, based on a literature review of academic works by Indonesian researchers on the topic of literary translation. The selected sources primarily focus on challenges faced in translating Indonesian literary texts into English, covering topics such as idiomatic language, cultural adaptation, and stylistic transfer. Articles were chosen based on relevance, publication in reputable journals, and their contribution to current discussion in the field. This approach is also helpful in translating poetry or other stylistically rich prose, where capturing the same imagery or rhythm in a new language requires flexibility.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data collected from respondents reveal several key insights into perceptions and challenges associated with literary translation. The responses analyzed determine dominant trends and interpret underlying implications.

Indicator	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1. Translating literary works requires a deeper cultural understanding.	52.94	23.53	21.57	1.96	0.00
2. Literary translators should act as both artists and cultural messengers.	52.94	15.69	23.53	5.88	1.96
3. Idioms and idiomatic expressions in	35.29	13.73	43.14	5.88	1.96

Indicator	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Indonesian are difficult to translate without losing meaning.					
4. Maintaining the author's distinctive language style and voice is a major challenge.	46.00	18.00	30.00	2.00	4.00
5. The translator should prioritize the target audience's understanding over absolute fidelity to the original.	38.00	24.00	32.00	4.00	2.00
6. The lack of practical exercises in literary translation makes me less confident.	45.10	17.65	29.41	7.84	0.00
7. Limited time often becomes an obstacle in completing literary translations optimally.	49.02	21.57	19.61	7.84	1.96
8. I often struggle to maintain the authenticity of the author's voice and style.	41.18	11.76	33.33	11.76	1.96
9. The main obstacle I face is choosing the right words to reflect the author's original style.	50.98	23.53	23.53	0.00	1.96
10. Challenges in literary translation highlight its role as a bridge between cultures.	58.82	21.57	13.73	1.96	3.92

The results of the study shed light on students' perceptions, challenges, and interests related to literary translation. The data indicates a strong general interest in the field of literary translation, below is a detailed discussion of the key findings:

1 Literary translation as Cultural Mediation

A significant majority of respondents (80.4%) agreed that the challenges faced in literary translation highlights its importance as a bridge between cultures. This underscores students' awareness of the translator's critical role in cross-cultural communication. Students appear to grasp that every translation decision carries the weight of representing one culture to another, particularly in literary texts that often embed deep cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings.

2 Cultural and Linguistic Depth in Translation

A high percentage (76.5%) agreed that literary translation requires deeper cultural insight than other types of texts. This confirms that students recognize how literary translation cannot rely solely on linguistic equivalence. It requires the translator to interpret and sometimes adapt cultural references, emotional tones, and idiomatic expressions to make the work resonate with the target audience without losing its original spirit.

3 Challenges with Style and Language Choices

The issues of maintaining the author's unique voice and style is a recurring theme in literary translation. A total of 74.5% of respondents stated that choosing the right words to preserve the author's style is a major obstacle, while 64% also identified maintaining the author's distinctive language as a challenge. Furthermore, 52.9% admitted that they personally struggled with that issue in their own translations.

4. Practical Constraints: time and confidence

70.6% of students believed that limited time hinders their ability to complete literary translations optimally. This may be due to the labor-intensive nature of literary translations, which requires careful reading, interpreting, researching, and rewording. In connection with this, 62.7% agreed that the lack of practical exercises affects their confidence in performing literary translations tasks.

5. Prioritizing audience understanding vs fidelity

A noteworthy 62% of respondents agreed that translators should prioritize audience understanding over absolute fidelity to the original text. This reflects a modern approach to translation theory, where communicative effectiveness is sometimes seen as more important than literal accuracy especially in literary contexts.

6. Role Identity: Translator as Artist and Messenger

68.6% of students agreed that a literary translator is not just a linguistic expert but also an artist and cultural messenger. This reflects an elevated perception of the translator's role, suggesting that students are aware of the creativity involved in literary translation and the responsibility of conveying meaning across cultural and artistic boundaries.

7. Idiomatic Challenges

While only 49% agreed that idioms in Indonesian are hard to translate into English, this still represents a significant challenge for nearly half of the participants. Idioms are often culture-bound and difficult to express in another language without losing their original nuance or meaning. This indicates a need for teaching idiomatic equivalence, translation of metaphors, and figurative language.

8. Maintain the Authenticity of the Author's Voice

The study found that 41.18% of participants often struggled to maintain the authenticity of the author's voice and style during translation. An additional 33.33% somewhat agreed with this statement, suggesting that over 74% of respondents experienced at least some difficulty in preserving the original tone and stylistic features of the text.

9. Main Obstacle I Face is Choosing the Right Words

This finding is reinforced by responses to the related statement that "the main obstacle I face is choosing the right words to reflect the author's original style," to which 50.98% strongly agreed and 23.53% agreed. Together, over 74% again expressed that lexical choices particularly those impacting the stylistic fidelity of a work — are among the most significant translation difficulties.

10. Challenges in Literary Translation Highlight its Role as a Bridge Between Cultures.

In addition to linguistic style, participants also acknowledged the broader cultural role of literary translation. 58.82% strongly agreed and 21.57% agreed that the challenges in literary translation highlight its role as a bridge between cultures, amounting to a total of over 80% who recognized its intercultural function. Such awareness suggests that students are developing a nuanced understanding of literary translation as a communicative and cultural act, rather than simply a technical process.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has explored the various challenges faced by student translators in rendering literary texts from Indonesian into English. The findings highlight that literary translation requires far more than linguistic accuracy it demands cultural sensitivity, stylistic awareness, and creative problem-solving. A significant majority of students acknowledged that literary translation serves as a bridge between cultures, reinforcing the role of the translator as a cultural mediator.

Students reported particular difficulty in maintaining the author's voice and stylistic features, with lexical choices identified as the most common obstacle. These issues are compounded by time constraints and a lack of practical exercises, which together hinder their confidence and performance in translation tasks. Furthermore, students are beginning to adopt a more communicative approach, emphasizing the importance of reader comprehension over literal fidelity.

The purpose of this research is to investigate tertiary student's difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions from Indonesia into English and their strategy in dealing with said difficulties. Along the way, this research also explores the students' translation quality. The findings of the study from the test showed that, the students have the difficulties mostly in word choice, followed by word form, the use of article, and preposition, the use of dependent clause, modals, sentence structure, and word order, sentence fragment and sentence clarity. the analysis of the students' interviews indicated that the unfamiliarity with the source language text, the lack of understanding of target language grammatical rules, and inability to find a target language equivalent are the main reasons of the student's difficulties.

To deal with these difficulties, the students employed some strategies such as consulting dictionaries, — either online or in book form, translating by paraphrase, and using word-for-word and literal translation. In addition, the participants of the research agree that familiarizing themselves with their own culture, and English

culture by reading more books, and watching Indonesian as well as English series and films. Moreover, being familiar with the adopted strategies may enhance students' abilities to translate more properly.

REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Fraser, C. (1999). Differentiated instruction and implications for literacy instruction. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 15(2), 153–170.
- Gilakjani, A. P. (2016). A review of EFL learners' speaking skill and the strategies for improvement. *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods (MJLTM)*, 6(9), 74–86.
- Gilakjani, A. P. (2017). A review of the literature on the integration of technology into the teaching and learning of English language skills. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(5), 95–106.
- Hassan, X. (2014). The impact of L1 interference on pronunciation in second language acquisition. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(3), 611–617.
- Bahrani, T. (2012). Audiovisual news, cartoons, and films as sources of authentic language input and language proficiency enhancement. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(4), 56–64.
- Pourhosein Gilakjani, A. (2017). The significance of pronunciation in English language teaching. *English Language Teaching*, 10(3), 96–105.
- Elipudin, E., et al. (2019). Improving pronunciation through hybrid method: A combination of ALM and role-play technique. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris*, 7(1), 12–18.
- Latofat, A., & Durdona, M. (n.d.). The problems of translation of idioms and phraseological units. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*.
- Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge