

EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSLATION QUALITY: EVIDENCE FROM A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

¹Thai Cong Dan, ²Thai Phan Bao Han, ³Nguyen Thi Be Ba

¹Senior English Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University
Can Tho City, Vietnam

²English Lecturer Faculty of Social Sciences, Can Tho University of Technology,
Can Tho City, Vietnam

³Lecturer, Department of History-Geography-Tourism,
School of Political Science, Social Sciences & Humanities, Can Tho University,
Can Tho City, Vietnam

Author's email:
tcdan@ctu.edu.vn

*Correspondence email: tcdan@ctu.edu.vn

Abstract. *This study explores the perceptions of translation quality among third-year Vietnamese EFL students after completing a practice translation course. Translation quality is a multidimensional construct influenced by linguistic competence, cultural awareness, cognitive skills, and professional responsibility. While prior research has examined translation quality from the perspective of experts, learner-centered studies highlight the importance of understanding how students themselves conceptualize a good translation. Fifty-nine EFL students, aged 20–21, participated in this study. Although they had limited prior exposure to translation theory (approximately 30 periods), they engaged in practical translation exercises without the use of AI tools. Data were collected using a short open-ended questionnaire, guided by ten translation-related factors, including comprehension of the source text, command of source and target languages, cultural knowledge, analytical skills, and professional responsibility. Thematic analysis revealed that students emphasized the importance of conveying meaning accurately, maintaining naturalness and readability in the target language, considering cultural appropriateness, and applying analytical decision-making. The findings indicate that even with limited theoretical background, students develop reflective awareness of translation quality through practical engagement. These insights have implications for EFL translation pedagogy, suggesting that guided practice combined with reflective prompts can enhance learners' understanding of what constitutes a good translation.*

Keywords: *EFL Students; Perceptions; Practical Translation Course; Translation Quality; Vietnamese University.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale of the Study

Translation quality has long been a central concern in both translation studies and translator training. Today, a “good translation” is no longer defined solely in linguistic terms; it is viewed as the result of a complex process that integrates comprehension, cultural awareness, cognitive decision-making, and professional responsibility (Albir & Alves, 2009; Alwazna, 2013). In EFL contexts, translation courses are particularly important for helping students move beyond literal, word-for-word transfer and develop a more functional, meaning-oriented understanding of translation.

Recent research emphasizes the value of considering translator trainees' perspectives when evaluating translation quality. Rather than relying solely on expert judgment, learner-centered approaches suggest that students' own conceptualizations reflect their developing translation

competence and the effects of instruction (Gonzalez Davies, 2004; Calvo, 2011). Dağgöl's (2018) study, *What Lies Behind Good and Poor Translation from the Perspective of Translator Trainees*, highlights that trainees' views of translation quality are shaped by multiple factors, including linguistic ability, cognitive effort, motivation, and prior training experience.

Despite the importance of learners' perspectives, empirical research on EFL students' perceptions of translation quality remains limited, especially in the Vietnamese context. Although translation is widely taught in Vietnamese universities, little is known about how students conceptualized a good translation after completing formal translation training. Most existing studies focus on translation products rather than students' reflective understanding of translation quality.

To address this gap, the present study investigated third-year Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of translation quality after completing a practice translation course. To guide their reflection, ten factors related to linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and professional aspects of translation were provided as prompts. These factors were intended to facilitate thoughtful responses rather than constrain them.

Before presenting the research aim and questions, it is important to note that this study focused on capturing students' reflective perspectives. The aim was not to evaluate the objective quality of their translations but to understand how practical translation training influenced their awareness of what constitutes a good translation.

1.2 Research Aim

This study aimed to explore third-year Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of translation quality after they completed a practice translation course, with particular focus on how they conceptualized the characteristics of a good translation. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study and provide a focused framework for data collection and analysis.

1.3 Research Questions

Main Question:

- What did third-year Vietnamese EFL students perceive as the characteristics of a good translation after completing a practice translation course?

Sub-question:

- Which linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic factors did students associate with translation quality?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Translation Quality: From Product to Process

Translation quality has traditionally been evaluated in terms of accuracy and faithfulness to the source text. However, contemporary translation studies emphasize that quality is multidimensional and context-dependent (Araghi & Ramezanpoor, 2012). Faithfulness, for instance, is no longer equated with literal translation, but with conveying meaning, intention, and communicative effect (Kukkola, 2002).

Alwazna (2013) argues that translation involves both scientific knowledge and artistic creativity, requiring translators to make informed choices rather than mechanical substitutions. This view supports the idea that good translation reflects sense, naturalness, and appropriateness in the target language, rather than formal equivalence alone.

2.2 Linguistic and Cultural Dimensions of Good Translation

Strong linguistic competence in both the source and target languages is widely regarded as a fundamental requirement for producing a good translation (Danbaba, 2017; Kamil, 2014). Accurate comprehension of the source text enables translators to grasp meaning, nuance, and intent, while proficiency in the target language allows for natural and fluent expression.

In addition to linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness plays a crucial role in translation quality. Abbasi et al. (2012) emphasize that language and culture are inseparable, and that cultural knowledge is essential for avoiding misinterpretation and loss of meaning. Knowing both source and target cultures enables translators to produce translations that are acceptable and meaningful for the target audience (Kocbek, 2005).

2.3 Cognitive and Analytical Aspects of Translation

From a cognitive perspective, translation is understood as a complex mental activity involving analysis, problem-solving, and decision-making. Albir and Alves (2009) describe translation as a cognitive process that includes comprehension, reformulation, and revision. Translators must analyze the source text, consider multiple translation options, and select the most appropriate solution based on context and purpose.

Kashirina (2015) further highlights the importance of critical and creative thinking in translation, arguing that good translation requires originality within constraints. This perspective aligns with the view that a good translation is not a mere copy of the source text, but a carefully constructed target text that fulfills communicative goals.

2.4 Translator Training and the Development of Translation Awareness

Translator training plays a key role in shaping students' understanding of translation quality. Calvo (2011) suggests that translation competence includes linguistic, cultural, strategic, and professional components, all of which need to be developed through systematic instruction. Similarly, Gonzalez Davies (2004) emphasizes reflective learning in the translation classroom, where students are encouraged to think about their translation decisions.

Dağgöl (2019) demonstrates that after translation training, students tend to develop a more comprehensive view of what constitutes good and poor translation. Rather than focusing solely on accuracy, trainees begin to consider factors such as meaning transfer, reader orientation, and responsibility. This finding supports the inclusion of guiding factors in research instruments to help students articulate their perceptions.

2.5 Learner Perceptions and Guided Reflection on Translation Quality

Understanding students' perceptions of translation quality is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of translation instruction. When students are provided with guiding factors—such as language competence, cultural knowledge, analysis, motivation, and use of tools—they are better able to reflect on their learning experience and express informed opinions.

In line with Dağgöl's learner-centered approach, the present study adopts guided reflection through ten translation-related factors to explore how Vietnamese EFL students conceptualize a good translation after completing a practice translation course. Rather than measuring objective quality, the study focuses on students' awareness and understanding of translation quality, offering insights into how training influences their perceptions.

In summary, the literature suggests that good translation is influenced by a range of linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and professional factors. While previous studies have examined these

dimensions theoretically, fewer studies have explored how EFL students themselves perceive translation quality after training, particularly in Vietnam. Building on Dağgöl's framework and using guided factors, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of what makes a good translation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore third-year Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of translation quality. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the study aims to capture students' subjective understanding and reflections on what constitutes a good translation, rather than to measure translation performance or product quality quantitatively. Guided by Dağgöl's (2019) learner-centered perspective, the study focuses on students' own explanations and interpretations following formal translation training.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 59 third-year EFL students enrolled in a practice translation course at a private university in Vietnam. All participants had completed the same course syllabus, which focused on practical translation exercises, discussion of translation strategies, and analysis of source and target texts.

The students had received prior instruction in both English language skills and introductory translation concepts. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes only and would not affect their course grades.

3.3 Instructional Context

The study was conducted at the end of a practice translation course, during which students completed various translation tasks from English into Vietnamese and vice versa. The course emphasized comprehension of the source text, naturalness in the target language, cultural appropriateness, and responsibility in translation.

To ensure the authenticity of students' reflections, the use of AI tools was not permitted during the course or when completing the questionnaire. Students relied on their own knowledge, classroom instruction, and permitted reference tools such as dictionaries.

3.4 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a short open-ended questionnaire consisting of one main question designed to elicit students' perceptions of translation quality.

Main open-ended question:

In your opinion, what makes a translation a good translation? Please explain your ideas based on what you learned in the practice translation course.

To support students in expressing their ideas, ten guiding factors: *comprehension of the source text, Good command of the source language, Good command of the target language, Knowledge of the source culture, Knowledge of the target culture, Analytical and critical thinking ability, Motivation and responsibility as a translator, Ability to produce natural, fluent, and accurate translations, Application of translation strategies and methods and Continuous improvement and use of tools (e.g., dictionaries, reference apps)* related to translation quality were provided as prompts. These factors reflected linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and professional

dimensions of translation and were adapted from translation studies literature and Dağgöl's (2019) framework. Students were informed that they were free to refer to any, all, or none of the factors and could add additional ideas.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in class during the final week of the course. Students completed the questionnaire individually within a fixed time limit. No discussion among students was allowed, and no AI-based tools were used during data collection. All responses were collected anonymously to encourage honest and reflective answers.

3.6 Data Analysis

Students' responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were first read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding. Meaningful units related to translation quality were then identified and coded. The codes were grouped into broader themes corresponding to the guiding factors and any emerging categories from the data. To enhance clarity and transparency, representative excerpts from students' responses were selected to illustrate each theme.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Their participation was voluntary, and they were free to withdraw at any time.

This above information has outlined the qualitative methodology used to explore Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of translation quality. By employing a short open-ended questionnaire with guiding factors, the study seeks to capture students' reflective understanding of what constitutes a good translation after completing a practice translation course.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Findings

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research aim and research question:

What do third-year Vietnamese EFL students perceive as the characteristics of a good translation after completing a practice translation course?

Analysis of the 59 students' open-ended responses revealed that students conceptualize translation quality as a multidimensional construct. Their perceptions extended beyond linguistic accuracy to include cultural awareness, cognitive analysis, professional responsibility, and translator motivation. Although ten guiding factors were provided, students varied in how they interpreted, prioritized, and combined these factors in defining a good translation.

The findings are presented under five major themes: *Linguistic Competence* – includes comprehension of the source text, command of source and target languages, *Cultural Awareness* – includes knowledge of source and target cultures, *Cognitive and Analytical Skills* – includes analytical and critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making in translation, *Professional Responsibility and Motivation* – includes translator motivation, responsibility, and ethical considerations and *Translation Product Quality* – includes naturalness, accuracy, application of strategies, and continuous improvement using tools, which correspond to the linguistic, cultural, cognitive, pragmatic, and professional dimensions discussed in the literature.

4.2 Linguistic Factors in Perceptions of a Good Translation

A dominant theme in students' responses was the importance of linguistic competence. Many students emphasized that a good translation requires clear comprehension of the source text and a strong command of both the source and target languages. Students frequently mentioned that understanding the "real meaning" of the source text was essential to avoid mistranslation.

Several students highlighted that a good translation should be faithful to the source text while remaining natural in the target language. Rather than advocating literal translation, students stressed the need to "reflect the sense of the text" and produce a translation that reads smoothly and naturally for target readers.

This finding suggests that students have developed an awareness of the balance between faithfulness and naturalness, which aligns with Kukkola's (2002) view of faithfulness as meaning-oriented rather than form-bound. It also reflects a shift away from word-for-word translation, indicating the impact of the practice translation course.

4.3 Cultural and World Knowledge Factors

Another prominent theme concerned the role of cultural knowledge in translation quality. Students frequently referred to the importance of knowing both the source and target cultures, noting that cultural misunderstanding could lead to inaccurate or awkward translations.

Some students also mentioned world knowledge as a supporting factor, explaining that background knowledge helps translators understand context, implied meaning, and references beyond the text itself. These responses suggest that students recognize translation as a culturally embedded activity rather than a purely linguistic one.

These perceptions are consistent with Abbasi et al. (2012) and Kocbek (2005), who emphasize that cultural awareness is essential for producing acceptable and meaningful translations. The findings indicate that students associate good translation with cultural appropriateness and reader awareness, addressing the pragmatic dimension of translation quality.

4.4 Cognitive and Analytical Dimensions

Students also emphasized cognitive and analytical skills as key characteristics of a good translation. Many responses mentioned the need to analyze the source text carefully, think critically, and make appropriate translation decisions.

Some students described good translation as an "original" process, explaining that translators should not simply copy sentence structures from the source language but should reorganize ideas to suit the target language. This reflects an understanding of translation as an active problem-solving process.

These findings strongly align with the cognitive view of translation proposed by Albir and Alves (2009), who describe translation as a sequence of comprehension, analysis, and reformulation. Students' emphasis on thinking and analysis suggests that they perceive translation quality as dependent on cognitive effort rather than mechanical transfer.

4.5 Professional Training and Translator Responsibility

Another significant theme related to translator training and professional responsibility. Students frequently acknowledged the role of university training in shaping their understanding of translation quality. Several students stated that learning translation theory and methods helped them make better translation choices.

Responsibility was also mentioned as an important characteristic of good translation. Students associated quality translation with careful work, revision, and accountability to both the source text and the target reader. Some students explicitly stated that a translator should be “serious” and “responsible” about the job.

These perceptions support Calvo’s (2011) view that translation competence includes professional and strategic components, and they echo Dağgöl’s (2019) finding that trainees increasingly associate good translation with responsibility and informed decision-making after training.

4.6 Affective Factors and Use of Tools

In addition to skills and knowledge, students identified affective factors, such as motivation and interest in translation, as contributing to translation quality. Several students suggested that loving the translation job or being motivated helps translators produce better work.

Regarding tools, students mentioned the use of dictionaries and applications as supportive resources. While AI tools were not used in the course, some students acknowledged their potential usefulness if applied responsibly. However, students generally emphasized that tools should support, rather than replace, the translator’s thinking and analysis. These findings highlight students’ growing awareness of ethical and responsible translation practices, aligning with professional standards such as those outlined by FIT Europe (2009).

4.7 Discussion in Relation to the Research Questions

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that third-year Vietnamese EFL students perceive a good translation as the result of interacting linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and professional factors. In response to the research question, students most strongly associated translation quality with accurate comprehension of meaning, natural expression in the target language, cultural appropriateness, and careful analysis.

Addressing the optional sub-question, students clearly recognized linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic factors as essential to translation quality. Their responses indicate a holistic understanding of translation that extends beyond accuracy to include reader orientation, context, and responsibility. Importantly, the use of guiding factors did not limit students’ responses but instead facilitated deeper reflection. This supports Dağgöl’s (2019) argument that guided reflection helps trainee translators articulate more informed and comprehensive views of translation quality.

In general, this section has presented and discussed the findings of the study, revealing that Vietnamese EFL students conceptualize good translation as a multidimensional process rather than a purely linguistic product. The results suggest that practice-oriented translation training, combined with guided reflection, can foster a more sophisticated understanding of translation quality among EFL learners.

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored third-year Vietnamese EFL students’ perceptions of translation quality after completing a practice translation course. Using a short open-ended questionnaire supported by ten guiding factors, the study examined how students conceptualize what constitutes a good translation. The findings indicate that students perceive translation quality as multidimensional, encompassing linguistic accuracy, naturalness, cultural awareness,

cognitive analysis, and professional responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on word-for-word accuracy, students emphasized meaning transfer, reader orientation, and careful decision-making, reflecting an emerging understanding of translation as a purposeful, context-sensitive activity.

Importantly, these perceptions were formed despite students having limited prior practical translation experience. Before this course, participants had completed only a theory-based translation course of approximately 30 periods, which provided foundational knowledge but minimal hands-on practice. The results suggest that even a short practice translation course can significantly enhance students' awareness of translation quality and foster a more holistic understanding of the translator's role.

These findings support Dağgöl's (2019) learner-centered perspective, highlighting that eliciting trainee reflections can provide valuable insights into translation pedagogy and the development of translation competence in EFL contexts.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, participants had limited prior training, which may mean their perceptions reflect an early stage of translation competence rather than fully developed professional awareness. Second, the study relied solely on a short open-ended questionnaire. Although this elicited reflective responses, triangulation with interviews or translation analysis could provide a richer understanding of students' conceptualizations.

Third, the study was conducted at one private university in Vietnam, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or EFL contexts. Finally, although the ten guiding factors helped students articulate their ideas, they may also have influenced how participants framed their responses.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the findings and limitations, several avenues for future research are recommended. First, longitudinal studies could track students over multiple semesters to examine how perceptions of translation quality evolve with increased practical experience and exposure to different text types. Second, comparative studies across institutions and regions would help determine whether students' perceptions differ in other EFL contexts.

Third, future studies could use multiple data sources, such as interviews, focus groups, or analysis of translation products, to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between perception and performance. Fourth, research could compare students with theory-based training versus practical exercises to evaluate the specific contribution of hands-on translation experience. Finally, studies could examine the effect of technology and digital tools, including dictionaries, apps, or AI-assisted platforms, on students' decision-making and conceptualizations of translation quality.

5.4 Closing Remarks

All in all, the study demonstrates that guided reflection through a short practice translation course can enhance Vietnamese EFL students' understanding of what constitutes a good translation. While further research is needed to generalize these findings, the results offer practical implications for translation pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of integrating practical exercises, reflective activities, and cultural awareness into translation training.

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About the Authors

Dr. Thai Cong Dan is a senior lecturer of English at School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam, and also serves as a project manager. He earned a PhD in Educational Administration (English Program) from Naresuan University, Thailand (2010), and an MA in Cultural Aspects and Literature from University of Notre Dame du Lac, USA (1999). His research interests include TEFL/TESOL, intercultural communication, English and American cultures, English education at secondary and tertiary levels, curriculum design, assessment, English program management, and ESP for Tourism, Hospitality, Political Education, and Food Technology. His work also focuses on professional development and educational administration. Email: tcdan@ctu.edu.vn | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9566-8128>

Miss Thai Phan Bao Han is presently an English lecturer at Can Tho University of Technology (CTUT). She has earned her MA in TESOL since 2022 from Can Tho University, Vietnam. Her main research interests are TEF/TESOL teaching and learning at any levels, linguistics, ESP for Technology and Engineering, Intercultural Communication (ICC), testing design and professional development. She can be contacted at tpbhan@ctu.edu.vn.

Dr. Nguyen Thi Be Ba is a Senior Lecturer in Department of History–Geography–Tourism, School of Political Science, Social Sciences and Humanities, Can Tho University, Vietnam. Her academic expertise focuses on community-based tourism, sustainable tourism, and food security in the Mekong Delta. She has led several significant research projects on tourism development and cultural preservation, and has authored over 70 scholarly publications, including books and articles in international journals. Her work contributes to tourism management, cultural heritage conservation, regional food security, and higher education curriculum development. She can be reached at ntbba@ctu.edu.vn.

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