Lost in Translation: Exploring Major Challenges Encountered by Tunisian EFL Learners Translating between English and Arabic

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Abstract

It is widely believed that translation is not only a process of transferring a source text into a target text, but also a complicated challenge of conveying to the readers of the target text the meaning of a source text, in which a translator should always take into account and pay attention to the message equivalence of both texts. Such complexity originates from the fact that a translator must, on the one hand, fully understand the content of the source material in order to provide accurate and acceptable translations and, on the other hand, pay full attention to all parts of language, such as meaning, syntax, style, and sounds, which are equally important in the translation process, as failure to observe any of them will result in meaning distortion, as strictly noted by Ghazala (2008). Working on a group of students' responses to three translation tasks and on classroom observation of these students while engaged in translation practices for a whole term, the following research paper using both qualitative and quantitative analyses sets out to explore major challenges encountered by Tunisian EFL learners when engaged in the process of translating between English and Arabic, focusing on the main sources of those challenges, and attempting to offer some possible solutions to alleviate the impact of such challenges on learners' performance related to translation practices.

Key words: challenges, distortion, equivalence, meaning, translation process

1. Introduction

In general terms, translation has been defined in a countless number of ways, which clearly reveals the complexity of coming up with a unified definition of this academic discipline. Wiratno (2003) says that translation is a process of transferring a message from SL into TL. SL or Source Language is the original language that is translated, while TL or Target Language is the final language that is used to express the result of translation. Mayoral (2001) contends that there can exist as many definitions as there are authors who have written on the subject. In his views, translation can be considered as a multifaceted term including at least three major elements: the general subject field, the product (the text that has been translated), and the process (the act of actually carrying out a translation). From a linguistic point of view, as stated by Catford (1965), translation is ''an operation performed on languages, a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another''. Newmark looks at translation as ''the transfer of meaning of a text which may be a word or a book from one language to another for a new readership''.

The importance of meaning between the original text and the target text when translating was initially highlighted by Nida & Taber (1969). They insisted that a translator should always reproduce the closest natural equivalent in the target language in terms of not only meaning but also style. Nida & Taber's theory is confirmed by Larson (1984), who states that translation means transferring the meaning of the source language into the receptor language. Newmark (1988) adds a further component towards the transferring meaning in a translation when he considers translation as rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text.

According to Akan et al. (2019), translation is considered as a means for learning English language that affects the learning process within the classroom which has a competent involvement in all fields of knowledge and plays an important role in the world's communication and information. This echoes Duff`s (1989) belief that translation`s purpose or function is communication. In his words: "As a process of communication, translation functions as the medium across the linguistic and cultural barriers in conveying the message written in a foreign language." (Duff, 1989). For Nida (1964), "Translation means communication because it has three essential elements to form a process of communication. The three essential 10 elements are source, message, and receptor, and these elements must be found in all communication activities".

In Tunisia, the field of translation has always been a major concern for scholars and researchers working within different disciplines. The field has been approached from more than one perspective, covering a large number of areas such as literature, linguistics, language learning, and cultural aspects. Sghaier & Zrigui (2020), for example, conducted research whose goal was to present a machine translation system capable of translating Tunisian Dialect (TD) text to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) using a rule-based approach. In their views, the translation process starts by giving TD input text, where the data are passed through three big parts, which are respectively morphological analysis and disambiguation, lexical and structural transfer, and morphological generation and spelling corrections to get the translated text in MSA.

Boustani (2018) approached the translation issue in Tunisia in relation to literature and the question of language with special attention paid to what he calls word learnability. Boustani contends that the success or failure of translation as a vocabulary learning strategy depends on two main factors: the learners' vocabulary knowledge and the extent of word-learnability. As such, Word learnability is also a very important measure since it shows the degree of ease or difficulty with which the students learn new words using this strategy of translation.

Following the remarkable increase in the use of Tunisian dialect in social media today and in the absence of a TD translator who will facilitate comprehension and communication for non-Tunisian users, Torjmen & Haddar (2021) conducted research with the aim of creating a translation system of Tunisian dialect (TD) into Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). In this context, the researchers carried out an in-depth linguistic study in order to better choose the translation rules that are applicable to the TD sentences. In their words, this study guarantees the best quality to obtain MSA sentences, proposing a method based on a linguistic approach. In addition, the method consists of the elaboration of a set of dictionaries and the construction of inflectional, morphological, and syntactic grammars using finite-state transducers.

Looking at the translation issue from a different stance, Lahiani (2025) approached this field in connection with what she terms the cultural turn in order to offer a translation for nonverbal communications. In her view, the field of translation studies has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, marked by a paradigm shift known as the 'cultural turn,' which moved the focus of translation from purely linguistic concerns to encompass cultural, political, and ideological dimensions. This broadening of scope has emphasized how translations are no longer mere linguistic transpositions but are deeply embedded within cultural contexts.

Having said that, and upon reflecting on a personal experience as a translation instructor for more than a decade, the following study will approach translation from a practical stance as performed by a category of learners who have never come across such an activity before. All that they used to do in their secondary education in terms of meaning transfer of a source text into a target one was limited to a subject studied for only one year called 'Arabization', in which they translated between Arabic and French only. Therefore, the study addresses the challenges this category of learners, who are now English majors, encounter when engaged in translating between Arabic and English. The study aims to explore how Tunisian EFL learners respond to diverse complexities encountered in the translation process in order to convey meaning in an almost satisfying manner.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Translation Difficulties

As it is not a simple task to come up with a clear definition of translation, the process of translating source language texts into target language texts is equally a tough mission as Bhawuk (2017) affirms. The difficulty, according to Bhawuk (2017), originates from the fact that any language exclusively symbolizes the world of its users in terms of their own and specific traditions, characteristics, and culture. Therefore, differences in languages together with cultural distinctions make translation a challenging task.

Following Watt & Kruger (2022), translation is a complex process as meaning is created through decoding the underlying text on the grammatical, structural, literary, and socio-cultural levels. This "meaning" must then be encoded into the target language using the target language's linguistic, literary, and cultural traditions. As a matter of fact, translating a text requires translators to completely understand the content of the source material in order to provide accurate and acceptable translations through observing a set of constituent elements such as semantics, syntax, stylistic elements such as figurative language, metaphors, idioms, and the genres of texts, socio-cultural, and historical ecology.

2.2. Possible Translation Problems

Because translation is seen as a crucial activity in any field, it is imperative to accurately transfer the meaning of the source text and provide the closest sense in the target text. Nonetheless, some

translation troubles might arise at any time, as Brown (2000) once wrote that "Mistakes, misjudgments, miscalculations, and error comprise an integral element of learning in obtaining knowledge". In other words, throughout the translation process, a translator may come across some difficulties or challenges which may be due to a misunderstanding or failure to use the proper translation strategy, particularly when the translator resorts to word-for-word translation, which is not always effective in transferring the source text meaning accurately, as affirmed by Arjomandi & Kafipour (2016).

2.2.1. Lexical Problems

According to Owji (2013), a lexical problem arises because a word in a given language may not usually be swapped with a word in another language when referring to the same thing or concept. Owji (2013) classifies lexical problems that translators encounter in the process of translation into five main categories: straight/ denotative meaning, lexical meaning, metaphorical expression, and semantic voids.

2.2.2. Syntactic Problems

This category of translation problems may result from the fact that no two languages have the same structural systems. Hence, language structures vary in terms of word classes, grammatical relations, word order, style, and pragmatic aspects, as Miremadi (1991) points out.

2.2.3. External Vs Internal Problems

Ajunwa (2015) pointed out two major categories of translation problems –external and internal problems. As for the first category, problems initially originate from the nature of the source text itself in terms of its length, complexity, or when it is highly scientific and technical. The problems are also due to the use of polysemantic terms with ambiguous meanings or to a lack of terminology in the target language (Ajinwa, 2015). The same researcher also states that another source of external problems encountered by translators is text hybridity.

Internal problems that translators might come across in the process of translating can include the following: a limited amount of vocabulary/terminology acquired by translators, a lack of background knowledge, a lack of grammar knowledge, spelling mistakes, mistakes of style as well as tight deadlines (Ajinwa, 2015). A lack of vocabulary in the target language as an external problem is closely related to a limited range of topics and a lack of vocabulary of novice translators as an internal or self-inflicted problem (Ajinwa, 2015). Hence, it is important for a translator to know the topic or the field and relate it to the context. A translator should not pay all his/her attention to the significance of separate words, translating them exactly, word-for-word, forgetting that those words are particles of a bound text (Ajinwa, 2015).

2.2.4. Cultural Problems

According to Delisle (1988) "what truly distinguishes translation is that it takes place in the context of the relations between two cultures, two worlds of thought and perception" (p. 74). In different terms, it is through translation that communication between cultures is achieved and people are introduced to different languages and thoughts. Thus, there is always a cultural value in translation, as Newmark (1981) argues. Consequently, Knowledge of the target culture is crucial for successful translation (Newmark, 1981; Delisle, 1988). In the same vein, Akbari (2013) contends that a good translator should be familiar with the culture, customs, and social settings of the source and target language speakers. Successful translation also requires familiarity with different styles of speaking and social norms of both languages. This awareness can improve the quality of the translations to a great extent. Yet, in Nida's views, when translating writings between cultures that

are not closely linked, the translator can encounter some difficulties arising from unfamiliar word forms, odd syntax, unexpected word combinations, and unfamiliar subjects.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm

This research uses both quantitative and qualitative analyses that aim to explore the different types of difficulties Tunisian EFL learners encounter in translating between English and Arabic in order to unveil the major reasons behind these difficulties and propose possible solutions to alleviate the impact of such problems on their performance when engaged in translation practices.

3.2. Background and Rationale

In the Tunisian context, like most EFL contexts, one of the goals EFL learners are expected to attain by the end of their university career is the ability to use English to communicate effectively and successfully to a desired level. Principal among the aspects of this communicative skill is the mastery learners acquire in translating from English into Arabic and vice versa. Since its foundation, the department of English at the Higher Institute of Languages in Gabes has offered translation courses to the undergraduate level as obligatory courses, either within the outgoing BA regime or within the current LMD regime, even though a remarkable decrease has been noticed over the years in the importance of this course when compared to other skills and subjects introduced to English majors.

3.3. Statement of the Problem

Despite full awareness that translation is a means for English language learning and that it has a significant role in improving students' awareness of their native language as well as the foreign language, the researcher's experience as a translation instructor for almost two decades has clearly shown that the output of such a course has always been less than satisfactory. Hand in hand with this awareness, the researcher always holds that making mistakes and going through challenges in the translation process is inevitable. Hence, EFL students are always likely to find difficulties in gaining mastery of translation skills. Indeed, translating Arabic texts into English and vice versa requires a distinguished bilingual proficiency. This is why different students face diverse types of difficulties that can originate from a variety of sources.

3.4. Research Questions

The current research paper addresses and attempts to answer the following questions:
1. What are the challenges most frequently encountered by English majors in the process of translation between English and Arabic?
2. What are the main strategies employed by English students to deal with translation tasks?
3. What are the leading causes behind translation challenges?

3.5. Significance of the Study

Reflecting on a personal experience as a translation instructor for almost two decades, the researcher has reached the conclusion that even after graduation, the majority of English majors at ISLG fail to transfer this skill to their future real-life practices. Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to identify the most specific difficulties encountered by Tunisian EFL learners when translating from English into Arabic and vice versa. It does so by observing translation practices of a cohort of EFL majors studying translation. The second goal of this study is to attempt to discover the underlying causes of such difficulties and to suggest possible solutions to help students improve their performance and become more qualified in this field of research.

3.6. Participants in the Study

The participants in this study are a group of 35 EFL learners who belong to the English department at ISLG. They are first-year English students, the only group of English majors who are offered translation courses once per week. They were observed for two successive sessions dealing with two different translation exercises during ordinary translation classes. All participants were chosen randomly from two different groups of first-year English students in the first term of the academic year 2024/2025.

3.7 Data Collection Technique

The data of this research paper were gathered from the students' answers to three different translation tasks, which were assigned to them. The tasks include two texts to be translated into Arabic, and a collection of separate expressions and sentences in both Arabic and English. The researcher's main objective was to observe his students while engaged in translation practices individually in order to have a more objective stance on the nature of their translation problems and to explore all types of difficulties most frequently encountered by such learners.

3.8. Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from the three translation tasks will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the most common types of errors made by students and the strategies they employed. The results will be presented in tables to provide a clear picture of the most frequently encountered challenges by the participants in the process of translation.

4. Results

4.1 Lexical Difficulties

Reading through the participants' answers to both translation tasks assigned to them has revealed a serious problem encountered by students of English in the process of translating between English and Arabic. Indeed, while such learners are expected to have a great deal of lexical knowledge, the area in which students make plenty of errors is the lexicon. This clearly indicates an insufficient lexical knowledge, which makes vocabulary errors one of the most serious difficulties faced by students in their translation tasks. Based on these facts, the data from the text shows that 20 out of 35 students (57, 14%) failed to find the accurate equivalents in the target language for the following lexical items: *(ruling – enclave - relentlessly - artillery snipers – shelling)*.

The data also reveal that the difficulty lies not only in translating military terms, but also in offering accurate translation for compound words. This is very evident in the case of *(stopped short)* as 22 out of 35 students (62,85%) completely failed to give an equivalent in the target language. In addition, students encounter a clear difficulty related to the inappropriate use of English terms or the misunderstanding of these terms, which affects their translation results later on. As such, the term *(case)* was used in an inappropriate way by more than 30 students (85, 71%), not in the sense of "شكوى", which is the accurate equivalent, but they translated it word for word as "حالة", which is likely to distort the real meaning of the text.

The second text assigned to students illustrates this problem of inappropriate use of English words facing students of English while translating English texts into Arabic. When I read through their answers, I came across the following examples: *"Suing"* was translated by more than 28 students (80%) not in the sense of making a legal claim against someone, but it was confused with the verb "to see" and as a result it was given a completely distorted translation "رأى" which obviously betrays the real meaning. Still another example that illustrates this problem well in this second text is the failure to use the following English terms appropriately: *(daughter-in-law –*

damages - their son and daughter-in-law – compensation). What is striking in the participants' answers is their total confusion when translating *son and daughter-in-law in* a way that indicates a serious problem in understanding compound nouns and, therefore, a total failure to translate them accurately.

The third translation task assigned to the participants gives more examples of the lexical difficulties faced by students of English when translating between English and Arabic. The examination of their replies indicates that 19 out of 35 students (54, 28%) resort to the easiest way out when asked to derive adjectives from a set of verbs that they can come across in different translation exercises: *safe to drink = drinkable, can be eaten = eatable, can be understood = understandable, can be touched = touchable...* Data also reveal that only eight students out of 35 (22, 85%) succeeded in providing correct forms for all the proposed verbs, whereas the other 8 students (22, 85%) mixed up answers.

Moreover, finding the exact words that fit the meaning in the target language is a visible problem that marked the participants' answers to the exercises they were tackling. Indeed, a large number of students, 31 out of 35 (88, 57%), failed to find the exact words in the Arabic language for the following expressions: *stopped short =* توقف قصيرا*, made him capable =* جعلاه قادرا *, on her own dime, under the wire, it is word on the street.* Thus, when translating such expressions, students either resort to word-for-word translation, as shown in the Arabic equivalents given earlier, or they leave blank spaces.

Translating words with no equivalents has been reported, based on the analysis of the data, to be a difficult situation that students of English face in their translation work. This is most obvious with respect to the Arabic into English case, where students fail to find the exact equivalents for many lexical items in the ST. As a result, they either resort to word-for-word translation or skip them, creating a blank in the new version as shown in the following examples: *"مصطلح السلطة الرابعة"*, *"اتجار المهربين"*, *"ومسكتا"*, and *"و عند الله"*.

Having a close look at how students dealt with these lexical items showed that 32 of them (91, 42%) resorted to word-for-word translation, while 3 of them (8, 58%) skipped them and made no effort to come up with their equivalents. The difficulty of translating words with no equivalents is more evident when students limit their translation of a set of words that have almost the same meaning to only one single word, as illustrated in the following example: where all *"الأطفال والأحداث"*, *"زمن الكوارث والأزمات"*, *"يعي ضرورته، ويقدر أهميته"*, *مفيدا، ومسليا، ومسكتا"* participants (100%) gave only one equivalent to the words they think they share the same meaning, while differences are obvious though very slight. The following table summarizes major difficulties regarding the use of lexicons

Table 1: *Difficulties Related to Lexical Knowledge*

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Failure to find accurate equivalents	20	57, 14%
Difficulty in translating compound words	22	62, 85%
Failure to use English terms appropriately	30	85, 71%
Difficulty in finding exact words in the TL	31	88; 57%
Translating words with no equivalents	32	92, 41%
Skipping words with no translation	03	8, 58%
Giving only one meaning among many	35	100%

4.2 Grammar Difficulties

The analysis of the participants' answers to the three exercises equally reveals another kind of difficulty faced by EFL learners in their translation endeavors. This difficulty relates

to the knowledge, use, and practice of grammar. Reading through the different answers unveils that the most common and frequent problem encountered by the participants in this respect relates to a failure to come up with an acceptable and accurate translation of a set of prepositions. In concrete terms, *marry off, over its war on the Gaza Strip, check up on, you left me on read, cut to, get off my back, she went off on him*, are clear examples showing how difficult to find an appropriate equivalent for certain prepositions and such difficulty is more obvious in cases a phrase or an expression includes more than one preposition as the case of the last example.

By and large, this difficulty originates from the fact that prepositions get different meanings in different contexts and this is exactly what explains how 28 out 35 (80%) totally failed to find the best suitable translation of those prepositions cited earlier, while seven students (20%) either left void blanks or gave inappropriate translations that showed misunderstanding of the contexts in which prepositions were deployed.

Additionally, a visible problem related to the knowledge and use of grammar appears when students cannot appropriately use the English tenses when translating, especially when a text is a mixture of more than one tense. Some specific tenses actually seem to be problematic for students while translating, specifically the present perfect and the past perfect ones. Accordingly, 26 out of 35 of the participants (74,28%)almost did not find the exact translation of the present continuous tense in the first sentence of the first task: *A couple in* <u>*India*</u> *are suing their son and daughter-in-law for not giving them grandchildren after six years of marriage.* They only gave one possible translation, which echoes the simple present tense translation يقاضيان with no focus on the fact that the present continuous refers to an action that is actually taking place. Meanwhile, 5students out of 35 (14, 28%) did not pay attention to the tense and translated it in Arabic in a way that reveals that the action took place in the past: **"رفع زوجان هنديان شكوى"** which clearly distorts the original meaning of the text.

In close connection to the problem of finding an exact translation of the present continuous, one also faces a serious difficulty while translating the present perfect and past perfect tenses. 27 students out of 35 (77, 14%) never cared about giving an exact translation of: *has delivered*, *has ordered, have been killed, have flooded,* but simply translated them using purely simple past equivalents.

In the same context, students still face another problem in relation to grammar knowledge, use, and practice while translating. Namely, the study notes that the difference in the structures in both languages makes it hard to translate well. While a sentence in Arabic can start with a noun or a verb, English sentences do not always abide by this rule, which is very likely to cause serious problems when translating. This is very obvious in the following examples: *a couple in* <u>*India*</u> *are suing, the couple claim they spent about, They raised him, educated him, made him capable, made him a pilot – which was expensive, said the couple's legal representative, Arvind Srivastava, on Monday, Thousands fleeing fighting in Khan Younis arrive in overcrowded Rafah, where winter storms have flooded displacement camps.*

What is clear in the students' answers is a difficulty in deciding when to start the Arabic translation with a noun or with a verb, and, in both cases, they make errors in attributing accurate verb conjugation according to how they start their translations. As such, 31 students out of 35 (88,57%) chose to keep the same structure of the English text, which means if a sentence starts with a subject, they translate it in Arabic starting with a noun. Yet, only 4 out of 35 (11,42%) made slight changes, though they shared the same difficulty, namely, minding the case.

Scrolling down the participants' answers to the three translation task, also, unveiled another difficulty encountered by students of English in their translation endeavors. One of the difficulties is finding the exact equivalent for sentences in the passive voice, especially when the verb is used with other tenses than the simple present or the simple past. Students, just to give a few examples, struggled with translating the following examples: ***At least 183 people have been killed and 377 wounded throughout the enclave in 24 hours, relentlessly targeted by Israeli artillery shelling.*** Though the verbs are used with the present perfect tense, I noticed that 30 out of 35 students (85, 71%) opted for the simplest answer, which translates into the simple past without giving any other detail to differentiate between the usages of the present perfect and simple past tenses. This affects the quality of the translation product.

It is difficult to break down Arabic sentences in order to make them short in English; this is another challenge encountered by the participants while translating into English. It is even harder to make links between sentences and to decide on using the active or the passive voice, the reported or the direct speech, and how to appropriately use the expressions of contrast or addition, and expressions like 'either' or 'neither'. Based on these facts, the data reveal that 25 out of 35 participants failed to find short sentences in English for the source extracts assigned to them and, thus, they tended to translate word-for-word without any effort to paraphrase or use literal translation. 30 participants clearly faced a challenge in using active and passive voices properly. Similarly, 32 participants had serious problems when using links like: on the one hand, on the other hand, especially, not only but also... in addition to a serious problem of using appropriate tenses (confusing simple past with past perfect). The following table summarizes some grammar-related difficulties.

Table 2: *Difficulties Related to Grammar Knowledge*

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Difficulty in translating prepositions	28	80%
Leaving prepositions without translation	7	20%
Confusing the present with the past tense	26	74,28%
Failure to translate the present perfect tense	27	77, 14%
Differences in the structures of both languages	31	88, 57%
Difficulty in dealing with passive voice	31	88, 57%
Difficulty in breaking down Arabic sentences	25	71, 42%
Difficulty using links and conjunctions properly	32	92, 41%

4.3 Lack of Background Knowledge

Based on a thorough analysis of the participants' answers to the three translation tasks at hand, another difficulty facing first-year English students has been documented. It is their lack of background knowledge of the source text. In other words, students seem to lack not only a necessary level of linguistic knowledge but also a necessary level of general knowledge that enables them to tackle translation exercises effectively. In this context, a high percentage of participants were unable to translate ***Indian rupees*** correctly, which implies that they have no idea or knowledge of the Indian currency. Similarly, this lack of breadth of general knowledge was obvious in the second task, where no less than 18 participants found difficulty in understanding the general context of the extract (the relationship between the ICJ, South Africa, Gaza, Israel, genocide, ceasefire, displacement camps...). This had a clear impact on the quality of the final product, manifested in other kinds of difficulties, like putting or linking ideas together.

This difficulty in having knowledge of the general background of the source material was again encountered by the same participants within a different context (Translation Exam). Although the material at hand was an extract talking about a national event that had taken place one day before

they had their exam, a large number of them not only failed to translate accurately, but also showed little or poor knowledge of the general context of the exam material. What is striking is that a high percentage of students lack this necessary level of background knowledge, though they constantly use the internet and different social media platforms to find resources. As a matter of fact, the quality of their translation will be significantly impacted by this double-faceted lack (linguistic proficiency and poor background knowledge).

4.4 Difficulties with Idiomatic Expressions

A careful analysis of the participants' answers led the researcher to conclude that translating idiomatic expressions has been a common difficulty facing first-year students of English in their translation practices. Working on idioms was a primary challenge, not because of insufficient lexical knowledge or inadequate grammar use and practice, but simply because of their use of figurative or symbolic meanings. In other words, having a necessary level of linguistic proficiency or acquiring sufficient grammar knowledge would never be enough for a translator to find out the meaning of the idiom whose meaning does not often comply with the literal meaning of the words that constitute it. Therefore, a translator always needs to decipher the intended meaning and not to focus on the surface-level of isolated words.

Translating idiomatic expressions is classified within the field of cultural translation. This entails that idioms are often deeply rooted in the culture of the source language, marking specific and unique historical, social, or regional references that do not necessarily exist in the target language, as Baker (2018) contends. In the view of Jabak (2019), "idioms do not derive their overall meaning from the meaning of the words that make them." An idiomatic expression, then, often consists of a set of words whose individual meanings can never help understand the real meaning of the idiom. This is why a translator needs to understand the context and the figurative meaning of the idiom to be able to convey a direct and appropriate equivalent in the target language.

Keeping in mind these facts about idiomatic expressions and particularly the fact that idioms are purely culture-bound and more specifically that the participants in this study lack total familiarity with the culture and the language from which idioms originate, it would not be surprising that such participants would find it problematic to guess the real meaning of the idioms at hand. In concrete terms, the third translation task assigned to first-year students included at least 10 idioms. However, the results show that translating those idioms in the target language was an obvious challenge for all participants (35 out of 35) without a single exception. While 16 participants resorted to word-for-word translation of the idioms, never caring too much about the intended meaning behind them, a minority of them (5 out of 35) did attempt to come up with roughly similar idiomatic expressions that convey the same meaning in the target language. The results also indicate that while seven students attempted to paraphrase some idioms, the other students left this section of the task and focused only on other sentences they considered easier to deal with. The table below illustrates some of these difficulties.

Table 3: *Problems with Idioms*

Frequency	Frequency	Percentage
Failure to translate idioms in the TL	35	100%
Resorting to word-for-word translation	16	45, 71%
Trying to find a similar idiom in the TL	5	14, 28%
Resorting to a paraphrase	7	20%
Leaving idioms with no translation	7	20%

Elaborating on the results provided in the table above, a common practice among students of English, when it comes to translating idiomatic expressions, reveals itself. It is to either try to find in the target language an idiom that captures the meaning of the original one, use word-for-word translation, paraphrase the original expression, or skip the idioms without translation. Besides, it is equally obvious that opting for any solution is surely challenging and would never necessarily ensure that the translation will be accurate, credible, and acceptable. In other words, translating idioms based on those common practices will always be associated with a risk of losing brevity and metaphorical richness of the original expressions, as Zarei & Rahimi (2020) spelled out.

Starting from this analysis of the participants' performance regarding idiomatic expressions translation and from the research's observations during subsequent translation sessions, it can be stated that the major difficulty first-year students of English face in translating idioms is essentially due to two factors. First, there is a visible lack of knowledge and awareness of this category of culture-bound and context-dependent combinations of words. Second, there is a lack of familiarity with the source language and culture from which idioms are constructed. Furthermore, what complicates the task of choosing an appropriate translation for idioms is not only their reliance on symbolic and figurative meaning which dictates on students translators to do their best to decipher the intended meaning instead of focusing on the surface-level meaning of individual words, but, also, a remarkable lack of linguistic proficiency and pragmatic knowledge and repertoire characterizing many if not most of first year students of English which blocks them from fully grasping the social, cultural and historical references of the idioms and consequently hindering them providing appropriate equivalents in the target language.

5. Discussion

Back to the research questions addressed by this paper and considering the above illustrations of the participants' performance, the researche4 cay can explicitly notice that first-year English students at ISLG struggle to attain a satisfactory level when engaged in translating between English and Arabic. EFL learners in the Tunisian context seem to face difficulties of various categories: insufficient lexical knowledge, poor or inadequate knowledge and practice of grammar, little background knowledge of the material they are supposed to deal with, and a lack of familiarity with the source language and culture. All this stops them from accurately translating idiomatic expressions, for example.

Working on both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data enabled the researcher to categorize those translation difficulties into specific patterns, as shown in the three tables that illustrate each type of difficulty and highlight the most problematic challenges for each category. In their struggle to overcome these difficulties, first-year English students tend to try out a set of practices, like word-for-word translation, as the most frequently deployed technique. Literal translation is also another technique deployed by students of English, but it is less common than the first technique. In other cases, students tend to try out paraphrasing, but due to a number of reasons, like poor linguistic proficiency and limited semantic mastery, this technique is not quite common among students/translators.

Following those facts about the participants' performance during translation sessions (tutorials and exams), the researcher can attribute those findings to a set of factors that contribute in different ways to an unsatisfactory level of achievement among first-year English students. Principal among these factors is the lack of practice and training on the part of EFL learners who are offered translation courses for only two terms out of six terms that constitute their academic career at the license phase. Only students of the first year have translation courses, compared to the BA regime when students of English used to have such courses for at least 3 years of their university studies.

Second, the LMD system, with its specific requirements with respect to assessment, negatively impacts students' performance in different subjects. This is because examination within this regime tends to have priority over academic learning, which clearly deprives learners of sufficient opportunities to fully practice what they acquire in class, not only for translation but also regarding many other subjects.

Marginalizing some subjects that constitute key components of EFL learners' acquisitions in terms of communicative skills they are meant to master by the end of their university career, like Oral skills, has had a visible impact on students' results in translation practices. Marginalizing such subjects as oral skills considerably deprives learners of plenty of opportunities to enrich their linguistic proficiency, improve their mastery of grammar rules and use, and raise their familiarity with the linguistic system and culture of both cultures (source and target). Those major challenges that closely arise from the requirements of the LMD system point to the dire need for urgent reforms of the whole regime in a way that enables them to create a balance between learning and assessment to achieve the main goals of the whole teaching process.

The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the participants' reactions to the diverse difficulties they encountered. The learners seemed to score better at the English into Arabic translation activities than the other way, which is in line with Boustani's (2018) affirmations. Besides, the study shares some similarities with Lahiani's (2025) research, which highlights the difficulty and complexity of translating culture-specific items between Arabic and English for Tunisian learners. Ther esearchers' students' responses to a number of these items included in the translation exercises confirm this finding.

The findings of the present study strongly confirm that Tunisian EFL learners experience considerable lexical and grammatical challenges when translating between English and Arabic, a pattern similarly reported in several recent studies. For instance, Alghamdi (2020), Alzahrani (2021), and Abdeljawad (2021) found that insufficient vocabulary depth and misuse of lexical equivalents were the most frequent errors among Arab EFL translators, closely mirroring the dominance of lexical errors observed in the current investigation

These studies, like the present one, also highlighted learners' tendency to rely heavily on word-for-word translation strategies, which often resulted in distorted meanings. Likewise, Kadhim and Mohammed's (2022) analysis of Iraqi EFL students revealed parallel issues in translating prepositions, tense forms, and compound nouns—areas in which the Tunisian participants in this study also demonstrated marked difficulty. Similarly, recent findings by Boudabous (2022) and Cherif (2023) confirm that learners across different Arab contexts display inadequate mastery of grammatical structures when translating into English, reinforcing the conclusion that grammatical deficiencies remain a persistent regional challenge. However, unlike studies conducted in contexts where learners receive extensive translation training, such as in Iran and Turkey (example Mahmoudi & Shukri, 2020), the present study shows that limited exposure to translation instruction exacerbates these linguistic weaknesses, suggesting that structural limitations within the LMD system significantly intensify learners' translation problems.

In addition to linguistic challenges, this study's findings also converge with more recent research emphasizing the cultural and pragmatic barriers that complicate translation between English and Arabic. The difficulty participants faced in translating idiomatic expressions aligns with the findings of Zarei & Rahimi (2020), Alharbi (2021), and Hasan (2022), all of whom documented that idioms are among the most problematic elements for EFL learners due to their culture-bound and figurative nature. This supports the argument, also presented by Lahiani (2025), that insufficient cultural familiarity significantly limits learners' ability to comprehend and reproduce

figurative meaning—an issue clearly reflected in the 100% failure rate among participants when translating idioms

Furthermore, the observed lack of background knowledge echoes the conclusions of Torabi and Behrooz (2021), who showed that inadequate contextual knowledge prevents learners from constructing coherent and accurate translations, especially in texts with political or cultural content. Comparing these findings with machine-translation-oriented studies such as Sghaier % Zrigui (2020) and Torjmen & Haddar (2021), the present study reveals a human-translator-specific limitation: while MT systems struggle primarily with structural and morphological ambiguities, novice human translators struggle more fundamentally with knowledge gaps and insufficient pragmatic competence. Overall, the convergence of the present and previous studies suggests that lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic translation challenges are consistent across EFL contexts, yet the severity of these difficulties among Tunisian learners appears uniquely tied to reduced instructional time and curricular constraints—calling for urgent pedagogical reform.

6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the major challenges that block Tunisian EFL learners from performing well when engaged in translating between English and Arabic. There were statistically significant findings on the most frequent areas of difficulties and complexities, which led to low achievements either during ordinary class sessions or during assessments.

The three translation tasks assigned to the researcher first-year students, together with the researchers' observations of their performance during translation sessions over two terms, helped me investigate the major challenges EFL learners in the Tunisian context may come across in the translation process between English and Arabic. Such challenges can be categorized into a set of patterns that combine lexical difficulties with grammatical, cultural, semantic, and pragmatic difficulties. As a matter of fact, this research has provided an insight into the major problems students of English are facing within a system that clearly robs them of ample opportunities for intense training and practice in a number of subjects that ideally make up the cornerstone of communicative skills mastery, like oral skills and translation. Being able to identify those difficulties, as in the case of the translation module and being, also, aware of their impact on learners' achievements and discussing them openly and carefully, seems to be the first and most important step on the way to avoid those problems and to solve them even partially, or to at least minimize their effect on learners' performance.

Unveiling the origins of these challenges and their immediate effects would be of greater significance when followed by a number of specific recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers as well. Principal among these recommendations is revisiting the position of the Translation Module within the current LMD system in terms of the time allocated to teaching sessions and to assessment as well. It has become quite obvious that exposing Tunisian EFL learners to a weekly session of translation for one single year would never be enough to practice multiple text samples and train learners on diverse activities, while students within the BA regime or those of the first promotion of the LMD system used to study translation between two and three years, if not four years. Second, following a meticulous revision of the position of translation within the current educational system, translation should be treated as a pedagogical tool that complements existing approaches to foreign language learning/teaching and helps learners to develop their fluency in the target language.

As such, it would be compulsory to revisit English students' stances on translation as a marginalized subject. In other words, a lack of interest in the subject, manifested in a huge rate of absenteeism, has always been a leading factor in learners' low achievement. Besides, the fact that

students are assessed only once per term is likely to negatively affect the image of translation in their eyes.

Additionally, based on my observations, it would be urgent to reconsider seriously the position of other subjects closely tied to the translation module. In this regard, oral skills or oral expression are to be given their real value with respect to teaching hours and modes of assessment so that students enjoy as many opportunities as possible to develop their vocabulary and learn more and more lexis, which is crucial in translation activities. A real and solid coordination is mandatory in this context between teachers in charge of oral skills instruction and those responsible for translation courses. Coordination can go beyond this specific circle of instructors to include others (literature and culture studies).

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