



Cambodian EFL Undergraduate Students' Challenges in Translating English Words: How to Deal with and Suggestions

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Abstract

Learning a new language requires effort and attention. No matter how most-studied language in the world, learners are still encounter some difficulties dealing with any skills or aspects of the language. Using the skills to produce the outcome of language might not be as easy as it is thought including translating meaning from one language to another. The challenges of EFL learners in translating words, phrases and sentences pose the questions to discover in the current study. This research aims to investigate the challenges encountered by Cambodian EFL learners in translating and how they deal with those struggles with some useful suggestions. The qualitative method was employed followed by the narrative technique to analyze the data from the interviews. The results found that they have problems with word choice, grammar, and misunderstanding of idioms, and slang words. In addition, they all share some strategies such as reading more related sources to improve vocabulary size and it will foster writing for translation. Moreover, the participants would suggest using dictionaries that provide the most appropriate definition with explanations of words used in contexts and using online websites for further aid. As the study results reveal, most of the participants encountered vocabulary in contexts and grammar as the major problems. The research was conducted using the qualitative with limited time allowed. The future study should consider mixed-method study for gathering both statistical data and the interview in order to enrich the discussion of the study.

Keywords: Cambodian, Challenges, English words, Translating

Introduction

Learning a language requires effort and attention to understand the meaning and words used in order to improve both receptive and productive skills effectively. Learners may find the meanings of words, phrases, or even sentences in their second language difficult to understand, which leads to translation needs. When we think of translation techniques, there are numerous types of it seeing as learners tend to implement them in various situations based on what works better for them. Sriwantaneeyakul (2018); Titford (1983) assert that translation seems to be a sensible way for second language learners which teachers can implement as an exercise to improve their students' competence and confidence in using their L2 accurately.

Using any technique of translation can help learners to figure out the best meaning in context and enhance their understanding competence in various skills such as comparing, contrasting, or analyzing. Asiyaban and Bagheri (2012) concur by mentioning in their study that applying translation techniques for helping second language learners can be seen as an extension and alternative implementation. The researchers reveal that translating the source language into the target language



fosters learners to enhance their capability more than just understanding the meaning of words themselves. The study of a hundred and seventy English students upholds the theory of using translation. The participants reveal some advantages such as promoting their confidence and feeling of security in learning also practicing English as a second language. The researchers mentioned in the study that translation is considered the basic approach to learning since nothing can help them except their mother tongue (Karimian & Talebinezad, 2013).

Translation can happen everywhere and in the classroom is no exception (Kupske, 2015). It has existed in second language acquisition (SLA) for ages. Colina (2002) asserts in the research that translation is implemented to bypass misunderstanding created by diverse of learners' perceptions. The teachers can apply the translation to ensure that everyone in the class can comprehend either the source or the target language. Meanwhile, the students tend to develop their proficiency by using this strategy. Kupske (2015) claims that it is known as a practical pedagogical tool for learners to employ in both mother tongue and second language learning progress. Since English is considered as a foreign language in some countries and a second language in others, learners might have various perspectives and techniques toward translation. The recent study shows that many undergraduate students use Google Translate (GT) for translating words, grammar and spelling. The highest number of uses was for translating vocabulary (68.07%) followed by phrases (20.17%) then sentences only 5.88%. Although GT cannot be utilized for multi functions, it is still needed for checking words for essay writing (Chandra & Yuyun, 2018). On the other hand, L2 learners use translation to improve their reading capability as well as maintaining the comprehension equivalence of source and target language. For instance, translation can foster learners to improve integration and reduce anxiety while practicing language (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012). Normally, readers would encounter some difficulties while reading texts in their target language. Abdul-Hamid and Samuel (2012) state that readers found general English words, complex general English sentences and long and complex scientific English sentences tricky for them to understand. The authors would recommend some useful strategies to deal with; however, this can cause the probability of using translation programs to help them out.

Although translation is said to be advantageous, another research study of eight undergraduate students found that google translate cannot work accurately in translating idioms, and long phrases but they still utilize it for checking words for their essay writing. Moreover, the two respondents among all states that they use least of it as the lecturers at university forbade (Chandra & Yuyun, 2018). In addition, if we look at the translation conducted by the Thai EFL students (Sriwantaneyakul, 2018), the results illustrate that learners encountered some difficulties and produced some errors. The low language comprehension would lead to unsuitable word-choice in translation and also semantic category as well as the pragmatic aspect. For instance, the meaning of output was cryptic and confused. The author also claims that the EFL students who got well-trained in translating and have



higher critical reading skill would not see it as a big deal and get better score than those who have low skills. On the contrary, Siregar (2018) argued that reading is treated as the skill for vocabulary enrichment only while listening and speaking play significant roles. Moreover, the basic knowledge that cannot look over is grammar which is said to compose the accurate sentences of translated texts.

In the Cambodian context, there are numerous research study recently based on the actual educational context. The study discussed the challenges and opportunities during the virus pandemic (Hong & Sol, 2021). The author asserts Corona crisis created the connection between technology and education. Educators and the stakeholders started to explore the online platforms for teaching and learning throughout the period of time. Moreover, COVID-19 also offered great challenges especially for private educational institutions facing bankruptcy and the quality of education declines. This was the time when the blended-learning has been discussed and implemented to progress schooling despite the barrier of virus. The author also mentions that digital era will need to work and build on it toward achievements. Besides, Yeourng (2021) suggests the gallery walk technique, a technique which students walk around the class and ask various questions to their classmates, to enhance EFL speaking skills. Yeourng believes that teachers should be well-prepared with the materials and keep encouraging learners to speak. However, there is very few research studies discussing about translation techniques and the strategies to deal with challenges encountered by Cambodian EFL learners. Therefore, this research attempts to examine the Cambodian EFL undergraduate students' challenges in translating English and the strategies to deal with.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the greatest challenges Cambodian EFL undergraduate students encounter in translating English?
- What are the techniques they would suggest to deal with it?

Research Methodology

The study applied the qualitative method using the semi-structured interview approach to gather the data for the research. Since the study tends to explore the experiences of Cambodian EFL learners in translation, the qualitative method is believed to be the most suitable method for conducting the study (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). The participants were randomly selected 10 Cambodian EFL undergraduate students who have experienced using English in teaching and learning for at least five years up to 15 years, and gender was not consider in selecting the participants. According to Hammarberg et al. (2016) small size of the participants in the qualitative study is normal, yet large size of respondents does not illustrate greater results or findings. The respondents gave their consent for conducting the data collection and related information to the research topic.



The open-ended questions were designed for conducting the semi-structured interview and gathering data from the participants. By conducting the semi-structured interview, it helps interviewer to manage the questions what to ask and not go too far from the topic. The interviews were conducted online due to the distance between participants and interviewer. The respondents were informed and asked for consent before giving the interview then the interview conducted online via Messenger Video Chat. Next, the data was transferred into scripts for the data analysis.

The collected data was converted from spoken to written texts. The data was divided into two main themes regarding the research questions. Finding relevant to each theme was scripted and interpreted using the thematic analysis as Turner (2010) suggested. Specific respondents' identity was not revealed, but labelling is used instead. For instance, P1 means participant number 1.

Findings and Discussion,

Findings

The data was transferred from the interview to written discourse. Among the 10 undergraduates EFL students, there are six female and four male participants who took English as their major at university. Initial surprising result shows that there are only four respondents used to join the translation courses or program before.

Come to the response of the participants related to the first research question, they all encounter difficulties in translation from the source to the target language. Each of them reveals that it is tricky to choose the most appropriate words to use in particular context as some words carry more than one meaning and are confusing when they are in different contexts. For instance, the word in Khmer [mean] which could be translated into English as [has/have], [there is/ there are], [rich] and [exist], states participant number 1 as well as the 6th participant. He states that he found English words in contexts are such difficult thing to deal with. In addition, many assert that grammar and sentence structure hold them back from fluent translate of the source into the target language. P8 believes that some aspects of sentence structure such as adjective order is also an obstacle and others also find idioms, and slang words as problem to deal with while translating. The result was shown that even though learners have learned English for many years, translation competence is still insufficient.

While translation is considered as the challenge for Cambodian EFL learners, all the participants except P2 and P3 believe that using online translate applications such as Google Translate and Grammarly can them out. However, a few responses argue that those kinds of tools are not really useful for translation all the time. It would work in conveying the meaning of words but not sentences, idioms or paragraph. For instance, P3 states that “Apps don’t help that much, I learn from movies and reading books.”, and P5 states that “I use Google translate and Grammarly just for sometimes.”. Similarly, P4 and P10 reveals that “To deal with that, I used translating applications, dictionary, and



learned more through watching professional speaker who spoke in TED talk and other speaking events.”

As some techniques shown above, meanwhile, P2 believes that reading newspapers (also agrees P7) and using dictionaries (P4 and P10) can improve basis knowledge of how words being used in contexts. “For instance, I read the newspaper and check dictionary to find out the synonym of the words.” states the participant number 2.

In addition, watching TED Talk also helps while P6 has other technique in translation such as acquiring new vocabulary from online apps and reading some pieces of writing related to the topic. The participants also report some suggestions for EFL learners. The highest recommended technique is to read more books and newspapers also learn new more vocabulary, phrases and grammar while using dictionaries is acknowledged by some other participants. Watching the movies and native speech are counted and only two respondents (P6 and P7) suggest that the educational institutions should open for the translation course for EFL learners and they should attend newspapers translation courses.

Discussion

The study attempts to discover the challenges encountered by the EFL learners in Cambodian contexts regarding translation from the source language (Khmer) to the target language (English). Numerous challenges found during the interview and data collecting process. As mentioned above that some Cambodian EFL learners encounter great difficulties such as words choice problems, grammar in use (sentence structure). Besides, the minority of the challenges can be seen as the idioms, and slang words. This could probably be resulted from the low capacity of language learning progress which could be describe as ineffective learning progress. As the participants provide information about their English learning background, they all have learned English as a foreign language for over 5 years at least and some other up to over 10 years. Moreover, they seemed to emphasize that semantic and pragmatic problems are the most challenging for them in translation. Sriwantaneyakul (2018) found the similarity in the study that the participants also face the words choice challenge during the translating task. Since one word in the source language would carry multiple meaning, it confuses learners whenever they have to choose appropriate word in the target language. In addition, the previous research shows that without writing and grammar fundamental aid knowledge (Siregar, 2018). The author inferred that without these skill and competency, the EFL learners might experience the translation difficulties because the they play significant role in conveying the meaning of written discourse from one language into another and ensure it maintain the meaning and reach the target. As the respondents found it hard to deal with vocabulary, idioms and slangs words, the consequence of the research reveals that reading would be employed for vocabulary improvement. It may foster learners to acquire some more additional words and even phrases.



Using online websites such as Google translate, Grammarly and other unmentioned online machine translations as assisting tools are utilized by the respondents and it is said to help translating single words more effectively than phrases, or sentences. It can be seen as free online websites serve limited options for EFL learners not only for translation but also other functions like plagiarism checkers. Although we can rely on the internet to check it out, we need to use it sensibly since it is just a machine. Abdulaal (2022) mentioned in the research study that the EFL learners should be aware of the errors the machine translation (MT) makes although it can carry the meaning of single word or phrases and sentences in written discourse. The author asserts that after using the MT, it requires users' ability to recheck and revise. Another research found 91.9% of whole population in the study use the online machine translation (OMT) for checking single words and the percentage of user checking each feature such as phrases, sentences, paragraph and long texts declines respectively.

The result from the interviews also show that other respondents favor reading newspapers and books to improve their basic knowledge for translation, while some raise about is dictionaries utilization. The previous study concurs that pleasure reading could develop writing skills and reading comprehension. While reading brings new vocabulary, and even sentence structure, it helps readers to comprehend better and faster (Attiyat, 2019). Besides, using dictionaries would be seen as traditional way of learning words if learners just looking for the meaning of words. The participants also state learning how to use words in contexts is very important.

Conclusion and Suggestion

After examine the challenges and the techniques to cope with, Cambodian EFL learners are found to have limitation of receptive skills including many aspects in language use. As the suggestion, learners should read more to improve vocabulary and overcome translation difficulties. As mentioned in the previous study, reading does help to acquire unconsciously about words, grammatical structure, comprehend the texts better and rapidly. However, using the OMT to assist while conveying the meaning of discourse would be recommended but users have to post-edit after that.

The answers from respondents would highly recommend Cambodian EFL learners to create reading habit for both extensive and intensive reading, look for most appropriate English dictionary to use. Last but not least, attending the translation course like newspaper translation course or any program provide for EFL learners for enhancing translation skills. Furthermore, the educational institutions should consider translation course and integrate in the study program or extra course for EFL learners. Moreover, it could path the way of Cambodian EFL learners to find themselves with the right skills and future career.

Through the findings and discussion, the study aims to expose the challenges of translation encountered by the Cambodian EFL learners which could be the notion for consideration regarding



the competency and quality of skills in use. This refers the duration of studying English as a foreign language, and the outcomes of it are not equivalent. From this study to Cambodian English teachers and learners, acquiring any aspects of the language especially English is significant because it requires almost all sub-skills and major skills in use. The further research would be highly suggested to conduct any aspect related to the aspect of Cambodian EFL learners with the translation with other possible and most suitable method of study.

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