

The Role of Cultural Knowledge in Translation among ESL Malaysian University Students

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Abstract

Translation plays an important role in English language learning among university students. The act of translating from one language to another is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a complex cultural transition that demands the transfer of ideas that are deeply rooted in the source culture's context. This process requires the student translators to preserve the cultural integrity of terms while also recognizing the challenge of conveying the nuance of the source text. However, student translators often struggle to effectively transfer cultural knowledge, which hinders effective communication of the source text's original meaning. This study, therefore, aims to identify the types of knowledge problems faced by Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) university students when translating culturally rich text. and to explore the effects of their cultural knowledge on their translation skills. To achieve this, the study adopts Olk' (2003) framework to identify knowledge problems faced by student translators. Employing an observational approach, the study closely examines the 'think-aloud' process as participants engage in translation tasks, followed by in-depth interviews to delve into their cognitive strategies and cultural knowledge. Notably, this study addresses a largely under-researched area of how ESL learners in Malaysian universities apply their cultural knowledge in translation tasks. The findings have the potential to refine translation teaching methods, bolster students' cultural fluency, and guide educational policy-making. Furthermore, it sets the stage for subsequent research in translation, marking a significant contribution to translation studies in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Translation, Culture, Intercultural Communication, ESL, Translation Approach

Introduction

The significance of culture in translation is indisputable, as the process involves not only a transition between languages but also between distinct cultures. According to Sotvoldiyevna and Jamolidinovich (2022), when transitioning from one language to another for a document, book, or film, it entails more than mere word translation—it involves the translation of ideas. These ideas are tied to a particular culture, shaped by the mindset of a distinct community. A translator needs to maintain the cultural essence of a term and acknowledge the limitation that not every intricate detail of the concept can be fully integrated.

Newmark (1998, p. 94) describes culture as the distinctive manner of living and its manifestations that are specific to a community utilizing a specific language for communication. Culture can manifest in various ways, encompassing vocabulary and sentence structure, as well as beliefs and societal norms within a specific culture. Hence, the translator must determine the level of emphasis placed on specific cultural elements and the degree to which translating them into the target language is needed or advisable. For ESL students who are learning translation, having the awareness of culture is crucial especially when creating translations that align with the cultural context and are readily comprehensible for the target audience.

Translating cultural-specific meanings between two languages cannot be successfully achieved without a considerable level of cultural knowledge and often poses difficulties to the translator (Venuti, 1998; Nord, 1994). Jumharia and Rusni (2018) stated that in most cases, university students tend to believe that having a good vocabulary and grammatical skills will help them to generate satisfactory translations. However, the reality is far more intricate. Effective text translation demands additional abilities to accurately convey the intended message in the target language while preserving the essence of the original text. A literal word-for-word approach, often characteristic of inexperienced translators, typically fails to achieve meaningful equivalence and can confuse the target reader. Such an approach to translation doesn't yield meaningful equivalence, potentially leading readers to confusion when attempting to extract information from the translated outcome. Guerra (2012) added that, beyond the students' linguistic expertise, they need to equip themselves with essential knowledge of both source language and target language. Occasionally, a text laden with cultural nuances might suffer a loss of meaning during translation because some terms are so deeply rooted in the source culture that they have no direct equivalent in the target language or culture.

This challenge in handling cultural elements in translation is exacerbated by differences in translators' awareness of their knowledge gaps. Olk (2003) highlights that translators may either recognize and address their lack of cultural knowledge, misinterpret cultural references without realizing their mistakes, or face no significant difficulties. For ESL learners, their awareness can influence the effectiveness of their translations, making cultural knowledge a critical component of translation competence. Without having the required cultural awareness, translations will turn out to be literal and losing the intended meaning of the source text.

The existing literature has established the crucial role of cultural knowledge in translation and has explored various strategies translators use to manage cultural differences (e.g., Tenaijy &

Al-Batineh, 2024; Youssef & Albarakati, 2023). Furthermore, studies have also shown that knowledge gaps, particularly among student translators, often lead to misinterpretations, inaccurate translations, and ineffective problem-solving strategies (Olk, 2003; Olalla-Soler, 2018). However, while these studies highlight the consequences of such gaps, there remains limited research on the specific types of knowledge problems that student translators encounter during the translation process itself. In particular, little attention has been given to how English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in the Malaysian university context navigate these challenges. Thus, the present study seeks to identify the types of knowledge problems that Malaysian university ESL students face when translating, as well as to look at how cultural knowledge affects these students' translation skills.

Research Objectives

- 1) To identify the types of cultural knowledge problems faced by Malaysian ESL university students when translating culturally rich text.
- 2) To explore the contextual occurrences of the types of cultural knowledge problems faced by Malaysian ESL university students when translating culturally rich text.

Literature Review

Language, Culture, and Translation

The inseparable relationship between language, culture, and translation has been highlighted by Abbasi et al. (2012), who found that translation is an inherently cross-cultural act and not a merely linguistic one. The function of translation is thus reflected in its capability for facilitating cross-cultural communication and the reduction of cultural disparities. Abbasi et al. further added that this connection is shown through the metaphor of a bride connecting different languages. However, the efficacy of this bride is not predicated solely on linguistic equivalence but on the successful transfer of ideas, a belief reflected in Sotvoldiyevna and Jamolidinovich's (2022) assertion that the process of translation involves the transfer of cultural thought processes.

This belief places significant responsibility on the translator, who must function as a bicultural mediator. Zhang (2018) affirmed that this mediatory role necessitates expertise in both the source and target language in addition to knowledge of the two different cultures and familiarity with the socio-cultural context. Only through this comprehensive understanding can the translator effectively convey the precise essence of the original content. This requirement extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency. Abbasi et al. (2012) found that effective translators must be both bilingual and bicultural, a belief reflected in the task of ensuring that the translated material is not only an accurate conveyance of the source text but also culturally suitable for the target audience.

This leads to one of the major challenges involved in translating cultural texts, which is translating culture-bound terms, phrases, and concepts that do not have direct equivalents in the target language (Venuti, 1998; Nord, 1994). This difficulty is particularly evident in the translation of idioms, metaphors, and other culturally unique phrases. A translator who lacks this cultural understanding may resort to literal translation when an equivalent cannot be found, which Lau et al. (2022) found to often result in a distorted or misleading translation. This belief is reflected in Newmark's (1988) assertion that literal translation may not always be the best option, as cultural connotations can be misconstrued during the translation

process. For successful translation, Shiryayeva and Badea (2014) thus highlighted the necessity of balancing cultural components of both the source and target texts. Ultimately, the ability to understand multiple cultures and apply this understanding is what allows a translator to provide a translation that is both accurate and effective.

Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items

The tension between linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness has often been conceptualized through the dichotomy of domestication and foreignization (Venuti, 1998). The selection of either approach is not arbitrary, reflecting instead the translator's underlying philosophy that shapes the representation of the source culture for the target audience.

Domesticating strategies are those that prioritize the experience of the target reader by minimizing the foreignness of the text. To achieve this, translators may employ universalisation, a technique that replaces culturally specific terms with more general or familiar equivalents (Lau et al., 2022). While this strategy may enhance readability, it often results in cultural dilution, whereby the unique flavor and specific connotations of the source item are lost (Tenaiju & Al-Batineh, 2024). In more extreme cases, translators might resort to deletion, which involves the complete removal of a cultural reference deemed too obscure or peripheral to avoid confusing the reader (Lau et al., 2022). These choices thus reflect a decision to favor communicative clarity over cultural fidelity.

In contrast, foreignization strategies are those in which the foreignness of the source text is deliberately retained, thus requiring the reader to adapt. The most common technique is preservation or transference, which involves maintenance of original names and cultural references within the translation. This strategy was found to be particularly effective for preserving cultural authenticity, especially when dealing with proper names, food, or other terms that are central to the source culture's identity (Ikawati & Cirebon, 2022; Tenaiju & Al-Batineh, 2024). The retention of the original term thus functions as an assertion of the source culture's value and an invitation for the reader into a foreign world.

Often, however, translators operate within the space between these two dichotomies, employing hybrid strategies for the achievement of both clarity and authenticity. Explication, which involves the use of additions like glossaries and footnotes, allows a translator to preserve a foreign term while providing the necessary context for the target audience to understand it (Ikawati & Cirebon, 2022; Youssef & Albarakati, 2023). This approach is frequently realized through couplets, a method Mamoon et al. (2023) found to be particularly common in tourism materials where both authenticity and comprehension are essential, and whereby two procedures such as transference and addition are combined for a single cultural item. This nuanced negotiation was also highlighted by Youssef and Albarakati (2023) in the handling of complex elements like metaphors, whereby translators must decide whether to retain, adapt, or demetaphorize the original figure of speech for the maintenance of its stylistic and conceptual impact. Ultimately, the selection of any strategy is a context-dependent decision that reveals the translator's priorities. However, the ability to make an effective choice is entirely dependent on the depth of their own cultural knowledge.

Critical Role of Cultural Knowledge in Translation

The choice of translation strategy is not merely a technical decision but is instead fundamentally shaped by the translator's cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge plays a pivotal role in the enhancement of translation skills, aiding in the understanding of the source text's contexts and nuances, which is crucial for accuracy (Dalib et al., 2019). The cultural knowledge allows translators to make informed decisions, grasp the meaning behind cultural references like metaphors, and produce translations that align with the intended meaning of the original text (Guerra, 2012; Youssef & Albarakati, 2023). Conversely, insufficient cultural knowledge can pose substantial challenges, leading to flawed processes and results.

Effects on Translation Process and Quality

The influence of a translator's cultural knowledge is directly reflected in both the process and the quality of their work. For instance, a link between a translator's expertise and their problem-solving efficiency was demonstrated in a study by Olalla-Soler (2018) who found that professional translators tended to rely on their well-developed internal cultural knowledge, which led to more direct and efficient choices. Novices, in contrast, often showed less confidence and engaged in more extensive, and frequently less effective, information-seeking behaviors. This suggests that the development of cultural competence leads to a more streamlined cognitive workflow for the translator.

The application of cultural knowledge is also determined by the context and medium of translation. In the case of subtitling, the multimodal nature of film provides a visual channel that complements the textual one, a factor Shiryeava and Badea (2014) noted allows translators to opt for strategies like omission or generalization if a cultural item is visible on screen. The audience's ability to infer meaning from the image thus allows for this strategic flexibility. Consequently, this interplay between text and image results in a different set of strategic considerations than in purely written translation.

The interaction between text and context is also observed in informal translation environments, such as fan communities. Cruz et al.'s (2019) study showed how fan-generated "paratexts", including annotated translations and explanatory notes, function as tools for cultural mediation, aiding audiences in the interpretation of not only linguistic information but also the culturally specific visual and performative codes embedded in media. By providing this additional layer of context, these informal translations facilitate a deeper transcultural intelligibility for foreign cultural products.

Knowledge Gaps and Challenges among University Students

Although experienced professionals and dedicated fan communities are observed to employ sophisticated strategies in managing cultural transfer, a significant body of literature indicates that university students within translation programs frequently struggle due to critical deficiencies in cultural knowledge. Research consistently suggests that these students often possess only a superficial understanding of cultural contexts, a factor which may impede their ability to effectively navigate cultural references in the translation process. A central issue appears to be the prevalent misconception that mere linguistic proficiency is sufficient. Indeed, Jumharia and Rusni (2018) posited that, in many instances, university students tend to believe that strong lexical and grammatical command will facilitate the generation of satisfactory translations. This viewpoint consequently leads them to underestimate the

significance of cultural competence in professional settings, often resulting in an over-reliance on literalism (Sun, 2021; Mudheher et al., 2023).

These knowledge gaps may therefore contribute to ineffective problem-solving processes and, consequently, to flawed translation outcomes. Guerra (2012) observed that students experienced difficulty in applying consistent translation strategies when handling culturally specific content, often resorting to adaptation, borrowing, or explanatory footnotes without a clear rationale. This lack of a coherent strategy is frequently compounded by inefficient information-seeking behaviors. Students have been noted to rely excessively on external resources, a practice which does not always facilitate more appropriate solutions, perhaps owing to a lack of confidence in their own cultural knowledge (Olalla-Soler, 2018). Ultimately, it is suggested that such comprehension difficulties and incorrect hypotheses concerning meaning result in translations of only modest quality, a situation which underscores the critical importance of robust cultural knowledge in the field of translation (Olk, 2003; Olalla-Soler, 2018).

It is suggested that such student deficiencies may be a reflection of systemic gaps within higher education. Despite possessing strong linguistic skills, it has been observed that many students continue to experience difficulties in cross-cultural communication, ostensibly due to insufficient cultural education. For instance, Zhang (2019) and Sun (2021) mentioned that language programs frequently focus on linguistic accuracy while placing less emphasis on structured cultural training. This observation is significant, considering that a study by Fryer et al. (2019) discovered that cultural exposure alone was insufficient for the development of cultural intelligence, emphasizing the necessity for structured pedagogical interventions to cultivate meaningful cultural awareness. Consequently, students have been noted to employ their own reactive strategies, utilizing translation tools, body language, and simplified speech to bridge cultural gaps (Dalib et al., 2019). While this phenomenon may demonstrate adaptability, it could also indicate a lack of formal institutional support. Therefore, the literature collectively suggests that cultural competence should be regarded as an integral component of translation education, requiring structured training, creativity-based learning approaches, and the development of critical information literacy skills (Sadriani & Shahnarazi, 2023; Olalla-Soler, 2018).

Effects on Translation Process and Quality

The influence of cultural knowledge can be observed across various translation contexts. Olalla-Soler (2018) noted that as translators gain experience, they shift from relying on external resources towards utilizing their internal cultural knowledge, a practice which may facilitate more confident and efficient translation choices. Indeed, several studies indicate that translators who possess a robust understanding of cultural nuances are more likely to make informed decisions and produce translations that align with the intended meaning of the source text (Olalla-Soler, 2018; Guerra, 2012). Conversely, insufficient cultural awareness is frequently associated with misinterpretations or inappropriate translation choices. For instance, Olk (2003) discovered that German students translating English texts often experienced difficulties with culture-bound references, a situation which resulted in inaccurate translations that failed to reflect the source text's meaning. Similarly, Mamoon et al. (2023) observed that when translators overlook cultural context, they risk distorting idiomatic expressions, which could render them incomprehensible to the target audience.

Additionally, Olalla-Soler (2018) also mentioned that novice translators tend to rely excessively on external resources, perhaps owing to a lack of confidence in their cultural knowledge, a practice that can contribute to inefficient research processes.

It has been observed that when translators lack sufficient familiarity with a target culture, their translation strategies may shift towards borrowing, generalization, or simplification. Guerra (2012) mentioned that limited cultural awareness can result in an overuse of borrowing because translators experience difficulty in identifying appropriate equivalents. Similarly, Tenaijy and Al-Batineh (2024) discovered that cultural terms are frequently generalized when direct equivalents are unavailable, a practice which contribute to a loss of cultural specificity. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the management of metaphors and culturally rich expressions. Indeed, Youssed and Albarakati (2023) posited that translators might occasionally adjust or demetaphorize culturally sensitive expressions in order to align them with the expectations of the target audience. However, such modifications could potentially diminish the text's cultural richness, which might then result in an incomplete representation of the source culture.

It is suggested that cultural knowledge may also be a factor that influences the choice between foreignization and domestication within the translation process. Guerra (2012) mentioned that translators who possess a comprehensive understanding of the source culture favor adaptation, a strategy which serve to maintain the meaningfulness of cultural references in the target text. Conversely, when familiarity with the target culture is deficient, it has been observed that translators might employ universalization or domestication, a practice which could render cultural elements more accessible to the target audience (Lau et al., 2022; Mamoon et al., 2023). However, as noted by Tenaijy and Al-Batineh (2024), this process occasionally result in strategic losses, a situation wherein certain cultural elements are omitted or simplified, perhaps to prioritize intelligibility over cultural depth.

In addition to professional translation, fan-generated translation is regarded as a significant mechanism for mediating cultural gaps, particularly within the context of global media circulation. Cruz et al. (2019) examined how informal translation practices, including subtitling, lyric translations, and explanatory notes, facilitate audience engagement with culturally embedded signs and symbols in media content. Indeed, their findings suggest that such translations can furnish essential cultural context, a provision which allow viewers to interpret not only linguistic meaning but also visual and performative elements. Furthermore, fan translations have been observed to supply practical clarifications, such as distinguishing between similar cultural references or explaining symbolic gestures. Therefore, Cruz et al. (2019) mentioned that these translation practices contribute to transcultural intelligibility, a process that could enable audiences to connect with foreign cultural material in ways that extend beyond direct language translation.

Developing cultural competence is essential for translators to improve their ability to handle culturally specific material. Olalla-Soler (2018) found that as translators gain experience, they shift from relying on external resources to drawing upon their internal cultural knowledge, resulting in more confident and efficient translation choices. However, early-stage translators often struggle with this transition, engaging in repetitive information-seeking behaviors that do not always lead to effective solutions. Olk (2003) and Olalla-Soler (2018) both emphasised

the need for formal training in cultural literacy, arguing that translation education should explicitly address the challenges posed by cultural differences. Without adequate training, translators may continue to encounter difficulties in rendering culturally rich texts accurately and meaningfully.

Typology of Knowledge Problems

Considering the documented challenges that students experience with cultural knowledge, a systematic framework is therefore necessary for the analysis of the specific nature of their difficulties. To facilitate this, the current study utilizes the typology of knowledge problems as developed by Olk (2003). This framework extends beyond the mere identification of errors in the final product and instead focuses on the categorization of cognitive situations that translators encounter when managing cultural references. In a subsequent work, Olk (2009) framed these challenges as central to the assessment of a student's broader intercultural competence, positing that translation provides a valuable mechanism for uncovering deficiencies in a learner's ability to mediate between cultures. Within this typology, three types of knowledge problems were distinguished: overt, covert, and no knowledge problem. An overt knowledge problem is defined as a situation wherein the translator is consciously aware of possessing insufficient cultural knowledge. According to Olk (2003), this situation is characterized by several observable behaviors, including the explicit statement of uncertainty regarding a term, the consultation of an external resource such as a cultural dictionary to find or confirm a meaning, and the verbalization and subsequent correction of an incorrect hypothesis during the translation process.

A covert knowledge problem is described as a situation wherein a translator erroneously interprets a cultural reference without conscious awareness of the error. According to Olk (2003), this problem is indicated by several factors, including: the formation and retention of an incorrect meaning hypothesis; the selection of an inappropriate translation owing to a lack of awareness of an item's cultural specificity; or the production of a final translation containing a clear misunderstanding, even though no problem was explicitly reported. Olk mentioned that these covert errors pose a significant challenge as they are frequently not apparent in the final translated text and consequently require process-tracing methods, such as think-aloud protocols, for their reliable detection.

Finally, a no knowledge problem is defined as a situation wherein the translator demonstrates a clear understanding of the cultural reference. According to Olk (2003), this situation is assumed to have occurred in the absence of any indicators for overt or covert problems, and when the final translation exhibits no evidence of misunderstanding concerning the reference.

Through the utilization of this typology, it is therefore possible for the current study to systematically identify and categorize the specific cognitive difficulties experienced by Malaysian ESL students, a process which facilitates a more detailed representation of their translation processes.

Methodology

Qualitative research was applied in this study as it examined the elements and qualities of translation texts in terms of the different demonstrated knowledge problems. This research

approach helps the researcher conduct a detailed and rich form of research analysis involving subjective and interpretative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), thus facilitating to comprehend the problem and research questions. To achieve this aim, this study employed undergraduate students of a translation skill course who was pursuing their bachelor's degree in intercultural communication at a public university in Malaysia. Students in their fourth semester were selected through purposive sampling. This sampling method necessitates that the participants meet specific criteria; in this case, they must be sampled from students in Translation Skill course (EIC553) of the program, participated in the program for a minimum of 14 weeks in the course, and must be aware of and understand the role of culture in translation.

To have a better understanding of individual translation outputs, five (5) participants were sampled and tasked with translating an excerpt of an online article from English to Malay, hereinafter labelled as Person 1 (P1) through Person 5 (P5). The article is titled "What is the Monarch's Role in British Government?" and rich with terms and phrases specific to British culture. The participants translated the text while being observed by the researcher in multiple sessions. The article was shared with the participants via Google Docs. Observation is a form of data collection that allows the researcher to get better insights from the participants in exploring their thought processes regarding the topic that needs to be analysed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This assisted with the data collection obtained through the translation task, think-aloud protocols, and post-task interviews with five these Malaysian ESL university students.

In the data collection process, these students were specifically instructed to 'think aloud' and their verbalized thought processes were audio-recorded to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge problems faced by the participants. This method provided researchers with a window into the mental operations of the participants as they navigated through the translation task. After completing the task, the participants were interviewed about their strategies for translating cultural terms and phrases. This included an exploration of their word choices, alternative translations, and the rationale behind the selected terms in Malay. The participants were also asked about their satisfaction with their translation. The process lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

To analyse the data, the audio recordings of the 'think aloud' were transcribed verbatim. Through thematic analysis, the data were then categorised and interpreted using Olk's (2003) cultural knowledge framework. To address the first research question (RQ1), three types of cultural knowledge problems in translation were identified using deductive qualitative approach in which the themes were already specified and outlined for their occurrences to be examined during the analysis of each translated text. The process culminated in the examination of contextual details and occurrences of each knowledge problem type, hence addressing research question 2 (RQ2). This step facilitated in demonstrating the richness of the descriptive findings of the first research question.

Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the data collected through several forms and examined through descriptive and contextual analysis methods. The presentation of these findings is structured in accordance with the two research objectives of the current study: (1)

to identify the types of knowledge problems during the translation process, and (2) to explore the contextual occurrences of the types of cultural knowledge problems faced by Malaysian ESL university students when translating culturally rich text.

Types of Cultural Knowledge Problems

A qualitative and thematic analysis revealed several culture-driven problems in the knowledge of the students in translating the given texts. The subsequent section discusses the most dominant knowledge problems with description of their presence as well as the meanings and interpretation of such problems to the students' translation levels of competence.

Table 1

Identified Types of Cultural Knowledge Problems and Description

	Type of Problems	Description
1.	Overt Problem	A conscious awareness of insufficient translation knowledge of the specific terms
2.	Covert Problem	A subconscious level of unawareness of committed translation errors in the specific terms
3.	No-Knowledge Problem	A clear absence of informative knowledge of specific translated concepts or terms
4.	Patterns-of-Knowledge-Gaps Problem	A systematic and repetitive lack of knowledge for the specific translated concepts or terms

As shown in Table 1, there are four major types of cultural knowledge problems identified in the students' translated outputs, think-aloud protocols, and post-task interview transcription analysis. These include Overt Problem, Covert Problem, No-Knowledge Problem, and Patterns-of-Knowledge-Gaps Problem.

Students demonstrated an overt knowledge in their translation skills in which an overt knowledge problem is defined as a situation wherein the translator is consciously aware of possessing insufficient cultural and linguistic knowledge for the adequate translation of an item (Olk, 2003). This awareness was frequently observed among the participants of the current study and was indicated by the verbalization of uncertainty, explicit questioning during the think-aloud protocol, the utilization of coping strategies such as generalization, and explicit admissions of difficulty during the post-task interviews.

As for a covert knowledge problem, it is defined as a situation wherein a translator erroneously interprets a cultural reference or term without conscious awareness of the error, a process which results in the production of a translation the translator believes to be correct, but which is, in fact, flawed (Olk, 2003). This type of knowledge problem is particularly insidious, considering that it frequently remains uncorrected and can result in the severe distortion of the source text's core message. This translation challenge was evident in these students indicating their deficient knowledge of proofreading and editing their own translation outputs. Without overcoming this type of knowledge, the students may run the

potential risk of wrongly perceived self-belief in their translation competence, resulting in their poor outcome any translation assignments in the course.

In addition, no-knowledge problem is another culture-related knowledge problems demonstrated by the students in their translation task. This translation challenge can be overcome through a situation wherein a participant demonstrates a clear and accurate understanding of a CSI, a process which is characterized by a confident and correct translation in the absence of any indicators of uncertainty (Olk, 2003). Such instances are considered significant for the current analysis, considering that they function as key differentiators which serve to distinguish the more competent translation performances from those that are less successful.

Finally, students were discovered to demonstrate Patterns-of-Knowledge-Gaps Problem in their translation outputs. This problem is described through systematic lack of knowledge in certain related terms, indicating their cultural deficiency of topic-specific understanding and information. It can be concluded that students were not equipped with adequate general and culture-specific information and knowledge prior to their enrolment of the course which can only be attained through substantial and increasing reading experiences and exposures to content information.

Contextual Occurrences of Types of Cultural Knowledge Problems

The subsequent sections present a detailed discussion concerning the different instances and their contexts in relation to the identified types of knowledge problems experienced by the participants in relation to these Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) terms. In the reported discussion of the relevant details, the contextual analysis also entails some instances wherein no such problem was apparent.

Table 2

Categorization of Terms and Their Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) in Translation Outputs

Category	Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) Terms
Political and historical concepts	"concession", "the crown (metonym)", "Glorious Revolution"
Legal and procedural terms	"levy taxes", "assented to", "acknowledged", "depose", "instituted"
Social and structural terms	"council of religious officials", "feudal lords", "nobles"
Formal titles and proper nouns	"Magna Carta", "Bill of Rights"

As shown in Table 2, the analysis of the translation tasks, think-aloud protocols, and post-task interviews indicated the presence of a spectrum of knowledge problems related to political and historical concepts, legal and procedural terms, social and structural terms, and finally, formal title and proper nouns. It was noted that the source text contained numerous culturally specific items (CSIs) which posed significant difficulties for the participants. These items were not comprised of random lexical items but were instead situated within distinct

domains of cultural knowledge, pertaining primarily to British political, legal, and social history. For clarity of discussion, these CSIs have been categorized and are presented in Table 1, a table which will function as a point of reference for the subsequent analysis of the knowledge problems they elicited.

Overt Knowledge Problem in Historical and Formal Procedural Terms

Further contextual analyses revealed that overt knowledge problems were distinctly shown in the students' lack of knowledge in the relevant cultural concepts. These problems were predominantly associated with CSIs pertaining to specific historical structures and formal procedural language.

A consistent deficiency in knowledge concerning historical social and political entities was demonstrated by the participants, particularly in relation to the phrase 'council of religious officials and feudal lords'. In managing this complex CSI, four of the five participants utilized generalization as a primary coping strategy. P1, for instance, rendered the phrase as the generic 'pihak berkuasa' (the authorities), while P2 translated it as 'agamawan dan pembesar kerajaan' (religious figures and government dignitaries). The awareness of this knowledge deficiency was made explicit during the post-task interviews. P1, for example, stated that he did not possess an understanding of "what is the council of [religion] and also feudal lords?" Similarly, P5 attempted a deconstruction of the term but ultimately utilized an anachronistic approximation for the second component, a process which resulted in the translation 'badan agamawan dan ahli politik' (religious body and politicians). Her rationale, articulated during the interview, demonstrated a conscious problem-solving process: "I understand [that] 'lords' [is] mostly about God...so I'm thinking that maybe 'Lord' is actually...high people in [a] feudal position". This logical deduction, although resulting in an inaccurate final term, serves as a clear indicator of an overt knowledge problem.

A different strategy was employed in relation to the term 'concessions'. Whereas a majority of the participants misinterpreted this term covertly, P4 identified it as a technical term for which the appropriate translation was uncertain. His solution involved the utilization of a direct loanword, a process which resulted in the translation 'konsesi'. This strategy of borrowing, prompted by a recognized knowledge deficiency, represents a common and frequently effective professional approach for the management of specialized terminology.

It was observed that formal legal and procedural verbs constituted a significant source of overt knowledge problems. The term 'assented to' was noted to be particularly challenging, with participants explicitly acknowledging their confusion. P3, for instance, demonstrated a clear overt problem-solving process during her interview, reasoning through the political context before arriving at an incorrect approximation: "I cannot figure out either it is giving the power or...[I think it means] 'mengarahkan' (to direct/order)." P1 was more direct in his admission, stating, "Yeah, I don't know what's 'assentend'." This explicit statement therefore confirmed the conscious nature of the difficulty experienced by the participant.

This difficulty also extended to the identification of precise equivalents for seemingly simpler words situated within a formal context. P5 experienced an overt knowledge problem in relation to the term 'acknowledged', rendering it as the less formal 'mengambil tahu' (to take note). A high degree of metacognitive awareness was evident during her interview, wherein

she expressed dissatisfaction with her lexical selection: “I have difficulty in finding the perfect words...for ‘acknowledged’...I think there’s another appropriate word for this context, but I’m not sure what it is.” This situation illustrates a higher-level overt problem, one in which the participant comprehends the general meaning but recognizes that her chosen term lacks the required register and specificity.

A particularly distinct response to an overt knowledge problem was demonstrated by P4 concerning the verb ‘depose’. In contrast to the other participants who utilized approximation, P4 made a conscious decision to omit the term from his final translation: “...dan King James II...”. During the post-task interview, P4 confirmed this term constituted one of his most significant challenges. This act of strategic omission, which serves as a significant indicator of a more mature translation approach, stands in stark contrast to the higher-risk strategy of approximation more frequently employed by the other participants when managing similar overt knowledge deficiencies.

A distinct type of overt knowledge problem was identified in relation to formal titles and proper nouns comprised of common, translatable words. Whereas all participants correctly retained the non-translatable name ‘Magna Carta’, terms such as ‘Bill of Rights’ and ‘Glorious Revolution’ elicited explicit confusion. P5 articulated this dilemma during her interview concerning ‘Bill of Rights’: “I’m kind of confused...sometimes when I try to translate in my native language, I was like, what does ‘Bill of Rights’ mean? Because what I know [is] that ‘act’ is ‘akta’, ‘article’ is ‘perkara’”. This statement demonstrates a conscious difficulty in determining whether to translate the constituent parts or to retain the title in its entirety. This uncertainty resulted in inconsistent and frequently inaccurate translations, including her rendering of the term as “Hak Asasi” (Human Rights) and P4’s literal translation as ‘Undang-Undang Hak’ (Law of Rights).

The term ‘Glorious Revolution’ similarly constituted a source of overt knowledge problem. Although aware that it functioned as the name of a historical event, participants such as P3 and P5 nonetheless attempted a translation of the adjective ‘Glorious’, a process which resulted in inaccurate approximations including ‘kejayaan revolusi’ (success revolution) and ‘Revolusi Kemenangan’ (Victory Revolution). This phenomenon demonstrates a conscious but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to resolve the problem posed by a partially translatable proper noun.

Covert Knowledge Problems in Legal and Political Concepts

The contextual analysis indicated that the most significant translation errors originated from these covert problems. These translation challenges were predominantly associated with abstract conceptual, legal, and political terms.

The most consistent and critical covert knowledge problem was identified in relation to the term ‘concessions’. Within the source text, this term is utilized to describe the monarchy yielding power to the nobles; however, a confident inversion of this concept was demonstrated by four of the five participants. P3, for instance, misinterpreted it as an act of control, a situation which resulted in the translation ‘pengendalian’ (management/control) and the subsequent explanation during her interview that she perceived its meaning as “how [to]...has control on the nobles”. In a similar manner, P2 understood the term as an issue of

lineage, rendering it as 'keturunan kerabat diraja' (descendants of the royal family), while the translation provided by P5 was 'keizinan' (permission). The provision of a confident yet incorrect translation was observed in each case, a practice which fundamentally misrepresented the historical power dynamic central to the text and altered a narrative of royal compromise into one of royal control or heredity.

A particularly significant instance of a covert knowledge problem was observed, which resulted in a translation that conveyed the opposite meaning of the source text. This situation occurred in the translation of the clause 'the crown could not levy taxes' as rendered by P1. The analysis of his think-aloud protocol indicated an incorrect hypothesis concerning the meaning of 'levy', a process which led in the final translation '[raja] tidak dapat mengelak cukai' ([the king] cannot evade taxes). This error, of which the participant was not consciously aware, transformed a statement about the limitation of the monarch's power to impose taxes into one concerning the prevention of monarchical tax evasion, a change that completely reversed the central purpose of the Magna Carta as described in the text. This phenomenon demonstrates how a single covert lexical error may possess the capacity to undermine the entire factual basis of a translation.

Covert knowledge problems were also observed to originate from misinterpretations of foundational verbs and symbols situated within a political context. The legal verb 'established', as used in the phrase 'established that the crown could not levy taxes', was misunderstood by P5. This was demonstrated in her translation of the phrase as 'membentuk takhta yang tidak boleh mengambil cukai' (formed a throne that cannot take taxes). The misinterpretation of 'established that' (to affirm a rule) as 'to form/create' consequently resulted in the production of a logically flawed statement, one which suggested that the Magna Carta was responsible for the creation of a new, tax-averse throne.

Furthermore, the political metonym 'the crown' was identified as a source of covert confusion for participants P1 and P3. Although both participants demonstrated the ability to translate the word in other contexts, they appeared unable to comprehend its function as the agent within the sentence pertaining to the levying of taxes. The translation provided by P3, 'penggubalan tentang raja tidak berupaya mengenakan cukai' (the legislation about the king is unable to impose taxes), erroneously identifies 'legislation' as the primary actor instead of the monarch. This misinterpretation demonstrates a covert deficiency in the understanding of how common political symbols function syntactically, a situation which resulted in a logically inconsistent and inaccurate rendering of a key historical fact.

No-Knowledge Problem in Legal, Historical, and Political Phrases

Apart from overt and covert knowledge problems which were embedded in the cultural manifestations of the students, they also showed No-Knowledge Problem through some instances shown in their translations of legal, historical, and political phrases. The translation of the legal phrase 'levy taxes' functioned as a primary differentiating factor. Whereas three participants produced critical covert errors in relation to this term, P4 and P3 demonstrated a clear comprehension of its meaning, a fact which was evidenced by their accurate translation as 'mengenakan cukai' (to impose taxes). The possession of this specific lexical knowledge consequently prevented the severe distortions of meaning observed in the other translations and constituted a hallmark of their more successful overall performance.

In a similar manner, competence in the management of the political metonym 'the crown' was identified as a clear indicator of a more proficient translation. Participants P4 and P5 consistently and correctly rendered this term as 'mahkota' and 'takhta' respectively, a practice which demonstrated an understanding of its function as a symbol for the monarch or the monarchy's authority. This performance stands in stark contrast to that of the other participants who experienced difficulty with the term, a situation which suggests that familiarity with this type of figurative political language constitutes a key component of cultural translation competence.

In addition to individual terms, no knowledge problems appeared to facilitate the selection of superior idiomatic and stylistic choices. For instance, in relation to the verb 'depose', P3 rendered the nuanced and contextually proficient translation 'menurunkan' (as in 'menurunkan takhta', to dethrone). Similarly, a high degree of command over the target language was demonstrated by P4 in the translation of 'gradually' not with a literal equivalent, but with the idiomatic adverb 'beransur-ansur'. These instances therefore demonstrate that in the absence of fundamental comprehension deficiencies, a participant's capacity to produce a translation that is not only accurate but also stylistically proficient and idiomatic in the target language is enhanced.

A stark contrast to these issues was observed in the management of the non-translatable proper noun 'Magna Carta', wherein all five participants demonstrated no knowledge problem in terms of strategy. This proficiency was evidenced by their uniform application of the preservation convention, a process which involved retaining the term in its original form. Although some participants acknowledged in their interviews a lack of specific knowledge regarding its meaning—a distinct type of overt knowledge deficiency—their consistent application of this strategy demonstrates a shared comprehension of this fundamental translational convention.

Patterns-of-Knowledge Gaps in Legal, Historical, Formal Terms

The detailed analysis of the knowledge problems experienced by the participants has revealed the emergence of several distinct patterns through Patterns-of-Knowledge Gaps problem which serve to characterize the difficulties faced by this particular cohort of ESL student translators. These patterns are indicative of systemic deficiencies in specific areas of cultural knowledge and also function as key differentiators between the more proficient and the less effective translation processes..

Firstly, it was observed that certain CSIs posed a universal challenge, a situation which represented a shared knowledge deficiency across the group. Abstract legal and historical concepts such as 'concessions' and 'assented to', in addition to the social-structural term 'feudal lords', consistently elicited either overt confusion or, significantly, critical covert misinterpretations. This near-universal deficiency in comprehension suggests a systemic deficiency in the participants' foundational knowledge concerning the British socio-political and legal context.

Secondly, and in contrast, a small number of CSIs were observed to function as key differentiating factors of proficiency. The ability of a participant to correctly translate the legal phrase 'levy taxes' and to comprehend the political metonym 'the crown' constituted a

significant predictor of their overall performance. The participants who managed these items without difficulty produced translations that were significantly more accurate and coherent, a situation which indicates that these specific terms functioned as a litmus test for a more profound and functional understanding of the source culture's history.

Thirdly, a distinct pattern was identified concerning the distribution of problem types. It was observed that abstract conceptual and legal terms were most likely to elicit covert knowledge problems. Participants frequently provided confident yet incorrect translations for terms such as 'concessions' or misinterpreted the function of verbs like 'established that', a phenomenon which suggests they were not consciously aware of their own comprehension deficiencies in relation to these abstract ideas. Conversely, terms which described concrete social structures, including 'council of...' and 'feudal lords', were more likely to be associated with overt knowledge problems. In such instances, participants acknowledged their lack of knowledge and utilized conscious coping strategies, a practice which suggests a distinct cognitive state when managing unknown groups in contrast to unknown concepts.

Finally, the management of proper nouns was observed to present a nuanced challenge. Although all participants correctly utilized the convention of preserving unique, non-translatable names such as 'Magna Carta', they experienced difficulty when formal titles were comprised of familiar English words (e.g., 'Glorious Revolution,' 'Bill of Rights'). Such instances frequently became sites of error, a situation wherein participants attempted a translation of the constituent parts, which resulted in inaccurate or stylistically inappropriate renderings like 'Revolusi Kemenangan' (Victory Revolution). This phenomenon demonstrates that even a seemingly straightforward translational convention may become complex when it intersects with partial linguistic knowledge.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a detailed window into the cognitive and procedural challenges faced by Malaysian ESL university participants in the act of translation. This discussion interprets the findings through the lens of the existing literature to explore the nature of the knowledge problems encountered and their profound effects on translation competence

The Nature of Knowledge Problems and Novice Intercultural Competence

The application of Olk's (2003) framework was observed to be particularly insightful, a process which revealed that the most significant translation deficiencies did not originate from overt, recognized problems, but rather from covert, unacknowledged misinterpretations. The prevalence of these covert errors therefore serves as significant empirical support for the notion that the source of greatest risk for novice translators is not a recognized lack of knowledge, but a mistaken belief in their own comprehension. The occurrence of such problems suggests a potential overestimation of cultural knowledge on the part of the participants or perhaps a perceived need to appear proficient. This tendency was noted to be particularly evident in relation to abstract political and legal concepts. For instance, the provision of confident yet erroneous translations of 'concessions' by four of the five participants is indicative of a systemic deficiency in comprehending a core historical concept. This finding aligns with that of Jumharia and Rusni (2018), who observed that university participants frequently assume their linguistic skills are sufficient, an overestimation that, as

the findings of the current study suggest, may mask deep-seated conceptual misunderstandings.

This pattern of covert errors may be further understood through the lens of Olk's (2009) subsequent work, which frames such translational difficulties as a measure of a learner's broader intercultural competence. From this perspective, a covert error constitutes not merely a lexical mistake, but rather a deficiency in cultural mediation. For instance, when P1 translated 'levy taxes' as its semantic opposite, or when P3 misinterpreted 'the crown' as 'legislation about the king', a failure to accurately represent the source culture's political reality was demonstrated. This phenomenon is indicative of a low level of intercultural competence, a situation wherein the translator is unable to correctly perceive and render the nuanced power dynamics embedded within the source text. This observation aligns with the findings of Sun (2021) and Mudheher et al. (2023), who noted that students' underestimation of cultural competence frequently results in an over-reliance on literalism or erroneous lexical selections which are suggestive of a superficial comprehension of the source material.

Conversely, overt knowledge problems, although numerous, were observed to be less detrimental, a situation attributable to their conscious recognition by the participants. In the management of unfamiliar social structures such as 'feudal lords' and 'council of religious officials', a majority of participants demonstrated an awareness of their knowledge deficiency and consequently utilized coping strategies, including generalization (Lau et al., 2022). However, the outcome of this awareness was not uniform. The willingness to acknowledge such deficiencies was, in some instances, indicative of a more proficient problem-solving approach. This was most clearly demonstrated in the strategic omission of 'depose' by P4, which represented a risk-averse decision. This acknowledgement of a knowledge deficiency, as highlighted by Olk (2003), constitutes a prerequisite for effective learning and problem-solving, a factor which distinguishes a more professional approach from the higher-risk strategy of approximation observed in other participants.

The Cascade Effect of Cultural Knowledge on Translation Skills

The findings therefore suggest the existence of a cascade effect, wherein a deficiency in cultural knowledge appears to elicit a series of negative outcomes which have a detrimental influence on strategic choices, process efficiency, and final product quality. This observation serves to corroborate the foundational arguments of scholars such as Venuti (1998) and Nord (1994) concerning the significant difficulty in the translation of culture-bound terms and the necessity for a profound cultural comprehension. The results further substantiate the notion that translation constitutes not merely a linguistic transition but a translation of ideas (Sotvoldiyevna & Jamolidinovich, 2022); consequently, a deficiency in the comprehension of the source culture's ideas may result in a breakdown of the translation process.

One of the most immediate influences of knowledge deficiencies was observed in the participants' selection of translation strategies. A lack of a robust internal knowledge base appeared to result in the demonstration of behaviors characteristic of novices, as described by Olalla-Soler (2018). Rather than utilizing the efficient, knowledge-driven decisions of professionals, the problem-solving processes employed by the participants were inconsistent and frequently less effective. This was evidenced by their vacillation between literalism, generalization, and approximation without a discernible overarching rationale, a pattern

consistent with the observations of Guerra (2012). For instance, the provision of erroneous and anachronistic approximations for 'feudal lords', such as P5's selection of 'ahli politik' (politicians), serves to exemplify the type of less effective problem-solving associated with novices who lack confidence in their own cultural schema (Olalla-Soler, 2018). This deficiency appears to necessitate the employment of reductive strategies, such as the frequent generalization of cultural terms, a practice which consequently results in the loss of cultural specificity described by Tenaijy and Al-Batineh (2024).

Ultimately, these erroneous processes, originating from knowledge deficiencies, were observed to have a direct influence on the quality of the final translations. The current study therefore demonstrates that cultural knowledge is significant for accuracy, a point also emphasized by Dalib et al. (2019). The distinct difference in quality between the translations of P4 and those of P1 may be attributed directly to their divergent levels of comprehension concerning key differentiating factors. The presence of this knowledge facilitates the ability of the translator to make informed decisions and to produce a text that aligns with the source's intended meaning (Youssef & Albarakati, 2023). Conversely, in its absence, even competent linguistic skills are insufficient for the prevention of the distortion of the original message. The successful translation of specific CSIs was therefore not incidental, but rather a direct result of the participant's possession of the requisite cultural knowledge. This phenomenon underscores that such competence is not merely an ancillary skill but is instead essential for the production of an accurate and meaningful translation, a fact which affirms the core principle concerning the inseparable nature of language, culture, and translation (Abbasi et al., 2012)

Implications for Translation Education

The findings of the current study possess significant implications for the field of translation pedagogy, a phenomenon which indicates the necessity for evolutions in curriculum design, classroom methodology, and the explicit instruction in strategic competence. The consistent patterns of knowledge deficiencies observed in this study suggest that a multi-faceted approach is required to reconcile the discrepancy between the linguistic proficiency of students and the profound cultural comprehension essential for professional translation.

A primary implication of this study is the necessity for an effective pedagogical approach to cultural education within translation curricula, one which integrates historical, political, and cultural contexts to facilitate the development of a more profound comprehension of source materials. This recommendation directly addresses the systemic deficiencies mentioned by Zhang (2019) and Sun (2021), who posited that language programs frequently prioritize linguistic accuracy while placing less emphasis on structured cultural training. Firstly, a review and potential revision of translation course syllabi is suggested to ensure that topics are aligned with the learners' cognitive capacity. This necessitates moving beyond a reliance on passive cultural exposure, which was found to be insufficient by Freyer et al. (2019), and toward the integration of specific modules designed to build the schematic knowledge required for the decoding of the complex socio-political concepts that posed significant difficulties in the current study.

In addition to curriculum content, the pedagogical environment and methodology are identified as critical components. The findings of this study suggest that the cultivation of a

specific classroom culture is essential for addressing both overt and covert knowledge problems. The establishment of an educational environment wherein questioning and exploration are valued may therefore contribute to an improvement in translation accuracy. One practical mechanism for achieving this is through the introduction of modules that familiarize students with the intercultural dimensions of discourse, a process which can facilitate their development into the effective bicultural mediators described by Abbasi et al. (2012).

Apart from formal instruction, the cultivation of learner autonomy is also posited as essential. To this end, novice translators should be encouraged to engage independently with diverse translational materials to enhance their familiarity with other cultures. This independent engagement with authentic materials can facilitate the development of the rich internal knowledge base which Olalla-Soler (2018) identifies as characteristic of professional translators.

Finally, the findings indicate a clear deficiency in professional problem-solving skills, a phenomenon wherein students frequently employ inconsistent or reactive strategies. Therefore, the introduction of various translational processes and strategies within ESL classrooms is posited as essential for the production of higher-quality work. This explicit instruction in strategic competence is critical for facilitating the transition of students beyond the novice behaviors observed by Guerra (2012). Such instruction entails the formal teaching of a range of compensatory strategies, including the appropriate utilization of generalization and borrowing, the development of information literacy skills, and the ethical considerations which underlie the use of a translator's note or a conscious omission. The enhancement of cultural intelligence through diverse cultural exposure and targeted education is essential for producing high-quality translations (Ginter, 2002); indeed, a core component of this intelligence is the capacity to proceed professionally when confronted with inevitable deficiencies in one's own knowledge.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The current study investigated the types of knowledge problems experienced by Malaysian ESL university students during the translation process, in addition to the influence of cultural knowledge on their translation skills. The findings confirm that profound deficiencies in cultural knowledge, particularly in relation to domain-specific areas of British political and legal history, constitute a primary impediment to the production of accurate translations. The analysis demonstrates that the most significant errors originate from covert knowledge problems, a situation wherein participants are not consciously aware of their conceptual misunderstandings, which consequently results in a severe distortion of the source text's meaning. Ultimately, this research furnishes significant empirical support for the principle that cultural competence is not merely an ancillary skill but rather a foundational component of translational proficiency; its absence, therefore, directly undermines a translator's capacity to function as an effective cross-cultural mediator.

Although the current study offers profound qualitative insights, its findings originate from a small, purposive sample from a single institution, a factor which necessarily limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, it is recommended that future research build upon these findings. Larger-scale quantitative or mixed-methods studies could be conducted to

determine if the patterns of knowledge deficiencies identified herein are prevalent within a wider population of ESL student translators. Furthermore, future studies might also utilize different text genres and source cultures to examine how the nature and frequency of cultural knowledge problems vary with context. Finally, longitudinal research which tracks students throughout their degree programs would be of significant value for the comprehension of how cultural competence develops over time and for the assessment of the effectiveness of the pedagogical interventions proposed in this paper. The continuation of such research would serve to further elucidate the complex interplay between language, culture, and translation, contributing to the refinement of approaches for the training of future translators.

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