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Use of Culture-laden Texts to Enhance Culture-specific Translation Skills from English  
into Arabic

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**Abstract**

This study explores the possibility of rendering culture-laden texts from English into Arabic, relying on a corpus of literary texts representing the local cultures of 16th and 18th century England. Therefore, this study taps into the applicability of using SL cultural texts to help students appropriately render culture-specific lexicon. The study made use of an experimental research method in order to identify the possibility of using literary texts to help learners of the Translation III course enhance their culture-specific translation skills and the traditional method of teaching translation in the College of Languages and Translation. Findings of the study suggest that the use of culture-laden literary texts is efficient in introducing the culturally loaded lexicon of the English language.

*Keywords:* gloss translation, Arabic, English, literature, cultural texts

## Introduction

Translation theorists have noted an interwoven relationship between the language and culture, maintaining that translation is a process of intercultural exchange (Lotman & Uspensky, 1978; Kloepfer & Shaw, 1981; Newmark, 1988; Kramersch, 1998; Pena, 2007; Pennycook, 2007). Hermans (1999) believes that translation should be recognized as a cultural practice. Gerding-Salas (2000) suggests that the main aim of translation is to serve as a cross-cultural bilingual communication vehicle among people of different tongues and cultures. According to several authors (Toury, 1998; Alvarez & Vida, 1996; Vollmer & Irmischer, 1998; Snell-Hornby, 2006), translation is certainly a highly skilled activity, a first-class art based on a high level of competence not only in the two languages but in both cultures, as contemporary approaches to translation have emphasised.

Al-Qurashi (2004), in this respect, too, believes that translation is significant to all nations, given its essential role in transmitting knowledge and learning from one culture into another inducing to a rich process of cross-cultural awareness and inter-lingual acculturation; it indeed assumes the function of 'cultural archives' (Evan-Zohar, 2000). Therefore, Bahameed (2008) argues that the question of intercultural translation has received a plethora of attention in the current socio-linguistic theory as well as in translation studies. Badawi, in a similar vein, claimed that translation, as a means of communication, has the potential to foster intercultural communications and mutual understanding, advocating a cultural approach to translation rather than maintaining the present linguistic approach.

In this vein, too, researchers and practitioner translators believe in the necessity that translators assume a mediatory role as bilingual or multi-lingual cross-cultural transmitters of culture by attempting to interpret concepts and speech in a variety of texts as faithfully and accurately as possible. To do this, Pena, (2007) argues that cultural

equivalence should be considered in translating process. In a word, it could be concluded that both language and culture should be highly regarded in the act of translation. Otherwise, communication pitfalls and misinterpreted messages may ensue if culture-laden meanings are excluded or ignored, knowingly or unknowingly, by the translators. Hence, Nida, in a classical warning, said that "differences between cultures may cause more serious problems for the translator than do differences in language structure" (Nida 1964, p.130).

The cultural connotations of concepts under translation are thus of significant importance as well as lexical and structural items are. In this regard, Lotman's theory states that "no language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language" (Lotman & Uspensky., 1978, p.211-32). Federici (2007) therefore has posed a happy note that "the translator between two worlds faces not only the question of displacement and untranslatability, but once again that of intertextuality" (p. 147). According to her,

the translating subject has to read between the lines the many and varied intertextual practices, the recognition of the author's intertextual references, the many traces from previous texts and former translations, the various signs of cultural and socio-political markers and possible linguistic adaptations. The text must be revealed as a complex web of intertextual references not always easy to reproduce in the target text/culture, but nonetheless a central element for the author's image in the target culture and the reception of the translated text. The translator becomes a cultural mediator who, dialoguing between cultures, carries on a transcultural interaction (Federici, 2007, p. 147).

Furthermore, Savory (1968) asserts that translation can be possibly rendered accessibly and communicatively by adopting an equivalent of the thoughts and underpinnings that the different lexical and structural idioms assume. By the same token, Nida and Taber (1969) believe that the process of translation consists of reproducing in the translation language the "closest natural equivalent" of the source language message, firstly in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style – a process that requires a rewriting of discourse in the style of the translation language. Correspondingly, Brislin (1976) defines translation in this light as “the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form” (p. 1)

The importance of the translation process as above identified is a process of rewriting the piece of discourse at issue in order to make it possible to convey the same message(s) of the SL author for communication purposes. This has led Newmark to propose componential analysis which he describes as being “the most accurate translation procedure, which excludes the culture and highlights the message” (Newmark, 1988, p.96). Nida's definitions of formal and dynamic equivalence (see Nida, 1964, p.129) may also be seen to apply when considering cultural implications for translation. According to Nida (1964), in this regard,

... a ‘gloss translation’ mostly typifies formal equivalence where form and content are reproduced as faithfully as possible and the TL reader is able to "understand as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression of the SL context (p.129).

Contrasting with this idea, dynamic equivalence seeks to

relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture" without insisting that he "understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context (Nida, 1964, p.129).

This, too, raises further challenges to culture translation, or transculturation. One of these challenges when translating interculturally, arises as to how to render cultural nuances of the source language text in the translated version, and avoid either making the translated

version neutral of any cultural nuances, or imposing the world view of the language into which the text is being translated (Agti, 2005). It is apposite here to regard meanings in one language that may not be easily expressible in some other languages, posing further challenges to transculturation. For instance, the word "أمانة" ['amaana] (possibly honesty, candidacy, integrity, sincerity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, etc.) in Arabic may not have an equivalent in other languages because the word bears further religious connotations. In Arabic, and Muslim traditions, it refers to the condition of keeping up to promise when entrusted with something or someone until given back to its owner. It may also, according to Muslim traditions and faith, refer to the Muslim belief in monotheism – a meaning which is purely cultural, because it did not exist in the Arabic language before Islam. Such 'untranslatable elements' are accepted through "a critical perspective of the ineluctability of a cultural difference envisioned not through a hierarchical juxtaposition but as an enriching interweaving" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219).

Therefore, cultural implications are difficult to render from one language to another, inducing to a variety of problems and challenges for the translator. This is what leads to undertranslation where there will be some loss of information in rendered texts. Meanings that we assign to words are determined by the culture of which they are an integral part. And this difficulty exemplifies the challenge implicit in translation, that is, to convey difference and similarity of meaning through a complex process of translation considered as a "transformative practice" (Federici, 2007, p. 149).

If the translator is supposed to render the communicative intentions of the producer of the original text, this entails preserving the intact meanings of the source text totally unchanged when it is transmitted into target text. But this depends on the choices the translator makes when s/he embarks on a translational writing activity. In this regard, Goethe cited in Thriveni (2001) notes:

There are two principles in translation. The translator can bring to his fellow countrymen a true and clear picture of the foreign author and foreign circumstances, keep strictly to the original; but he can also treat

the foreign work as a writer treats his material, altering it after his own tastes and customs, so that it is brought closer his fellow countrymen, who can then accept it as if it were an original work.

Such foreignising translation strategies can be adopted only when the source and translation languages are similar or they share similar cultural backgrounds, for culturally shared elements and mutually inclusive socio-cultural features of the source text will become transparent to target readers as is the case in interlingual translation into Indo-European languages (e.g., English and German) or Semitic languages (Arabic and Urdu).

Although the target readers may lack background knowledge possibly possessed by source readers, maintaining the otherness of the source text is based on the expected readers' willingness to negotiate the meaning of obscure spots by drawing on their own experience. This view joins the idea that there are more similarities than differences among cultures in translation. So, this in turn strengthens the cultural ties among peoples belonging to different cultures and at the same time can make the task of translating culture less challenging.

By the same token, translating culture-laden texts requires a lot of training in order to avoid pitfalls of communication. No doubt, then, that Pena (2007) contended that translators should carefully attend to cultural equivalence.

Therefore, the aim of transferring “an understanding to people in their own language and create the same impact as the original text” (Galibert, 2004, p.1) assumptively requires that translation be considered as “the process of establishing equivalence between the source language texts and target language texts” (Sa'edi, 2004, p.242). In this regard, Sugimoto (2005:1) assertively writes:

Simply speaking, translation is the exchange of one set of clothes for another set of clothes that will cover the same meaning or thought. However, when we think of translation culture, first we must understand its background and give some thought to the age in which it was born (p.1).

In other words, the SL culture is converted to the TL culture and the text is rewritten. Accordingly, equal importance to both linguistic and cultural differences between the SL and the TL must be taken in consideration, and students of translation should be trained thereunto.

### **Context of the Study**

As of late, there is a paucity of research attention paid to translating culture-laden features of the source language into the translation language. Culturally-laden content is virtually difficult to render in one language by the same or a similar phraseology in the translation language (Armellino, 2008). Culture-specific content includes metaphors, proverbs, idioms and collocations. because the meaning which lies behind this kind of idioms is usually associated with specific cultural context where the text originates in or with the cultural context the translation seeks to recreate.

However, idioms and expressions laden with specific cultural content are hard to come by. Therefore, cultural translation involves translating cultural meanings associated with idioms and collocations represent real translation problems especially among non-natives.

As such, information exchange, particularly cross-language and cross-culture information retrieval between the two languages, are pertinent and, therefore, are fundamental to the process of inter-linguistic translation in the two languages. However, translation instruction and training has been traditional for a longer period of time in Arab universities. In fact, translation has been favoured for teaching language and literature since long (Morgan, 1917; Goggio, 1925; Finney, 1941; Irvin, 1942; Myron, 1944; Virtue & Baklanoff, 1952; Hall, 1952; Gillis, 1960; Woolsey, 1974; Rees, 1974; Beichman, 1983; Venuti, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2003). Most of it is grounded in dictionary work, sentence and short text processing that is approached oftentimes by grammar and lexicon work, drilling, practicing and modelling (Hartmann, 1989). With beginner students of translation, a lot of work is done to introduce to them the art of translation and the rudiments of its practice as a methodical science.

### **Problem of the Study**

The translation of culture-specific content from Arabic into English and vice versa is not well documented by empirical evidence in EFL translation teaching institutions in Saudi Arabia. The case being as such, translating culture-laden idioms and discourse raises potentially problematic difficulties for trainee translators at colleges of languages and translation, KSA. Therefore, the present study seeks to identify intermediate level students of Translation III as to translating culture-laden content in literary discourse from different samples of English literature of 16th and 18th century England - particularly idioms and collocations of literary discourse for identifying their translational writing strategies they employ when rendering this type of discourse. The research question the present study sought to answer is as follows: How effective is the training course in helping translation students render culture-laden literary discourse?

### **Methodology of Research**

#### ***Participants***

The participants were two groups of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, altogether forming 51 learners assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The students in both groups were equated on such factors as language proficiency, based on information provided from the academic advisor on the GPAs. Their ages ranged from 21 to 23 years old. The sample was limited to the fourth year English language majors who were supposed to be well acquainted with English language and translation courses, especially Translation III as well as having access to literary forms and texts available at this level of their study.

#### ***Instrumentation***

##### ***Culture-specific Discourse Test***

The researchers selected a set of 4 literary discourse pieces from literary texts modelling the material covered in class training, which were thought to be laden with cultural loadings. The idioms and collocations in the translation literary excerpts were not

actually taught during coursework prior to the experiment, but reproducing similar strategies of translating cultural content.

The main objective of the test was to assess the participants' ability to translate culture-bound expressions, idioms and collocations implied in the literary excerpts on the test.

For assessing the validity and reliability of the test, it was adjudicated by 5 teachers in the department who have had prior expertise with teaching translation. The jury approved its face and content validity. For estimating the reliability of the test, it was assessed for a test-retest reliability piloting by administering it twice in a period of two weeks to 25 students in the department, other than the participants. The test-retest procedure was used to calculate the reliability of the test using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The reliability coefficient of the test was ( $r= 0.86$ ).

### ***Procedures***

#### ***Control Treatment***

Students in the control group studied Translation III in a traditional fashion of Islamic and literary texts assignments for translation in class and at home, with the effort being mostly on the part of the learners. No training on inter-cultural nuances between Arabic and English were explained to the control participants.

#### ***Experimental Treatment***

The experimental group learners studied a specially designed course involving culture-specific literary texts from 16th century Shakespearean drama and 18th century novels. Though similar texts were also used with the two groups, emphasis was laid on cultural translation strategies with the experimental group. The problem of tone has always seemed to be essential in choosing the right medium for translating such texts. By expansion, an idiom too classical and grand would lead to declamation and inanity; and an idiom too common and 'low' may falsify certain 'effects' in such texts, especially in Shakespearean dramatic texts. However, it was important to emphasise for the students in the experimental group that lexical accuracy should never be sacrificed for special effects, of course, but an individual interpretation may tip the balance in favour of an

apparent synonym that seems to fit the sense in better fashions. The faithfulness of the literary texts, we assured the trainees, should be felt in transmitting the beauty and pleasure of the original text with the use of target language words and structures that convey these values. For example, the students were given some lines from a Shakespearean sonnet (in Quiller-Couch, 1918, p. 145) that reads:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometimes declines.

The instructor asked the participants to try assay preserving the essence of beauty implied in the British culture, in the above quoted lines, which is hardly attainable when the lines are rendered into Arabic. This is because the Arabic culture does not have these favourable qualities permeated in these poetic lines. It was also necessary to train the experimental students that the target text cannot be achieved through the exact equivalents of the source; rather, replacing expressions that gush forth emotive values can be a solution for pressing more emotive power on the new reader would solve the problem of losing these emotions and qualities in translation. The instructor more frequently cited Robinson (2001, p.166), quoting Dryden's (1680) to help them take liberty with the text and adapt it to the new culture at issue:

... since every language is so full of its own properties, that what is beautiful in one, is often, barbarous, nay sometimes nonsense, in another, it would be unreasonable to limit a translator to the narrow compass of his author's words: 'tis enough if he chooses out some expression which does not vitiate the sense.

Back again to the instructional module for translating Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, the instructor explained that in the Arabic culture, summer is related to unfavourable values and connotations, such as ruthless and cruel weather, long hot daytime, windy sands, droughts, among many other inauspicious elements. For that reason, an Arabic poet or an Arabic translator of English poetry cannot compare his beloved lady with summer, and should try to find other natural elements that can bear similar meanings. Therefore, text accommodation and adaptation had been adopted as a common translation procedure. This required that the trainee translator should have created new situations that can be considered as being equivalent, and this special kind of equivalence is what is known as the 'situational equivalence'.

Towards the end of the semester, participants in the two groups took the same test during class time, two grades were assigned to each culture-laden piece of discourse: one mark for the correct translation of the word (comprehension of lexicon) and another for correct cultural rendering of the entire excerpt (cultural translation). Furthermore, the two researchers marked the tests for both groups. Disagreement about scoring occurred only in a few instances of 'approximate' cultural translations in the test. However, the inter-rater reliability was 0.91.

## Results

Differences among participants in the experimental and control groups were scrutinized by running a t-test in SPSS (Vers. 14). Considering the t- values in Table 1, readers can detect significant differences between both experimental and control groups of the study in the comprehension of and further appropriate cultural rendering of the idioms and collocations compared against the performance of the control group participants, as indicated in the learners' translation of these idioms and cultural expressions in the test items assessed by the overall scores, and the overall effectiveness as expressed by the summation of both comprehension and cultural translation scores. The t- value differences between all groups show that the experimental group that was trained on cultural corpus translation yielded the best results.

Table 1: *t*-test Results of the differences between both Groups

Group	Lingua-cultural Comprehension		Cultural Translation		Lingua-cultural Comprehension & Cultural Translation	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Ex (25)	7.08	2.00	5.04	2.35	7.88	2.160
Ctrl (26)	5.28	2.25	7.20	2.16	6.72	2.28
t-value	4.20		4.30		4.89	
p	.00001		.00001		.05	

All *p*-values on the comprehension and cultural translation pretest/posttest assessments and the aggregate comprehension and cultural translation pretest/posttest assessment were significant at .00001, .00001, and .05, respectively. It appears from the table above that the *t*-values on comprehension and cultural translation as well as on the aggregate comprehension and cultural translation were all statistically significant to the good of the experimental group (*t*-values = 4.2, 4.3, and 4.89, where the calculated *t*-values are larger than the tabular *t*-values, indicating that the differences are favourable to the post-assessment). In addition, the results of the study also made clear the fact that training the students on transculturation of literary corpus from the target language culture into Arabic culture facilitates Saudi EFL EFL learners' comprehension of cultural features of the literary eras which the texts belonged to; this is clear from the comprehension and cultural translation pretest/posttest assessment where the *t*-value was comparatively more than the individual assessments of lingua-cultural comprehension and cultural translation (*t* = 4.89)

The experimental group outperformed the control group that was indulged in bilingual dictionary work for their translation. In the light of this finding, it could be concluded that EFL translation students' performance in translating culture-bound English expressions and idioms excerpted from literary corpus has been improved after the training programme as reflected by their scores on the culture-based translation test. As mentioned before, it seems that training on culture-specific literary corpus translation to reach out for the correct meanings may have helped the experimental group, while they had enough vocabulary knowledge to understand the defining vocabulary available in their dictionaries.

### **Conclusions**

This study strongly supports the view that culture influences comprehension and interpretation, and hence the significance of cross-culture awareness for apposite, sound translation. When reading a text, especially literary corpus, readers acquire meaning from the text by analyzing words and sentences against the backdrop of their own personal knowledge of the world which, in turn, is conditioned by their culture (See Galibert, 2004; Sa'edi, 2004, for further relevant discussions). However, in translating foreign corpus, an awareness of the culture of the target language needs to be conditioned, too. In other words, the target culture influences knowledge, beliefs, and values, and they, in turn, provide an interpretive framework which the reader will utilize during reading.

Findings from the present research, commensurate with prior research (Savory, 1968; Nida and Taber, 1969; Lotman & Uspensky, 1978; Pena, 2007), too, confirm this fact that the target culture understanding can be conducive to better comprehension, and consequently, to more apposite translations. Since the target culture literary texts used in the present study depicted aspects of the indigenous EFL culture, which they have been exposed to and familiarized with in other literature courses, they were more in line with the readers' knowledge, beliefs, and values and thus more comprehensible to the participants. This warrants the observation that the use of literature in translation teaching

can better induce more improved culture-specific interpretation of literary corpus (Woolsey, 1974; Rees, 1974; Beichman, 1983; Venuti, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2003).

The study also showed, at least in the theoretical body, that there is a close relationship between language and culture has become virtually axiomatic. Being the primary means of human communication, language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. In this vein, Kramersch (1998) adeptly explained that language expresses cultural reality, embodies cultural reality, and symbolizes cultural reality.

Therefore, a short story, a novel or a play written in English language by an English writer expresses, embodies, and symbolizes the realities of the English culture. According to Bock (2006), there are considerable differences, amongst pieces of literary discourse from different cultures because each culture's literature contains characters, events, themes, and value systems that are common within that specific culture but not necessarily known or understood by other cultures (pp. 72-73). Indeed, transculturation is a process of changing the cultural elements of the target language discourse into learners' own culture so that it can express, embody, and symbolize the cultural reality of the learner's life and experiences.

The findings of this study are consistent with the results found in Erten and Razi (2003) and Razi (2004) that transculturation of literature corpus from target language culture into learner's own culture enhances their comprehension of this corpus and enables better rendition skills.

Findings from the present study are also commensurate with the results of prior research on the relationship between cultural modification of texts and reading comprehension (e.g., Chihara et al., 1989; Sasaki, 2000), which demonstrated that adapting texts to conform to the learners' cultural expectations makes these texts more comprehensible to the readers of the rendered texts. The findings also lend further support to the larger body of research which has investigated the role of cultural background knowledge or cultural schemata in reading comprehension and culture translation (Abu-Rabia, 1996, 2003; Carrell, 1987; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Johnson,

1981; Pritchard, 1990; Steffensen & Joag-dev, 1992; Steffensen, Joag-dev, & Anderson, 1979).

### **Recommendations & Pedagogical Implications**

In line with these studies, the current study suggests that translators be exposed to the different socio-linguistic and cultural features of target texts. To this end, they should be trained on how to deal with both the source language and the translation language cultures for which they have well-developed cultural background knowledge than texts that deal with a less familiar or unfamiliar culture and for which they lack the appropriate cultural schemata. More time and effort should also be allocated for the students both in class and in home-work assignments in order for them to be able to produce culturally appropriate versions of rendered texts. In a parallel mode, especially in Saudi colleges of languages and translation, there should be more courses on the culture and literature of target languages than is currently allotted. Such courses can provide a culturally rigorous background into the target language culture.

### **About the author**

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