

Bridging Cultures and Meaning: EFL Learners' Challenges in Translating English Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

Translation is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly in helping learners understand and express meaning across languages. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by EFL learners in translating English idiomatic expressions and to examine the linguistic and cultural factors underlying these challenges. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design with limited quantitative support. The researcher used error analysis and content analysis to analyze the data to answer the first research question. Then, the researcher used thematic analysis to analyze the data from the questionnaire and interview to answer the second research question. The participants of this study are EFL learners studying English as a foreign language at a university level in Central Java. The instruments used in this study are the idiomatic translation test, questionnaire, and interview. The researcher found that the challenges faced by EFL learners in translating English idiomatic expressions were lexical challenge (18%), semantic challenge (36%), idiomatic challenge (14%), and literal translation tendencies (32%). Then, the researcher found linguistic factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as vocabulary (45%), idiom familiarity (35%), and grammar (20%). On the other hand, the researcher found that cultural factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as cultural references (40%), context (30%), and figurative meaning (30%). This study highlights the need for greater emphasis on idiomatic competence, cultural awareness, and contextual understanding in EFL instruction.

Keywords: EFL learners, English Idiomatic Expressions, Translation Challenges, Linguistic Factors, Cultural Factors

Introduction

Translation is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, especially in aiding learners to understand and express meaning across languages. Translation is the process of transmitting thought or ideas from one language to another by utilizing the most accurate comparable term from the source language, especially about language and culture (Ali et al.,

2022). Translation means replacing text in one language or Source Language (SL) with similar text in another language or Target Language (TL) without changing the meaning (Sari et al., 2025). The crucial aspect of translation is the sentence's message (Sulistyaningsih et al., 2025). The translator couldn't change the message of the sentence. From this explanation, it can be concluded that the translator must focus on exchanging information in the target language with the equivalent information from the source language.

Idioms are groups of words that have a meaning that is different from the literal meaning of the individual words (Giler et al., 2024). Translating idioms and slang presents serious difficulties for both beginners and professional translators because they frequently contain social connections, historical context, or implications that might not have an equivalent in the target language (Hajiyeva, 2025). From those statements, we know that among various linguistic features, idiomatic expressions present a significant challenge for EFL learners because their meanings cannot be interpreted literally. English idioms are deeply embedded in cultural contexts, reflecting native speakers' values, beliefs, and social practices. As a result, successful translation of idiomatic expressions requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural awareness.

In many EFL contexts, learners tend to rely heavily on word-for-word translation strategies due to limited exposure to authentic language use. This tendency often leads to inaccurate or misleading translations of idiomatic expressions, as the figurative meanings of idioms differ substantially from their literal interpretations. Consequently, EFL learners frequently experience difficulties in identifying appropriate equivalents in their native language, resulting in semantic distortion or cultural mismatch. These challenges may hinder effective communication and reduce learners' confidence in translation tasks. Besides that, EFL learners also found ambiguity appears when they cannot decide which meaning to choose (Sandra, 2018). Words in English sometimes have multiple meanings and functions, whether it is a noun, a verb, or even an adjective.

There was some previous research that analyzed challenges in translating text. First, the previous research was conducted by Amin in 2023, who analyzed the challenge faced by Kurdish EFL learners in translating English. He used a mixed method to investigate the difficulties encountered by Kurdish EFL learners in translating English collocations and analyzed solutions to improve their translation proficiency. 20 fourth-year students from the University of Sulaimani were included in this research (Amin, 2023). Then, the second previous research was conducted by Bulbul in 2024, who investigated the challenges in understanding idiomatic expressions. He explored the internal and external obstacles learners encounter in comprehending and employing idioms, encompassing semantic opacity, cultural interdependence, and interference from their original language (Hajiyeva, 2024). The other previous research was conducted by Abduxelilova and Mamasoliyev in 2025. They analyzed fixed expressions in English, such as idioms, proverbs, and collocations, and explored the challenges of translating them into other languages. It emphasises that fixed idioms often contain specific cultural characteristics that are difficult to translate effectively into another language, frequently resulting in misinterpretations or a loss of meaning (Abduxalilova & Mamasoliyev, 2025). Then, Vula and Ymeri in 2025 also conducted research that focused on examining the translation strategies used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University

“Fehmi Agani” in Gjakova, especially identifying the usage of literal translation, paraphrase, and cultural equivalents when translating English idioms into Albanian (Vula & Ymeri, 2025).

Previous studies have highlighted various problems in translating idiomatic expressions, such as limited vocabulary mastery, insufficient cultural knowledge, and a lack of awareness of idiomatic usage. However, many of these studies have focused primarily on translation outcomes rather than exploring learners' experiences and perspectives during the translation process. A qualitative investigation is therefore necessary to gain deeper insights into the nature of the challenges encountered by EFL learners and the factors influencing their translation decisions. Given the cultural specificity of idiomatic expressions, understanding how EFL learners bridge cultural and semantic gaps in translation is essential. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by EFL learners in translating English idiomatic expressions and to examine the linguistic and cultural factors underlying these challenges. By identifying common difficulties and learners' strategies, the findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of more effective translation instruction and to enhance learners' intercultural competence in EFL contexts.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design with limited quantitative support. The design is appropriate for exploring in depth the types of challenges faced by EFL learners and the linguistic and cultural factors influencing their translation of English idiomatic expressions. This study is grounded in Nida's theory of equivalence, which emphasizes meaning-oriented translation, and is supported by cultural translation theory to explain the cultural constraints affecting EFL learners' translation of English idiomatic expressions. The participants of this study are EFL learners studying English as a foreign language at a university level in Central Java. A total of 28 learners were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria that participants: have learned English for at least three years, have been introduced to basic translation activities, and share the same native language.

The instruments used in this study are the idiomatic translation test, questionnaire, and interview. An idiomatic translation test is used to identify types of translation challenges. It was used to answer the first research questionnaire. Then, a questionnaire was used to know the learners' perceptions of difficulty, familiarity with idioms, and cultural understanding. It used to answer the first and second research questions. While interview used to explore learners' thought processes, cultural interpretations, and linguistic difficulties when translating idioms. Primarily address linguistic and cultural factors. It was used to answer the second research question. Instrument validity in this study was ensured through content and construct validity, reliability checks, and expert judgement. These procedures confirmed that the idiomatic translation test, questionnaire, and interview instruments were appropriate and aligned with the research objectives and theoretical framework.

There were some steps in the data collection procedures. The first step was for participants to be briefed on the purpose of the study and to give informed consent. Then, they had a test to assess their competence in idiom translation. The idiomatic translation test was administered in a controlled setting. After the learners completed the test, they filled out the questionnaire. After that, the participants take part in semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into their translation strategies and difficulties. All of the procedures were conducted

within two weeks. The researcher had some points as the consideration in collecting the data, such as the participants' identities remain anonymous, participation was voluntary, and the data was used only for academic purposes.

The researcher used error analysis and content analysis to analyze the data to answer the first research question. It is categorized into: lexical challenges, semantic challenges, idiomatic equivalence problems, and literal translation tendencies. Then, the researcher used thematic analysis to analyze the data from the questionnaire and interview to answer the second research question. Themes related to linguistic factors such as vocabulary knowledge, idiom familiarity, and grammar. Besides that, cultural factors such as cultural references, context, and figurative meaning are identified and interpreted.

Results and Discussion

The research aimed to explore the challenges faced by EFL learners in translating English idiomatic expressions and to examine the linguistic and cultural factors underlying these challenges. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the participants were drawn from a limited population of EFL learners within a specific educational context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other EFL settings with different proficiency levels or cultural backgrounds. Second, the idiomatic translation test focused on a selected number of idiomatic expressions, which may not fully represent the self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions and response bias. Finally, although interviews provided in-depth insight, the number of interview participants was limited, and the findings may not capture all possible perspectives on linguistics and cultural challenges in idiom translation. The researcher found that the challenges faced by EFL learners in translating English idiomatic expressions were lexical challenge, semantic challenge, idiomatic challenge, and literal translation tendencies. We can read the detailed categories below:

Table 1. Idiomatic expression translation challenge

No	Categories	Percent (%)
1	Lexical Challenge	18%
2	Semantic Challenge	36%
3	Idiomatic Challenge	14%
4	Literal Translation Tendencies	32%

Then, the researcher found that linguistic factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as vocabulary, idiom familiarity, and grammar. On the other hand, the researcher found that cultural factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as cultural references, context, and figurative meaning. We can read the detailed categories below:

Table 2. Several factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately

No.	Categories	Percent (%)
1.	Linguistic Factors	Vocabulary
	Idiom Familiarity	
	Grammar	
2.	Cultural Factors	Cultural references
	Context	
	Figurative meaning	

Idiomatic Expression Translation Challenge

The researcher found that the idiomatic expression translation challenges were lexical challenges, which were about 18%, semantic challenges were about 36%, idiomatic challenges were about 14%, and literal translation tendencies were about 32%. The dominant idiomatic expression translation challenge was a semantic challenge.

Lexical Challenge

Idiomatic Expression: Let the cat out of the bag

Translation Data (1,4) : *Biarkan rahasianya terungkap*

Translation Data (7,4) : *Biarkan rahasia terbongkar*

From the data (1,4) the learners translate the idiomatic expression to be “*biarkan rahasianya terungkap*” and data (7,4) the learners translate the idiomatic expression to be “*biarkan rahasia terbongkar*” it should be “*membocorkan rahasia secara tidak sengaja*”. The learners have difficulties related to vocabulary choice. It happens when learners lack equivalent words in the target language. Lexical challenge involves problems with wrong meaning and word form. It was because the learners had limited vocabulary knowledge.

Semantic Challenge

Idiomatic Expression: Break the ice

Translation Data (6,1) : *Pemanasan*

Translation Data (13,1) : *Beranilah untuk mengambil keputusan*

From the data (6,1) the learners translated the idiomatic expression to be “*pemanasan*”, and from the data (13,1) the learners translated the idiomatic expression to be “*beranilah untuk mengambil keputusan*” it should be “*mencairkan suasana*”. Semantic challenge concerns the learners' difficulties in understanding the intended meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence in context. It happens when the learners misunderstand contextual or implied meaning. The learners may know the vocabulary, but they misinterpret the meaning.

Idiomatic Challenge

Idiomatic Expression: Under the weather

Translation Data (9,1) : *Tidak percaya diri*

Translation Data (4,5) : *Cuaca buruk*

From the data (9,1) the learners translated the idiomatic expression to be “*tidak percaya diri*,” and from the data (4,5) the learners translated the idiomatic expression to be “*cuaca buruk*,” which should be “*tidak enak badan*”. An idiomatic challenge arises when translating idioms or fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be understood literally. The meaning is non-compositional or not predictable from individual words. Here, the meaning of the sentence is strongly influenced by culture. Then, literal translation usually results in nonsense or incorrect meaning.

Literal Translation Tendencies

Idiomatic Expression: Under the weather

Translation Data (6,6) : *Di bawah cuaca*

Idiomatic Translation: Hit the nail on the head

Translation Data (4,2) : *kuku dan tangan*

From the idiomatic expression under the weather, data (6,6) the learners translate the idiomatic expression to be “*di bawah cuaca*” and the idiomatic expression hit the nail on the head, data (4,2) the learners translate the idiomatic expression to be “*kuku dan tangan*”. Learners usually translate the idiomatic expression word-for-word without adjusting for grammar, meaning, or culture. The, this challenge often leads to errors in idiomatic and semantic meaning. It is because of students' lack of confidence or insufficient translation competence.

The result of this study was similar to Hajiyeva's research; her study explored the internal and external challenges learners face in understanding and using idioms, including issues of semantic opacity, cultural dependencies, and native language interference (Hajiyeva, 2024). The other previous research was conducted by Hajiyeva in 2025, which focused on exploring the complex challenges that arise in the translation of idioms and slang expressions, focusing on their cultural specificity, semantic ambiguity, and lack of direct equivalents in target languages (Hajiyeva, 2025). On the other hand, Sandra conducted research that focused on analyzing the problems and strategies in translating text from English as the source text to Indonesia language as the target text. Then, the result showed that the problems in translation mostly were around lexical, grammatical, and semantic elements (Sandra, 2018). There was another previous research that was conducted by Sari, Matilda, and Rosalinah, they focused on analyzing translation strategies of idiom expression (Sari et al., 2025), while this study focus to analyze the challenge in translating idiom expression.

Several factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately.

Then, the researcher found linguistic factors contribute to EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as vocabulary was about 45%, idiom familiarity were about 35%, and grammar was about 20%. Then, cultural factors contribute to

EFL learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately, such as cultural references were about 40%, context was about 30%, and figurative meaning was about 30%.

Linguistics Factors

One of the learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately was vocabulary. The differences in word meanings between English and my native language affect the learners' understanding of idioms. Then, the second difficulty was idiom familiarity, the learners had difficulties in analyzing polysemy (words having multiple meanings) in English idioms causes confusion in translation. Besides that, the learners' limited knowledge of English idioms contributes to inaccurate translations. Besides that, the learners' English proficiency influences their ability to translate idiomatic expressions correctly. Then, the third learners' difficulties in translating English idiomatic expression accurately was grammar. Grammatical differences between English and the learners' native language affect the accuracy of idiom translation. It was similar with Sandras' study, she found that the problems in translation mostly are around lexical, grammatical, and semantic elements (Sandra, 2018). However, her study used text as the subject of the study, while this study used idiom expressions as the subject of the research.

Cultural Factors

The learners had difficulties in translating English idiomatic expressions accurately because they did not know the cultural references of the target language. Cultural differences between English-speaking countries and the learners' culture make it difficult to translate the idiom expression. Idiomatic expressions are often rooted in a specific culture's history, traditions, beliefs, or daily life. These cultural elements may not exist or may carry different connotations in the target language. As a result, a literal translation can be confusing or misleading for target readers. Translators must understand both source and target cultures to find an equivalent expression that conveys the same meaning and pragmatic effect, rather than the same words.

The second reason was about context. Context determines how an idiom should be interpreted and translated. The meaning of an idiomatic expression can change depending on the situation, tone, speaker's intention, or discourse type (e.g., formal vs informal). Without considering context, a translator may choose an incorrect meaning or an inappropriate level of formality. Context helps translators decide whether an idiom should be translated idiomatically, paraphrased, or replaced with a culturally appropriate alternative.

The third reason was figurative meaning. The learners found it difficult to identify the figurative meaning of idiomatic expressions. Idioms function through figurative or metaphorical meanings that differ from the literal meanings of their individual words. Translators must identify the underlying figurative message (such as emotion, attitude, or evaluation) before translating. If the figurative meaning is ignored, the translation may sound unnatural or fail to communicate the intended message. Effective translation focuses on transferring meaning, not form.

The result of the study was similar to Jepri's study; he found that substantial difficulties occurred when translating idioms since there were no direct parallels in Indonesian and there

were discrepancies in cultural references (-, 2024). However, his study focused on analyzing idioms in social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It was supported by Fitria and Djauhari's study, which found that the translator's choices were affected by various factors, such as the limited space for subtitles, the intended audience (children and families), and the cultural differences in the use of idioms (Fitria & Djauhari, 2025). Besides that, the study conducted by Rifani and Nuran also supported the result of this study; they found that students who do not understand what English idioms really are and also the difficulty of distinguishing English idioms from other sentences that were not idiomatic expressions (Rifani & Nuran, 2024). However, they used narrative text as the subject of their study, while the researcher used idiomatic expressions in this study.

Conclusion

This research concludes that EFL learners encounter substantial challenges in translating English idiomatic expressions, primarily due to the non-literal nature of idioms and their strong dependence on cultural and contextual knowledge. The findings indicate that learners frequently struggle with recognizing idiomatic meanings, leading to literal translation tendencies that result in inaccurate or unnatural renditions in the target language. Lexical limitations and insufficient semantic awareness further contribute to these difficulties, as learners often rely on word-for-word strategies when appropriate idiomatic equivalents are unavailable or unknown.

Moreover, the study reveals that linguistic factors- such as limited vocabulary range, inadequate mastery of figurative language, and lack of pragmatic competence-interact closely with cultural factors, including unfamiliarity with source-language cultural references and differences in worldview between languages. These factors collectively hinder learners' ability to interpret and convey the intended meanings of idiomatic expressions.

Overall, the research highlights the need for greater emphasis on idiomatic competence, cultural awareness, and contextual understanding in EFL instruction. Integrating explicit teaching of idioms, comparative cultural explanations, and context-based translation practice may help EFL learners overcome these challenges and improve the accuracy and naturalness of their idiomatic translations.

The findings of this research have important implications for translation studies and EFL pedagogy. By identifying the linguistic and cultural challenges faced in translating idiomatic expressions, this study highlights the need to integrate idiom awareness, cultural competence, and contextual analysis into translation training. The results suggest that translation instruction should move beyond literal translation strategies and emphasize figurative meaning, pragmatic usage, and cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, this research contributes to the development of more effective teaching materials and translation strategies that can help learners produce more accurate and natural translations of idiomatic expressions. Future research may build on these findings to design targeted instructional models or assessment tools for idiom translation competence.

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