



# FOURTH-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF POETRY TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH TO VIETNAMESE IN LITERATURE CLASSES AT UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, HUE UNIVERSITY

Nguyen Bui Thuy Minh

University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, 57 Nguyen Khoa Chiem St., Hue, Vietnam

**Abstract.** Given the rise in the tendency of multi-cultural co-existence, culture is becoming greatly important in the exchange among countries. As a branch of translation, literature translation is regarded as a cross-cultural language transforming art, and literary translators act as a bridge in this process. In order to keep pace with the rapid development of translation industry, University of Foreign Languages – Hue University has strived to train high-qualified translators who are able to meet society's demands. However, within the broad scope of translation, poetry translation is one of the most overlooked fields and students often perform poorly in translating poems. Therefore, the general idea behind the research is to shed light on students' perception of poetry translation in the literature classes, their solutions to overcome common obstacles encountered while translating as well as proposing suggestions for the improvement of the current situation. It is envisaged that the study will be of benefit to not only English-majored students but also literature teachers at the university.

**Keywords:** poetry, translation, literary translation, poetry translation, students' perceptions, literature classes

## 1. Introduction

Literature, in its most comprehensive meaning, is an art form, or any single written work deemed to have lasting artistic or intellectual merit, mostly due to deploying language in distinctive ways that differ from ordinary usage. Because every facet of life can be written, recorded in and learned from a piece of writing, literature is also viewed as the reflection of humanity's cultures, beliefs and traditions.

Of all the prevailing genres of literature, poetry is often regarded as the most powerful and the longest-surviving form of writing throughout human history. Because poets tend to use words sparingly with no unnecessary ones, their products are usually terser in meaning and tighter in construction. In the matter of linguistic nature, poetry has more energy and strength

---

\* *Corresponding:* thuyminh.nb1602@gmail.com

in a shorter space compared with other types of literature. Thus, poetry is widely considered as the most effective and expressive gateway to transmitting knowledge and emotions of human beings.

In an attempt to spread out the knowledge and experience that have been written in literary texts, literary translation comes into existence as a solution. Millions of literary works have been translated annually and several obsolete ones have been revived into other languages. Simply speaking, translated literature adds to humanity's pleasure and encourages a greater understanding between different communities and cultures. In the long run, the cultural understanding and linguistic capability can help fuel economic competitiveness, improve employability and develop insight into foreign markets.

From a pedagogical perspective, literary translation can basically foster a deeper understanding of the intricacies of language and its various functions as well as improving written and spoken communication skills of students [2]. In particular, the process of translating a creative genre such as poetry allows students to interact with language on a deeper level and practice more authentic self-representation than they otherwise would. Aside from the lessons learned from grammatical accuracy, imagery effectiveness, etc., "their attempts to communicate familiar, internalized truths rather than simply mimicking modeled target language writing is where real learning takes place" [4].

Therefore, at most of the foreign-language teaching schools in the world, literary translation has been developed as either core curriculum or small task in literature classes. In specific, at the research site of this paper – University of Foreign Languages, Hue University (HUFL), training programs in translation have been offered, which means a number of trained students will embark on a professional translation career path. In addition, because translated literature is widely seen as a necessary medium of connecting distinct cross-border diversities, literary translation may ensure a bright prospect for students who plan to step into the translation industry. However, "translating literary texts, particularly poetry is a difficult process because it includes different figures of speech and literary devices and conveys metaphorical and figurative concepts beyond its literally meanings" [3]. Even professional translators, in many cases, find it hard to capture the source text's totality and to reach the criterion of "satisfactory renderings", let alone the students who are lacking in experience and knowledge. Difficult as it is, poetry translation is one of the most overlooked fields in students' language acquisition at HUFL. Neither translation practice curricula nor literature curricula make much of the aspect of poetry.

The scope of this research, hence, gives full attention towards English-majored students and poetry translation tasks undertaken in literature curricula.

## 2. Research questions

The research attempts to explore students' perception of literary/ poetry translation in literature classes, their problems during the process of poetry translation and solutions used to tackle those problems. Certainly, providing some specific suggestions to help students render poetry effectively is a valuable outcome.

The study aims to address the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of literary/ poetry translation in literature classes?
2. What difficulties do students encounter in poetry translation? What are the potential causes of their problems?
3. What solutions do students adopt to overcome difficulties in poetry translation?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research participants

This research was carried out at the Faculty of English, HUFL. The subjects for this research consist of 105 participants, who are divided into two main groups:

A total of 100 undergraduates majoring in English took part in the research. Because the participants are currently in their senior year, they already attended two compulsory translation practice curricula and two literature curricula. Hence, they are supposed to get a grasp of basic translation and poetry theories and hands-on experience in translating poems.

Five lecturers who have various levels of experience in teaching literature and linguistics form the rest of the sample. They also apply their own teaching methods to better facilitate students' understanding and performance in classes.

### 3.2. Data collection

The research combines the use of students' questionnaires and lecturers' interviews.

#### *Questionnaire*

The survey questionnaire is comprised of seventeen (16) questions, which are mostly closed-ended items alongside a small number of open-ended ones.

#### *Interview*

As interview insights into the nature of issue and the individual respondent's attitudes and experiences through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, the researcher

decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with five experienced lecturers (coded as T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5), who were purposefully chosen. Five (5) lecturers were interviewed at different times; each one lasted for 15-20 minutes.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The results of quantitative and qualitative data collected from fourth-year English-majored students' questionnaires and lecturers' interviews at HUFL are presented and analyzed in this section. Afterwards, in the light of relevant research studies, the findings will be drawn in response to the research's objectives.

##### 4.1. Students' attitudes towards literary/ poetry translation in literature classes

###### 4.1.1. Fourth-year English-majored students' prior knowledge in poetry translation

Because students' prior knowledge is one of the strongest indicators of students' attitude and performance in class, it is essential to have a good grasp of the surveyed students' background knowledge before taking any further step. A set of 6 items on the Likert Scale was used to investigate students' levels of understanding on basic poetry translation theories that have been introduced into the university curricula.

Table 1. Students' background knowledge in poetry translation

Knowledge	Not at all (%)	Very little (%)	Somewhat (%)	To a great extent (%)
Translation process	0	0	74	26
Translation principles	0	0	63	37
Translation criteria	0	0	63	37
Poetry genres	0	40	30	30
Figurative language in poetry	0	50	50	0
Sound features in poetry	18	49	33	0

The findings reveal that whereas a substantial majority of English-majored students have a good command of translation theories, a noticeable number of them show their lack of knowledge when it comes to poetry. The obtained results are in line with researcher's expectations owing to the differences in curriculum distribution. In the second and third years of university, English-majored students are required to follow two translation practice curricula, and specialized knowledge if they continue their further study for professional translators. In contrast, with the broad scope of literature, the limitation of time does not allow lecturers to cover the syllabus, not to mention the mere subject of poetry.

**Table 2.** Frequency of students’ practicing translation

Frequency of practicing	Rate, %
Always	22
Sometimes	45
Rarely	33
Never	0

With regard to the frequency of students’ after-school practicing, almost every English-major student appeared to practice translation at home, at different frequencies. This is not a surprising result, given that translation is a complex process that requires students a considerable time to get a thorough command of the source and target languages in terms of their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties. On the other hand, the fact that there was one out of three students said they rarely practiced translation at home is quite a serious situation that needs taking into consideration by the educators.

*4.1.2. Students’ attitudes towards the role of poetry translation in literature classes:*

In a classroom context, students’ attitudes towards learning determine their ability and willingness to learn. Needless to say, attitude assessment is a challenging activity which requires adequate and thorough approaches. Figure 1 presents students’ responses to the question regarding the significance of literary/poetry translation in literary courses.

Do you think literary/ poetry translation should be valued more in literature courses?



**Figure 1.** The importance of literary translation in literature courses

Regarding the role of poetry translation in literature classes, a majority of students (69%) agreed that literary/ poetry translation should be valued more in literature courses. When asked to justify their choices, a majority of students affirmed that thanks to the act of translating, not only can they enhance their aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment of fine literature in general; they also have a chance to develop their translation skills. The findings suggest that most of the

English-majored students are well aware of the importance of poetry translation and favor the idea of literary/poetry translation being given more importance in literature courses. The rest, on the other hand, took a dim view of the issue in that poetry translation itself is beyond the abilities of students including students trained as professional translators.

To gain a more thorough insight into the issue, the researcher carried out interviews with HUFL teachers. From the perspective of educators, literary translation is of great value as a language teaching tool. However, to accord literary translation the place it deserves, one should not merely view it within the narrow context of literature class. This field of translation studies should come far more pervasive and acquire its status as a key academic domain in the university.

4.1.3. *Students’ interest in poetry translation tasks in literature classes*

Generally speaking, the extent to which students are keen on learning is intrinsically linked with students’ motivation for learning, learning process and school performance. The absence of enjoyment in the education context, therefore, is among the major causes of low achievement that does not reflect the actual and true potential of students <sup>[1]</sup>. For such reasons, an investigation into English-majored students’ level of enjoyment in poetry translation is the survey’s focal point as it promises to offer a panoramic view of students’ attitudes at HUFL for the whole research.

**Table 3.** Degree of students’ interest in poetry translation

Degree of interest	Rate, %
Very much	0
Somewhat	56
Slightly	29
Not at all	15

The results reveal the fact that over a half of the participants (56%) were somewhat interested in poetry translation, followed by those who had little enjoyment in it with 29%. The remainder said they gained no enthusiasm from the experience. Basically, most of the subjects appreciated the activity in a fairly positive manner. In relation to previous discussion, the level of enjoyment in poetry translation, to a certain degree, is in accordance with great significance that students attached to the matter.

4.1.4. *Students’ attitudes towards the usefulness of poetry translation in literature classes*

Table 4 shows students’ responses to the 5 items regarding the usefulness of poetry translation tasks in literature classes.

**Table 4.** Usefulness of poetry translation in literature classes

Purpose	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
To develop literary appreciation (understanding of theme, setting, form, meter, literary devices, symbolism, etc.)	0	0	9	76	15
To acquire knowledge about the source and target cultures	0	0	11	46	43
To raise awareness of the differences between both linguistic systems	9	12	39	30	10
To improve lexical and grammatical knowledge	0	4	21	42	33
To improve translation skills (strategies and techniques)	0	8	0	64	28

Of all the items, it came as no surprise that literary appreciation was the most preferable factor. Maley and Duff [5], when discussing the important conditions for language acquisition, asserted that poetry was par excellence the medium in which learners could play with language, test and explore its limits. In this sense, the act of translating poetry takes students a significant step further in their encounter with writing styles as well as literary devices. With a more comprehensive grasp of the definitions and applications of these foregoing poetic features, students' abilities to enjoy and evaluate artistic merits would be boosted considerably. On the other hand, an unexpected number of students appeared to have a negative attitude towards linguistic benefits obtained from poetry translation, probably due to the fact that the facet of linguistics is not highlighted as a syllabus goal.

Overall, the questionnaire results indicate that most English-majored students recognized the status of poetry translation as an effective learning tool and its usefulness in various prospects in the context of literature classes.

## 4.2. Problems encountered by students during the process of poetry translation

### 4.2.1. Students' perspective on poetry translation's level of difficulty and their frequency of facing difficulties in poetry translation

Students were asked to rate the level of difficulty of poetry translation and the frequency of encountering obstacles during their own translating experiences. The following tables summarize the related statistics.

**Table 5.** Students’ perspective on poetry translation’s level of difficulty

Level of difficulty	Rate, %
Very difficult	43
Difficult	57
Not so difficult	0
Not at all	0

The findings show a high percentage of the participants, namely 43% regarded poetry translation as being very difficult to undertake while another group accounting for 57% ranked it as a difficult task. Strikingly, no one opted for the choices “Not so difficult” and “Not at all”. One valid inference could be drawn from the data is that English-majored students at HUFL are well aware of the difficulty of poetry translation. In an effort to find out potential factors that may have impact on fourth year English-majored students’ performance in poetry translation, the researcher also interviewed five lecturers for a more reliable interpretation. All of them shared the same point of view that how difficult it is for fourth year English-majored students to translate poetry depends on both internal and external factors. However, personal factor is the single most important factor that correlates strongly with students’ attitude and performance in their learning.

**Table 6.** Frequency of facing difficulties in poetry translation

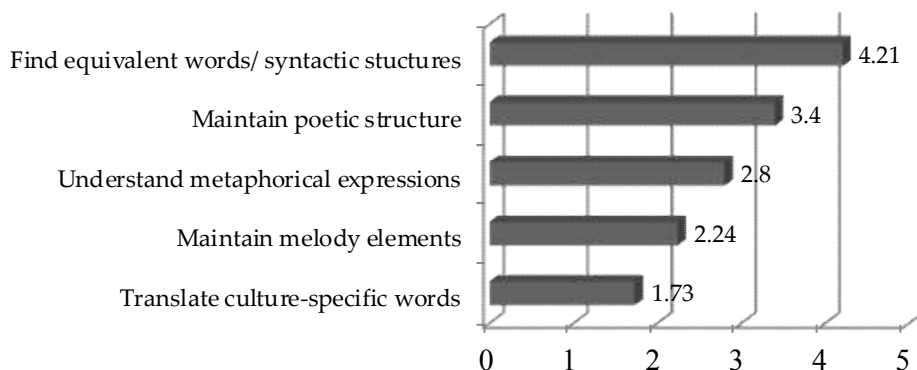
Frequency	Rate, %
Always	46
Sometimes	35
Rarely	19
Never	0

On answering the question “How often do you encounter problems while translating a poem?”, nearly a half of the total participants (46%) said that they always came across obstacles when translating poetry. Meanwhile, the percentages of those who admitted to occasionally and rarely encounter problems are 35% and 19% respectively. Overall, most of English-majored students experienced difficulties when rendering poetry. Concerning the nature of poetry translation, it is inevitable that translators have to face various obstacles due to linguistic, literary and aesthetic, and socio-cultural dissimilarities of two different languages.

*4.2.2. Problems during the process of poetry translation*

In this section, five categories of translation problems were devised and students were asked to rank them. The detailed statistics are as follows.





**Figure 2.** Most problematic factors of poetry translation

The results reveal that out of five given aspects, to find similar words, collocations, syntactic structures was the most critical challenge for students while translating poetry. The other concerns were ones derived from poetic structure and metaphorical expressions, followed closely by problems related to sound in poetry. The factor that contributed the least extent of intricacy in translation work was rendering culture-specific words.

To verify the findings obtained from quantitative data, the researcher asked lecturers to make comments on the issue as they are ones who interact and work directly with students. Although other lectures’ responses varied to some extent, they all agreed that linguistic elements such as collocation and obscured syntactic structures are major obstacles that fourth year English-majored students encounter when translating poetry.

**4.3. Students’ preferred solutions to overcome difficulties**

Because students’ ability to respond to various learning situations reflect their attitudes towards their effectiveness in learning to a certain extent, this part of the questionnaire aims to find out students’ most preferable solutions when they encounter obstacles while translating poetry.

**Table 7.** Students’ solutions when encountering difficulties

Solutions	Frequency (%)
Ignore the difficulties and continue with easier parts	0
Ask teachers	29
Ask friends	30
Study reference materials	41
Others (Please specify)	0

As clearly displayed in Table 7, nearly under a half of the respondents (41%) claimed using reference resources when they got stuck in poetry translation. Meanwhile, there are also a number of students, accounting for 30%, tended to ask their friends for help. Another 29% of students considered they would rather turn to their teachers when they ran into difficulties. In general, English-majored students preferred collaborative work either with their peers or their teachers when problems in poetry translation arise. As students are actively involved in interacting with other people, better solutions that would have not been reached individually can be produced. Besides, some considered the option of using previously translated material that is similar in style and/or content. The proliferation of information on the Internet as well as the accessibility of library at the university makes it all easier for students to approach useful reference materials.

As pointed out when describing the procedure followed in the survey, this question also included a section in which students could include additional solutions to tackle problems during translating poetry. Albeit students were encouraged to provide their personal opinion, there were no comments on what solutions could contribute.

To sum up, as much as students highly valued teacher's role in improving their literary translation performance, their increasing level of engagement with the materials and collaboration with their peers also showed their active manner in learning.

## **5. Conclusions, limitations and future research**

### **5.1. Conclusions**

The major findings display that fourth year English-majored students fully acknowledged the role of literary translation in facilitating their aesthetic evaluation and appreciation as well as translation skills. They also favored the idea of incorporating translation tasks into the teaching of other literary genres aside from poetry. Notwithstanding the great value students attached to literary/ poetry translation, they showed a lack of devotion and genuine interest in the activity. Main poetry translation problems encountered are also taken into consideration. The major problems were believed to be linguistic, literary and aesthetic, and socio-cultural factors. The issue of linguistics, which revolves around the finding of equivalent collocation and deviant syntactic structure, posed the biggest challenge for students. Literary elements such as poetic structure, metaphor and sound were also regarded as real aching obstacles among students. Lastly, the least problematic factor in poetry translation originated from culturally-bound words or expressions. Students' final point of view on their preferred solutions to overcome difficulties indicates that English-majored students agreed that the most effective way to overcome difficulties in poetry translation was asking their teachers and friends for advice. Besides,

some of them preferred studying reference resources available on the Internet and in the libraries to tackle the problems.

## 5.2. Limitations and implications for future research

Certain limitations may prompt the need for further research. To start with, small research sample (in comparison to the total number of English-majored students at HUFL) was not representative of general opinions and practices. There is also the possibility of selection bias, which means certain attitudes of students were not captured by this research. Addressing these limitations, the current findings could be used as a basis for confirmatory work on a larger sample of students and universities. In addition, it is possible that perceptions of poetry translation in literature classes and related issues may change in the coming years. For example, in recent years, HUCFL has updated and adjusted its training programmes and pedagogical objectives to keep up with the demands of society, and therefore students' attitudes towards the role of literary/ poetry translation in general may be altered. Hence, this study could be extended in a comparative way and more research will in fact be necessary to refine and further elaborate the findings emerged from my analysis.

## References

1. Al-Shara, I. (2015), Learning and Teaching Between Enjoyment And Boredom As Realized By A Survey From The Educational Field. *European Scientific Journa*, 11(19), 146–168.
2. Clee, N. (2011, September 29), *Ten reasons to value literary translation*. Retrieved from Book Brunch: <http://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/free-article/ten-reasons-to-value-literary-translation/>
3. Fadaee, E. (2011), Poetry in Translation: A Comparative Study of Silverstein's Monolingual and Bilingual (English to Persian) Poems. *Journal of English and Literature*, 2(3), 75–82.
4. Lacey, P. M. (2013), Poetry in translation to teach ESL composition at the college level. Retrieved from <https://dc.ewu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com.vn/&httpsredir=1&article=1087&context=theses>
5. Maley, A. & Duff, A. (1989), *The Inward Ear: Poetry in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.