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PERCEIVED DIFFICULTY AND TRANSLATION PERFORMANCE IN CULTURE-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS: EVIDENCE FROM EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: Culture-specific elements are widely recognised as challenging in translation, yet the alignment between learners' perceived difficulties and their actual performance remains underexplored. This study examines these dimensions together with students' perceived causes of difficulty in translating culture-specific elements. A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining questionnaire data from 113 students with analysis of translation outputs from a subset of 40 students. The findings show that the learners tended to regard idioms and proverbs and culturally marked items as difficult, while perceiving more familiar elements, such as food and forms of address, as less challenging. However, translation performance varied considerably across categories, with over-literal translations and inadequate cultural renderings accounting for more than 80% of responses. The results also indicate only partial alignment between perceived difficulty and observed performance, suggesting that learners' awareness does not fully capture the complexity of translation tasks. These findings highlight the importance of integrating cultural knowledge, strategic awareness, and reflective practice in translation instruction.

Keywords: culture-specific elements, translation performance, perceived difficulty, perception–performance gap, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners

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NHẬN THỨC VỀ ĐỘ KHÓ VÀ HIỆU SUẤT DỊCH CÁC YẾU TỐ ĐẶC THÙ VĂN HÓA: MINH CHỨNG TỪ NGƯỜI HỌC EFL

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Tóm tắt: Các yếu tố đặc thù văn hóa được xem là một trong những thách thức trong dịch thuật, nhưng sự tương đồng và khác biệt giữa nhận thức về độ khó và hiệu suất dịch thực tế vẫn chưa được nghiên cứu đầy đủ. Nghiên cứu này xem xét hai khía cạnh này, đồng thời khảo sát nhận thức của sinh viên về các nguyên nhân gây khó khăn khi dịch các yếu tố đặc thù văn hóa. Nghiên cứu sử dụng thiết kế hỗn hợp, kết hợp dữ liệu bảng hỏi từ 113 sinh viên với phân tích sản phẩm dịch của 40 sinh viên trong nhóm này. Kết quả cho thấy người học có xu hướng đánh giá thành ngữ, tục ngữ và các yếu tố mang đậm dấu ấn văn hóa là khó dịch, trong khi các yếu tố quen thuộc như món ăn và cách xưng hô được xem là ít khó hơn. Tuy nhiên, hiệu suất dịch cho thấy sự khác biệt đáng kể giữa các nhóm yếu tố văn hóa, trong đó, dịch sát nghĩa và diễn đạt chưa đầy đủ ý nghĩa văn hóa chiếm hơn 80% số trường hợp. Kết quả cũng cho thấy chỉ có sự tương đồng một phần giữa nhận thức về độ khó và hiệu suất dịch thực tế. Những phát hiện này nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc tích hợp hiểu biết văn hóa, nhận thức chiến lược và thực hành phản tư trong giảng dạy dịch thuật.

Từ khóa: yếu tố đặc thù văn hóa, hiệu suất dịch, nhận thức về độ khó, khoảng cách giữa nhận thức và hiệu suất, người học EFL

1. Introduction

The translation of culture-specific elements remains a persistent challenge in language learning contexts, particularly for learners working between linguistically and culturally distant languages. Such elements often carry meanings deeply embedded in cultural practices, social relationships, and symbolic systems, making them difficult to render accurately in another language. Because these meanings are culturally situated, successful translation requires more than linguistic equivalence; it also involves interpreting and conveying culturally embedded meanings across contexts (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988). This challenge is particularly relevant in Vietnamese - English translation, where learners must negotiate culturally embedded meanings across substantially different linguistic and cultural systems.

Previous research has examined translation strategies and the difficulties associated with culture-specific elements. However, existing studies have often focused either on translation products and strategy use or on learners' self-reported perceptions of translation difficulty. Comparatively less attention has been paid to examining both perspectives within the same research context. While studies focusing on learners' perceptions provide insight into how translation difficulties are understood and evaluated (Angelone, 2010), analyses of translation performance offer evidence of how such difficulties are reflected in translation outputs and strategy use (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018). Because perceptions and performance capture different dimensions of translation competence, examining only one perspective may provide an incomplete understanding of translation difficulty (Angelone, 2010; Pym, 2014).

Considering both perceived difficulty and observed translation performance may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner translation competence. Examining these perspectives together makes it possible to identify areas where learners' perceptions correspond with the patterns reflected in their translation performance, as well as areas where important divergences emerge. Such comparisons can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of learner awareness of translation difficulty and the challenges reflected in translation practice. They may also offer insights that inform more targeted pedagogical practices in translation education.

Accordingly, the present study examines learners' perceived difficulties, their observed translation performance in handling culture-specific elements, and the extent to which these two dimensions align with or diverge from one another. It also explores the factors that learners perceive as contributing to translation difficulty. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. *What difficulties do students perceive when translating culture-specific elements?*
2. *How do students perform in translating such elements in practice?*
3. *In what ways do perceived difficulties align with or diverge from observed translation performance in translating culture-specific elements?*
4. *What factors do students perceive as contributing to their translation difficulties?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culture-Specific Elements as a Source of Translation Difficulty

Culture-specific elements (CSEs), also referred to as culture-specific items (CSIs), have long been recognized as a significant source of translation difficulty. These elements generally refer to lexical items, expressions, or references that are closely tied to the cultural context of the source language and may not have direct equivalents in the target language (Aixelá, 1996; Newmark, 1988; Pedersen, 2011). Such elements may include references to food, social practices, rituals, forms of address, and other culturally embedded concepts whose meanings extend beyond purely linguistic representation.

A central challenge associated with CSEs lies in the cultural asymmetry that often exists between source and target language communities (Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988). Because such elements are embedded within particular cultural systems, translating them involves more than replacing words across languages. Instead, translators must interpret culturally situated meanings and determine how these meanings can be represented in ways that remain intelligible and appropriate for target-language readers (Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988). This challenge becomes particularly evident when source-language expressions reflect concepts, practices, or social relationships that are unfamiliar to the target audience.

The difficulty of translating CSEs may also vary according to the nature of the cultural element involved. Some elements, such as food or material objects, may permit relatively direct transfer or borrowing, whereas culturally embedded practices, rituals, beliefs, and social relationships often require greater adaptation or explanation (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018). Similarly, forms of address may present challenges because they frequently reflect culturally specific systems of social hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, and identity that do not map neatly onto equivalent forms in another language (Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988).

These perspectives suggest that CSEs represent a domain in which translation requires both linguistic and cultural mediation. Difficulties arise not only from the absence of direct lexical equivalents but also from the need to interpret and convey culturally grounded meanings

across different cultural systems. Similar challenges have also been reported in Vietnamese-English translation contexts, where culture-bound references, symbolic meanings, and idiomatic expressions may resist straightforward transfer into English and require strategic adaptation by translators (Tran, 2025). Such challenges make CSEs a particularly useful context for examining translation difficulty and the challenges learners encounter when translating culturally embedded meanings.

2.2. Translating Culture-Specific Elements: Strategies and Competence

Because culture-specific elements often lack straightforward equivalents across languages, translators are required to make decisions about how culturally embedded meanings should be represented in the target language. Translation is therefore not simply a matter of transferring lexical forms but involves selecting among alternative ways of conveying meaning across cultural contexts (Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988). The translation of culture-specific elements may consequently be understood as a process of mediation in which translators balance considerations of meaning, cultural specificity, readability, and communicative effectiveness.

Translation studies have identified a range of strategies for handling culture-specific elements, often conceptualized along a continuum between source-oriented and target-oriented approaches (Aixelá, 1996; Newmark, 1988). At one end of the continuum are source-oriented strategies, such as borrowing or direct transfer, which preserve the form of the source-language element and maintain its cultural specificity. At the other end are more target-oriented strategies, including paraphrase, explicitation, adaptation, and cultural substitution, which seek to enhance accessibility for target-language readers while potentially modifying aspects of the original cultural meaning (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018; Newmark, 1988). Between these poles, translators may employ a variety of intermediate solutions depending on the characteristics of the cultural element and the communicative demands of the translation context.

The selection of a translation strategy is rarely predetermined. Rather, it involves evaluating alternative possibilities and making context-sensitive decisions about how culturally embedded meanings can be represented most effectively (Chesterman, 2016; Pym, 2014). Factors such as the nature of the cultural element, the intended audience, and the purpose of the translation may all influence strategic choices. As a result, different translators may adopt different solutions when confronted with the same culture-specific element.

The ability to make such context-sensitive decisions has frequently been associated with broader understandings of translation competence (Hurtado Albir, 2015; Kelly, 2005; Pym, 2014). In educational contexts, learners' handling of culture-specific elements may be influenced by factors such as cultural understanding, linguistic resources, and strategic awareness. These factors have been widely identified as important dimensions of translation competence (Hurtado Albir, 2015; Kelly, 2005; Pym, 2014). In the case of culture-specific elements, learners must draw upon these resources to interpret culturally grounded meanings and determine how they can be conveyed appropriately in the target language (Hurtado Albir, 2015; Kelly, 2005).

These perspectives suggest that the translation of culture-specific elements involves more than the application of isolated translation procedures. Instead, it requires the coordinated use of cultural knowledge, linguistic resources, and strategic decision-making. Variations in how learners handle culture-specific elements may therefore provide insight into the challenges they encounter when responding to translation difficulty. However, the challenges reflected in translation performance may not always correspond to how learners themselves perceive translation difficulty (Angelone, 2010; Pym, 2014). This suggests the need to consider both

perspectives when examining translation difficulty. This distinction between perceived and observed difficulty provides the basis for the discussion in the following section.

2.3. Perceived and Observed Translation Difficulty in Research

Translation difficulty has been examined from a variety of perspectives in translation studies. While some researchers have focused on the characteristics of texts and translation tasks, others have emphasized the role of translators and the ways in which difficulty is experienced and managed during the translation process. As a result, translation difficulty is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that may be approached through different forms of evidence rather than a single indicator (Sun, 2015; Sun & Shreve, 2014). This perspective suggests that understanding translation difficulty requires attention not only to translation outcomes but also to how translators perceive and experience translation challenges.

One common approach has focused on learners' perceptions of translation difficulty. Such studies typically draw on questionnaires, interviews, self-assessments, or reflective accounts to examine the challenges learners believe they encounter during translation. This line of research has provided valuable insights into learners' awareness of linguistic, cultural, and strategic difficulties, as well as the factors they perceive as influencing translation performance. For example, Nguyen and Dao (2020) found that learners experienced difficulties in evaluating translation quality and identifying problems in their own translations, suggesting that learners' perceptions could provide important insights into how translation challenges were understood and interpreted. Studies of perceived difficulty are therefore valuable because they offer direct access to learners' experiences and judgments regarding translation tasks.

A second approach has concentrated on observed translation performance. Rather than examining learners' perceptions, these studies analyze translation products, translation behavior, or performance outcomes in order to identify sources of difficulty and evaluate translation quality. This body of research has contributed important evidence regarding the linguistic, cultural, and strategic challenges encountered during translation. At the same time, translation difficulty cannot always be inferred directly from translation quality alone. Sun and Shreve (2014), for example, found that translation quality may not serve as a reliable indicator of translation difficulty, highlighting the complexity of assessing difficulty solely through translation outcomes. Performance-based approaches, therefore, provide valuable but partial evidence regarding translation difficulty.

The distinction between perceived and observed difficulty has attracted increasing attention because these perspectives do not necessarily generate identical insights. Research on translation trainees has suggested that self-evaluation and confidence do not always correspond closely with actual performance outcomes (Latorraca, 2023). Differences between learners' perceptions and their observed performance, therefore, suggest that challenges identified by learners may not always correspond directly to those reflected in translation outcomes. Together, these studies indicate that perceived difficulty and observed performance provide complementary rather than interchangeable perspectives on translation difficulty.

Within Vietnamese - English translation contexts, previous studies have reported difficulties associated with culturally embedded expressions, cultural references, translation quality assessment, and translation strategy selection (Nguyen & Dao, 2020; Tran, 2025). However, these studies have generally focused on either learners' accounts of translation difficulty or analyses of translation products. Comparatively less attention has been directed toward examining how these two forms of evidence compare when learners translate culture-specific elements.

Existing research has therefore provided valuable insights into translation difficulty from both perceptual and performance-oriented perspectives. However, the alignment and divergence between these dimensions remain insufficiently understood, particularly in the translation of culture-specific elements within Vietnamese - English translation contexts. Consequently, there remains a need for studies that examine learners' perceived difficulties, their observed translation performance, and the extent to which these dimensions align or diverge when translating culture-specific elements.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design to examine students' perceived difficulties and observed performance in translating culture-specific elements. Quantitative data obtained through a Likert-scale questionnaire were used to investigate learners' perceptions of translation difficulty and the factors they perceived as contributing to those difficulties. In parallel, translation outputs were analyzed to examine how learners handled culture-specific elements in practice and to identify patterns in their translation performance.

The study is informed by a framework that conceptualizes translation difficulty as a multidimensional phenomenon that may be examined through both learners' perceptions and their observed translation performance (Sun, 2015; Sun & Shreve, 2014). Analytically, the study compares these two forms of evidence in order to identify areas of alignment and divergence between perceived and observed difficulty in the translation of culture-specific elements. Observed translation performance is treated as an indirect indicator of potential translation difficulty rather than as a direct measure of difficulty itself.

Translation performance was analyzed using a coding scheme adapted from previous work on the translation of culture-specific elements (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018). Student translations were coded according to the type of response produced for each culture-specific element. Initial coding was conducted by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the second author. Any discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. The integration of questionnaire data and translation analysis enabled a more comprehensive understanding of translation difficulty than either source of evidence alone.

3.2. Participants

A total of 113 final-year English-major students participated in the questionnaire survey. They were recruited from intact classes because they had completed core coursework in translation and interpreting and had prior experience with English - Vietnamese translation tasks, including classroom-based translation exercises involving culturally specific expressions. All 113 participants completed the questionnaire, which was used to examine their perceived difficulties and perceived causes of difficulty in translating culture-specific elements.

The translation task required more time and written effort than the questionnaire; therefore, participation in this task was voluntary. Among the 113 questionnaire respondents, 40 students agreed to complete the translation task. These 40 participants were not a separate sample but a subset of the original survey participants. Their translation outputs formed the dataset for the analysis of observed translation performance.

All participants provided informed consent before data collection, and all data were anonymized for analysis.

3.3. Instruments

The study employed two instruments: a questionnaire and a translation task. The questionnaire was designed to investigate students' perceived difficulties in translating culture-specific elements and their perceptions of factors contributing to those difficulties. The translation task was used to examine students' observed performance in translating culture-specific elements from Vietnamese into English.

3.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to investigate students' perceived difficulties in translating different types of culture-specific elements, as well as their perceptions of underlying causes.

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by lecturers with experience in translation teaching and research to ensure clarity, content relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Minor revisions were subsequently made to improve wording and conceptual consistency. No major issues of item clarity were reported during administration.

The perceived difficulty scale consisted of five response options ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). For analytical purposes, the scale was reverse-coded so that higher values indicated greater perceived difficulty.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each multi-item construct. The perceived difficulty scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .74$). The items measuring perceived causes were grouped into three multi-item categories: cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical. The cultural ($\alpha = .89$) and linguistic ($\alpha = .81$) scales showed good internal consistency, while the pedagogical scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .69$). The contextual factor was measured using a single item and was therefore not included in the reliability analysis.

Table 1

Internal Consistency of the Questionnaire

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's α
Perceived difficulty	5	.74
Cultural causes	3	.89
Linguistic causes	3	.81
Pedagogical causes	3	.69
Contextual factor	1	—

** Note. The contextual factor was measured using a single item; therefore, internal consistency was not calculated.*

3.3.2. Translation Task

The translation task was designed to examine students' observed performance in translating culture-specific elements from Vietnamese into English. The task consisted of ten Vietnamese sentences containing culture-specific elements selected to represent the major categories examined in the study, including kinship terms, food-related items, customs, festivals and beliefs, costumes and symbolic references, idioms and proverbs, and historical figures. These categories were selected because they represent forms of culture-specific meaning that are commonly discussed in the translation literature and may present challenges in cross-cultural translation (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018).

The sentences were developed to reflect culturally meaningful expressions commonly encountered in Vietnamese contexts and to require translation decisions beyond direct lexical transfer. Prior to administration, the task was reviewed by lecturers with experience in translation teaching to ensure the appropriateness, clarity, and representativeness of the selected items.

Participants were required to translate each sentence into English. For analytical purposes, each culture-specific element was treated as a unit of analysis rather than each sentence as a whole. This approach enabled a more detailed examination of how individual cultural elements were handled in translation and facilitated the identification of recurring patterns in students' translation performance across different categories of culture-specific elements.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Perceived Difficulties

Questionnaire data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20). Descriptive statistics, including means (M) and standard deviations (SD), were calculated to examine students' perceived difficulties in translating different types of culture-specific elements and their perceptions of factors contributing to those difficulties. The different types of culture-specific elements were subsequently ranked according to their mean scores in order to identify those perceived as more or less difficult by students.

3.4.2. Translation Performance

Translation performance was analyzed using a product-oriented approach focusing on students' translation outputs. Each culture-specific element was treated as a unit of analysis. The coding scheme was developed through an iterative examination of students' responses and informed by previous discussions of culture-specific translation and translation strategies in the literature (Aixelá, 1996; Baker, 2018). The resulting categories captured recurring patterns in the ways students handled culture-specific elements in translation.

Each culture-specific element was assigned a single code representing the primary translation outcome observed. Only issues directly related to the rendering of culture-specific meaning were included in the analysis, while linguistic errors unrelated to cultural meaning were excluded. In cases of incomplete responses, only segments containing relevant culture-specific elements were analyzed.

All translation responses were coded using the established scheme, and frequency counts were calculated to identify dominant patterns across the dataset. Initial coding was conducted by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the second author. Ambiguous cases were discussed during the coding process, with final coding decisions made by the first author. The coding focused on the extent to which cultural meaning was conveyed rather than on strict lexical equivalence. Where direct equivalents were unavailable, translations were evaluated according to their ability to represent or explain the underlying cultural concept.

The coding scheme used to analyze translation performance is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Coding Scheme for Analyzing Translation Performance

Category	Code	Description	Examples
Over-literal translation	OL	Word-for-word rendering that preserves lexical meaning but fails to convey cultural meaning	“banh tet” for bánh tét; “cô” retained
Misinterpretation of	MI	Incorrect or distorted interpretation of	“croissants” for bánh tét;

cultural meaning		the cultural reference	“aunt” for cô
Omission of cultural elements	OM	Partial or complete omission of culturally salient elements	omission of khoai tay; omission of address forms
Inadequate cultural rendering	IR	Linguistically acceptable translation that does not adequately represent cultural significance	“crossed arms” for khoai tay; “Miss” for cô
Explication	EX	Addition of explanatory information to clarify culturally specific meaning	“bánh tét (a traditional Vietnamese sticky rice cake)”
Accurate rendering	AC	Translation that accurately conveys both linguistic and cultural meaning	“take off their shoes before entering”

* *Note.* Examples are drawn from student translations in the dataset.

3.4.3. Alignment and Divergence between Perception and Performance

The final stage of analysis involved comparing findings from the questionnaire and translation task. Perceived difficulty was represented by mean scores obtained from the questionnaire, whereas observed performance was reflected in the distribution of translation outcomes across coding categories. Rather than examining statistical relationships between the two datasets, the analysis focused on identifying areas of alignment and divergence between students’ perceived difficulties and their observed translation performance across different types of culture-specific elements.

4. Results

4.1. Perceived Difficulties in Translating Culture-Specific Elements

Table 3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for students’ perceived difficulties in translating different types of culture-specific elements. As the scale was reverse-coded, higher mean values indicate greater perceived difficulty.

Table 3

Perceived Difficulties in Translating Culture-Specific Elements

Cultural elements	Mean	SD	Rank
Idioms, proverbs, and figurative expressions	3.81	1.21	1
Festivals, rituals, and culturally specific ceremonies	3.27	1.09	2
Traditional costumes with cultural meaning	3.27	1.10	2
Food and other material culture	2.93	1.18	4
Kinship and address forms	2.83	1.27	5

* *Note.* The scale was reverse-coded, so higher mean values indicate greater perceived difficulty.

Overall, students reported varying levels of difficulty across the five categories. Idioms, proverbs, and figurative expressions were perceived as the most difficult ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.21$), standing out clearly from the other categories. This was followed by festivals, rituals, and culturally specific ceremonies ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.09$) and traditional costumes with cultural meaning ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.10$), which showed similar levels of perceived difficulty.

In contrast, food and other material culture ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.18$) and kinship and address forms ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.27$) were rated as relatively less difficult. Among these, kinship and address forms were perceived as the least challenging.

The standard deviations across categories indicate a moderate degree of variation in

students' responses, suggesting that perceptions of difficulty were not entirely uniform across the sample.

4.2. Patterns of Translation Performance Across Cultural Elements

Table 4 presents the overall distribution of translation outcomes across all responses.

Table 4

Overall Distribution of Translation Outcomes

Category	Code	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate cultural rendering	IR	157	41.8%
Over-literal translation	OL	150	39.9%
Accurate rendering	AC	32	8.5%
Misinterpretation	MI	25	6.6%
Omission	OM	12	3.2%
Total		376	100%

* Note. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of coded units ($N = 376$).

The analysis of translation responses revealed systematic patterns in how students handled culture-specific elements. Rather than reflecting a single type of difficulty, the data revealed a combination of recurring translation outcomes with varying degrees of effectiveness across cultural domains.

Overall, two categories accounted for the majority of responses. Inadequate cultural rendering (41.8%) and over-literal translation (39.9%) together comprised more than 80% of all coded units (see Table 4). In contrast, accurate renderings were relatively limited (8.5%) and were concentrated in specific contexts. Misinterpretation (6.6%) and omission (3.2%) occurred less frequently but remained analytically significant because of their impact on meaning. Instances of explicitation occurred too infrequently to warrant separate reporting in the frequency distributions.

A closer examination suggests that translation outcomes were not distributed uniformly across cultural element types. Instead, different patterns emerged across different categories of culture-specific elements. A more detailed breakdown by cultural element type is presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Distribution of Translation Outcomes Across Types of Culture-Specific Elements

Cultural element type	OL	IR	MI	OM	AC
Food (C1, C4, C5)	87	23	4	0	0
Gesture (C2)	0	30	4	3	0
Address (C3)	23	14	2	1	0
Festival (C6)	18	16	2	0	0
Ritual (C7)	0	27	6	4	0
Cultural object (C8)	13	22	3	0	0
Cultural practice (C9)	9	22	2	3	0
Everyday norm (C10)	0	3	2	1	32
Total	150	157	25	12	32

For food-related items (e.g., *bánh tét*, *bánh chưng*, *bún đậu mắm tôm*), over-literal translation was the dominant outcome. In most cases, students retained the original Vietnamese terms (e.g., *banh chung*, *bun dau mam tom*) without modification. In a smaller number of responses, descriptive equivalents such as “sticky rice cake” or hybrid forms such as “Chung cake” were used; however, these tended to reduce cultural specificity and were therefore classified as inadequate cultural renderings.

In contrast, gesture-based and object-related elements (e.g., *khoanh tay chào*, *nón lá*) were more frequently rendered through descriptive translations. These typically involved surface-level descriptions such as “crossed his arms” or “conical hats.” While such translations conveyed observable features, they often did not capture the cultural meanings associated with respect or symbolic identity. As a result, inadequate cultural renderings were particularly prominent in these categories.

A similar pattern was observed for more abstract cultural practices and rituals (e.g., *Rằm tháng Bảy*, *xông đất*), where inadequate cultural renderings and misinterpretations occurred more frequently. Students often relied on partial explanations (e.g., “first-footing ritual” or “the first person to enter the house”), which approximated the meaning but did not fully reflect the cultural significance of the original concepts. In some cases, misinterpretations occurred, particularly when students mapped lunar-based events onto Gregorian calendar references (e.g., “July 15th”), resulting in a shift in meaning.

In contrast to these patterns, everyday cultural norms (e.g., removing shoes before entering a house) showed a markedly different distribution. For this type of item, accurate renderings were predominant. Most students produced structurally and semantically appropriate translations (e.g., “take off their shoes before entering”), suggesting that when a clear conceptual equivalent was available in English, translation performance improved substantially.

These findings indicate that translation performance varied systematically across different types of culture-specific elements. Different translation outcomes were associated with different categories of cultural elements.

4.3. Alignment and Divergence between Perceived Difficulty and Observed Performance

A comparison between students’ perceived difficulties (Section 4.1) and their observed translation performance (Section 4.2) revealed both areas of alignment and divergence. While students were generally able to identify certain challenging areas, their perceptions did not always correspond closely to patterns observed in the translation data.

Some cultural elements that were not perceived as highly difficult were associated with a relatively high frequency of problematic translations. This was particularly evident in the case of forms of address and culturally embedded practices. For example, although kinship and address forms received the lowest perceived difficulty rating in the questionnaire, students’ translations showed considerable variation, including over-literal transfer (e.g., retaining *cô*) and approximations (e.g., “Miss” or “Ms”). These responses suggest a divergence between perceived difficulty and observed performance in the translation of culturally specific address systems.

A similar pattern was observed in the translation of cultural practices and rituals. Despite only moderate levels of perceived difficulty, students frequently produced inadequate cultural renderings or partial explanations when translating items such as *Rằm tháng Bảy* or *xông đất*. These translations often captured only surface-level meanings or relied on approximations (e.g., “first-footing ritual”), indicating a divergence between perceived difficulty and observed performance in conveying culturally embedded practices.

The comparison also revealed areas of alignment. Everyday cultural norms (e.g., removing shoes before entering a house) were associated with a high proportion of accurate translations. Most students produced appropriate expressions such as “take off their shoes before entering,” suggesting that these items posed relatively few difficulties in practice.

At the same time, some categories associated with weaker translation performance were also identified as challenging by students. Although food-related items were not among the highest-rated categories in terms of perceived difficulty, they were associated with a substantial proportion of over-literal translations (e.g., retaining *banh chung* or *bun dau mam tom*). These responses preserved the original terms but provided limited support for conveying their cultural meanings to English-speaking readers.

Overall, the comparison revealed both alignment and divergence between perceived difficulty and observed performance. In some cases, students’ perceptions corresponded broadly with patterns observed in the translation data. In other cases, however, elements that were not perceived as particularly difficult were associated with substantial translation problems. These findings suggest that learners’ perceptions provided only a partial indication of the challenges encountered when translating culture-specific elements.

4.4. Perceived Causes of Translation Difficulties

The questionnaire data also provided insight into students’ perceptions of the underlying causes of their translation difficulties. The causes reported in this study reflect learners’ perceptions based on questionnaire responses and do not necessarily represent objectively observed sources of difficulty. Overall, students tended to attribute their challenges to a combination of factors rather than to a single source.

Table 6

Perceived Causes of Translation Difficulties

Cause category	Mean	SD
Cultural knowledge limitations	3.71	1.25
Lexical and cognitive factors	3.64	1.10
Training-related factors	3.59	1.17
Contextual constraints	3.85	1.16

* Note. Values represent mean scores on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate stronger agreement with each perceived cause.

As shown in Table 6, contextual constraints received the highest mean score ($M = 3.85$), indicating that students perceived factors such as time pressure as having a notable impact on their translation performance. Cultural knowledge limitations were also rated relatively highly ($M = 3.71$), suggesting that students recognized gaps in their understanding of the cultural meanings embedded in the source language, particularly for items related to traditional practices, rituals, and symbolic objects.

Lexical and cognitive factors ($M = 3.64$) were also identified as contributing to translation difficulties. Students reported challenges in finding appropriate expressions in English, especially in cases where no direct equivalents were available. Training-related factors received the lowest mean score among the four categories ($M = 3.59$), although the value still indicates moderate agreement. This suggests that while students perceived some limitations in their training and exposure to translation strategies, these were not considered as prominent as other factors.

Collectively, students perceived translation difficulties as arising from a combination of contextual constraints, cultural knowledge limitations, lexical and cognitive factors, and training-related issues. Although the relative importance of these factors varied, all four categories received mean scores above the midpoint of the scale, indicating general agreement regarding their contribution to translation difficulties.

5. Discussion

5.1. Students' Perceived Difficulties in Translating Culture-Specific Elements

The findings from Section 4.1 indicate that students perceived varying levels of difficulty across different types of culture-specific elements, with idioms and proverbs rated as the most challenging, followed by rituals and culturally specific events. In contrast, food-related items and kinship-based address forms were perceived as relatively less difficult.

This pattern is broadly consistent with earlier work suggesting that figurative language may present particular challenges in translation because it often relies on metaphorical meaning and cultural context (Newmark, 1988). Unlike more literal expressions, idioms and proverbs typically require interpretive processing beyond surface-level lexical equivalence, which may make their difficulty more readily identifiable to learners. Similarly, culturally embedded practices such as rituals and ceremonies have been widely recognized as complex translation units, as they are closely tied to specific cultural frameworks and often lack direct equivalents in the target language (Aixelá, 1996).

At the same time, the relatively lower difficulty ratings assigned to food-related items and address forms suggest that familiarity and perceived accessibility may influence learners' judgments. These elements are commonly encountered in everyday communication, which may contribute to a sense of confidence in handling them, as suggested in research on translation competence and learner familiarity (Pym, 2014). In the case of address forms, learners may rely on seemingly available equivalents in English (e.g., "Miss," "Ms"), which can create an impression of lower difficulty despite underlying differences in cultural meaning. This perception is also broadly consistent with the questionnaire data, in which students identified cultural knowledge limitations and lexical constraints as contributing factors to translation difficulty, suggesting an awareness of these challenges at a general level.

From a broader perspective, research on translation competence suggests that learners' perceptions of difficulty are shaped not only by linguistic complexity but also by their awareness of contextual and cultural factors (Pym, 2014). Elements that are more visibly complex may therefore be more readily recognized as difficult, whereas culturally embedded elements with apparent equivalents may be perceived as more manageable. However, such perceptions may reflect only certain visible or salient aspects of translation difficulty and may not fully capture the complexity of actual translation performance. As will be discussed in Section 5.3, this partial alignment between perceived difficulty and observed performance suggests that learners' awareness, while meaningful, remains limited in scope.

Overall, these findings indicate that students' perceptions of translation difficulty are shaped by a combination of linguistic visibility and familiarity. While learners appear to recognize certain types of difficulty, particularly those requiring interpretive processing, other forms of difficulty, particularly those involving culturally embedded meanings, may be underestimated.

5.2. Patterns of Translation Performance Across Cultural Elements

The findings from Section 4.2 indicate that students' translation performance was characterized by the predominance of over-literal translations and inadequate cultural renderings, with relatively few accurate translations. This suggests that learners often relied on preserving source-language forms or providing approximate descriptions rather than fully conveying cultural meaning in the target language.

This tendency is broadly consistent with earlier work on culture-specific translation, which highlights the frequent use of borrowing and descriptive strategies when direct equivalents are unavailable (Aixelá, 1996; Newmark, 1988). Thus, forms such as *banh chung* or *bun dau mam tom* represent direct transfer, whereas descriptive renderings such as "conical hat" reflect attempts to approximate meaning across cultural boundaries. Although these strategies may preserve observable aspects of meaning, previous research has noted that they do not always convey broader cultural significance (Aixelá, 1996).

More recent perspectives on translation competence further suggest that strategy use reflects not only linguistic constraints but also decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Pym, 2014). Consistent with this view, learners in the present study did not apply a single strategy uniformly but adjusted their responses according to the type of cultural element and the resources available. More concrete items, particularly food-related expressions, tended to elicit form-based transfer, whereas culturally embedded practices more often prompted descriptive approximations.

Accurate renderings were largely confined to cases where functional equivalence could be readily established in the target language, suggesting that translation became more straightforward when conceptual alignment between source and target contexts was relatively high (Newmark, 1988). Overall, these findings indicate that both the nature of the cultural element and the availability of linguistic and conceptual resources shaped students' translation performance. While learners demonstrated flexibility in strategy use, their reliance on form-based transfer and surface-level description in culturally complex cases suggests continuing challenges in mediating cultural meaning across languages.

5.3. Alignment and Divergence Between Perceived Difficulty and Observed Performance

The findings from Sections 4.1 and 4.2 reveal that students' perceptions of translation difficulty were only partially aligned with their observed performance. While certain categories identified as difficult, such as figurative language and culturally specific rituals, were indeed associated with translation challenges, notable divergences were observed in other areas.

In particular, some elements perceived as relatively less difficult, such as kinship-based address forms and certain cultural practices, showed considerable variation in translation performance. As shown in Section 4.2, these items were associated with substantial inconsistency in how cultural meaning was rendered, suggesting that familiarity with a cultural item does not necessarily correspond to effective translation performance. This divergence may also be related to the factors identified in the questionnaire data, particularly learners' reported limitations in cultural knowledge and uncertainty in conveying meaning, which may help explain their reliance on over-literal transfer and descriptive renderings when handling culturally embedded elements.

At the same time, successful performance was closely associated with the availability of functional equivalents in the target language. Where conceptual alignment between source and target cultures was relatively straightforward, students were more likely to produce accurate

translations, even when these items were not explicitly identified as easy in the perception data. This pattern highlights the role of conceptual compatibility in shaping translation outcomes.

These observations can be interpreted in relation to existing research on the translation of culture-specific elements, which has emphasized the challenges posed by the absence of direct equivalence and the need for strategic adaptation (Aixelá, 1996; Newmark, 1988). However, the present findings extend this line of research by showing that such challenges are not always reflected in learners' perceptions. While previous studies have primarily focused on the inherent difficulty of culture-specific elements (Aixelá, 1996; Newmark, 1988), the results suggest that learners' awareness of these difficulties may be uneven, particularly when surface-level or partial equivalents are available.

This finding is also consistent with research suggesting that perceived difficulty and actual task performance do not always correspond closely. Previous studies have reported that learners may identify certain challenges while overlooking others that become evident only during task execution (Sun & Shreve, 2014). Similar concerns regarding learners' awareness of translation difficulties have been reported in Vietnamese translation contexts (Nguyen & Dao, 2020), while studies of culture-bound and potentially untranslatable elements have highlighted the continuing challenges of conveying culturally embedded meanings across languages (Tran, 2025). The present study brings these strands together by showing that apparent familiarity with culture-specific elements does not necessarily result in successful translation performance.

From the perspective of translation competence, this divergence may also reflect the complexity of decision-making in translation. As noted by Pym (2014), translation involves selecting among multiple possible options under conditions of uncertainty. In the present study, learners appeared to engage in such decision-making processes, but their choices did not always result in effective representations of cultural meaning. This suggests that awareness of difficulty does not necessarily translate into the ability to select appropriate translation solutions.

Taken together, these findings point to a partial gap between perceived and actual translation difficulty. While learners demonstrated some awareness of challenges, particularly in linguistically or conceptually salient areas, this awareness did not consistently align with their performance across different types of culture-specific elements. These findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between perceived difficulty and demonstrated translation performance and suggest that both dimensions are needed to develop a fuller understanding of learner translation competence.

5.4. Pedagogical Implications for Translation Instruction

The findings of this study suggest several implications for translation instruction, particularly regarding the alignment between learners' perceptions, their actual performance, and the factors underlying translation difficulties. Overall, the results indicate that instruction should move beyond raising awareness of difficulty toward helping learners develop more effective approaches to handling culture-specific content.

First, the partial mismatch between perceived and actual performance highlights the need for more explicit attention to culturally embedded meanings in translation tasks. While learners appear to recognize certain types of difficulty, particularly in figurative language, they may underestimate the complexity of translating culturally grounded elements such as rituals and address systems. Instruction should therefore not only introduce such elements but also guide learners in unpacking their cultural significance and exploring how meaning can be appropriately conveyed in the target language. This is consistent with research emphasizing

cultural competence as a core component of translation ability (Aixelá, 1996; Pym, 2014).

Second, the patterns of translation performance observed in this study point to the need for more systematic instruction in translation strategies. The predominance of over-literal transfer and descriptive renderings suggests that learners may benefit from clearer guidance on when and how to use strategies such as borrowing, paraphrasing, and explicitation. Rather than treating these as isolated techniques, instruction could focus on helping learners evaluate their effectiveness in different contexts and make more informed translation decisions.

Third, the findings related to perceived causes of difficulty indicate that learners are aware of certain limitations, particularly in cultural knowledge and lexical resources. These perceptions can serve as a starting point for instruction, for example, through tasks that explicitly address gaps in cultural understanding or provide structured support for expressing culturally specific meanings in English. In this way, learners' perceptions can inform targeted pedagogical interventions.

Finally, the results suggest the importance of integrating reflective components into translation instruction. Given the divergence between perceived and actual performance, learners may benefit from comparing their intended strategies with their actual outputs and reflecting on the effectiveness of their choices. Such activities may help bridge the gap between awareness and performance by encouraging more deliberate and informed strategy use.

Overall, these implications highlight the value of an instructional approach that integrates cultural knowledge, strategic awareness, and reflective practice. By addressing not only what learners perceive as difficult but also how they respond to these difficulties in practice, translation instruction can better support the development of effective and context-sensitive translation competence.

6. Conclusion

This study examined students' perceived difficulties and observed performance in translating culture-specific elements, as well as areas of alignment and divergence between these dimensions. The findings indicate that while learners demonstrate some awareness of translation difficulty, particularly in linguistically or conceptually salient areas, this awareness does not consistently align with their performance. Translation outcomes varied systematically across different types of cultural elements, with over-literal translations and descriptive renderings predominating in cases where direct equivalents were unavailable, and more accurate renderings occurring when functional equivalence could be established.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between perceived difficulty and demonstrated translation performance. The study contributes to existing research by showing that learners' perceptions provide only a partial account of translation challenges, while performance reflects the combined influence of cultural knowledge, linguistic resources, and translation decision-making. These findings suggest the potential value of instructional approaches that integrate cultural understanding, strategic awareness, and reflective practice to support the development of translation competence.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study was conducted with a single group of EFL learners in one institutional context and focused on a limited set of culture-specific elements. In addition, observed translation performance was used as an indirect indicator of potential translation difficulty rather than as a direct measure of difficulty itself. Consequently, problematic translation outcomes should be interpreted as

evidence of possible areas of difficulty rather than definitive indicators of translation difficulty. Future research could examine whether similar patterns of alignment and divergence between perceived difficulty and observed performance emerge across different learner populations, translation tasks, and cultural domains.

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APPENDIX

The supplementary appendix can be accessed by scanning the QR code below:

