


# Cultural Competence and Translation Accuracy among Novice EFL Learners

Elfadil Mahgoub Ibrahim Ahmed 

Elfadil Mahgoub Ibrahim Ahmed, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Education, Alzaiem Alazhari University, Khartoum, Sudan

Corresponding Author: [elfadil.mahgoub@aau.edu.sd](mailto:elfadil.mahgoub@aau.edu.sd)

## ABSTRACT

Translation is increasingly conceptualized as an act of intercultural mediation rather than a purely linguistic transfer of form. Within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, novice translators frequently encounter difficulties when culturally embedded meanings must be interpreted across linguistic systems. This study investigates the relationship between cultural awareness and translation accuracy among novice EFL learners and evaluates the pedagogical impact of explicit culture-focused instruction. A mixed-methods design was implemented, integrating quantitative assessment of translation performance with qualitative analysis of learners' cognitive and interpretive processes. Participants were novice EFL learners enrolled in translation-related courses at the Sudan University of Science and Technology. Data were collected through translation tasks, think-aloud protocols, questionnaires, interviews, and pre and post-instructional assessments. Quantitative findings demonstrate a statistically significant positive correlation between cultural awareness and translation accuracy, while qualitative data reveal that instructional intervention promotes interpretive flexibility and metacognitive awareness. Cultural misunderstanding emerged as a primary source of translation error, exceeding purely linguistic inaccuracies. The study provides empirical support for integrating cultural literacy into translation pedagogy and argues that translation training should be reconceptualized as the development of intercultural competence.

## KEYWORDS

Cultural awareness, translation accuracy, intercultural competence, EFL learners, translation pedagogy.

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## 1. Introduction

Translation is increasingly understood as an act of intercultural mediation rather than a process of linguistic substitution. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that meaning is shaped by sociocultural context, communicative intention, and pragmatic function, requiring translators to interpret culturally embedded discourse rather than reproduce linguistic form. Within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, novice translators frequently encounter difficulty when culturally bound expressions

must be interpreted across linguistic systems. While learners may demonstrate grammatical accuracy, they often fail to convey intended meaning when cultural knowledge is required for interpretation.

Despite theoretical recognition of culture as central to translation competence, instructional practices in many EFL environments remain predominantly form-focused. Translation is commonly taught as an exercise in lexical equivalence and grammatical accuracy, which may encourage literal translation strategies and limit learners' engagement with sociocultural meaning. As a result, translation errors frequently arise from cultural misunderstanding rather than linguistic deficiency.

Although previous studies have acknowledged the importance of cultural competence in translation performance, three important limitations remain. First, existing research has primarily focused on theoretical discussions or descriptive analyses rather than empirical evaluation of instructional interventions. Second, few studies have examined how explicit cultural instruction influences learners' cognitive translation processes in addition to translation outcomes. Third, studies integrating quantitative performance measures with qualitative process-oriented evidence remain limited, particularly in Sudanese EFL contexts. Therefore, the present study addresses these limitations through a convergent mixed-methods design examining both translation accuracy and learners' interpretive development following explicit culture-focused instruction. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between cultural awareness and translation accuracy among novice EFL learners and evaluates the pedagogical impact of explicit cultural instruction. Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on translation products or theoretical discussions, this study combines performance outcomes with process-oriented evidence to investigate how explicit cultural instruction reshapes novice EFL learners' cognitive translation processes within a Sudanese context. The following objectives guided the study:

1. To determine the relationship between cultural awareness and translation accuracy.
2. To evaluate the effect of explicit cultural instruction on translation performance.
3. To examine how cultural instruction influences learners' interpretive and cognitive strategies.

## **2. Literature Review**

Modern translation theory increasingly conceptualizes translation as a culturally embedded act of meaning negotiation rather than a purely linguistic transfer process. Dynamic equivalence theory emphasizes that translation should reproduce communicative effect instead of structural similarity (Nida, 1964). Similarly, functionalist approaches foreground purpose, audience, and sociocultural context as central determinants of translation strategy. From this perspective, translators function as interpreters of meaning rather than mere transmitters of linguistic form. Venuti (1995) further expands this sociocultural understanding by describing translation as a culturally situated practice shaped by ideology, audience expectations, and power relations between source and target cultures.

Culture-specific expressions (CSEs), including idioms, metaphors, proverbs, and culturally bound references, remain among the greatest challenges in translation practice. Since their meanings emerge from shared cultural knowledge rather than literal lexical structure, direct equivalents are often unavailable across languages. Effective translation therefore requires adaptation, contextual paraphrase, and functional equivalence strategies (Katan, 2014). Empirical studies by the PACTE Group (2003) and Göpferich (2009) demonstrate that novice translators frequently rely on literal translation strategies when encountering culturally embedded meanings, leading to semantic distortion and pragmatic failure. These findings suggest that insufficient cultural knowledge restricts strategic decision-making and interpretive flexibility.

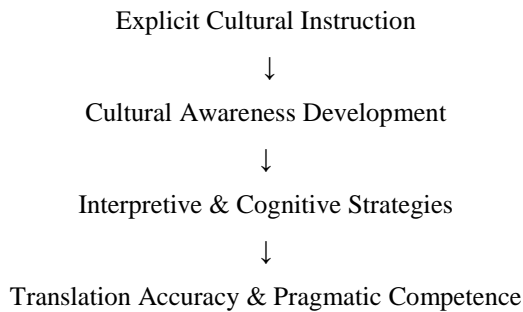
Translation competence is now widely recognized as a multidimensional construct involving linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and cultural components. Cultural awareness enables translators to interpret sociocultural meaning, anticipate audience expectations, and negotiate contextual ambiguity. Cognitive translation studies further indicate that expert translators demonstrate greater metacognitive awareness and interpretive flexibility than novice learners (Shreve, 2009). Recent scholarship increasingly supports the relationship between intercultural competence and translation performance among EFL learners. Hua and Le (2025) emphasize contextual communication awareness as central to culturally appropriate translation, whereas Liu and Yang (2025) argue that translation effectiveness emerges through interaction between language proficiency and cultural understanding. Likewise, House (2020) and Pym (2021) demonstrate that explicit cultural instruction improves interpretive accuracy, strategic decision-making, and awareness of communicative intent. Contemporary studies using think-aloud protocols and eye-tracking methodologies further reveal that culturally competent learners engage in deeper inferential processing and contextual reasoning during translation tasks.

Pedagogical approaches to cultural translation increasingly advocate systematic analysis of sociocultural meaning, authentic discourse exposure, explicit interpretive strategy instruction, and reflective evaluation of translation choices. These approaches align with sociocultural learning theory, which views cognitive development as emerging through mediated interaction with cultural tools (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Recent studies further reinforce the pedagogical significance of intercultural competence. Mekheimer (2026) identifies major intercultural gaps among EFL translation learners and argues that translation programs frequently overemphasize linguistic accuracy at the expense of cultural interpretation. Similarly, Abdelhalim et al. (2025) demonstrate that AI-assisted translation systems continue to struggle with culturally embedded meanings, highlighting the continuing importance of human intercultural judgment. Emerging scholarship also suggests that culturally aware learners produce more pragmatically appropriate translations and exhibit greater flexibility in resolving culture-specific expressions (Li, 2022; Wang & Sun, 2023).

Despite growing theoretical consensus regarding the importance of cultural competence, empirical investigations of explicit cultural instruction remain limited, particularly in Sudanese EFL

contexts. Few studies have systematically examined how intercultural instruction influences both translation outcomes and learners' cognitive processing mechanisms. The present study addresses this gap through an integrated mixed-methods approach examining the relationship between cultural awareness, interpretive reasoning, and translation accuracy among novice EFL learners.

The theoretical foundation of the present study is based on the relationship between intercultural competence, cultural awareness, cognitive interpretation, and translation accuracy. The following conceptual framework illustrates how explicit cultural instruction contributes to the development of interpretive strategies and pragmatic translation competence among novice EFL learners.



**Figure 1:** *Conceptual Framework of Cultural Competence and Translation Accuracy*

The framework in figure 1 demonstrates that intercultural competence functions as a mediating factor between cultural instruction and improved translation performance by enhancing contextual understanding, interpretive reasoning, and pragmatic awareness.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to capture both measurable learning outcomes and underlying cognitive mechanisms. Quantitative analysis provided an objective assessment of translation accuracy and cultural awareness, while qualitative methods explored interpretive strategies, decision-making processes, and learner perceptions. Methodological triangulation enhanced validity by integrating multiple data sources.

To provide a clearer overview of the methodological structure of the study, the major components of the research design are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of Research Design and Methodological Components

Component	Description
Research Design	Convergent Mixed-Methods
Participants	50 Novice EFL Learners
Context	Sudan University of Science and Technology
Instruments	Translation Tasks, Questionnaire, Interviews, Think-Aloud Protocols
Quantitative Analysis	Correlation, Paired t-test, Effect Size
Qualitative Analysis	Thematic Coding
Intervention Duration	Four Weeks

The mixed-methods design enabled the study to integrate both quantitative and qualitative perspectives in examining the relationship between intercultural competence and translation accuracy among novice EFL learners.

### 3.2. Participants

Fifty novice EFL learners enrolled in translation-related courses participated in the study. Participants demonstrated lower-intermediate to intermediate proficiency (B1 level, CEFR). All had completed foundational English coursework but had limited formal training in translation theory or practice. A purposive subsample of twelve participants engaged in think-aloud protocols and interviews to provide in-depth qualitative data.

### 3.3 Instruments

**Translation Tasks:** Short Arabic texts containing idioms, proverbs, and culturally embedded references were translated into English. Error classification distinguished between linguistic inaccuracies and interpretive failures.

**Cultural Awareness Questionnaire:** The Cultural Awareness Questionnaire was adapted from previously validated intercultural competence instruments and reviewed by three specialists in translation studies and applied linguistics to ensure content validity. A validated Likert-scale instrument assessed learners' knowledge of cultural norms, pragmatic interpretation, and contextual meaning construction.

1. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .87$ )
2. Pre-Post Instructional Tests: Equivalent translation tasks measured performance change following the instructional intervention.
3. Think-Aloud Protocols: Verbalization of cognitive processes provided insight into strategy use and interpretive reasoning.
4. Semi-Structured Interviews: Explored learners' perceptions of cultural difficulty, confidence, and strategy development.

### **3.4 Methodological Rigor and Ethical Procedures**

Participant selection followed purposive sampling procedures because the study specifically targeted novice EFL learners with comparable educational backgrounds and limited formal translation experience. This sampling approach ensured that participants represented the population under investigation and possessed characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

To ensure instrument validity, the Cultural Awareness Questionnaire was adapted from previously validated intercultural competence instruments and reviewed by three specialists in translation studies and applied linguistics. Expert evaluation established content validity and confirmed the appropriateness of questionnaire items for the study context. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

Qualitative data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures involving open coding, category development, and theme refinement. To strengthen credibility and minimize researcher bias, a second reviewer independently coded selected portions of the qualitative data, and coding consistency was discussed collaboratively.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

### **3.5 Instructional Intervention**

The four-week intervention emphasized interpretive competence through guided analysis of culturally embedded texts. Instruction included contextual analysis, strategy comparison, reflective discussion, and collaborative problem-solving. Pedagogical emphasis shifted from lexical equivalence toward communicative effect.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, and Pearson correlation analysis. Effect sizes were calculated to determine instructional impact. Qualitative data were coded thematically to identify patterns in cognitive processing, awareness development, and strategy use.

## **4 Results**

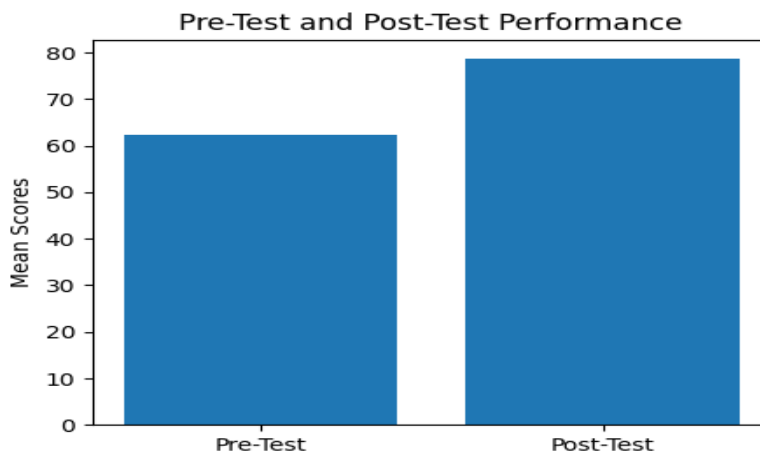
### **4.1 Quantitative Findings**

Literal translation and cultural misinterpretation together accounted for 80% of observed errors, suggesting that translation difficulty stemmed primarily from insufficient cultural mediation rather than grammatical deficiency.

A strong positive correlation was identified between cultural awareness and translation accuracy ( $r = .64, p < .01$ ). The finding indicates that learners with higher levels of cultural awareness tended to produce more contextually appropriate translations, suggesting that translation performance may depend not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners' ability to interpret sociocultural meaning.

Instructional impact was substantial. Mean translation performance improved significantly from pre-test ( $M = 62.4$ ) to post-test ( $M = 78.7$ ), with a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 1.39$ ). The magnitude of this effect suggests that the intervention produced meaningful educational improvement rather than merely statistically detectable change. The observed reduction in literal translation errors may indicate increased awareness of contextual and culturally embedded meaning.

The statistical findings indicate noticeable improvement in learners' translation performance after exposure to intercultural competence instruction. Figure 2 visually presents the comparative mean scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test assessments.



**Figure 2:** Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Translation Scores

The graph above clearly demonstrates the positive impact of cultural competence instruction on learners' translation accuracy. The increase in post-test scores reflects improved interpretive understanding, contextual awareness, and pragmatic comprehension among the participants.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Findings

Think-aloud data indicated noticeable changes in participants' translation behavior following instruction. Learners increasingly considered contextual meaning, communicative intent, and audience expectations during translation tasks. Interview responses also revealed increased confidence and greater awareness of cultural nuance. Participants frequently reported recognizing situations in which literal translation failed to convey intended meaning.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Cultural Awareness as a Core Component of Translation Competence**

The findings indicate that cultural awareness functions as a foundational dimension of translation competence rather than as a supplementary skill. The observed relationship between cultural knowledge and translation performance suggests that successful translation involves interpretation of sociocultural meaning in addition to linguistic decoding. These results support multidimensional models of translation competence in which translators actively negotiate contextual meaning across cultural systems. The present findings are consistent with recent empirical studies emphasizing the role of intercultural competence in translation performance among EFL learners. Previous research has demonstrated that culturally informed learners are better able to negotiate pragmatic meaning, interpret culture-specific references, and avoid literal translation strategies. The observed shift from lexical processing toward contextual reasoning in the present study also aligns with cognitive translation research, suggesting that expert-like translation behavior is characterized by inferential thinking, metacognitive regulation, and strategic flexibility. The findings therefore reinforce contemporary perspectives that conceptualize translation as an intercultural and cognitive activity rather than a purely linguistic process.

The high frequency of literal translation strategies suggests that novice learners rely heavily on surface-level linguistic processing when encountering culturally embedded expressions. This tendency may reflect limited exposure to authentic intercultural contexts and insufficient strategic awareness. Such behavior supports cognitive perspectives suggesting that novice translators often prioritize lexical equivalence before developing more sophisticated inferential strategies. This observation substantiates multidimensional models of translation competence in which cultural knowledge functions as a prerequisite for strategic decision-making.

The strong correlation between cultural awareness and translation accuracy suggests that successful translation requires the ability to interpret meaning within sociocultural frameworks rather than merely decode lexical items. This aligns with functionalist perspectives that conceptualize translation as communicative action shaped by context, audience, and pragmatic purpose. The results, therefore, reinforce the theoretical position that translation competence cannot be reduced to bilingual proficiency.

### **5.2 Cognitive Effects of Cultural Instruction**

The qualitative findings suggest that explicit cultural instruction influenced learners' underlying translation processes rather than merely improving observable performance outcomes. The increased attention to contextual meaning, communicative intent, and audience expectations indicates a shift toward more sophisticated forms of interpretive reasoning. From a cognitive translation perspective,

these changes may reflect movement away from surface-level lexical processing toward deeper inferential and metacognitive engagement. Such developments resemble characteristics associated with expert translation behavior identified in previous cognitive translation studies. Therefore, the instructional intervention appears to have facilitated not only performance improvement but also development in the cognitive mechanisms underlying translation decision-making. The findings are broadly consistent with previous studies emphasizing intercultural competence as a determinant of translation quality. For example, Li (2022) reported that culturally informed learners demonstrated greater pragmatic sensitivity and strategic flexibility. Similarly, Mekheimer (2026) identified significant intercultural gaps among EFL learners and argued that translation programs often overemphasize linguistic accuracy. The present findings extend this research by demonstrating not only improvements in translation performance but also changes in learners' cognitive processing patterns.

### **5.3 Pedagogical Transformation in Translation Education**

The findings suggest that translation instruction should move beyond traditional grammar-centered approaches toward pedagogical models integrating cultural literacy and interpretive practice. Explicit instruction in sociocultural meaning, contextual analysis, and reflective strategy use may facilitate the development of intercultural competence among EFL learners. Translation training should therefore be conceptualized as preparation for intercultural mediation rather than as an exercise in linguistic substitution.

### **5.4 Implications for EFL Contexts**

In EFL environments where learners have limited exposure to target-language communities, structured cultural instruction may compensate for restricted intercultural experience. The findings suggest that translation classrooms can function as important spaces for developing intercultural awareness and communicative sensitivity. The results from learners at the Sudan University of Science and Technology demonstrate that targeted pedagogical intervention can compensate for contextual limitations in cultural exposure. Translation pedagogy may therefore serve as an effective site for developing intercultural competence within foreign language education.

### **5.5 Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to a single institutional context, which may restrict generalizability to other EFL populations. Second, the instructional intervention was relatively short in duration, preventing examination of long-term retention of cultural competence. Third, translation accuracy was assessed through task-based performance rather than authentic professional translation contexts. Fourth, the study relied partially on self-reported measures of cultural awareness, which may be subject to response bias. Finally, language proficiency was

controlled at an intermediate level; the relationship between cultural awareness and translation accuracy may differ at advanced proficiency levels.

Future research employing longitudinal designs, cross-institutional samples, and professional translation tasks would strengthen external validity and extend the explanatory scope of the findings. The study extends translation pedagogy research by integrating process-oriented qualitative evidence with measurable performance outcomes. Unlike previous studies focusing primarily on translation products, the present research examines how cultural instruction reshapes cognitive processing mechanisms among novice EFL learners.

## **Conclusion**

This study makes three original contributions to translation pedagogy research. First, it provides empirical evidence linking cultural awareness to translation accuracy within a Sudanese EFL context, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Second, it demonstrates that explicit cultural instruction influences not only translation outcomes but also cognitive processing mechanisms. Third, the study integrates quantitative performance analysis with qualitative process data, offering a comprehensive model of how intercultural competence develops among novice translators.

Future research should expand participant recruitment across multiple institutions and educational contexts to enhance external validity. Longitudinal and experimental intervention designs are recommended to examine sustained development of cultural competence over time. Comparative studies across proficiency levels and learning environments would further clarify how intercultural competence interacts with translation expertise. Additionally, future investigations may explore the role of technology-mediated translation tools in supporting culturally informed decision-making.

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## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## **Declaration**

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part.

The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

## About the Author

**Dr. Elfadil Mahgoub Ibrahim Ahmed** is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT). He has been teaching English at the Faculty of Education, Alzaeim Alazhari University (Sudan) for more than a decade and has also taught at several Sudanese universities. His academic and research interests include communication strategies, discourse analysis, translation studies, and the application of artificial intelligence in education. He is actively engaged in research and professional development in language teaching and learning.

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