

Difficulties of the Sixth Semester Students of English Language Study Program UIN Datokarama Palu in Translating Essential Idioms

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i4.2834>

*Guslam, Muhammad Ihsan, Ruslin, Hijrah Syam^{abcd}

¹²³⁴ English Education Department, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: gulsamucak@gmail.com

A B S T R A C T

Despite being an essential translation competency, idiom translation remains challenging for English Language Study Program students at UIN Datokarama Palu. Students often produce literal or unnatural translations due to limited cultural awareness, structural rigidity, dependence on translation technology, and difficulties in determining appropriate equivalents. This study aims to analyze the difficulties faced by sixth-semester students in translating English idioms and identify the factors influencing these difficulties. A mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and an analysis of students' understanding of idiom translation. The findings reveal that students experienced moderate to high levels of difficulty in translating idioms. The main challenges involved determining appropriate lexical equivalents, selecting suitable translation strategies, and understanding cultural and pragmatic meanings. Limited vocabulary and a tendency to rely on literal translation also contributed to students' difficulties. The findings indicate that idiom translation requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural and pragmatic awareness. Therefore, contextual and integrative instruction is recommended to help students produce more accurate and natural idiom translations.

Keywords: *Students' Difficulties, Idiom Translation, Essential Idioms*

Article History:

Received 17th July 2026

Accepted 07th August 2026

Published 09th August 2026



INTRODUCTION

The ability to translate idioms accurately is one of the important competencies that should be mastered by students in the English Language Study Program. Idioms are fixed or multiword expressions whose overall meanings are not always predictable from the meanings of their individual components. Consequently, idioms can present particular challenges for language learners and translators because their meanings are often non-compositional and dependent on linguistic and contextual knowledge (Baker, 2018; Shojaei, 2012). For non-native English learners, idioms may become especially challenging because they are closely related to cultural background, contextual meaning, and language use. Therefore, students need not only linguistic competence but also cultural understanding in order to produce accurate and natural translations.

In translation activities, idioms cannot always be translated literally. Translators are required to understand the meaning, context, and cultural nuance behind the expression before transferring it into the target language. Shojaei (2012) explains that idiom translation involves difficulties arising from differences in meaning, context, and the availability of equivalent expressions between the source and target languages. Idioms also contribute to natural and expressive communication and are closely associated with the cultural and sociolinguistic characteristics of language use. Therefore, translating idioms requires attention not only to linguistic form but also to the cultural and contextual meaning embedded in the

expression. However, because idioms contain figurative meanings, they are often difficult to translate directly into another language.

In addition, limited vocabulary mastery and the lack of equivalent expressions in the target language often make the translation process more difficult. Empirical studies involving students have reported that learners experience lexical, grammatical, stylistic, and cultural difficulties when translating idiomatic expressions. Pardede et al. (2023), for example, found that students' difficulties included lexical, stylistic, cultural, and grammatical problems, with lack of idiom knowledge and vocabulary mastery identified as important contributing factors. Similarly, research on students translating English idioms into Indonesian has shown that differences between English and Indonesian and the absence of equivalent idiomatic expressions can create substantial difficulties (Ariyani et al., 2021).

Several theories explain the importance and difficulties of translating idioms. According to Baker (2018), idioms can be problematic in translation because an idiom in the source language may not have an equivalent expression in the target language. Differences in meaning, cultural associations, and conventional usage may therefore require translators to adopt alternative translation procedures. Shojaei (2012) identifies several strategies for dealing with idioms, including using an idiom with similar meaning and form, using an idiom with similar meaning but different form, translating through paraphrase, and, in some circumstances, omitting the idiom. These strategies demonstrate that idiom translation requires careful consideration of context and the linguistic and cultural resources available in the target language.

Several previous studies have discussed students' difficulties in translation. Studies of students translating idiomatic expressions have found that learners commonly struggle to identify the appropriate meaning of idioms, select equivalent expressions, and determine suitable translation strategies. For example, Sinurat (2017) reported that students experienced difficulties related to vocabulary, contextual interpretation, determining the exact meaning of idioms, and selecting appropriate diction when translating English idioms into Indonesian. More recently, Pardede et al. (2023) found that students' difficulties included lexical, stylistic, cultural, and grammatical problems. These findings indicate that idiom translation difficulties involve multiple dimensions rather than a single linguistic problem.

Research has also demonstrated that students employ different strategies when translating English idioms into Indonesian. Ariyani et al. (2021) investigated 50 English Department students and found that students encountered difficulties in finding equivalent meanings because of cultural and linguistic differences. Similarly, a study of sixth-semester students found that learners used several strategies in translating English idioms, while difficulties remained in finding appropriate equivalents and understanding idiomatic meanings (Nabiila, 2024). These findings are particularly relevant to the present study because they demonstrate that idiom translation problems continue to occur among university-level English learners.

Previous studies on idiom translation have generally focused on the types of translation strategies used, students' general translation errors, or the linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered when translating idiomatic expressions. However, relatively limited attention has been given to examining multiple dimensions of students' difficulties simultaneously within a specific Indonesian higher-education context. In particular, lexical equivalence, translation strategy selection, cultural and pragmatic understanding, vocabulary limitations, and students' tendency toward literal translation may interact in producing idiom translation difficulties. Existing studies have frequently employed either qualitative or descriptive approaches, indicating the value of combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to obtain a more comprehensive explanation of students' difficulties. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by investigating the difficulties faced by sixth-semester students of the English Language Study Program at UIN Datokarama Palu using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. By combining questionnaire findings with observational and qualitative evidence, the study seeks to provide a more detailed understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and strategic factors underlying students' difficulties.

Although previous studies have discussed translation difficulties and idiomatic expressions, many have focused on general translation procedures, specific texts, or particular groups of learners. In contrast, this study specifically investigates students' difficulties in translating essential English idioms among sixth-semester students at UIN Datokarama Palu. This research is important because university students may still experience difficulties in understanding idiomatic meanings and producing natural translations. Evidence from Indonesian higher-education contexts shows that students continue to experience difficulties in identifying appropriate equivalents and dealing with the linguistic and cultural characteristics of idiomatic expressions (Nabiila, 2024; Pardede et al., 2023).

Based on preliminary observations, students tend to translate idioms word-for-word without sufficiently considering contextual meaning and cultural aspects. Literal translation is particularly problematic when the meaning of an idiom cannot be derived from its individual words (Baker, 2018; Shojaei, 2012). Students may also rely on online translation resources when encountering unfamiliar expressions. This issue is important because idiomatic expressions require interpretation beyond word-level equivalence, and inappropriate literal rendering may produce translations that fail to convey the intended meaning.

The difficulties in translating idioms are therefore not only influenced by linguistic factors but also by non-linguistic factors such as cultural and contextual understanding. Students may experience problems related to limited vocabulary, difficulty interpreting figurative meanings, identifying appropriate equivalents, and producing natural expressions in the target language. Previous empirical research confirms that lexical, stylistic, cultural, and grammatical factors can all contribute to students' difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions (Pardede et al., 2023).

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze the difficulties faced by students in translating essential idioms and to identify the factors influencing those difficulties. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of translation teaching, particularly by helping students understand idiomatic expressions, recognize their contextual and cultural meanings, select appropriate translation strategies, and produce more accurate and natural translations.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single research design to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' ability to translate idioms. Mixed methods research involves the intentional integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, the quantitative approach is used to measure students' level of ability in translating idioms through a test instrument, while the qualitative approach is used to analyze the difficulties faced by students more deeply through descriptive data. The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence allows researchers to examine both measurable outcomes and the experiences or explanations underlying those outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Thus, the use of mixed methods is expected to provide a more holistic picture of students' abilities and challenges in translating idioms.

This research adopts a sequential explanatory design. This strategy is carried out in stages, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to strengthen and explain the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In an explanatory sequential design, qualitative data are generally collected after the quantitative phase and are used to explain, elaborate, or clarify important quantitative results (Ivankova et al., 2006). This sequential structure is appropriate for the present study because the qualitative phase is intended to provide deeper explanations of students' difficulties identified through the quantitative assessment.

In the first stage, the researcher collects and analyzes quantitative data to address the research problem related to students' ability to translate idioms. The quantitative data are obtained through test instruments administered to the research subjects and then analyzed to determine the overall level of idiom translation ability. Quantitative data provide numerical evidence that can be systematically summarized and interpreted to describe patterns in students' performance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In the second stage, the researcher collects and analyzes qualitative data to further explore the findings from the quantitative stage, particularly regarding the difficulties faced by students in translating idioms. The qualitative data are obtained through interviews and/or analysis of students' work, providing deeper insights into the factors influencing their translation ability. In sequential explanatory research, qualitative follow-up data can be used to explain unexpected, significant, or particularly important quantitative findings and to provide contextual interpretations of the numerical results.

By employing a sequential explanatory strategy, this study is expected to present a more comprehensive understanding, not only in terms of measured outcomes but also in terms of the processes and challenges experienced by students in translating idioms. The integration of findings from the two phases is an essential component of mixed methods research because conclusions should be developed by considering how the quantitative and qualitative findings relate to and complement one another (Fetters et al., 2013).

This research was conducted at UIN Datokarama Palu, with sixth-semester students serving as the research sample. Data collection was carried out both online and offline. Quantitative data were collected through tests distributed via Google Forms, allowing the researcher to efficiently reach respondents and gather data. Meanwhile, qualitative data were collected directly through interviews and/or analysis of students' work, while adhering to ethical research procedures.

Data analysis was conducted in stages in accordance with the mixed methods approach, including initial quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative analysis, and concluding with the integration and interpretation of the data to produce comprehensive findings. Mixed methods integration can be achieved by connecting the results of one phase with the subsequent phase and subsequently integrating the findings during interpretation (Fetters et al., 2013). This approach allows the qualitative findings to provide explanatory depth to the quantitative results and strengthens the overall interpretation of students' abilities and difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of observations and surveys conducted, it was found that students' difficulties in understanding and translating idioms constitute a complex and interrelated problem. Observational findings indicate that most students do not yet possess a fundamental understanding of idioms in terms of their definition, usage, and application in sentences. These findings are further supported by survey results obtained through questionnaires distributed to students. The processed data are presented in the following table:

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents' Answers

No	Statement (Brief)	SS	S	N	TS	STS	Category
1	Understanding literal meaning of idioms	4	8	8	3	1	Moderate
2	Distinguishing idiomatic meaning	3	9	7	3	2	Moderate
3	Determining lexical equivalents	5	10	5	3	1	High
4	Choosing sentence structure	4	9	7	3	1	Moderate
5	Understanding idiom variations	5	8	6	4	1	Moderate
6	Using contextual inference	6	7	7	3	1	Moderate
7	Remembering idioms	5	8	6	4	1	Moderate
8	Determining translation strategies	6	9	5	3	1	High
9	Evaluating translation results	5	8	6	4	1	Moderate
10	Vocabulary limitations	7	9	4	3	1	High
11	Understanding cultural references	6	8	5	4	1	High

Difficulties of the Sixth Semester Students of English Language Study Program UIN Datokarama Palu in Translating Essential Idioms

12	Adapting cultural context	6	9	5	3	1	High
13	Use of informal idioms	5	8	6	4	1	Moderate
14	Cultural differences (US vs UK)	6	8	5	4	1	High
15	Pragmatic nuances of idioms	7	8	5	3	1	High

Based on the data presented in the table above, it can be observed that the distribution of respondents' answers is dominated by the "agree" (S) and "strongly agree" (SS) categories across nearly all items. This finding indicates a strong tendency that students experience difficulties in comprehensively understanding and translating idioms. Specifically, a high level of difficulty is found in several key aspects, namely determining lexical equivalents (item 3), translation strategies (item 8), and vocabulary limitations (item 10). In addition, aspects related to cultural competence—such as understanding cultural references (item 11), the ability to adapt idioms into the target cultural context (item 12), and understanding cultural differences (item 14)—also show a high level of difficulty. These findings indicate that idiom translation requires not only linguistic competence but also adequate mastery of cultural aspects.

On the other hand, several aspects fall into the moderate category, including understanding the literal meaning of idioms (item 1), distinguishing between idiomatic and literal meanings (item 2), selecting appropriate sentence structures (item 4), and using contextual inference (item 6). Additionally, the ability to remember idioms (item 7), evaluate translation results (item 9), and understand the use of idioms in informal contexts (item 13) are also categorized as moderate. This condition suggests that although students possess basic abilities in understanding idioms, these abilities have not yet developed optimally, particularly in situations requiring deeper contextual understanding.

Furthermore, the high level of difficulty in the aspect of pragmatic nuance (item 15) confirms that students still face challenges in capturing the implicit meanings embedded in idioms. This has implications for potential misinterpretations in the translation process, especially when idioms are used in complex communicative contexts.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students' difficulties in translating idioms are multidimensional, encompassing lexical, strategic, pragmatic, and cultural aspects. Therefore, the level of difficulty can be categorized as moderate to high, highlighting the need for more targeted pedagogical interventions in teaching idiom translation.

The findings of this study reveal that students experience various difficulties in understanding and translating idioms. These difficulties are not only related to linguistic aspects but also involve cultural and pragmatic understanding. Based on the questionnaire results, most students admitted that they still encounter challenges in determining lexical equivalents, choosing appropriate translation strategies, and understanding the cultural references contained in idiomatic expressions. This indicates that translating idioms is a complex process that requires more than vocabulary mastery alone.

The findings support Baker's theory, which states that idioms are difficult to translate because they are culture-bound expressions and often do not have direct equivalents in the target language. In this study, students showed significant difficulties in understanding cultural references and adapting idioms into the target cultural context. This condition demonstrates that students still struggle to transfer meanings naturally from the source language into the target language. As a result, many translations tend to sound literal and unnatural.

In addition, the high level of difficulty in determining translation strategies indicates that students are still limited in applying appropriate translation techniques. Many students tend to translate idioms word-for-word without considering contextual meaning. This finding is consistent with Premasari & Widodo (2021), who found that translators employed various strategies to deal with idiomatic expressions, indicating the importance of selecting an appropriate strategy according to the context and meaning of the idiom.

The findings also reveal that vocabulary limitation is one of the major factors influencing students' difficulties in translating idioms. Students with limited vocabulary

knowledge often struggle to find suitable equivalents in the target language. This finding is supported by Effendi et al. (2024), who found that translating idioms requires careful consideration of linguistic and contextual meanings to achieve appropriate translation quality.

Furthermore, students experienced difficulties in understanding pragmatic nuances contained in idioms. They found it challenging to capture implied meanings, emotions, and communicative intentions behind idiomatic expressions. This finding is consistent with Tergui (2024), who reported that translation students encountered challenges when rendering Arabic idioms and proverbs into English, particularly in dealing with the linguistic and cultural meanings embedded in such expressions. Consequently, translated expressions may fail to fully convey the intended meaning of the source language.

Although several aspects were categorized as moderate, such as understanding literal meanings, distinguishing idiomatic meanings, and using contextual clues, these findings indicate that students' abilities have not yet developed optimally. Students may understand the basic meaning of idioms but still experience difficulties when dealing with more complex contextual and cultural situations. Vula & Muhaxhiri (2024) similarly emphasized the role of linguistic and cultural barriers in students' translation strategies and challenges.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in translating idioms are multidimensional, involving lexical, cultural, strategic, and pragmatic aspects. Therefore, translation instruction should incorporate cultural contexts, authentic idiomatic expressions, and explicit training in translation strategies. Such approaches can help students develop greater idiomatic competence and produce more accurate, natural, and contextually appropriate translations.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that translating idiomatic expressions is a complex process that requires more than basic vocabulary knowledge. Students frequently experienced difficulties transferring idiomatic meanings naturally from the source language into the target language, often producing literal and unnatural translations. These difficulties were associated with cultural and contextual barriers, limited translation strategies, vocabulary constraints, and pragmatic challenges. Culture-bound idioms were particularly problematic because many expressions lack direct equivalents in the target language, consistent with Baker's theory. Students also relied heavily on word-for-word translation and showed limited ability to apply appropriate translation strategies, supporting Delima's findings on the importance of understanding figurative meaning. Limited vocabulary further restricted their ability to identify suitable lexical equivalents, consistent with Rizki Ardia's findings regarding vocabulary mastery and translation competence. Moreover, students had difficulty interpreting implied meanings, emotions, and communicative intentions. Therefore, translation instruction should integrate cultural awareness, authentic materials, explicit strategy training, and pragmatic interpretation to improve students' vocabulary, strategic competence, and ability to produce accurate, natural, and contextually appropriate translations.

REFERENCES

- Ariyani, S., Listia, R., & Arapah, E. (2021). Students' Difficulties in Translating English Idioms into Indonesian. *LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal*, 11(2).
- Baker, M. (2018). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Effendi, O. D., Ravindran, L., Amini, M., & Alipour, M. (2024). Exploring Strategies and Perceptions of Quality in English to Indonesian Translation of Idioms in the Short Story "Dear Life." *International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 7-19.

- Fetters, M. D., Curry, L. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). Achieving integration in mixed methods designs: Principles and practices. *Health Services Research*, 48(6), 2134–2156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12117>
- Ivankova, N. V, Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05282260>
- Nabiila, N. (2024). *Students' Strategies and Difficulties in Translating English Idioms into Indonesian*. Universitas Islam Darul 'Ulum Lamongan.
- Pardede, P., Siburian, R., & Nasution, M. K. (2023). Students' Difficulties in Translating English Idiomatic Expressions. *English Language Teaching and Practice*.
- Premasari, A. A., & Widodo, P. (2021). Translation Strategies of Idiomatic Expressions in the Novel Edensor. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 4(2), 64–69.
- Shojaei, A. (2012). Translation of Idioms and Fixed Expressions: Strategies and Difficulties. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(6), 1220–1229.
- Sinurat, B. (2017). Students' Difficulties in Translating English Idioms into Indonesian. *KAIRO*, 1(2).
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2010). *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Tergui, S. (2024). Investigating Translation Students' Challenges in Rendering Arabic Idioms and Proverbs into English: Insights and Recommendations. *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, 8(4).
- Vula, E., & Muhaxhiri, G. (2024). Exploring Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Literary Translation: An Analysis of Undergraduate Students' Strategies and Challenges in Translating Albanian Texts into English. *Sapienza: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 5(4), e24067–e24067.