

## Arabic-English Translation and French Influence in Algerian Universities: University of Algiers 2 as a Case Study.

Rachida SADOUNI  
Institute of Interpreting and Translation  
University of Algiers 2, Algeria

### Abstract

This paper will mainly focus on the difficulties encountered by Algerian students when translating from Arabic into English. It will give examples of texts dealt with during classes and exams, and the mistakes students usually make. It will also deal with the impact of French as the second language in Algeria, on the meaning rendering in English. The period will cover the academic years 2012 and 2013, and the study will concern junior and senior students in translation institute, University of Algiers 2. The presentation will deal with some principles of the nature of Arabic and English, originally different from each other in both culture and civilization.

The paper will specifically answer the two following questions: To which extent is the current translation curriculum in the Algerian university efficient to teach and learn English? What are the criteria of a successful English teaching for students in translation?

**Key Words:** Translation, Students Mistakes, Rendering English, Culture, Learning English

### ملخص:

يركز هذا المقال أساسا على الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة الجزائريون عند الترجمة من اللغة العربية إلى اللغة الإنجليزية، ويعطي أمثلة من نصوص الترجمة التي درّست في الصفوف أو التي كانت موضوع امتحانات، وكذا الأخطاء التي يرتكبها عادة هؤلاء الطلبة. كما يتناول هذا المقال تأثير اللغة الفرنسية، بصفتها لغة أجنبية في الجزائر، على إيصال المعنى باللغة الإنجليزية، ويعنى بالسنة الجامعية 2012م - 2013م، وبطلبة السنة الثالثة والسنة الثالثة تخصص ترجمة، بمعهد الترجمة، جامعة الجزائر 2.

ويحاول المقال الإجابة على سؤالين أساسيين هما: إلى أي مدى يعدّ برنامج الترجمة الحالي في جامعة الجزائر ناجعا

لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية وتعلّمها؟ وما هي المعايير المطلوبة لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية ضمن الترجمة تدرّسا ناجحا؟

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الترجمة، الطلبة الجامعيين، أخطاء الترجمة، تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، الجامعة الجزائرية

## Introduction

The universities in Algeria have given a great importance to the teaching of foreign languages for students. One of them, the University of Algiers 2, involves the teaching of French, English, Russian, Spanish, Italian, German and Turkish. Students can learn these languages separately, i.e., they obtain a degree in one of them, or in combination together thanks to translation, a field in which students discover the *Other* through different cultures and civilizations.

Through this paper, we will see the different aspects of teaching translation, the examples of texts dealt with during classes, the mistakes students make when they translate from Arabic into English as a foreign language. As a teacher of translation, my paper will focus on the impact of French as a large-scale spoken and written language in Algeria, on the Arabic-English translation, and what it involves of meaning rendering. This will exclude the training of interpreters because the presenter of this paper has always taught translators at university. As for the period, it will cover the years 2012 and 2013. The study will concern both junior and senior students.

We will deal with some principles of the nature of Arabic and English, originally different from each other. Each of these two languages has its own grammar and syntax. Besides, each of them belongs to different civilization and culture, which make the task of trained translators a bit difficult compared to interpreters because they have to transfer vocabulary and meaning with all what it implies of connotations and pitfalls. All this will be dealt with through examples taken from the mistakes students make during exams and in class.

At the end, my paper will present a result of teaching the Arabic-English translation module, and the extent of learning English by Algerian students, who use to speak and write Berber, Arabic and French much more than English.

Compared to interpreters, whose mistakes can go unnoticed, translators are required to produce a “very close” equivalent of the original text both in vocabulary and meaning. Grammar, spelling and syntax are very important in translators’ work in which the simplest mistake can be visible. That is, in a sense, what motivated the achievement of this paper. The aim is to demonstrate that translation is not only -like some people think- to find equivalents to original words and put them together randomly, but to take into consideration both source and target languages, their compounds, cultures and civilizations, and most importantly the context, before expressing them (original words) in another language.

Thus, the two main questions that rise themselves are: To which extent is the current translation curriculum in the University of Algiers 2 efficient in teaching and learning English? What are the criteria for a successful English teaching in Algeria, especially to students in translation?

## 1. Content and Goal of Teaching Translation at the Institute of Interpreting & Translation

The institute of translation and interpreting, at the University of Algiers 2, offers students the opportunity to become good translators by teaching them the principles of both source and target languages before teaching them translation.

A specific program of teaching translation is not available in the institute. Each teacher is free to choose the curriculum that suits the students' level. This is not a disadvantage, but it allows teachers to deal freely with materials rather than remaining restricted to a limited area of translation teaching. This also allows students to learn an infinite range of vocabulary and, thus, equivalents that they will need while translating. Besides, they are in constant deal with grammar rules that help them to produce an "acceptable" translation text by respecting the structure of both source and target languages.

Most of the teachers have been abroad (mostly in Europe) for studies or trainings. Once they are back, they use methods they learnt there and apply them in class. With the development of technology these last years, teachers could take advantage of the Internet by visiting other universities' websites, learn from their experiences and use their methods for teaching students. One should also keep in mind that Algerian students have the feature to be multilingual; it means that they practise more than a language in their daily life <sup>(1)</sup>. In addition to translation, students study other modules tightly related to this field, which are: languages grammar, oral and written expressions, Islamic civilization, American civilization, French civilization, German and Spanish civilizations, ...etc. When the student chooses his/her field of study, he/she is urged to learn deeply about the language he/she is intending to translate from or to translate into.

In English (the language that concerns us here), the student learns the basics of grammar (active and passive voices, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, tenses...), which are different from Arabic <sup>(2)</sup>. In parallel, he/she learns how to write short paragraphs dealing with specific themes, like telling about his/her summer vacation, what to become in the future, and speak about social problems. Oral and written expressions allow the student, in the first place, to get familiar with a language, and to be gradually fluent in both speaking and writing. During four years of study, the student learns the different ways and techniques of translation, taking into consideration the culture and the aspects of both source text and target text.

Translation is taught once a week (One and a half hour during the three first years and three consecutive hours in senior year). It is a very important module since it is the key for a certain evaluation of the student's level.

As a teacher of the Arabic-English translation module, I choose for my students different types of texts that we try to translate together in the classroom. I always give them a text one week before we do it in class so that they will have enough time to prepare it at home. I generally start the year by giving them short texts that deal with general themes, just to see how they can render meaning in English, and to which extent they can respect grammar and syntax. Unlike some other teachers, I never give a final translation but let my students make

their own translation to be self-confident. What other teachers do is, in my opinion, discouraging students from being able to evaluate their own work, and a reason for losing confidence in them. They will take the teacher's translation as the only translation sample for the original text and will not make any effort to do another translation by their own. Moreover, I keep telling them: "There is no final translation". Indeed, every translation can be improved, modified and corrected repeatedly and constantly.

During 2012 and 2013, I taught junior and senior students. Something is common between the two categories: the medium and weak level of the majority of them in English. By level, I mean the extent of mastering English as a foreign language. Students think in Arabic or in French, and try to render the meaning in English. Their translations usually sound like French or Arabic but rarely like English. This is due, in a way, to the fact that Algerian students (like many of their compatriots) mostly use either French or Arabic for oral communication and writing. They learn English only at school, but they do not practise it outside. Second, some teachers of English modules (translation or others) use dialectal Arabic or French in the classroom for explanation. This gives students a very short opportunity to improve their level in English.

The texts, translated in my classes, were mainly politics (Western Sahara), literature (Mahmoud Timour), biographies (Margaret Mitchell, Edison), speeches (The head of Algerian Police Department during the graduation ceremony), economics (The World's top ten economic countries), medical texts and Curriculum vitae. The texts were newspapers' articles, books' extracts or Internet articles. I always take into account the date of issue of each text, that should be (except for literary texts) recent to keep students involved in the present changes. Sometimes, it is of no harm when I give them a text written in the 1970's or the 1980's if I see that it deals with a situation that can exist even nowadays. During the exams, I select a text (about ten lines) related to one of the themes, we had dealt with in class, to be done during one hour and a half.

Nevertheless, students do not practise in the exam what they learn in the classroom. They keep making the same mistakes even if I spend weeks explaining that each language has its own structure. For instance, how many times, did I tell them that in Arabic, the verb precedes the subject, whereas in English, it is the opposite? That in English, sentences start with a capital letter and end with a full stop, whereas in Arabic, capital letter is not used, instead, they should leave a gap before starting a new paragraph? These are principles in writing; if students do not master such matters, how can they move to a higher level : translation?

The mistakes students make while translating can be divided into three main categories:

#### **a- Spelling Mistakes:**

Students generally mistake English words for French ones. As former colonized of France, they are influenced by the French language in their writing to mean English when the words are common. For instance, they write: *personnality, humain, futur, raison* and *creatif* to mean *personality, human, future, reason* and *creative*, as a translation of the following words from Arabic: شخصية، إنساني، مستقبل، سبب، مبدع respectively. This includes proper names for which

students usually give the French name, such as “Athènes”, “Liban” and “Grèce” to mean “Athens”, “Lebanon” and “Greece”.

Spelling mistakes also concern the miswriting of some words such as : *succeed*, *people*, *believe* and *lose* that students translate as follow: *succed*, *peopl*, *beleive* and *loose* as equivalents for the Arabic words: (خسر، آمن، الناس، نجح) respectively.

### b- Grammar mistakes:

These mistakes mainly concern the misuse of tenses, pronouns and prepositions. This includes the subject. Students intend to start a long sentence with a subject and finish it with another subject, such as: “We do not mean by relying on others,...but he means...” as a translation for: "ولا نعني بالاعتماد على الآخرين... بل نقصد...". Here, there is one subject (نحن) [we ] (implicite pronoun), but in students’ translation, it varies between “we” and “he”. We think that the student, as long as he/she advances through the long sentence, forgets the nature of the subject. It is, in fact, a lack of focus, especially, when translation is limited in time, as it is the case in an exam. Grammar mistakes also include the misuse of verbs and nouns, like the followings: “*You can success*” instead of “*you can succeed*”, “*you are failure*” instead of “*you fail*” and “*we choice*” instead of “*we choose*”.

With verbs, students in their great majority, do not know how to conjugate irregular verbs in the past simple. For instance, they write: “*build*” to mean “*built*”, “*maked*” to mean “*made*”, and “*fighted*” to mean “*fought*”.

We must not forget direct and indirect speeches. Mostly, my students translate a direct speech into an indirect speech without making the required changes. Here is an example: ويقول: "مارك لوين، مراسل بي بي سي في أثينا: "اليونانيون يلومون إجراءات التقشف". Direct speech in Arabic comes after the two dots and it is put between two inverted commas. Most of my students translated this passage by: “*Mark Lowing, the BBC correspondent in Athènes said that: “Greeks blame austerity measures”*”. The introduction of “that” would mean that it is an indirect speech, but the presence of the two dots and the inverted commas would show that it is a direct speech. The mistake is double, then, because the verb “blame” is in the present simple while it should be so if “that” is omitted. With “that”, the verb will be “blamed” in the past simple unless the introductory verb is “says”.

### c- Structure Mistakes:

It is obvious that every language has its own structure that differs from other languages. Students in translation should be the first ones to know that. Unfortunately, some of them do not. In fact, in one of my classes, my students translated the following passage:

"قال عميد كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية الدكتور أحمد حطيط" by « *Said the dean of college of literatures and sciences humaines Dr. Ahmed Hatit* ». Here, the use of « sciences humaines » - which is French- is to refer to « humanities ». The verb “said” comes before the subject “the

dean". It is clear that students borrowed the Arabic structure and put it into English. This is a serious mistake.

## 2. Languages' Nature and their Impact on Translation Process

The two poles that concern us, here, are Arabic and English languages. We need to know the nature of each of them in order to understand the extent to which students can learn and practise them before they translate from or into them.

Arabic mainly uses verbal sentences, whereas English uses nominal sentences. The verb in Arabic takes different forms for each pronoun in a specific tense <sup>(3)</sup>, whereas the verb in English is used in the same form for all the pronouns except 'he', 'she' and 'it', and in all tenses. Some words are singular in English, such as rain, fish and audience, but they are plural in Arabic (أمطار، أسماك، حضور) respectively. Students often mistake these words, and intend to use the plural when they translate into English. Some words in English are common to French, but they are faux-amis. If they are not considered within a context, there can be a counter-meaning in translation. For instance, students use to translate the verb (خَيَّب) in Arabic by (deceive) into English. This is because they are influenced by the French verb (décevoir), which is a correct equivalent for the verb in Arabic, but it is not the case for English.

The appropriate equivalent here is "to disappoint". They also translate (in so many occasions) the adverb (حاليا) in Arabic, which means (nowadays) by (actually), which sounds like the French adverb (actuellement). This is because after more than a century of French occupation in Algeria, the French language has gained a large scale in both speaking and writing, more than any other foreign language in the country. Even Algerian Arabic is "pierced" by many French words and expressions. This is why students in translation usually use French to mean English.

In Arabic, a new idea is linked with the previous one with a conjunction, mostly with (و). In English, capital letters after a full stop are used for this purpose. Students most often start their sentences in English by using (and) that they unconsciously translate from Arabic. It is common, then, to read: "**And** after a presentation by Rima Mansour, ..." as translation of "وبعد تقديم من ريمة منصور،...". The conjunction (و) at the beginning of the sentence is correctly used in Arabic, but that is not the case in the translation into English except in few cases. Also, translating "وحصلت اليونان بالفعل على هذه المبالغ" by "**And** Greece indeed obtained these sums". The sentence in English should be: "Greece indeed obtained these sums".

In Arabic, the nature of relative pronouns (الذي، التي، اللذان، الذين، اللواتي) <sup>(4)</sup> (that are in singular, dual and plural) enables their use for both human and non-human, but English makes the difference between "who" for human and "which" for non-human. My students (and actually most of the students in our institute) mistake relative pronouns in the two languages.



For instance, they write such sentences: “*the difficulties who....*”, “*forests who reaches upon Tlemcen mounts*” to translate “الصعاب التي...” and “جبال تلمسان...” respectively. Most students do not consider tenses. The sentence: “كنت في هذه الجامعة منذ” (the context is that the person was at the university only to sign an agreement and left after that), was translated by some students by: “*I was at this university since less than four years*”. The use of (since) is false here because it implies that the person is still in this university, but, in fact, he just came for the agreement. The tense (past simple) is correctly expressed because the action is completely finished in the past. The adequate adverb should be “ago” instead of “since”. If students were a little bit aware of English grammar rules, they would understand that such tense cannot be used with the adverb (since) in this particular case.

The misuse of tenses by students in translation also includes the use of “does”. This present form of the verb (to do) is used (by students) with pronouns others than “he”, “she” and “it” as in the following examples: “ولا نعني بالاتكال على الآخرين” and “ولا يعني الشخص” that are respectively translated by “We **does** not mean by relying on others...” and “the person **do** not mean...”.

The misuse of prepositions in English is a common mistake to all students. The prepositions “on”, “in” and “for” are mostly mistranslations of Arabic prepositions. It is common to read in my students’ papers “to believe on” instead of “to believe in”, “patience on fail” instead of “patience after fail”, “to depend in” instead of “to depend on,” and so on. The teaching of languages in the institute of translation, aims in the first place to the mastering of a minimum of these languages. Unfortunately, this is not what one can notice today. In fact, as junior and senior students, who spent two years in learning foreign languages in parallel with translation, we assume that they master, at least, the basics of English as a target language, which is not the case.

We have the right, then, to ask ourselves the following questions: Why do junior and senior students in translation make these mistakes? What are the consequences of mistaking French and English on Arabic-English translation? Could we say that Algerian students, according to what we have demonstrated above, should study a unified curriculum approved by the Institute Teachers Board instead of many curriculums that are personal efforts made by teachers?

We will try to answer these questions in order to give an overview of the reality of teaching and learning English within translation process as well as to deal with the reasons that stand behind the weak level of most of students in the institute of translation, University of Algiers 2.

### 3.Reality of English Teaching/Learning at the Institute of Translation

As some may think, students in translation at the University of Algiers 2, are not that skilled. They spend four years to obtain a degree but if you ask them to translate a simple sentence from Arabic into English, only one student among five, will do it correctly. Some of the reasons that lead to such an affirmation are as follow:

- Very few students like reading books, magazines or newspapers in English. The majority prefers to listen to the radio or watch TV in languages other than English. This leads, obviously, to spelling mistakes. We mean that when you read a word, it is not as you hear it or listen to it because you know how to write it only when you “see” it,

- The use of more French and dialectal Arabic in the classroom by teachers, does not help students to learn enough English and that encourages them to express themselves most of the time using only Arabic or French during an English class. English becomes only a tool for teaching and not a purpose of teaching,

- Some teachers deal with texts that aim at learning new equivalents for original words, and at communicative goals. They omit to teach students the deeper structure in which they can see the beauty of a language and its own features, or what Ofelia García calls “*horizontal and vertical aspects of a language*”: <sup>(5)</sup>

*(...) We often view language only as a resource for communication with others, its horizontal aspect. But we must unearth and discover the deeper meaning of language that is contained in its metaphors, its word play, its images, its vertical aspect.*

- Lack in dealing with literary texts. Using literature in translation is a very useful way to master a language. In fact, literary texts have this particularity to use an elevated level of language. If the teacher gives students –at least once a month- a literary text to translate, they will certainly improve their level by time. Unfortunately, we have noticed that very few do so. I personally do it with my students, who keep complaining almost all the time by telling me that such or such a teacher had given them “simple” texts while they think that mines are “complicated”,

- Students generally rely on teachers to learn English. How so? They come to the classroom with the idea that the teacher can give them everything they need to learn. Once outside, they do not bother themselves to practise the language itself or translation. However, none can learn a language in one hour or three hours a week. Students should read in English to get familiar with its vocabulary and choose short texts in Arabic to translate into English. There are other ways new technologies allow nowadays, but students do not take advantage of them.

They want everything “ready” instead of working hard to get it. One of my students told me that she used to use Google dictionary for translation. She did not realize that translation requires, first, a monolingual dictionary and not a bilingual one. Second, I do not agree with students, who think that electronic dictionaries are better than dictionaries in paper <sup>(6)</sup>,



- Some students do not learn enough English in high school. This is due to the lack of teachers of English, or if the teacher is available, he/she focuses only on the curriculum without encouraging students with more homeworks or extra activities. All these reasons and others have contributed to the retreat in teaching and learning English in the University of Algiers 2.

We think that the current curriculum does not meet the expectations of students, who will face the future without any strong knowledge foundation. The world of work requires skilled translators, and I definitely think that if the situation goes on, students of today will become (if they have the chance to be hired with such skills) bad translators tomorrow.

The French language have overwhelmed students, and they use it every day and everywhere. This fact has had a great (and negative) impact in their translations and whatever the teacher gives as advice; they build ideas in French and re-express them in English. The Institute Board should invite both teachers and students to promote the English language to avoid the serious mistakes students still make.

## Conclusion

It is time for us to answer the two questions we have asked at the beginning of this paper. For the first question (**To which extent is the current translation curriculum in the Algerian university efficient to teach and learn English?**), we can say that the curriculum in itself is not based on strong backgrounds. Students need to understand a language before they translate from or to it. The non-existence of a unified curriculum has led, in our opinion, into anarchy in teaching and learning English in the institute of translation. Although some teachers make huge efforts in both “*vertical and horizontal aspects*” of English, many of them are satisfied with superficial and general texts. This implies also the fact that in some cases, teachers, who pretext the lack of time, use the same texts every year. If they can do this for some texts, they cannot for others. Students are, thus, at the mercy of individual efforts of the teacher, who cannot show them the vertical aspect of English as a foreign language.

For the second question (**What are the criteria of a successful English teaching for students in translation ?**), we recommend that a special committee should be installed and takes in charge the establishment of a curriculum that meets the international standards in teaching and learning English within translation. As we mentioned previously, most of the teachers have been abroad, but none has initiated such a suggestion. The reality of teaching Arabic-English translation (the same thing is to be said about other combinations) is catastrophic, and the assimilation of English by students weakens everyday. We will propose hereunder what we think is beneficial for teaching and learning English in the institute of translation. These criteria are personal efforts of what we believe it will help both teachers and students to see other than the functional value of English as a tool of teaching and learning, not only in translation, but also in all levels of education:

- We should teach English since elementary school, in parallel with French and Arabic,

- The timetable should include more hours for English in elementary school because specialists have conducted studies and experiences to show that a child is “fresh” and can learn any language at an early age,

- The Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Higher Education should work together in order to come up with the introduction of new methods of teaching English, such as audio and video instruments in classrooms. They should also initiate a compulsory programme for the teaching of English during the weekends for all the students.

- The medias can cooperate with the US Embassy and the British Council to initiate the use of English for readers of all ages, like what the Algerian newspaper El Chourouk did two years ago when it collaborated with the British Council. The television also has to initiate shows in English for beginners, especially children, who watch only French and Arabic,

- The university should organize more cultural activities in the profit of students and teachers, such as contests and conferences in English, to encourage its use and development.

Finally, we hope that our students will be able in the future to make good translations from Arabic into English, and will have more confidence in themselves because the field of translation is, in our opinion, a crossroads for all the beauty of languages all over the world.

## Notes

1. See Kh.T.Ibrahim: *Les Algériens et leur(s) langue(s)*, 1997, P 22.
2. Arabic is the official language in Algeria. Berber is only recognized as national. Official correspondences are written either in Arabic or in French, but never in Berber. In the institutes of Translation in all universities of Algeria, Arabic is the key language from which or to which students should translate. For instance, there is no French-English translation or Spanish-German translation. I personally think that it is a pity because it would be enriching if the Ministry of Higher Education allowed such combinations in translation teaching at universities.
3. For further reading, see Jane Wightwick & Mahmoud Gaafar: *Arabic verbs and essentials of grammar: a practical guide to the mastery of Arabic*, McGraw-Hill, New York, USA, 1998.
4. See Karin C. Ryding: *A reference grammar of modern standard Arabic*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 322.
5. See Ofelia García: *Societal multilingualism in a multicultural world in transition*, P. 23, 1992.
6. Electronic dictionaries are adopted by people who look for rapidity in achieving translation no matter the quality of the work is. Usual dictionaries are more beneficial because they give all the connotations and the deepest meaning of the word, whereas electronic dictionaries mention only the superficial meaning.

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