

Intercultural Competence in Arabic-English Proverb Translation: A Study of Yemeni EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study examines intercultural competence in translating Arabic proverbs into English. It goes beyond simple linguistic analysis to dive into how EFL learners use translation strategies for the cultural, figurative, and pragmatic aspects of proverbs. For this purpose, a quantitative descriptive research design was used with data collected through a translation test administered to 45 fourth-year students from three Yemeni universities during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. The analysis focused on linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic difficulties in learners' translations. The results revealed a reliance on literal translation and limited cultural adaptation. The findings also showed that learners sometimes paraphrase, but their ability to convey cultural and figurative meanings is limited. In general, the learners' intercultural competence in Arabic-English proverb translation remains underdeveloped. These results highlight the need to strengthen intercultural training in translation teaching and to help learners deal more effectively with cultural meanings in proverbs.

Keywords: EFL learners, Proverbs, intercultural competence, translation

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Introduction

Translation has been primarily discussed from a linguistic point of view. It has been viewed as a process of transferring words and structures from one language to another. Earlier translation theories prioritized fidelity and accuracy (Meeshi, 2026; Qizi & Qizi, 2025). Translation errors were commonly classified as grammatical, lexical, or equivalence-related (Baker, 1992; Cozma & Jumanca, 2023). However, this traditional view is now considered insufficient. It may fail to convey meanings rooted in a community's social and cultural context (Guo, 2012; Usmanova, 2026). Modern translation studies have therefore shifted towards an intercultural perspective (Meeshi, 2026; Usmanova, 2026). Translation is increasingly understood as a complex act of intercultural communication and cultural transfer across cultural systems (Meeshi, 2026; Pelillo-Hestermeyer, 2024; Usmanova, 2026). This shift reflects a broader recognition of culture's role in shaping how meaning is constructed and interpreted (Bassnett, 2007; Deka, 2020; Newmark, 1988).

In this intercultural view, translation is no longer regarded as a simple movement from a source text to a target text (House, 2016). It is a deeper process in which culture plays a crucial role (Dadajanova, 2025; Loogus, 2012). Linguistic choices are also interpretive choices. They may carry implied cultural meanings (Dadajanova, 2025; Venuti, 2021). As Tessicini (2014) stated, "there is no act of translation that is not also an act of negotiation" (p. 1). Similarly, Eco (2003) explained that negotiation involves compromise, since each party may "renounce something else" before reaching satisfaction (p. 3). This means that the translator acts as a mediator between two cultural systems, not merely as a linguistic converter (Tessicini, 2014). Such mediation becomes especially important when translating culture-specific expressions, such as Arabic proverbs. These proverbs are often metaphorical and culturally embedded, which makes direct equivalence difficult (Dadajanova, 2025). Therefore, translators need to consider the cultural context of both source and target cultures to ensure clarity and accuracy of meaning (Fahmi, 2016).

Proverb translation is particularly relevant to intercultural competence. Proverbs contain cultural wisdom, metaphor, and worldview. Their meanings may go beyond their literal wording (Mieder, 2004). Literal translation may therefore fail to convey the intended message. This is especially true when the proverb is closely connected to a specific cultural context. Translation, in this case, functions as an "active cultural bridge that mediates, negotiates, and transforms meaning within and across societal boundaries" (Paşcalău, 2025, p. 209). It is also a "complex process of negotiating cultural meaning and identities" (Zoheir, 2025, p. 352). Successful translation requires a "skilled negotiator of meaning" who balances "fidelity, cultural authenticity and the expectations of the target audience" (Zoheir, 2025, p. 361). This need is crucial in Arabic–English proverb translation among EFL learners, where intercultural competence directly affects translation quality.

Problem statement

Several issues related to proverb translation and culture-bound expressions have been researched. For instance, Shehab (2023) focused on the limitations of literal translation in addressing socio-cultural gaps. Others have examined diglossia and regional variation, especially the difficulty of distinguishing between Modern Standard Arabic and vernacular forms in empirical data (Hamdi et al., 2023). Recent research has also discussed the limitations of artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, in handling figurative and culturally embedded expressions (Ahmed et al., 2025; Darwish et al., 2025; Jibreel, 2023). Cultural approaches further show that proverbs may reflect social values, gender roles, social stratification, and cultural worldview (Ghafoori & Elyas, 2023). Comparative studies also indicate that proverbs across cultures may share common values and metaphors, although their interpretation remains affected by culture, history, and society (Hazaymeh, 2025;

Wuryaningrum et al., 2025). Shehab and Daragmeh (2014) showed that removing contextual meaning from proverbs may lead to mistranslation. These studies suggest that successful proverb translation should not depend only on linguistic equivalence. It should also consider cultural diversity, figurative meaning, and contextual use.

Empirical studies in Arabic-speaking contexts, including Yemen and Iraq, show that EFL learners struggle with culture-bound expressions. They tend to rely on literal translation strategies because of cultural distance and limited intercultural awareness (Al-Khadem, 2024; Mahmoud & Jamal, 2024). However, most of these studies remain descriptive. They mainly identify linguistic problems or classify translation strategies, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, omission, and equivalence-related choices (Almjlad, 2023; Hmaidan, 2024). They pay limited attention to translation competence as a holistic construct. This construct includes linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions. As a result, the learner-translator is often treated as a linguistic converter rather than an intercultural mediator (Al-Sowaidi, 2022; Bamma, 2023). This suggests that translation problems in the Yemeni EFL context are not only linguistic but also cultural, pragmatic, and intercultural.

Yemeni EFL learners face difficulty in capturing the implicit cultural meanings of Arabic proverbs when translating them into English. Proverbs are culturally loaded expressions, and their meanings often go beyond their literal wording (Mieder, 2004). Learners may produce translations that are linguistically accurate but pragmatically weak if they rely mainly on literal translation. In such cases, the cultural resonance and intended message of the Arabic proverbs may be lost (Baker, 1992). This problem reflects a limitation in intercultural competence in proverb translation rather than a purely linguistic deficiency. It signals the need to move beyond literal meaning to interpret the cultural and figurative meanings embedded in Arabic proverbs. This is consistent with Bamma's (2023) view that intercultural competence in translation remains "largely uncovered by researchers and translation theorists" (p. 154).

Observably, Yemeni EFL learners produce translations that are grammatically acceptable but culturally weak. This is particularly obvious when it comes to translating proverbs. Such weakness may affect the quality of Arabic–English proverb translation. While previous studies covered linguistic problems and translation strategies, including literal translation, paraphrasing, omission, and equivalence-related issues, this study pays more attention to learners' ability to understand and transfer the cultural meanings embedded in Arabic proverbs. This issue is important because proverbs often carry figurative and pragmatic meanings beyond their literal wording. That is, translation is not only a linguistic process but a cultural and pragmatic act. Learners must be able to interpret figurative meanings embedded in Arabic proverbs. Without cultural awareness, proverb translation may remain incomplete and culturally inappropriate. The study contributes to improving learners' awareness of culture-bound expressions in Arabic–English translation.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to assess Yemeni EFL learners' intercultural competence in translating Arabic–English proverbs. It examines their ability to move beyond literalism and interpret cultural and figurative meanings. To translate the objectives into research questions, the researcher used the following questions:

1. What is the level of intercultural translation competence demonstrated by Yemeni EFL learners in translating Arabic proverbs into English?
2. How does reliance on literal translation affect the quality and acceptability of their translations?

Review of literature

Language and culture are closely connected in translation studies. Language is both a carrier of cultural identity and a result of that identity, which explains the strong relationship between culture and translation (Portelli, 2018). Since the cultural turn of the 1990s, translation has no longer been viewed only as linguistic transfer. It has become a more comprehensive perspective of cultural transference (Portelli, 2018). In this view, the translator does not simply replace words from one language with words from another language. Rather, the translator acts as a cultural mediator or bi-cultural expert who connects different social systems (Portelli, 2018). This role requires attention to both written content and the “unsaid” meanings behind social behavior. Pym (2014) also linked translation with intercultural communication because it helps people from different groups understand how shared human goals are expressed in different situations. Therefore, translation can be understood as a form of communication that moves between languages, cultures, and social worlds.

The cultural role of translation becomes more important in the context of globalization. Cronin (2003) argued that translation supports global citizenship because it helps different cultures recognize and understand one another. This idea shows that translation is not only a technical activity. It is also connected to cultural recognition and mutual understanding. According to Dabaghi et al. (2010), the translation of proverbs and figurative language supports this perspective. These forms transmit culture and reflect a people’s social values and sensibility. To preserve this role, translators should carry the cultural conventions of the original into the target text. This may require them to recreate the same situation while using wording that maintains the intended stylistic impact. Such cultural adaptation can make the translated message more acceptable and understandable in the target culture. However, this process can also be problematic. Venuti (1995) warned that domestication may create an illusion of transparency by making the foreign text appear too familiar to target readers. As a result, cultural differences may be reduced, and the translator may become invisible in the translated text.

Modern translation studies have also introduced the concept of cultural translation. This concept does not focus only on fixed texts. It also considers the movement of people, identities, and cultural practices across borders. Pym (2014) explained that cultural translation may create cultural hybridity through contact between different cultures. In this sense, translation can occur in a “third space” between stable cultural boundaries. This space allows meanings to be negotiated rather than transferred. Cronin (2003) also argued that translation has an important role in preserving biocultural diversity in a globalized world. However, translation still faces the problem of untranslatability. Li (2021) connected this problem with cultural non-equivalence, including historical, social, and religious differences between languages. These differences may prevent literal equivalents from fully conveying cultural meanings. Consequently, effective translation requires deep cultural understanding and continuous intercultural dialogue (Li, 2021).

Intercultural Competence and Translation

Intercultural competence is central to current discussions of translation. The cultural turn in translation studies shifted attention from language transfer to cross-cultural communication (Liu, 2010). This shift is especially relevant to the translation of proverbs because their meaning depends on semantics, conventions, and pragmatic force. In this perspective, the translator is not only a linguistic intermediary. The translator is an intercultural mediator who deals with the customs, beliefs, and values of different societies. Mejri (2024) explained that the translator must transfer a text written for one source culture into a form that can function in the target culture. Mejri argued that intercultural competence is a broad competence that affects almost all translation tasks. Byram’s (1997)

concept of intercultural communicative competence is useful here because it includes knowledge, interpretive skills, and critical awareness. These elements help explain why translators need more than vocabulary and grammar when working across cultures.

In proverb translation, translators need to understand how a proverb functions in the source culture to decide how it can be represented in the target culture. Sometimes, equivalence may be possible, but in other cases, reformulation or paraphrase may be more suitable. House (2015) treated translation as intercultural communication. Hatim and Mason (1997) stressed that translation operates across discourse worlds shaped by context, ideology, and audience. Aixelá's (1996) discussion of culture-specific items further explained why formulaic expressions become difficult when they are rooted in local cultural knowledge. These points of view suggest that intercultural competence should not be treated as a minor supporting idea. It is a theoretical lens that helps explain why some translations fail even when they are grammatically correct.

The importance of intercultural competence has also appeared in translator education. Tomozeiu et al. (2016) argued that intercultural competence should be taught clearly in translator training. It should not be left to develop indirectly or by chance. Beseghi (2018) also showed that translation pedagogy can strengthen intercultural awareness when students work with culturally loaded texts. Orozco-Jutorán (2024) extended this discussion to legal translation trainees and showed that strategic competence and intercultural competence are closely linked in professional decision-making. In the Arab context, Al-Batineh and Bilali (2017) found gaps between translator training curricula and the realities of the language industry. Al-Batineh and Al Tenaijy (2024) later showed that this mismatch also has a technological dimension. Alzamil (2024) highlighted similar tensions between academic preparation and professional expectations in Saudi Arabia. Hazaea and Qassem (2024) also argued that translation competence should include cultural, strategic, instrumental, and problem-solving competencies. These studies suggest that translator training in the region needs a stronger competence-based design.

Proverbs and culture-bound meaning

Proverbs are among the most common forms of language that carry cultural meaning. Mieder (1985; 1993, as cited in Mieder, 2004) defined a proverb as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (p. 3). This definition is important because it shows the collective nature of proverbs. Proverbs belong to society, and they gain meaning through repeated social use. They are also fixed and memorable expressions, which makes them powerful in communication. However, this fixed form does not mean that their meaning is simple. Much of their meaning lies in convention, figurative framing, and rhetorical effect. Therefore, a literal translation often fails to capture the full meaning of a proverb.

Proverb translation is related to cultural difficulty. Newmark (1988) regarded proverbs as cultural expressions that are difficult to translate. Baker (1992) also explained that culturally specific expressions are difficult because the target language may lack cultural equivalence. This difficulty may arise when similar forms carry different meanings. It may also appear when literal and figurative meanings are mixed. This is common in Arabic-English proverb translation because both languages have many proverbs, but their meanings and effects do not always match. An Arabic proverb may have no English equivalent. It may also have only a partial equivalent, or it may show a misleading literal similarity. For this reason, translating proverbs requires more than finding matching words. It requires attention to cultural meaning, pragmatic function, and naturalness in the target language.

Recent empirical studies have confirmed the persistence of these challenges. Tergui (2024) argued that Arabic idioms and proverbs create semantic, syntactic, and cultural

difficulties for translation students. This means that the problem is not limited to vocabulary or grammar. It also involves cultural awareness. Shormani (2020) showed that students' ability to translate proverbs improved after they became familiar with the cultural aspects of those proverbs. This finding supports the importance of intercultural competence in producing better translations. It also shows that proverb translation can be used to test learners' cultural awareness and strategic thinking. When learners understand the background, use, and moral meaning of a proverb, they can make more suitable translation decisions. Therefore, proverbs are useful material for studying intercultural competence in translation.

Previous Studies

Previous studies have emphasized the important role of society and context in proverb translation. For example, Fahmi (2016) and Hazaymeh (2025) described proverbs as expressions that reflect a society's values, beliefs, and social traditions. This description supports the view that proverbs are not only linguistic expressions. They are also cultural and social acts. English and Arabic belong to different linguistic and cultural systems, so translating proverbs between them is often difficult (Hmaidan, 2024; Ibrahim, 2003). Several scholars have explained that translating proverbs is not a simple process in which words are replaced by other words, but it is an intercultural process that requires a complete understanding of both language and culture (Ibrahim, 2003; Shormani, 2020). Studies have also shown that proverbs are strongly linked to social and communicative context. Therefore, translators need to understand the intended meaning and pragmatic function of proverbs before translating them (Shehab & Daragmeh, 2014; Abdulrazaq, 2022).

Identifying literal translation as a major problem in proverb translation, Almjlad (2023) and Darwish et al. (2025) argued that word-for-word translation often fails to convey the figurative and cultural meanings of the original expression. Similarly, Ibrahim (2003) and Tergui (2024) noted that literal translations may be grammatically correct but can sound unnatural or unclear in the target language. This problem becomes more serious when the proverb includes culture-specific images or ironic meanings (Shehab & Daragmeh, 2014). In such cases, the translation may lose its communicative value. It may also become difficult for target readers to understand. For this reason, many researchers consider literal translation an ineffective strategy when it is used as the main approach to proverb translation. This supports the need to examine learners' reliance on literal translation in relation to intercultural competence.

Other studies highlighted the role of intercultural competence in translation. Ibrahim (2003) speculated that translators should be bilingual and bicultural to translate proverbs accurately. This means that translators should understand the social, religious, historical, and cultural values of both languages (Fahmi, 2016; Hamdi et al., 2023). Studies have shown that many translation errors made by EFL learners are related to weak cultural knowledge and weak language ability (Shormani, 2020). Learners who lack cultural knowledge often depend on literal translation because it seems safer and more direct. However, learners who understand cultural meaning are more likely to produce natural and meaningful translations. This contrast shows why intercultural competence is not only an additional skill. It is an essential part of translation competence, especially in the translation of proverbs.

Several studies in Yemen and other Arab countries have examined proverb translation among EFL learners. Shormani (2020) studied senior Yemeni EFL students at Ibb University using a two-phase translation test. In the first phase, students translated proverbs without cultural instruction and achieved only 0.5% accuracy on proverbs with no direct Arabic equivalents. In the second phase, students received cultural instruction about the origin, background, usage, and moral meaning of the proverbs. Their performance then improved and reached 83.5% (Shormani, 2020). This result strongly supports the role of cultural

instruction in proverb translation. It also shows that learners' poor performance may not result from language weakness alone. It may also result from limited intercultural awareness and limited knowledge of proverb use.

Studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Jordan have reported similar difficulties (Almjlad, 2023; Hmaidan, 2024; Tergui, 2024). In these studies, students showed a strong tendency to use literal translation strategies. Omani learners faced semantic, syntactic, and cultural difficulties at the same time. Saudi learners also struggled with culture-bound expressions because they did not pay enough attention to cultural aspects (Almjlad, 2023; Tergui, 2024). These findings confirm that proverb translation remains a major challenge for Arab EFL learners. From a linguistic view, this challenge may be explained as a problem of equivalence. From an intercultural view, it can be explained as a problem of understanding and transferring culturally embedded meanings. Therefore, the intercultural explanation is more useful for the present study. It allows the analysis to move beyond error classification and examine learners' competence more broadly.

Artificial intelligence and machine translation studies have added another dimension to this discussion. Researchers have shown that AI tools, including ChatGPT, frequently depend on literal translation strategies when translating figurative expressions (Ahmed et al., 2025; Darwish et al., 2025; Jibreel, 2023). Some studies have found that literal translation appeared in more than half of AI-generated translations. Other tools, such as Bing, sometimes produced more communicative equivalents. However, machine translation systems still struggle with the figurative and cultural differences of proverbs (Ahmed et al., 2025; Darwish et al., 2025; Jibreel, 2023). This finding shows that the difficulty of proverb translation is not only a learner-related issue. It is also a deeper problem connected with cultural and pragmatic meaning. Therefore, both human and machine translation studies support the need to study proverb translation as an intercultural process.

While prior research has provided important insights into proverb translation, literal translation, equivalence, cultural meaning, and translation strategies, the focus has been on describing errors or classifying strategies rather than examining proverb translation as a broader intercultural process. More attention has been given to translating English proverbs into Arabic than to translating Arabic proverbs into English, particularly in the Yemeni EFL context. This leaves Yemeni EFL learners' intercultural competence in Arabic–English proverb translation insufficiently explored. With that said, this study addresses this gap by examining Yemeni EFL learners' intercultural competence in translating Arabic–English proverbs at the undergraduate level.

Method

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design to examine the intercultural aspect of translation competence in Arabic–English proverb translation among Yemeni EFL learners. This design is suitable because it describes learners' performance without changing or controlling any variables. It also allows for a systematic analysis of translation data (Creswell, 2014). In addition, the study uses translation error analysis and strategy analysis to identify the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic difficulties found in students' translations. A cross-sectional approach was followed because the data were collected from all participants at one specific time without any intentional manipulation of variables (González & Gallardo, 2021, as cited in Usquiano, 2025). This approach is commonly used in studies of translation competence to assess learners' performance under similar conditions.

Participants

The population of the study consists of undergraduate fourth-year translation students at The National University, Sana'a University, and the University of Science and Technology during the second semester of the academic year 2024/2025. The sample includes 45

students selected from the three universities because they were accessible and relevant to the objectives of the study. Fourth-year students were chosen because they had completed several translation courses and have therefore developed an appropriate level of translation competence. Including students from the three universities was intended to provide broader representation of Yemeni EFL translation learners.

Instrument

The main instrument of the study is a translation test consisting of 20 Arabic proverbs selected from *One Thousand and One English Proverbs Translated into Arabic* by Jabak (2008). The test was designed to evaluate students' ability to translate Arabic proverbs into English and to identify the translation strategies they use. The students' translations were classified according to Thalji's (2015) categories of literal, paraphrase, and cultural translation strategies. Validity of the instrument was established through expert review by five experts in translation and applied linguistics. They evaluated the clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the test items and provided standard translations for comparison. Based on their feedback, several items were revised, and the number of proverbs was reduced from 30 to 20 to improve clarity and suitability. Reliability was tested through a pilot study using SPSS, and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient reached 0.72, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Ahmad et al. 2024). The final version of the test was then administered under controlled conditions. Participants completed the test individually within one hour without using dictionaries or machine translation tools, and formal instructions were provided across all testing sessions.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS to calculate the frequencies and percentages. Such descriptive statistics were used to classify students' translations into accurate, acceptable, and unacceptable categories. The students' translation of Arabic proverbs was classified into four groups: untranslated, unacceptable translation, acceptable translation, and accurate translation. This classification was adapted from Awadh and Khan (2020), who used similar categories to assess translation responses. An untranslated response was used to refer to an item left without translation. An unacceptable translation was used to refer to a translation that failed to convey the meaning or cultural implication of the proverb. An acceptable translation referred to the translation that conveyed the meaning, but with minor linguistic and cultural awareness. An accurate translation refers to the translation that transfers the meaning, function, and cultural force of the proverb naturally and appropriately into English. This scale was suitable for the present study because proverb translation requires not only linguistic accuracy but also intercultural competence. Translation strategies were also identified and quantified based on Thalji's (2015) framework. The analysis focused on linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic difficulties reflected in learners' translations. Results were then interpreted in relation to previous research on proverb translation competence and intercultural communication.

Results

This section presents the results of the study according to its main objectives. It begins with learners' intercultural translation competence in translating Arabic–English proverbs. In this part, students' responses are classified into untranslated, unacceptable, acceptable, and accurate translations. Then it moves to the translation strategies used by the participants, namely literal translation, paraphrasing, and cultural adaptation. Each table is followed by a descriptive analysis to explain the main patterns in students' performance. The discussion of the results focuses on both the quality of the translations and the strategies that influenced them.

Intercultural Translation Competence in Proverb Translation

The first objective of the study is to assess learners' intercultural translation competence in Arabic–English proverb translation tasks. It is analyzed through Table 1, which presents learners' performance across 20 Arabic proverbs. The table classifies responses into untranslated, unacceptable, acceptable, and accurate translations.). The analysis focuses on patterns of success and failure in cultural transfer. It also examines how learners handle meaning reconstruction across different types of proverbs.

Table 1. Participants' Performance in Translating Arabic Proverbs

No.	Proverbs	Untranslated		Unacceptable		Acceptable		Accurate	
		F.	%	F.	%	F.	%	F.	%
1	القناعة كنز لا يفنى	0	12	26.7	27	60.0	6	13.3	
2	الجوع كافر	0	34	75.5	8	17.8	3	6.7	
3	العين بصيرة واليد قصيرة	0	41	91.1	3	6.7	1	2.2	
4	القرد بعين أمه غزال	0	24	53.3	20	44.5	1	2.2	
5	على قدر بساطك مد رجلتك	0	21	46.7	2	4.4	22	48.9	
6	لا تعمل من الحبة قبة	0	10	22.2	4	8.9	31	68.9	
7	الصبر مفتاح الفرج	0	18	40	26	57.8	1	2.2	
8	كل ممنوع مرغوب	0	23	51.1	5	11.1	17	37.8	
9	كثير الكلام قليل الأفعال	0	38	84.5	6	13.3	1	2.2	
10	من حفر حفرة لأخيه وقع فيها	0	16	35.6	29	64.4	0	0	
11	من طلب العلا سهر الليالي	0	44	97.8	1	2.2	0	0	
12	إرضاء الناس غاية لا تدرك	0	29	64.4	15	33.4	1	2.2	
13	حبلى الكذب قصير	0	29	64.4	8	17.8	8	17.8	
14	في العجلة الندامة	0	19	42.2	26	57.8	0	0	
15	خير الكلام ما قل ودل	0	29	64.4	16	35.6	0	0	
16	لا تؤجل عمل اليوم إلى الغد	0	5	11.1	21	46.7	19	42.2	
17	الوقاية خير من العلاج	0	4	8.9	11	24.4	30	66.7	
18	السكوت علامة الرضا	0	23	51.1	14	31.1	8	17.8	
19	يضرِب عصفورين بحجر واحد	0	8	17.8	5	11.1	32	71.1	
20	خير الأمور أوسطها	0	44	97.8	0	0	1	2.2	
Total		0	471	52.33	247	27.44	182	20.23	

The results in Table 1 show that unacceptable translations represent the highest proportion of responses. More than half of the translations (52.33%) fail to meet acceptable standards of meaning or cultural equivalence. This indicates that learners face serious difficulties in translating Arabic proverbs into appropriate English forms. Acceptable translations account for 27.44%, which reflects partial understanding of meaning without full equivalence. Accurate translations represent only 20.23%, which indicates limited success in achieving intercultural translation competence. The absence of untranslated items confirms that all learners attempted the task, so the results reflect actual performance levels.

A closer item-level analysis shows that learners perform worst in culturally dense and metaphorical proverbs. Items such as "من طلب العلا سهر الليالي" and "خير الأمور أوسطها" recorded 97.8% unacceptable translations. Similarly, "العين بصيرة واليد قصيرة" recorded 91.1% unacceptable responses. In these cases, learners failed to identify equivalent English proverbs and relied mainly on literal translation. For example, "من طلب العلا سهر الليالي" was translated as "He who seeks glory will stay up all night," which reflects structural transfer but

not cultural equivalence. This shows that learners process proverbs as compositional sentences rather than fixed cultural expressions. As a result, intercultural meaning is lost.

Other difficult items include “كثير الكلام قليل الأفعال,” which recorded 84.5% unacceptable translations. Learners produced literal or semi-literal forms such as “Those who talk a lot do not do much.” Although the meaning is understandable, it does not reflect an established English proverb such as “Actions speak louder than words.” This indicates partial semantic understanding without cultural substitution. It also shows reliance on paraphrasing rather than equivalence-based translation. This pattern reflects limited intercultural translation competence.

In contrast, some proverbs show relatively better performance. For example, “الوقاية خير” recorded 66.7% accurate translations, and “لا تعمل من الحبة قبة” recorded 68.9% accurate translations. These results suggest that familiarity plays an important role in successful translation. Learners are more likely to produce correct equivalents when they recognize the proverb. However, this success is not consistent across all items. It depends on exposure rather than systematic competence development. Furthermore,

Item “لا تؤجل عمل اليوم إلى الغد” shows relatively strong performance, with 42.2% accurate and 46.7% acceptable translations. Learners produced near-equivalent forms such as “Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.” However, variation still exists across responses, which shows inconsistent application of knowledge. Some learners still relied on literal translation structures. This reflects partial but not stable intercultural competence.

Intermediate performance is also observed in “من حفر حفرة لأخيه وقع فيها,” where 64.4% of responses were acceptable. Learners produced translations such as “Whoever dug a hole for his brother fell into it.” This shows a correct understanding of meaning, but there is a lack of established English proverb equivalence. Similarly, “القناعة كنز لا يفنى” recorded 60% acceptable translations, with responses such as “Contentment is an everlasting treasure.” These examples show semantic transfer without full cultural reconstruction.

Items with metaphorical complexity show the weakest performance. For example, “القرد بعين أمه غزال” recorded only 2.2% accurate translations. Learners relied on literal translation, such as “The monkey is a gazelle in its mother’s eyes.” This shows an inability to interpret figurative meaning. Likewise, “خير الكلام ما قل ودل” recorded 64.4% unacceptable translations and no accurate equivalents. These results confirm failure to transfer cultural meaning in complex expressions.

The overall pattern shows a clear intercultural competence continuum. Literal translation represents the lowest level of competence. Paraphrasing represents an intermediate level. Cultural adaptation represents the highest level. However, learners mainly operate within the first two levels. Accurate cultural equivalence is rarely achieved. This indicates that intercultural translation competence is still developing among participants.

To conclude, the findings show a strong relationship between strategy use and intercultural translation competence. The dominance of literal translation (48.2%) corresponds directly with the high rate of unacceptable translations (52.33%). This indicates that reliance on literal translation negatively affects intercultural performance. Paraphrasing functions as a transitional strategy that improves meaning clarity but does not guarantee cultural equivalence. Cultural adaptation remains limited, which reflects weak intercultural awareness.

Learners’ Reliance on Literal Translation Strategies

The second objective of the study is to identify the extent to which Yemeni EFL learners rely on literal translation strategies in translating Arabic proverbs into English. This objective is examined through Table 2, which presents the distribution of translation strategies used by the participants. The analysis focuses on how frequently each strategy is used and what

this reveals about learners' translation behavior. The results are interpreted in relation to strategy dominance and translation decision-making patterns. The findings also reflect how learners approach proverb translation at the linguistic and cultural levels.

Table 2 Strategies Used in Translating Proverbs

Proverbs		Cultural	Literal	Paraphrase
All proverbs	F	208	434	258
	%	23.1	48.2	28.7
Rank		3	1	2

The results in Table 4.2 show that literal translation is the most frequently used strategy among participants. It accounts for 48.2% of all responses, which represents nearly half of the total translations. This high percentage indicates that learners mainly depend on direct word-for-word transfer when translating Arabic proverbs into English. This tendency is clearly reflected in the translation of "لا تؤجل عمل اليوم إلى الغد," which was translated as "Don't delay today's work to tomorrow," "Don't leave what you can do today to tomorrow," and "Don't postpone today's work until tomorrow." These versions show a direct lexical transfer of Arabic structure into English. Although the general meaning is preserved, the translations do not consistently reflect the established English equivalent "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." Another example is "على قدر بساطك مد رجلتك," which was translated as "Cut your coat according to your legs," "Stretch your legs according to carpet," and "As much as your rug, extend your legs." These responses clearly show that the participants used word-for-word translation to convey the meaning of the proverb. The responses also demonstrate limited awareness of the fixed English equivalent "Cut your coat according to your cloth." In short, these examples confirm that learners give priority to structural correspondence over cultural or functional equivalence. This reflects a tendency to treat proverbs as ordinary sentences rather than fixed cultural expressions.

Paraphrasing comes second with 28.7% of the responses. This indicates that learners sometimes attempt to express meaning using alternative wording when direct translation is not possible. This is evident in the translation of "كثير الكلام قليل الأفعال," which was rendered as "A man of many words is of few deeds," "Those who talk a lot do not do much," and "Actions speak louder than words." These responses show that learners were able to express the general meaning of the proverb. However, the translations vary in accuracy and stylistic quality. Some responses remain close to literal structure, while others approach natural English expression. This indicates that paraphrasing is used mainly as a compensatory strategy when literal translation fails. It reflects a partial understanding of meaning without consistent access to idiomatic equivalence. Therefore, paraphrasing represents an intermediate stage between literal translation and cultural adaptation.

Cultural adaptation is the least used strategy, with only 23.1% of responses. This low percentage indicates a limited ability to produce culturally appropriate equivalents in English. This is reflected in the translation of "كل ممنوع مرغوب," where learners produced "The grass is always greener on the other side," "Stolen water are sweet," and "Stolen pleasure is sweetest." These responses show attempts at cultural equivalence, but not a consistent or accurate selection of the established English proverb "Forbidden fruit is sweet." A similar pattern appears in "في العجلة الندامة," which was translated as "Slow and steady wins the rise," "Quick thoughts are slippery thoughts," "Quick decisions are the best," and "Caution is a sign of weakness." These translations show variation in meaning transfer, but they do not consistently correspond to the correct English equivalent "Make haste slowly." These examples indicate that learners sometimes attempt cultural substitution, but they lack stable

knowledge of equivalent English proverb forms. This reflects weak awareness of culturally embedded expressions and limited exposure to target-language proverb systems.

In conclusion, the distribution of strategies shows a clear hierarchy in translation behavior. Literal translation dominates through responses such as those observed in “لا تؤجل” “على قدر بساطك مد رجلك” and “عمل اليوم إلى الغد.” Paraphrasing occupies a secondary position, as demonstrated in “كثير الكلام قليل الأفعال.” Cultural adaptation remains the least frequent and is inconsistently applied, as shown in “كل ممنوع مرغوب” and “في العجلة الندامة.” This hierarchy reflects a gradual but incomplete development of translation competence. It also shows that learners rely more on linguistic transfer than on cultural equivalence. The findings directly support the first objective of the study by demonstrating strong dependence on literal translation strategies among Yemeni EFL learners.

In general, the results clearly show that Yemeni EFL learners rely heavily on literal translation strategies and demonstrate limited intercultural translation competence in proverb translation tasks. Their performance improves with familiar proverbs but declines significantly when cultural interpretation is required. This confirms that translation behavior is still largely linguistically driven rather than culturally mediated. It also highlights the need for stronger training in intercultural translation strategies and proverb equivalence.

Discussion

The findings revealed a clear relationship between linguistic proficiency and intercultural translation competence. 48.2% of the participants relied on literal translation strategies when translating Arabic proverbs into English. This finding supports previous research that reflected a strong dependence on word-for-word translation among Arab learners. Similar findings were shown among Saudi students in the study of Almjlad (2023) and among Omani learners in the study of Tergui (2024). In these studies, literal translations were often described as unclear or meaningless for the target audience (As-Safi, 2011). The findings confirm that many Arab learners still face difficulties in transferring the cultural and figurative meanings of proverbs effectively.

Also, a high failure percentage in translating proverbs aligns with Shormani (2020), who found that Yemeni students achieved very low scores in translating proverbs with “Zero Arabic Equivalence” before receiving cultural training. The similarity between the two studies highlights the importance of cultural knowledge in proverb translation. Learners may understand the direct meaning of words but fail to understand the implied cultural meaning of the proverb. The findings also mention that translation problems are not only linguistic. They are strongly connected to intercultural and cultural understanding. This supports the view that successful proverb translation requires more than language proficiency alone.

On the other hand, Table 1 showed relatively better performance in translating proverbs related to widely shared human experiences, such as “لا تؤجل عمل اليوم إلى الغد,” which received 42.2% accurate and 46.7% acceptable translations. This result supports the arguments of Shehab (2023) and Hazaymeh (2025), who argued that formal or literal equivalence can be effective when the meanings of the source and target proverbs are similar. In such cases, learners can produce more acceptable translations because the cultural gap becomes smaller. The performance on this proverb suggests that literal translation may not always be unsuccessful. Its effectiveness depends on the degree of similarity between Arabic and English proverbs. This explains why learners performed better in proverbs that express common human experiences. This pattern is consistent with previous literature on proverb translation strategies.

The comparison with studies conducted in other Arab contexts shows some differences. While Yemeni learners mainly relied on literal translation strategies, which accounted for 48.2% of all responses in Table 2, Hmaidan (2024) found that Jordanian university students

frequently used proverbs with similar meanings but different forms. This difference suggests variation in strategy use among learners from different educational contexts. It may also reflect differences in intercultural awareness and translation training. These differences may indicate that learners' educational background and exposure to translation practice affect their translation choice. However, further comparative research is needed to confirm this interpretation.

The use of paraphrasing in 28.7% of the responses, as shown in Table 2, also highlights the role of paraphrasing as an intermediate strategy in proverb translation. The present study follows the classification of Thalji (2015), which considers paraphrasing a compensatory strategy and an intermediate stage in translation competence. This means that learners may use paraphrasing when they are unable to find a direct equivalent for the proverb in the target language. However, Baker (1992) and Newmark (1988) consider paraphrasing a valid professional strategy that helps preserve communicative meaning when direct equivalence is unavailable. This difference presents an important nuance in the discussion of translation competence. It shows that the evaluation of translation strategies may differ according to theoretical perspectives. It also reflects different views regarding the function of paraphrasing in translation practice.

The item-level responses also suggest that bilingualism alone may not be sufficient for successful proverb translation. For example, translations such as "He who seeks glory will stay up all night" for "من طلب العلا سهر الليالي" and "The monkey is a gazelle in its mother's eyes" for "القرود بعين أمه غزال" show that learners may know both languages but still fail to transfer cultural meanings effectively. This interpretation is consistent with Rudhel and Wen's (2021) view that successful translation requires "extra-linguistic sub-competence," including cultural and subject-matter knowledge. This supports the argument of Ibrahim (2003), who stated that successful translation depends on intercultural competence. It also agrees with Leppihalme's view that a translator must be "not just bilingual but also bicultural" to accurately convey the cultural framework of the original message (Leppihalme, 1997, as cited in Zheng, 2025). These responses may also support the importance of intercultural pragmatic knowledge in translation.

Furthermore, the 48.2% reliance on literal translation in the present study shows a descriptive similarity between human learners and AI translation tools, as both have been reported to rely heavily on literal translation when dealing with figurative language (Darwish et al., 2025). However, this similarity should be interpreted cautiously because the present study did not directly compare learner translations with AI-generated translations. This finding highlights the importance of human intercultural understanding in translation. Finally, the study suggests that proverbs should not be treated as fixed linguistic expressions. Their meanings should be understood within their cultural and pragmatic contexts (Wuryaningrum et al., 2025).

The contribution of this study lies not in examining Yemeni translation students in general, since previous studies have already addressed this context. Rather, it lies in examining a more specific area of Arabic–English proverb translation using data collected from 45 fourth-year translation students at three Yemeni universities. Previous Yemeni studies, such as Shormani (2020), provided valuable findings, but they were based on limited samples from one institution. Therefore, the present study provides a broader cross-sectional view of learners' proverb translation competence in the investigated Yemeni context. In addition, the study focuses on Arabic-to-English translation, a direction that has received less attention than English-to-Arabic translation in Middle Eastern proverb translation research (Tergui, 2024). More importantly, the study does not stop at identifying errors or classifying strategies. It links learners' translation choices to different levels of intercultural translation competence. Literal translation may indicate limited intercultural competence in some cases, whereas paraphrasing, reformulation, and cultural adaptation may reflect higher levels of

intercultural awareness when they successfully preserve the intended meaning. In this way, the study offers a broader institutional scope and a competence-based interpretation of Arabic–English proverb translation. However, because the study involved a limited sample and used a descriptive design, its conclusions should be restricted to the participants and tasks investigated. Future research could examine these patterns using larger samples, additional Yemeni universities, interviews, or experimental studies of intercultural translation instruction.

Conclusion

This study examined the intercultural dimension of translation competence in Arabic–English proverb translation among Yemeni EFL learners. The discussion indicates that learners’ difficulties are not limited to linguistic transfer but are also connected to cultural and pragmatic understanding. The main conclusion drawn from the study is that many learners still approach proverbs as ordinary sentences rather than culturally fixed expressions. As a result, literal translation remains the dominant strategy, while paraphrasing appears as a partial solution and cultural adaptation remains limited. This suggests that translation competence should be developed not only through language practice but also through systematic training in intercultural awareness, pragmatic meaning, and proverb equivalence. The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Its focus on Yemeni EFL learners provides useful contextual insight into proverb translation in Yemen, but it limits the applicability of the findings to wider EFL contexts. The sample was also limited to fourth-year translation students from three Yemeni universities, which means that the results may not represent all Yemeni EFL learners or translation students in other educational settings. In addition, the study examined only Arabic–English proverb translation, so the findings may differ in English–Arabic translation or in other types of figurative expressions. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples from different Arab and non-Arab EFL contexts. Further studies may also compare Arabic–English and English–Arabic proverb translation or examine the effect of intercultural training on learners’ use of cultural adaptation strategies.

Disclosure Statement

I (Ali Saaleh Ahmed Al-Haidari) hereby declare that research ethics and citation principles have been considered in all stages of this paper. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of a dispute. I confirm that the manuscript has been created by the author(s) and not an AI tool/Large Language Model (LLM).

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