

Training and Guiding New Indian Translators: Challenges and Realities

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Abstract

Translation is a universal discipline. Although Malaysia's translation field was once considered underdeveloped, that is no longer the case today; translation has long been a familiar component of Malaysian literary activity. However, translation is still frequently seen as a behind-the-scenes practice rather than a mainstream domain. The outdated perception that translated works are inferior in quality and highly priced has changed significantly—there has been a marked increase in acceptance and readership of translated publications in recent years. Public attitudes have gradually evolved in favor of translation as a valuable field. There exists a widely held misconception that anyone who knows at least two languages can automatically become a translator. This is not true, as stated by Fraser Tytler in his study on translation principles: (1) all essential meanings of the source text must be retained in the target language; (2) the tone and style of the source text must be carried over as closely as possible into the target language; and (3) the effect of a translation on the reader should closely resemble the effect experienced by readers of the original text. Unfortunately, many aspiring translators are unaware of this.

Keywords: Translation, Translators, Indian Translators, New Translators, Translation Challenges

Introduction

Translation plays a critical role in facilitating communication across linguistic, cultural, and institutional boundaries, particularly in multilingual societies such as Malaysia. As globalization intensifies interactions in education, governance, media, law, and commerce, the demand for accurate and culturally sensitive translation has increased significantly. Despite this growing demand, translation is still frequently perceived as a secondary or auxiliary activity rather than a specialized professional discipline. One of the most persistent misconceptions surrounding the field is the belief that bilingualism alone qualifies an individual to function effectively as a translator. This assumption has contributed to widespread quality issues, ethical lapses, and cultural misrepresentations in translated texts.

Scholars of translation studies have long emphasized that translation competence extends far beyond linguistic knowledge. Fraser Tytler's classical principles of translation highlight the necessity of preserving meaning, tone, and reader impact between source and target texts. Contemporary translation theory similarly underscores the importance of analytical skills, cultural awareness, subject-matter knowledge, and ethical decision-making. Without systematic training, novice translators often resort to literal translation, inappropriate terminology, or culturally insensitive expressions, thereby undermining the communicative purpose of the text and diminishing public confidence in translated works. These challenges indicate a clear need for structured and context-specific translator training programmes.

Within the Malaysian context, translation has gradually gained recognition as a vital professional practice, particularly in relation to minority and heritage languages such as Tamil. While translation has historically been embedded in Malaysian literary and cultural activities, formal and sustained training opportunities, especially for Indian and Tamil translators, remain limited. Existing initiatives, including workshops and short courses conducted by professional bodies, provide valuable exposure but are often insufficient to develop comprehensive translation competence. There is a notable lack of empirical research examining how novice translators are trained, what challenges they encounter during training, and how effectively institutional programmes prepare them for real-world translation demands.

Against this backdrop, the Tamil Programme at Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI) represents a significant institutional response to both employment and professional training gaps. Since its establishment, UPSI has played a central role in producing Tamil language teachers for Malaysia, with a substantial proportion of Tamil educators nationwide being UPSI graduates. Between 2016 and 2020, the Tamil Department observed that many Indian graduates faced difficulties securing permanent teaching positions. At the same time, the growing demand for Indian-language translation services highlighted an untapped professional pathway for language-trained graduates. Recognizing this convergence, the Department introduced translation studies into its teacher-training curriculum as a strategic intervention.

Beginning in 2018, a translation course was incorporated into the Bachelor of Education programme with dual objectives: to equip teacher-trainees with practical translation skills that could supplement their income while awaiting placement, and to contribute to the development of qualified Indian translators in Malaysia. The programme emphasizes applied translation practice alongside foundational theoretical principles, enabling students to engage with real-world texts across multiple subject domains. Through collaborations with professional organizations such as the Malaysian Translators Association (PPM) and the Malaysian Indian Translators Association (PPIM), as well as partnerships with schools nationwide, UPSI has trained more than 300 undergraduate teacher-trainees in translation. In recent years, the initiative has expanded to include postgraduate students, reflecting growing interest and recognition of translation as a viable professional skill.

The present study examines the challenges and realities encountered in training novice Indian translators within this institutional framework. By analysing translation assignments produced by undergraduate and postgraduate trainees, the study identifies recurring

linguistic, cultural, and professional difficulties that emerge during the training process. In doing so, it demonstrates the practical limitations of short-term translation instruction while simultaneously highlighting its effectiveness in cultivating foundational translation awareness and competence.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Academically, it enriches the limited body of literature on translator training in the Malaysian Tamil context by providing empirical insights grounded in actual student output. Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for curriculum designers, translation trainers, educational institutions, and professional associations seeking to improve translator education. More broadly, the study underscores the necessity of systematic, ethically informed, and culturally sensitive translation training in multilingual societies, challenging prevailing misconceptions and reinforcing translation as a legitimate and essential professional discipline.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in both scholarly and practical terms, as it addresses a clearly identified gap in translator training within multilingual and minority-language contexts. While translation is increasingly recognized as a professional necessity in Malaysia, systematic research on the training of novice Indian and Tamil translators remains limited. By examining translation assignments produced within a structured university-based programme, this study provides empirical evidence of the specific linguistic, cultural, and professional challenges encountered by trainee translators, thereby extending existing theoretical discussions on translation competence into an applied educational setting.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to translation studies by demonstrating that bilingual proficiency alone is insufficient for professional translation. The findings reinforce established theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity, terminological accuracy, ethical awareness, and functional equivalence. By documenting recurrent error patterns and training constraints, the study advances understanding of how translation competence develops under institutional limitations, such as restricted course duration and diverse student backgrounds.

Practically, the study offers direct benefits to multiple stakeholders. For curriculum developers and translation trainers, the findings provide evidence-based insights that can inform course design, teaching strategies, and assessment methods in translator education programmes. For educational institutions, the study illustrates how translation training can serve as a viable professional skill set for language graduates, enhancing employability and widening career pathways beyond traditional teaching roles. Professional bodies and industry practitioners may also draw on the findings to better understand the preparedness of novice translators and to align training initiatives with real-world professional expectations.

More broadly, the study has implications for language policy and intercultural communication in Malaysia's multilingual society. By highlighting the consequences of inadequate translation training, such as literal translation, misuse of terminology, and cultural insensitivity, the research underscores the importance of professionally trained translators in maintaining linguistic accuracy, cultural respect, and public trust. In doing so, the study demonstrates the utility and effectiveness of structured translator training as a means of strengthening both

the quality of translation practice and the status of translation as a recognized professional discipline.

Research Data

For this study, translation assignments produced by both undergraduate and postgraduate teacher-trainees were reviewed. These students were required to translate texts across different subject areas, both from various languages into Tamil and from Tamil into other languages. Each assignment consisted of a minimum of 5 pages and up to 15 pages of human translation—machine translation was discouraged, though students were permitted to use dictionaries, specialized glossaries, encyclopedias, and Google Translate only as reference tools.

Findings and Analysis

Challenges Faced by UPSI in Developing Skilled Translators

Training translators to meet real-world professional standards presents significant challenges. The main issues encountered include:

Limited Course Duration

Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education programme are not primarily training to become full-time translators; however, the institution aims to equip them with translation competence. With only a single semester allocated for this course, the timeframe is extremely short. Extensive practical training is required—such as translating passages of at least 500 words—causing students to perceive the subject as burdensome. In this compressed schedule, lecturers strive to cover the syllabus as comprehensively as possible.

Teaching Approaches

Kiraly (1995:2) emphasizes the need to identify what skills students lack compared with trained translators, and to design effective teaching strategies accordingly. As students come from diverse backgrounds and age groups, it is crucial to teach the fundamental principles of translation while balancing theory with real-world practice. Theory supports decision-making in translation, but theory alone cannot produce a competent translator. UPSI's course, restricted by time, focuses more on practical exposure to actual translation tasks and professional expectations, with theory taught only in a limited manner.

Language Competence

Translation competence includes the analytical skills needed to interpret and convert meaning. Pym (2005:3–5) argues that while language proficiency alone does not make someone a good translator, it is an essential prerequisite. A translator must have strong grammatical knowledge and vocabulary in both source and target languages. Lack of linguistic competence results in serious errors.

Frequent student errors observed include:

- a) Inaccurate word selection
- b) Literal or word-for-word translation
- c) Translation of proper nouns
- d) Use of unfamiliar terminology/jargon

Inaccurate Word Selection

Translation refers to the process of conveying the message expressed in a source language into a target language. However, accurately conveying meaning requires more than merely understanding the literal sense of the original text. As Larson (1984) notes, a translator must also possess a strong command of the vocabulary and the appropriate usage patterns of both languages in order to produce a faithful and meaningful translation.

Examples:

Source Term	Student Translation	Recommended Translation
Bank Negara Malaysia	Malaysian National Bank	Central Bank of Malaysia

This error is also commonly found among novice translators. At first glance, the translated term may appear correct; however, the accurate designation should be *Central Bank of Malaysia*. For a long time, the central financial institution of Malaysia has officially identified itself as the “Central Bank of Malaysia.” Nevertheless, it is common even among media practitioners to mistakenly translate it otherwise. The primary cause of this confusion is that novice translators often attempt to translate the Malay term “*Bank Negara Malaysia*” literally. In reality, the original and official terminology is the English expression “*Central Bank of Malaysia*.” Had the translators been working from the English source text, this issue might have been avoided.

Source Term	Student Translation	Recommended Translation
Tanah Perkuburan Islam	Islamic graveyard	Muslim cemetery

Although translation is fundamentally the act of transferring meaning from a source language to a target language without distortion, it is equally essential that translators safeguard cultural nuances and avoid culturally inappropriate interpretations. A competent translator must possess a solid understanding not only of vocabulary and grammar in both languages but also of their respective literary traditions, artistic values, and cultural contexts.

While not all translations pose cultural challenges, particular sensitivity is required when translating content related to religion or ethnicity. Even when a literal translation appears semantically correct, it may cause discomfort or misrepresentation for readers from certain cultural or religious communities. For example, although a term may be understood at the level of meaning, a Muslim reader might find it inappropriate if it conflicts with Islamic norms. In Islamic tradition, for instance, the deceased is not referred to as *piṇam* (dead body) or *saṭalam* (corpse), but rather with the respectful term *jenazah*. Similarly, the burial site is not described as a mere “graveyard” but is respectfully called *mayyathu kolai* (muslim burial ground or cemetery). Some of these misinterpretations may stem from the influence of other languages; nonetheless, it is crucial for translators to recognize such sensitive cultural nuances and ensure that translations remain respectful and accurate.

Literal Translation

This common type of translation error often distorts the fundamental meaning of the source language when transferred into the target language. As a result, the intended message is altered and replaced with an unintended interpretation. When a translation modifies the

original meaning in such a manner, the outcome becomes biased, one-sided, and potentially misleading. Ultimately, it may create confusion and convey inappropriate implications to readers of the target language. As Chesterman (2001) emphasizes, a translator must function like a mirror—accurately reflecting every essential element of the source text into the target language without adding or omitting meaning.

Source Term	Student Translation	Recommended Translation
Kaki Tangan	Hands and feet	Staff / Officials

Translation of Proper Nouns

Although the primary task of a translator is to render words from one language into another, the field of translation is governed by a number of professional and ethical guidelines. One such principle is that proper nouns should not be translated. For instance, while it may be technically possible to translate the names of commercial brands, geographical locations, or individuals into another language, doing so is discouraged, as established translation conventions require that proper nouns be retained in their original form.

Source Term	Student Translation	Recommended Translation
Facebook	Mugannool(lit.) “Face-Book”	Facebook
YouTube	“Online Audio”	YouTube

Today, even within the media industry, many people translate the term *Facebook* into Tamil as “*Mugannool*” (face-book). Although a literal breakdown of the word might yield such a meaning, *Facebook* functions as a proper noun, specifically the official name of a company and platform. Therefore, it is more appropriate to transliterate the name as “*Facebook*” in Tamil rather than translate it as *Mugannool* or *Mukappuththagam*. According to established principles of translation, altering a proper noun in such a manner is considered a violation of correct practice. Similarly, translating place-names such as *Janda Baik* into Tamil would be inappropriate.

The term YouTube is similar to the aforementioned *Facebook* example—the same rule applies.

Many individuals, including members of the media, begin translating solely on the basis of knowing two languages, without first learning the fundamental principles and conventions of translation. It is regrettable that even scholars proficient in Tamil often commit such errors. For example, translating the proper noun “*Janda Baik*”—a place name in Malaysia—into Tamil as “*Nalla Kaïmpēṇ*” (“good widow”) would be highly inappropriate and misleading. Such a translation is absurd, and the same holds true for the translation of other proper nouns. It is therefore essential that translators refrain from altering the inherent identity of proper names.

Use of Unknown or Exclusive Terminology

Language is understood as a medium that conveys meaning from one party to another. It is constructed through a shared set of linguistic expressions within a community, and effective communication requires that speakers of a language mutually comprehend one another. Tamil speakers in Malaysia, Singapore, and India must therefore interact using a form of Tamil

that facilitates mutual understanding. When communication breaks down due to unnecessary linguistic deviations, the fundamental unity that connects these communities as Tamil speakers is weakened.

Source Term	Student Translation	Recommended Translation
Happy Birthday	“Aghavai Niraindhaal Vazhthukkal”	Happy Birthday / Pirandhanaal Vaazhthukkal
Rest In Peace	“Aadhan Amaidhiyutraar”	May his/her soul rest in peace

In recent years, such forms of translation have increasingly appeared across social media platforms. What is particularly ironic is that many who share these expressions are the very individuals who frequently advocate for speaking “pure Tamil” and upholding linguistic standards. There is nothing incorrect or inadequate about conveying greetings such as “**Pirandhāna! Vāḷttukkal!**” (“Happy Birthday”) in standard Tamil. Yet, some individuals associated with particular groups or movements deliberately use rigid or literal terminology in their posts. This practice, however well-intentioned, often results in unnatural and awkward expressions in Tamil.

As mentioned earlier, the expression “*Sivapatham adaindhār*” is widely regarded as the most appropriate and culturally resonant phrase in Tamil, fully aligned with Tamil linguistic tradition. However, some individuals—often belonging to particular groups—frequently use expressions such as “*Āthan amaithiyurrār*”, which are not commonly used in everyday language and are understood only within specific circles. Due to the widespread use of such unfamiliar terminology in the media, today’s trainee teachers also tend to imitate it, leading to the gradual normalization of non-standard expressions.

Terms unfamiliar to the general community—despite being grammatically Tamil—can create confusion or sectarian overtones.

Reality

Training and mentoring translators is a complex endeavor requiring interdisciplinary knowledge: language, grammar, literature, culture, technology, and contemporary socio-global awareness. Public misconceptions that “any bilingual person can translate” must be corrected. Competent translators must exhibit professional, linguistic, and cultural intelligence.

Conclusion

While institutions such as ITBM, PPM, and PPIM conduct periodic translation workshops in Malaysia, UPSI stands out as the only higher-learning institution systematically integrating Tamil translation into its curriculum and developing future professionals. It is expected that this training effort will continue to strengthen, addressing existing gaps and producing more highly skilled translators for Malaysia’s multilingual environment.

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