



Between Loss and Gain: A Strategic Analysis of English Idiom Translation into Indonesian among Islamic EFL Students

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Abstract

Translating idioms is a high-level cognitive task that requires metaphorical competence not only linguistic proficiency. For pre-service English teachers, the ability to negotiate meaning in figurative language is crucial for natural fluency. This study aims to analyse the translation strategies used by EFL students when dealing with English idioms and to evaluate the resulting phenomenon of “loss and gain” in their translation. Using a descriptive qualitative design and content analysis, this study examined 140 translation data points from 20 fourth-semester English Education students. The primary instrument was a researcher-generated narrative text titled “A Tough Day,” containing seven distinct idioms. Data were analysed using Mona Baker’s framework. The results reveal that translation by paraphrase is the most dominant strategy (81.4%), providing a “gain” in communicative clarity but a “loss” in metaphorical stylistics. While some students achieved maximum gain by using equivalent local idioms (e.g., swallow a bitter pill), 15% of the data showed “total” loss due to literal translation (e.g., in the following weather conditions). This literalism confirms a significant semantic gap between the source and the target languages. While students demonstrate strong semantic mapping abilities, they remain weak in stylistic preservation. These findings suggest that translation pedagogy should place greater emphasis on compensation strategies to enhance the metaphorical competence of future educators.

INTRODUCTION

In linguistics, idioms are recognized as a unique phenomenon that is often difficult to interpret literally (Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011). Theoretically, an idiom is a fixed expression whose meaning is non-compositional, meaning that its overall meaning cannot be deduced simply by interpreting its individual words (Deigman, 2018; Li et al., 2024). More than just wordplay, idioms reflect a culture’s identity, history, and social intuition (Hajiyeva, 2025; Hassan & Tabassum, 2014). For English Language Education students, mastering these expressions is a core component of metaphorical competence. Without this ability, a prospective teacher’s speech will sound stiff, even though natural fluency depends heavily on an understanding of this figurative language (Hajiyeva, 2025).

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The process of translating idioms is often referred to as a “hard task” because idioms are deeply rooted in culture and rarely have direct equivalents (Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011; Shojaei, 2012). As emphasized by Eugene Nida, the success of a translation is measured by the similarity of the reader’s responses; readers of the target language must experience the same impact as the original readers (Krisandini & Sutrisno, 2021; Nida, 2021). To achieve this, translators must employ various strategies. Referring to Mona Baker’s theory (1992/2018), these strategies include the use of similar idioms, paraphrasing, and even omission (Almrayat & Citation-Contributors, 2024; Huda et al., 2018; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2023; Shojaei, 2012). This dilemma gives rise to the main theme of this study, namely the balance between loss and gain. Loss occurs when the richness of a metaphor’s meaning is lost in translation, whereas gain is achieved when the translator successfully creates an expression that feels natural to the local culture (Bassnett, 2013; Kyrychuk, 2018).

It is important to note that the main obstacles in this process often stem from profound gaps in grammatical and semantic aspects between the source and target languages. Roza, (2024); Weng et al., (2025) emphasizes that these sharp differences in language structure pose a major stumbling block for students in their academic projects. Furthermore, it has been widely observed that paraphrasing strategies are the dominant choice among students, accounting for more than half of the available data (Almrayat & Citation-Contributors, 2024). For instance, Ngongo et al., (2024) examined the strategies of Indonesian students, while Premasari & Widodo, (2021) analyzed the use of idioms in novels. On the other hand, although neural machine translation (NMT) technology continues to advance, these systems often remain trapped in literal meanings that distort the original messages (Mounadil, 2023; Ye, 2024). This underscores that translating idioms is a high-level cognitive task requiring social sensitivity (Hassan & Tabassum, 2014; Shojaei, 2012).

Despite extensive research, a significant research gap remains. Most studies focus on literary works or film texts, yet very few examine the specific struggles of pre-service teachers in the classroom (Premasari & Widodo, 2021). In-depth analyses of how students negotiate the loss and gain of meaning when encountering narrative texts specifically designed to test the limits of their metaphorical abilities remain rare. Furthermore, few studies in Indonesia have used researcher-generated texts to isolate how students make decisions when facing these language barriers.

Based on this limitation, this study aims to analyze the strategies used by fourth-semester English Education students in translating the text “A Tough Day” and to identify which elements must be sacrificed to ensure the message is conveyed. By analyzing the students’ responses, this study seeks to uncover the thought processes of prospective teachers when faced with language that cannot be translated word for word. Ultimately, the results of this study are expected to provide practical insights for translation instruction, demonstrating that language learning is not merely about exchanging words but about building cultural awareness. Through this study, we seek to answer the following questions: i) How do students negotiate “loss and gain” when translating idioms? ii) What strategies do they most frequently use to achieve equivalence of meaning?

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design using a content analysis approach to explore linguistic phenomena in the translation process (Abduldayev et al., 2026; Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011; Baker, 2018; Efendi et al., 2026; Engkizar et al., 2025, 2026; Hajiyeva, 2025; Hamzah et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025). This design was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive and in-depth picture of events or phenomena in a systematic manner. By focusing on students’ written translation,

this study aims to map the decision-making patterns and strategies they employ when encountering linguistic units that cannot be interpreted literally (non-compositional).

The subjects of this study were fourth-semester students in the English Language Education program. Participants were selected through the purposive sampling, as students at this stage are in a critical transitional phase where their metaphorical competence begins to be tested through more complex texts. Data generated from their academic experiences serve as a highly relevant primary source for evaluating the extent to which prospective educators can negotiate meaning without getting trapped in big confusion resulting for literal translation. This aligns with the findings of (Roza, 2024), who emphasize that difference in grammatical and semantic structures between languages often pose a real challenge for students in their academic tasks.

The primary instrument of this study is a text titled “A Tough Day” which was composed by the researcher. This text was specifically designed to include seven idioms of varying difficulty levels, such as “under the weather,” “hold your horses,” “piece of cake,” “bite the bullet,” “burn the midnight oil,” “called it a day,” and “not my cup of tea.” The use of this self-composed text aims to isolate specific idiomatic challenges and observe how students balance fidelity to the original text (form) with the achievement of natural meaning (meaning), which is at the core of the discussing regarding loss and gain.

The collected data was then systematically analyzed using categorization techniques based on Mona Baker’s (1992/2018) framework for translating idioms. The analysis stages included: Identifying idiom equivalents in the students’ work, classifying their choices into strategy categories, such as the use of similar idioms or paraphrasing, evaluating the loss (what is lost) and gain (what is gained) aspects of those choices. Through this procedure, the study not only technically grouped the data but also interpreted how these strategies impact effective cross-cultural understanding and their future professional communicative competence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study analysed 140 translation data points, from 20 participants x 7 idioms, to identify dominant strategies and the effects of the loss and gain phenomenon. The analysis revealed that most students successfully negotiated meaning, although there were some critical failures resulting from literal translation.

Global Distribution of Translation Strategies

Overall, the paraphrasing strategy (translation by paraphrase) is the most commonly used method among students. This aligns with the argument put forth by Almrayat & Citation-Contributors, (2024) that paraphrasing often serves as the primary way out when students are unable to find an equivalent idiom in the target language.

Table 1. Student Strategy Summary

No	Strategy (Mona Baker)	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Impact
1	Translation by Paraphrase	114	81.4 %	Gain: Clarity Loss: Metaphorical Stylistics
2	Similar Meaning and Form	0	0%	-
3	Similar Meaning but Dissimilar Form	5	3.6 %	Gain: Naturalness & Imagery
4	Literal Translation (Error/Miss)	21	15 %	Loss: Semantic Distortion

Analysis of Idioms and the Loss & Gain Phenomenon

The first, the triumph of meaning over style (gain in clarity, loss in style). In idioms such as “under the weather,” “burn the midnight oil,” and “not my cup of tea,” nearly all students chose to abandon the original metaphorical form and replace it with an explanation of the meaning.

Example: “not feeling well” or “working overtime”

Analysis: There is a gain in terms of communicative effectiveness because Indonesia readers immediately understand the text’s meaning. However, there is a loss in the cultural richness of the source text, as the uniqueness expression is completely lost.

The second, the use of local cultural idioms (maximum gain). An interesting finding emerged regarding the idiom “bite the bullet.” Some students used very strong local expressions.

Example: “Swallowing a bitter pill” and “Accepting a bitter reality”

Analysis: This represents the highest level of translation in this data. A double gain occurs; the meaning is conveyed very clearly, and the metaphorical style is preserved through local cultural adaption. This strategy minimizes the loss that often occurs in the translation of figurative language.

The third, semantic failure due to grammatical discrepancies (extreme loss). In line with the warning by Roza, (2024) regarding the sharp differences in grammatical and semantic structures, two students consistently fell into literal translation.

Example: “In the rain,” “Hold on to your horses,” and “Burning midnight oil”

Analysis: Total loss has occurred. The original message of the text is destroyed, causing extreme confusion for the target language reader. This error indicates a lack of “metaphorical competence” that prospective English teachers should possess.

Discussion: Why does Paraphrasing Dominate?

The dominance of paraphrasing (81.4%) indicates that students prioritize the communicative function over the aesthetic function of the text. Students tend to feel more secure explaining the core meaning rather than searching for Indonesian idiomatic equivalents they may not yet fully master. However, an excessive reliance on paraphrasing results in the translated text feeling bland or sterile.

This finding supports the idea that translation instruction at the university level needs to place greater emphasis on compensation strategies to minimize cultural loss in translation. As shown by data from Roza, (2024), without a deep understanding of semantic systems, students will continue to rely on literal translation, which risks undermine their professional quality in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL students at the fourth-semester level predominantly employ translation by paraphrase when dealing with English idioms, prioritizing communicative clarity over metaphorical fidelity. This finding reflects a general tendency among pre-service English teachers to transfer the core meaning of idiomatic expressions rather than preserve their figurative or cultural dimensions. While this approach ensures that target-language readers comprehend the intended message, it consistently results in a loss of stylistic richness and cultural nuance inherent in the source text. The phenomenon of loss and gain, as analyzed through Mona Baker’s (1992/2018), reveals that the majority of students achieve communicative gain at the expense of metaphorical and cultural loss.

A minority of students demonstrated maximum gain by employing culturally equivalent Indonesian idioms, such as swallow a bitter pill for “bite the bullet” successfully preserving both meaning and metaphorical style. Conversely, 15% of data exhibited total semantic loss due to literal translation, producing unintelligible expression such as in the weather for “under the weather” that distort the source

message entirely. These results affirm that metaphorical competence remains underdeveloped among many EFL learners, particularly in bridging the semantic and grammatical gap between English and Indonesian. In conclusion, while students show adequate semantic comprehension, their capacity for stylistic and cultural compensation in idiom translation requires substantial reinforcement.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are directed toward translation instructors and curriculum designers at the university level. First, translation pedagogy should place greater emphasis on compensation strategies, which allow students to transfer not only the denotative meaning but also the connotative and cultural dimension of idiomatic expressions. Incorporating activities that expose students to culturally equivalent target-language idioms can significantly reduce over-reliance on paraphrasing. Second, lecturers are encouraged to design classroom tasks using researcher-generated narrative texts that specifically target idiomatic challenges, as this approach effectively isolates metaphorical competence from general linguistic ability and reveals more authentic decision-making patterns among learners.

For future researchers, this study recommends expanding the scope of participants beyond fourth-semester students to include advanced-level learners or professional translators, in order to trace the development line of metaphorical competence across proficiency levels. Longitudinal studies tracking how students' translation strategies evolve following targeted idiom instruction would further enrich the field. Additionally, future investigations may explore the role of digital tools and corpus-based resources in supporting idiom translation among EFL students, particularly in the context of Indonesia Islamic higher education where cross-cultural language mediation holds both pedagogical and religious significance. Comparative studies across different regional campuses or language education programs would also be valuable in generalizing these findings more broadly.

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