



Challenges in Translation Teaching in the Iranian Context: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Many studies can be found on translation teaching and students' perceptions of different classroom practices. However, few studies have focused on how translator trainers view the task at hand. In the present study, the researchers aimed to explore the challenges translator trainers faced during the act of teaching translation. The method applied in this research was ethnography. The participants were two female translator trainers who were teaching translation courses at one of the state universities in Isfahan. The researchers participated in their classes and closely observed translation courses for six months. In the field work, three different sources of information were used: the researchers' field notes, the participants' diaries, and interviews. The challenges discovered are as follow: dictionary use, finding an equivalent and word selection, lack of facilities, students' reluctance, demotivation, and high expectation, unexpected situations, content knowledge and general information, students' general English proficiency, know-it-all students. At the end of this study, some implications and recommendations for further research were proposed to help experts in the field.

Keywords: Ethnography, Language teaching, Pedagogical translation, Translation, Translation studies

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching is an elusive endeavor. Many methods have been used for teaching language. However, no one has yet been able to propose a convincing model as to which method has to be used with which group of students. Different researchers have applied their own methods and have assured everyone that their method is fruitful. Nevertheless, some years later, another method has been introduced which makes a change in the way of language teaching. But, the

conflicts among these methods have not stopped.

Teaching translation, if perceived as a branch of language teaching, is no exception. It demands a huge effort and has its own complexities. Since translation in general (both oral and written) is an activity requiring all four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, it may pose many challenges to translator trainers (see for example, Pym, 2012; Gile, 2009; Neubert, 2000; in Schaffner & Adab, 2000). Probably, each teacher gives his/her undivided attention to one specific point and accordingly utilizes a method not nec-

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essarily identical to the one used by another teacher.

What, to the researcher's point of view, is needed in this context would be a comprehensive descriptive investigation as to what challenges translator trainers face in the class and how they deal with the many difficulties and hurdles in the way of translation teaching. An excellent, but rather untouched, method is ethnography. Ethnography is a comprehensive, descriptive and interpretive report of a particular case under study.

The present research was a qualitative, ethnographic study. Therefore, it sought to generate, rather than confirm, a number of hypotheses. The main overarching question to the study is as follows:

- *What are the challenges (linguistic and non-linguistic) in translation teaching from the view point of translator trainers?*

According to Beeby-Lonsdale (1996), translation is inclined to be a craft. Therefore, it should be taught as a craft. Based on the Oxford English Dictionary, a craft is skill or a technique. Considering translation as a craft, it can be said that translation is teachable. Adjacency of translation teaching and language teaching is irrefutable. However, it is necessary to make a distinction between these two. Accordingly, translator trainers must be aware of the distinctions and overlaps available in the methods applicable to them.

Lei (1999) looked at the present situation of translation teaching in China from the following perspectives: the history of translation teaching, the importance of translation teaching, teaching materials, teaching methods, research into translation teaching, and teacher training. He concludes that "the development of translation teaching relies upon guidance from translation theory, and that effective translator training must incorporate the research and development of translation teaching theories. Therefore, teachers of translation must pay attention to translation studies as well as translation teaching theories." (p. 1)

With respect to the whys and the wherefores of translation teaching, Ghazizadeh & Jamalimanesh (2010) argue that many trainers and trainees cannot recognize the importance of translation teaching. Through translation teaching, students would be able to deepen their understanding of two languages and two cultures, learn both the foreign language and their mother tongue thoroughly, and enhance their knowledge of structures. The purpose of translation teaching is to give students not only practical bilingual ability, but also to encourage the attitudes that will allow them to do the best possible translation work after graduation. From the students' point of view, translation is a very useful skill to graduate with. The level of translation reflects comprehensive abilities in a foreign language and the mother tongue (including listening, speaking, reading and writing) and even a comprehensive understanding. Graduates with strong translation or interpreting abilities can more easily find good jobs.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In recent years, a considerable number of studies have been carried out to investigate not only pedagogical translation, but also how to teach language through translation. No research, to the researcher's surprise, has focused on translator trainers' perception when they actually teach in classroom contexts.

For example, an action research conducted by Kim (2013) on using translation exercises provides insight into how the grammar translation method (GTM) which is widely viewed as a traditional learning approach, can contribute to students' progress in writing.

An explanatory study by Rolin Lanziti and Varshney (2008) suggested that "the students attribute a function to L1 to import knowledge about the target language (TL) medium. The students showed preference for the use of L1 to perform classroom management, while L1 use may alleviate classroom anxiety, it may also be a demotivating factor" (p. 249).

Yagi (2000), also, concluded that oral translation from the native language to the target language contributes positively to the enhancement in oral ability.

Furthermore, a case study from a functional perspective was conducted by Karoly (2013). The results showed that "a functional approach can sensitize the students to the relationship between text and context, which can develop the cultural and textual awareness. This analysis also provides readers with additional information about the translation processes." (p. 1)

Since choosing a correct translation technique is an essential skill in the field of translation, translation students need to know the reason behind using each particular technique. Zainudin and Awal (2011) focused on teaching of translation techniques in a translation classroom from the cooperative learning perspective. This is a step by step procedure workshop that was proven quite successful in the translation class in terms of students' motivation, productivity and higher quality of work. Preliminary observations revealed that "students tend to use wrong translation techniques when translating from English into Malay" (p. 328).

Dehghan (2009) studied the present situation of teaching interpretation in the undergraduate program of translation in Iranian universities and argued that the interpretation is practiced besides translation but it does not meet the needs of present-day Iran. She concluded that there should be two different majors, one for translation and the other for interpretation to train professional translators and interpreters who are able to work effectively in the society.

Some studies were discussed in the above mentioned paragraphs. Yet, none was found to investigate teachers' perception when they are actually engaged in teaching translation. This would make the present study significant and at the same time a timely endeavor.

METHODS

This qualitative study was designed as an ethnographic work with the focus on two partici-

pants, who were assistant professors and taught translation at state universities. What mattered in this study was their attitudes toward the task in question.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE

The researcher focused on two female participants. The selected participants were two assistant professors at the state University of Payame Noor in Isfahan. They were 35 and 33 years old and were considered as young and novice academic instructors who had about 4 years of experience in language teaching, especially translation courses. The reason behind choosing young teachers was that they are energetic and patient enough to try different methods and are eager enough to spend time with students. Young instructors are rather inexperienced and at the same time eager to detect the problems in the class. Middle aged and old teachers may not be so enthusiastic to dedicate as much time as young teachers do to their students. As a consequence, the best choice was young and energetic teachers who were deeply immersed in teaching translation courses.

The researcher participated in their classes and observed one semester (six months) of their translation courses. Based on the researcher's observation, Payame Noor University was host to students with a low level of English proficiency. Their classes had about 50 students. However, the researcher's focus was on the teachers and not on the students. What mattered was the teachers' attitude and perception.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The researcher observed translation courses for six months with focus on the problems and obstacles she assumed the teachers faced during the practice of translation teaching. She observed the classes while the intimacy between the teachers and the researcher was increased. The researcher's field notes were prepared at this stage. The teachers were also asked to write some diaries after the translation classes. The researcher's field notes and the teachers' diaries helped the researcher develop follow-up interview ques-

tions. In the interviews, the researcher informed the participants of the problems she observed during the classes. She asked the participants if these challenges were their challenges too. The discussion between the researcher and the teacher had two sides. If the teachers' perception toward a challenge corresponded to what the researcher observed as a challenge, the researcher's claims was confirmed. If, on the other hand, the teachers' perception toward the obstacles was completely different from what the researcher has assumed, the researcher's questions was refined. In both cases the teachers discussed possible solutions for the identified problems.

The researcher collected required data in this way:

OBSERVATION

The researcher observed their translation classes for six months and took note and recorded the teachers' voice in order to elicit valuable information for this study. In this respect, the researcher followed Gold (1958, p. 217) who has introduced four theoretically possible roles for those carrying out field work:

a. Complete participant: The true identity and purpose of the complete participant in field research are not known to those whom he observes. Role pretense is a basic theme in these activities.

b. Participant as observer: Although basically similar to the complete observer role, the participants as observer role differs significantly in that both field worker and informant are aware that their role is a field relationship. The mutual awareness tends to minimize problems of role-pretending.

c. Observer as participant: The observer as participant role is used in studies involving one-visit interview. It calls for relatively more formal observation than either informal observation or participation of any kind. It also entails less risk of role pretending than either the complete participant role or the participant as observer role. However, due to the brief contact with an informant, the observer as participant is likely to misunderstand the information.

d. Complete observer: The complete observer role entirely removes a field worker from social interaction with information. Here a field worker attempts to observe people in ways in which make it unnecessary for them to take him into account, for they do not know he is observing them".

It should be noted that, the researcher in the present ethnography, played the role of complete participant.

Teachers' diaries: The participants were asked to make a diary book and write a piece of diary every session after they finished the class. In these diaries, teachers shared their deep perception toward the challenges they had encountered during the class time.

Interview: The participants' comments were also of high value for the researcher. Accordingly, the research organized an interview with the teachers in question (Fetterman, 2011).

RESULTS

The researcher carried out this study to investigate the challenges that translator trainers face during the act of translation, and their perception toward their tasks.

The problem of equivalent was the first challenge the researcher identified in the observation. She observed that students constantly asked their teacher the meaning of some words and phrases. The teachers had different approaches in those situations. Sometimes they immediately answered the questions and made the points clear for the students. But sometimes they could not quickly suggest suitable answers for their questions, or their suggested equivalents were stated with hesitation and uncertainty. For some phrases, they wanted the students to think, search about the phrase, and deliver an acceptable response. The researcher's observation showed that the students were not so successful at finding appropriate equivalents. This is what made the teachers tired and irritated. The students did not pay ample attention to the context. On some occasions, the students faced a somewhat complicated phrase and discussed over its meaning. Alt-

though that phrase had a specific and predetermined equivalent which could be easily recognized, the students provided a word for word translation for that phrase. According to the interviews, when one of the participants were asked about finding suitable equivalents for words and phrases, she complained about how the students acted.

Therefore, finding suitable equivalents based on the context and neighboring words played a striking role. Accordingly, the students and teachers' interactions about the word selection, meaning, and equivalent is considered a challenge in translation teaching courses.

Another thing that attracted the researcher's attention in all sources of information, was the issue of the dictionary. In her observation, the researcher realized that most of the students had difficulty using the dictionary. Even some of them did not have the dictionary in the class. This was one of the issues that surprised the researcher: their awkward use of the dictionary caused a somewhat big challenge for both the students and the teachers. What they found as equivalent in the dictionary was far from the intended meaning. They did not use the dictionary correctly. They were often misled by the first meaning of the word, neglecting its potential meaning in the context. Sometimes a phrase had a predetermined equivalent. However, the students mostly offered a word for word translation. The students only focused on the micro -level meaning of the words, which posed a challenge for the teachers. During the interviews, the participants confirmed that the dictionary and the way the students used it, could pose a challenge during the act of teaching translation course. They confessed that the students' lack of knowledge in the field, could slow down the course progress.

Another tricky problem that caught the researcher's attention during the observation, was the lack of facilities in translation classes. The classes were not equipped with the Internet, which threw a big obstacle to both the students and the teachers. The researcher observed that some problematic devices made the progress of

the course very slow. As one of the participants stated in her diary, it seemed essential for her to present the lessons on a screen by a data projector. In oral translation course, she aimed to teach the shadowing technique to the students. However, the lack of high-tech facilities did not allow her to actually practice the shadowing technique in the class. Therefore, she just talked about some of its basic principles. The Internet, as a crucial tool for translators, was absent in the class. Some of the questions asked by the students about the meaning of technical phrases and words could hardly be answered without the Internet. The Internet is a valuable source of information which can be used as a rich and up to date dictionary. The Internet is an indispensable tool for professional translators and translator trainers. Lack of facilities (Internet is just one of them) distanced the course from its goal.

Another challenge detected by the researcher was the ennui and reluctance of some students toward the tasks of the courses. The researcher witnessed many situations in which the students were asked to do a task and be prepared for the next session. But surprisingly, many of them did not follow what the instructor told them. For example at one session, the students were asked to listen to an audio file at home and then write down its key points and come to the class. The next session they came to the class with its transcription at hand. Or in another session the instructor asked them to transcribe a video file and then translate it, but the students were reluctant to do so, urging the teacher to give them a prepared transcription so that their only task was to translate the already prepared text. The students expected their teacher to provide them with answers of all questions.

Teachers were tired and frustrated due to many questions asked by inactive students. It should be noted that not all kinds of questions were annoying to them. Some questions showed the students' attention, enthusiasm, and concern toward the course and, as a result, were warmly welcomed by the teachers. These questions proved that the students eagerly followed the task

in the class. During the task, they came up with some detailed questions which showed their precision. Yet there were other types of questions demonstrating the students' indolence. For instance, the meaning of many words can be found in the dictionary. However some students frequently asked such questions from the teacher in the face of short duration of the course. During the interview, the participants stated that not only inactiveness, but also lack of motivation and personal reasons caused students to act inefficiently in the class. The teachers' approach toward demotivation, reluctance, and inactiveness was different. What surprised the researcher was that, the teachers sympathized with the students, clarifying that each of them had personal reasons. Of course, some of them were lame excuses, but some of them were reasonable enough to convince the teacher. For example, some of them did not have motivation to practice the translation because they were not interested in it and wanted to change their major. Such pretext was not convincing and the teacher would not be justified by those excuses. Yet, there were some students who had reasonable problems and, as a result, and the teachers would be patient in those cases. For instance, the teachers should showed a higher tolerance to those students who had memory problems due to being middle aged. The teacher did not always accuse the students of not being as active and attentive as she expected them to be. When they faced such a challenge, they tried to get along with the students, showing empathy to them, since they were not equal in terms of condition and level of proficiency.

Another challenge witnessed by the researcher was unexpected situations in the class. Sometimes the teachers were surprised by the prompt and unexpected questions the students asked regarding the meaning of some words and phrases. More often than not, the translator trainers searched and found the Persian equivalents of the words they aimed to teach every session, then came to the class with great dominance over the materials. However, some students who studied further lessons, asked about the exact equivalents

of some words the teacher had not prepared in advance. The researcher observed such situations in translation classes and perceived it as a challenge for translator trainers. One of the participants in her report confessed that she was shocked by unplanned and sudden questions asked by the students. The situation got worse when she did not remember the answers. Most of the questions in this field were related to the precise meaning and equivalents of words and phrases. These words and phrases often belonged to the next lessons she could not prepare in advance. So she tried to guess the meanings of the words according to the context to avoid embarrassment and being judged by the students. In the interviews, the teacher pointed out that when she encountered an unexpected and unplanned question and paused for a moment to either remember or guess the answer from the context, some students started whispering. The teacher's delay was unacceptable for students. They might consider the teacher's delay as her illiteracy and poor knowledge of the material, though it was not reasonable. The students' high expectation of the teacher was a challenging issue during the act of translation training.

Another challenge referred to the translation of technical words. When the class was involved in translating technical texts, the process of finding equivalents for technical words and phrases was a hardship for both the students and the teachers. Technical texts usually brought about several questions. A tricky challenge to the teachers in those circumstances was that students specifically relied on the teacher to get the answers, while the teachers were not aware of all technical words.

In the interview, the researcher informed the participants of what she observed during the translation courses. The participant confirmed her opinion. In the process of translating technical texts, the students expected the teacher to have an answer for each question. By asking them to find the answers by the help of an expert in the field, for example an accountant, the teacher implied that she was not skilled at all majors and as a

result, did not know the equivalent of every technical word. General information was needed in a degree, but translator trainers could not immerse themselves in every field.

Yet, there was another challenge related to the students' English proficiency. In the field note, the researcher argued that some students lacked the required English command and this caused the class to have a slow progress. Based on the personal diaries of the participants, one can argue that the heterogeneity of the English proficiency level in translation training classes might be considered as a challenge for teachers.

The last challenge detected by the researcher in translation courses was the problem of know-it-all students. She observed that some students tried to challenge their teacher. After the class discussed over an equivalent, the teacher usually gave the final answer to prevent the students from being puzzled and confused. However, sometimes a number of students disagreed with the teacher. According to the diaries, one of the teachers talked about one of her students who was a tour leader and thought highly of himself. He imposed his opinion on the teacher with no logical reason. Because he had a decent level of English proficiency due to his job, he did not easily accept the teacher's idea. What made a challenging situation for the teacher was the students' unyielding behavior toward her. That very student thought he knew better than the teacher. Generally speaking, those students who study some English courses in the language schools outside the university and are rated at high level of English proficiency, sometimes appeared in the role of a rival and opponent to the teacher. They used to challenge the teacher's answers while they were just English proficient, not the expert in translation training.

It should be noted that according to the interview, one of the teachers stated that despite all the difficulties of translation courses, they got a positive feedback by the students at the end of the course.

DISCUSSION

The researcher carried out this study to investigate the challenges translator trainers face during the act of translation teaching. For this purpose the researcher used ethnography to carry out the study. The findings of this ethnography were as follow:

The Challenge of the Dictionary: Students did not know how to professionally use the dictionary which posed a challenge for the teacher. Some of them even did not have a suitable dictionary. They mainly focused on the first meaning of the words, ignoring the connotative meaning the words may have in different contexts. Every session, a part of the class time was devoted to students' questions about the word selection and the suitable meaning a word may have. The teacher felt tired and harassed. She tried to teach them the correct way of working with dictionary.

The Challenge of Finding an Equivalent and Word Selection: The teachers faced this challenge when the students did not pay ample attention to the context and accordingly the equivalent they suggested for a word was not correct. The students did not recognize which phrase had a predetermined equivalent and which one is new and its equivalent should be created by themselves. The word selection was a demanding task in the class especially when students could not detect the type of the equivalent.

The Problem of the Lack of Facilities: Translation practice needs facilities such as the Internet or translator training workshops. Sometimes the teachers get stuck in a problem in the class that can be solved merely by access to the Internet. Accessing the Internet would help the students and the teachers become familiar with the theme of the text and act better in finding equivalents for the words, specially technical and difficult words.

Students' Reluctance, De-motivation, and High Expectation: The teachers expected the students to act attentively in the class and show enthusiasm. However, some students did not appear active in the class, failing to do their assignment. When the entire burden, even doing

what the students were responsible for, descended on the teacher's shoulder, this would be considered a challenge for the teachers. They wanted their teachers to answer all the questions for them. The students made no effort to find the answers for their questions, even when they were assigned by the teacher to do so. It was unreasonable to expect the teacher to know everything. The students themselves should have been involved in the task to feel what their teacher perceived in the class. Translation needs practice and no one can learn translating unless he/she immerse him/herself in the practice of translation. The reluctance and inactiveness of a number of students prevented the class from having a promising progress. It also irritated the teachers.

Unexpected Situations: Unexpected situations and students' improvised questions about the next lessons was another challenge that the translator trainers faced during their teaching. Since the students anticipated the teacher to know everything and immediately provide the answer for every question, such situations were somehow difficult to handle by the teacher.

Content Knowledge and General Information: Translation students should become familiar with different contents and technical texts. Then, the translator trainers were expected to practice the translation of different technical texts with students. However, translating technical texts is a complicated task and even the translator trainers do not know the equivalents of all technical words. Teachers faced a great challenge when students asked questions about the equivalent of technical words. They confessed that they should enhance their general knowledge about different field, but it is impossible for them study every field.

Students' General English Proficiency: English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for translation training courses. Translation courses will have a reasonably quick pace if the students are at a high level of English proficiency. One who chooses to attend translation courses, should be completely equipped with a high level of English

proficiency. The homogeneity of the English level is also of high significance. Students should be at an equal level to avoid getting bored or confused in the class environment. However, what poses a challenge for the translator trainers is related to the aforementioned issues. Some students lack the required English proficiency and distract the class from its main goal -that is the translation practice and translation training-, resulting in slow progress of the course. A translator trainer is not set to teach the language, but the strategies of the translation. Sometimes, teachers aimed to involve students in a translation task but they did not manage to fulfil what they had in their mind due to the circumstances such as the students' lack of English proficiency. The heterogeneity of the students in the sense of English proficiency may pose obstacles in the way of translation training.

Know-it-all Students: The last finding of this study was the challenge of know-it-all students. Sometimes the teachers were challenged by some students who either relied on the guidebook they had, or were proud of themselves due to some English courses they had in private language schools. They thought that they exceeded even their teacher in the field. It happened when what they assumed to be the answer of a question, did not associate with what their teacher suggested as the answer of a question. It often opened a discussion in the class. The teachers happened to be annoyed by the rude behavior of some of those students who rudely told their teacher "What you said is wrong. Your answer is not correct." Dealing with such students who think they are the master of everything, is really difficult for the teacher as they are not convinced easily or they may aim to ruin the teacher's prestige in front of the other students.

The results of the present study are in line with Al-Mubarak's (2017) perception-based study which reported on challenging factors in teaching process of translation theories and practice. He, based on the translator trainers' perceptions, found that such factors as lack of target language cultural knowledge among students, language

labs and necessary equipment, motivation for the students to improve their translation competence, and training and seminars for the translation teachers were among the challenges with which the translation teachers were dealing in the translation classes.

CONCLUSION

In sum, figure 1 indicates the challenges which were identified by the researcher as the thorniest problems perceived by the translation teachers in translation classrooms:

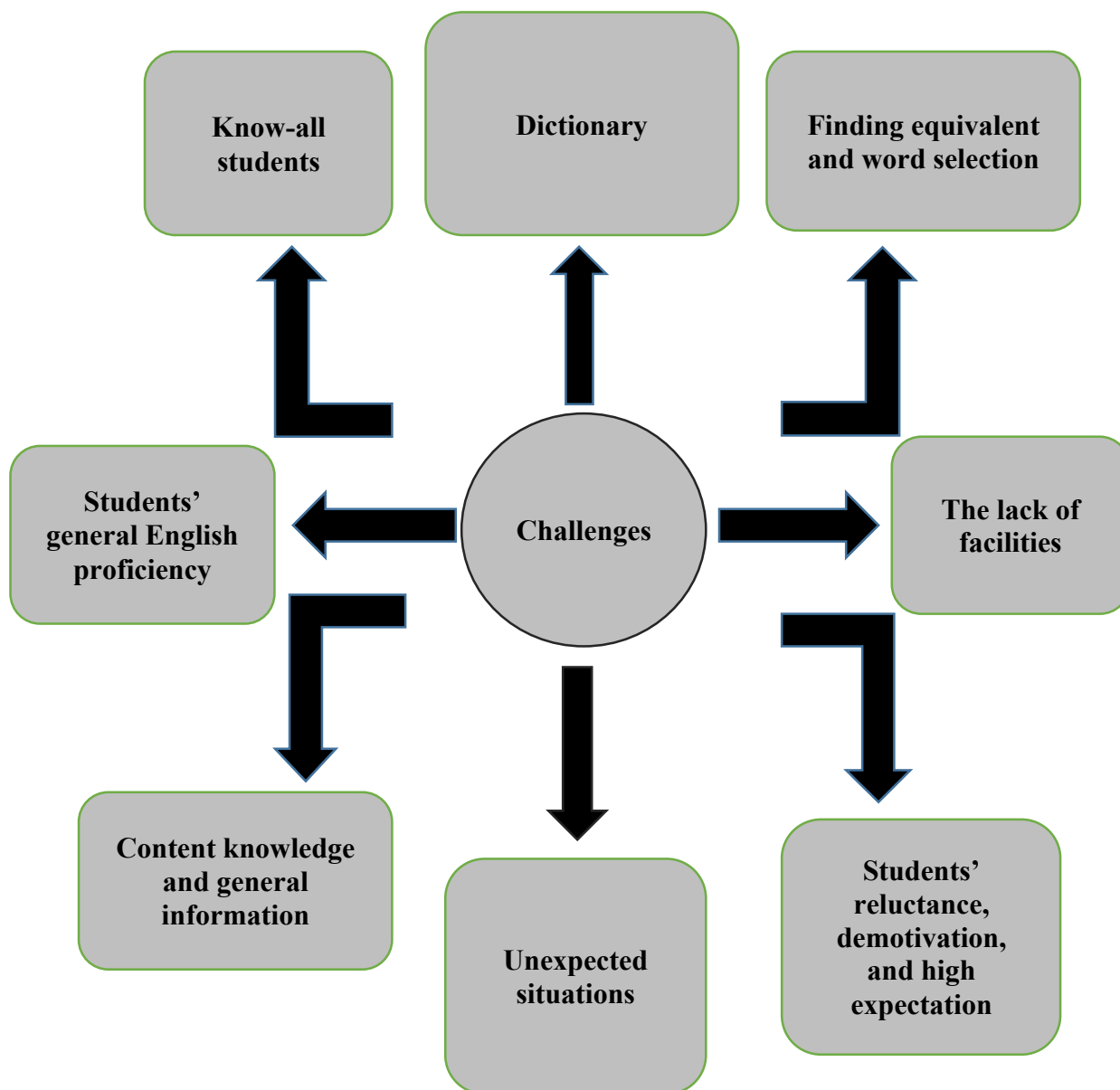


Figure 1. The challenges discovered by the researcher

The teachers' perception in the course design and material development has been ignored for years, and something should be done to ameliorate this situation. The present study was an effort to see what challenges the translator trainers face in the translation classes and also how they address those challenges. Moreover, the present study would enrich the literature on pedagogical translation.

The next research can duplicate this research with participants of different age who have longer experience of teaching, to discover what challenges they may face when teaching translation.

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