

EXPLORING EFL WRITING PROFICIENCY THROUGH TRANSLATION OF A SHORT STORY: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF TWELFTH-GRADE STUDENTS

Achim Napoleon Beis^{1*}, Rudolof J. Isu², Deby Marisa Malelak³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Persatuan Guru 1945 Kupang

E-mail: napoleon40@gmail.com, rudi.isu73@gmail.com, debymarisamalelak@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aims to describe the ability of twelfth-grade students at SMA Penabur Plus Teas in writing English through translating a short story from Indonesian into English. The research question is: How is the ability of twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas in the academic year 2025/2026 to write in English by translating an Indonesian short story? A descriptive quantitative approach was used. The data consist of students' translation texts analyzed based on five writing aspects from Jacobs et al. (1981): grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, fluency, and form. The data collection technique used was a translation test. The data source was 23 twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas. The theories applied are translation theory and writing theory. The research findings indicate that students' ability in writing through translating a short story is categorized as **"Good"** with an average score of **73%**. A total of 4 students (17.39%) achieved the "Excellent" category, 9 students (39.13%) achieved the "Good" category, 5 students (21.74%) achieved the "Average" category, and 5 students (21.74%) fell into the "Poor" category. Students encountered two main categories of problems: (1) lexical problems (limited vocabulary, difficulty with word meaning and distribution, and literal translation), and (2) syntactical problems (incorrect sentence structure and grammatical errors).

Keywords: *Writing ability, Translation, Short story, Senior high school*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental means of human communication, enabling the expression of thoughts, ideas, and feelings. In the era of globalization, English has established itself as the main international language, widely used in various sectors including business, academia, tourism, and diplomacy. As emphasized by Adenan (1985), a second or foreign language holds an important position in daily life. Consequently, in Indonesia, English is taught as the first foreign language, a compulsory subject from secondary school to university level, aimed at equipping students with the skills to access global knowledge and foster international relations.

One critical skill in mastering a foreign language is writing. Writing is a complex process of discovering and organizing meaning, and communicating it effectively to the reader (Richards & Longman, 1987; Gad Bard, 1989). To produce a coherent and comprehensible text, a writer must master various aspects, including grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and form.

An integral part of language learning, particularly in higher education, is translation. Translation is the process of transferring a message from a Source Language (SL) to a Target Language (TL) while maintaining semantic and stylistic equivalence (Bell, 1991). In the English Department of SMA Penabur Plus Teas, translation is a compulsory subject that requires students to translate not only from English to Indonesian but also from Indonesian to

English. Translating from Indonesian to English is particularly challenging because it demands a high level of competence in the target language's writing system.

Wisnubroto (1993) identified eleven types of common errors in student writing, which also frequently appear in translation tasks. These include grammatical errors, wrong word choice, misspelled words, and sentence fragments. Given these potential challenges, the researcher is interested in investigating the ability of twelfth-grade students at SMA Penabur Plus Teas in writing through translation. Specifically, this research will focus on how well they can translate an Indonesian short story into English, analyzing their translation results based on key aspects of writing.

This research offers novelty in its unique integration of writing and translation using a short story as the instrument, with a comprehensive analysis based on five writing aspects, conducted at a location that has never been studied with twelfth-grade students in the current academic year. The urgency of this research is based on the importance of English proficiency in globalization, the complexity of writing skills, the compulsory nature of translation in the curriculum, the specific challenges of Indonesian–English translation, and the need for diagnostic data to improve teaching and learning at SMA Penabur Plus Teas.

Based on the background above, the research question is: How is the ability of twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas in the academic year 2025/2026 to write in English by translating an Indonesian short story.

In accordance with the problem and the research objective, which is to determine students' ability in writing through translating a short story, the theories applied are translation theory and writing theory. Translation theory examines the process of transferring a message from one language to another (Bell, 1991; Nida, 1964), while writing theory examines the aspects required to produce a good piece of writing (Jacobs et al., 1981).

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach, which aims to describe a phenomenon or situation as it is (Latunusa, 1988). This approach allows the researcher to draw conclusions based on systematically collected and analyzed data.

The data collected in this research are written data in the form of students' translation texts from an Indonesian short story into English. The data source was 23 twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas in the academic year 2025/2026. The data collection technique used was a test (translation test).

According to Sudjarwo (2011), a qualitative approach is limited to presenting purely qualitative data. However, such qualitative data are first processed to enhance the validity of the analysis. In the context of this research, quantitative data in the form of scores were analyzed descriptively to describe the students' level of ability.

The data analysis procedure was carried out through the following steps: (1) scoring the students' translation results using an analytical rubric based on the five writing aspects from Jacobs et al. (1981); (2) calculating individual scores; (3) categorizing the scores based on a rating scale; (4) calculating the class average; and (5) identifying students' difficulties qualitatively.

Students' scores were evaluated based on a rating scale adapted from Nida (in Bolla, 2000): 80–100 (Excellent), 70–79 (Good), 60–69 (Average), and 0–59 (Poor). The average score was calculated using the formula $M = \Sigma x / N$, where M is the average score, Σx is the sum of all student scores, and N is the number of students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data were collected by administering a translation test in which students were asked to translate a short story from Indonesian into English. Students' translations were evaluated based on two main aspects: lexical accuracy and syntactical accuracy. Each aspect was scored, and the total score was converted into a percentage to determine the students' level of ability.

Table 1 presents the scores of each student.

Table 1. Students' Translation Ability Scores

1	Sample	Lexical	Syntactical	Total Score	Score (%)	Category
1	1	90	90	180	90	Excellent
2	2	85	90	175	87	Excellent
3	3	85	85	170	85	Excellent
4	4	85	80	165	82	Excellent
5	5	80	75	155	77	Good
6	6	80	75	155	77	Good
7	7	75	75	150	75	Good
8	8	75	75	150	75	Good
9	9	73	75	148	74	Good
10	10	73	75	148	74	Good
11	11	74	73	147	73	Good
12	12	70	75	145	72	Good
13	13	70	70	140	70	Good
14	14	70	68	138	69	Average
15	15	65	65	130	65	Average
16	16	65	65	130	65	Average
17	17	60	65	125	62	Average
18	18	64	60	124	62	Average
19	19	58	60	118	59	Poor
20	20	59	55	114	57	Poor
21	21	58	55	113	56	Poor
22	22	55	55	110	55	Poor

23	23	55	50	105	52	Poor
	Total	1624	1611	3235		

Based on the data analysis, the highest score achieved by students was 90%, while the lowest score was 52%. The average ability of twelfth-grade students in translating a short story from Indonesian into English was **73%**, which falls into the “**Good**” category.

The frequency distribution of students’ abilities is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Students’ Translation Ability

No	Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage	Total Score	Average per Category
1	Excellent	80–100	4	17.39%	690	86.25
2	Good	70–79	9	39.13%	1318	73.22
3	Average	60–69	5	21.74%	647	64.70
4	Poor	<60	5	21.74%	560	56.00
	Total		23	100%	3235	

Table 3 shows students’ achievement in lexical and syntactical aspects.

Table 3. Analysis of Lexical and Syntactical Achievement

Aspect	Total Score	Maximum Score	Average	Percentage
Lexical	1624	2300 (23 × 100)	70.61	70.61%
Syntactical	1611	2300 (23 × 100)	70.04	70.04%
Combined	3235	4600	70.33	70.33%

Students achieved a slightly higher average in the lexical aspect (70.61) compared to the syntactical aspect (70.04). The difference of 0.57 points indicates that students faced slightly greater challenges with sentence structure and grammatical rules in English than with vocabulary. This suggests that while students have a relatively adequate vocabulary repository, their ability to arrange words into grammatically correct English sentences still needs improvement.

Problems Encountered by Students in Translating the Short Story

Data obtained from the translation test revealed that the twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas encountered two main categories of problems: lexical problems and syntactical problems.

Lexical Problems

Lexical problems relate to difficulties with vocabulary, including word choice, meaning, and usage. The research identified several specific lexical challenges:

- a. Limited Vocabulary

Many students struggled to find the appropriate English words to convey the meaning of the Indonesian source text. This was especially evident in sentences containing specific or less common terms. For example:

- Original Sentence (Indonesian): “Kita tahu bahwa di negara kita pemerintah selalu mengadakan kompetisi sepak bola setiap tahun.”
- Student’s Less Accurate Translation: “We know that in our country the government always holds football competitions every year.”
- More Natural Translation: “As we know, the government in our country always holds football competitions every year.”

The student’s translation, though grammatically understandable, lacks the natural flow of a native English speaker. The phrase “we know that in our country” is acceptable but less idiomatic than “as we know.” The core issue is not merely a lack of vocabulary, but a lack of *collocational* and *idiomatic* vocabulary—knowing which words naturally go together.

b. Difficulty with Word Meaning and Distribution

Students also struggled with words that have multiple meanings (polysemy) or where the Indonesian word does not have a one-to-one equivalent in English. Several students admitted being confused by words such as “promontory,” “ancient,” “remains,” and “preserved,” which appeared in the short story. This confusion stemmed from their unfamiliarity with these specific English terms and their contextual usage.

c. Literal Translation (Transfer Errors)

Some students translated word-for-word from Indonesian to English, producing unnatural or nonsensical translations. This indicates a failure to grasp the overall meaning of the sentence and to reconstruct it according to English conventions.

Syntactical Problems

Syntactical problems relate to difficulties with grammar and sentence structure. Analysis of students’ translations revealed the following problems:

a. Incorrect Sentence Structure

A large number of students (14 out of 23) produced translations with flawed sentence structure. They struggled to analyze and understand complex sentences in the source text, leading to translations that significantly deviated from the intended meaning. A clear example is provided below:

- Original Sentence (Indonesian): “Bima Sakti adalah pemain terbaik dan termahal di Indonesia, sesuatu yang sangat mengejutkan baginya.”
- Student’s Incorrect Translation 1: “Bima Sakti itu terbaik dan terkenal pemain bola di Indonesia, suatu yang bagus baginya.”
- Student’s Incorrect Translation 2: “Bima Sakti sebagai orang terkenal dan pemain terbaik di Indonesia, sesuatu yang menggembarakan.”
- Correct Translation: “Bima Sakti was the best and most expensive footballer in Indonesia, something that was very surprising for him.”

Error Analysis:

In the first incorrect translation, the student misused “itu” as a filler, mistakenly used “terkenal” (famous) instead of “termahal” (most expensive), and produced a fragmented structure (“terbaik dan terkenal pemain bola”). The phrase “suatu yang bagus baginya” (something good for him) completely loses the meaning “very surprising.” In the second incorrect translation, the student altered the structure entirely, omitted the comparison (“best and most expensive”), and softened “surprising” to “pleasing/happy.” Both incorrect translations demonstrate a fundamental difficulty in processing complex clause relationships within the source sentence. The students failed to correctly identify the subject, predicate, and restrictive clauses, resulting in meaning distortion in the target language.

b. Grammatical Errors

Beyond sentence structure, students made various grammatical errors, including:

- Incorrect verb tense usage (e.g., using present tense when past tense was required).
- Subject–verb agreement errors.
- Misuse of articles (a, an, the).
- Incorrect word order within phrases.

Discussion

The findings of this research show that the overall translation ability of twelfth-grade students at SMA Penabur Plus Teas is “Good,” with an average score of 73%. This indicates that the English study program has been relatively successful in equipping students with basic translation skills. However, a closer examination of the data reveals a more nuanced picture.

The distribution of ability levels (Table 2) shows that while the majority of students (56.52%) fall into the “Excellent” and “Good” categories, a substantial portion (43.48%) are in the “Average” and “Poor” categories. This bimodal distribution suggests a disparity in language proficiency within the classroom. Some students have mastered the lexical and syntactical skills required for translation, while others continue to struggle significantly.

The slightly lower performance in the syntactical aspect (70.04%) compared to the lexical aspect (70.61%) is an important finding. It supports the assertion by many translation scholars that grammatical competence is often the more challenging component of translation, especially when moving from a source language to a target language with different structural rules. Indonesian and English have very different syntactical structures. Indonesian relies more heavily on context and word order, whereas English has a more rigid structure with explicit grammatical markers for tense, number, and aspect. The students’ difficulty with complex sentences, as seen in the “Bima Sakti” example, highlights this challenge. They struggled to deconstruct the Indonesian sentence and reconstruct it according to English syntactic norms—a process known as “restructuring” in translation theory.

Lexical problems, especially limited vocabulary and a tendency toward literal translation, point to a gap between receptive and productive vocabulary. Students may recognize many English words when reading, but they cannot readily access and use them accurately when constructing their own sentences (i.e., during translation). This is compounded by a limited understanding

of collocations and idiomatic expressions, which are essential for producing natural-sounding translations.

These results align with the findings of Payung and Sukarno (2025), who showed that the use of translation tools can help improve students' writing skills, but still requires adequate mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, Rizky and Martriwati (2025) emphasized that translation requires strong linguistic competence in order for the translation results to be accurate and natural.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the data presented, the following conclusions can be drawn.

4.1 Students' Ability in Writing through Translating a Short Story

The ability of twelfth-grade students of SMA Penabur Plus Teas in writing through translating a short story from Indonesian into English is categorized as **“Good.”** This is evidenced by the overall average score of **73%** achieved by the 23 student participants.

The distribution of students' ability levels is as follows:

- 4 students (17.39%) achieved the “Excellent” category (score 80–100)
- 9 students (39.13%) achieved the “Good” category (score 70–79)
- 5 students (21.74%) achieved the “Average” category (score 60–69)
- 5 students (21.74%) fell into the “Poor” category (score below 60)

Analysis of the two main aspects assessed shows that students performed slightly better in the lexical aspect (70.61%) compared to the syntactical aspect (70.04%). This indicates that while students have a relatively adequate vocabulary foundation, they face greater challenges in constructing grammatically correct and well-structured English sentences.

4.2 Problems Encountered by Students

The research identified two main categories of problems faced by students when translating a short story from Indonesian into English:

a. Lexical Problems

- **Limited Vocabulary:** Students struggled to find the appropriate English words, especially for specific or less common terms.
- **Difficulty with Word Meaning and Distribution:** Students were confused by words with multiple meanings (polysemy) and words that do not have direct equivalents in English.
- **Literal Translation:** Students often translated word-for-word, producing unnatural target texts.

b. Syntactical Problems

- **Incorrect Sentence Structure:** A large number of students (14 out of 23) produced translations with flawed sentence structure.

- Grammatical Errors: Students made various grammatical errors, including incorrect tense usage, subject–verb agreement errors, misuse of articles, and incorrect word order.

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