

## Grammatical Accuracy in Translating Direct Speech: A Comparison between Professionals and EFL Students

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the grammatical accuracy in translating direct speech from English to Indonesian by comparing the performance of professional translators with that of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The research utilizes 20 carefully selected excerpts from "The Valley of Fear" by Arthur Conan Doyle. Fifteen final-year English education students' translations were meticulously assessed against an officially published version, allowing for a robust comparative analysis. A qualitative comparative approach was employed, utilizing a rubric grounded in Nababan's (2012) translation quality model, which evaluates critical aspects such as tense usage, agreement, sentence structure, and punctuation. The findings reveal significant insights into the translation capabilities of EFL students. While students exhibited moderate accuracy in tense and agreement, they encountered considerable challenges with punctuation and sentence structure. For instance, the nuanced use of commas and quotation marks in direct speech, which can dramatically alter the meaning and flow of dialogue, often eluded the students. In contrast, professional translators demonstrated a higher level of grammatical cohesion and a lower frequency of errors. This disparity underscores the complexities involved in translating literary texts, where the subtleties of language play a pivotal role in conveying the author's intent and character voice. Moreover, the study emphasizes the pressing need for grammar-focused and genre-specific training within translation education.*

*Keywords: direct speech translation; EFL students; grammatical accuracy; literary translation; professional translator;*

### INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalized and multilingual world, translation plays a pivotal role in bridging communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Bardhan & Benítez-Burraco, 2024; House, 2015). Among various types of translation, literary translation demands not only linguistic competence but also deep cultural and stylistic sensitivity. One of the most complex elements in literary translation is the accurate rendering of direct speech, which serves as a key narrative device that conveys character identity, tone, and interpersonal dynamics (Venuti, 2012; Baker, 2018; Hasan & Yahya, 2024). Nakamura et al, (2021) informed that ensuring grammatical accuracy in translating direct speech is critical, as errors may distort meaning, weaken characterization, and reduce the literary quality of the text. In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), the development of

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translation competence, particularly grammatical precision in literary texts, remains a persistent pedagogical and professional challenge.

Despite growing attention to translator training in higher education, a noticeable gap persists between the grammatical accuracy demonstrated by professional translators and that of EFL students, particularly in the context of literary works (Maas & Hübner, 2018; Hatim & Munday, 2019; Tsai, 2019). Direct speech is especially problematic due to its syntactic complexity, use of tenses, modals, and pronoun shifts, which are often mishandled by student translators (Gaido et al, 2021). Moreover, literary texts like *The Valley of Fear* by Arthur Conan Doyle, rich in dialogue and nuanced speech acts, pose significant demands on both linguistic and pragmatic levels. The translation of such texts is not merely a mechanical process but an interpretive act shaped by the translator's grammatical control and discourse awareness (Newmark, 1988).

Several studies have investigated grammatical accuracy in EFL contexts, focusing primarily on writing, speaking, or general translation exercises (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ellis, 2008; Mekasha & Amogne, 2025; Senowarsito et al., 2024). However, few have examined grammatical accuracy in translating direct speech within literary texts, and even fewer have made direct comparisons between professional translators and EFL students. This is surprising, considering the centrality of direct speech in narrative discourse and its pedagogical implications for translation education. Empirical studies by Schäffner (2010) and Nord (2005) emphasize the need for more targeted research on functional and grammatical aspects of literary translation, especially in EFL settings.

Theoretical perspectives from contrastive linguistics, systemic functional grammar, and discourse analysis provide valuable lenses to examine how translators construct equivalence in dialogue. For instance, Halliday's (1994) model of transitivity and modality offers insight into how grammatical structures carry interpersonal meaning, which is especially relevant in direct speech. Yet, few empirical studies have systematically applied such models to compare professional and student translations in literary contexts, highlighting a significant state of the art limitation.

The research gap becomes evident when considering the scarcity of comparative analyses on grammatical accuracy in translating direct speech between professional translators and EFL students. While numerous studies have explored translation competence in general (e.g., PACTE, 2003), the micro-level grammatical performance in specific discourse types—such as fictional dialogue—remains under-investigated. This gap limits our understanding of how grammatical competence differentiates novice from expert translators and how instructional interventions might be designed to address these disparities.

Given this lacuna, the current study is both timely and necessary. It addresses the need to evaluate and understand how professional translators and EFL students handle grammatical accuracy when translating direct speech. The urgency of this research is also amplified by curricular demands in Indonesian translation programs, which increasingly emphasize authentic translation tasks without adequate empirical grounding to inform pedagogy. Furthermore, findings from this study may contribute to improved curriculum design, focusing on grammatical precision in literary translation.

This research offers novelty by situating grammatical accuracy within the specific genre of fictional dialogue and employing a comparative lens between professionals and EFL learners. Unlike previous studies that treat translation accuracy holistically, this study focuses narrowly on the syntactic and morphological dimensions of direct speech, thus offering fine-grained insights that are both theoretically grounded and pedagogically relevant. Moreover, it introduces *The Valley of Fear*, a canonical English text that has seen limited scholarly attention in Indonesian translation, studies as a case study to explore these issues.

In sum, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between grammatical accuracy, translator experience, and literary genre. By comparing the performance of professional translators and EFL students, it seeks to identify specific patterns, errors, and strengths that can inform both translation practice and instruction. The next section will present the research questions and objectives that guide this inquiry into the linguistic and pedagogical dimensions of translating direct speech.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative comparative research design to examine the grammatical accuracy of translated direct speech in a literary context (Cresswell, 2012). The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the research focuses on describing, interpreting, and comparing linguistic features, particularly grammatical structures, in two sets of translation outputs one by professional translators and the other by EFL students. The comparison was structured to identify the patterns, frequency, and types of grammatical errors, as well as to interpret underlying translation challenges faced by non-professionals in rendering direct speech from English to Indonesian.

#### Participants and Sampling

The data were derived from two primary translator groups. The first group consisted of professional translators, represented by the officially published Indonesian version of *The Valley of Fear* by Arthur Conan Doyle. The second group included fifteen of final-year students enrolled in the English Education Department at a public university in Indonesia. These students were selected using purposive sampling based on their completion of core translation courses and their availability to participate in a controlled translation task. All participants in the student group were given the same 20 excerpts of direct speech to translate independently.

### Research Instruments

The primary instrument utilized in this study was an analytical rubric adapted from Nababan et al. (2012), which assesses grammatical accuracy across four key dimensions: tense usage, subject–verb agreement, punctuation, and sentence structure. Each translated excerpt was evaluated on a scale indicating the level of grammatical correctness and the severity of errors. In addition, the study adopted Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1974; Ellis, 1997) to classify and interpret the types of grammatical errors found in the translated texts, providing a consistent framework for cross-group comparison.

#### Procedure

The research was carried out in several stages. First, twenty (20) direct speech excerpts were carefully selected from the original English version of *The Valley of Fear*, based on their syntactic complexity and variation in grammatical features. Second, the student translation task was administered, in which participants translated the excerpts under guided conditions. Third, the professional version the officially published Indonesian translation was extracted and aligned with the same source excerpts for comparison. Finally, both student and professional translations were examined using the Nababan (2012) rubric, and grammatical errors were categorized according to Error Analysis.

### Data Analysis

The translated data from both groups were subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis. Each translated excerpt was scored using the grammatical accuracy rubric, and the frequency and types of grammatical errors were recorded and classified. Specifically, the analysis focused on (1) identifying grammatical inconsistencies in tense, agreement, punctuation, and structure; (2) categorizing errors based on Error Analysis theory (e.g., omission, addition, misformation); and (3) comparing the distribution and severity of these errors across the student and professional groups. The comparative analysis sought to draw meaningful inferences about translation competence and error patterns, with a focus on the fidelity and fluency of direct speech translation in literary contexts.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In examining the results, it became evident that there were substantial discrepancies in how students approached the task of maintaining grammatical integrity while translating direct speech. For instance, some students exhibited a strong command of tense usage, successfully capturing the nuances of past and present dialogue as intended by the original text. In contrast, others struggled with this aspect, leading to translations that felt disjointed or temporally inconsistent. A notable example can be seen in the translation of a line where the original speaker's past action was misrepresented as a present action, thereby altering the intended meaning and emotional impact of the dialogue. This highlights the critical importance of understanding context, as the verb tense plays a pivotal role in conveying the speaker's intent and the timeline of events.

Subject-verb agreement also emerged as a significant area of variation among the translations. While some students demonstrated a keen awareness of grammatical rules, others overlooked basic agreements, resulting in sentences that sounded awkward or incorrect. For instance, a translation that read "The group of detectives were investigating" instead of the grammatically correct "The group of detectives was investigating" not only reflects a lapse in grammatical accuracy but also distracts from the professionalism expected in an academic translation. Such errors can undermine the credibility of the translation, making it imperative for students to pay close attention to the singular and plural forms, particularly in complex sentences.

Furthermore, sentence structure proved to be another critical factor influencing the overall quality of the translations. Some students opted for overly simplistic structures that failed to capture the richness of the original text, while others experimented with more complex constructions that, while ambitious, occasionally resulted in convoluted sentences that obscured meaning. An illustrative case is the translation of a multi-clause sentence that, when simplified, lost essential details and nuances that were present in the source material. This aspect of translation underscores the balance that must be struck between fidelity to the original text and clarity in the target language, a challenge that requires both linguistic skill and creative insight. Punctuation, though often overlooked, also played a vital role in the students' translations. Proper punctuation not only aids in the clarity of the text but also reflects the tone and rhythm of the original dialogue. In several instances, the absence of appropriate punctuation led to confusion or misinterpretation of the dialogue's intended emotion. For example, a lack of quotation marks or incorrect comma placements could transform a direct speech into a narrative statement, thereby altering the reader's engagement with the text. This aspect emphasizes the need for students to be meticulous in their attention to detail, as punctuation marks serve as crucial indicators of how dialogue should be read and understood.

In conclusion, the analysis of grammatical accuracy in the translations of direct speech by final-year EFL students highlights significant variations in their understanding and application of core grammatical principles. The evaluation through a structured rubric revealed that while some students excelled in specific areas such as tense usage and subject-verb agreement, others faced challenges that affected the overall quality of their translations. The interplay of tense, agreement, structure, and punctuation illustrates the complexities inherent in translating direct speech, underscoring the necessity for EFL students to develop a nuanced understanding of both grammar and context. Ultimately, this analysis not only sheds light on the students' current capabilities but also serves as a valuable guide for future instruction, emphasizing the importance of targeted feedback and practice in enhancing their translation skills.

The data showed that the average total score per excerpt per student ranged between 6 and 10, with the majority scoring between 7 and 9, indicating a moderate level of grammatical control. Specifically:

1. Tense accuracy was the most consistent aspect, with 60% of translations scoring 3.
2. Subject-verb agreement showed more variability, with only 35% of translations receiving a perfect score.
3. Sentence structure posed considerable difficulty, with 40% of the excerpts receiving a score of 1, reflecting ungrammatical or awkward constructions.
4. Punctuation accuracy was the most problematic area; only 25% of student translations used quotation marks and punctuation marks correctly in dialogue, often omitting or misplacing them.

When compared with the professional translation version, students demonstrated a significantly higher frequency of grammatical errors, particularly in complex or inverted sentence structures commonly found in dialogue. This confirms earlier observations in translation pedagogy that direct speech, with its embedded clauses and shifts in deixis, poses a unique challenge for EFL learners (Hatim & Munday, 2019; Nababan et al., 2012).

The findings affirm the complexity of translating direct speech, a genre that requires mastery of both grammar and discourse structure. According to Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1974; Ellis, 1997), such student errors can be categorized as intralingual (e.g., overgeneralization of Indonesian sentence structure) and interlingual (e.g., L1 interference in English modality or verb agreement). The students' relatively strong performance in tense accuracy resonates with previous studies, such as Bitchener and Ferris (2012), which noted that EFL learners, particularly in academic contexts, tend to develop awareness of tense patterns earlier than other grammatical forms. However, the struggle with punctuation and sentence boundaries particularly in quoting speech supports Nord's (2005) observation that translation requires attention not only to semantic equivalence but also to the stylistic and formal conventions of the target language.

Compared to the professional translation, the student translations showed a marked lack of discourse cohesion and inconsistent handling of quotation rules, suggesting gaps in training related to genre-specific grammatical demands. This finding echoes Schäffner (2010), who emphasized the need for translator education to move beyond general competence toward text-type and function-based strategies, especially in narrative and fictional texts. The relatively low punctuation scores also reflect the challenge of navigating English quotation conventions, which differ from Indonesian norms. In the professional version, quotation marks, commas, and reporting verbs were consistently placed with high accuracy, indicating professional familiarity with English stylistic norms a skill still underdeveloped in the student cohort. Furthermore, the use of the analytical rubric adapted from Nababan et al. (2012) proved effective in identifying micro-level issues in the students' work. This confirms

previous research (e.g., PACTE, 2003) that advocates the use of component-based assessment tools to monitor translator competence development. The rubric not only highlighted the most problematic areas but also offered a structured way to evaluate translation outputs systematically. In sum, the performance gap between students and professionals in translating direct speech is both quantitative (in terms of average scores) and qualitative (in the types of errors committed). This supports the argument by Hatim and Munday (2019) that translator training must include explicit instruction in the translation of speech acts, including reported speech, turn-taking, and modality—features frequently found in dialogue.

The complexity of translating direct speech is a multifaceted challenge that requires not only a solid grasp of grammar but also a nuanced understanding of discourse structure. This complexity is underscored by the need for translators to navigate various linguistic and cultural hurdles, which can significantly affect the accuracy and fluidity of their translations. As delineated by Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1974; Ellis, 1997), the errors made by students in this context can be classified into two primary categories: intralingual errors, which arise from overgeneralizations of the Indonesian sentence structure, and interlingual errors, which stem from first language (L1) interference in English modality or verb agreement.

Intralingual errors, such as the overextension of familiar grammatical structures from Indonesian into English, often lead to awkward or incorrect translations. For instance, a student might translate a simple declarative sentence in Indonesian directly into English without considering the necessary modifications in verb tense or subject-verb agreement. This type of error manifests in translations that lack clarity or coherence, ultimately obscuring the intended meaning. Conversely, interlingual errors highlight the challenges posed by differences in modality between languages. An example can be seen in how students might struggle with the subtleties of modality in English, leading to translations that fail to convey the appropriate level of certainty or obligation inherent in the original text.

The students' relatively strong performance in tense accuracy is noteworthy and resonates with findings from previous studies, such as those conducted by Bitchener and Ferris (2012). These studies suggest that EFL learners, particularly within academic contexts, often develop an awareness of tense patterns earlier than they do with other grammatical forms. This phenomenon may be attributed to the structured nature of tense in English, which is often emphasized in language instruction. For instance, students may excel at using the past simple tense when recounting events but struggle with more complex tenses like the past perfect, which require a deeper understanding of temporal relationships.

However, despite this strength in tense usage, students continue to grapple with punctuation and sentence boundaries, particularly when it comes to quoting speech. This struggle aligns with Nord's (2005) assertion that translation is not merely a matter of achieving semantic equivalence; it also necessitates a keen awareness of the stylistic and formal conventions of the target language. In English, the rules governing punctuation in direct speech are particularly intricate. For example, the placement of quotation marks, commas, and reporting verbs can alter the meaning and flow of a sentence. Students may inadvertently misplace these elements, leading to translations that are grammatically incorrect or stylistically awkward.

When comparing student translations to professional ones, a marked disparity in discourse cohesion becomes evident. Professional translations tend to exhibit a seamless flow of ideas and a consistent application of quotation rules, whereas student translations often reveal gaps in training related to genre-specific grammatical demands. This observation echoes the findings of Schäffner (2010), who emphasized the necessity for translator education to extend beyond general linguistic competence and towards strategies that are

tailored to specific text types and their functions. In narrative and fictional texts, where dialogue plays a crucial role, the ability to convey direct speech accurately becomes paramount.

The relatively low punctuation scores among students further illustrate the difficulties encountered in mastering English quotation conventions, which differ significantly from Indonesian norms. For instance, while Indonesian may allow for more flexibility in punctuation, English adheres to stricter rules that dictate how speech should be presented. In professional translations, quotation marks are consistently placed, and commas and reporting verbs are used with high accuracy, reflecting a familiarity with English stylistic norms that appears to be underdeveloped in the student cohort. This lack of familiarity not only hampers the clarity of their translations but also detracts from the overall quality of their work.

The implementation of an analytical rubric adapted from Nababan et al. (2012) proved to be an effective tool in identifying micro-level issues present in the students' translations. This approach aligns with previous research, such as that conducted by PACTE (2003), which advocates for the use of component-based assessment tools to monitor the development of translator competence. The rubric not only illuminated the most problematic areas within the students' work but also provided a structured methodology for systematically evaluating translation outputs. By breaking down the translation process into specific components, educators can more effectively pinpoint areas that require targeted intervention and support.

In summation, the performance gap between students and professionals in the translation of direct speech is both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, students tend to score lower on average compared to their professional counterparts, indicating a need for enhanced training and practice. Qualitatively, the types of errors committed by students reveal a lack of understanding of the intricacies involved in translating speech acts. This observation supports the argument put forth by Hatim and Munday (2019) that translator training must encompass explicit instruction in the translation of speech acts, including reported speech, turn-taking, and modality features that are frequently encountered in dialogue.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of addressing the complexities involved in translating direct speech. By recognizing the specific challenges posed by both intralingual and interlingual errors, as well as the necessity of mastering punctuation and discourse cohesion, educators can better prepare students for the demands of professional translation. The use of analytical rubrics and targeted instructional strategies can facilitate a deeper understanding of the nuances of translation, ultimately bridging the gap between student and professional performance. As the field of translation continues to evolve, it is imperative that training programs adapt to meet these challenges, ensuring that future translators are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in their craft.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined the grammatical accuracy of final-year EFL students in translating direct speech from the novel *The Valley of Fear* by Arthur Conan Doyle, and compared their translations with those of a professional Indonesian version. The findings revealed that while students demonstrated moderate proficiency in certain grammatical areas particularly tense usage they struggled significantly with sentence structure and punctuation, especially in maintaining the syntactic and stylistic conventions of direct speech. The analysis confirmed that grammatical errors were more frequent and varied in student translations than in the professional version. The most recurring issues included incorrect placement of quotation

marks, faulty sentence constructions, and occasional subject–verb mismatches. These findings suggest that EFL students, even at the final stage of their undergraduate program, still face challenges in translating dialogue with both grammatical precision and narrative fluency.

The study reinforces the need for genre-sensitive translation training, particularly in literary and dialogic texts where grammatical accuracy directly affects character voice and textual coherence. Moreover, the use of an analytical rubric proved effective in identifying specific error patterns and diagnosing areas requiring pedagogical intervention. In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of translation studies by highlighting the performance gap between professional and novice translators, especially in the handling of direct speech. It underscores the importance of integrating explicit grammar-focused instruction and functional stylistic analysis in EFL translation curricula to bridge this gap and better prepare students for professional translation demands.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, translation pedagogy in EFL contexts should integrate genre-based instruction, particularly focusing on literary texts involving direct speech, to help students master both grammatical structures and stylistic conventions. Second, targeted training on grammatical aspects such as punctuation, sentence structure, and subject verb agreement should be implemented to address the most frequent errors identified. Third, the adoption of standardized assessment tools, like the rubric adapted from Nababan (2012), is recommended to provide objective and diagnostic feedback on students' translation performance. Lastly, future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse participant groups and to incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews or think-aloud protocols to gain deeper insight into the cognitive processes behind translation decisions, especially in rendering fictional dialogue.

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