

Exploring Students' Cultural Sensitivity and Ethical Reflection through Digital Translation Tasks

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital translation tasks can foster students' cultural sensitivity and ethical reflection in the context of translation learning. It specifically aims to explore how students recognize culturally embedded expressions and how they respond to ethical considerations when translating them. Guided by Byram's (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, the research involved 32 students from Class B 2022 of the English Literature Study Program, who worked collaboratively to translate an article containing Makassarese-influenced Indonesian expressions into English using AI translation tools of their choice. Students analyzed the AI outputs, identified mistranslations particularly those involving culturally bound expressions, politeness markers, and dialectal features and revised them to reflect culturally appropriate meaning. Thematic analysis of their written reflections and translation decisions revealed that while AI tools successfully generated structurally acceptable translations, they frequently failed to interpret pragmatic meaning, social hierarchy, and culturally embedded markers, at times producing inaccurate or inappropriate results. Through these translation tasks, students demonstrated increasing intercultural awareness, developing the ability to negotiate meaning, preserve cultural nuance, and critically evaluate the limitations and ethical implications of AI-generated translation. The findings suggest that digital translation activities can serve as meaningful tools for strengthening intercultural communicative competence, highlighting the importance of cultural responsibility, ethical decision-making, and human judgment in translation practice in the AI era. This study contributes to emerging discussions on AI literacy, translation pedagogy, and intercultural education, emphasizing that while technology can support translation processes, culturally informed human intervention remains essential.

Keywords: *Cultural Sensitivity; Digital Translation Tasks; Ethical Reflection; Translation Pedagogy.*

1) INTRODUCTION

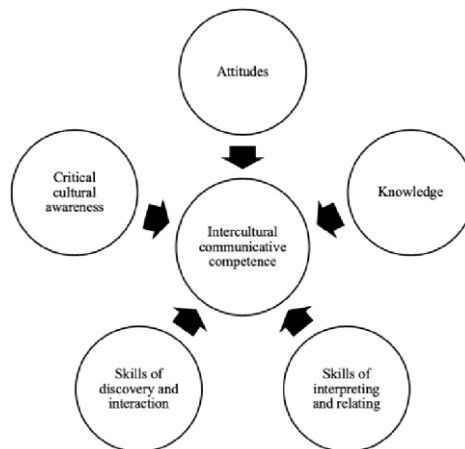
The accelerating development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has reshaped how translation is practiced, learned, and conceptualized in academic and professional settings. With tools such as DeepL, Google Translate, and conversational models like ChatGPT becoming increasingly sophisticated, the act of translating no longer relies solely on human linguistic intuition but is now intertwined with digital assistance and machine-generated output. This technological shift has made translation faster and more accessible, yet it has also raised important questions regarding cultural nuance, interpretative responsibility, and ethical engagement in translation work. As automated

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systems become capable of producing grammatically fluent sentences, the role of the human translator must evolve from literal text conversion to critical evaluator, cultural mediator, and ethically aware decision-maker (Mellinger & Hanson, 2024). Therefore, translation in the AI era demands not just language proficiency but heightened cultural sensitivity and ethical reflection at every stage of the translation process.

Culture plays a fundamental role in meaning-making, and translation inevitably involves more than the transfer of words. Language carries cultural identity, shared values, humor, power relations, historical memory, and social assumptions. Translators who lack cultural awareness risk misrepresenting meaning, creating culturally inappropriate interpretations, or erasing key elements of identity embedded in the source text. Studies have indicated that AI tools still encounter limitations when processing figurative language, culturally embedded expressions, dialectal variation, and socio-pragmatic cues, often producing literal but culturally inaccurate results (M. Liu et al., 2023). Students who rely uncritically on such tools may reproduce these errors and unintentionally engage in cultural insensitivity or misinformation (J. Liu & Li, 2024). Thus, cultural competence remains a crucial human skill something machines approximate, but do not fully comprehend.

Byram's (1997) Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) provides a foundational lens for understanding how language learning extends beyond grammatical accuracy into cultural negotiation, ethical awareness, and identity-sensitive communication. The model emphasizes five interrelated components attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness which collectively enable learners to mediate meaning across cultural boundaries rather than merely translate linguistic forms.



Picture 1: *Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence*

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In the context of translation work, particularly when interacting with regional or culturally embedded language varieties such as Makassarese-influenced Indonesian, Byram's framework becomes especially relevant because meaning is shaped not only by lexical choice but also by cultural norms, pragmatic markers, social hierarchies, and contextual interpretation. As AI-assisted translation becomes increasingly integrated into academic and professional practice, the ICC model offers a theoretical anchor to assess how learners engage with cultural nuance, evaluate machine-generated output, and make ethical decisions when meaning risks being distorted or misrepresented. Thus, adopting Byram's ICC perspective enables this study to shift from evaluating translation accuracy alone to examining how students demonstrate intercultural sensitivity and ethical reasoning while working with AI-supported translation tasks.

Ethical responsibility is equally essential within contemporary translation practice. Translation ethics encompasses values such as accuracy, confidentiality, transparency, respect for source communities, and acknowledgment of the translator's agency (Pym, 2023). In the digital era, ethical concern is no longer limited to content accuracy but includes issues such as plagiarism, dependency on machine output, disclosure of AI assistance, and the risk of cultural bias embedded in algorithmic systems. Recent scholarship has highlighted that AI systems are trained on large datasets that often replicate dominant cultural ideologies, which can further reinforce bias or misrepresentation during translation (Lion et al., 2024). For students, this raises new dilemmas: Should they adapt culturally sensitive expressions or keep them literal? How much modification is ethically permissible? When using AI, must they disclose it? These decisions require moral reasoning and reflective judgment rather than technical skill alone.

In response to these emerging changes, translation pedagogy must integrate spaces where students can develop both cultural sensitivity and ethical reasoning. Digital translation tasks provide an opportunity not only to produce translated output but also to analyze, compare, and critique differences between human and machine-generated translations. Through reflective engagement, students can observe how cultural signifiers shift or disappear in automated output, identify potential ethical risks, and make informed decisions about adaptation strategies. Recent empirical work suggests that structured translation training involving reflection, error analysis, and ethical discussion helps learners internalize responsible translation practices and improves intercultural competence (Moneus & Sahari, 2024; Pérez-González, 2013).

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Against this backdrop, the present study explores how students develop cultural sensitivity and ethical reflection through digital translation tasks. The study aims to examine how learners recognize cultural elements, respond to AI-generated inaccuracies, and justify their translation decisions in ethically meaningful ways. This research is significant because it addresses a current gap in translation education moving beyond technical accuracy to foster reflective, culturally respectful, and ethically responsible translators. In an era where AI can translate text in seconds, it is ultimately human judgement, empathy, and cultural awareness that preserve meaning and uphold ethical values in translation.

2) METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design supported by elements of reflective translation analysis. The design was selected to explore students' cultural sensitivity and ethical reasoning as evidenced through their engagement with digital translation tools. Rather than measuring translation accuracy through quantitative scoring, this approach focused on understanding how students made decisions during the translation process particularly moments where cultural meaning, dialectal variation, and ethical choice were involved. The qualitative descriptive design allowed the researcher to capture authentic student reflections, interpretive reasoning, and patterns emerging from translation outcomes and discussions. This design is appropriate for studies aiming to describe learners' behaviors, perceptions, and meaning-making processes in naturalistic educational settings without experimental manipulation or imposed intervention.

Participants

The participants of this research were students enrolled in the Translating Scientific Texts course in Class B, academic year 2022, at the English Literature Program of Universitas Negeri Makassar. Initially, the class consisted of multiple working groups formed for collaborative translation tasks. For the purpose of this study, Group 1 was selected purposively as the primary participant set. The rationale for selecting this group rather than the whole class was based on three considerations:

- a. The group demonstrated balanced participation across members during classroom discussions;

- b. They represented a typical range of translation competence within the cohort (neither highest nor lowest performing); and
- c. They completed the assigned tasks with sufficient detail and reflective commentary suitable for qualitative analysis.

All members of the group shared similar linguistic backgrounds as native Makassarese speakers, making them an appropriate sample for investigating cultural interpretation and contextual translation judgment when working with culturally embedded material.

Instruments

Two research instruments were used in this study: (1) a translation task and (2) a structured reflection guide. The translation task involved an article containing culturally embedded expressions specific to Makassarese values, practices, and lexical items. The article was retrieved from the online repository of the journal *Konsepsi*, accessible at: <https://www.p3i.my.id/index.php/konsepsi/article/view/196/193>. The article examines how Makassarese influences the Indonesian language among residents of Barrang Lompo Island, focusing on linguistic interference and integration in everyday communication. It highlights how bilingual speakers naturally mix phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical elements from both languages, showing how local identity and habitual speech patterns shape language use.

The second instrument was a structured reflection sheet developed by the researcher to guide participants' evaluation of their translation output. The reflection instrument contained prompts asking students to:

- a. Identify mistranslated or culturally shifted terms;
- b. Compare human intuitive meaning with AI-generated output;
- c. Justify decisions to modify, localize, or preserve certain expressions;
- d. Reflect on ethical concerns related to reliance on AI, cultural representation, and translator responsibility.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place in three phases over two classroom meetings.

Phase 1: Task Assignment and AI Translation

Students were instructed to translate the selected article using any AI translation tools of their choice, including Google Translate, ChatGPT, or DeepL. They were free to select the tool they trusted or were most familiar with. This step aimed to simulate authentic digital translation habits and observe whether their choices reflected convenience, familiarity, or perceived quality.

Phase 2: Analysis of AI Output

After generating the translation, students worked collaboratively to identify mistranslations, missing cultural meaning, lexical inconsistencies, and inappropriate adaptations. Special attention was directed toward culturally loaded vocabulary such as terms related to kinship, food, social hierarchy, local rituals, and identity. Students highlighted errors and annotated the reasoning behind corrections.

Phase 3: Reflection and Documentation

Students completed the reflection sheet documenting their translation decisions, ethical considerations, and comparison between AI output and their lived linguistic and cultural knowledge as Makassarese speakers. All group discussions and outcomes were submitted digitally.

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis. First, all student outputs including raw translations, annotated corrections, and reflection sheets were compiled. The researcher then carried out open coding to identify recurring patterns across the data, such as:

- a. Types of cultural mistranslations produced by AI tools,
- b. Strategies used by students to correct meaning,
- c. Evidence of cultural awareness and dialect sensitivity,
- d. Explicit ethical reasoning or value-based translation decisions.

Codes were then grouped into larger themes including cultural negotiation, AI dependency awareness, ethical justification, and identity-based translation knowledge. The final stage involved synthesizing themes into an interpretive narrative that addressed the research objectives.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of students' engagement with AI-generated translations revealed a clear activation of knowledge (*savoirs*) as defined in Byram's ICC model. Students demonstrated an awareness of the linguistic structure of Makassarese-influenced Indonesian, particularly the role of enclitics such as *-ji*,

–*mi*, –*pi*, and –*ki* in shaping tone and interpersonal meaning. When faced with literal machine outputs such as “How are you, *goodji?*” or “Here *saike*,” students identified the linguistic mismatch and articulated why these translations felt unnatural or incomplete. Their ability to contrast AI output with contextual meaning showed that linguistic competence alone was not sufficient; cultural context and dialect knowledge were equally essential to meaning-making.

In addition to knowledge, students displayed shifts in attitudes (*savoir-être*)—a willingness to critically question, emotionally respond to, and protect cultural meaning embedded in language. Their reactions to mistranslations ranged from amusement to discomfort, particularly in cases like “*Mauka pergi jalang sama temanku besok*,” which AI incorrectly rendered as “go bitch.” This emotional response indicated that students were not merely evaluating linguistic errors but also responding to perceived threats to cultural dignity and identity representation. Their comments suggested pride in their heritage language and a desire to prevent misinterpretation, reflecting openness, respect, and ethical responsibility core aspects of Byram’s attitudinal dimension.

Students also demonstrated strong skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir-comprendre*) as they compared AI translations with intended cultural meaning. They provided explanations for why *ibu* in the context of “*Kau perhatikang ji tadi PR yang dikasihkan sama ibu*” should be interpreted as teacher rather than mother, and why “*Sudahmi na kerja tugas sekolahnya Humaira?*” referred to a third person rather than a direct addressee. These interpretive moves show that meaning in translation extends beyond grammar into social relationship, hierarchy, and context areas where AI lacked sensitivity. By repositioning the mistranslations, students demonstrated an emerging intercultural mediation skill: transferring meaning between linguistic systems rather than substituting vocabulary.

Furthermore, evidence of skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir-faire*) emerged as students attempted to revise AI translations into culturally and contextually appropriate equivalents. For example, when analyzing “*Pindahmi juga tugas pak camat tugas di, bukanmi disini*,” students reconstructed the meaning to express implied administrative authority and relocation rather than the literal structure produced by AI. Similarly, they reformulated “*Janganko sotta-sotta*” into the pragmatic English equivalent, “Don’t act like a know-it-all,” demonstrating their capacity to negotiate meaning dynamically rather than rely on mechanical transfer. This process reflects their growing ability to adapt translation strategies based on context, audience, and communicative purpose key features of intercultural interaction competence.

Finally, the task encouraged the development of critical cultural awareness (*savoir-s'engager*), the highest level of Byram's ICC model. Students reflected on the ethical implications of mistranslations, especially those that distorted meaning or produced unintended disrespect. They expressed concern that AI-generated translations may perpetuate stereotypes, erase dialect identity, or misrepresent cultural intentions if used without human reflection. This awareness shifted the activity from a purely linguistic exercise to an ethical evaluation of responsibility, authenticity, and cultural preservation in translation practice. Students concluded that while AI tools are helpful for initial processing, human translators must remain critical gatekeepers who ensure meaning is conveyed accurately and respectfully.

Collectively, the results suggest that integrating AI-assisted translation with reflective analysis not only strengthened technical translation skills but also fostered deeper intercultural sensitivity aligned with Byram's ICC model. Students learned to navigate linguistic complexity, protect cultural nuance, and make ethical choices based on audience, context, and meaning. In this way, the translation task functioned as a catalyst for intercultural learning, allowing students to recognize their role not simply as translators but as cultural mediators responsible for safeguarding meaning in a digital era where automation cannot yet interpret culture.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that AI-assisted translation cannot replace the nuanced cultural, ethical, and contextual judgment required in translation practice, especially when working with culturally embedded language varieties such as Makassarese-influenced Indonesian. While the tools used by students Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT were capable of producing structurally acceptable English sentences, they consistently failed to recognize discourse particles, politeness markers, kinship terms, and implicit pragmatic meanings. These patterns reflect Byram's notion that linguistic competence alone is insufficient; translation requires intercultural communicative competence, where meaning is shaped not only by language structure but by lived cultural knowledge, values, identity, and social relationships. Thus, while AI may support the translation process, it cannot yet engage with the cultural dimension that underpins meaning (Mellinger & Hanson, 2024; Pérez-González, 2013)

These results align with Byram's components of *savoirs* (knowledge) and *savoir-comprendre* (interpreting and relating), as students demonstrated increased awareness of how meaning shifts

depending on context such as recognizing *ibu* as a teacher rather than a biological mother and how politeness particles like *-ji* or *-ki* function as expressions of social closeness, hierarchy, or respect rather than lexical items. This awareness parallels global literary translation practices where translators must negotiate not merely replace cultural meaning. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* demands mediation of Igbo kinship metaphors, while Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* requires sensitivity to Pashto and Dari expressions. Likewise, in Makassarese expressions, literal mapping generates distortion rather than meaning transfer, demonstrating the need for translators to interpret cultural worlds rather than translate words.

The ethical dimension of students' responses reflects Byram's *savoir-être* (attitudes) and *savoir-s'engager* (critical cultural awareness). Their reactions intensified when AI outputs were not only inaccurate but inappropriate or offensive for example, translating *jalang-jalang* as "go bitch." Such cases underscore that translators serve as cultural representatives, and mistranslations can misrepresent identity, damage relationships, or perpetuate stigma. This ethical vulnerability parallels mistakes seen in poorly adapted translations of *The Tale of Genji*, García Márquez's magical realism, or Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, where cultural metaphors are inseparable from meaning. Students increasingly recognized that translation is not neutral it carries responsibility, power, and consequence.

The findings further support the argument that AI must function as a tool rather than a substitute for human reasoning. AI-generated output must be evaluated, revised, contextualized, and ethically filtered before being accepted. Students demonstrated growth in Byram's *savoir-faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), recognizing that reliance on AI without cultural and ethical judgment risks misrepresentation and cultural harm. Ethical translation requires transparency about when AI is used, correction of misinterpretation, and professional discretion regarding when machine output should be rejected entirely. This perspective aligns with ethical expectations outlined by translation bodies such as FIT and EMT, which emphasize accuracy, confidentiality, cultural respect, and accountability.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of preparing emerging translators to become culturally responsive and critically reflective practitioners. Byram's ICC model emphasizes that intercultural competence is not optional, and the findings affirm this: it is essential for translators working with multilingual and multicultural contexts, especially those translating minority, regional, or heritage languages. To translate responsibly is to recognize and sometimes protect cultural meaning: some expressions require explanation rather than substitution, adaptation rather than direct mapping,

or in certain cases intentional retention to preserve cultural authenticity (Halim et al., 2025). This principle mirrors respected translations of *The God of Small Things*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, where the translator's cultural sensitivity ensures that the text remains meaningful across languages while honoring the author's world.

4) CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how students engaged with AI-assisted translation tools when translating culturally embedded Makassarese-influenced Indonesian expressions into English and how this process reflected the development of intercultural communicative competence as framed by Byram's (1997) model. The findings demonstrate that while AI systems are capable of generating syntactically acceptable translations, they lack the cultural intuition necessary to interpret pragmatic meaning, relational markers, dialectal forms, and culturally situated expressions. Instances such as the mistranslation of *jalang-jalang* as *"go bitch," or the literal retention of enclitic markers like *-ji* and *-ki*, underscore the limitations of AI when handling localized linguistic identity and cultural nuance. These errors highlight the irreplaceable role of human judgment, cultural knowledge, and contextual awareness in the translation process.

The study further revealed that students did not simply evaluate AI outputs mechanically; instead, they engaged critically and ethically with the translations, displaying awareness of cultural dignity, contextual meaning, and potential misrepresentation. Through this reflective engagement, components of Byram's model became evident as students drew from linguistic and cultural knowledge, interpreted meaning across systems, adapted translations to preserve tone and intention, and demonstrated ethical responsibility in deciding whether and how AI outputs should be revised. The task therefore functioned not only as a translation exercise but also as an intercultural learning experience that encouraged students to consider the translator's role as a mediator between cultures rather than a passive language converter.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that AI can support translation workflows but cannot replace the human translator's cultural competencies, ethical reasoning, and interpretive sensitivity. For translators working with minority, regional, or culturally symbolic languages such as Makassarese, reliance on AI without critical evaluation risks cultural distortion and communicative harm. Developing intercultural communicative competence is therefore essential not only for producing accurate translations but also for ensuring respectful representation of cultural meaning in multilingual communication. This study

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underscores the need to integrate ethical AI literacy, cultural awareness, and reflective translation pedagogy into translator training so that future practitioners can navigate the evolving relationship between technology, language, and culture responsibly.

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