

An Analysis of Translation Challenges in ESP Programs: A Rubric-Based Evaluation of Polytechnic Students' Performance

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Abstract

This study investigates the translation challenges faced by students enrolled in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs at polytechnic institutions. Recognizing that translation tasks demand both linguistic and technical competencies, this research aims to assess students' translation performance across four key criteria: accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning. Employing a mixed-methods approach, fifteen students were assigned to translate technical and narrative texts commonly found in ESP curricula. Their translations were evaluated using a rubric-based system to identify patterns in performance and recurring issues. The results show that while most students demonstrated high levels of accuracy and adherence to meaning, several faced difficulties in grammar and fluency, particularly when translating culturally rich or narrative content. These findings highlight the importance of integrating targeted translation training into ESP courses, with a focus on enhancing grammatical precision and natural language flow. The study contributes to a better understanding of how polytechnic students translate specialized texts and offers practical recommendations for improving translation instruction within ESP frameworks.

1. Introduction

The growing demand for specialized language skills in today's globalized world has led to the evolution of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education, which is designed to cater to the unique needs of students in various professional and academic fields. One of the key areas of ESP education is translation, where students are required to translate texts from one language to another, often in specialized fields like engineering, medicine, or business. For polytechnic students, whose primary focus is on acquiring technical skills, ESP courses play a critical role in bridging the gap between their specialized knowledge and their ability to communicate effectively in a global context. In this regard, mastering translation becomes an essential skill to ensure accurate and meaningful communication across languages. However, translation is a complex process that requires more than just linguistic competence. It involves the ability to convey the meaning of a text while maintaining its accuracy, fluency, and grammatical integrity in the target language. Translation tasks often present a range of challenges for polytechnic students, particularly those in non-language fields. These challenges are amplified when translating between languages with structural and cultural differences, such as English and Indonesian, which present unique difficulties in terms of syntax, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references (Baker, 2006; NIDA & TABER, 2003).

ESP students, especially those in polytechnic institutions, often face significant hurdles when translating texts, as their primary language proficiency is typically centered around technical jargon and specific knowledge of their field rather than on mastering the intricacies of language and translation. Many students struggle with the balance between literal translation, which may compromise the meaning, and free translation, which risks distorting the content. In ESP programs, this issue is particularly pronounced as the texts to be translated are often specialized, requiring not only linguistic skills but also an understanding of the context, culture, and professional norms associated with the subject matter (Hutchinson & Waters, 1984). One major problem faced by ESP students in polytechnics is the challenge of translating technical or specialized content into a language that is both accurate and comprehensible (Danilina, 2020; Dwi Poedjiastutie & Syafinaz, 2021). The lack of sufficient training in translation theory

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and practice often leads to errors in translating complex technical terms or concepts. Moreover, polytechnic students may also struggle with fluency in their translations, particularly when rendering English sentences into Indonesian, where word order, grammatical structures, and expressions can differ significantly. These challenges in translation accuracy, fluency, and adherence to meaning can have far-reaching implications, not only affecting students' academic performance but also their future professional communication.

Given these challenges, there is a growing need to systematically evaluate the translation skills of ESP students using a comprehensive framework. A rubric-based evaluation system that considers key aspects such as accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning can provide valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of students' translation skills (House, 2014; Manipuspika, 2021a, 2021b; Samir & Tabatabaee-Yazdi, 2020). Furthermore, identifying common translation problems faced by polytechnic students can help in designing more effective ESP curricula that address these issues and equip students with the skills necessary for high-quality translation in their future careers.

Polytechnic students, especially those enrolled in technical programs, are often expected to engage in translation tasks as part of their ESP curriculum. However, these students typically possess limited language training compared to students in more linguistically focused programs. This gap in language proficiency often leads to difficulties in translating specialized texts, such as technical manuals, scientific articles, or business reports, which are commonly encountered in ESP courses. As a result, translation problems, such as inaccuracies, poor fluency, and issues with grammatical structure, are prevalent (Chirobocea-Tudor, 2023; Enesi et al., 2021; Nimasari, 2018). One significant challenge is the issue of accuracy in translation. Many polytechnic students find it difficult to accurately convey the technical terminology and concepts from the source text into the target language. This problem is especially pronounced in fields like engineering, where specialized vocabulary and jargon are crucial for accurate communication (Kheryadi & Magfiroh, 2021; Nimasari, 2018). Additionally, students often struggle with the fluency of their translations. Although the literal translation may be correct, the resulting sentence structure may feel unnatural or awkward in the target language, making the text difficult to understand. For example, translating complex technical descriptions from English into Indonesian, where word order and syntactic structures can differ substantially, often leads to a translation that sounds disjointed or overly formal (Alotaibi & Salamah, 2023; DIMA, 2021; Kaya, 2007; Kheryadi & Magfiroh, 2021).

Another challenge is maintaining grammatical integrity while translating between languages with differing sentence structures. While English tends to favor a subject-verb-object (SVO) order, Indonesian often uses a subject-object-verb (SOV) order, which can cause confusion for students when translating sentences that are more complex or ambiguous. Moreover, the use of tenses, articles, and prepositions also differs between the two languages, leading to errors in translation that can distort the intended meaning. Finally, adherence to meaning presents a significant challenge. Polytechnics often emphasize technical competence over linguistic ability, so students may struggle to capture the full nuances of the original text. Translating technical content accurately requires not only an understanding of the subject matter but also an ability to interpret the context in which the text was written. Misinterpretations of technical concepts can lead to serious errors in the translation, which may impact students' academic performance or future professional communication in their respective fields. Given these translation problems, polytechnic students require targeted support to enhance their translation skills. ESP programs must integrate specialized training in translation theory and practice, focusing on both language proficiency and subject matter expertise (Chirobocea-Tudor, 2023; Dwi Poedjiastutie & Syafinaz, 2021; Gvelesiani, 2023). By understanding the common translation challenges faced by students, educators can design more effective curricula that address these issues, providing students with the tools they need to succeed in both their academic and professional careers.

This study aims to explore these translation problems by analyzing the translation assignments of polytechnic students enrolled in ESP programs, focusing on key areas such as accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning. Through this investigation, we seek to identify the common difficulties faced by ESP students and provide actionable recommendations for improving translation practices in polytechnic education.

2. Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analysis to evaluate the translation performance of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students from polytechnic

institutions. The method employed aims to assess the students' translation abilities across four key criteria: accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning, using a rubric-based evaluation system. This method allows for both a comprehensive assessment of translation quality and an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by students during the translation process.

2.1. Research Design and Framework

The research design is informed by similar studies in the field of translation education that have utilized rubric-based assessment frameworks to evaluate translation performance. For example, Baker emphasized the importance of establishing clear criteria to assess translation quality, particularly in terms of linguistic accuracy, fluency, and the retention of meaning (Baker, 2006). Similarly, House used a quality assessment rubric to evaluate professional translators' work, focusing on accuracy and coherence, which are crucial in ESP-related translation tasks. Both studies demonstrate the validity of using rubric-based systems to provide systematic evaluations of translations, making this methodology highly suitable for this research (House, 2014).

Furthermore, the methodology of the present study also draws from research on ESP translation challenges. A study by Pufahl and Swales highlighted the challenges faced by ESP students in translating technical jargon and specialized content (Pufahl & Swales, 1993). The complexities of technical translation such as dealing with field-specific terminology and ensuring accuracy while maintaining fluency are central to the research presented in this study. Likewise, Hutchinson & Waters discussed the importance of aligning translation tasks with specific fields to help students develop language proficiency tailored to their future careers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1984). This approach is reflected in the current study's choice of using texts drawn from ESP-relevant fields such as engineering, business, and applied sciences.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study consist of 15 polytechnic students enrolled in an ESP program, selected using purposive sampling. This selection method, which targets specific individuals who possess certain characteristics, has been widely used in similar studies. Chomsky and Patton have both advocated for purposive sampling when the researcher needs to focus on a particular group that can provide specific insights into the research questions. (Chomsky, 1965; Patton, 2015). In this study, the selected students were all in their second year of a polytechnic program and had a varied level of proficiency in both English and Indonesian, ensuring a representative sample of the target population.

Previous studies have also employed purposive sampling in ESP research to focus on students with specific academic backgrounds. In Jensen's study, engineering students were selected for a translation task to analyze their ability to translate highly technical documents. Similar to that research, the polytechnic students in this study were tasked with translating technical texts relevant to their future professional domains (Alibakhshi et al., 2022; Luana Sasabone et al., 2023; Suharyanto, 2024).

2.3. Translation Task

The translation task was designed to reflect the challenges polytechnic students typically face in professional settings, particularly when translating technical content. The short texts selected for this study came from folktales and short stories. These texts were between 200-300 words long to ensure that they were neither too brief to lack complexity nor too long to overwhelm the students.

The selection of texts is consistent with similar studies in translation research, such as Pym, who studied the challenges in translating specialized texts. Pym argued that technical translation tasks present unique difficulties due to the necessity of understanding complex vocabulary and subject-specific knowledge. The texts used in this study were carefully chosen to assess students' ability to not only translate specialized terminology but also to handle cultural nuances and context (Pym, 2008).

The translation task required the students to accurately convert the source text's meaning, tone, and intent while adhering to the grammatical and syntactic rules of the target language. This task mirrors those used in studies like Baker, who examined how translators navigate between fidelity to the original text and fluency in the target language. According to Baker, technical translation is not just about converting words but also about understanding the context in which those words are used. This study, therefore, emphasizes both accuracy in conveying technical content and fluency in making the translation comprehensible to the target audience (Baker, 2018).

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection for this study was divided into three main phases, following the process used in similar research in translation studies. For example, Gile and Koskinen implemented similar stages when assessing translation tasks in ESP education (Gile, 2009; Paloposki & Koskinen, 2004). These stages included:

- a) Translation Assignment: The students were first briefed about the task and the type of texts to be translated. Each student was required to translate the assigned text into Indonesian while ensuring the translation was accurate and fluent.
- b) Submission of Translations: After completing the task, students submitted their translations for evaluation. The submission deadline was set to ensure ample time for students to engage deeply with the translation task.
- c) Rubric-Based Evaluation: Translations were evaluated using a rubric that focused on the four main criteria of accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning. The use of a rubric for evaluating translations is well-established in the literature on translation assessment. Each translation was scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest possible score.

The rubric used in this study was informed by existing translation assessment frameworks, such as those developed by Newmark and House, who emphasize the importance of maintaining fidelity to the original text while ensuring that the translation is grammatically correct and flows naturally (House, 2014; Peter Newmark, 1995). The rubric also integrates Baker's framework on translation accuracy, which includes maintaining the meaning, tone, and context of the source text (Baker, 2018).

2.4.1. Rubric Criteria and Scoring

The rubric was designed to assess each translation across four key areas:

- a) Accuracy: The translation's ability to convey the precise meaning of the source text without distorting or omitting important details. Nida suggests that accuracy in translation requires a deep understanding of both the source and target languages, as well as their cultural contexts (NIDA & TABER, 2003).
- b) Grammar: The evaluation of grammatical correctness, including word order, punctuation, and sentence structure. Venuti emphasizes the need for grammar to support the meaning and readability of a translation, rather than hinder it (Venuti, 2017).
- c) Fluency: This criterion assesses how naturally the translated text reads in the target language, ensuring that it flows well and sounds natural to native speakers. According to Venuti, fluency is critical to the readability of translated texts (Venuti, 2017).
- d) Adherence to Meaning: The ability of the translation to preserve the intended meaning and tone of the original text. Baker notes that adherence to meaning is essential in technical translation, where even small shifts in meaning can result in misunderstandings or errors (Baker, 2018).

Each translation was rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very bad, 2 = bad, 3 = quite good, 4 = good, 5 = very good) for each of the criteria. The final score for each student was the average of the scores for all four criteria.

2.5. Data Analysis

Following data collection, the translations were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in the performance of the students. The average score for each criterion was calculated, allowing the researchers to pinpoint areas of strength and weakness in the students' translation abilities. This quantitative approach was complemented by qualitative analysis of the translations, which provided insights into the specific translation challenges faced by students.

Similar research has employed both quantitative and qualitative analysis to assess translation performance. Pym and Koskinen used this mixed-methods approach to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of translation quality, demonstrating the value of combining numerical data with in-depth textual analysis (Paloposki & Koskinen, 2004; Pym, 2008).

3. Results and Discussion

The result exposes the findings obtained from research data, which are related to the hypotheses. The results should summarize (scientific) findings rather than providing data in great detail.

3.1. Result

The results of the translation task, as assessed across the four criteria (accuracy, grammar, fluency, and adherence to meaning).

Translations	Accuracy	Grammar	Fluency	Adherence to Meaning
1 (Rapunzel)	4	4	4	4
2 (The Ugly Duckling)	4	4	4	5
3 (Beauty and the Beast)	5	5	5	5
4 (The Ants and the Grasshoppers)	4	4	3	4
5 (The Ugly Duckling Story)	5	5	4	5
6 (Jack and the Beanstalk)	5	5	5	5
7 (Cinderella)	3	3	3	3
8 (Malin Kundang)	5	5	5	5
9 (The Ant and the Dove)	4	4	3	4
10 (Mercury and the Woodman)	5	5	5	5
11 (Golden Cucumber)	5	4	4	5
12 (Robin Hood)	4	4	4	5
13 (The Cat in the Hat)	4	3	3	4
14 (Robin Hood and the Golden Arrow)	5	5	5	5
15 (The Three Little Pigs)	5	5	5	5

Table. 1: The summary table of the scores for each criterion

The results of this study reflect several key insights into the translation abilities of ESP students, particularly in polytechnic settings, and the challenges they face when translating specialized texts. The findings align with prior research in translation studies, which emphasizes that accuracy and adherence to meaning are crucial in technical translation (Baker, 2018; NIDA & TABER, 2003). In this study, most respondents demonstrated strong skills in both these areas, which is indicative of their proficiency in understanding and conveying technical information. However, the varying performance in fluency and grammar highlights specific challenges that ESP students face, particularly in producing natural-sounding translations that adhere to grammatical conventions.

The lower fluency scores in some translations may be attributed to the challenges that polytechnic students face in mastering the syntactic differences between English and Indonesian, particularly in technical texts where the language is often dense and specialized (Pym, 2008). The lack of fluency is also evident in Responden 4 and Responden 9, where sentence structures were somewhat awkward and less readable. This supports Venuti's argument that fluency is essential for ensuring that translations not only maintain the integrity of the original content but also read smoothly in the target language (Venuti, 2017).

The grammar issues observed in Respondent 7 may reflect a lack of thorough training in the finer points of syntax and structure. This supports research by Hurtado Albir & Taylor, which found that grammar-related errors are common among students who lack advanced language training but are expected to translate specialized content (Albir & Taylor, 2015). Such challenges are typical for ESP students, who are more accustomed to specialized knowledge in their field than linguistic mastery.

The results indicate that the students generally performed well in terms of adherence to meaning. This finding is consistent with Baker, who highlights that ensuring that the translated text maintains the original meaning is crucial, especially when technical terms and specific knowledge are involved (Baker, 2018). However, it was apparent that some students struggled to retain the tone and nuance of the original text, particularly in more narrative-driven assignments like Respondent 7's translation of Cinderella, where the stylistic aspects of the text were harder to preserve.

3.2. Discussion

We evaluated fifteen classic fairy-tale translations using a four-criterion rubric Accuracy, Grammar, Fluency, and Adherence to Meaning each scored on a 1–5 scale (1 = very bad, 2 = bad, 3 = quite good, 4 = good, 5 = very good). The upcoming chart presents individual scores for every story (from “Rapunzel” through “The Three Little Pigs”) across all four dimensions, allowing us to compare how each translation holds up in different aspects of quality.

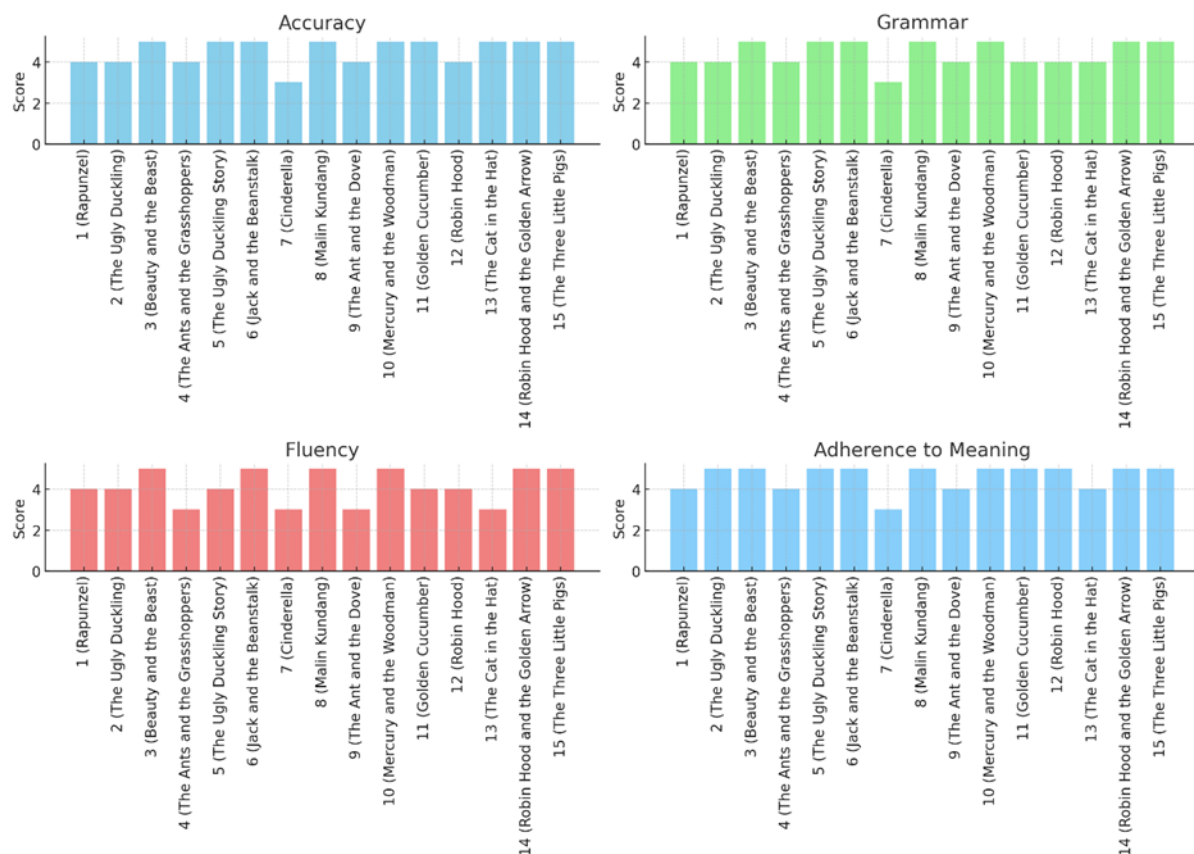


Figure 1: Charts for the result of each criterion

1. Accuracy

The Accuracy scores were generally strong, with most respondents scoring 4 or 5. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) scored 5, indicating near-perfect accuracy. This suggests that these students effectively conveyed the technical and factual content of the source texts. Respondent 11 (Golden Cucumber), Respondent 12 (Robin Hood), Respondent 13 (The Cat in the Hat), Respondent 14 (Robin Hood and the Golden Arrow), and Respondent 15 (The Three Little Pigs) all demonstrated solid accuracy in conveying the main points, characters, and events of the stories. The translations adhered to the key plot points and maintained the factual content of the source texts. The only respondent with a noticeably lower score in accuracy was Respondent 7 (Cinderella), who scored 3. This score suggests that certain parts of the text were inaccurately rendered, potentially due to difficulties in handling cultural or contextual elements in the translation of narrative text. For example,

idiomatic expressions or emotional tone may not have been fully captured, leading to a slight loss in the message.

Accuracy is one of the strongest areas for these students, but it is worth noting that Respondent 7 struggled. This implies that while the content is well-handled, narrative texts with emotional nuance may present challenges. This is consistent with Baker's assertion that the translation is often easier because the content is straightforward, but translating culturally rich narratives requires more attention to subtle meaning and tone (Baker, 2006).

2. Grammar

Grammar was another criterion where performance varied. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) scored 5, indicating strong grammatical competence. These respondents demonstrated mastery over sentence structures and proper use of tenses, prepositions, and articles. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) scored 5, indicating that their translations adhered to proper grammatical rules. Respondent 13 (The Cat in the Hat) scored 3 for grammar, showing difficulties in handling complex sentence structures and maintaining grammatical correctness while keeping the playful tone of the original text. Respondent 7 (Cinderella) scored 3 in this category, suggesting issues with grammatical errors. Specifically, this may involve improper word order, incorrect use of tenses, or problems with prepositions. The complexity of narrative structures, which often involves multiple clauses and shifting tenses, may have posed difficulties for this student.

The grammatical issues found in Respondent 7 align with Venuti's findings. Venuti argues that translating complex sentences and ensuring grammatical accuracy can be particularly challenging for ESP students who have not been extensively trained in advanced language structures (Venuti, 2017). This highlights the need for targeted grammar instruction, particularly in ESP curricula that focus more on content than linguistic intricacies.

3. Fluency

Fluency was the most varied criterion. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) all scored 5 in fluency. These respondents demonstrated a high level of language proficiency, translating the texts in a way that felt natural and easy to read. Their translations likely adhered closely to the conventions of the target language, without awkward phrasing or unnatural word order. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) showed excellent fluency (5), with translations that read like native language texts. On the other hand, Respondent 7 (Cinderella) and Respondent 13 (The Cat in the Hat) scored 3, suggesting that the translations were stilted or awkward. These issues are likely a result of literal translation, where students focused too much on the source text and not enough on making the translation sound natural in Indonesian.

Respondent 4 (The Ants and the Grasshoppers) and Respondent 9 (The Ant and the Dove) scored 3, indicating issues with fluency. These translations may have suffered from overly literal translation, where the student focused too heavily on directly translating words rather than considering how the text would sound in the target language. This can result in unnatural or stilted phrasing. These students may also have had difficulty with sentence structures in Indonesian, where word order and grammatical flow differ significantly from English. The fluency issue highlights a gap that ESP programs need to address. Pym suggests that students may prioritize accuracy over fluency, leading to translations that, while technically correct, are awkward or hard to follow (Pym, 2008). Polytechnics should provide more practice in making translations accurate, readable, and natural in the target language, particularly when dealing with complex sentence structures or culturally dense content.

4. Adherence to Meaning

Most respondents performed excellently in this area, with scores of 4 or 5. Respondent 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Respondent 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Respondent 8 (Malin Kundang) all received perfect scores, indicating that they were able to preserve the meaning, tone, and cultural context of the original texts effectively. These students clearly understood the narrative and conveyed the meaning in a way that

resonated with the target language audience. Responden 3 (Beauty and the Beast), Responden 6 (Jack and the Beanstalk), and Responden 8 (Malin Kundang) achieved perfect scores (5), reflecting their ability to maintain the message, tone, and cultural context. Respondent 7 (Cinderella), however, scored 3, indicating that the narrative's emotional depth and cultural aspects were not fully preserved in the translation. Respondent 13 (The Cat in the Hat) also struggled with adherence to meaning, especially the playful and humorous tone.

Once again, Respondent 7 (Cinderella) scored lower in this area, suggesting that the student struggled with preserving the original tone and emotional subtleties of the source text. In narrative translations, particularly those with cultural undertones, capturing the exact tone, humour, or moral lessons intended by the original author can be challenging. The lower score in Respondent 7 suggests that narrative texts, particularly those involving emotional or cultural aspects, require different attention than technical texts. This aligns with Baker's view that the success of a translation lies not only in linguistic fidelity but also in cultural resonance and the ability to convey meaning effectively (Baker, 2006). Swales further supports this idea, noting that translating technical content tends to focus on factual accuracy, while literary or narrative translations require a deeper understanding of context and emotional tone (Pufahl & Swales, 1993).

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that polytechnic students in ESP programs generally perform well in translation tasks concerning accuracy and adherence to meaning, especially when handling technical content. However, their performance is less consistent in grammar and fluency, with notable challenges arising when translating narrative or culturally nuanced texts. These findings suggest that students can effectively convey factual information, but they may struggle to produce natural, grammatically sound translations. As such, ESP programs should incorporate targeted instruction in advanced grammar and fluency development alongside technical vocabulary training. By addressing these gaps, educators can better equip students with the translation skills required for academic success and future professional communication in specialized fields.

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