

Investigating Saudi EFL Students' Weaknesses in Translating English–Arabic Imperative Sentences: A Mixed-Methods Study

Sulafa Mohammed Ahmed Dafalla Gewi

English department, Al Dayer University College, Jazan University, KSA,

Email:ID: sgewi@jazanu.edu.sa,

Email:ID: sulafagewi@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates Saudi EFL students' difficulties in translating imperative sentences between English and Arabic. It focuses on the interaction of structural, functional, pragmatic, and pedagogical dimensions of imperative translation. A convergent mixed-methods design was used with 80 female undergraduate EFL students at Jazan University and 20 university teachers. Data were collected through a translation test covering English–Arabic and Arabic–English imperative constructions and a structured teacher questionnaire supplemented by open-ended questions. The quantitative findings indicate that students performed best in the reported Negative/Logical domain ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.25$) and weakest in the Pragmatic domain ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.29$), with Structural ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.35$) and Functional ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.23$) performance falling between these two areas. The results suggest that students generally recognize imperative structures but experience greater difficulty when translation requires contextual interpretation, communicative-function recognition, politeness management, and pragmatic equivalence. Teacher responses similarly emphasized cross-linguistic structural differences, implicit subjects, morphology, contextual meaning, and pragmatic factors. The study argues that imperative translation should be taught as a multidimensional competence rather than as a purely grammatical exercise. The findings support an integrated approach combining contrastive analysis, pragmatic awareness, contextualized translation practice, explicit feedback, and collaborative correction...

Keywords: imperative sentences; English–Arabic translation; Saudi EFL learners; translation competence; pragmatic competence; contrastive analysis; PACTE.

INTRODUCTION

Translation requires learners to transfer meaning across linguistic and cultural systems while producing a target text that is accurate, natural, and communicatively appropriate (Nida & Taber, 1969; Newmark, 1988; Nord, 2005). This requirement becomes particularly important when the source expression has a grammatical form whose interpretation depends strongly on context. Imperative sentences are one such category. Although imperatives are commonly associated with commands, they can also function as requests, advice, warnings, invitations, instructions, encouragement, and other directive acts. Their successful translation therefore requires attention to both grammatical form and communicative function.

English and Arabic differ substantially in the realization of imperative constructions. English imperatives normally use the base form of the verb with an implicit second-person subject, whereas Arabic imperative forms encode information about the addressee through morphology, including distinctions associated with gender and number. The two languages also differ in the expression of negative imperatives and in the linguistic resources used to convey politeness and indirectness. These differences

create opportunities for cross-linguistic interference and literal translation, particularly when learners rely on source-language form rather than communicative purpose.

Previous research on Arab and Saudi EFL learners has documented grammatical, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, and strategy-related translation difficulties (Al-Jarf, 2015; Al-Qahtani, 2016; Salih & Abdalla, 2023). Research on imperative translation, however, remains comparatively limited, especially empirical research examining university students' performance in English–Arabic translation. The present study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on imperative sentences and by combining students' translation performance with teachers' perceptions of the difficulties and instructional practices associated with imperative translation.

Purpose and Research Questions

The study investigates the weaknesses experienced by Saudi EFL students when translating imperative sentences between English and Arabic and examines the linguistic and pedagogical factors associated with those weaknesses. The study addresses four questions:

To what extent are imperative sentences formally distinguishable from other sentence types across English and Arabic

What logical and functional meanings do imperative sentences express, and how do these meanings affect translation?

To what extent can imperative meaning be explained by syntactic components alone, and what role do semantic and pragmatic context play?

What instructional practices do teachers perceive as effective for improving students' translation of imperative sentences?

Significance of the Study

The study contributes to English–Arabic translation research by treating imperative sentences as a distinct grammatical and communicative category. It also contributes pedagogically by identifying areas in which learners require support, particularly pragmatic interpretation and functional equivalence. Finally, the study provides evidence from a Saudi university context and links learner performance with teachers' observations of translation problems and instructional practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Translation, Meaning, and Translation Competence

Translation has been described as the production of a target-language message that represents the meaning of the source message while remaining natural and appropriate for target readers (Nida & Taber, 1969). Newmark (1988) distinguishes semantic and communicative approaches, while Nord (2005) emphasizes the purpose of the target text. Taken together, these approaches suggest that translation accuracy cannot be reduced to formal correspondence. This principle is particularly relevant to imperatives because the same grammatical form can perform different communicative functions depending on context.

The PACTE model conceptualizes translation competence as multidimensional, involving bilingual, extra-linguistic, translation-related, instrumental, and strategic components (PACTE Group, 2003, 2017). For imperative translation, bilingual competence supports recognition of grammatical forms; extra-linguistic and pragmatic knowledge supports interpretation of context and communicative force; and strategic competence helps learners evaluate alternatives and select an appropriate target-language formulation. The present study therefore treats translation weaknesses as potentially multidimensional rather than purely grammatical.

2.2 Speech Act, Communicative, and Contrastive Perspectives

Speech Act Theory is relevant because imperatives primarily realize directive speech acts. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) distinguish linguistic form from the action performed through an utterance. An imperative may therefore be grammatically recognizable while its communicative force varies according to context. A form such as *Close the door* can function as a command,

request, or instruction depending on the interactional situation. Translators must consequently preserve the intended force rather than mechanically reproduce surface form.

Communicative competence further emphasizes the relationship between grammatical knowledge and appropriate language use. Canale and Swain (1980) identify grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions of communicative competence. In imperative translation, these dimensions are relevant because learners must recognize the structure, interpret the social relationship and communicative purpose, construct a coherent target expression, and select strategies when direct equivalence is unavailable.

Contrastive Analysis Theory (Lado, 1957) provides a complementary explanation of cross-linguistic difficulty. English and Arabic differ in word order, morphology, subject realization, negation, and pragmatic conventions. Such differences can encourage negative transfer, although contrastive differences alone cannot explain every learner error. The present study therefore uses contrastive analysis as one explanatory perspective within a broader framework that also considers pragmatic and strategic competence.

2.3 English and Arabic Imperatives

English imperatives generally use the base verb form and an understood second-person subject. Negative imperatives commonly use *do not* or related prohibitive forms, while politeness markers such as *please* can modify interpersonal force. Arabic imperatives are morphologically richer and distinguish forms according to properties of the addressee. Negative imperatives commonly use the prohibitive particle *lā* with a jussive present form. These differences mean that an English imperative may leave information implicit that Arabic requires the translator to represent morphologically, while Arabic may encode distinctions that are not overt in the English source.

Imperatives in Arabic can also carry varied rhetorical and pragmatic meanings, including guidance, advice, warning, encouragement, supplication, and obligation. Abdul-Raof (2005) demonstrates this diversity in Qur'anic discourse. The relevance of such examples to the present study is not that the student test is a Qur'anic translation task, but that imperative form cannot be interpreted independently of communicative function and context.

2.4 Translation Problems and the Research Gap

Translation problems may be lexical, syntactic, semantic, cultural, or pragmatic. Miremadi (1991) distinguishes lexical and syntactic problems, while later work on Arab EFL learners has documented literal translation, structural interference, grammatical inaccuracies, and difficulties with culturally or pragmatically loaded expressions. Akki and Larouz (2021) also indicate that translation direction can affect learner performance. These findings suggest that English–Arabic translation requires more than knowledge of isolated lexical equivalents.

The literature reviewed for this study reveals a specific gap. Existing research has frequently examined general

translation errors, idioms, culture-bound expressions, or broader pragmatic competence. Relatively little empirical work has isolated imperative sentences as a grammatical category and examined students' performance across structural and pragmatic dimensions. The present study responds to this gap by combining a focused imperative

translation test with teacher questionnaire data and qualitative responses.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Participants

Table 1. Study Participants

Participant group	n	Gender	Instrument	Purpose
EFL students	80	Female	Translation test	Measure imperative-translation performance
University teachers	20	Male/female	Questionnaire	Examine perceptions of difficulties and instructional practices
Total	100	—	—	—

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design. The student component involved 80 female undergraduate EFL students at Jazan University. The teacher component involved 20 university teachers. The two sources of evidence were used to examine students' translation

performance and to obtain professional perceptions concerning the nature of imperative-translation difficulties and effective instructional practices.

3.2 Instruments

Table 2. Translation Test Structure

Component	Description
Total items	20 imperative sentences
English → Arabic	10 items
Arabic → English	10 items
Assessment domains	Structural; Logical/Negative; Functional; Pragmatic
Scoring	Five-point scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent)
Raters	Three translation/applied-linguistics specialists
Inter-rater reliability	0.89

Two principal instruments were used: a translation test containing English-to-Arabic and Arabic-to-English imperative items, and a structured teacher questionnaire organized into four domains: formal and structural characteristics, logical and functional aspects, syntax–

semantics relationships, and translation/pedagogical treatment. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions that were examined thematically.

3.3 Data Analysis

Table 3. Reliability of the Research Instruments

Instrument	Reliability method	Coefficient	Interpretation
Translation test	Inter-rater reliability	0.89	High agreement
Teacher questionnaire	Cronbach's alpha	0.913	Excellent internal consistency

Questionnaire responses were summarized using frequencies, percentages, and means, with correlation analysis used where appropriate. Translation-test performance was summarized across Structural, Functional, Negative/Logical, and Pragmatic domains. Because the domains are represented by different numbers of test items, domain performance is reported as the mean score per item on the common five-point scale (1 = poor, 5 = excellent). Pearson correlations were used to examine associations among domain scores. Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to identify recurring explanations of learner difficulty and recommended instructional practices.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Local Committee for Research Ethics at Jazan University (HAPO-10-Z-001), Reference No. REC-47/08/1750, on 21 January 2026. The study was approved following review of the research proposal/protocol, participant information and consent materials, questionnaire, and investigator documentation. The study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the research ethics committee.

4. Results

4.1 Teacher Questionnaire

Across the four questionnaire domains, teachers showed consistently strong agreement that imperative translation requires structural awareness, understanding of communicative function, integration of syntax and semantics, and effective pedagogical support. In the structural domain, all four items received high levels of agreement, with complete agreement on the importance of distinguishing imperative forms and strong agreement on the value of morphological awareness. These responses indicate that teachers view grammatical recognition as necessary, while the broader results suggest that it is not sufficient on its own.

The logical and functional domain similarly produced high agreement. Teachers emphasized that imperative meaning depends on context and pragmatic intention and that understanding the relationship between form and communicative function assists translation. The syntax–semantics domain showed that teachers generally regarded syntactic structure as an important source of meaning, but responses to the proposition that sentence meaning equals the meaning of its parts were more varied. This pattern is consistent with the view that imperative interpretation cannot be reduced to compositional meaning alone.

The pedagogical domain produced strong support for teacher feedback, classroom discussion, and collaborative correction. These practices were perceived as useful because they allow learners to compare alternatives, understand the reasons for translation choices, and develop greater awareness of recurring grammatical and pragmatic problems.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Teachers' open-ended responses identified several recurring sources of difficulty. These included implicit subjects, English–Arabic structural differences, verb morphology, negation, pragmatic and cultural factors, vocabulary limitations, sentence complexity, and pedagogical factors. Teachers also emphasized the value of functional and pragmatic approaches, contrastive analysis, contextualized practice, feedback, collaborative activities, cultural awareness, and explicit grammar instruction.

The qualitative evidence therefore complements the questionnaire findings by showing why structural recognition alone may not lead to accurate translation. Teachers repeatedly connected imperative difficulty to the interaction between grammatical form and contextual or pragmatic interpretation.

4.3 Student Translation-Test Performance

Table 4. Students' Performance Across Imperative-Translation Domains

Domain	N	Mean	SD	Rank
Negative/Logical	80	3.92	0.25	1
Structural	80	3.77	0.35	2
Functional	80	3.64	0.23	3
Pragmatic	80	3.54	0.29	4

The descriptive statistics show a clear ordering of performance across the four domains. The Negative/Logical domain had the highest mean score ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.25$), followed by the Structural domain ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.35$), the Functional domain ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.23$), and the Pragmatic domain ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.29$). Thus, students' strongest reported performance was associated with the Negative/Logical domain, whereas pragmatic performance was the weakest.

Students' relatively strong performance in the Negative/Logical and Structural domains suggests that recognition of imperative form and certain logical relations may be less problematic than the interpretation of communicative function and pragmatic force.

4.4 Correlations Among Translation-Test Domains

Table 5. Correlations Among Translation-Test Domains

Variables	R	p
Negative/Logical – Pragmatic	0.633	< .001
Pragmatic – Functional	0.427	< .001
Structural – Pragmatic	-0.387	< .001
Structural – Functional	-0.318	.004
Functional – Negative/Logical	0.277	.013
Structural – Negative/Logical	-0.137	.224

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine associations among the four translation-test domains. The strongest association was between Negative/Logical and Pragmatic performance ($r = .633$, $p < .001$). Structural performance was significantly and negatively associated with Pragmatic performance ($r = -.387$, $p < .001$) and Functional performance ($r = -.318$, $p = .004$). Functional performance also showed a weak positive association with Negative/Logical performance ($r = .277$, $p = .013$). The relationship between Structural and Negative/Logical performance was not statistically significant ($r = -.137$, $p = .224$). Overall, the pattern suggests that stronger structural performance did not necessarily correspond to stronger pragmatic or functional performance.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that imperative translation difficulty is multidimensional. Students' relatively stronger performance in the Negative/Logical and Structural domains, together with their weaker Functional and especially Pragmatic performance, suggest that structural performance did not necessarily correspond to stronger pragmatic or functional performance.

The correlation pattern reinforces this interpretation: Structural performance was negatively related to Pragmatic and Functional performance, whereas Pragmatic and Negative/Logical performance showed a strong positive association. Taken together, these findings suggest that translation requires coordination of grammatical, bilingual, pragmatic, contextual, and strategic knowledge rather than direct substitution of forms.

The contrast between structural and pragmatic performance also supports the relevance of Contrastive Analysis without reducing all errors to first-language transfer. English and Arabic differ in imperative morphology, subject realization, negation, and politeness strategies, creating predictable points of difficulty. At the same time, a learner can recognize the relevant structure and still select an inappropriate translation if the communicative function is misunderstood. This explains why pragmatic awareness must complement contrastive grammatical analysis.

The teacher findings reinforce the student-test pattern. Teachers strongly emphasized contextual interpretation, communicative purpose, and pragmatic awareness, while also identifying structural differences as important sources of difficulty. The convergence of the two data sources strengthens the interpretation that imperative translation should be taught through integrated activities rather than isolated grammar drills.

The findings also support the pedagogical relevance of the PACTE model. Translation performance appears to involve several interacting competences: learners need bilingual and grammatical knowledge to recognize forms, extra-linguistic and pragmatic knowledge to interpret context, and strategic competence to evaluate alternative target-language formulations. Teacher feedback and collaborative correction may support the development of these strategic processes by requiring learners to explain and revise their translation decisions.

The study therefore extends previous work on Saudi EFL translation difficulties by focusing on imperative sentences as a specific grammatical and pragmatic category. Its principal contribution is the combination of student performance data with teacher perceptions and qualitative evidence, allowing the study to connect observed translation weaknesses with plausible instructional explanations.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The study concludes that Saudi EFL students' difficulties in translating imperative sentences cannot be explained by grammatical knowledge alone. Students demonstrated comparatively stronger performance in the reported Negative/Logical and Structural domains and weaker performance in Functional and especially Pragmatic translation. The correlation results further show that structural performance was not positively associated with pragmatic or functional performance. These findings indicate that interpreting communicative intention, contextual meaning, politeness, and pragmatic force is a central challenge in English–Arabic imperative translation.

The findings have direct implications for translation teaching. Instruction should combine contrastive analysis of English and Arabic imperative structures with

contextualized tasks that require students to identify communicative functions. Authentic examples should include commands, requests, advice, warnings, invitations, and other directive uses. Teachers should provide formative feedback and use classroom discussion and collaborative correction to help learners compare alternatives and understand why a translation is appropriate or inappropriate.

Translation assessment should likewise evaluate more than grammatical accuracy. Criteria should include semantic equivalence, pragmatic appropriateness, communicative function, lexical choice, and contextual suitability. Such assessment would better reflect the multidimensional nature of translation competence identified in the PACTE framework.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The study was conducted at one Saudi university and involved female undergraduate students; therefore, the findings should not be generalized automatically to other institutions or learner populations. The study also focused specifically on imperative sentences and written translation. Future research could replicate the study across universities, include male and female learners, compare proficiency levels, and use longitudinal or experimental designs to evaluate the effects of explicit pragmatic instruction, contrastive analysis, and feedback-based interventions.

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