

Evaluating legal text translation using translation quality assessment: Comparative studies on undergraduates and postgraduates' translation products

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Abstract

This study examines differences in the quality of legal translation between undergraduate and postgraduate EFL students using the Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) framework. Legal translation requires not only linguistic competence but also a deep understanding of legal concepts and contextual accuracy, making it a complex and specialized field. Although translation competence models and legal translation theories have extensively explained the knowledge and skills required for legal translators, limited empirical research has examined how these theoretical competencies are reflected in the actual translation performance of students at different academic levels. This study addresses this gap by comparing the legal translation quality of undergraduate and postgraduate students using the Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) framework. This research employed a quantitative design involving 33 undergraduate and 6 postgraduate students, who completed a legal translation task comprising 26 sentences. The translated outputs were evaluated based on three criteria: accuracy, readability, and acceptability. Statistical analysis, including the Mann-Whitney U test, was conducted to determine significant differences between the two groups. The findings reveal a statistically significant difference in translation quality ($p = 0.009$), with postgraduate students outperforming undergraduates. Postgraduate students demonstrated greater ability to apply contextually appropriate and legally informed translation strategies, while undergraduate students tended to rely on literal translation. These results indicate that advanced academic exposure and legal knowledge significantly influence translation performance. This study highlights the importance of integrating legal competence and translation competence to enhance students' professional readiness in handling legal texts.

Keywords: comparative studies; legal texts; translation; translation quality assessment

INTRODUCTION

Legal translation is crucial for accurately communicating legal concepts and principles across different languages, thus helping maintain the integrity of legal systems. Legal knowledge and its textual manifestations vary significantly between legal traditions and jurisdictions, reflecting historical differences in human relations and institutions. This



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challenges legal translators due to the idiosyncrasies and culture-bound elements of legal texts ([Alkathery, 2023](#); [Rivera-Trigueros, 2021](#)). Legal translators play a crucial role in preserving the accuracy of legal documents in various legal systems, as they are the main language used in international business relations in the field of legal translation

Specializing in the language of law as a legal translator, possessing the appropriate skills in both linguistic abilities and contextual understanding of legal matters. Consequently, the language used in law to achieve its purpose is predominantly prescriptive, directive, and imperative ([El-daly, 2022](#); [Alghamdi, F., & Alotaibi, H. \(2025\)](#)). Therefore, an experienced translator is crucial ([Zeifert & Tobor, 2022](#); [Mahapatra et al., 2023](#)). The legal translator undertakes the formidable task of translating legal texts from one language to another while preserving the literal meaning, legal nuances, cultural context, and rhetorical style. [Pascarina & Saefudin \(2019\)](#) stated that it is crucial to distinguish legal texts from non-legal texts. A good translation must be accurate and equivalent in linguistic and legal terms. More precisely, it is essential to pay attention to the meaning in order ([Lesznych & Balogh, 2019](#); [Ding, 2024](#)). Hence, legal translation is more than just rendering words from one language into another; it is a complex, intellectual endeavour that demands linguistic dexterity, legal acumen, and cultural sensitivity.

Previous studies have highlighted the need for further research on legal translator competencies in legal translation. Hu and Cheng (2016) emphasized that effective legal translation requires translators to understand and interpret context-dependent legal meanings, while also noting that additional research is needed to explore the professional expertise required of legal translators. Furthermore, [Haigh \(2002\)](#) examined whether there was a significant difference in the quality of legal translation produced by students with and without legal qualifications. Additionally, [Molina and Albir \(2002\)](#) examined the challenges encountered in legal translation to improve legal translators' capabilities. The scope of these previous research studies provides an opportunity to shed light on a gap in translation studies, particularly in the education aspect.

While transferring meaning from one legal document to another, a legal translator should render the closest natural equivalent message and produce the same effect in the target language. There is a consensus among translation scholars and translators that legal documents should be translated as faithfully as possible. The prevalence of literal translation as the "default" preferred technique to avoid "deviating" from the original ([Alkathery, 2023](#); [Wiesmann, 2019](#); [Muhaya & Nugrogo, 2024](#); [Manipuspika, 2021](#)). However, the specialized language of legal or legalese contains terms that are required to be translated according to the context to ensure the fidelity of the intended meaning, which causes the utilization of a singular translation strategy to be challenging. These results emphasize the intricacies of legal translation and highlight the need for further research in this area.

This study seeks to enhance understanding of successful strategies in legal translation by examining the tactics utilized by both undergraduate and postgraduate students. By comparing the translation approaches adopted by learners at different academic levels, the study provides empirical insights into the development of legal translation competence across stages of translator training. It aims to provide suggestions for improving translation education and industry standards, ultimately filling gaps in current research. Based on the background of the study, the present researchers came up with a research question: (1) How significant are the differences between the quality of translation using TQA adopted by undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education?

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to translation studies by advancing understanding of translation strategies in the legal context and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Several theories adopted for this research, including (Seo, 2023) that serve as the foundation for assessing the practicality and relevance of the present translation studies.

For current translators, this study has direct implications, as it presents the challenges faced by legal translators and offers practical strategies to enhance translation quality and navigate legal texts more proficiently. This study also offers a stance on training and practical implications for future translators and can be a source for curriculum development and modification to better prepare students pursuing translation courses, especially in the context of legal translation. Furthermore, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for educators and professional training providers to design legal translation instruction that integrates both theoretical knowledge and authentic translation practice, thereby fostering greater accuracy, consistency, and legal awareness among prospective translators.

The scope of this study encompasses an in-depth analysis of the quality of legal translation by undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education. The study compares and evaluates the accuracy, fluency, and overall quality produced by the two groups of EFL students. Accuracy measures the degree to which the meaning of the source text is conveyed correctly into the target text. Readability measures how easily a translation can be understood by target readers. Acceptability assesses the naturalness of the translation in accordance with the norms of the target language. The following terms are used throughout the study and must be defined. Legal texts encompass diverse written materials created for different legal purposes and address issues involving regulation, contractual agreements, or legal proceedings, using legal language to express legal rights, responsibilities, and obligations. Legal translation is a specialized field within the translation industry, categorized as a specific type of translation due to its technical nature, and involves the need for a thorough understanding of both language and legal concepts when transferring information from the source text to the target text, conveying significance and a form of interaction within the legal system. Translation strategy refers to the process of translating words, phrases, clauses, or sentences from one language to another (Prieto Ramos, F., & Guzmán, 2024). Translation abilities are essential for developing proficiency, as they require understanding two languages and, in legal translation, comprehending legal terminology and legal language (Ginting & Mono, 2020). The quality of translation is determined by how well a translated text captures the meaning, tone, and context of the original, while remaining fluent and suitable in the target language. The translator's understanding of the process also affects the quality of the translation (Pungă & Ungurean, 2022; Alkatheery, 2023; Yu, 2023).

In line with the research question, this study aims to assess and compare the quality of legal translations produced by undergraduate and postgraduate students to determine whether there are significant differences in translation accuracy and to understand the factors influencing their strategic decisions. In addition, the study examines how differences in academic training and translation experience may contribute to variations in translation quality. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence that can inform the design of legal translation curricula and support the development of translator competence in both academic and professional contexts.

Review of literature

Legal text translation

Translation is widely understood as the process of transferring meaning from a source language to a target language while preserving the communicative purpose, semantic meaning, and cultural context of the original text. Rather than merely replacing linguistic forms, translation requires translators to negotiate linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences to produce a natural and functionally equivalent target text (Simon, 2022). Contemporary translation studies further emphasize that translation is a communicative and intercultural act in which meaning is reconstructed according to the target audience and sociocultural context (Munday, 2008). Accordingly, translation conveys not only linguistic meaning but also the cultural values and communicative intentions embedded in the source text, making it an essential process of cross-cultural communication (Stepanova, 2017).

Legal translation has a long history, evolving alongside the development of multilingual legal systems and international communication. Today, it is recognized as a specialized branch of translation studies that requires not only linguistic competence but also a thorough understanding of legal concepts, legal traditions, and jurisdiction-specific terminology (Alkatheery, 2023). The significance of legal translation lies in its cross-disciplinary nature, integrating language, law, and culture to ensure that legal meaning is transferred accurately and functionally across different legal systems (Ramos, 2011). Consequently, legal translators must distinguish among the stylistic, terminological, and functional characteristics of legal texts and adopt translation strategies that preserve both legal equivalence and communicative effectiveness in the target language.

Consequently, the language of legal texts is predominantly prescriptive, directive, and imperative because it is intended to establish rights, obligations, and legal consequences with precision and authority (Alkatheery, 2023). As translation is a purposeful and context-dependent communicative activity rather than a neutral linguistic transfer (Munday, 2008), the words, phrases, and syntactic structures employed in legal documents are deliberately selected to preserve legal meaning, ensure terminological consistency, and achieve the intended legal effect across different legal systems (Ramos, 2011).

Several theories include comprehensive study of legal translation within the interdisciplinary study of law and translation theory (Williams, 2001). The emphasis was on interpreting between the Common Law and the Civil Law. The legal system in Indonesia follows the Continental European, or Civil Law, system. The primary focus is on translating texts of legal authority, with examples drawn mainly from statutes, codes, and constitutions, as well as from documents of the European Union and international treaties and conventions.

Therefore, legal translators need both linguistic skills and a deep understanding of legal concepts to specialize in legal translation (Šarčević, 2000). It is generally agreed that a professional legal translator should be an expert in linguistics and, to some extent, law (Newmark, 1998). Legal texts are characterized by their intricate terminology, complex structures, and precise language, making them distinct from other documents.

Legal translation is often more complex than other types of translation because each country has its own legal terminology, distinct from that of other countries. Although Šarčević (2000) states that legal competence comprises knowledge concerned with legal terminology, it also includes an in-depth understanding of logical principles, logical reasoning, problem-solving ability, text analysis, and knowledge of the target and source

legal systems. [Alkatheery \(2023\)](#) also elaborated on the point that legal translators must understand how lawyers think and write.

Translation quality assessment

Translation quality refers to the degree to which a translated text accurately conveys the meaning, style, and intended effect of the original text while also meeting the target audience's expectations. [Baker \(1992\)](#) and [Baker \(2011\)](#) discuss the importance of equivalence and the various dimensions of translation quality. [Williams \(2001\)](#) emphasized the importance of context, purpose, and audience expectations in assessing translation quality.

Translation quality is particularly critical in legal contexts because even minor inaccuracies may alter legal meaning and produce significant legal consequences. High-quality legal translation requires not only linguistic competence but also a comprehensive understanding of legal concepts, legal systems, and specialized terminology in both the source and target languages ([Alkatheery, 2023](#); [Ramos, 2011](#)). Contemporary translation quality assessment commonly evaluates three essential dimensions: accuracy, readability, and acceptability. Accuracy refers to the faithful transfer of semantic content and legal intent from the source text to the target text without omission, addition, or distortion of meaning. Readability concerns the extent to which the translated text is clear, coherent, and easy for the target audience to understand while maintaining the conventions of legal discourse. Acceptability reflects the degree to which the translation conforms to the linguistic norms, stylistic conventions, and legal practices of the target language and legal culture ([Munday, 2008](#)). Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating whether a legal translation successfully preserves legal meaning while remaining comprehensible and appropriate for its intended users.

Cultural factors also play a significant role in the quality of legal translation. [Zeifert and Tobor \(2022\)](#) and [Munday \(2008\)](#) highlighted the complexity of legal terminology and concepts. [Baker \(2011\)](#) emphasized the divergent nature of legal systems. [Briva-Iglesias \(2024\)](#) stressed the use of large language models in machine translation to translate legal texts.

METHOD

Research design participants

This study employed a quantitative design to identify and compare translations of legal texts by undergraduate and postgraduate students. The design was selected to capture the frequency of strategies to reveal characteristics of students' translation outputs, directly addressing the first research question concerning differences in strategy utilization between academic levels. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants relevant to the research objective. The undergraduate group consisted of 33 students from the English Education program (class of 2021) who had completed an Introduction to Translation course. The postgraduate group comprised six students from the Linguistics Study Program (class of 2022) who had taken a Business and Legal Translation course. These two cohorts were deliberately selected to represent differing levels of academic exposure to translation and legal knowledge. Ethical consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Instrument

The primary instrument was a translation task comprising 26 legal sentences administered via Google Forms. The sentences were designed to represent a range of distinctive features

of legal language identified in recent legal translation scholarship, including legal terms of art, doublets and triplets, Latin and other foreign expressions, modal verbs expressing legal obligation, archaic and formulaic expressions, complex syntactic structures, nominalization, passive constructions, and legal phraseology (Alkatheery, 2023; Zeifert & Tobor 2022; Ramos, 2011). These linguistic features reflect the specialized nature of legal discourse and present common challenges for translators in preserving legal meaning and functional equivalence. The sentences were extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to ensure their authenticity and contextual relevance.

The instrument was developed to systematically represent all 10 categories, ensuring content validity. Expert validation was conducted by two translation scholars to refine sentence selection and confirm contextual appropriateness. One item was removed after validation, leaving 26 valid items. Students were instructed to translate each sentence from English into Indonesian. The translated outputs served as the primary data for identifying translation strategies. An answer key was developed as a reference point to anchor terminology analysis.

Procedures

Data were collected in May 2024. The undergraduate students completed the translation task in a supervised classroom setting within 2 hours. The postgraduate students completed the same task online within the same time limit due to scheduling constraints. Participants were permitted to use dictionaries or online machine translation tools for terminology support; however, the use of generative AI tools was prohibited.

The translated sentences were compiled and organized in spreadsheet format. Each key legal term was analyzed to identify the translation strategy applied. The frequency of each strategy was calculated and grouped according to Haigh's categories of legal text peculiarities (Haigh, 2002). Comparative analysis was conducted to examine patterns and differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The analysis focused on identifying trends in strategy preference, variation in technique application, and consistency across legal categories. The findings were then interpreted to determine how academic level influences strategic decision-making in legal translation. In addition, cross-case comparisons between undergraduate and postgraduate participants were conducted to identify recurring patterns and differences in translation performance, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between academic level and legal translation competence.

Data analysis

To answer the research question regarding significant differences in translation quality between undergraduate and postgraduate students, the translated outputs were assessed using Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) rubric (Kupriyanova et al., 2023). The instrument consisted of twenty-six legal sentences translated from English into Indonesian. The TQA rubric was selected because it provides systematic criteria for evaluating translation quality across the dimensions of accuracy, readability, and acceptability, making it suitable for comparing the translation performance of student translators in a legal context.

The TQA framework evaluates translation quality based on three criteria: accuracy, readability, and acceptability. To enhance reliability and minimize subjectivity, two evaluators independently assessed all translated texts. Both evaluators possessed adequate knowledge of translation principles and general legal concepts. Each sentence was rated on a scale according to the TQA criteria. The evaluators' scores were calculated individually

and then averaged to obtain the mean score for each criterion per participant. The mean scores represented each student's overall translation quality.

After scoring, the data were analyzed statistically. A normality test using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted to assess whether the data were normally distributed. The results indicated that the distribution was not normal; therefore, a non-parametric test was selected for further analysis. Descriptive statistics were first computed to identify the mean, median, standard deviation, and score range for both groups across the three quality criteria. These descriptive results provided an initial overview of differences in translation performance. They also served as a preliminary basis for interpreting score distributions and identifying patterns that were subsequently examined through inferential statistical analysis.

To determine whether the differences between the two groups were statistically significant, the Mann–Whitney U test was applied. This nonparametric test was considered appropriate given the nonnormal distribution of the data and the unequal sample sizes. The test results provided statistical evidence of significant differences in translation quality between the two academic levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistical analysis

This section presents the findings on the first research question, namely whether significant differences exist in the translation quality produced by undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, a normality test, and the Mann–Whitney U test.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the total translation quality scores based on Translation Quality Assessment criteria (accuracy, readability, and acceptability) (Kupriyanova et al., 2023).

Table 1

Statistics of Translation Quality Scores

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Undergraduates	33	209.788	16.8741
Postgraduates	6	224.750	12.7701

The undergraduate group (S1) consisted of 33 students with a mean score of 209.788 (SD = 16.8741). The postgraduate group (S2), consisting of six students, obtained a higher mean score of 224.750 (SD = 12.7701). The initial descriptive results indicate that postgraduate students achieved higher overall translation quality scores than undergraduate students.

Normality test

A Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was conducted to determine whether the data were normally distributed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Normality Test Results

Group	Sig. Value	Distribution
Undergraduate	0.000	Not normal
Postgraduate	0.200	Normal

Note: S1 = undergraduate students; S2 = postgraduate students. A significance value below 0.05 indicates a non-normal distribution.

The undergraduate group showed a significance value below 0.05, indicating a non-normal distribution. Although the postgraduate group showed normal distribution, the presence of non-normal data in one group required the use of a non-parametric statistical test. Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test was selected because it does not assume normality and is appropriate for comparing differences between two independent groups when the assumptions of parametric tests are not fully satisfied.

Mann-Whitney U test

To examine whether the observed difference in mean scores was statistically significant, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Mann-Whitney U test result

Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)	Interpretation
0.009	Significant Difference

Note: A significance value below 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between groups.

The Mann-Whitney U test yielded a significance value of 0.009, which is below the alpha level of 0.05. This result indicates a statistically significant difference in translation quality between undergraduate and postgraduate students. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The higher mean score obtained by postgraduate students indicates that they performed significantly better at translating legal texts than undergraduate students. This finding suggests that advanced academic training and greater exposure to translation theory and practice may contribute to the development of higher levels of legal translation competence. It also highlights the importance of systematically integrating specialized legal translation instruction and extensive translation practice into undergraduate curricula to better prepare students for the linguistic and conceptual challenges of legal texts.

The findings demonstrate a statistically significant difference in the quality of legal translation between undergraduate and postgraduate students, with postgraduate students achieving higher overall scores. This difference can be critically interpreted through the lens of translation competence development and legal translation expertise. The results suggest that higher levels of academic training and sustained engagement with specialized translation tasks contribute to the development of the linguistic, strategic, and legal competencies required for producing high-quality legal translations.

Discussion

From the perspective of [Zeifert & Tobor's \(2022\)](#) model of translation competence, translation quality is not merely a product of bilingual ability but the integration of bilingual, extra linguistic, strategic, and instrumental sub-competences. Postgraduate students, having undergone more advanced academic training, are likely to possess stronger extra linguistic competence, particularly in legal knowledge. Legal translation requires not only linguistic transfer but also the accurate rendering of legal concepts embedded within specific legal systems. The higher performance of postgraduate students suggests a more developed interaction between linguistic and legal knowledge components.

This finding is also consistent with [Šarčević's](#) argument that legal translation demands a deep understanding of legal reasoning and system-bound terminology ([Šarčević, 2012](#); [Ramos, 2014](#)). Undergraduate students, who are generally exposed to foundational translation theories, may rely more heavily on surface-level equivalence strategies. In contrast, postgraduate students may demonstrate greater sensitivity to contextual and conceptual accuracy, which directly influences accuracy, acceptability, and readability—the three dimensions measured in Translation Quality Assessment framework ([Kupriyanova, 2023](#)).

The significant difference identified in this study reinforces prior research indicating that exposure to advanced academic material enhances translation performance in specialized domains ([Simon et al., 2022](#)). However, this study contributes by providing empirical statistical evidence in the Indonesian higher education context, particularly in legal translation. While previous studies often discuss competence in theoretical terms, this research quantitatively demonstrates that educational level correlates with measurable differences in the quality of legal translation.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between declarative and procedural knowledge. Undergraduate students may possess declarative knowledge of translation theories, yet postgraduate students appear to demonstrate more procedural competence—the ability to apply knowledge strategically in practice. Legal translation, characterized by technical terminology and system-specific concepts, requires procedural decision-making rather than literal transfer ([Cao, 2007](#)).

Although limited by sample size and institutional scope, the findings establish a clear link between educational level and measurable differences in the quality of legal translation. Future research should expand the participant pool and explore additional variables, such as professional experience and instructional methods, to further examine the factors influencing the development of translation competence. Future studies should also investigate how legal, linguistic, and cultural competencies interact in shaping translation quality across different legal systems and text genres, as these dimensions are fundamental to producing legally accurate and functionally equivalent translations ([Almahasees et al., 2025](#); [Yu, 2023](#)).

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively small and uneven sample size (33 undergraduates and 6 postgraduates) may affect statistical power and generalizability. Additionally, the study was conducted within a single institutional context, which limits broader applicability. Future research should include larger, multi-institutional samples to validate whether the observed difference persists across different educational environments.

Overall, the discussion highlights that translation quality in legal contexts is significantly influenced by the depth of academic exposure and specialized training,

emphasizing the importance of advanced education in developing professional-level translation competence. These findings suggest that translation curricula should incorporate more discipline-specific legal translation tasks, authentic legal texts, and systematic feedback to strengthen students' translation competence from the undergraduate level. Furthermore, greater integration of translation theory with practical legal translation exercises may better equip future translators to produce accurate, readable, and acceptable translations in professional legal settings.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated whether there are significant differences in the quality of legal translation between undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education. Statistical analysis using the Mann–Whitney U test (0.009) confirmed a significant difference, with postgraduate students demonstrating higher overall translation quality scores. These findings indicate that advanced academic training and greater exposure to specialized translation practices play an important role in enhancing students' competence in legal translation. This evidence suggests that advanced academic training contributes to stronger translation competence, particularly in specialized domains such as legal translation. Postgraduate students' higher performance indicates more developed integration of linguistic proficiency and legal knowledge, which directly impacts translation accuracy, readability, and acceptability. These findings underscore the need for translation programs to provide progressive, discipline-specific training that systematically develops both legal knowledge and translation competence from the undergraduate level onward.

The study provides empirical support for the argument that translation quality improves alongside academic and disciplinary specialization. It reinforces the importance of structured legal translation training within higher education curricula. The findings also suggest that integrating specialized legal translation modules into undergraduate programs may facilitate the gradual development of the competencies required for professional legal translation. Although limited by sample size and institutional scope, the findings establish a clear link between educational level and measurable differences in the quality of legal translation. Future research should expand the participant pool and explore additional variables, such as professional experience and instructional methods, to further examine the factors influencing the development of translation competence. Additionally, future studies could incorporate participants from multiple universities and diverse legal translation contexts to enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings across different educational settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization, methodology, software; **Author 2:** Data curation, writing—original draft preparation; **Author 3:** Visualization, investigation, supervision

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