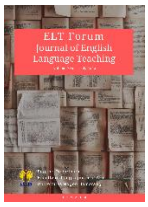
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Students' Perception of Using the Literal Translation Method to Translate Descriptive Text

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Abstract

Literal translation is commonly used by student translators because it helps them retain the words and sentence structures of the source text. However, its use in translating descriptive texts can become problematic when closely following the original structure leads to unnatural or inappropriate expressions in the target language. Drawing on Newmark's concept of literal translation, this study explores university students' perceptions of the effectiveness, challenges, and pedagogical value of literal translation. A qualitative approach was employed involving students from the English Department of a state university. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires and analyzed thematically. The analysis focused on source-text fidelity, structural accuracy, naturalness, contextual appropriateness, and communicative purpose. The findings show that students find literal translation helpful for maintaining accuracy, understanding sentence structures, and learning vocabulary. However, they also experience difficulties in producing natural and effective translations. These findings suggest that literal translation is most useful when applied selectively, balancing fidelity to the source text with the communicative purpose of the target text.

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INTRODUCTION

Translation is commonly viewed as a linguistic tool to facilitate communication across languages (Corina, 2021). It involves systematically transferring the 'content' or 'message' of a source-language text into a target-language text, aiming for informational and communicative equivalence. This conventional, instrumental view emphasizes overcoming linguistic barriers for smooth information exchange. Some types of texts, such as descriptive ones, can be translated using a method that renders each word exactly as it appears in the source text while maintaining the original structure (Newmark, 1988). Although it is the simplest and safest option for novices, it can still yield accurate vocabulary results. Raunak (2023), however, researched machine translation and determined that not all words, and occasionally not even entire sentences, can be translated literally. Instead, the translation tool automatically paraphrases or condenses the text in the target language.

Azzan & Sakale (2025) noted that Literal Translation has some advantages, such as preserving the original meaning, which is important in legal documents where precision matters. Another advantage is that Literal Translation promotes consistency in terminology and benefits beginner EFL learners. Sinambela (2023) conducted a study on the use of simple English vocabulary with 25 3rd-grade students, achieving a remarkable outcome. The students acknowledged that using simple translation helped them understand English and improve their confidence in using it. Although Literal Translation offers advantages that can help EFL learners learn easily, Azzan & Sakale (2025) found that literal translation is unsuitable for idioms, as their meaning is not derived from individual words and often lacks a direct equivalent in the target language. Translating idioms word-for-word typically yields nonsensical or irrelevant results, failing to convey the figurative meaning. Therefore, effective idiom translation necessitates abandoning structural fidelity in favor of semantic and pragmatic equivalence, requiring a functional equivalent that captures the original's communicative force and cultural context. Obeidat et al. (2024) state that the initial step in translating idioms is their recognition; if a phrase is not identified as an idiom, proper translation is impossible. Nevertheless, the fact that all programs provided some accurate translations suggests that reliance on literal translation stems from a failure to recognize the idiomatic character of the source texts. Lypka (2025) also demonstrates that literal translations are effective only when idioms have similar forms and meanings in both languages, for example, "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?", popularized by Natsume Soseki in Japanese literature, which can be translated using literal translation to become "Bulannya indah bukan?", which means "I love you". Another example is "Iron Hand" or "Tangan Besi", which means a dictator, and "Long Hand" or "Panjang Tangan", which means a thief. Idioms that can be translated literally, as in descriptive text, suggest the possibility of direct translation. However, as Lypka noted, this direct translation is feasible only when the phrases exhibit similar structure and semantic content, as in descriptive text.

In Sofyan's (2021) research, he stated that translating legal documents using literal translation, while it works decently, is quite challenging. This happens because of the complexity introduced by differences in legal systems and terminology, as well as translators' lack of specialized knowledge. Therefore, even if literal translation can be used, its drawbacks remain. Hidayanti's (2023) study on literal translation of narrative texts among 55 students found that literal translation ranked fourth, used in 54% of translations, trailing only borrowing, calque, and modulation. This suggests that literal translation is often difficult to apply effectively to narrative texts, which typically require strategic additions or omissions to be successful. Lexical and grammatical disparities, along with differing cultural backgrounds, introduce another layer of complexity. These factors necessitate more than simple word-for-word substitution, as translators must make subjective choices regarding vocabulary, structure, and cultural terms to navigate these difficulties, which can ultimately impact the translation's outcome (Kembaren et al., 2024).

Indonesian English learners frequently use literal translation because it simplifies comprehension. This approach is significant because language itself is vital for promoting social change and inclusivity, as it triggers transformative shifts in societal viewpoints while also strengthening existing norms, thus broadening access to resources and opportunities (Kumari, 2024). However, English learners from Indonesia often rely too heavily on the literal meaning of words, without considering the context in which they are used, which can affect their understanding of the precise meaning (Rosyada, 2023). This finding is consistent with Riecher's (2023) study on student translation methods, which showed a significant, dominant reliance on literal translation. Another study by Listyani & Thren (2023) also shows that not only Indonesian English learners rely on literal translation, but they also have limitations in their translation ability, such as a lack of vocabulary

and translation experience, despite literal translation being the most frequently used technique. Ariyani's (2021) research on student translations supports this notion, concluding that most students employ literal translation. This strategy involves directly seeking meaning by using expression and formation strategies that closely resemble the original text. This suggests a common preference for a word-for-word approach, possibly due to perceived simplicity and the clear dominance of literal translation, highlighting an important area for focus in translation education.

Fitriah & Ardi (2026), in her experiment, observed that students are mostly facing challenges, especially in translation accuracy, even when students are facilitated with machine translation. Given the similarity in basic sentence structure between Indonesian and English (Kusumawati, 2025), descriptive texts and literal translations can effectively bridge the learning gap. Consequently, this approach enables students to learn English more easily without being overly concerned with the text's form.

While Kusumawati (2025) stated that structural similarities between Indonesian and English in descriptive text can become a bridge for learner's comprehension, Fitriah & Ardi (2026) findings record that students are still struggling in translation accuracy even if supported with machine translation. It is still unexamined whether most students are perceiving LTM as a scaffolding diagnostic or as a definitive strategy when translating descriptive text. Furthermore, current studies do not capture how students perceive structural fidelity by considering LTM as a basic procedure in translating text, semantically and communicatively (Newmark, 1988).

Students' views on these methods, shaped by their experiences, attitudes, and understanding of the pros and cons, provide valuable teaching insights and address gaps in previous research, which focused more on strategies and quality than on university students' perspectives on literal translation for descriptive texts. This research implements Newmark's Literal Translation to address unique Indonesian translation difficulties. The framework first establishes basic translation accuracy (meaning, terminology, grammar) to minimize errors. It then progresses to complex challenges like idioms, cultural nuances, and connotative meaning, requiring semantic and pragmatic adjustments. This deliberate sequencing, from literal accuracy to deeper semantic equivalence, is a controlled, step-by-step mechanism to enhance translator skill. This innovation offers a practical pedagogical model for Indonesian translation training.

This research was conducted to create opportunities for more accessible English learning for students and English learners in Indonesia. A further objective of this study is to demonstrate that acquiring English, particularly for students in Indonesia, can be facilitated by applying the literal translation method to descriptive texts as a preliminary step for introducing and enhancing students' vocabulary. The novelty of this research lies at the university level, where the students selected as research participants have prior exposure to translation studies, enabling them to offer their perceptions of the method at a certain level of sophistication. The research questions formulated as the foundation of this study are as follows: (1) How do students perceive the Literal Translation Method as an introductory learning strategy? (2) How do students manage the challenges based on their personal experiences when applying Literal Translation Method? (3) How do students evaluate their results and suitability when implementing Literal Translation Method.

METHODS

The study utilizes a qualitative approach to explore and describe the phenomena under investigation in a straightforward manner. According to Aspers and Corte (2021), qualitative research is an ongoing process that helps understand a topic by making new and essential distinctions, bringing researchers closer to the phenomenon being studied. In this study, qualitative research is used descriptively, focusing on providing a comprehensive summary of events or experiences in everyday terms rather than developing an abstract theory. Qualitative descriptive research aims to stay close to participants' own words and observable reality, prioritizing rich, detailed accounts over extensive interpretation or theorization beyond the data. This approach is well-suited to acquiring nuanced insights into participants' perspectives and to facilitating an in-depth understanding of the research subject through systematic yet primarily descriptive analysis.

To conduct this study, the researcher enrolled 33 college students in the English department at UNNES from the 4th and 8th semesters who had already completed the Translation course. This particular group was chosen using the Non-probability Expert Sampling technique for their relevant background and ability in language studies, especially in translation, which aligns with the research focus on translation and related skills. The instrument's publication will be shared directly to the

participants via WhatsApp private chat, starting from 8th May to 22nd May. Throughout the process, ethical considerations, such as informed consent and anonymity, will be prioritized.

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to understand students' perceptions and experiences of using literal translation to translate descriptive texts. Data were gathered through a Likert-scale questionnaire, open-ended questions, and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms to see general patterns in students' responses to statements about literal translation. The frequencies and percentages were used simply to describe these patterns and support the qualitative findings, rather than to conduct statistical tests or make generalizations about a larger population.

The questionnaire was developed based on the research objectives and guided by Newmark's concept of literal translation and Skopos Theory. The items focused on areas such as accuracy, preservation of source-text structure, naturalness, contextual appropriateness, and communicative purpose. Before being given to participants, the questionnaire was reviewed to make sure that the questions were clear, relevant, and related to the research focus. Open-ended questions were included so that students could explain their answers in more detail. After completing the questionnaire, selected students participated in semi-structured interviews, either in person or through Zoom. With their permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The questionnaire results were then considered together with the open-ended and interview responses to better understand the reasons behind students' perceptions and experiences.

In qualitative research, the interview is a frequently employed technique for uncovering individuals' experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them (Dursun, 2023). It aims to uncover the rich details of individuals' live experiences and the personal meaning, interpretations, and subjective significance they assign to them. Through direct, often semi-structured dialogue, researchers elicit narratives that reveal participants' perspectives, feelings, motivations, and the complex contexts that shape their worldviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine whether the Literal Translation Method is suitable for translating descriptive texts despite its limitations. Data were collected through structured questionnaires containing Likert-scale and open-ended questions, followed by semi-structured interviews with selected students. The Likert-scale responses were summarized using frequencies and percentages to identify general patterns, while the open-ended and interview responses were analyzed thematically. The researcher read the responses several times, identified important points, and grouped similar responses into codes and categories. These categories were then compared and developed into three main themes: (1) students' conceptual perceptions of the method, (2) the practical challenges and difficulties they encountered, and (3) its application in an academic context. The questionnaire and interview findings were considered together to provide a clearer understanding of students' perceptions and experiences.

General Knowledge of the Literal Translation Method

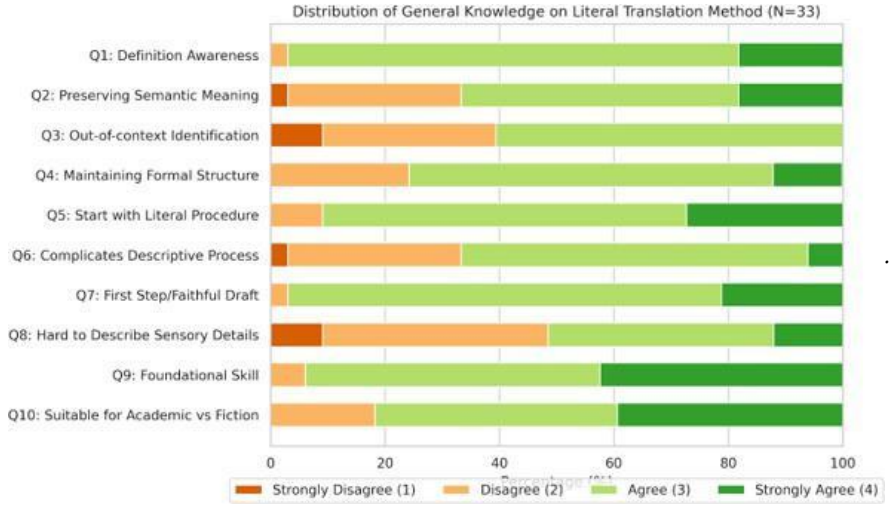


Figure 1. Distribution of General Knowledge on Literal Method

The findings indicate that student translators generally perceive literal translation as an essential "safety net" that prioritizes meaning over linguistic accuracy and also facilitates language comprehension (Marth, 2026). Most respondents consider a word-for-word approach to be a necessary initial step in the translation process. It provides a foundation for understanding the source text's grammatical structure and serves as a starting point for developing the translation. By first identifying the underlying structure, students are better able to revise and refine their work into a more natural and coherent target text

Nevertheless, a clear distinction exists between students' reliance on literal translation for structural accuracy and their ability to convey deeper meaning. While more than half of the respondents use a literal approach to minimize serious grammatical errors, they also recognize its limitations. About half of the participants believe that translation should closely follow the source text while preserving its original meaning. At the same time, they are aware that an overly literal approach may reduce the richness, nuance, and natural flow of the translated text.

The major finding of this study is that students encounter greater difficulties when applying literal translation to some texts. Around 81% of the 33 respondents believe that the method is more appropriate for objective and academic texts than for descriptive or expressive writing. Many participants explicitly stated that a strict word-for-word approach can interfere with translating descriptive passages. When a text is intended to create a particular mood or evoke vivid imagery, literal translation is no longer an effective strategy. Instead, it often limits the translator's ability to produce a natural and engaging target text. This challenge is particularly evident when students attempt to translate sensory details, such as sounds, smells, and emotional atmosphere, which require not only linguistic accuracy but also careful interpretation to preserve the intended effect of the original text.

A considerable proportion of the respondents still believe that sensory adjectives can be translated simply by selecting their dictionary equivalents. In contrast, the remaining participants recognize that using literal translation to translate the text while preserving its original imagery often produces a rigid, awkward, and unnatural draft that fails to capture the atmosphere of the original text (Mahdi, 2025). This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that highly descriptive, sensory-rich sentences are widely perceived as challenging to interpret, particularly when students translate them without sufficient contextual understanding**.**

Personal Experiences and Challenges of the Literal Translation Method

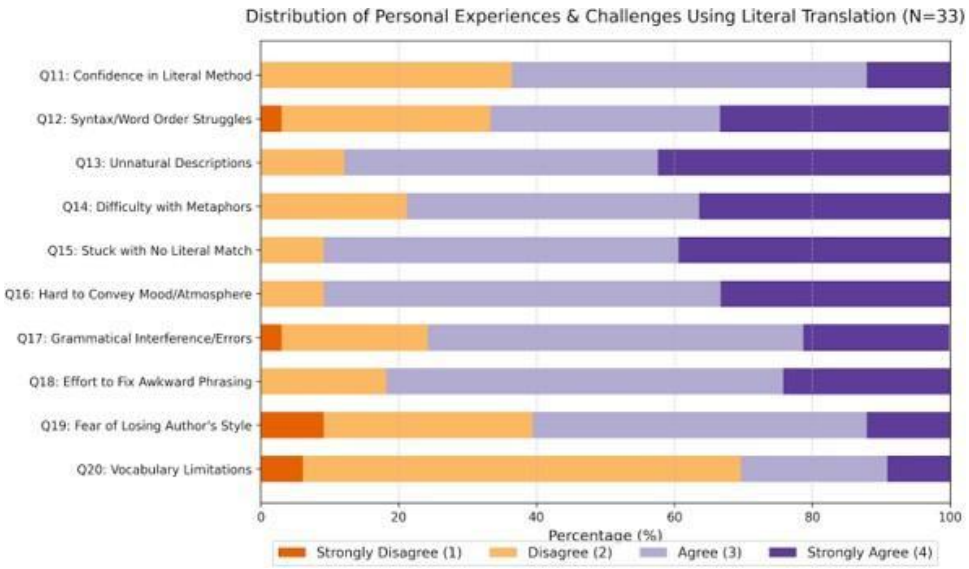


Figure 2. Distribution of Personal Experiences & Challenges Using Literal Translation

The questionnaire data illustrate the psychological and practical challenges faced by student translators when working with descriptive texts. Many students rely heavily on literal translation because it provides a sense of security and helps them maintain confidence throughout the

translation process. However, this dependence also creates significant obstacles, particularly when they attempt to preserve the author's original style and expressive language, even when they possess a strong vocabulary. For many participants, adhering closely to established translation rules provides a structured, reliable approach, enabling them to complete the task with greater confidence despite the method's limitations.

However, the limitations of this approach become more apparent when students translate descriptive prose. Most respondents reported relying on a direct, word-for-word strategy, which often resulted in translations that sounded rigid and unnatural. In addition, nearly all participants experienced difficulties translating complex descriptive expressions that lacked direct equivalents in the target language. Instead of adapting or reformulating these expressions to convey the intended meaning, many students remained closely tied to the source text's literal structure, limiting their ability to produce fluent, natural translations. This finding is consistent with previous research by Firdausyiah et al. (2021), which found that literal translation was the most frequently used translation technique among undergraduate students, indicating a tendency to preserve the source text's structure rather than reformulate it in the target language.

Lexical limitations represent only one aspect of the challenges associated with literal translation. Relying too heavily on a word-for-word approach often leads to structural and stylistic problems that reduce the expressive quality of the translated text. This is supported by Junaeny and Nirdayanti (2023), who found that students frequently employed word-for-word and literal translation, resulting in problems with vocabulary, word order, and sentence structure, which made the target texts sound stiff and less natural. A substantial number of respondents acknowledged that this mechanical method weakens the mood, atmosphere, and emotional impact that are central to descriptive writing, particularly in passages intended to evoke vivid imagery or build dramatic tension. By closely following the structure of the source text, student translators frequently produce translations with grammatical interference and awkward sentence patterns. As a result, the translated text often loses its natural flow and fails to convey the artistic qualities of the original prose.

Ultimately, students often experience the drawbacks of relying on what they perceive to be a safe translation strategy. Many respondents reported that, after producing an initial literal draft, they had to spend considerable time revising awkward, ungrammatical, or unnatural sentences. This suggests that an overly literal approach may increase the overall effort required to produce a fluent and accurate translation. The findings also indicate that improving translation competence involves more than expanding students' vocabulary. Translation courses may benefit from providing explicit instruction on when and how to move beyond literal translation by making informed translation choices. Such guidance could help students develop the confidence and skills needed to avoid the limitations of literal translation, particularly when working with descriptive texts.

Implementation at the College Level

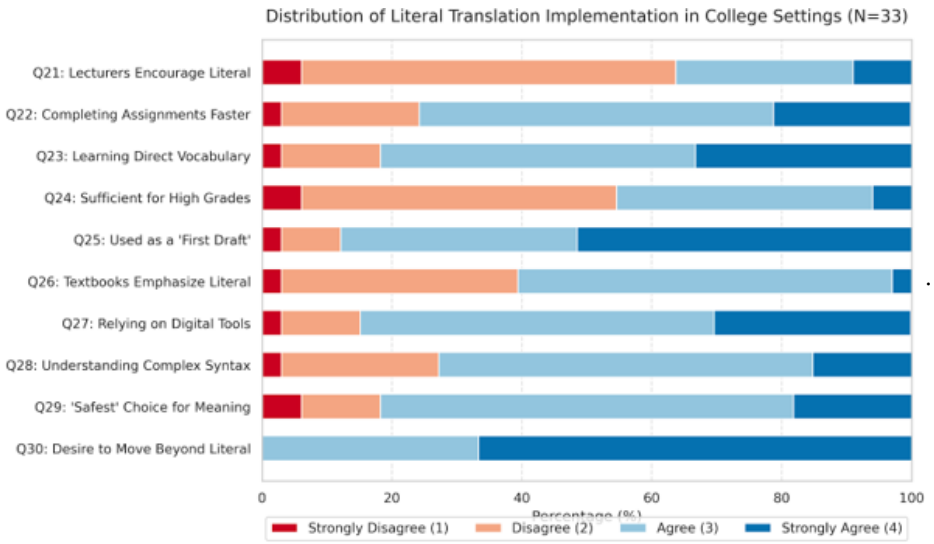


Figure 3. Distribution of Literal Translation Implementation in College Settings

The findings reveal a noticeable gap between the university's academic expectations and the practical strategies students use during the translation process. On the one hand, institutional standards are relatively high. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported that their lecturers discourage word-for-word translation. At the same time, more than half acknowledged that a purely literal translation is unlikely to receive high marks. These expectations emphasize translations that are natural, accurate, and appropriate to the target language

Nevertheless, many undergraduate students continue to rely heavily on the Literal Translation Method. When faced with challenging texts and complex grammatical structures, they use them as a useful analytical tool to examine sentence patterns and understand the source text's structure before producing a more refined translation. These findings are consistent with those of Gebbia (2023), who reported that translation students relied on literal translation to preserve the core meaning of the source text despite recognizing that it often reduced the stylistic and communicative effectiveness of the translation. As before, Waluyo (2026) found in his study that students break down sentences into a few segments and translate each segment from the source language into the target language. This step-by-step process helps students process the complexities of English texts and enhances their language comprehension by understanding the meaning of each segment.

Heavy academic workloads encourage students to use digital technology as a practical strategy for managing their translation tasks more efficiently. Most respondents reported that beginning with a word-for-word translation helps them complete assignments more quickly. This process is further supported by machine translation tools, with nearly all participants relying on platforms such as Google Translate. Rather than rejecting the output of these tools, students use them strategically as part of their translation process. They perceive machine-generated literal translations as a useful starting point for expanding their vocabulary and establishing an initial draft before further revision.

The findings suggest that literal translation functions less as a final translation strategy than as a source of confidence during the early stages of the translation process. A substantial proportion

of the respondents viewed a literal draft as the most reliable way to minimize major translation errors and misinterpretations, using it as an initial version before further revision. By first establishing the basic meaning and grammatical structure of the source text, students create a foundation that allows them to focus on improving fluency, style, and naturalness in subsequent revisions.

Overall, the data indicate that many students recognize the limitations of their current translation practices and express a strong desire to develop more advanced translation skills. Almost all respondents expressed interest in learning strategies that go beyond literal translation and enable them to produce more natural, contextually appropriate target texts. These findings suggest that, although machine translation tools and literal drafting help students work more efficiently, they are also aware of the shortcomings of these approaches. As a result, they seek greater academic guidance and practical training to strengthen their translation competence and produce translations that meet professional standards. Similarly, Gebbia (2023) argued that translation pedagogy should provide explicit instruction in creative translation strategies and encourage students to develop stronger inferencing and decision-making skills rather than relying predominantly on literal translation

Discussion

The findings show that college students have mixed views about using the Literal Translation Method (LTM) to translate descriptive texts. Most students see literal translation as a useful starting point because it helps them maintain grammatical accuracy and keep the main meaning of the source text. This finding is in line with Newmark (1988), who considers literal translation useful when the structure and meaning of the source text can be transferred appropriately into the target language. It also agrees with Azzan & Sakale (2025), who found that students may rely on literal translation to deal with unfamiliar words and sentence structures.

However, students also realized that using LTM too closely can create problems. Some expressions may sound unnatural or even lead to misunderstanding when translated directly. This finding is also supported by Azzan & Sakale (2025), particularly regarding the limitations of relying too much on literal translation. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, this suggests that a good translation cannot focus only on accuracy. It also needs to consider the purpose of the translation and how naturally the message can be understood by the target readers. Therefore, the students'

responses suggest that LTM is helpful as a first step, but it needs to be adjusted when the context or purpose of the translation requires it.

The challenges become clearer when students translate descriptive prose, a genre that relies heavily on imagery, figurative language, and atmosphere. Although many participants possess sufficient vocabulary to consider alternative translations, they often hesitate to move beyond literal translation for fear of altering the author's intended meaning or style. Respondents 3 and 28 implied that translating a sentence directly using the exact meaning may result in unnatural output, which can cause an awkward condition. This finding is supported by Aminudin and Hidayati (2021), who found that literal translation was the most dominant technique used by students in their translation work, indicating that students tended to rely on direct rendering of the source text. Such reliance may result in translations that preserve the source meaning but fail to achieve naturalness and fluency in the target language. When descriptive expressions lack direct equivalents in the target language, students often struggle to adapt them in ways that preserve both meaning and stylistic effect.

The study also indicates that literal translation presents stylistic challenges in descriptive writing. Respondent 21 acknowledged that sensory details, emotional atmosphere, and figurative expressions cannot always be conveyed through direct lexical substitution, highlighting a loss of naturalness, difficulty translating idioms and figurative language, and variations arising from cultural differences. This aligns with Hashim & Hamdani (2025) study, which finds that sensory detail, emotional atmosphere, and figurative expressions cannot be preserved through direct lexical substitution, and that overreliance on literal methods will lead to a loss of naturalness. Nevertheless, academic demands and time constraints encourage students to rely on literal translation alongside machine translation tools such as Google Translate. Participants reported using machine-generated literal translations as an initial draft that allows them to identify the core meaning of the source text and complete assignments more efficiently. This is shown in Kapnas et al. (2025) study, in which participants demonstrate improved task performance. However, Kapnas et al. (2025) also mentioned that the participants need to enhance their interaction with the machine to improve fluency, coherence, and stylistic appropriateness.

Consequently, students frequently experience a demanding revision process. Respondent 2, as well as Shudooh (2026), agreed that Literal Translation first drafts often contain awkward sentence structures, unnatural word order, and expressions that do not reflect the conventions of the target language. Considerable time and effort are therefore required to revise these drafts into translations that read more naturally. This finding helps explain why all participants expressed interest in receiving further instruction on translation strategies that extend beyond literal translation and support more flexible decision-making.

Overall, the findings suggest that students perceive the Literal Translation Method as a useful learning and drafting strategy rather than merely as a rigid approach to translation. It helps them manage complex grammatical structures, reduce the risk of major translation errors, and cope with academic workloads, while also providing a clear way to understand and describe the meaning and structure of descriptive texts. This finding is supported by Sipahutar et al. (2021), whose study of students' translation of descriptive texts found that literal translation was among the most dominant methods used. Similarly, Aminudin and Hidayati (2021) found that literal translation was the most dominant technique in students' subtitling work, suggesting that students frequently rely on direct rendering to maintain the meaning of the source text. These published works support the present findings by demonstrating that literal translation can be a practical strategy to help learners understand, organize, and convey the core meaning of descriptive texts. Therefore, literal translation should not be viewed solely as a limitation, but also as a useful method for explaining and describing textual content, particularly when students need to maintain the essential meaning of the source text. Nevertheless, students should also be encouraged to develop flexibility in applying other translation strategies when naturalness, stylistic expression, and contextual appropriateness are required.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how the Literal Translation Method (LTM) can be perceived as a useful translation method in the learning process. The findings indicate that students found LTM as an introductory strategy for recognizing new vocabulary, analyzing sentence structure, and reviewing basic grammar. Students also considered LTM as a scaffolding tool to comprehend the source text before attempting to process it in a more natural way.

The study also found that LTM is suitable for daily use when applied as an initial stage of the translation process rather than as a complete translation method. While it helps students analyze sentence structures, reduce major translation errors, and complete tasks more efficiently, it is less effective for translating descriptive texts that require stylistic adaptation, figurative language, and contextual interpretation. Therefore, literal translation should be followed by revision to improve fluency and naturalness.

Moreover, the findings suggest that LTM remains a valuable learning tool, particularly for Indonesian university students as they develop their translation competence. From a theoretical perspective, the study demonstrates that linguistic, cognitive, and contextual factors shape students' reliance on literal translation. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of teaching students to use LTM strategically while also developing their ability to apply more flexible translation strategies. Overall, the Literal Translation Method is most effective as a foundation for English learning and translation, rather than as a final approach to producing natural, communicatively effective descriptive translations.

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DECLARATION OF AI USE

The authors used AI tools, specifically Gemini AI to assist with brainstorming and creating tables, and Grammarly to improve structure, clarity, and explore alternative phrasing in sentences. Following the use of this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the AI-assisted content as necessary. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the publication.

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