

## **Students' Abilities in Translating Personal Pronouns from Khmer to English**

**Seth Soy\*<sup>1)</sup>, Ira Maisarah<sup>2)</sup>**

<sup>1)</sup> Techo Hun Sen Kalaom Pluk High School, Kalaom Pluk Village, Prey Svay Commune, Moung Ruessei District, Battambang Province, Cambodia; and Postgraduate of English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Bengkulu, Indonesia

<sup>2)</sup> Postgraduate of English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Bengkulu, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author, email: [sethsoy68@gmail.com](mailto:sethsoy68@gmail.com)

Received: March, 12, 2022

Revised: April, 17, 2022

Accepted: May, 10, 2022

### **Abstract**

Unlike personal pronouns in English, personal pronouns in Khmer do not have the different forms of subject pronouns and object pronouns since a certain word can function both as a subject and as an object of a sentence. Another fact is that the personal pronouns in Khmer have many alternative words for one specific kind of personal pronouns based on the context in terms of age, social position or status, and intimacy. Therefore, the current study aims at investigating students' abilities in translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English. Specifically, it intends to measure the proportion (percentage) of correct and incorrect translation, and explore types of errors within the translation. The qualitative study employed a set of translation exercises given to 40 students in a class of grade 10 in the first semester of the academic year 2022-2023. To investigate the kinds of errors, the researcher employed the framework of Corder (1974) which categorized errors into 4 types namely error of omission, addition, selection, and error of ordering. The results of the study showed that 82% of exercises were translated correctly. In addition, three types of errors were found. The error of omission was (51%) followed respectively by the error of selection (46%), and the error of addition (3%) but the error of ordering could not be found. The results suggested that the teacher should focus specifically more on the problematic areas of personal pronouns to help the students translate and learn personal pronouns better.

**Keywords:** Personal Pronouns, Translation, Errors, Source Language, Target Language

### **Introduction**

Translating one language to another language with a different syntactic pattern is a difficult task for the translator. Being a competent translator, one of the most important tasks is to preserve equivalence between the source language and the target language. The equivalence at word level and above word level, grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, and semiotic equivalence are what the translator has to deal with (Baker, 2018). Besides the equivalence, the translator should consider the text, genre, and discourse shifts in the translation. Also, ideology is another vital consideration (Hatim & Munday, 2019). It seems to be obvious that even though people can use software applications to help in their translation, they still face many problems in order to produce a good translation (Arono & Nadrah, 2019).

The number of criteria should be taken into account in order to produce a good translation. The translation requires 3 main elements. The first element is linguistic knowledge such as phonology, lexis,

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syntax, and text organization by ways of cohesion and thematic arrangement. The second element is cultural aspects both the intercultural factors (culture-specific expressions, aesthetic differences, political interference, and ethical influence) and intracultural factors (strategic orientation, period style). The third element is the personal factors, including personal competence, and personal attitudes, including aesthetic attitudes, attitudes toward recipients' response, strategic attitudes, political and ethical attitudes, and professional attitudes (Wong, & Shen, 1999). Similarly, translation demands different strategies and comprehension. The realization of native speakers' behaviors, nature of the culture of both languages, and nature of the source and target language, for example, discourse element or grammatical competence have to be considered. If the language system of source and target languages is extremely incompatible, translation may contain an unreliable message as the result of wrong grammatical construction (Zhiri, 2014). Therefore, translators have to possess in-depth comprehension of source and target languages. The source language refers to the original one, which will be translated into another language, whereas the target language is a translated version or product translated from the original one (see Maisarah & Febriana, 2021). However, translation means more than just substitution of the source language with some equivalents in the target language. An inseparable correlation between translation and culture is necessary. Mastering stylistic and linguistic understanding is not enough for translation because translation is not just only vocabulary replacement, but it is a cultural product leading to meaningful communication (Babae, Wan Yahya, & Babae, 2014). Talented translators have to understand the sense as well as the meaning of the original text and its writer. Moreover, they should be knowledgeable in terms of technical expertise since they have to master digital literacy, knowledge of relevant subject matters, language skills, research skills, and writing skills. In addition, they need to use the right tools, for example, various kinds of dictionaries, encyclopedias, glossaries of technical terms, and so on. Furthermore, linguistic competence including the knowledge of grammar, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics together with socio-cultural backgrounds related to the original text and the translated text is required. Also, honesty, perseverance, and commitment are what the translator needs. More importantly, knowing the audience and objective of translation contributes to better translation (Sowndarya & Lavanya, 2007).

Baker (2018) stated that among grammatical categories mentioned above, pronouns are used to express the category of person which involves the participant roles. According to Arsyad (2021), & Bella Utary, *et al.* (2019), a pronoun is a word used to substitute a noun or a noun phrase in order to prevent writers or speakers from using the noun repeatedly. It takes the place of the noun to make a good flow in a sentence and make the sentence more influential and attractive. It shares the same functions with the noun and it is divided into many kinds. Personal pronouns can function as the subject (*I, we, you, they, he, she, and it*) and the object (*me, us, you, them, him, her, and it*). Interrogative pronouns include the word *who, what, and which*. Relative pronouns consist of the word *who, whom, whose, which, and that*. Demonstrative pronouns are the words such as *this, these, that, and those*. Reflexive pronouns refer to the word *myself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves, himself, herself, and itself*. Reciprocal pronouns refer to *one another* and *each other*. Indefinite pronouns contain the word *someone, somebody, anyone, anybody, no one, and nothing*. Lastly, possessive pronouns include the words *mine, ours, yours, theirs, his, and hers*.

One of the pronouns frequently used in a spoken or written text is the personal pronoun. Suryani, & Hidayatullah (2017) specified it into two types. The first type is subject pronouns consisting of the words *I, we, you, they, he, she, and it*. It is utilized as a subject of a verb in a sentence or a clause. The second type is object pronouns consisting of the words *me, us, you, them, him, her, and it*. It stands after a verb or preposition through a specific sort of verb preposition combination. Sometimes, it can be seen between the verb and preposition in the case like *call him up*. Similarly, Altenberg, & Vago (2010) divided personal pronouns into three categories namely first-person, second-person, and third-person pronouns. First-person pronouns address an individual who is speaking or a group of individuals incorporating the one who is speaking. Specifically, the word *I* or *me* refers to an individual whereas the word *we* or *us* refers to a group of individuals. The second-person pronoun, the word *you*, indicates an individual or a group of individuals to whom are being spoken. Third-person pronouns point out the specifically mentioned individual, an animal or a thing, and the group of individuals, animals, or things. They denote the word *he* or *him* for male individual, *she* or *her* for female individual, *it* for the animal or thing, and *they* or *them* for the group of individuals, animals, or things. The personal pronouns shift the form in terms of the person (first, second, third), case (subject, object, possessive), number (singular,

plural), and gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). To understand personal pronouns easily, Rizvi, Saujan, & Munas (2021) make the table as follows:

**Table 1. Personal Pronouns**

Singular	Subject	Object
The 1 <sup>st</sup> person	I	me
The 2 <sup>nd</sup> person	You	you
The 3 <sup>rd</sup> person	He/She/It	him/her/it
Plural		
The 1 <sup>st</sup> person	We	us
The 2 <sup>nd</sup> person	You	you
The 3 <sup>rd</sup> person	they	them

After discussing the definition, function, kinds, and the importance of personal pronouns in English above, the key differences and similarities between personal pronouns in English and Khmer can be revealed. Personal pronouns in English have different words for subject and object pronouns, for example, *I* as the subject and *me* as the object. However, personal pronouns in Khmer have the same word for subject and object pronouns. For instance, “ខ្ញុំ” (*Khnhom*) meaning *I/me* in English has the same form for both subject and object pronouns. Another difference is that personal pronouns in English have a fixed and certain word for a specific personal pronoun; however, the personal pronouns in Khmer have many alternative words for a pronoun based on the context in terms of age, social position, or status, and intimacy. For instance, there are many words in Khmer which is equal to the pronoun *I/me* in English when talking or writing to a person. To mean *I/me*, someone has to use the word “ខ្ញុំ” (*Khnhom*) to talk or write to the public or people in general, “អញ” (*Anh*) for the impolite word to close friends or younger people, “ត្រា” (*Khnear*) for the polite word to close friends with similar age, “ករុណា” (*Karuna*) to Buddhist monks, and “តុលបង្គំ” (*Tul Bangkum*) to members of royal families. However, the monk has to use the word “អាត្មា” (*Athma*) meaning in English *I/me* to communicate with people.

According to Li (2007), another interesting fact is personal pronouns in Khmer do not have specific gender and number category, but they can be identified through the nouns that are replaced by those pronouns. Regarding person aspect, personal pronouns of Khmer are divided into three parts as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Person: consists of the word “ខ្ញុំ”, “អញ”, “ត្រា”, “អាត្មា”, (*I/me* in English), “យើង”, (*we/us* in English)...
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Person: consists of the word “ឯង”, “អ្នក”, “លោក”, (*you* in English), and so on.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Person: consists of the word “វា” (*it, she/her, he/him* in English), “គេ”, “គាត់” (*he/him, she/her* in English), “នាង” (*she/her* in English), “លោក”, (*you, he/him* in English), “ពួកវា”, “ពួកគាត់”, “ពួកគេ”, (*they/them* in English) and so on.

As stated in the national textbook for Khmer subject of grade five on pages 68-69 published by MoEYS (2016), personal pronouns in Khmer can be used as follows:

- “ខ្ញុំ” (*Khnhom*) meaning *I/me* in English is used to talk to the ones who are older than the speaker and it is used for politeness.
- “ត្រា” (*Khnear*) is a word used by a speaker or writer to communicate with a person who has a similar age. It shows intimacy to mean *I/me* in English.
- “អាត្មា” (*Athma*) is a word used by Buddhist monks to mean *I/me* in English.
- “ឯង” (*Ang*) has equal meaning to the pronoun *you* in English. It is used to express intimacy between close friends, or to the ones who are younger than the speaker.
- “អ្នក” (*Neak*) is a polite word that means *you* in English.
- “លោក” (*Louk*) meaning *you* in English is for politeness when used with male people, especially with those who have a higher social position or status.

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- “វា” (*Vea*) can be expressed in an impolite way to refer to *she/her* or *he/him* in English. In addition, this word is equal to the pronoun *it* in English when referring to a thing or an animal, but when we refer to a group of things or animals, it is equal to *they/them* in English.
  - “គេ” (*Ke*) is used with general people to mean *they/them* in English.
  - “គាត់” (*Kat*) means *she/her* or *he/him* in English. This word is used to refer to a person who is older than the speaker.

It can be concluded that the personal pronouns in Khmer have the same words for subject and object pronouns. Unlike English, personal pronouns in Khmer have a lot of alternative words which are equal to a specific personal pronoun in English. In addition, the personal pronouns in Khmer do not have specific gender and number category, but we can identify them by referring to the replaced noun.

The previous studies conducted in different countries have focused on translating personal pronouns from a second or foreign language into a native language, or vice versa, such as in China by Yao (2018), in Saudi Arabia by Al-Jarf (2010), and in Sri Lanka by Rizvi, Saujan, & Munas (2021). On the other hand, the study about students' abilities in translating personal pronouns has not yet been conducted in Cambodia. In Indonesia, Sajarwa (2022) investigated how personal pronouns of French in novels are translated to Indonesian. The finding indicated that the translation applies four strategies, namely pronouns, lexical equivalences, repetitions, and substitutions. However, the previous studies mentioned above did not explore the specific problematic area of translating personal pronouns. Therefore, this current study will bridge the gap by investigating the students' abilities in translating the personal pronouns from Khmer to English, specifically to measure the proportion of the correctness in the translation, and explore the specific problematic area in their translation. This study is very crucial in order to look for the problematic area encountered by the students because knowing the strategies used in translating pronouns alone is not enough. It is necessary to look for the specific errors produced by the learners in order to help them translate personal pronouns better and learn about personal pronouns more. The result of this study will direct the teachers to work mainly on specific error areas. As a guideline, the following questions will be answered.

1. What is the proportion (total percentage) of correct translation?
2. What errors are made by the students in translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English?

## Methods

This study employed the qualitative method because Wang (2018) claimed that the qualitative method suits the research that investigates personal experiences, perspectives, opinions, or challenges, especially it suits interpretation-based research which can identify the problem and solution based on the real context. The study was conducted at Techo Hun Sen Kalaom Pluk High School, a public school, located in Kalaom Pluk Village, Prey Svay Commune, Moung Ruessei District, Battambang Province, Cambodia. The convenience and the purposive sampling methods were applied to select the research site and samples. The convenience sampling method was used for selecting the research site (target school) whereas the purposive sampling method was used for selecting the research samples (target classes). The population was all students in 4 classes of grade 10, 3 classes of grade 11, and 3 classes of grade 12. Having been compared to other levels, 10 graders were considered to be the least mature in terms of English learning experiences while the knowledge of basic English has to be emphasized necessarily. Therefore, it is important to investigate their abilities to translate personal pronouns. This is the reason why the researchers decided to choose all 40 students in a class of grade 10 in semester one of the academic year 2022-2023 as the samples. The instrument used to collect data was a translation exercise that was designed in Khmer. It consisted of 14 items based on the total number of personal pronouns, 7 subject pronouns, and 7 object pronouns. The participants were clearly informed about the purpose of this study before they were given an exercise. After an exercise was given, the researchers carefully read each statement in the exercise one by one to make sure the participants fully understand those items. Then, the participants were asked to translate the exercise individually in the classroom. The framework of Corder (1974) was employed to investigate types of errors. This model categorized errors into 4 types namely omission, addition, selection, and order. The error of omission refers to the absence of the required linguistic items. The error of addition refers to the addition of unnecessary linguistic items. The error of selection refers to the wrong selection of items. The error of ordering means

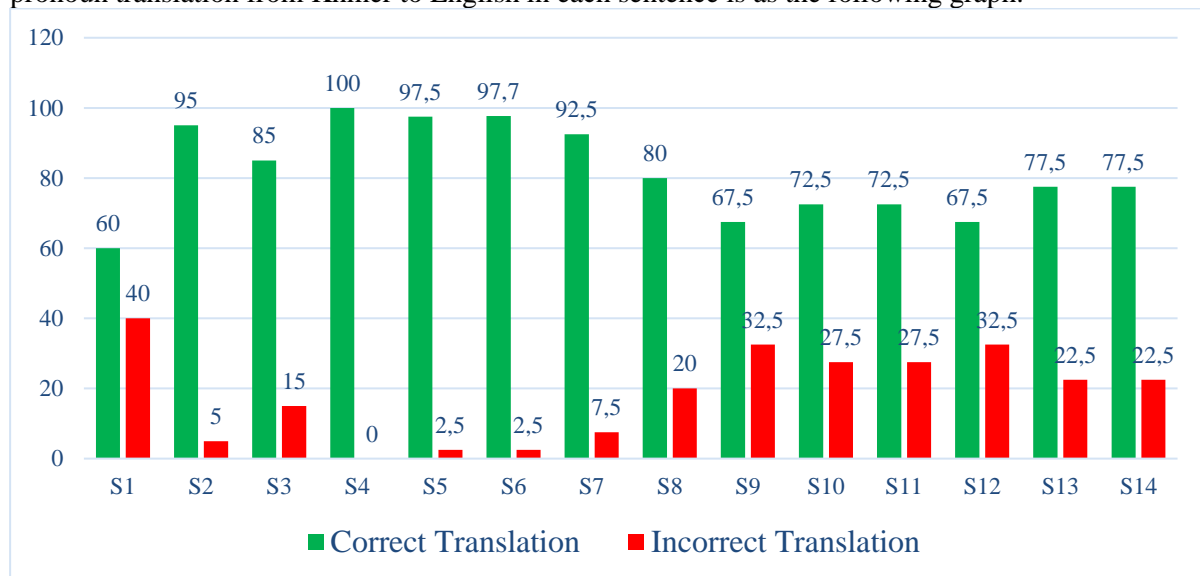
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wrong word order. The data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and illustrated through graphs and pie charts in the form of a percentage.

## Results and Discussion

### The Percentage of the Correct and Incorrect Translation in Each Sentence

According to the research findings, the total percentage of the correct and incorrect personal pronoun translation from Khmer to English in each sentence is as the following graph.



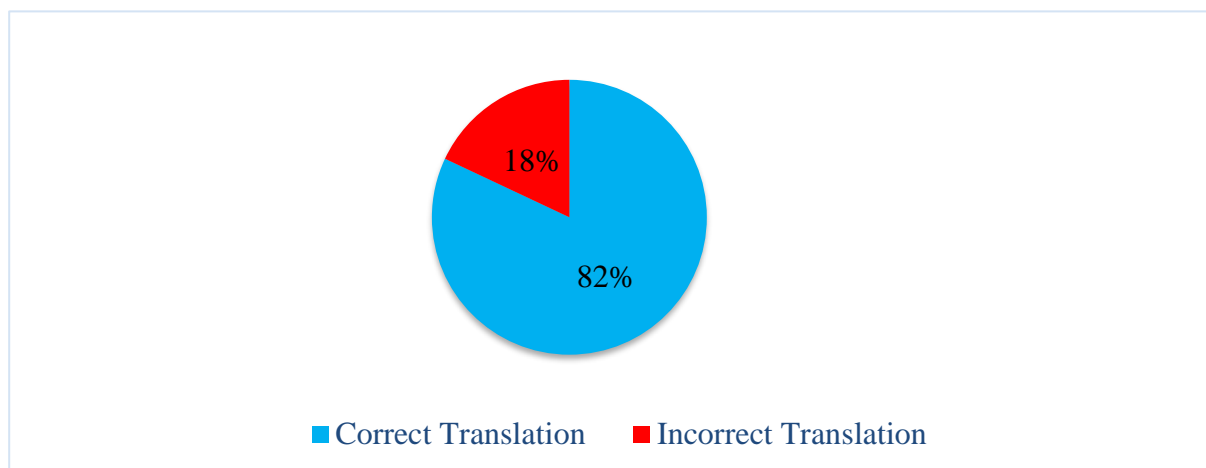
**Figure 1. The Percentage of the Correct and Incorrect Translation in Each Sentence**

Based on the results, sentence number 1 has the highest percentage (40%) in terms of the translation error. It seems that the students are not familiar with the compound sentence as sentence number 1 is a compound sentence. From sentence number 2 to sentence number 7, the proportion of the error is lower than the distribution of the error in sentence number 8 to sentence number 14. Since the pronoun in sentence number 2 to sentence number 7 function as the subject of the sentence, the students seem to have translated them better. However, because the pronoun in sentence number 8 to sentence number 14 function as the object of the sentence, the students seem to be difficult to translate them correctly. The majority of the students left the sentences without translating them. Moreover, most of the students translated only half of the sentence while ignoring the rest of the sentence. This is probably because they lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

When translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English, if the distribution of errors between subject pronouns and object pronouns are compared, it can be seen clearly that the distribution of errors when translating object pronouns are higher than the proportion of errors when translating subject pronouns based on the fact that personal pronouns in sentence number 1 to 7 are used as the subject whereas in sentence 8 to 14 are used as the object pronouns. Another interesting point that should be noticed is that the highest percentage (40%) of the problematic areas lies in sentence number 1 since this item is constructed as a compound sentence. In conclusion, the students have a problem translating object pronouns rather than subject pronouns, and they are not familiar with compound sentences. Therefore, it is suggested that the students should be taught more to differentiate between the use, location, as well as the function of the subject pronouns, and the object pronouns. Additionally, compound sentences should be taught more not just only simple sentences.

### The Overall Percentage of the Correct and Incorrect Translation in the Exercise

Based on the results, the percentage of overall translation exercise is as the following pie chart:

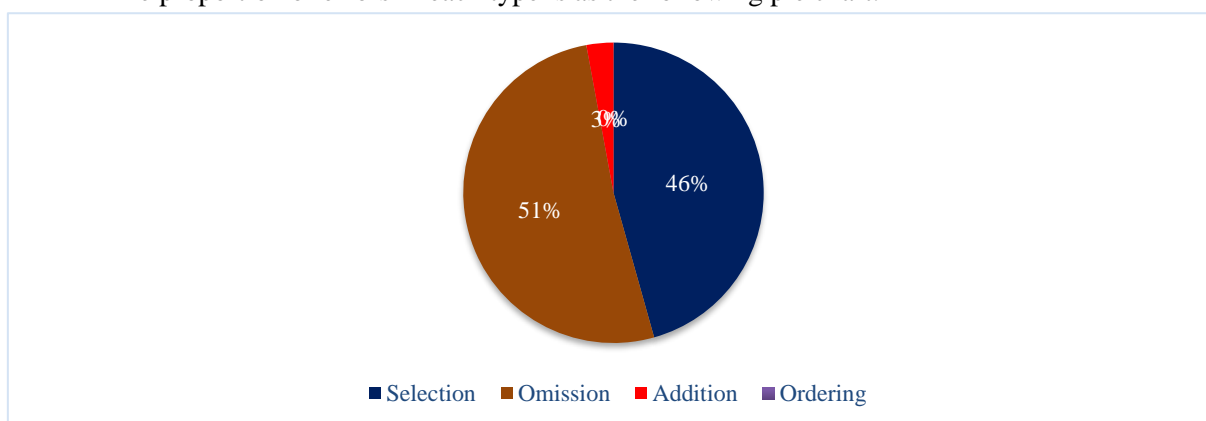


**Figure 2. The Total Percentage of the Correct and Incorrect Translation in the Exercise**

As shown in the pie chart above, the correct translation is 82 % whereas the incorrect translation is just only 18%. In conclusion, the ability of the students in translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English is in a good level. Therefore, the teacher just focuses mainly on the specific types of errors that will be demonstrated in the following section.

### Types of Errors Made by the Students

The proportion of errors in each type is as the following pie chart:

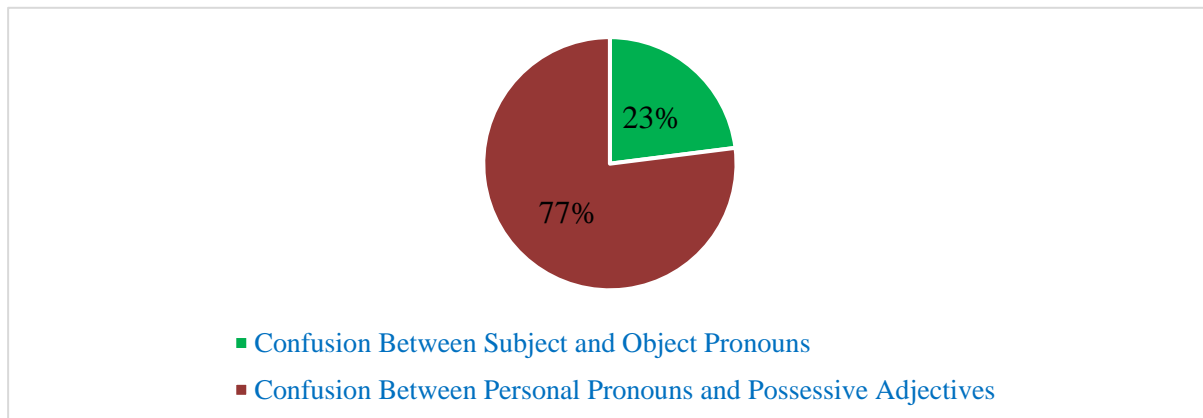


**Figure 3. The Total Percentage of Each Type of Errors in the Translation**

Based on the findings, three types of errors among four proposed by Corder (1974) were revealed. The highest percentage of errors (51%) lied on the omission error which means that the right items are absent. It simply means that the pronoun is absent from the translation. Most cases of missing the pronouns took place because the students left the sentence without translating it. The second highest percentage of errors (46%) is the selection error. Wrong selection simply means that the students did not use the correct pronouns in the translation, yet they used the wrong pair of pronouns. For example, they used a subject instead of an object pronoun vice versa (the wrong pronoun), or other items, but not personal pronouns. Evidently, the students were confused using the subject pronouns, object pronouns, and possessive adjectives as they used all of these items interchangeably in terms of wrong use. The lowest percentage of errors was seen on the addition error which means that unnecessary items are added. It happened in the translation when the students used two pronouns in the same place or add unnecessary items, for instance, the article next to the personal pronoun. However, there were not any errors in terms of the error of ordering. To sum up, the students' errors when translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English lied extensively on the error of the omission, followed respectively by the selection, and the error of addition.

### The Items Found within the Selection Error.

The following pie chart illustrated the percentage of items leading to the wrong selection.



**Figure 4. Types of Items Found in the Selection Error.**

Although there are a lot of possibilities of items that may be selected, the study found only 2 kinds of items that contribute to the wrong selection. They were the confusion between subject and object pronouns, and confusion between personal pronouns and possessive adjectives. The confusion between subject and object pronouns accounted for 77% of errors in the wrong selection, whereas the confusion between personal pronouns and possessive adjectives contributed to 23% of the total percentage of errors in wrong selection. The confusion between subject and object pronouns took place when the students used wrong pronouns, for example, the subject pronoun instead of the object pronoun or vice versa. Additionally, the confusion between personal pronouns and possessive adjectives happened when the students used the personal pronouns instead of the possessive adjectives or vice versa. Obviously, the confusion between subject and object pronouns, and confusion between personal pronouns and possessive adjectives stem from the lack of knowledge to identify the kinds and functions of the personal pronouns in the sentence, especially in the compound sentence.

It is generally acknowledged that difficulties in translation stem from many factors. According to Al-Darawish (as cited in Arono, & Nadrah, 2019), the problems in the translation are generally caused by the linguistic differences between two languages including the different aspects of phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, as well as semantics. Therefore, sentences or syntactic organization will be distinct. Alrishan, & Smadi (2015) investigated the challenges faced by EFL Jordanian University students in translating English Idioms into Arabic. The result showed that the inaccuracy of their translation is due to the shortage of cultural language comprehension of the target language, the cultural language gap between the source language and the target language, and carelessness in English courses as well as in translating English idioms. Pasaribu & Hutahaean (2020) explored students' problems in translating a narrative text from English into Indonesia in grade eight of SMP Negeri 9 Pematangsiantar. The findings revealed that the main difficulty is tense followed respectively by sentence, a phrase, clause, attribute, and indefinite article. Similarly, Alfadly, & AldeibaniFull (2013) analyzed linguistic problems in English-Arabic translations encountered by Yemeni English majors at Hadramout University. The results indicated that lack of grammatical knowledge impedes the students in understanding and translating sentences from English into Arabic or from Arabic into English. Zhiri (2014) examined Moroccan undergraduates' difficulties in translating English tenses and aspects into Arabic. The outcome illustrated that the problem generally lies on the present perfect. The progressive aspect is a problem in the students' translation because they miss associating it with the perfect aspect in order to make the present perfect progressive tense. Consequently, the simple present tense is overused.

Pham, Nguyen, & Pham (2021) measured Vietnamese private university learners' viewpoints towards the problematic areas when they translate an English text into their mother tongue. As the result, background knowledge, lexical, grammatical, and cultural aspects affect their translation. Specifically, the most problematic factor is lexis while the difficulty stems from grammar is less notable. Fitri (2018) observed the Indonesian students' errors in translating plural nouns from Indonesian to English. The types of problems are omission, addition, misformation, and misordering error. Among these errors,

misinformation in alternating form is the most frequent error due to mother tongue interference. Simanjuntak (2019) reported that the students at a university in Indonesia have trouble translating passive voice from English to Indonesian because there are a lot of Indonesian words used to translate into English passive voice based on the context. While translating English passive voice to the passive voice of their native language, they want to know if it should preserve the same form of passive voice of their mother tongue. They are doubtful whether they have to use affixes such as *di-*, *ter-*, or *Ke-an*. According to Baker (2018), it is not easy to look for a category that has regular and uniformed expressions across languages. In grammatical categories, translators face many difficulties as the source language and the target language may be different in terms of number, gender, person, tense and aspect, and voice.

## Conclusion

In this study, the researchers investigated the students' abilities in translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English. Specifically, the researchers explored the total percentage of the correct and incorrect translation in each sentence as well as in the overall translation exercise, and the types of errors in their translation. According to the results, it can be concluded that the ability of students in translating personal pronouns from Khmer to English is at a good level (with 82% of correctness). Furthermore, three types of errors were found. Among the types of errors, the error of omission (51%) was predominant followed respectively by the error of selection (46%), and the error of addition (3%). Since the students are confused in making a decision about whether to use the subject pronoun or object pronoun or the possessive adjective, it can be assumed that the errors are caused by the lack of knowledge to identify the types, uses, and functions of the personal pronouns, and unfamiliarity with compound sentences. Therefore, it is suggested that the teacher should further clarify the kinds, uses, and functions of personal pronouns in English as well as to differentiate between personal pronouns and possessive adjectives. Ultimately, the researchers recommend that the teacher should familiarize the students with other kinds of sentences, especially compound sentences as knowing only simple sentences is not enough.

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