

Negotiating Cultural References in Folktale Translation: A Student Translator's Decision-Making Process

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ABSTRACT

Culture-specific references often become one of the most challenging aspects of translating Indonesian folktales into English. Translators are expected to preserve cultural meanings embedded in the source text while at the same time producing a translation that can be understood by target readers. This paper examines how a student translator dealt with this challenge when translating *Asal Usul Sompil Gripis di Umbul Pengging*, a Javanese folktale rich in local cultural references and wayang-related terminology. This study employed a qualitative case study design within the framework of Translation Process Research. Data were collected from the translator's draft, translation quality assessment, and retrospective interview. The analysis focused on culture-related items, including personal names, social titles, forms of address, and local cultural terms. Several interesting patterns emerged from the data. Although the translator repeatedly stated that preserving meaning was more important than readability, many translation decisions were influenced by assumptions about international readers. For example, *Dewi Sembadra* was rendered as *Princess Subhadra*, while names such as *Kresna*, *Karno*, and *Sengkuni* were replaced with the forms *Krishna*, *Karna*, and *Shakuni* after the translator consulted English-language sources. Terms without close English equivalents, such as *sendang*, were retained and explained through footnotes. Paraphrase was also frequently used to avoid what the translator perceived as awkward or overly literal expressions. These strategies generally improved readability, yet some of them reduced cultural specificity and affected translation accuracy. The findings suggest that translation decisions

are shaped not only by linguistic considerations but also by the translator's perception of who the target readers are and what they are expected to understand.

Keywords: cultural references, readability, translation process, folktale translation, student translator

INTRODUCTION

Translating local folklore is more than just swapping words between languages; it involves a complex process of sharing culture and ideas across borders (Alangari, 2022; Baker, 2018; Bassnett, 2013; Zuo et al., 2023). When a story is deeply rooted in Javanese wayang traditions, the translator must act as a bridge between two different worlds (Hatim & Mason, 1990). They need to connect a very specific local worldview with what a foreign, usually Western, reader already knows (Berman, 1992; House, 2018). This balancing act is especially stressful for student translators. Novice writers frequently find themselves stuck trying to obey the strict theoretical rules they learned in class while also trying to produce something that readers can easily accept and enjoy (An & Tan, 2024; Hurtado Albir, 2015; PACTE, 2003).

Ever since the "cultural turn" changed the landscape of translation studies (Lefevere, 1992; Munday, 2016), scholars have agreed that translation is never a completely neutral activity. It is always influenced by the values and pressures of the target culture (Even-Zohar, 1990; Hermans, 1999). Venuti conceptualized this struggle through the famous ideas of domestication and foreignization. Domestication brings the text closer to the target reader's familiar world, while foreignization forces the reader to encounter the cultural differences of the original text (Venuti, 1995). For student translators turning local Indonesian tales into a global language like English, the urge to domesticate the text is usually very strong, mostly because foreign audiences have completely different cultural backgrounds, even if this goes against academic training (He & Su, 2022; Pym & Aylvazyan, 2017; Zheng & Xiang, 2018).

Existing translation literature offers many useful ways to identify and handle Culture-Specific Items, or CSIs (Aixelá, 1996; Davies, 2003; Zuo et al., 2023). Earlier theories about dynamic equivalence and translation shifts also give us strong tools to analyze the final text (Catford, 1965; Nida, 1964). However, there is still very little research on what actually goes on in a student translator's mind while they work. Most traditional studies focus only on the finished product (Holmes, 1988; Toury, 2012). This approach completely misses the

real-time struggles, the pausing, the heavy backspacing, and the moments of hesitation, that happen at the keyboard during the active writing phase (Abdel Latif, 2025; Dong & Li, 2020; Englund Dimitrova, 2005).

To really understand how cultural translation skills develop, we must watch the process itself. Recent studies confirm that tracking real-time writing habits shows exactly how student translators manage heavy cognitive demands (Carl & Schaeffer, 2017; Rojo López et al., 2024). Why does a translator decide to delete a whole sentence instead of explaining it? Why do they change a local spiritual title into a common Western one? How long do they pause before giving up on finding a perfect English word? We can only answer these questions by observing their behavior in real-time (Gouadec, 2007; Jakobsen, 2011; Muñoz Martín, 2016). Therefore, this study tracks the step-by-step translation process of a 78-sentence Javanese folktale, "*Asal Usul Sompil Gripis di Umbul Pengging*," into English. By combining keystroke tracking data with translation quality scores and a post-task interview, this paper shows the gap between what a student translator plans to do and what they actually do during the task.

METHOD

We grounded this investigation within the Translation Process Research paradigm, using an embedded qualitative single-case study design (Jakobsen, 2011; Yin, 2014). We observed a translation project done by a student translator, who was asked to translate a Central Javanese folktale into English. Based on the preliminary interview, the participant is a sixth-semester English Education major who has completed formal coursework in Translation Theory and Translation Practice. To establish a solid baseline of linguistic competence, the participant was specifically selected based on his advanced English proficiency, evidenced by an outstanding TOEFL score of 617. This critical criterion confirmed that any translation difficulties and temporal delays encountered during the task were not caused by a lack of foundational English grammar or vocabulary, but rather by the heavy cognitive demands of cultural transfer. To ensure our findings were clear and reliable, we collected data from three different sources.

First, we recorded the real-time writing process using Translog software, which is an industry-standard tool for tracking keyboard behaviors and keylogging experiments (Carl & Schaeffer, 2017; Dragsted, 2004; Rustandi, 2023). This software tracked the total time taken, counts every keystroke (both typing and deleting), and measures how many milliseconds the translator paused before

translating difficult cultural terms. This gave us a clear map of his mental effort and moments of hesitation.

Second, we assessed the quality of the final translation. We used Nababan's Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) model, which judges the final text independently from the software logs (Nababan et al., 2012). Every single sentence in the story got a score from 1 to 3 for Accuracy (meaning), Acceptability (naturalness in the target culture), and Readability (how easy it is to comprehend) (House, 2018).

Third, we conducted a retrospective interview right after the task. We asked the translator to explain his thought process behind specific word choices, deletions, and long pauses (Gile, 2009).

Finally, we compared the software data with the TQA scores to spot sentences that required a lot of effort but received low accuracy scores. We then used the interview answers to understand why he made those choices, focusing heavily on how he treated *wayang* names, titles, local places, and deleted sentences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at all the data together reveals a big difference between the translator's personal goals and his actual writing habits. During the interview, he confidently stated that accuracy was his main focus: "I always try to prioritize the accuracy of meaning over readability ... I believe that meaning accuracy is more important than readability." However, the software logs and final scores tell a different story. Instead of staying completely faithful to the source text, he naturally adjusted his translation to meet the expectations of his international readers (House, 2018).

1. *The Mental Effort in Translating Cultural Terms*

The Translog software provides a clear picture of how hard the translation process was. Translating folklore is rarely straightforward; it involves heavy cognitive behaviors like generating ideas, revising, and retrieving information (Englund Dimitrova, 2005; Rustandi, 2023). The whole session took 5 hours, 31 minutes, and 5 seconds straight. During this time, he made 9,184 total keystrokes, which included 6,948 insertions and 1,086 deletions.

Because of the high number of deletions, it is clear he did not just type straight through. He constantly changed his mind, deleted, and made continuous self-corrections (Silaban et al., 2022). The software recorded some very long pauses right before he typed Javanese terms. In fact, his longest pause lasted nearly 6 minutes (349,906 milliseconds) just before typing the letter "B" for a difficult character name. Another pause of over 5 minutes (348,109 milliseconds)

happened shortly after. These long breaks and heavy rewrites almost always happened around Culture-Specific Items (CSIs). This proves that translating culture takes a massive amount of mental effort and forces the brain to pause and analyze the options carefully (Abdel Latif, 2025; Jakobsen, 2011; Nitzke, 2019; Sun, 2016).

Table 1:
Translog Evidence

Indicator	Result	Interpretation
Total duration	5 hours 31 minutes	The task required sustained cognitive effort, showing that the translation process was not simple or linear.
Total events/keystrokes	9,184	The translator actively produced, edited, and reformulated the target text.
Insertions	6,948	The translator developed the translation through continuous text production.
Deletions	1,086	The translator revised or removed earlier choices, indicating evaluation and decision-making.
Longest keystroke pause	349,906 ms	This pause appeared around culturally loaded references such as Dewata , Lord Nagaraja , and Sendang Penganten .
Second longest keystroke pause	348,109 ms	This pause appeared around culturally sensitive dialogue involving Raden Arjuna , Princess Subhadra , Uncle Shakuni , and Commander Shakuni .

2. Changing Javanese Names to Sanskrit Forms

When looking at the final translation, there was a major shift in how names were spelled. The translator ignored Javanese spelling rules and used the classical Sanskrit versions instead. Table 1 shows these changes clearly.

Table 2:
Changing Javanese Names to Sanskrit Forms

Source Text	Target Text	Interpretation
Kresna	Krishna	Shifted into a more globally recognized Indian epic form.
Baladewa	Baladeva	Adapted toward Sanskrit spelling.
Karno	Karna	Repositioned from Javanese wayang form into Indian epic form.
Sengkuni	Shakuni	Replaced with the Sanskritized name commonly found in English references.
Sembadra	Subhadra	Adapted into a more internationally recognizable epic name.
Gatutkaca	Ghatotkacha	Shifted from Javanese wayang spelling to Sanskritized spelling.
Werkudara	Vrkodara	Replaced with a Sanskrit form, making the Javanese naming less visible.
Sadewa	Sahadeva	Adapted into Indian epic spelling.
Burisarawa	Bhoorishrava	Shifted into Sanskritized spelling.
Dursasana	Dushshasana	Adapted into a Sanskrit/Indian epic form.
Aswatama	Ashvatthama	Adapted into Sanskritized spelling.

As seen in Table 2, this was not just a small styling choice. It was a major change affecting fifteen different names in the story. The interview revealed why he did this: while translating, he got stuck and searched for the characters on open-source digital encyclopedias (Sycz-Opoń, 2019). He noticed that English-language reference sites use the Sanskrit spelling. He decided to prioritize what foreign readers are used to over the original Javanese text. He explained: "I kept the international target readers in mind... modifying the spelling of these names will make them more familiar to an international audience." While this strategy made the text flow perfectly for English readers, it wiped out the unique Javanese feel of the story (Venuti, 1995; Zheng

& Xiang, 2018). By following global trends, he accidentally turned a local Javanese tale into a generic Indian epic.

3. *The Loss of Spiritual Meaning in Social Titles*

Another drop in accuracy happened when he translated social titles. Javanese social status is complex, mixing political power with spiritual purity (Baker, 2018). Every time the text mentioned "*Dewi Sembadra*" (12 times in total), he translated it as "*Princess Subhadra*". Similarly, "*Adipati Karno*" became "*Grand Duke Karna*", and "*Patih Sengkuni*" became "*Commander Shakuni*".

During the interview, he justified this by saying that since *Dewi Sembadra* is *King Basudewa*'s daughter, she is technically a princess. However, this shows a gap in cultural understanding (Chesterman, 1997). In Javanese culture, "*Dewi*" is not just a royal rank; it carries a sacred, almost divine meaning. Translating it as "*Princess*" forces a Western royal concept onto a Javanese myth (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997). Because he stripped away this cultural depth, the TQA Accuracy score for these sentences dropped to a 2 (Nababan et al., 2012). By trying to make the text easier to read, he changed the core identity of the character. The details of the loss of spiritual meaning in social titles can be observed on Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3:
Titles Lost Cultural Depth

Social Title in the Source Text	Translation in the Target Text	Dominant Technique	Impact on Cultural Meaning	Impact on Translation Quality
Raden	Raden	Borrowing + footnote	The Javanese noble title is preserved, while the footnote helps readers understand its meaning.	Accuracy is generally maintained.
Dewi	Princess	Adaptation	The female royal status is conveyed, but the Javanese/wayang nuance of Dewi is reduced.	Readable, but some cultural accuracy is lost.
Prabu	King	Established equivalent / literal equivalent	The royal status is conveyed, but the local meaning of Prabu is weakened.	Generally acceptable and easy to understand.
Patih	Commander	Adaptation	The leadership role is conveyed, but Patih as a royal official or chief adviser is not fully represented.	Readable, but culturally less accurate.
Adipati	Grand Duke	Adaptation	The aristocratic status is conveyed, but the title is shifted into a European nobility system.	Acceptable, but domesticated.
Dewa	Lord	Adaptation	The sacred or divine meaning is partly conveyed, but the Hindu-Javanese religious nuance is reduced.	Acceptable, but not fully equivalent.
Kakanda / Dinda / Paman / Anakku / Cucuku	Dear / Uncle / My son / omitted	Adaptation, reduction, literal translation	Kinship, hierarchy, and emotional closeness are partly conveyed, but some nuances of respect are lost.	Natural in English, but reduction may lower accuracy.

Table 4:
Social Title Frequency

Social Title Pattern	Frequency in Source Text	Main Translation Pattern
Dewi	24 occurrences	Mostly translated as Princess
Prabu	16 occurrences	Mostly translated as King
Patih	14 occurrences	Translated as Commander
Raden	7 occurrences	Retained as Raden with footnote
Adipati	1 occurrence	Translated as Grand Duke
Dewa	5 occurrences	Mostly translated as Lord

4. *Handling Untranslatable Local Terms*

Translators often struggle when dealing with local places that do not exist in the target language (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). When he

had to translate the word "*Sendang*", dictionaries suggested "water spring." But he knew that was not quite right. He explained his thought process: "When I tried translating it via Google, the result was 'water spring'. But then I thought, a 'water spring' refers to the water source itself, not the pond... there is simply no exact equivalent in the target language."

To solve this problem without losing meaning, he kept the original Javanese word ("*Sendang Penganten*") and added a footnote to explain it (Aixelá, 1996). He wrote at the bottom: "*Sendang is a pond which its source of water came from a water spring. used by people to bath*". This smart combination of keeping the foreign word and adding an explanation kept the Javanese culture alive while helping foreign readers understand. As a result, these sentences received a perfect score of 3 for all quality metrics.

Table 5:
Retention Worked Better for Untranslatable Terms

Cultural Term in ST	Translation in TT	Strategy	Interpretation
Sendang Penganten	Sendang Penganten	Borrowing + explanation	The term was retained to preserve the local name of a culturally specific bathing place.
Sendang Ngabeyan	Sendang Ngabeyan	Borrowing + explanation	The original name was maintained to show that it refers to a specific local bathing place.
Sendang Dudho Raden	Sendang Dudho Raden	Borrowing + explanation Borrowing + footnote	Retention helped preserve the cultural geography of Umbul Pengging. The Javanese noble title was retained and explained to support reader comprehension.
Dewata	The Dewata	Borrowing / retention	The spiritual term was retained to avoid reducing its Hindu-Javanese meaning into a less precise English equivalent.
Pandawa	The Pandavas	Borrowing + explanation	The group name was retained/adapted with explanatory support to help readers recognize the epic reference.
Kurawa	The Kauravas	Borrowing + explanation	The term was preserved as an epic group name and supported by a footnote.

5. *Deleting Crucial Parts of the Folktale*

The most surprising choice he made was completely deleting a sentence: "*Itulah sebabnya sompil-sompil di Umbul Pengging menjadi geripis atau tumpul*". Because he skipped it, the Accuracy score for that part crashed to a 1.

In the interview, he admitted he did it on purpose because he felt it was repetitive, since previous paragraphs already described the clams being crushed. He said: "Yes, this was a fully conscious decision... I felt the sentence was repetitive, so I deleted it."

While deleting it definitely made the English text shorter and more direct (Gutt, 2000), it ruined the purpose of the folktale. In Javanese storytelling, repetition is normal. More importantly, that specific sentence is the core of the myth, it explains exactly why the clams in that specific spring are blunt today. By removing it, he sacrificed the story's cultural meaning just to make the English sound slightly better.

Table 6:
Deletion Reduced Accuracy

Source Text	Target Text	Quality Impact	Interpretation
Itulah sebabnya sompil-sompil di Umbul Pengging menjadi geripis atau tumpul.	Deleted	Accuracy: 1, Acceptability: 1, Readability: 1	The sentence explains the origin of <i>Sompil Gripis</i> . Its deletion removes the cultural and narrative explanation of the folktale.

6. Paraphrasing for Natural English Flow

The typing logs also showed that he spent a lot of time restructuring sentences by paraphrasing. Javanese stories often use passive voices or indirect wording that sound awkward if translated literally into English. He actively changed these structures. For example, he changed "*Cobalah lihat di kaca paesan... Siapa tahu kita mendapat petunjuk penyebab sakitnya Dinda Dewi Sembadra*" into "*try to take a look at the Paesan Mirror... We might get a hint on Princess Subhadra's illness*".

The TQA scores show that this paraphrasing was very effective. It made the text flow smoothly and helped his English sound natural and varied, rather than stiff and robotic.

7. Overall Translation Quality Scores

All these thousands of typing choices, pauses, and edits directly affected the final scores of the 78-sentence text. When we averaged the TQA scores, his true priorities became clear:

- Mean Accuracy: 2.72 / 3.00
- Mean Acceptability: 2.90 / 3.00
- Mean Readability: 2.96 / 3.00

These numbers are very telling. The text scored extremely high in Readability (2.96) and Acceptability (2.90), proving that the student can write excellent, natural English prose (Hvelplund, 2016). However, the Accuracy score (2.72) was noticeably lower. This proves that no matter how much a student claims they want to stay faithful to the original text, the pressure to make the English sound good for international readers usually wins (Rojo López et al., 2024). His desire to produce a smooth English text led him to sacrifice the cultural truth of the Javanese story, creating a highly domesticated translation (Munday, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Translating folklore is a constant battle between saving local culture and making sure foreigners can understand the text. This study shows that a student translator's actual writing process often goes against what they claim they want to do (Alves & Gonçalves, 2019; Toury, 2012). Even though the translator said he valued

accuracy, his typing logs and final translation showed a heavy reliance on adapting the text for Western readers (An & Tan, 2024; Venuti, 1995). By changing Javanese names to Sanskrit, turning spiritual titles into regular royal ranks, and deleting the main conclusion of the myth, he lost the unique Javanese flavor of the story. He succeeded in making the text highly readable, but he did so by sacrificing its local identity.

Moving forward, translation classes need to teach students more than just vocabulary and grammar (Kussmaul, 1995; Massey, 2017). Teachers must help students realize how their small editing choices and assumptions about their readers can completely change how a culture is represented (Pym & Ayvazyan, 2017). Without this awareness, student translators will continue to inadvertently flatten local stories just to make them easier for foreigners to read.

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