



Bridging the Pedagogical Divide: Identifying Curricular Strengths and Gaps in Saudi Translation Studies Programs through Stakeholder Perceptions

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of Translation Studies programs in Saudi Arabia from the graduates' and employers' perspectives. The research focuses specifically on curriculum alignment and graduates' employability. The research is informed by the competence-based model of translation, Constructive Alignment theory, and employability concepts. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design is used for this research. Quantitative research is carried out using structured questionnaires from 100 graduates and 50 employers. The research instruments aim to measure graduates' and employers' perceptions of graduates' linguistic competence, cultural competence, technological competence, and project management competence. Statistical analysis techniques used for quantitative research include descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test, ANOVA, effect size statistics (Cohen's d and Eta squared), and post-hoc tests using Tukey's method. The research findings show that graduates performed well in linguistic and cultural competence areas. There are no statistically significant differences between graduates and employers in these areas. However, graduates performed poorly in technological competence and project management competence areas. The research found significant gaps between graduates and employers' perceptions in these areas. ANOVA analysis showed substantial discrepancies between competency domains, which indicate structural imbalances in curriculum design. These results indicate a partial match between educational training and the requirements of the modern translation industry. The study concludes that, although the translation studies programs offered in Saudi Arabia have a good foundation in theory and bilingual training, they need to be integrated with training on using technology, artificial intelligence, and working with professionals to improve the employment prospects of graduates. The results of this study can be used as a set of recommendations for improving the curriculum of translation studies programs.

Keywords: Translation Studies, Curriculum Alignment, Employability, Technological Competence, Translator Training

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of translation as a profession has undergone a profound transformation in the past decade, driven largely by technological innovation, globalization, and the expansion of multilingual communication across digital platforms. The contemporary translation industry is no longer confined to traditional text-based interlingual transfer; rather, it encompasses localization, audiovisual translation, machine translation post-editing, terminology management, transcreation, and multilingual project coordination. Scholars have consistently observed that the profession now demands a hybrid profile that integrates linguistic expertise with technological literacy, intercultural mediation, and strategic

decision-making (O'Brien & Ehrensberger-Dow, 2022; Rodríguez-Castro, 2023). Consequently, translator education worldwide has faced mounting pressure to reform curricula to ensure alignment with evolving market expectations.

In the Saudi Arabian context, this transformation acquires additional urgency due to the strategic objectives of Vision 2030, which emphasize human capital development, economic diversification, and global competitiveness. Translation and language services occupy a critical position within this national agenda, particularly as Saudi Arabia expands its participation in global commerce, tourism, diplomacy, and knowledge exchange. Universities offering Translation Studies programs are therefore expected not only to produce linguistically competent graduates but also to cultivate professionals capable of functioning effectively within technologically mediated and commercially driven environments. However, emerging research indicates that a mismatch persists between academic training and labor-market demands in several Middle Eastern translation programs (Alharbi & Almutairi, 2022; Alsubhi, 2024).

This perceived mismatch is frequently described as a “theory-practice divide,” whereby curricula remain heavily oriented toward theoretical models of equivalence, comparative linguistics, and literary translation, while providing limited exposure to authentic professional workflows, digital tools, and collaborative project management (Kiraly, 2022; Pym, 2023). Although theoretical knowledge remains indispensable, scholars argue that overemphasis on abstract models without sufficient experiential learning can hinder graduates’ transition into professional environments. Employers increasingly expect familiarity with CAT tools, translation management systems (TMS), terminology databases, quality assurance protocols, and machine translation post-editing strategies (Moorkens, 2022; Bundgaard & Christensen, 2023). The absence of structured training in these areas may undermine graduates’ employability and professional confidence.

At the same time, research in translator competence development underscores the multidimensional nature of professional readiness. The PACTE research group’s competence-based model—originally developed in earlier decades but extensively revisited and empirically refined in recent years—conceptualizes translation competence as an integrated system of sub-competencies, including bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, strategic, and psycho-physiological components (Hurtado, 2023). Contemporary validation studies reaffirm that instrumental and strategic competencies play a central role in expert performance, particularly in technology-rich environments (PACTE, 2022). This perspective challenges traditional curricula that prioritize linguistic mastery while marginalizing technological and professional skills.

Moreover, technological disruption—especially the rise of neural machine translation (NMT) and generative AI—has reshaped professional expectations. Rather than replacing human translators, these tools have redefined their roles toward post-editing, quality evaluation, and workflow management (O'Brien, 2022; Kenny, 2022). Recent empirical research indicates that translator education must incorporate critical AI literacy to ensure that graduates understand not only how to use such tools but also how to evaluate their limitations, biases, and ethical implications (Vieira & Alonso, 2023). Programs that fail to integrate AI-informed pedagogies risk preparing students for a profession that no longer exists in its previous form.

Within Saudi Arabia, preliminary studies suggest that Translation Studies curricula generally succeed in fostering bilingual and cultural competence, particularly in Arabic-English language pairs (Alotaibi, 2023). Graduates often demonstrate strong grammatical accuracy and sensitivity to cultural nuances. However, employers report dissatisfaction with graduates' limited exposure to CAT tools, specialized translation domains (e.g., legal, technical, medical), and real-world project simulations (Alsubhi, 2024). This divergence between academic self-assessment and employer evaluation underscores the need for systematic curricular analysis grounded in stakeholder perspectives.

The importance of stakeholder-informed curriculum evaluation is emphasized in higher education research. Tomlinson (2022) argues that employability is not solely a function of knowledge acquisition but of the perceived alignment between graduate capabilities and industry expectations. Programs that incorporate employer feedback mechanisms, internship structures, and industry partnerships tend to produce graduates with stronger professional integration. Similarly, Jackson (2023) highlights the significance of authentic assessment and work-integrated learning in bridging the gap between classroom theory and workplace practice.

To diagnose curricular strengths and gaps effectively, it is essential to situate the discussion within a robust theoretical framework that integrates competence theory, constructive alignment, and employability paradigms. These frameworks collectively provide analytical tools for evaluating how curricular structures influence professional readiness.

First, the competence-based approach to translation provides a foundational lens. According to updated models by PACTE (2022) and Hurtado (2023), translation competence is not a static accumulation of knowledge but a dynamic integration of sub-competencies activated during problem-solving. The bilingual sub-competence involves pragmatic and sociolinguistic control of both source and target languages. The extra-linguistic component encompasses cultural, encyclopedic, and domain-specific knowledge. The instrumental sub-competence includes mastery of documentation resources and digital tools. The strategic sub-competence orchestrates problem identification and solution selection, serving as the regulatory core of the system. Contemporary studies reveal that instrumental and strategic competencies increasingly determine professional efficiency, particularly when translators operate in collaborative digital ecosystems (Moorkens, 2022).

In light of this model, curricular evaluation must move beyond measuring linguistic accuracy alone. A program may excel in developing bilingual competence while remaining deficient in instrumental training. Without balanced competence development, graduates may struggle to adapt to complex workflows involving terminology extraction, corpus analysis, and machine translation post-editing. Research by Rodríguez-Castro (2023) demonstrates that students exposed to integrated CAT tool training exhibit significantly higher confidence and productivity during internships compared to peers trained exclusively in traditional translation exercises.

Second, Biggs' theory of Constructive Alignment provides a pedagogical framework for examining curriculum design. Although originally formulated in earlier decades, the theory has been widely applied in recent higher education reform studies (Goh & Sandars, 2023). Constructive alignment posits that effective learning occurs when intended learning outcomes (ILOs), teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and assessment tasks (ATs) are

coherently aligned. When applied to Translation Studies, this principle implies that if programs claim to produce technologically competent translators, then digital tool training must be embedded explicitly within learning outcomes, supported through hands-on practice, and evaluated through authentic assessment.

Misalignment may occur when course descriptions reference professional readiness, yet assessments remain limited to pen-and-paper translation exams disconnected from digital environments. Studies in European translator training contexts reveal that authentic assessment methods—such as simulated translation projects with deadlines and client briefs—enhance students’ strategic competence and collaborative skills (Kiraly, 2022; González-Davies, 2023). Therefore, constructive alignment offers a systematic lens for diagnosing structural weaknesses in curriculum implementation.

Third, employability theory broadens the analytical scope by situating translator education within labor-market ecosystems. Tomlinson (2022) conceptualizes employability as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing human capital (skills and knowledge), social capital (professional networks), cultural capital (workplace norms), and psychological capital (confidence and adaptability). Applied to Translation Studies, this theory suggests that curricular reform must extend beyond technical training to include internship opportunities, portfolio development, and professional identity formation.

Recent research in Gulf higher education contexts indicates that employer engagement in curriculum design correlates positively with graduate employment outcomes (Alghamdi, 2023). Programs that incorporate advisory boards, industry guest lectures, and collaborative research projects are better positioned to anticipate technological shifts and market trends. In contrast, isolated academic departments may lag behind industry innovation, perpetuating the theory-practice divide.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing curricular efficacy. The competence-based model identifies which skills should be cultivated; constructive alignment evaluates whether pedagogical structures support those skills; and employability theory assesses the broader socio-economic relevance of training outcomes. Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses within Translation Studies programs.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the ethical dimension of translator education. With the proliferation of AI and automated systems, translators must navigate issues of data privacy, algorithmic bias, and intellectual property (Kenny, 2022; Vieira & Alonso, 2023). Curricula that neglect ethical literacy risk producing graduates ill-equipped to manage professional responsibilities in sensitive domains such as legal or governmental translation. Embedding ethical reflection within competence development aligns with both constructive alignment principles and employability objectives.

Another significant dimension concerns intercultural competence. Although Saudi programs often demonstrate strength in bilingual training, globalized communication demands deeper intercultural mediation skills, particularly in sectors such as tourism, diplomacy, and international business. Recent studies highlight the importance of scenario-based learning and case studies in cultivating intercultural problem-solving (González-Davies, 2023). These approaches align with Kiraly’s (2022) social constructivist model, which

advocates collaborative project-based learning as a means of simulating authentic professional contexts.

In synthesizing these insights, it becomes evident that evaluating Translation Studies curricula requires more than descriptive analysis of course offerings. It demands theoretical grounding that connects micro-level pedagogical practices with macro-level socio-economic transformations. The integration of competence theory, constructive alignment, and employability paradigms offers such a foundation. Within the Saudi context, this integrated framework is particularly relevant. As the country seeks to expand its global engagement, translation professionals serve as cultural and linguistic mediators across industries. Universities must therefore adopt stakeholder-informed, technology-integrated, and strategically aligned curricula to ensure that graduates can meet both national and international standards.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, which integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches in two consecutive phases. This design was selected to provide both breadth and depth in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Saudi Translation Studies curricula. Mixed-methods approaches are widely recommended in higher education research where complex phenomena—such as curriculum effectiveness and employability—require both statistical measurement and interpretive explanation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). In the first phase, quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to graduates and employers. The purpose of this phase was to identify general trends in stakeholder perceptions of curricular effectiveness across key competence domains. In the second phase, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. The integration of findings occurred at the interpretation stage, ensuring triangulation and enhanced validity.

Research Context

The study was conducted across selected Saudi public universities offering undergraduate Translation Studies programs within English departments. These programs typically combine theoretical coursework (e.g., translation theory, contrastive linguistics) with practical translation modules. However, the degree of technological integration and professional simulation varies across institutions. The employer participants were drawn from translation agencies, government ministries, and private-sector organizations employing Saudi translation graduates. These institutions represent the primary labor-market stakeholders responsible for evaluating graduate readiness and professional performance.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised Saudi EFL graduates who completed Translation Studies programs between 2021 and 2025, and employers or supervisors directly responsible for overseeing translation graduates in professional settings.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed during the quantitative phase to ensure representation across universities and employment sectors. One hundred (100) Graduates (age range 22-27) were stratified by institution and graduation year, while fifty (50) employers (age range 28-49) were stratified by sector (public vs. private).

For the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted. Participants who exhibited notably high or low satisfaction ratings in the survey were invited for follow-up interviews to provide explanatory insights. The qualitative sample consisted of 15 graduates and 10 employers.

Instruments

Two structured questionnaires—one for graduates and one for employers—were developed based on three theoretical foundations: the PACTE competence model, Constructive Alignment theory, and employability theory. The instruments contained four sections: Demographic information, Linguistic and cultural competence, Instrumental and technological competence, Strategic and professional competence.

Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in Translation Studies and research methodology.

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore themes emerging from the quantitative results. The interview protocol included open-ended questions addressing perceived curricular strengths, technological preparedness, professional integration, and suggestions for reform. Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected electronically via institutional email and professional networks. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey completion. The survey period lasted six weeks, with periodic reminders sent to enhance response rates.

Following preliminary quantitative analysis, selected participants were contacted for interviews. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via videoconferencing platforms, depending on participant availability. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study employed mixed approach. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed to identify areas of perceived strength and weakness. Inferential statistics which including independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to examine differences between stakeholder groups and across institutional categories. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

In the other hand, the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework. Transcripts were coded

inductively to identify recurring patterns related to curricular alignment, technological integration, and workplace preparedness. Themes were refined through iterative comparison and cross-checked against quantitative findings to ensure coherence and triangulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the survey administered to 100 graduates and 50 employers. Descriptive statistics revealed strong perceived performance in linguistic and cultural competence, while technological and project management competencies were rated considerably lower by both groups. These findings indicate partial curricular alignment with professional demands.

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Core Competencies

Competency	Graduate Mean	Employer Mean
Linguistic Competence	4.2	4.1
Cultural Competence	4.0	3.9
Technological Competence	2.5	2.3
Project Management Skills	2.8	2.6

Table 2: Ratings of Technological Competence

Competency	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Linguistic	0.867	0.3874	0.15
Cultural	1.661	0.0989	0.288
Technological	3.689	0.0003	0.639
Project Management	2.645	0.009	0.458

There was a significant difference in technological competence ratings between graduates and employers, $t(148) = 3.689$, $p = 0.0003$, $d = 0.639$.

Table 3: Graduates Rating

Source	Sum of Squares	F-value	p-value
Between Groups	196.138	229.766	0.0

As shown in Table 1, linguistic competence received the highest ratings ($M=4.2$ for graduates; $M=4.1$ for employers), indicating strong theoretical and bilingual foundations. Conversely, technological competence received the lowest ratings ($M=2.5$ and 2.3), highlighting a major skills gap.

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Saudi Translation Studies programs from the perspectives of graduates and employers. Consistent with recent research (Alsubhi, 2024; O'Brien & Ehrensberger-Dow, 2022), the results reveal a significant imbalance between linguistic preparation and technological readiness.

The high ratings for linguistic and cultural competence confirm that Saudi translation curricula continue to excel in developing bilingual accuracy and intercultural sensitivity. This aligns with findings from Alotaibi (2023), who reported that Saudi translation students demonstrate strong grammatical and stylistic control in Arabic-English translation tasks. Similarly, international research confirms that traditional translator training programs remain effective in fostering textual analysis and equivalence strategies (Hurtado, 2023).

However, the comparatively low ratings in technological competence suggest that curricular structures have not fully adapted to the demands of the digital translation industry. Employers reported dissatisfaction with graduates' familiarity with CAT tools, terminology management systems, and machine translation post-editing workflows. This mirrors findings from Moorkens (2022), who argues that instrumental competence has become central to professional productivity.

Furthermore, project management skills were rated below satisfactory levels by both groups. This includes competencies such as deadline management, teamwork, client communication, and workflow coordination. Recent employability research (Tomlinson, 2022; Jackson, 2023) emphasizes that such transferable skills are critical for graduate integration into knowledge economies.

Qualitative interviews further clarified these quantitative trends. Graduates reported limited hands-on exposure to licensed translation software during their studies. Many indicated that their practical assignments were conducted without simulation of real-world deadlines or client briefs. Employers confirmed that new recruits often require additional on-the-job training in project coordination and professional communication.

These findings support the theoretical framework underpinning this study. According to the PACTE competence model, translation expertise depends on balanced integration of bilingual, instrumental, and strategic competencies (PACTE, 2022). The observed imbalance suggests that instrumental and strategic dimensions require curricular reinforcement.

Similarly, from the perspective of Constructive Alignment theory (Goh & Sandars, 2023), the results imply partial misalignment between intended learning outcomes and assessment practices. If programs aim to produce industry-ready translators, assessment tasks must incorporate authentic technology-based projects rather than purely theoretical examinations.

In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, these findings carry significant implications.

Translation professionals play a strategic role in tourism, diplomacy, and global commerce. Strengthening technological training and embedding internships within curricula could enhance graduate competitiveness and align higher education outcomes with national economic objectives.

Overall, the results confirm that Saudi Translation Studies programs possess a solid linguistic foundation but require systematic reform in technological integration and

professional simulation. Future curricular redesign should incorporate CAT tool certification modules, project-based learning models, and industry partnerships to bridge the classroom-to-career divide.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Saudi Translation Studies programs possess a strong foundation in linguistic and cultural competence, reflecting their long-standing emphasis on bilingual accuracy, textual analysis, and theoretical knowledge. Both graduates and employers acknowledged the effectiveness of curricula in developing core language skills essential for professional translation. However, the results also revealed significant gaps in instrumental and strategic competencies, particularly in technological proficiency and project management skills. This imbalance suggests partial misalignment between academic training and the evolving demands of the contemporary translation industry, which increasingly requires digital literacy, workflow coordination, and familiarity with AI-assisted translation environments.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Translation Studies programs undergo systematic curricular reform to enhance technological and professional integration. Universities should embed structured training in Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) tools, machine translation post-editing, terminology management systems, and translation project simulation within core courses rather than as optional components. In addition, assessment strategies should be redesigned to reflect authentic industry practices, including deadline-based assignments, collaborative projects, and client-oriented briefs. Establishing formal partnerships with translation agencies and incorporating mandatory internships would further strengthen experiential learning and reduce the classroom-to-career divide.

Finally, curriculum developers should adopt a stakeholder-driven model of continuous evaluation, incorporating regular feedback from employers, alumni, and industry experts to ensure responsiveness to technological and market shifts. Integrating employability skills—such as teamwork, communication, entrepreneurship, and ethical AI literacy—will enhance graduates' adaptability in a rapidly transforming professional landscape. Through balanced competence development and constructive alignment with industry needs, Saudi Translation Studies programs can better fulfill their strategic role in advancing national human capital goals under Vision 2030.

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