

Translation Equivalence in Cultural Elements of the Batak Folktale *Legenda Danau Toba* by Fifth-Semester Students at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the types of translation equivalence and translation strategies employed by fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan in translating cultural elements of the Batak Toba folktale *Legenda Danau Toba* into English. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative method. The data were collected from 23 student translation manuscripts of a 15-paragraph Batak Toba text. The analysis focuses on 16 selected cultural elements classified into ecological, social, and cultural categories. The analysis of equivalence is based on Nida's (1964) theory, while translation strategies are analysed using Vinay and Darbelnet's (1958) framework. The findings reveal that students applied three types of equivalence: formal, dynamic, and acceptable equivalence, with dynamic equivalence as the most dominant. Formal equivalence is mainly used for simple lexical items, while dynamic and acceptable equivalence are applied to culturally bound expressions. In terms of strategies, cultural equivalent and literal translation are the most frequently used, followed by functional and descriptive translation. The results indicate that students demonstrate an emerging ability to translate cultural elements; however, inconsistencies remain due to variations in linguistic competence and cultural understanding. Therefore, strengthening students' knowledge of translation theory and cultural context is necessary to improve translation quality.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis kesepadanan terjemahan dan strategi penerjemahan yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa semester lima Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan dalam menerjemahkan unsur budaya dalam cerita rakyat Batak Toba *Legenda Danau Toba* ke dalam bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Data diperoleh dari 23 hasil terjemahan mahasiswa terhadap teks Batak Toba yang terdiri dari 15 paragraf. Analisis difokuskan pada 16 unsur budaya yang diklasifikasikan ke dalam kategori ekologis, sosial, dan budaya. Analisis kesepadanan didasarkan pada teori Nida (1964), sedangkan strategi penerjemahan dianalisis menggunakan teori Vinay dan Darbelnet (1958). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menggunakan tiga jenis kesepadanan, yaitu kesepadanan formal, dinamis, dan dapat diterima, dengan kesepadanan dinamis sebagai yang paling dominan. Kesepadanan formal digunakan pada unsur leksikal sederhana, sedangkan kesepadanan dinamis dan dapat diterima digunakan pada unsur budaya yang memerlukan interpretasi. Dalam hal strategi, padanan budaya dan terjemahan literal paling sering digunakan, diikuti oleh padanan fungsional dan deskriptif. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memiliki kemampuan yang berkembang dalam menerjemahkan unsur budaya, namun masih terdapat ketidakkonsistenan akibat perbedaan kompetensi bahasa dan pemahaman budaya. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan peningkatan pemahaman teori penerjemahan dan konteks budaya untuk menghasilkan terjemahan yang lebih akurat dan alami.

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a complex system through which individuals express ideas, emotions, and cultural values. Beyond its communicative function, language reflects the identity, traditions, and historical background of

a community. In Indonesia, which is characterized by rich linguistic diversity, local languages such as Batak Toba play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. However, the rapid development of globalization and the dominance of English as an international language have contributed to the declining use and understanding of local languages, particularly among younger generations (Hidayat & Santosa, 2022; Putra, 2019; Widiastuti, 2024)). This condition raises concerns regarding the preservation of cultural values embedded in regional languages.

In this context, translation becomes an essential medium for transferring not only linguistic meaning but also cultural values from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL). Translation is defined as the process of conveying meaning while maintaining both the message and cultural essence of the original text. In literary translation, this process becomes more complex due to the presence of aesthetic elements, contextual meanings, and culturally bound expressions (Baker, 2018; House, 2018; Munday, 2016). Therefore, translators must consider not only linguistic equivalence but also cultural aspects to produce accurate and meaningful translations.

One of the fundamental concepts in translation studies is equivalence. According to (Nida & Nida, 1964), equivalence is categorized into formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and acceptable equivalence. These concepts remain relevant in contemporary translation studies, especially in analysing how meaning and cultural values are transferred across languages (Chesterman, 2017; Gambier & van Doorslaer, 2016). Formal equivalence focuses on preserving the form and content of the source text, while dynamic equivalence emphasizes producing a natural response for target readers, and acceptable equivalence prioritizes clarity and naturalness. These concepts are particularly important in translating cultural expressions that do not have direct equivalents in the target language. In addition, translation strategies play a significant role in addressing translation challenges. (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958) propose strategies such as cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, and descriptive translation, which are still widely applied in modern translation practices (Molina & Albir, 2015; Newmark, 2017)

This study focuses on the translation of Batak cultural elements in the Batak Toba folktale *Legenda Danau Toba*. This folktale represents the cultural identity and local wisdom of the Batak Toba community and contains various cultural elements, including ecological, social, and religious aspects, such as *tano Batak*, *parjoloan*, *marhobas*, *indahan*, and *adat Batak*. These elements often pose challenges in translation due to the absence of direct equivalents in English. For example, the term *parjoloan* carries a deeper meaning related to ancestry that cannot be fully represented by the word "man," while *indahan* specifically refers to cooked rice rather than rice in general. Such cases indicate that literal translation is insufficient and requires appropriate strategies to maintain meaning and cultural nuance (Rahmawati, 2020; Sembiring, 2021)

Previous studies have explored translation and cultural elements from various perspectives. (Sari, 2020) found that students tend to simplify cultural expressions into more familiar forms in the target language, indicating a tendency toward domestication. Similarly, (Panjaitan, 2022) revealed that Batak cultural concepts such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* are often simplified in student narratives, resulting in reduced cultural meaning. (Hardi, 2023) also reported that cultural meanings, particularly in religious contexts, are frequently reduced or distorted in translation. These findings suggest that maintaining cultural meaning remains a major challenge in translation practices.

In addition, a more recent study conducted by (Simanjuntak, 2025) analysed translation techniques used in translating the North Sumatran folktale *Legenda Danau Toba*. The study identified the dominant use of translation techniques based on Molina and Albir's framework and found that students tend to rely on certain techniques to handle cultural terms. While the study provides valuable insights into the application of translation techniques, it primarily focuses on identifying techniques without deeply examining how equivalence is achieved in preserving cultural meaning. Therefore, it does not fully address the relationship between translation strategies and equivalence in cultural translation.

From a broader perspective, studies in translation have emphasized the importance of meaning transfer and cultural preservation. (Nord, 1997) highlights the functional approach in maintaining meaning in translation, while Leppihalme (1997) stresses the importance of preserving cultural identity in translating cultural references. More recent studies (Al-Hassan, 2020; Fitriani et al., 2022; Lubis & Gurning, 2021; Pratama, 2020; Sihombing, 2023) further confirm that translating culturally bound expressions requires both appropriate equivalence and effective strategies to ensure that meaning is not lost.

However, a review of previous studies reveals a significant research gap. Most studies tend to focus either on translation strategies or cultural elements separately, without integrating both within a single analytical framework. In addition, prior research has generally examined general texts or different cultural contexts, rather than specifically addressing Batak Toba cultural elements embedded in a local folktale. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the application of Nida's (1964) equivalence theory in analysing how ecological, social, and religious elements are translated by university students. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of translation equivalence and strategies in the cultural elements of *Legenda Danau Toba*, as translated by fifth-semester English Education students at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan. The subjects of this study are fifth-semester students who have completed fundamental language courses and are currently developing their translation competence, particularly in literary translation. As intermediate learners, they provide a relevant context for analysing translation choices, strategies, and difficulties in handling cultural expressions (Saliha, 2021; Sipayung & Silitonga, 2023; Siregar, 2024)

Based on this background, the problems of this study are formulated as follows: (1) what types of equivalence are used by students in translating Batak cultural elements in *Legenda Danau Toba* from Batak Toba into English, and (2) what translation strategies are applied in the process. Accordingly, this study aims to identify and analyse the types of equivalence (formal, dynamic, and acceptable) and translation strategies (cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, and descriptive equivalent) used by students, as well as their effectiveness in preserving cultural meaning.

This study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches translation studies by integrating equivalence and translation strategies in analysing culturally bound texts. Practically, the findings provide references for lecturers, teachers, and students in improving translation learning, particularly in handling cultural elements. Furthermore, this study supports the preservation of Batak Toba cultural values through accurate and meaningful translation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to systematically identify and analyse the types of equivalence formal, dynamic, and acceptable utilised by fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan in translating Batak cultural elements found in the Batak Toba folktale *Legenda Danau Toba* from Batak Toba as the source language (SL-BT) into English as the target language (TL-EN). This design was deemed appropriate as the study emphasised an in-depth examination of naturally occurring translation phenomena, focusing on meaning-making processes rather than statistical generalisation.

The participants of this study consisted of 23 fifth-semester students, aged between 20 and 22 years, who were selected through purposive sampling to ensure data richness and adequacy for qualitative analysis. The inclusion of both Batak and non-Batak students enabled the investigation of the potential influence of cultural background on translation decision-making. The object of the study comprised 23 student-produced translation manuscripts of a 15-paragraph Batak Toba narrative text of *Legenda Danau Toba* (approximately 450 words). The analysis focused on 16 selected cultural elements, categorised into ecological, social, and religious domains, which functioned as the primary units of analysis.

In accordance with qualitative research principles, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument (Creswell, 2012), responsible for data collection, classification, and interpretation based on the theoretical framework of equivalence proposed by Nida (1964). Supporting instruments included document analysis and classroom observation. The documentary data consisted of students' written translation products (Arikunto, 2006), while observational data were obtained to capture the translation process and to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic procedure. Initially, the researcher administered an authentic Batak Toba text of *Legenda Danau Toba* to the participants, who were instructed to translate the text individually into English within a 90-minute session. The use of dictionaries was permitted to reflect authentic academic practice. Subsequently, all translation manuscripts were collected and prepared for analysis. In addition, classroom observations were conducted across two sessions (2 × 45 minutes) using an observation checklist to document students' translation behaviours and decision-making processes.

The data were analysed using (Creswell, 2012) qualitative data analysis framework, which encompasses three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data condensation stage, the researcher identified and compared the 16 cultural elements in the source text with their corresponding translations in order to determine the types of equivalence applied. The findings were then organised in the data display stage through tabulation and categorisation to facilitate the identification of patterns across the dataset. Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the emerging patterns to determine the dominant types of equivalence and their effectiveness in preserving cultural meaning, while continuously verifying the consistency and accuracy of the analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, methodological triangulation was employed by integrating document analysis and classroom observation. This approach enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings.

by cross-verifying the data obtained from different sources. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a comprehensive and reliable account of how equivalence is applied in the translation of cultural elements by fifth-semester students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study examined 23 student translation manuscripts of the Batak Toba folktale *Legenda Danau Toba*, focusing on 16 selected cultural elements classified into ecological, social, and cultural categories. These elements represent culturally bound expressions that require careful translation decisions due to the absence of direct equivalence between the source language (SL-BT) and the target language (TL-EN). The analysis integrates both the types of equivalence and translation strategies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students transfer cultural meaning.

To facilitate analysis, the identified cultural elements are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of Cultural Elements

No	Category	Cultural Terms (SL-BT)
1	Ecological	Tano Batak, Aek, Ikan, Ladang, Dolok, Danau Toba, Pulau Samosir
2	Social	Parjoloan, Boru, Huta Batak, Dakdanak
3	Cultural	Marhobas, Jabu, Adat Batak, Partondion, Indahan

The table shows that ecological elements dominate the dataset, followed by cultural and social elements. This distribution is significant because ecological terms generally have clearer referential meanings, while cultural and social terms tend to be more abstract and context-dependent, thus requiring more complex translation decisions.

The findings reveal that students applied three types of equivalence: formal, dynamic, and acceptable equivalence. The distribution is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of Translation Equivalence

Type of Equivalence	Frequency	Percentage
Formal Equivalence	8	34.8%
Dynamic Equivalence	10	43.5%
Acceptable Equivalence	5	21.7%
Total	23	100%

As shown in Table 2, dynamic equivalence is the most dominant type (43.5%), indicating that students prioritise meaning transfer and naturalness over structural preservation. This tendency reflects an awareness of target reader comprehension and aligns with Nida's (1964) principle that translation should produce an equivalent effect. Students appear to favour communicative clarity, particularly when dealing with culturally bound expressions.

However, a closer examination of the data reveals that the use of equivalence is highly dependent on the nature of the lexical item. Formal equivalence is predominantly applied to concrete and universally recognised terms, such as *ikan* → *fish*, *aek* → *water*, and *Danau Toba* → *Lake Toba*. These terms exhibit high translation

consistency, suggesting minimal semantic ambiguity and strong lexical correspondence across languages. In such cases, translation becomes largely procedural, requiring limited interpretative effort.

In contrast, culturally bound terms exhibit significant variation. For example, *parjoloan* is translated as *ancestors* and *forefathers*, while *indahan* appears as *rice* and *cooked rice*. These variations demonstrate the application of dynamic and acceptable equivalence, as students attempt to negotiate meaning rather than replicate form. Nevertheless, the inconsistency also indicates uneven cultural competence. The translation *rice* for *indahan*, for instance, reflects semantic generalisation, whereas *cooked rice* demonstrates a more precise cultural understanding. This suggests that translation accuracy is closely linked to the translator's depth of cultural knowledge.

Acceptable equivalence functions as an intermediary strategy, particularly in cases where students attempt to balance clarity and contextual appropriateness. Translations such as *boru* → *daughter/girl* and *adat Batak* → *Batak tradition/custom* illustrate this tendency. While these translations are readable and contextually acceptable, they may involve a degree of semantic reduction, indicating a compromise between accuracy and accessibility.

In addition to equivalence, the analysis also identifies four major translation strategies: literal translation, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, and descriptive translation. The distribution of these strategies is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Translation Strategies

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Literal Translation	8	34.8%
Cultural Equivalent	9	39.1%
Functional Equivalent	4	17.4%
Descriptive Translation	2	8.7%
Total	23	100%

Table 3 indicates that cultural equivalent is the most frequently used strategy (39.1%), suggesting that students actively attempt to adapt cultural expressions into forms familiar to the target audience. This strategy is particularly evident in translations such as *parjoloan* → *ancestors* and *boru* → *daughter*, where cultural concepts are mapped onto approximate equivalents in English. While effective in enhancing readability, this approach may lead to partial loss of cultural specificity.

Literal translation (34.8%) is predominantly used for lexical items with direct equivalents, reinforcing the findings from equivalence analysis. However, its limitations become apparent in structurally awkward translations such as *tano Batak* → *Batak land*, which, although accurate, lacks naturalness in English. This indicates that some students prioritise lexical correspondence over syntactic appropriateness.

Functional equivalent reflects a higher level of interpretative competence, as seen in *marhabas* → *working together* and *dakdanak* → *children*. These translations demonstrate that students are able to capture general meaning, although specific cultural nuances may be diluted. Meanwhile, descriptive translation, though least used

(8.7%), represents the most explicit attempt to preserve meaning, as shown in *indahan* → *cooked rice* and *jabu* → *traditional house*. This strategy indicates advanced awareness of cultural gaps but also suggests limited confidence in elaborative translation.

A critical observation is that students frequently shift between strategies for the same cultural term, indicating a lack of systematic decision-making. For example, *indahan* is translated using both functional and descriptive approaches, while *parjoloan* is rendered through cultural and functional equivalents. This variability suggests that students are still developing strategic competence and have not yet established consistent translation principles. These findings corroborate previous research. Sipayung and Silitonga (2023) and Saliha (2021) similarly found that students tend to prioritise dynamic equivalence and cultural adaptation to enhance readability. Furthermore, Siregar (2024) confirms that formal equivalence is commonly applied to concrete lexical items. The dominance of cultural equivalent strategy also aligns with Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), who emphasise its importance in translating culturally specific expressions.

Overall, the results demonstrate that students are capable of employing a range of equivalence types and translation strategies; however, their application remains inconsistent and context-dependent. While students show a clear preference for meaning-oriented translation, variations in output reveal differences in linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and strategic control. This suggests that translation pedagogy should place greater emphasis on developing students' cultural literacy and strategic decision-making in order to achieve more accurate and consistent translations of culturally bound texts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Medan employed three types of translation equivalence: formal, dynamic, and acceptable in translating Batak cultural elements from the folktale *Legenda Danau Toba*. The findings demonstrate that students did not rely on a single equivalence type; instead, they flexibly adjusted their approach depending on the characteristics and level of cultural specificity of each term. This indicates an emerging ability to negotiate meaning across languages, particularly when dealing with culturally bound expressions.

Among the three types, dynamic equivalence was found to be the most dominant, reflecting students' tendency to prioritise meaning transfer, naturalness, and readability in the target language. This finding supports Nida's (1964) theoretical perspective that effective translation should produce a natural response for target readers. Formal equivalence was primarily applied to concrete lexical items with direct equivalents, while acceptable equivalence functioned as a mediating approach to enhance clarity and contextual appropriateness. However, variations in translation outputs suggest that students' application of equivalence remains inconsistent and influenced by differing levels of linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

In terms of translation strategies, students employed literal translation, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, and descriptive translation. Cultural equivalent emerged as the most frequently used strategy, indicating a strong tendency to adapt source language expressions into culturally familiar forms in the target language. While this strategy enhances readability, it may also lead to partial loss of cultural specificity. Literal

translation was effectively used for simple lexical items but occasionally resulted in less natural constructions. Functional and descriptive strategies demonstrated a deeper level of interpretative effort, although their relatively limited use suggests that students are still developing confidence in applying more complex translation techniques.

Overall, the findings reveal that students are capable of applying a range of equivalence types and translation strategies; however, their translation performance is not yet fully systematic. The tendency to prioritise meaning over form reflects a communicative orientation, but the simplification of certain cultural elements indicates a need for stronger cultural competence. Therefore, translation pedagogy should emphasise not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural awareness and strategic decision-making in order to improve the quality and consistency of student translations.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, students are encouraged to deepen their understanding of both translation equivalence and cultural context, particularly when dealing with culturally bound expressions. Second, lecturers should integrate more culturally rich texts and strategy-based instruction into translation courses to enhance students' analytical and interpretative skills. Finally, future researchers are recommended to expand the scope of study by involving different types of texts, such as literary works or audiovisual materials, and larger participant groups in order to obtain more comprehensive insights into translation competence.

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