FACTORS AFFECTING EFL STUDENTS' ORAL TRANSLATION EXAM PERFORMANCE: A CASE IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu[1], Nguyen Hieu Thao[2*]

Abstract – *Despite the rapid development of technology and digital applications, interpreters play an indispensable role in assisting effective communication and connecting speakers from different cultures. To fulfil the global demand, more oral translation programs and courses are offered in higher education institutions. While there has been more attention to process-based teaching and learning, little has been done to examine what affects students' performance during summative assessment. This study explores (1) EFL students' perceptions of the factors influencing their oral translation exam performance, and (2) strategies they use and expectations on lecturers to enhance interpreting competence. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach comprising both survey and interview. An online questionnaire was used to collect data from 72 English majors at a university in the south of Vietnam. The results revealed that audio quality, testing-taking anxiety, memory, vocabulary shortage, and listening skills had a greater impact on students' oral translation exam performance than other factors. Students have various strategies and expectations of lecturers concerning a positive testing environment.*

Keywords: EFL student, exam performance, oral translation, Southern Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

The urge to integrate into the global community and Vietnam's 1986 open-door policy increased the demand for English in the country [1]. Moreover, English is viewed as the universal language as it facilitates communication for people who live in various parts of the world when travelling or studying abroad [2]. Similarly, Al-Salman [3] asserts that, because of globalization, people around the world communicate with each other for various purposes, such as business, social communication, and academic purposes. Therefore, the globe has acknowledged and confirmed English's prominent role. This results in a high demand for interpreters who support communication between non-English speakers and English speakers [4].

Neubert [5] claims that interpreting training programs should be tailored to the development of society. This is in addition to teaching translation competence: training programs have to emphasize teaching students how to work in their particular working context. According to Pym [6], the theories that directly affect the training of translators, such as creating comprehensive training programs, testing and evaluating translator and interpreter proficiency, creating teaching materials, and developing translation support techniques, have been under-researched and thus are insufficient to meet the requirements of high-quality training programs. For the context of Vietnam, Le [7] points out that the professional interpreter training program is inadequate. Moreover, the author also notes that these programs hardly keep up with the state of training in developed countries and fall short of the standards of domestic society. Consequently, although there are numerous trained interpreters, they still cannot satisfy the demand for highly qualified professional interpreters. This demonstrates the necessity for Vietnamese universities to focus on developing students' interpreting competence. However, while several studies have been conducted over the years, there is a modest

[1]Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam
[2]Tra Vinh University, Vietnam
*Corresponding author: nguyenhieuthao@tvu.edu.vn

number exploring factors influencing students' oral translation performance while they are taking exams. Additionally, in a given context, individuals might apply different learning strategies. With this in mind, this study explores what factors influence Vietnamese EFL students while they take an oral translation summative exam. The study hopes to provide EFL language teachers and students with insights into the practical uses of teaching and developing test-based oral translation evaluations.

This study addresses two questions:

1. What are EFL students' perceptions of factors influencing oral translation exam performance?

2. What are EFL students' strategies and expectations for enhancing oral translation competence?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. What is oral translation?

One of the most widely known definitions of oral translation is that it interprets a message from one language into another in the form of spoken language [8, 9], and thus oral translation is the bridge to communication [10, 11]. Specifically, Nolan [10] states that interpretation sends a message whose meaning is best represented in the speaker's mother tongue and best understood in the languages of the listeners. In other words, an interpreter listens to a source language and then verbally translates it into the target language consecutively or simultaneously. Similarly, Laver et al. [11] demonstrate that interpretation is a method of communication where one or many target audiences cannot or only partially grasp the original language. Considering this knowledge, interpreting is similar to communicating, which requires speaking and listening abilities, and therefore, people can only have a successful conversation with effective listening abilities [12]. On the other hand, speaking involves producing, receiving, and processing information as part of interactive understanding [13]. Hence, speaking is crucial to delivering clear and efficient communication [14]. As a result, it can

be argued that proficient speaking and listening abilities are necessary for successful interpreting. Apart from language skills, Kermis [15] indicates that interpreters are expected to possess a set of competencies in a specific field. This consists of a collection of skills and knowledge that involve proficiency in both the source and the target languages [5, 15, 16].

B. The upsides of oral translation

Interpretation is crucial in many settings, such as communication, education, politics, commerce, and healthcare [17]. In the view of Gentile et al. [18], interpreters become involved in communication situations where participants have to adapt skills and abilities to make judgements, especially in liaison interpreting. Moreover, Weda et al. [19] indicate that almost every aspect of daily life benefits from effective communication. These benefits show how interpretation overcomes linguistic barriers, thus allowing speakers of different languages to communicate and understand one another. Meldia [20] adds that promoting understanding between countries is another goal of interpretation. It suggests that translating words, phrases or sentences is not the only task involved in interpretation. Interpretation, in other words, transcends cultural boundaries. It fosters a greater understanding of cultures other than one's own. Thus, interpreters are not only masters of their languages but also know target cultures [19].

C. Types of oral translation

For communication purposes in a variety of contexts, including social and institutional contexts, different interpreting techniques have been developed [21]. Two time-based orientations that interpreters have used are consecutive and simultaneous interpretation [17]. Regarding consecutive interpretation, interpreters listen to someone's speech before interpreting the message into another language [22]. Thus, consecutive interpreting stages involve listening to the speaker, taking notes, and translating into the target language [10]. This process can be conducted in a pattern of short or long segments, depending

on how long the speech lasts; the consecutive interpreter depends primarily on memory, yet effective note-taking is crucial. Pöchhacker [21] states that consecutive interpreting is a two-step technique entailing understanding the source language's speech first and then re-expressing it in a different language. Pöchhacker [21] also claims that, to perform consecutive interpretations, memory is essential. According to Chunli et al. [23], such interpretation places many high demands on interpreters doing simultaneous interpreting because they have to listen to and take notes on what the speaker is saying while concurrently saying it in another language. It implies that language production and comprehension occur simultaneously [17], and interpreters deliver the message within a minimum time delay [24]. Consequently, the interpreting is conducted under intense time pressure. In other words, after the speaker has finished speaking, the interpreter is advised to accurately, naturally and understandably translate the message. As a result, consecutive interpreters must speak two languages well, have a solid understanding of each culture, and be proficient in taking notes and remembering things.

D. Factors influencing oral translation performance

External, psychological, and competency factors play an important role in students' exam performance, as highlighted by Fraihat et al. [16] and Mazouzi [25].

External factors

There are different external factors influencing students' performance. Among these, Siegel [26] explored the perspectives of 711 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students on three distinct types of factors that affect notetaking performance, including personal (notetaker's interest in the topic and their notetaking skills), speaker (accent, rate of speech, and volume of speech), and contextual (purpose for notetaking, the difficulty of the topic, and time of day). The results show that the factors most commonly identified were the speed of speech, personal interest in the topic,

and each individual's note-taking capability. Rajab et al. [27] conducted a study to explore listening comprehension difficulties and strategies among Kurdish EFL learners. They concluded that the length of the text, the speaker's accent, and the speed of delivery impact listening skills. If the speaker speaks quickly without pausing to allow time for the students to understand the material, the students will find it challenging to understand what the speaker is saying. Similarly, in Renaldi's study [28], students revealed their challenges in understanding what the speaker is trying to convey because they speak quickly. Moreover, the speakers' diverse accents further challenge the students' poor listening skills.

Psychological factors

Psychological issues like nervousness, a lack of confidence, and a fear of public speaking frequently impede people's emotional health and productivity [29]. Jannah et al. [30] investigated psychological issues among students, and it was reported that the students find it difficult to speak English because it is not their first language. Jannah et al. [30] emphasised that typical psychological issues students encounter when speaking include fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and a lack of confidence. Studies by Haidara [31] and Juhana [32] also share similar results.

Interpreting competence factors

Interpreting competence is another vital element that significantly affects the performance of the interpretation. Interpreters are supposed to possess a wide range of sub-linguistic skills and language proficiency to accomplish their translation [16].

There is a strong connection between effective speaking and listening abilities. Students are required to listen, understand the topic, and then interpret it. As a result, listening abilities influence how well students interpret [33]. Renaldi [28] conducted a study to determine the factors affecting students' speaking skills. The findings showed that various factors affected one's talking capacity. The biggest effect lies in listening skills, as students must comprehend the speaker's words to translate or react. Therefore, listening skills

are essential for interpreting because students can only process information when they can listen to it [3, 34]. Moreover, interpreters need to combine their memory, notes, and background knowledge when interpreting [22]. This demonstrates that, besides listening comprehension, interpreting necessitates skills like note-taking, memorising, and a basic understanding of translating themes. Siegel [26] conducted a study to examine factors affecting note-taking performance. The results showed that these include speech rate, students' note-taking abilities, accents, volume, and topic difficulty. It is reported that students find it hard to listen and take notes simultaneously. Therefore, they tend to miss essential information.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Participants and research design

The participants were English-major students in their second, third, and fourth years at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam. Following the curriculum, participants studied and experienced summative exams of oral translation modules.

An online questionnaire and interviews were both used as research instruments in the current study. The survey instrument was adapted under the description and comparison of various models in the literature presented by Fraihat and Mahadi, and thus being redesigned to suit the context of the present study [16]. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section I investigated students' perceptions of external, psychological, and competency factors that influence oral translation exam performance using 19 items. Section II discussed the strategies and expectations for strengthening interpreting competencies. There was a total of 72 responses collected. Interviews were conducted with five volunteers who registered voluntarily after completing an online survey. They were specifically asked if they were willing to participate by agreeing to leave their contact information for scheduling purposes. Each interview session lasted approximately 10 - 15 minutes, during which the interviewees were asked about factors affecting their exam performance, the strategies they employed, and their

expectations from lecturers to aid in improving their oral translation skills. This ensured that participants were well-informed about the content and objectives of the interview process, facilitating open and meaningful discussions.

Data collection procedures and analysis

The survey questionnaire was created on Google Forms, and the data were analysed using SPSS software. In the face-to-face interviews, the participants expressed their perceptions of factors influencing their interpreting exam performance. The Vietnamese language was used in the interviews to let the participants feel more at ease expressing themselves in their mother tongue [35]. Subsequently, transcriptions of the interviews and responses from the open-ended questions were analysed employing the thematic method.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

Factors affecting EFL students' oral translation exam performance

- External factors

Table 1: External factors influencing oral translation exam performance

Item	Mean	SD
Audio length	4.07	.92
Audio speed	4.07	1.03
Speaker accents	4.00	.94
Preparation time	3.93	.99
Noise	3.87	1.13
Audio volume	3.51	1.21

Table 1 illustrates the external factors students face when taking the interpreting exam. Audio length and fast speed of the audio shared similar mean scores (M = 4.07). Other factors such as noise and short preparation time ranked lower than the speaker's variety of accents. The audio volume accounted for the lowest mean score (M = 3.48, SD = 1.23).

Qualitative insights from interviews underscore the prominence of noise as a critical external factor, five interviewees emphasized noise as the most significant factor affecting their performance:

'Outside noise caused me to lose focus on my interpretation exam.' [36]

Besides, the length of text, the speed of speech, and the accents affect the performance:

'My concentration is reduced when I listen to long texts.' [37];

'I get confused and cannot interpret well when speakers speak too fast or listen to an unfamiliar accent.' [38]

- Psychological factors

Table 2: Psychological factors influencing oral translation exam performance

Item	Mean	SD
Anxiety about taking exams	4.21	.99
Afraid of mistranslating the content	4.08	.90
Afraid of making grammar mistakes	4.07	.85
Afraid of making pronunciation mistakes	3.93	.97
Afraid of facing examiners	3.85	1.27

In Table 2, the test-taking anxiety was found to have the most significant impact on students' oral translation performance was anxiety (M = 4.21, SD = .99). Besides, the fear of translating wrongly, using wrong grammar, and pronouncing inaccurately showed considerable effect on students. Finally, fear of facing examiners (M = 3.85, SD = 1.27) was reported as having the least impact on students' interpreting performance.

Regarding the influence of psychological factors on exam performance, detailed interviews with participants provided a qualitative dimension that aligns with the quantitative data from the questionnaire. Specifically, all interviewees highlighted experiencing a range of psychological pressures, notably anxiety, a high sense of pressure, diminished confidence, and a significant fear of making errors:

'I feel anxious before, while, and even after taking the exam. I lack confidence because I worry about mistranslating, mispronouncing, and employing incorrect grammar.' [36]

Notably, the data collected from the interview revealed another factor that differs from quantitative findings that hinder interpreting performance. P5 claimed that there is a fear of being underscored by examiners if using simple sentences:

'I worry that the examiner will lower my score if I do not have sufficient knowledge of grammar.' [36]

Remarkably, the qualitative data collected represents a completely different viewpoint from P2. This participant claimed that there was no psychological influence on the interpretation exam thanks to his thorough preparation.

- Competency-based factors

Table 3: Competency-based factors influencing oral translation exam performance

Item	Mean	SD
Poor short-term memory	4.28	.83
Lack of specialised vocabulary	4.18	1.00
Poor listening skills	4.04	1.05
Inappropriate word choice	3.98	.93
Lack of specialised knowledge	3.92	1.00
Poor note-taking skills (Can't take notes while listening.)	3.72	1.17
Poor note-taking skills (Try to note everything.)	3.56	1.23
Difficult test materials	3.42	.96

Based on the result displayed in Table 3, having poor short-term memory was revealed as the most important factor (M = 4.28, SD = .83). In addition, factors relating to language skills such as vocabulary and listening skills (M = 4.04, SD = 1.05) were found to have a greater impact than either topical knowledge (M = 3.92, SD = 1.00) or note-taking skills. Lastly, the exam material difficulty level had the lowest mean in the group (M = 3.42, SD = .96).

The interviews revealed that respondents unanimously attributed their poor performance to deficiencies in essential interpreting skills, including listening comprehension, memory, note-taking, specialized vocabulary and knowledge, and familiarity with exam content. Notably, both Participant 1 and Participant 5 emphasized the significance of specialized vocabulary:

'I can understand the exam materials or express my translation if I have the vocabulary, particularly terminologies.' [39];

'It challenges me when engaging in specialized topics since I need more vocabulary.' [36]

Five interviewees shared similar perceptions about how listening skills affected oral translation exams. P4 claimed that:

'Listening skills significantly impact my interpretation performance.' [38]

Additionally, all interviewees underlined the significance of note-taking abilities by claiming that failing to take notes would cause them to miss the content, negatively affecting their performance. One of them said:

'I only note the stressed words, so I frequently interpret them ineffectively.' [40]

P5 also shared how note-taking skills influenced her interpreting exam:

'I habitually note everything I listen to rather than the main ideas, so I frequently miss vital details and cannot interpret the entire piece.' [36]

Strategies for enhancing oral translation competence

This section presents the responses to the open-ended questions and interviews related to students' strategies and expectations.

- Using YouTube and online applications

All interviewees revealed that they usually listen to and watch English videos on YouTube and then interpret them. This approach serves to enhance their listening and note-taking skills while also expanding their vocabulary. One of them said:

'I usually practice interpreting videos on YouTube.' [40]

A participant highlighted that learning online through YouTube and using applications to speak to foreigners is necessary. This helps students improve their speaking and listening skills, and become accustomed to a native speaker's accent that they may face when translating from English into Vietnamese. This participant said:

'You should learn online via YouTube and use foreign-talking applications to improve your interpreting skills.' [41]

Regarding expectations, P1 and P4 stated that they could prepare vocabulary for the exam's topics in advance if they knew what subjects it would cover, thus improving their performance;

'I expect the lecturers to systematize the course material and exam themes so that students can limit their revision scope.' [39]

P4 expressed that the exam room would be well-equipped with quality speakers and a sound-proofing system. Moreover, this participant expected that the exam level should be appropriate for the student's ability:

'Lecturers should use qualified speakers and a well-equipped exam room. Regarding the exam level, I hope it reflects the student's overall academic abilities.' [38]

- Note-taking skills practice

A participant shared a tip for taking better notes while interpreting. This strategy suggests that students should learn or create their symbols to take notes faster. This strategy is effective because it helps students take notes quickly:

'Students should learn more or create symbols to take notes faster when taking notes for interpretation.' [42]

- Pronunciation practices

Another student said that practicing pronunciation enhances the capacity to interpret:

'Pronunciation practice enhances the word-listening ability and improves listening skills in interpretation.' [43]

- Peer practice

The other expectation is to take the exam with a classmate to reduce psychological influences such as anxiety, worry, fear, and so on from impacting the examination:

'I expect that I can take the interpreting exam with another friend to relieve pressure.' [44]

Expectations for enhancing oral translation competence

- Extended interpretation time

One student hoped the preparation time would be extended. This gives students more time to think about vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation:

'I expect the interpreting time will be longer.' [45]

- Practical interpreting topics

Last but not least, practising interpreting real-life events instead of in-class conversations is preferred. This expectation is beneficial for learning additional vocabulary and knowledge from actual events and practising interpretation effectively:

'I want to interpret real events as they will be more interesting than the role-play dialogues in the classroom.' [43]

B. Discussion

This study explored English majors' (years 2 to 4) perceptions of factors influencing oral translation exam performance, strategies, and expectations to improve their interpretation proficiency. The current study found that external factors significantly affect interpretation performance. Most participants said that when listening to the test content, if the sound is too low, the speaker speaks too fast or speaks with an unfamiliar accent, they cannot take notes and understand the content. These findings aligned with the study by Siegel [26] on students' perceptions of external factors influencing their taking notes. In addition, the study of Rajab and Nimehchisalem [27] yielded similar results. Most participants perceived the listening issues they encountered when interpreting due to the length of the text, the speaker's accent, and the speed of delivery. When listening to long exam content or fast speaking, students' concentration is decreased, and they cannot remember the content. Next, the influence of performance conditions, especially time pressure, also makes students not have the proper consideration when translating. This result also concurred with the previous study by Renaldi [28] about factors affecting speaking performance. In summary, external factors such as accent, speed of delivery, text length, and time pressure are confirmed to significantly influence the students' interpretation performance.

Responses regarding the psychological problems of the students align with the findings of Jannah et al. [30] in terms of anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and stress when facing examiners. Most students admitted they were unsure of their abilities, fearful of making mistakes, and nervous, especially when facing examiners. As a result, these factors dominate their concentration and memory, and their interpretation performance is ineffective. However, different from the current study, the study by Jannah et al. [30] did not uncover the fear of being underestimated as a factor impacting interpreting performance. Students said they frequently worry that the examiner may underestimate their language proficiency, therefore, they get timid and hesitant to interpret. In line with the current study, Haidara [31] and Juhana [32] found the effect of fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence in students' speaking performances. Students who lack confidence in their knowledge frequently fear making interpreting errors, which leads to additional psychological issues like anxiety and pressure. Hence, they usually forget the material and do not concentrate sufficiently to interpret it accurately.

In contrast to previous studies on the influence of psychological factors on exam performance, this current study yielded a new finding. One out of five interviewees said that his performance was not influenced by any psychological factors. According to this participant, the key to achieving the greatest performance is paying attention wholly to the exam without anxiety or pressure. This proves that although psychological factors affect interpretation exam performance, not everyone is influenced by those factors.

The study also found the influence of some competency factors on the interpretation test, including listening skills, memorization, specialized vocabulary and knowledge, note-taking skills, and exam level. The findings on the influence of factors on speaking ability conducted by Renaldi [28] are also similar to the results of this paper. The results revealed that topical knowledge and listening ability are the two competence factors affecting speaking performance. In addition, in the article on note-taking skills in interpreting, this study shares similar views with Gillies [22] on essential skills when interpreting, including notes, memorization, and background knowledge. This proves that if students do not master these skills, they certainly have ineffective interpretation performance, this concurred with the current study's findings. In line with Siegel [26], factors such as speech rate, note-taking abilities, accents, volume, and topic difficulty significantly influence note-taking performance in particular and interpretation in general.

What are EFL students' strategies and expectations for enhancing oral translation competence?

Several methods and aspirations for enhancing interpretation proficiency were revealed through this research. An effective strategy for improving vocabulary and language-related skills, and specifically interpretation abilities, involves using foreigner-talking applications and online platforms such as YouTube. Furthermore, two crucial elements for strengthening oral translation skills are a regular practice of pronunciation and the habit of taking notes.

Regarding expectations, students have expressed various desires concerning exam equipment, lecturers, exam questions, and exam formats. To minimize noise interference, most students emphasized the expectation of well-equipped exam rooms. Additionally, students proposed a system of exam topics and formats to have adequate preparation. Some students also preferred to take the interpreting test in pairs since it helps reduce anxiety and fear. Finally, students hope that the exam materials are designed to match their skill levels as appropriate to their levels.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored EFL students' perceptions of factors impacting oral translation test performance, along with their strategies and expectations for improving interpreting skills. When taking the interpreting exam, most students admitted encountering outside factors such as noise, text length, accents, and delivery speed. Text length and delivery speed have the most impact on exam performance. Furthermore, student psychology significantly impacts interpreting exam performance. In particular, most students believe that psychological issues like anxiety, pressure, and a lack of confidence during the test affect them negatively. These factors, especially anxiety and lack of confidence are reported to cause students to perform poorly on exams.

Finally, the impact of interpreting competency elements is discussed. Students acknowledge that, when their interpreting abilities, particularly their listening, speaking, and note-taking abilities, are lacking, their exam results suffer because they cannot listen to the materials, take notes on them, or express the interpreted content. Additionally, students' lack of vocabulary impacts the performance of most students.

Based on the results, there are several recommendations. For students, it is recommended to take advantage of the resources available to them to enrich their language competencies and vocabulary knowledge. For lecturers, it is recommended to focus on helping students develop their speaking, listening, note-taking, memorization, and vocabulary expansion skills. This can be done through a variety of teaching methods, such as using interactive activities, providing clear and concise instructions, and providing feedback on students' performance. Additionally, lecturers need to pay attention to students' expectations, provide better teaching materials, and help students perform better on exams.

Additional research is necessary to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact of these factors and to develop appropriate teaching strategies for various contexts. This research can help lecturers tailor their teaching strategies to the needs of their students and provide the most appropriate and effective exam materials.

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[41] ST17. Interviewed by: Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu. 21st March 2023.

[42] ST22. Interviewed by: Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu. 21st March 2023.

[43] ST46. Interviewed by: Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu. 21st March 2023.

[44] ST31. Interviewed by: Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu. 21st March 2023.

[45] ST40. Interviewed by: Ta Nguyen Yen Nhu. 21st March 2023.