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Translating in the AI Era: A Phenomenological Study of Arabic Language Students' Use of DeepL Translate

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Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of using DeepL Translate in translating Arabic assignments. The increasing adoption of AI-based translation tools among students offers convenience and efficiency, yet raises issues of accuracy, contextual understanding, and academic dependency. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, five active students of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at IAIN Kendari were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal three major perception patterns: (1) critical use, where two students utilized DeepL as an initial aid while revising outputs manually; (2) pragmatic dependence, where two others relied entirely on the tool due to limited mastery of *nahwu* and *sharaf*; and (3) reflective evaluation, where one participant verified translations through peer discussion and comparison with other sources. Although all participants acknowledged DeepL's speed and ease of use, they also noted frequent inaccuracies in translating Islamic and

scientific texts. The study concludes that DeepL can enhance comprehension and efficiency when used reflectively, but pedagogical guidance is essential to strengthen linguistic awareness, translation competence, and ethical responsibility in AI-assisted translation.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci: DeepL Translate, Penerjemahan, Persepsi Mahasiswa, Fenomenologi, Bahasa Arab.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa terhadap penggunaan DeepL Translate dalam menerjemahkan tugas berbahasa Arab. Peningkatan penggunaan alat penerjemahan berbasis kecerdasan buatan (AI) di kalangan mahasiswa menawarkan kemudahan dan efisiensi, namun juga menimbulkan persoalan terkait akurasi, pemahaman kontekstual, dan ketergantungan akademik**.** Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi fenomenologis**,** dengan melibatkan lima mahasiswa aktif Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab IAIN Kendari yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga pola persepsi utama: (1) penggunaan kritis, yaitu dua mahasiswa menggunakan DeepL sebagai alat bantu awal dan tetap merevisi hasil terjemahannya secara manual; (2) ketergantungan pragmatis, yaitu dua mahasiswa bergantung sepenuhnya pada aplikasi karena keterbatasan penguasaan *nahwu* dan *sharaf*; serta **(3)** evaluasi reflektif, di mana satu mahasiswa melakukan verifikasi hasil terjemahan melalui diskusi dan perbandingan dengan sumber lain. Meskipun seluruh partisipan mengakui kecepatan dan kemudahan penggunaan DeepL, mereka juga menyoroti ketidakakuratan dalam menerjemahkan teks keislaman dan ilmiah. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa DeepL dapat meningkatkan pemahaman dan efisiensi jika digunakan secara reflektif, namun tetap memerlukan bimbingan pedagogis untuk memperkuat kesadaran linguistik, kompetensi penerjemahan, serta tanggung jawab etis dalam penerjemahan berbantuan AI.

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Introduction

Arabic language learning in higher education, particularly at IAIN Kendari, plays a strategic role in developing students' academic and religious competencies. Arabic is not only studied as a means of communication but also as the primary source language for various Islamic disciplines such as tafsir, hadith, and fiqh (Rifa'i, 2020). Therefore, the ability to understand and translate Arabic texts is an essential skill for students in the Arabic Language Education Study Program, considering that most classical and contemporary Islamic literature is written in Arabic (Mubarok, 2019).

However, in practice, many students still face difficulties in translating Arabic texts into Indonesian. These difficulties are generally caused by weak mastery of grammatical rules, limited vocabulary, and a lack of critical reading skills toward Arabic texts (Wahyuni, 2021). Such conditions affect the quality of students' translations, especially when dealing with academic texts that have complex structures and implicit meanings.

With the rapid development of technology, students increasingly rely on artificial intelligence–based translation tools such as DeepL Translate to complete their translation assignments. DeepL is known as one of the neural machine translation (NMT) applications that can produce more natural and contextual translations than several other tools, due to its ability to analyze syntactic structures and semantic contexts in depth (Tran, M., & Castilho, 2021). Nevertheless, the use of DeepL in translating Arabic texts into Indonesian still raises issues of terminological accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and stylistic consistency, particularly when dealing with academic or religious texts (Azzahra, N., & Pratiwi, 2023).

Previous studies have shown that the effectiveness of machine translation tools largely depends on users' linguistic readiness and critical awareness. Students with limited language proficiency tend to rely on literal translation results without evaluating the contextual meaning (Hirdah, N., Syarif, M., & Fatimah, 2021). Moreover, Musthofa, Hanani, and Wahyuni

emphasized that the limited understanding of structure and implicit meaning in academic texts makes it difficult for students to produce contextually appropriate translations (Musthofa, R., Hanani, A., & Wahyuni, 2022). Similarly, Hustanah highlighted the importance of integrating theoretical and practical aspects in translation teaching so that students do not depend solely on technology (Hustanah, 2023).

Although several studies have examined the use of machine translation tools in foreign language learning, research specifically exploring the perceptions of Arabic Language Education students regarding the use of DeepL Translate remains limited. Understanding these perceptions is crucial to identify how students evaluate the usefulness, convenience, and impact of such technology on their learning experiences (Sobur, 2013).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the perceptions of Arabic Language Education students at IAIN Kendari regarding the use of DeepL Translate in translating Arabic assignments. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of Arabic language learning strategies that are more adaptive to technological advancements, while encouraging students to utilize technology in a critical and productive manner.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design to explore students' perceptions of using DeepL Translate in translating Arabic assignments. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it enables a deep exploration of individuals' subjective experiences when encountering a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2015)(Moustakas, 1994). The research subjects consisted of five active students from the Arabic Language Education Study Program at IAIN Kendari, selected through purposive sampling based on the criterion of having used DeepL Translate in their academic assignments. The sample size of five participants was considered sufficient as the collected data had reached data saturation, meaning no new

information or emerging themes appeared during the interviews (Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes for each participant. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded with verbal consent from the participants. Ethical considerations were maintained by ensuring the confidentiality of the data, respecting participants' privacy, and using the information solely for academic purposes. The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involve three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview transcripts to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research objectives. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher applied reflexivity by maintaining reflective notes throughout the interview and analysis process, as well as conducting source triangulation and peer debriefing to minimize subjective bias (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, 1985).

Result and Discussion

Based on in-depth interviews with five students from the Arabic Language Education Study Program at IAIN Kendari, three major themes emerged that represent their perceptions of using DeepL Translate to complete Arabic translation assignments: (1) critical use, (2) pragmatic dependence, and (3) reflective evaluation. These themes reflect a continuum of awareness, from active and reflective users to those who depend on the technology in a more practical manner.

1. Critical Use

Several participants demonstrated a critical and reflective attitude toward the use of DeepL Translate. One of them, NS (7th semester), stated that she did not rely on DeepL as the main tool but used it as an initial aid to grasp the general meaning of an Arabic text. She explained: "I use DeepL not for the

final result, just to get the general idea first. But I always reread and revise it because sometimes the sentence structure still sounds odd."

This statement shows strong linguistic awareness. NS recognized the limitations of machine translation and did not accept its results uncritically. She treated DeepL as an initial support tool to ease understanding, not as a replacement for human reasoning and manual editing. This reflects a metacognitive ability in language learning — the capacity to monitor and evaluate one's own thinking while processing language (Wenden, 1998).

Her awareness also aligns with the notion of *autonomous learning* (Little, 1991), in which learners engage critically rather than passively with technology. NS's experience illustrates that DeepL Translate can serve as an effective language learning aid when used reflectively and supported by adequate linguistic competence.

2. Pragmatic Dependence

In contrast, another participant, MT (5th semester), admitted to using DeepL Translate entirely to complete translation assignments. She said: "Usually, I just copy what DeepL gives and submit it as my answer because I don't have much time and I'm not good at grammar."

This statement reflects limited mastery of Arabic grammatical structures and time constraints that push students toward a more instant solution. In such cases, DeepL is perceived as a "quick lifesaver" rather than a reflective learning tool. This tendency aligns with the concept of *instrumental motivation* (Brown, 2000), where technology is used merely to accomplish tasks efficiently rather than to gain deep understanding. As a result, students often depend on machine-generated translations without verifying their accuracy.

A similar pattern was found by Hirdah, Syarif, and Fatimah, who noted that many students directly rely on machine translation due to weak vocabulary and grammar knowledge (Hirdah, N., Syarif, M., & Fatimah, 2021). Consequently, the translated output often lacks contextual accuracy and weakens text comprehension. MT's experience shows that students' perceptions

of technology are strongly shaped by their linguistic ability and academic pressures. While DeepL provides practical convenience, uncritical reliance may foster passive language learning habits.

3. Reflective Evaluation

The third participant, LR (5th semester), highlighted DeepL's weaknesses in translating academic or religious terms. She said: "Sometimes when the text is too academic or full of Islamic terms, DeepL doesn't really catch the meaning, so it gets lost."

This quote demonstrates conceptual awareness that AI-based translation technologies still struggle to capture contextual and cultural nuances. LR understood that Arabic texts—especially religious ones—carry deep semantic and cultural meanings that cannot be translated literally.

Similarly, WG (7th semester) employed a strategy of cross-verifying DeepL results with other tools and peers: "For Islamic texts, I usually compare DeepL with Google Translate or ask my friends, just to see which one makes more sense."

This reflects a reflective and evaluative approach to technology use. WG did not accept translations passively but engaged in verification through multiple sources and social interaction. This process shows a form of collaborative learning, where students use peer networks to achieve a more accurate understanding of the text.

Meanwhile, MR (5th semester) emphasized practicality and ease of use: "I like DeepL because it's fast and simple. It's perfect for someone like me who doesn't really understand grammar."

While appreciating its efficiency, MR also revealed a degree of dependency caused by limited grammatical proficiency. Such comfort with automation can be a double-edged sword — on one hand, it facilitates task completion, but on the other, it may hinder the development of independent translation skills if not accompanied by critical reflection.

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Perceptions and Use of DeepL Translate

Participant	**Semester**	**Key Perspective**	**Representative Quote**	**Interpretation / Implication**
LR	5th	Critical awareness of limitations in academic and religious translation	"Sometimes when the text is too academic or full of Islamic terms, DeepL doesn't really catch the meaning, so it gets lost."	Shows strong conceptual and cultural awareness; understands that religious Arabic carries deep contextual meaning that AI often misses.
WG	7th	Reflective and evaluative user; cross-verifies translation	"For Islamic texts, I usually compare DeepL with Google Translate or ask my friends, just to see which one makes more sense."	Demonstrates collaborative learning and critical use of multiple tools; relies on peer support and verification.
MR	5th	Pragmatic, convenience-focused user; depends on DeepL	"I like DeepL because it's fast and simple. It's perfect for someone like me who doesn't really understand grammar."	Indicates dependency due to limited grammar proficiency; efficiency appreciated but may hinder independent skill development.
NS & WG	—	Critical users of technology	—	Treat AI tools as aids rather than replacements for human reasoning.
MT & MR	—	Pragmatic dependence	—	Use AI tools heavily due to limited linguistic skills or time pressure.
LR	—	High linguistic and cultural awareness	—	Recognizes the depth of religious and contextual Arabic meanings that AI struggles to convey.

The findings indicate that students' perceptions of DeepL Translate span a continuum from critical use to pragmatic dependence and reflective

evaluation. This variety reflects how learners' linguistic competence, motivation, and academic context shape their engagement with technology.

Students like NS and WG represent critical users who position technology as a learning aid rather than a substitute for human reasoning. Meanwhile, MT and MR illustrate pragmatic dependence driven by limited linguistic skills and time pressure. LR, on the other hand, demonstrates high linguistic and cultural awareness, particularly when dealing with religious or contextual Arabic texts.

These patterns align with Sobur's concept that perception is an internal process involving organization, interpretation, and meaning-making toward a given stimulus (Sobur, 2013). In Arabic language learning, perceptions of technology are not solely determined by usability but also by the learner's reflective capacity to evaluate both the translation output and the source text.

The results also resonate with findings from (Poláková, P., & Klímová, 2023) and (Al-Salman, A., & Haider, 2024) who argue that the effectiveness of AI translation tools depends greatly on users' linguistic awareness and critical readiness. Thus, DeepL Translate should not be treated merely as a shortcut but as a pedagogical aid that fosters analytical thinking in translation learning.

Consequently, Arabic language instructors and curriculum developers should promote digital and linguistic awareness among students. DeepL can be integrated pedagogically as a means to stimulate critical reflection and discussion, rather than as a substitute for comprehension. When used thoughtfully, such tools can strengthen students' linguistic awareness and critical thinking in engaging with Arabic texts, both academic and religious.

Conclusion

The findings of this study conclude that students' perceptions at IAIN Kendari toward the use of DeepL Translate in completing Arabic translation assignments differ widely, shaped by their linguistic competence, learning backgrounds, and individual needs. While some students employ DeepL as a

preliminary support tool—using it to grasp general meanings before revising the output—others rely heavily on it due to limited mastery of nahwu and sharaf or because of time pressure. Although students appreciate the efficiency and user-friendliness of DeepL, many also recognize its inability to accurately translate Islamic terminology and academic expressions, prompting them to cross-check translations using alternative tools or peer consultation.

A notable and unexpected finding lies in the students' heightened awareness of the cultural and contextual limitations of AI translation tools. Contrary to the assumption that learners use DeepL passively, several students demonstrate reflective and evaluative behaviors—such as comparing outputs across platforms, engaging in collaborative verification, and identifying semantic distortions in religious or discipline-specific texts. This reveals that students are not merely dependent on technology but are developing critical digital literacy and contextual sensitivity, especially when dealing with culturally embedded Arabic content. Such awareness suggests a growing maturity in how learners navigate the intersection of language, technology, and meaning.

Despite these insights, this study acknowledges several limitations. The research focuses only on students from IAIN Kendari, which restricts the generalizability of findings to broader Arabic language learning contexts in Indonesia. Additionally, the study relies primarily on self-reported perceptions without incorporating a detailed analysis of actual translated texts, limiting the ability to measure the accuracy or quality of DeepL translations empirically. Future studies should expand participant diversity, compare multiple AI translation platforms, and include textual analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how translation technologies influence Arabic language learning.

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