

Arabic Subtitling of Cultural References in Netflix's Wednesday: A Case Study at the Islamic University of Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how third-year translation students at the Islamic University of Lebanon (IUL) deal with the subtitling of extralinguistic cultural references (ECRs) from English into Arabic, the target language (TL). Given the multimodal and culturally dense nature of audiovisual translation (AVT), subtitling poses unique challenges, particularly under strict temporal and spatial constraints. Fourteen participants translated 10 selected extracts from the Netflix series Wednesday and 5 of them were individually interviewed. The research utilizes Pedersen's (2011) taxonomy to analyze translation strategies and Pedersen's (2017) Functional Equivalence, Acceptability, Readability (FAR) model to assess subtitle quality. Thematic coding was also applied to analyze the interview data and identify common difficulties students encountered during the translation task. Findings reveal a predominant use of substitution, generalization, direct translation, and specification strategies, with frequent semantic, stylistic, and grammatical errors. The study highlights the students' struggles related to cultural awareness, idiomatic expressions, technical subtitling constraints, and limited AVT training. These challenges underscore the necessity for integrating comprehensive AVT pedagogy within translation curricula, emphasizing practical exercises and cultural competence to prepare students for real-world audiovisual subtitling tasks. The results contribute to the broader understanding of subtitle translation in Arabic and offer pedagogical insights for enhancing translation education in culturally complex audiovisual contexts.

Keywords: Subtitling, Cultural references, Translation strategies, Arabic, English, Audiovisual translation.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of audiovisual content via global platforms such as Netflix has amplified the role of audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly subtitling, as a crucial area of focus in Translation Studies (Nikolić & Bywood, 2021). Subtitling, the transcription of spoken dialogue into concise written text synchronized with audiovisual content, has grown widely due to its cost-effectiveness and accessibility (Bogucki, 2020). This mode of translation operates under strict spatial and temporal limitations, forcing translators to carefully balance clarity, brevity, and accuracy in their renderings (McLoughlin et al., 2011). According to Pedersen (2011), cultural references, deeply rooted in the source culture's norms, values, and knowledge, represent a central challenge in AVT due to their extralinguistic nature. Alfaify and Pinto (2021) demonstrated that Arab audiences prefer subtitles that adapt cultural references, employing explanatory or adaptive techniques rather than literal translations, particularly when humor or idiomatic expressions are involved.

Challenges Posed by Audiovisual Translation

Within subtitling, extralinguistic cultural references (ECRs)—such as idioms, historical names, institutions, and pop culture symbols—pose notable challenges due to their reliance on culture-specific knowledge that often lacks direct equivalents in target languages (Pedersen, 2011). Subtitlers must navigate this by employing various strategies including retention, substitution, omission, or generalization, each impacting the audience's comprehension and cultural coherence differently (Sibson, 2012). For instance, the Netflix series *Wednesday* exemplifies the complexity of subtitling culturally dense content, incorporating culturally embedded humor, intertextual references, and genre-specific symbols. These features increase the difficulty in translating ECRs into Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which, although being the lingua franca in Arabic media and education, can limit expressiveness and cultural relatability due to its formal nature (Alanazi, 2024). Student translators, particularly in the Arabic context, frequently encounter lexical and idiomatic hurdles due to the absence of direct equivalents and cultural unfamiliarity, leading to strategy choices that prioritize simplification or omission over full equivalence (Al-Khadem, 2024; Hashish & Hussein, 2022). The lack of formal subtitling training is an additional challenge, resulting in inconsistent and sometimes inadequate translations (El-Farahaty & Alwazna, 2024).

Recent studies highlighted the challenges encountered during the subtitling process. Mudawe (2024) in his analysis of the series *Friends*, noted that Arab subtitlers encountered substantial difficulties translating idioms, slang, and cultural allusions without Arabic equivalents. Likewise, Al-Khadem (2024) found that Yemeni students experienced confusion due to cultural gaps and unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions, leading them to rely heavily on paraphrasing and generalization strategies. Ghazi's (2024) study on the stand-up comedy *The American Dream* addressed the challenge of translating idiomatic and metaphorical language and reported frequent mistranslations due to literal renderings and failure to culturally adapt idioms and humorous language. Similarly, Shuhaiber and Haider (2023) found that paraphrasing using unrelated words was a common but problematic strategy in rendering Egyptian idioms, often distorting meaning due to cultural non-equivalence. Moreover, Chai et al. (2022) identified timing and screen space limitations as key subtitling challenges when translating Chinese cultural items. Additionally, Tee et al. (2022) linked technical issues with the loss of humor and meaning in fansub translations, reinforcing the idea that spatial and temporal constraints are universal barriers in AVT. El-Farahaty and Alwazna (2024) also emphasized that inappropriate strategy selection—often due to insufficient training—resulted in frequent cultural losses in Netflix subtitles. Hashish and Hussein (2022) further contrasted professional subtitlers with fansubbers, noting the former's superior application of subtitling strategies due to professional experience and training. Finally, Mehawesh and Neimneh (2021) observed a narrow and inconsistent range of strategies in the subtitling of the Jordanian film *Theeb*, leading to loss of cultural meaning and viewer confusion. Likewise, Al-Jabri et al. (2023) reported mixed effectiveness in subtitling strategies applied to Arabic stand-up comedy, particularly when dealing with culturally or linguistically complex humor.

Subtitling Strategies and Quality

The application of Pedersen's (2011) taxonomy provides a framework for understanding translation choices made under audiovisual constraints. It comprises seven strategies including retention, specification, direct translation, generalization, substitution, omission, and official equivalent. Recent studies analyzing subtitling strategies in culturally complex audiovisual texts (E.g. Mehawesh & Neimneh, 2021; Al-Khadem, 2024) reveal predominant reliance on substitution, generalization, and omission over retention or official equivalents (Mudawe, 2024). In addition, researchers assess subtitle quality by evaluating functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability using Pedersen's FAR model (2017). This model accounts for errors that impact meaning accuracy, language naturalness, and technical presentation, which are critical in maintaining subtitle quality and viewer satisfaction.

Study Objectives and Research Questions

Despite the crucial role of audiovisual translation in contemporary global communication, a gap remains in understanding how translation students, especially those without formal AVT training, manage subtitling challenges in culture-bound audiovisual texts. This study explores how third-year translation students at the Islamic University of Lebanon, Tyre campus, render ECR subtitling from English into Arabic using extracts from *Wednesday*. The research not only investigates the translation strategies used but also examines the difficulties students encounter during the subtitling process. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies do third-year translation students at IUL use in subtitling extralinguistic cultural references in the Netflix series *Wednesday* from English into Arabic?

RQ2: What challenges do these students encounter when subtitling cultural references in Wednesday's series from English into Arabic?

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative case study design involving third-year translation students at the Islamic University of Lebanon, Tyre campus. The participants were 14 females aged between 21-25 years. They voluntarily consented to translate 10 Selected extracts from the Netflix series Wednesday containing extralinguistic cultural references (see Table 1). Data were gathered through 14 students' translations and semi-structured interviews with 5 participants after completing the subtitling task. Interview questions examined the difficulties the participants faced when translating the 10 extracts and explored the strategies they used. The study analyzes students' subtitling outputs using Pedersen's (2011) taxonomy of subtitling strategies and evaluates quality through Pedersen's (2017) FAR model. Thematic analysis was also employed to interpret the interview data. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect the privacy of the study participants.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the qualitative data collected through the translation task using Pedersen's ECR Taxonomy and Pedersen's FAR Model in addition to thematic coding to analyze the interviews. Table 1 below provides an overview of the translation strategies employed by the students across all ten extracts, classified according to Pedersen's (2011) Extralinguistic Cultural Reference (ECR) Taxonomy.

In Extract 1, five strategies were identified in the students' translations. Direct translation was used by four students (28.57%) who closely mirrored the English metaphor with minimal adjustment. For instance, translating "soul-sucking void" as "فراغًا يمتص الحياة", thus maintaining structural and lexical fidelity but reducing idiomatic naturalness. Substitution appeared three times (21.43%), where students chose culturally familiar expressions; for example, they replaced "void" with "ثقب أسود" (black hole), creating a more vivid image for the Arabic reader. Omission occurred in three cases (21.43%), as in translations like "تجنب وسائل التواصل كل ما هو تافه", which excluded "soul-sucking void" and simplified the overall sentiment. Generalization was also used

Table 1. Strategies Used to Analyze Extracts 1-10.

Extracts		Pedersen's ECR Taxonomy						
		Retention %	Specificity %	Direct Translation %	Generalization %	Substitution %	Omission %	Official Equivalent %
1	I find social media to be a soul-sucking void of meaningless affirmation.	0	7.14	28.57	21.43	21.43	21.43	0
2	Secrets are like zombies; they never truly die.	57.14	7.14	0	0	28.57	0	7.14
3	Hold thy tongue	0	14.29	21.43	42.86	21.43	0	0
4	That gives me the heebie-jeebies.	0	35.71	0	14.29	7.14	0	42.86
5	Thing, a hand here?	35.71	7.14	7.14	7.14	7.14	35.71	0
6	Are you mansplaining my power?	0	57.14	0	21.43	7.14	14.29	0
7	Listen, Velma, why don't you and the Scooby gang stick to your homework and leave investigating to the professionals	0	0	50	14.29	35.71	0	0
8	It's not my fault I can't interpret your emotional Morse code	7.14	14.29	0	21.43	42.86	14.29	0

9	A siren can never change her scales	7.14	0	28.57	14.29	35.71	14.29	0
10	Don't let killing one supernatural pilgrim get to your head	0	7.14	21.43	28.57	21.43	21.43	0
Total		10.71	15	15.71	18.57	22.86	12.14	5

three times (21.43%); for instance, “وسائل لا معنى لها” (meaningless means) generalized the metaphor, sacrificing nuance for clarity. Finally, specification appeared once (7.14%), as a student clarified “soul-sucking void” through the verb “تجذب” as well as explaining “meaningless affirmation” by “كل ما هو عديم القيمة”, adding explanatory meaning while maintaining coherence.

In Extract 2, four strategies were identified in the students' translations. Retention was the most frequent (57.14%), used by eight students who kept the English term “zombie” in its transliterated form “الزومبي”, which reflects reliance on the audience's familiarity with Western media. Substitution appeared four times (28.57%), as using “الجزور تحت الأرض” (“deeply rooted underground”), which adds symbolic meaning but diverges semantically from the original metaphor. Specification occurred once (7.14%), when a student expanded the comparison in “لا تموت بل تبقى خالدة”, clarifying the metaphor by emphasizing immortality. Finally, official equivalent was used once (7.14%) by a student who translated “zombies” as “الأموات الأحياء”, a standard Arabic equivalent that preserved both meaning and naturalness.

In Extract 3, four strategies were observed in the students' translations. Generalization was most common (42.86%), used six times when students replaced the archaic tone with modern imperatives like “اصمت”, prioritizing clarity over stylistic faithfulness. Direct translation appeared three times (21.43%), as in using “اضبط لسانك”, which closely mirrors the original structure and preserves both meaning and tone. Substitution was also used three times (21.43%), with the use of “انتبه لألفاظك” (“watch your language”) adapting the phrase to a culturally natural Arabic expression. Lastly, specification occurred twice (14.29%), exemplified by the use of “ولا تقضحنا”, which adds contextual meaning and transforms the command into a socially grounded warning.

In Extract 4, four strategies were identified in the students' translations. Official equivalent was the most frequently used (42.86%), as six students used the established Arabic term “القشعريرة”, which naturally conveys the same sense of fear or unease. Specification appeared five times (35.71%), as in the use of “هذا الشيء قد أرعبني”, which intensifies the original mild idiom by specifying a stronger emotion of fear. Generalization occurred twice (14.29%), exemplified by the use of “إنه يعطيني شعور بعدم الراحة”, which delivers only a general sense of discomfort and loses the idiomatic vividness. Lastly, substitution was used once (7.14%), with the use of “هذا الشيء يرسل رعشة”, replacing the source idiom with a culturally similar expression that retains the emotional impact.

In Extract 5, six strategies were identified in the students' translations. Retention was the most frequent (35.71%), used five times by students who kept the name “Thing” in transliteration, as in “ثينغ”, preserving the original reference but risking confusion for unfamiliar audiences. Omission also appeared five times (35.71%), as in translations like “هل تساعدني؟”, which removed the humorous wordplay and simplified the meaning. Direct translation was used one time (7.14%) by a student who translated the sentence almost literally: “ثينغ” (Thing) is retained, and “يدك” (your hand) is a fairly Direct Translation of the literal meaning of “a hand”. Generalization was also used once (7.14%), exemplified by the use of “بعض المساعدة؟”, which conveyed the request but lost the cultural nuance. Specification appeared once (7.14%), in the translation “يد العون منك؟ حرفياً؟”, which clarified the pun by adding “literally?”. Substitution was used once (7.14%), with the use of the idiomatic expression “مَدَّ يَدَ العون”, a culturally equivalent Arabic phrase that retained the figurative meaning naturally.

In Extract 6, four strategies were identified in the students' translations. Specification was the most common (57.14%), used by eight students who expanded or clarified the meaning of “mansplaining”. For instance, using “هل تشرح لي قوتي بتعالٍ لمجرد أنك رجل؟”, explicitly adding “بتعالٍ” (condescendingly) and “لمجرد أنك رجل” (just because you are a man), defining both tone and gender dynamics. Generalization appeared three times (21.43%), as in “هل تستخف بقدراتي”, which conveys condescension but omits the gendered nuance. Omission was used twice (14.29%), with the use of “لماذا تستنزف طاقتي?”, removing the cultural and gendered elements entirely. Finally, substitution appeared once (7.14%), when a student localized the meaning through “إنك تنظر لقوتي نظرة رجل شرقي لقوة امرأة”, adapting the critique into a culturally familiar frame.

In Extract 7, three strategies were identified in the students' translations. Direct translation was the most frequent (50%), used by seven students who retained the original reference with minimal change. For example, the use of “تلتزمين أنت وعصابة سكوبي بواجباتكم المدرسية وتتركون التحقيق للمحترفين؟” mirrors the source both structurally and

semantically, preserving the reference to “the Scooby gang”. Substitution appeared five times (35.71%), as in the use of “رفاقك” (your friends) and “لأهله” (to its people), replacing the cultural reference with familiar Arabic expressions. Finally, generalization was used twice (14.29%), exemplified by the use of “تقفين أنت وفريق سكوبي جانبا”, which simplifies the cultural nuance by focusing on the general idea of stepping aside.

In Extract 8, five strategies were identified in the students’ translations. Substitution was the most frequent (42.86%), used by six students who adapted the cultural reference for Arabic audiences by replacing “Morse code” with “رسائلك المشفرة” (your encrypted messages), preserving the idea of coded communication. Generalization appeared three times (21.43%), as in the use of “لم أستطع فهم مشاعرك”, which conveys emotional confusion but omits the cultural element. Specification was used twice (14.29%), exemplified by the addition of “التي لا يفهمها حتى” (that even spies don’t understand), which amplifies the metaphor for clarity. Omission also occurred twice (14.29%), as in “لست مسؤولاً عن عجزك في فهم شيفرتي العاطفية”, which alters the meaning and removes the reference entirely. Finally, retention appeared once (7.14%), with one student keeping “Morse code” as “شفرة مورس”, maintaining fidelity but risking audience unfamiliarity.

In Extract 9, five strategies were found in the students’ translations. Substitution was the most frequent (35.71%), used by five students who replaced the cultural metaphor with familiar Arabic expressions. For instance, students used the proverb “الطبع يغلب التطبع” (nature overcomes nurture), effectively adapting the idea of unchangeability. Direct translation appeared four times (28.57%), as in “الحورية لا تغير حراشفها”, which stays close to the source but sounds unnatural to Arabic audiences unfamiliar with the mythological reference. Omission was used twice (14.29%), exemplified by the use of “المنظم لا يمكن أن يغير جدولته”, which removes the metaphor entirely and alters the intended meaning. Generalization also occurred twice (14.29%), with the use of “الحورية تبقى حورية”, simplifying the metaphor while preserving its core message. Finally, retention was seen once (7.14%), when a student transliterated “siren” as “سيرين”, maintaining the term but losing its cultural and symbolic depth.

In Extract 10, five strategies were identified in the students’ translations of this extract. Generalization was the most frequent (28.57%), used four times when students replaced “supernatural pilgrim” with broader phrases like “عدو واحد يملك قوة خارقة”, which conveyed the idea of power but lost the historical and cultural nuance of “pilgrim”. Direct translation appeared three times (21.43%), as in “حاج خارق”, which preserved form but produced an awkward and unclear expression in Arabic. Substitution was also used three times (21.43%), exemplified by the use of “يصعدك فوق السحاب”, which effectively conveyed arrogance but deviated from the source meaning. Omission occurred three times (21.43%), as in the use of “لا تجعل هذا الانجاز يشعرك بالغرور”, which omitted the cultural metaphor while maintaining fluency. Lastly, specification appeared once (7.14%), with the translation “مخلوق خارق للطبيعة كبير في السن”, which clarified the reference but resulted in an unnatural phrasing.

Table 2 below presents an overview of the quality assessment of students’ translations of all extracts analyzed according to FAR model.

In Extract 1, under Functional Equivalence, one serious semantic error (4.76%), four standard semantic errors (19.05%), and three minor semantic errors (14.29%) were observed. The serious error appeared in the sentence “تجنب وسائل التواصل كل ما هو تافه”, which completely altered the meaning by omitting “soul-sucking void” and “meaningless affirmation”, while a standard error was evident in the translation “وسائل لا معنى لها لسلب الحياة”, which misrepresented the metaphor by rendering “soul-sucking” as “depriving life”. A Minor error was seen in “كل محتوى وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي أصبح فارغاً ومنحرف”, which shifted focus from the speaker’s perception to a judgment about social media content. In terms of Acceptability, idiomaticity errors appeared three times - two minor (9.52%) and one standard (4.76%) - such as “يمتص الروح من تأكيدات بلا معنى”, where the preposition “من” distorted the intended meaning, while minor grammar errors (9.52%) were found in “فارغاً ومنحرف” and “فراغ” instead of “فراغاً”. One student also committed a minor spelling error (4.76%) by writing “شيء” instead of “شيء”. Under Readability, one punctuation error (4.76%) was found in the omission of a comma before “مليناً” in “...الحياة، مليناً بتأكيدات...”, and six line length errors (28.57%) exceeded Netflix’s Arabic subtitling character limits.

In Extract 2, for Functional Equivalence, most students successfully conveyed the intended meaning using retention, specification, or official equivalent, but others committed serious (5.56%) and standard (16.67%) semantic errors due to poor lexical choices. A standard error was seen in the word choice of “الجنور”, which shifted the metaphor’s meaning from “immortality” to “resilience”. Under Acceptability, minor spelling errors occurred six times (33.33%), such as “الاسرار” instead of “الأسرار”, mainly due to missing *Hamza* or *Tanween*, while idiomaticity errors appeared twice (11.11%), as in “أبداً حقاً”, which sounds awkward in Arabic. For Readability, punctuation errors appeared four times (22.22%), such as missing the comma before “لا تموت” (e.g., “الأسرار لا تموت أبداً” instead of “الأسرار كالزومبي، لا تموت أبداً”), which disrupted fluency, while line length errors were found twice (11.11%) for exceeding Netflix’s Arabic subtitle character limits.

In Extract 3, in terms of Functional Equivalence, the students made minor stylistic errors (35.71%), as they failed to reproduce the archaic tone of “Hold thy tongue”. Their translations, such as “اصمت”, were clear but overly direct and lacked the original’s formal register. Minor semantic errors (35.71%) appeared five times, including “انتبه لأفانك” which only partially conveyed the

Table 2. Quality Assessment of Extracts 1-10.

Extracts		Pedersen’s FAR Model												
		F					A					R		
		ME Sem %	Stan E Sem %	SerE Sem %	ME St %	Stan E St %	ME Gr %	Ser E Gr %	ME Spl %	ME Id %	Stan E Id %	ME LL %	ME Pn %	ME Sg %
1	I find social media to be a soul-sucking void of meaningless affirmation.	14.29	19.05	4.76	0	0	9.52	0	4.76	9.52	4.76	28.57	4.76	0
2	Secrets are like zombies, they never truly die.	0	16.67	5.56	0	0	0	0	33.33	11.11	0	11.11	22.22	0
3	Hold thy tongue	35.71	0	0	35.71	0	7.14	0	7.14	7.14	0	7.14	0	0
4	That gives me the heebie-jeebies.	37.5	0	6.25	0	0	6.25	0	18.75	18.75	0	12.5	0	0
5	Thing, a hand here?	0	12.5	25	6.25	0	0	0	31.25	6.25	0	6.25	12.5	0
6	Are you mansplaining my power?	22.73	13.64	13.64	0	0	0	0	18.18	0	0	18.18	13.64	0
7	Listen, Velma, why don’t you and the Scooby gang stick to your homework and leave investigating to the professionals	16	4	0	0	4	4	0	16	0	0	24	32	0
8	It’s not my fault I can’t interpret your emotional Morse code	19.23	3.85	7.69	0	0	3.85	3.85	23.08	3.85	0	30.77	0	3.85
9	A siren can	18.7	12.5	37.5	0	0	0	0	12.5	0	0	18.7	0	0

	never change her scales	5										5		
10	Don't let killing one supernatural pilgrim get to your head	16.67	13.33	3.33	0	6.67	33.33	0	6.67	3.33	0	16.67	0	0
Total		17.65	9.8	9.31	2.94	1.47	7.84	0.49	16.67	5.39	0.49	18.63	8.82	0.49

meaning by emphasizing caution in speech rather than the intended command for silence. For Acceptability, a minor spelling error (7.14%) occurred in “لألفاظك” (missing *Hamza*), a minor grammar error (7.14%) appeared in “أصمت”, where the past tense was used instead of the imperative “أصمت”, and a minor idiomaticity error (7.14%) was noted by the addition of “احتفظ بكلامك لنفسك”, which created an unnatural phrase. Under Readability, a single minor line length error (7.14%) was found in one translation, which exceeded the character limit set by Netflix’s Arabic Timed Text Style Guide (2023).

In Extract 4, in Functional Equivalence, one serious semantic error (6.25%) was made in the translation “شعور بالسعادة”, which completely reversed the intended meaning of fear or unease, thus distorting the original idiom. Minor semantic errors were more common (37.5%), occurring six times. For instance, using “هذا يعطيني القشعريرة” conveyed the sense correctly but sounded slightly awkward due to the literal use of “يعطيني” instead of the more idiomatic “يصيبني”. In Acceptability, minor idiomaticity errors appeared three times (18.75%); for example, the use of “هذا يشعرني بالقشعريرة” was grammatically correct but unnatural, since “يشعرني بـ” typically takes emotional rather than physical nouns. Minor spelling errors were found three times (18.75%), including the word “يشعرني” with an extra “ن”, and missing *Hamzas* in “إنه” and “أشعر”. One minor grammar error (6.25%) occurred in “شعور” instead of the correct “شعورًا”. For Readability, only two line length errors (12.5%) were noted for exceeding the Netflix Arabic subtitling character limit.

In Extract 5, for Functional Equivalence, four serious semantic errors (25%) occurred when the dual meaning—literal and idiomatic—was lost. For instance, the use of “لحظة، أديك يد في الموضوع” completely misinterpreted the intended humor, as the Arabic idiom means involvement rather than a request for help. Two standard semantic errors (12.5%) appeared when context was unclear, such as “تينغ، أهناك يد؟”, which literally asks if a hand exists rather than requesting assistance. One minor stylistic error (6.25%) was seen in the poetic phrasing “أترانا نحط بيد العون منك؟” followed by “حرفياً؟”, which felt unnatural and clashed with the original’s casual tone. Under Acceptability, minor spelling errors were the most frequent (31.25%), made by five students, including writing “تينغ” instead of “تينغ” and “شيء” instead of “شيء”. One minor idiomaticity error (6.25%) appeared in “يدك”, which was polite but more formal than the original. Regarding Readability, punctuation errors were observed twice (12.5%) as students omitted the question mark at the end of the sentence, while one line length error was noted (6.25%) as a student exceeded the Netflix Arabic subtitling character limit.

In Extract 6, in terms of Functional Equivalence, five minor semantic errors (22.73%), three standard semantic errors (13.64%), and three serious semantic errors (13.64%) were observed. Minor semantic errors reflected slight meaning or tone deviations; for instance, the use of “اتشرح لي قوتي، كأنني لا أفهمها؟” captured the condescension but failed to reflect the gendered aspect of “mansplaining.” Standard semantic errors such as “هل انت تشرح لي عن قواي؟” conveyed only the idea of “explaining my power”, omitting tone and gender bias. Serious semantic errors occurred when the meaning was entirely altered or omitted, such as “لماذا تستنزف طاقتي”, which misinterpreted the phrase as “why are you draining my energy”. For Acceptability, minor spelling errors appeared four times (18.18%), including the missing *Hamza* in “أنت” and the unnecessary addition of it in “امراة”. In Readability, minor punctuation errors (13.64%) were noted for omitting the question mark, while minor line length errors (18.18%) occurred for exceeding the Netflix Arabic subtitling character limit.

In Extract 7, for Functional Equivalence, there were four minor semantic errors (16%), one standard semantic error (4%), and one standard stylistic error (4%). Minor semantic errors reflected partial meaning loss, such as “أنصحك أن تترك المغامرات لأهلها”, which omitted the investigation aspect central to the scene. The standard semantic error occurred in “تخطيتم واجبك”, which distorted “stick to your homework” into “you neglected your homework”, changing the sense entirely. The same student made a stylistic error by using “شلة” (gang), a colloquial term that sounds unnatural in Standard Arabic. Under Acceptability, minor spelling errors appeared four times (16%), such as missing the *Hamza* in “أن” and omitting the *Tanween* in “جانباً”. One minor grammar error was made (4%), with the use of incorrect verb agreement, writing “تقومي” instead of the feminine “تقوين”. For Readability, minor

punctuation errors were frequent (32%), as eight students missed the question mark, and one added an unnecessary comma after “اسمعي”. Minor line length errors (24%) were made as students exceeded Netflix’s Arabic subtitling character limit.

In Extract 8, for Functional Equivalence, there were five minor semantic errors (19.23%), one standard semantic error (3.85%), and two serious semantic errors (7.69%). Minor semantic errors reflected partial meaning loss, such as “ليس ذنبي أن مشاعرك غير واضحة”, which simplified the emotional nuance by omitting the “code” metaphor. As well as the exaggerated version, “لست مسؤولاً عن فك شيفرة مشاعرك التي لا يفهما حتى الجواسيس”, which overextended the metaphor, making the tone hyperbolic. The standard semantic error appeared in “هذا ليس خطأي”, where the conjunction “فلا” illogically linked blame and inability. The serious semantic errors changed the sentence perspective entirely, such as “لو أردت أن أفهمك، لقلت ما تريد بوضوح”, which turned the statement into a conditional reproach instead of expressing frustration with misunderstanding. Under Acceptability, there were six minor spelling errors (23.08%), including missing *Hamza* in “أنني” and “أستطيع”, and the misspelling of “خطئي” as “خطأي”. One minor grammar error (3.85%) involved adding an unnecessary “من”, while one serious grammar error (3.85%) resulted from using feminine forms “أفهمك، لقلت، أردت” when addressing a male. A single minor idiomaticity error (3.85) appeared in “تفكيك شيفرتك السرية”, which sounded unnatural in Arabic. For Readability, one student made a minor segmentation error (3.85%) by inserting a full stop mid-sentence “لا يمكنني. ليست مشكلتي”, disrupting coherence, and eight students made minor line length errors (30.77%) for exceeding Netflix’s Arabic subtitling character limit.

In Extract 9, for Functional Equivalence, there were six serious semantic errors (37.5%), two standard semantic errors (12.5%), and three minor semantic errors (18.75%). Serious semantic errors involved complete deviation from the source meaning, such as “ذيل الكلب لا يتغير لو وضعته بالقالب ٤٠ سنة”, a metaphor about persistence and resilience that distorts the original idea of immutable nature. Standard semantic errors occurred when students partially conveyed the idea but used unsuitable metaphors; for example, the use of “الذنب يبقى ذنباً لو لبس جلد خروف” (the wolf remains a wolf even if it wears sheepskin) expressed constancy but disregarded the siren context of the original. Minor semantic errors reflected small inaccuracies or awkward word choices, such as “الحورية لا تغير قشورها” (the mermaid does not change her scales), which correctly mirrored the metaphor but used “قشور” (peels) instead of “حراشف” (scales). Under Acceptability, minor spelling errors appeared twice (12.5%) as students omitted both the *Hamza* and *Tanween* in “أبدا”, and missed the *Hamza* in “أن”. For Readability, minor line length errors occurred three times (18.75%), where subtitles exceeded Netflix’s Arabic character limit.

In Extract 10, for Functional Equivalence, there was one serious semantic error (3.33%), four standard semantic errors (13.33%), five minor semantic errors (16.67%), and two standard stylistic errors (6.67%). The serious semantic error occurred when a student mistranslated “supernatural pilgrim” as “الحيوانات” (animals) and “get to your head” as “تكون في عقلك”, completely altering the intended meaning. Standard semantic errors reflected partial misunderstanding, such as “لا تتعالى كثيراً” (don’t be arrogant), which oversimplified the expression, and “مخلوق كبير في السن” (old creature), which distorted the metaphor. Minor semantic errors showed slight meaning loss, such as “لا يغرك قتل عدو واحد يملك قوة خارقة” (don’t be fooled by killing one enemy with supernatural power), which conveyed the warning but lost the cultural nuance of “pilgrim”. The standard stylistic errors resulted from non-standard colloquial phrasing like “بس لأنك قضيت” (just because you killed), which clashed with formal Arabic style. Under Acceptability, ten minor grammar errors (33.33%) appeared mostly for failing to apply the feminine form (e.g., “تدع” instead of “تدعي”), while other students used incorrect *Tanween* “حاج خارقاً” instead of “حاج خارق”. Minor spelling errors (6.67%) were made by students who omitted the *Alef* in “حاجاً” and missed the *Hamza* in “أن”. One minor idiomaticity error (3.33%) appeared in “فيضرب رأسك” (so it hits your head), an unnatural idiom in Arabic. For Readability, five minor line length errors (16.67%) were recorded for exceeding Netflix’s Arabic subtitling character limit.

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

The analysis of the 5 interviews revealed five major themes reflecting students’ experiences subtitling cultural references. Cultural knowledge gaps were evident among all participants, as they struggled to understand references without sufficient background knowledge. For example, Student 4 admitted, “It was hard to me knowing the appropriate correct meaning of the word ‘pilgrim’”, while Student 3 noted, “In extract 4 you should know that Thing is a character.” Lexical and idiomatic challenges were also widespread, with students struggling to render idioms such as “heebie-jeebies” and “mansplaining”. Student 2 found “heebie-jeebies” “a new and unfamiliar word”, and Student 5 explained that since “mansplaining” has no Arabic equivalent, she used the simpler “شرح” (explanation) instead. The third theme, technical constraints, such as subtitle length and formatting added further difficulty; Student 2 remarked, “Word limit hindered the process. I cannot express all the ideas,” referring to

Extract 4, while Student 5 admitted, “Honestly I have ignored the word count but it worked out fine.” Another key theme was lack of training, as students highlighted their limited exposure to subtitling conventions and cultural adaptation. Student 3 said, “I made some research to know the contextual meaning of extracts... to preserve the ironic tone of Wednesday,” whereas Student 4 replaced difficult expressions like “emotional Morse code” with easier alternatives. Finally, under strategy use and translational decision-making, students reported applying strategies such as omission, borrowing, equivalence, modulation, and adaptation. Student 1 noted, “I think I used omission many times... I also used borrowing like zombies, Thing and Scooby,” while Student 4 said, “Adaptation helps in making the subtitles more relatable,” citing “Hold thy tongue” → “اضبط كلامك”. Overall, the interviews underscored that the main subtitling challenges arose from limited cultural familiarity, idiomatic ambiguity, and technical and training constraints, leading students to rely on practical but varied translation strategies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section answers the research questions of this study and ends with a conclusion and recommendations for future research.

RQ1: What strategies do third-year translation students at IUL use in subtitling extralinguistic cultural references in the Netflix series Wednesday from English into Arabic?

Table 1 shows that students primarily employed substitution (22.86%), generalization (18.57%), direct translation (15.71%), and specification (15%). Substitution—used in all extracts—indicates that students often replaced culturally dense expressions with familiar target-language equivalents. Generalization, noted in nine extracts, allowed them to simplify complex or specific cultural terms, while specification was used to add details that would clarify meaning. Other strategies, such as omission (12.14%), and retention (10.71%), were applied less frequently, and official equivalent (5%) was rarely used, suggesting limited reliance on standardized translations. Additionally, interviewees reported using borrowing (E.g. retaining terms like “zombies”), equivalence and modulation to blend cultural elements, and adaptation or simplification to make the subtitles clearer. Table 2, based on Pedersen’s FAR model, shows that students’ subtitles had a lot of Functional Equivalence errors. Minor (17.65%), standard (9.8%), and even serious (9.31%) semantic errors were common across most extracts, indicating that students often struggled to fully capture the original meaning—particularly with idioms and metaphors. Acceptability issues were also prevalent, as shown by frequent grammar minor and serious (8.33%), spelling (16.67%), and idiomaticity minor and standard (5.88%) errors, which disrupted the natural flow of the text. Moreover, Readability errors, such as excessive line length (18.63%) and punctuation (8.82%) errors, were widespread, highlighting technical issues likely linked to a lack of formal training in subtitling practices.

The findings of this study echoed Liu et al. (2024), whereby substitution was the most frequently used strategy, while official equivalents and retention were used less often. However, other studies such as Omer and Aminzadeh (2023) and Farkhan et al. (2020) showed a preference for retention, suggesting a more source-oriented approach compared to the students in this study. In terms of quality, this study found many Functional, Acceptability, and Readability errors in the students’ subtitles, especially with idioms, grammar, and technical issues like line length, which matches Gil’s (2023) findings. On the other hand, studies such as Abdelaal (2019) and Liu et al. (2024) showed higher subtitle quality, possibly because they involved professional subtitlers. The interview responses in this study confirmed the use of various strategies and showed that students tried to make the subtitles clearer for the audience by using substitution and specification similar to what was found in previous research.

RQ2: What challenges do these students encounter when subtitling cultural references in Wednesday’s series extracts from English into Arabic?

Multiple difficulties emerged during the translation task. Many students struggled with unfamiliar references, especially those related to American culture, idioms, or fictional characters. This was clear in expressions like “Scooby gang”, “pilgrim”, or “emotional Morse code”, which some students either misunderstood or avoided. Another difficulty was translating idiomatic and metaphorical expressions which had no direct equivalent in Arabic, such as “heebie-jeebies” or “mansplaining”. Consequently, they sometimes used general or simplified translations, which affected the richness or accuracy of the subtitle. In many cases, they chose substitution or generalization over keeping the original term or using an official equivalent, which shows their uncertainty or lack of familiarity with standard translation practices. Technical limitations also played a role. Students mentioned the difficulty of fitting translations within the word or character limits required in subtitling. This constraint forced them to shorten or change their translations, which sometimes caused the loss of important details or meaning. The FAR model analysis supported this, showing frequent errors related to subtitle length, punctuation, and formatting. Another challenge was the lack of formal training in audiovisual translation. Students admitted that they did not know the specific rules of subtitling, such as line breaks, synchronization, or software use. Finally, participants showed inconsistent use of translation strategies. While some used retention, substitution, or specification, others used

omission or direct translation, often without a clear reason. This inconsistency resulted in different translations for similar expressions, and sometimes affected the clarity or tone of the subtitles.

The study findings related to the prominent difficulty of understanding and interpreting culturally bound expressions due to insufficient background knowledge mirrored the observation by Mudawe (2024). Additionally, participants' unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions, leading them to rely heavily on paraphrasing and generalization strategies match the findings of Al-Khadem (2024). The challenge of translating idiomatic and metaphorical language was another recurring issue echoing Ghazi's (2024) study results. Technical constraints, such as character limits and subtitle length, were also widely reported by Chai et al. (2022). The lack of formal training among student participants was another significant challenge also noted by El-Farahaty and Alwazna (2024). Finally, this study found an inconsistent use of translation strategies, with students applying retention, substitution, specification, omission, or direct translation without clear rationale. This mirrored the findings of Mehawesh and Neimneh (2021).

CONCLUSION

The study findings revealed that student subtitlers intuitively employed a range of strategies, with substitution (22.86%), generalization (18.57%), and direct translation (15.71%) among the most frequent. However, a lack of AVT-specific training often led to inconsistent and incorrect translations, particularly in dealing with idiomatic and culture-bound expressions. The FAR model evaluation highlighted common errors in functional equivalence, idiomatic accuracy, and subtitle readability—issues compounded by limited cultural knowledge and a lack of familiarity with technical subtitling conventions. Thematic analysis of interviews further identified five core challenges: cultural knowledge gaps, lexical and idiomatic complexity, technical constraints, absence of formal training, and uncertainty in strategic decision-making. These findings must be situated within the broader context of a rapidly evolving audiovisual landscape. The global surge in streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ has dramatically increased the demand for high-quality subtitles that can bridge linguistic and cultural divides. As content becomes more transnational, the role of subtitling grows more complex, requiring not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural sensitivity, technical expertise, and strategic agility. In light of these shifts, the limitations exposed in student translations highlight a critical gap between traditional translation education and the real-world demands of audiovisual translation (AVT). To address this gap, this study underscores the need for integrating AVT modules into translation programs. These should cover not only subtitling strategies and quality assessment models but also practical training with subtitling software and case-based problem-solving. Developing students' cultural competence and strategic reasoning through guided exposure to diverse audiovisual materials can enhance both their confidence and competence as future subtitlers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies may explore several directions. First, research could examine the subtitling performance of students with varying levels of AVT training to assess the impact of formal instruction on translation quality. Comparative studies across different institutions or cultural contexts could also provide valuable insights into pedagogical approaches and student preparedness. Additionally, investigating audience reception of student-generated subtitles could provide a more holistic view of functional equivalence and viewer engagement.

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