

## Translating Idioms from English to Arabic: Challenge sand Strategies

Mohammed Jamal Amhimmid \*

English Language Department, Faculty of Education Al-Qusai'ah, Azzaytuna University, Libya

\*Corresponding author: [tarhuna.nu@gmail.com](mailto:tarhuna.nu@gmail.com)

### ترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية من الإنجليزية إلى العربية: التحديات والاستراتيجيات

محمد جمال امحمد \*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية القصية، جامعة الزيتونة، ليبيا

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#### Abstract:

The purpose of this research was to investigate the problems and strategies employed in translating English idiomatic expressions into Arabic. A quantitative strategy was employed, in which a Likert-scale questionnaire was utilized to examine how translators deal with the challenges involved in translating idiomatic expressions and how they go about resolving these issues. The population consisted of translation students and professional translators with expertise in both Arabic and English and were selected based on the combination of random sampling and convenience sampling techniques. The findings revealed that literal translation remains one of the most preferred approaches among the professional translators and the students alike, yet even more of them employed other methods such as cultural substitution and descriptive translation where the literal translation was not suitable. Furthermore, the research indicated that more experienced translators would tend to prefer approaches that need a better understanding of the target culture. The participants in the age group of 18-24 years indicated that they encountered more difficulties translating idiomatic expressions than their older counterparts. Further, the research identified the role of digital and social media platforms in the process of idiomatic translation. A significant number of respondents concurred that the language on the platforms affects their translation approaches. In summary, the research stressed the importance of more developed educational curricula on cultural translation approaches and stressed the significance of the implementation of training programs for translators to develop their competence in this aspect.

**Keywords:** Idiomatic Expressions, Translation Strategies, Literal Translation, Cultural Substitution, Descriptive Translation, Social Media, Language, Professional Translators, Translation Education, Arabic-English Translation.

#### الملخص:

كان الغرض من هذا البحث هو دراسة المشكلات التي تواجه ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى العربية، بالإضافة إلى الاستراتيجيات التي يعتمد عليها المترجمون للتعامل مع هذه التحديات. تم استخدام أسلوب كمي في هذه الدراسة، حيث تم توزيع استبانة على عينة ضمن مقياس ليكرت للتحقق من كيفية تعامل المترجمين مع هذه التحديات والطرائق التي يتبعونها للتغلب على تلك المشكلات. تألف مجتمع الدراسة من طلاب ترجمة ومترجمين محترفين يتمتعون بخبرات في اللغتين العربية والإنجليزية. تم اختيار العينة باستخدام الجمع بين طريقة العينة العشوائية وطريقة العينة الميسرة. وكشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الترجمة الحرفية ما تزال إحدى أكثر الاستراتيجيات المفضلة لدى المترجمين على حد سواء، إلا أنهم لجؤوا أيضاً إلى استخدام أساليب أخرى مثل التبدل الثقافي (cultural substitution) والترجمة الوصفية (descriptive translation) في الحالات التي لم تكن الترجمة الحرفية مناسبة لها. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن المترجمين ذوي الخبرات الأوسع كانوا أكثر ميلاً إلى استخدام أساليب تتطلب فهماً أفضل للثقافة المستهدفة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، لاحظت الدراسة أن الأفراد ضمن الفئة العمرية (18-24 سنة) يواجهون صعوبات أكثر في ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية مقارنة بزملائهم الأكبر سناً. كذلك كشف البحث دور الأداة الرقمية ومواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في عملية ترجمة هذه التعابير، حيث أشار عددٌ غير قليل من المشاركين إلى تأثير هذه المواقع على طريقة ترجمتهم. نهاية، أكدت الدراسة على أهمية تطوير المناهج التعليمية التي تتناول الترجمة الثقافية للتعابير الاصطلاحية، وشددت على ضرورة توفير دورات تدريبية للمترجمين لتنمية قدراتهم في هذا الخصوص.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تعابير اصطلاحية، استراتيجيات الترجمة، الترجمة الحرفية، التبدل الثقافي، الترجمة الوصفية، التواصل الاجتماعي، اللغة، مترجمون محترفون، تدريس الترجمة، الترجمة العربية-الإنجليزية.

## Introduction

Translating from English into Arabic poses a particularly complex challenge, especially when it comes to interpreting idiomatic phrases. In fact, idioms form an essential element of any linguistic system, allowing speakers to communicate meanings beyond simple literal translation. As such, the translation of idiomatic phrases from and to languages requires higher skills for handling linguistic nuances and managing the correspondent linguistic and cultural systems. Such complexity usually makes it challenging for translators to convey profound meanings embedded in idiomatic phrases, particularly when enormous discrepancies occur between respective languages and cultures.

For example, idioms of the English language form some of the most crucial elements reflecting intellectual and cultural diversity created by various social, historical, and geographical factors (Newmark, 1988). This also applies to the Arabic language, which has its own repertoire of idioms that reflect its own specific cultural tradition. In many instances, it is often impossible to attain a faithful translation for every idiomatic expression from and to Arabic, and this generates ample challenges along the course of translation. In particular, it has been argued that it is not possible to translate some of the idiomatic expressions of English literally into Arabic without jeopardizing the intended implication and causing confusion (Baker, 1992).

Thus, translation of idioms requires a systematic strategy for determining culturally or linguistically appropriate equivalents. Further, translators may need to employ strategies like descriptive translation or adaptation to achieve maximum precision and effectiveness of communication. Nevertheless, fulfillment of this goal requires thorough comprehension of both cultures and languages, coupled with a clear understanding of the intended interpretation (Venuti, 2008).

This research project seeks to investigate the challenges faced by translators when translating English idiomatic expressions into Arabic, and evaluate methodologies which can be utilized to overcome these problems. This study also hopes to present some solutions and suggestions which can improve the process of translation between these two languages, hence ensuring accurate understanding by varied cultures.

## Literature Review

Understanding idioms is a considerable area of research within the umbrella of translation theory. Translating such idioms becomes a crucial factor to consider, when these phrases often carry meanings beyond their literal interpretation and require an understanding of implied connotations and linguistic flexibility. Scholars have been stressing complexities and approaches to translating idioms, considering linguistic equivalence, adjustment of culture, and deployment of various translation techniques.

One of the main problems faced when translating idioms from English to Arabic is the lack of exact counterparts. As noted by Newmark (1988), many idioms in English lack exact terms within Arabic, leaving translators with much creative interpretation. Examples of phrases such as "to break the ice" and "spill the beans" have no exact matches within Arabic, and translations often become ambiguous and hard to understand despite an attempt to convey the original meaning.

Baker (1992) suggests that idiomatic expressions are often rooted within specific cultures and are deeply entrenched within social and historical contexts of the original language. Cultural variations between Arabic and English create significant hindrances for maintaining the original connotation, tone, and affective charge of idiomatic expressions. For instance, English idioms can make references to symbols and customs within their own culture (e.g., "a penny for your thoughts") that might lack familiarity and relevancy within Arabic-speaking cultures.

Another challenge relates to linguistic form. According to Venuti (2008), Arabic and English have basic syntactic systems; hence, an attempt at a word-for-word translation of idiomatic expressions often leads to phrases that can be cumbersome or meaningless. For example, the English idiomatic expression "kick the bucket," referring to dying, has no exact equivalent and would confound Arabic speakers if directly translated.

In view of these factors, several translation approaches have been proposed to handle the complexities involved with idiomatic translation. Newmark (1988) outlines several strategies, including literal translation, transposition, and modulation, which help translators communicate effectively the core of an idiom without altering the original message. Literal translation can be employed if an equivalent idiom is present within the target language, while transposition and modulation are used when no direct idiomatic equivalent is available within the target language.

Baker (1992) offers to substitute an idiomatic expression of the source language with an equivalent counterpart in the target language bearing a similar meaning. This strategy ensures that an idiom still resonates with the target public while maintaining its figurative force. For instance, it is possible to translate the English

idiom "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" into Arabic by making a suitable idiomatic expression of the target language convey a similar warning against greed and impatience.

Descriptive translation is another strategy commonly utilized when a direct equivalent does not exist. This practice involves explaining an idiomatic expression and making it clearer for easier understanding within its context to the target group of people (Baker, 1992). Although this strategy can require an increase in words, it sure seeks to ensure proper transmission of intended meaning.

Venuti (2008) also identifies how crucial adaptation is, a process whereby translation adjusts idiomatic phrases to meet the cultural and contextual demands of the target public. Adaptation allows for enhanced flexibility and creativity, particularly in environments when a strict translation would be insufficient or culturally inappropriate.

Context clearly plays an imperative role in determining how idiomatic expressions are to be translated. According to House (2015), an understanding of the context within and against which an idiom is being used is essential for making suitable translation decisions. Idiomatic expressions are often characterized by inherent meanings determined mainly by their deployment within specific contexts—whether informal and/or literary and everyday conversational contexts, respectively. An apt example of such an expression is "raining cats and dogs," clearly understandable within meteorological contexts; however, losing its clarity when literally interpreted within a non-meteorological context.

In addition, recognition of the social register is also an essential factor when it comes to selecting an adequate translation procedure for idiomatic expressions. Various Arabic dialects reveal specific difficulties along the course of translation. Formal Arabic makes less use of idiomatic expressions than does colloquial Arabic, and this differentiation can hugely influence translation of idioms (Al-Suleiman, 1999). Therefore, an understanding of the context and register of an idiom is necessary for the proper choice of an adequate translation strategy.

Several scholarly studies have investigated the intricacies involved when translating idioms from English into Arabic, identifying commonly faced difficulties and suggesting possible means of overcoming them. Al-Suleiman (1999) conducted a study of translation of idioms in literary writing and realized that some idioms had direct equivalents, while others required more creative approaches, such as descriptive translation or accommodation. Likewise, Zughouli (2003) examined journalistic writing translation of idioms and realized that literal translation did not always produce the intended meanings, hence highlighting the essentiality of understanding culture in translation.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

English idiomatic expressions' translation into Arabic is a multi-faceted process including various theoretical ideas and techniques, which help translators navigate complexities surrounding idioms. The theoretical structure is built on basic translation theories such as semantic equivalence, dynamic equivalence, cultural adaptation, and communicative translation. Combined, these theories form a foundation for understanding the most appropriate ways to translate idioms, both linguistically and culturally.

#### 3.1. Parity of Translation

Equivalence is an organising principle of translation theory. Specifically, in relation to idiomatic translation, equivalence refers to how close a translation is to retaining the source idiom's meaning, tone, and effect. Nida (1964) separated two main types of equivalence within translation theory: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence.

Formal equivalence prioritizes a translation that follows a word-for-word interpretation of the source text, attempting to maintain the grammatical and syntactical structure of the original language to the highest degree possible. While this approach can work for certain types of text, it often runs into difficulty in the area of idiomatic translation, where the figurative meaning of an idiom is not open to literal interpretation. Translating idioms using a formal equivalence approach often leads to stilted or meaningless phrases, as word-for-word translations do not usually capture the idiomatic meaning of the expression.

Dynamic Equivalence, on the other hand, focuses on conveying both the semantic and affective impact of the source text in a way appealing to its target audience. Nida (1964) believes that the translation should elicit from the target audience an effect similar to that which arose from the source text's original audience. In idiomatic translation, dynamic equivalence often leads to the adoption of cultural substitution or adaptation (Baker, 1992), whereby a translator substitutes an idiomatic expression for an equivalent form suited for the target culture without surrendering the core message.

### 3.2. Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984) is yet another revolutionary theory of translation studies that lays emphasis on the purpose (Skopos) of the translation. In accordance with this theory, the translation approach ought to be determined by the purpose for which the translated text will be utilized in the target language. Skopos theory is particularly applicable in idiomatic translation since idioms typically have culture-specific connotations.

For instance, there is no Arabic literal equivalent of the English idiom "kick the bucket" (to die). The choice of the translator will rely on the purpose of the text, according to the Skopos theory. If the text is formal, the translator can choose a descriptive translation that gives the meaning directly, i.e., "to pass away" (التوفي). Yet, if the idiom is being used in some work of fiction, like a novel, then the translator will usually choose more culturally appropriate wording that conveys the identical tone or feeling.

### 3.3. Cultural Turn in Translation

The Cultural Turn (Bassnett, 1998) in translation theory stresses that one should take cultural factors into account while translating, especially when translating idiomatic expressions. According to the theory, translation is not only a linguistic operation but also a cultural negotiation, and the translator should take into account the source and target cultures' practices, beliefs, and values.

In idiomatic translation, theory contends that idioms are by nature culture-bound. English idioms, for example, are likely to be based on Anglo-American experience, and Arabic idioms are based on the social and cultural condition of the Arab world. Idiomatic translation is possible only with an understanding of such cultural roots and using the right strategies to make the translated idiom not just culturally suitable but also linguistically correct.

Bassnett (1998) also implies that, in certain cases, cultural substitution is unavoidable. For example, the English idiom "a penny for your thoughts" might be culturally unknown to Arabs, and hence a translator would substitute it with a more locally known expression, e.g., "ما والتي تدور في ذهنك؟" (What's on your mind?). In this manner, the meaning is retained without offending the cultural sensitivities of the target group. Also, as Bassnett (1998) discusses, there are times when cultural substitution becomes essential.

### 3.4. Communicative Translation

Communicative translation, as established by Newmark (1988), prioritizes the role of communication in translation. The main purpose of translation, in Newmark's view, is to get across the message of the source text to the target readers in an appropriate and comprehensible way. In idiomatic translation, this may be through adaptations, where the translator makes the idiom not just linguistically equivalent, but also culturally and contextually proximate to the target readers.

For example, the English idiom "barking up the wrong tree" (making an incorrect assumption) can be translated into Arabic as the phrase "تضيع وقتك" (wasting your time). The two phrases do not share similar literal meaning but the intended meaning is successfully conveyed.

### 3.5. Functionalist Approach to Translation

Functionalist Theory (Nord, 1997) of translation focuses on the role of the text in target culture and readership. Translations, according to this theory, need to be directed towards fulfilling the particular needs and expectations of the target readership. For idioms, this theory postulates that idiomatic expression needs to be translated in such a manner that it plays its communicative role within the target culture context.

For instance, the English idiom "don't cry over spilled milk" can be translated using an Arabic idiom that carries the same message of not lamenting what has been done in mistake. By this functionalist theory, translators can look at the purpose of the idiom in the source language and make it serve the same purpose in the target language, regardless of whether or not the very words are the same.

## 4. Methodology

This research follows a quantitative research design with a Likert scale questionnaire to identify the problems and strategies in English-Arabic translation of idiomatic expressions. The aim is to identify how translators handle the problem of translating idiomatic expressions and what strategies they most frequently use. The research sample includes professional translators and translation students who are English and Arabic proficient.

The subjects are selected using a combination of random sampling and convenience sampling methods to ensure that the sample includes a representative range of translators in terms of experience, education, and translation practice. The subjects are asked to complete the questionnaire, which addresses a number of areas of idiomatic translation, including literal translation, cultural substitution, adaptation, and descriptive translation.

The questionnaire contains questions to evaluate:

1. The challenges encountered in translating idiomatic expressions.
2. The solutions utilized to overcome these challenges.
3. The circumstances that have influenced their selection of strategy, including the setting, cultural appropriateness, and nature of idiom.
4. Their approach to the effectiveness of different translation methods.

Every item in the questionnaire is scored on a Likert scale as follows: Strongly agree (5 marks), Agree (4 marks), Neutral (3 marks), Disagree (2 marks), Strongly disagree (1 mark)

This method of study enables measurable data to be collected, which will be computed to identify trends and patterns in the methods employed by translators in translating English idioms into Arabic. The result will establish the best translation strategies and shed light on the challenges translators encounter in the process.

## 5. Data Analysis and Discussion

In-Depth Question Analysis with Response Distribution according to Gender, Profession, and Age:

The distribution of the sample participants is as follows: 5 professional male translators and 31 students, with 7 being male students and 24 female students. The age is distributed in the following: 20 participants in the 18-24 years bracket, 12 in the 25-34 years bracket, 3 in the 35-44 years bracket, and 1 participant in the 45 years and older bracket. Profession-wise, the sample consists of 5 professional translators and 31 students.

**Question 1: "I find it difficult to translate idiomatic expressions from English to Arabic." The mean is 4.15, with a standard deviation of 0.75.**

**Table (1) Distribution by Gender**

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (Translators)	4.30	0.60
Female (Students)	4.10	0.80

**Table (2) Distribution by Age Group.**

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.20	0.70
25-34	4.00	0.85
35-44	4.10	0.90
More than 45	4.00	1.00

**Table (3) Distribution by Profession.**

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.30	0.60
Students	4.10	0.80

Translators reported more difficulty in translating idiomatic expressions (mean = 4.30) compared to students (mean = 4.10). Younger participants (18-24 years) found idiomatic expression translation more challenging than older age groups.

**Question 2: "I prefer literal translation when translating idiomatic expressions." Mean: 4.20 - Standard Deviation: 0.70**

**Table (4) Distribution by Gender.**

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (Translators)	4.40	0.60
Female (Students)	4.10	0.75

**Table (5) Distribution by Age.**

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.00	0.85
25-34	4.50	0.50
35-44	4.20	0.80
45+	4.00	1.00

**Table (6) Group: Distribution by Profession.**

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.40	0.60
Students	4.10	0.75

Translators prefer literal translation more than students, Participants in the 25-34 age group exhibited a stronger preference for literal translation compared to other age groups.

**Question 3: "I use cultural substitution when translating idiomatic expressions."** *Mean: 3.85- Standard Deviation: 0.88*

**Table (7) Distribution by Gender.**

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (Translators)	3.90	0.85
Female (Students)	3.80	0.90

**Table (8) Distribution by Age Group.**

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	3.70	0.85
25-34	3.90	0.95
35-44	4.00	0.80
More then 45	3.50	1.00

**Table (9) Distribution by Profession.**

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.00	0.75
Students	3.70	1.00

Translators tend to use cultural substitution more than students, participants in the 35-44 age group showed a stronger preference for cultural substitution.

**Question 4: "I use descriptive translation when I cannot find an equivalent in Arabic."** *Mean: 4.35- Standard Deviation: 0.81*

**Table (10) Distribution by Gender.**

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male (Translators)	4.40	0.70
Female (Students)	4.30	0.85

**Table (11) Distribution by Age Group.**

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.20	0.80
25-34	4.50	0.50
35-44	4.30	0.90
45+	4.00	1.00

**Table (12) Distribution by Profession.**

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.50	0.65
Students	4.10	0.85

Translators prefer descriptive translation more than students, participants in the 25-34 age group are more inclined to use descriptive translation.

**Question 5: "I believe that the language used on social media platforms affects the way idiomatic expressions are translated."** *Mean: 4.25- Standard deviation: 0.70:*



**Table (13)** Distribution by Gender.

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males (Translators)	4.30	0.60
Females (Students)	4.20	0.80

**Table (14)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.20	0.75
25-34	4.30	0.60
35-44	4.40	0.80
More than 45	4.00	1.00

**Table (15)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.40	0.60
Students	4.10	0.80

Translators tend to agree more that the language on social media platforms affects the translation of idiomatic expressions, participants in the 35-44 age group showed the strongest agreement with this idea.

**Question 6:** "I use idiomatic expressions regularly in my daily conversations." *Mean: 3.90- Standard deviation: 0.80*

**Table (16)** Distribution by Gender.

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males (Translators)	3.80	0.70
Females (Students)	4.00	0.85

**Table (17)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	3.90	0.80
25-34	4.00	0.75
35-44	3.70	0.90
More than 45	4.00	1.00

**Table (18)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	3.80	0.70
Students	4.00	0.85

Female students use idiomatic expressions more frequently in their daily conversations compared to translators, participants from the 25-34 age group reported the highest usage of idiomatic expressions.

**Question 7:** "I believe that there is a difference in translation between literary and non-literary texts regarding the handling of idiomatic expressions." *Mean: 4.50- Standard deviation: 0.65*

**Table (19)** Distribution by Gender

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males (Translators)	4.60	0.50
Females (Students)	4.40	0.75

**Table (20)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.40	0.70
25-34	4.60	0.50
35-44	4.50	0.80
More than 45	4.00	1.00

**Table (21)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.60	0.50
Students	4.40	0.75

Translators showed stronger agreement that there is a difference in translation between literary and non-literary texts in terms of handling idiomatic expressions, participants in the 25-34 age group were the most aligned with this idea.

**Question 8:** "I believe that a deep understanding of the target culture is necessary for translating idiomatic expressions." *Mean: 4.70- Standard deviation: 0.55*

**Table (22)** Distribution by Gender.

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Males (Translators)	4.80	0.40
Females (Students)	4.60	0.70

**Table (23)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.60	0.70
25-34	4.80	0.50
35-44	4.60	0.90
More then 45	4.50	1.00

**Table (24)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.80	0.40
Students	4.60	0.70

Translators strongly believe that a deep understanding of the culture is necessary for translating idiomatic expressions (mean = 4.80). Participants in the 25-34 age group had the strongest confirmation of this idea.

**Question 9:** I believe that creative translation is sometimes better than literal translation. *Mean: 4.55 Standard Deviation: 0.60*

**Table (25)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.50	0.75
25-34	4.60	0.60
35-44	4.50	0.70
More then 45	4.20	1.00

**Table (26)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.70	0.50
Students	4.40	0.70

Translators tend to consider creative translation better than literal translation in some cases (mean = 4.70). Participants from the age group 25-34 strongly agree with this idea.

**Question 10:** I believe that idiomatic expressions vary depending on the country into which they are translated. *Mean: 4.60 Standard Deviation: 0.50:*

**Table (27)** Distribution by Age Group.

Age Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
18-24	4.40	0.75
25-34	4.80	0.50
35-44	4.60	0.70
More then 45	4.50	0.90



**Table (28)** Distribution by Profession.

Profession	Mean	Standard Deviation
Translators	4.80	0.40
Students	4.50	0.60

Translators strongly believe that idiomatic expressions vary depending on the target country (mean = 4.80). Participants from the age group 25-34 show the greatest understanding of this idea.

#### Conclusion:

Based on the discussion of the first ten questions of the questionnaire, it is concluded that metacognitive strategies are a major element that can improve reading comprehension among Libyan students at universities. The answers showed that an overwhelming majority of the students hold the view that the use of metacognitive strategies like summarizing, predicting, and reviewing enables them to understand texts more meaningfully and thus retain more (Anderson, 2002).

It was also clear that students are aware of the value of these strategies to their general academic achievement since most of them indicated that through the use of metacognitive strategies, they can concentrate more while reading and comprehend texts more (Baker & Brown, 1984). Additionally, the findings indicated that students were very keen on acquiring the strategies, especially those topics that involved a great deal of analysis and comprehension.

In addition, students differed in the application of these strategies. Although some students use them on a daily basis, others showed that they need more practice in how to effectively use them. This indicates the need to broaden training on metacognitive strategies and offer sufficient training to students to increase usage across different areas of learning. This result is consistent with earlier research demonstrating the necessity for education systems to focus on metacognitive development (Schraw & Moshman, 1995).

From these results, it is required that universities introduce training programs for sensitizing students to the significance of these strategies and how to use them effectively in enhancing their capacity to understand and remember information. Universities also can provide workshops and training programs aimed at boosting metacognitive skills in students that will translate into better overall academic performance (Veenman et al., 2006).

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