

English as Foreign Language Learners' Strategies for Translating In-Game Texts

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the strategies that Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners use to translate English texts within online games. As digital games have become a widespread form of entertainment, they also provide opportunities for incidental language learning and informal translation practice. The English texts found in games—including instructions, dialogues, and item descriptions—require players to interpret meaning in real time, often without formal language instruction. Using open-ended questionnaires, the study collected data from ten purposively selected participants who regularly play online games. The findings identify four dominant translation strategies: contextual guessing, using digital translation tools, cultural interpretation and adaptation, and motivation-driven language engagement. The most common strategy was contextual guessing, which involved using narrative and visual cues. This was closely followed by the use of digital tools like Google Translate and online dictionaries. The study also found that some learners used more advanced strategies, such as adapting idioms and culturally specific expressions to retain their original meaning in Indonesian. Furthermore, learners' intrinsic motivation—whether to succeed in the game or to improve their English skills—played a significant role in encouraging them to engage with the language. The study concludes that online gaming environments can foster authentic language exposure, promote problem-solving skills in translation, and enhance learners' linguistic and cultural awareness. These insights suggest that game-based contexts could be a valuable tool for EFL educators and curriculum designers, complementing traditional methods for teaching translation and language competence in informal settings.

Keywords:

EFL learners;
Translation strategies;
Online gaming;
Contextual guessing;
Cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

In recent years, online games have become a common part of everyday life for many, especially students and young adults. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, these games provide unexpected exposure to English through in-game instructions, dialogue, item descriptions, and communication with other players. While the primary goal of gaming is entertainment, the frequent appearance of English text naturally creates opportunities for learners to encounter and interpret language in context. This process can support incidental vocabulary acquisition and enhance learners' awareness of language use in a real-world setting (Wijirahayu, et al., 2024).

Game-based learning has been widely discussed as a method to enhance language skills in an engaging way. Studies show that digital games can significantly improve learner motivation, vocabulary retention, and participation. For instance, Li (2021) found that EFL learners who used game-based mobile apps demonstrated higher motivation and better vocabulary achievement. Similarly, Patra and Mahadewi (2022) concluded that digital games contribute to vocabulary retention and learner

participation, while Erya and Taloko (2023) showed that narrative-based video games help students understand and remember new words better due to rich contextual and storytelling elements.

Beyond language learning, online games also create a space for informal translation practice. When players encounter unfamiliar words or phrases, they often rely on their existing knowledge or use translation tools to understand the meaning. Wibowo (2021) identified several translation strategies used by players of the game *Dragon Nest*, such as adaptation, borrowing, and equivalence. These strategies reflect how EFL learners manage real-time translation tasks in a digital environment (Wijirahayu, Effendi, Hartati, 2025).

Despite these promising findings, research on the translation strategies EFL learners use for in-game texts is still limited, especially from a qualitative perspective. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the specific translation strategies used by EFL learners when interacting with English texts in online games. Using a qualitative research design, this study seeks to understand how learners deal with translation challenges during gameplay and what strategies they apply to make meaning from English-language content. The findings are expected to provide insights into how digital gaming can contribute to language development, particularly in the area of informal translation skills.

The study addresses a notable gap in the existing literature by focusing on the specific translation strategies EFL learners use in a gaming context. While previous research has explored game-based learning and the role of digital tools in language acquisition (Li, 2021; Patra and Mahadewi, 2022), few studies have qualitatively investigated the cognitive processes and decision-making behind how learners translate in-game texts. Therefore, the research question proposed in this study is “What specific translation strategies do Indonesian EFL learners employ to comprehend English texts (instructions, dialogues, and item descriptions) during online gameplay?” By investigating the strategies learners employ, this research will add to the growing body of literature on game-based language learning and informal language acquisition.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the translation strategies used by EFL learners when they interact with English-language texts in online games. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for a deep, rich understanding of participants' experiences, thought processes, and decision-making during informal translation activities. Instead of focusing on statistical data, this design aims to uncover patterns of behavior, personal strategies, and learners' reflections that are not easily captured through quantitative.

The study involved a single cohort of 26 students. These participants were primarily in their sixth semester of the English Education study program and were concurrently enrolled in a Translation course at a private university located in East Jakarta

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed to gather detailed, reflective responses from participants at their own pace. It included a mix of structured and open-ended questions to probe their translation habits, tools used, common challenges, and specific examples of in-game English content they had encountered and attempted to translate.

The data gathered from the online questionnaire were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved a systematic process of reading and re-reading the participants' responses to identify recurring patterns, ideas, and insights. By coding and categorizing the data, this analysis allowed for the identification of key themes and translation strategies employed by the learners (Wijirahayu, Nurmaulida, Fathin, 2025). This methodological approach allows for the exploration of authentic learner behavior in a naturalistic setting. The findings are expected to shed light on how informal learning environments, such as online games, can contribute to the development of translation awareness and language competence among EFL learners.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Based on the thematic analysis, this study found three primary translation strategies used by EFL learners when engaging with in-game texts. The most common strategy was contextual guessing, where learners relied on the game's storyline, character dialogues, and visual cues to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases. A second, widely-used strategy involved the use of digital translation tools like Google Translate and online dictionaries, particularly when in-game context was insufficient to derive meaning. It is shown in table 1.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis

Contextual Guessing	Inferring from story/dialogue	I usually guess the meaning by paying attention to what just happened in the game	7
	Relying on visuals and gameplay	If they is confusing, I look at the picture or mission clue to figure it out	5
Use of Digital Tools	Google Translate	I copy the sentence and paste it in Google Translate when I don't understand it	6
	Online dictionary	Sometimes I use an online dictionary if one word keeps appearing	4
Cultural Interpretation	Rephrasing idioms	When there's an idiom, I change it to something similar in Indonesian	3
	Adjusting jokes or puns	Some jokes in English don't make sense, so I just make them into normal sentences	2
Learning Motivation	Desire to understand the game better	I like translating the quests because it helps me play better and learn new words.	5
	Interest in language learning	I enjoy figuring out the meaning without help—it feels like a challenge.	3

The final, and most sophisticated, strategy was cultural adaptation, where a small number of participants modified idiomatic expressions or culturally specific references to better fit an Indonesian context. These findings demonstrate that EFL learners are not passive recipients of language but are active agents who employ a variety of cognitive and technological resources to make sense of English in a dynamic, authentic environment.

3.2 Discussion

Contextual Guessing: Learning Through Narrative

The most common strategy identified was contextual guessing, where participants used the game's storyline, character dialogues, and visual cues to interpret unfamiliar English words or phrases. A representative participant noted, "I usually guess the meaning by paying attention to what just happened

in the game.” This approach demonstrates a cognitive engagement with the game's narrative and suggests a powerful form of incidental language learning (Wulandayati, Wijirahayu & Siswana, 2025). This finding aligns directly with the work of Erya and Taloko (2023), who found that narrative-driven games effectively support vocabulary learning by providing immersive and repeated exposure to new words within a meaningful context. For example, a participant successfully translated the complex sentence, “You must defeat the guardian before the portal closes, or the whole village will fall,” into “Kamu harus mengalahkan penjaga sebelum portalnya tertutup, atau seluruh desa akan hancur.” This translation shows the learner's ability to process and convey both conditional and causal clauses correctly by relying on the context of the game's quest or mission.

The Role of Digital Tools as Translation Aids

When contextual clues were insufficient, many participants turned to digital translation tools like Google Translate or online dictionaries. One learner stated, “I copy the sentence and paste it into Google Translate when I don't understand it.” This behavior highlights the practical use of technology to overcome linguistic barriers in real time.

This strategy supports the findings of Li (2021) and Patra & Mahadewi (2022), who demonstrated that digital tools can significantly assist in vocabulary acquisition and improve learner motivation within a game-based context. The use of these tools allows learners to quickly confirm their understanding and continue playing without interruption (Alifah & Wijirahayu, 2025). The translation of “Although the mission failed, you still gained experience points which will help you level up” into “*Meskipun misinya gagal, kamu tetap mendapatkan poin pengalaman yang akan membantumu naik level*” exemplifies this. The learner successfully preserved the complex clause structure, showing a practical application of grammar understanding that was likely supported by their use of a digital tool.

Cultural Interpretation and Adaptation

A smaller but significant theme was cultural interpretation and adaptation (Wijirahayu, 2024). This advanced strategy involved modifying English expressions, especially idioms, jokes, or culturally specific references, into more culturally appropriate or understandable equivalents in Indonesian. One participant commented, “Some jokes in English don't make sense, so I just make them normal sentences.”

This strategy resonates with Wibowo (2021), who emphasized the role of adaptation and borrowing in video game translation to preserve the user experience, and Deckert et al. (2024), who advocated for more user-focused studies in game localization. The participants' behavior reflects the actual decision-making processes of a translator, prioritizing meaning and cultural relevance over literal word-for-word translation.

For instance, the English idiom “Don't count your chickens before they hatch” was translated as “Jangan terlalu cepat berharap hasilnya sebelum waktunya tiba.” Instead of a literal translation, the learner chose a culturally neutral equivalent that conveyed the same cautionary message, demonstrating a pragmatic equivalence (Newmark, 1988). This shows a higher level of linguistic awareness, where learners are not just decoding messages but also negotiating meaning across cultures. This aligns with Aprilia and Nasekhah's (2023) findings that gamified learning encourages students to explore language expressively and creatively.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners employ a range of cognitive and pragmatic strategies to translate in-game English texts. The most prevalent approach identified was contextual guessing, where learners interpreted meaning using the storyline, character dialogue, and visual cues. This reflects an intuitive engagement with the language that supports incidental vocabulary acquisition and comprehension without the need for formal instruction. When contextual clues were insufficient, learners relied on digital tools such as Google Translate and online dictionaries to supplement their understanding.

A smaller but significant group of participants demonstrated more sophisticated strategies, including the cultural adaptation of idiomatic expressions and humor. This behavior indicates a growing awareness of the need to preserve meaning and cultural relevance, showing that these learners were not just translating words but actively interpreting content. This ability points to an emerging translation competence that goes beyond simple word-for-word substitution.

An equally important finding is the link between motivation and translation behavior. Participants were highly engaged with in-game texts, driven by a desire to improve gameplay and challenge themselves linguistically. This confirms that motivation and learner autonomy are crucial for successful informal language acquisition.

In sum, this study affirms that online games are not just for entertainment; they also provide valuable linguistic input and practical challenges that stimulate translation awareness and skill development among EFL learners. The findings highlight the need for greater recognition of informal translation practices as a legitimate avenue for language learning. For educators and practitioners, this suggests that incorporating game-based learning could bridge the gap between formal education and real-world language use, particularly for developing translation and interpretation skills. This approach could make language learning more authentic and engaging for future students.

For EFL educators and curriculum designers, these insights suggest a shift toward more context-rich, task-based learning. By integrating elements of game-based translation—such as narrative-driven quests and idiom-matching exercises—teachers can leverage the strategies students already use in their leisure time to enhance formal linguistic and cultural competence. This approach not only validates the learners' informal experiences but also prepares them for the real-world, digital-first landscape of modern communication.

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