

Pedagogical Translation in Chinese as a Foreign Language: Students' Perceptions of Grammatical Development, Competence and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Translation has long been marginalized in foreign language pedagogy, often associated with non-communicative practices. However, recent developments in pedagogical translation, particularly within Translation in Language Teaching (TILT) and translanguaging frameworks, suggest that translation can function as a valuable cognitive and pedagogical resource. Despite this shift, limited research has examined how students perceive the role of translation in supporting grammatical development in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) contexts. This study examines students' perceptions of translation tasks in a CFL course at a Malaysian public university. A cross-sectional mixed-methods design was employed, involving 140 undergraduate students who completed a structured questionnaire, followed by semi-structured interviews with five participants. Quantitative findings indicate consistently positive perceptions of translation as a tool for enhancing grammatical understanding, improving sentence accuracy, and promoting attention to both meaning and form. Qualitative findings further reveal that translation supports vocabulary retention and contributes to increased communicative confidence. At the same time, students identified challenges related to homophonous pinyin, tonal distinctions, and syntactic differences in Chinese. To address these challenges, students reported using strategies such as context-based analysis, collaborative discussion, and systematic vocabulary learning. The findings suggest that TILT-informed translation tasks, when integrated within a translanguaging-oriented pedagogy, can effectively support grammatical development and broader language competence. These results highlight the potential of pedagogical translation as a central component of effective CFL instruction, particularly at the foundational level.

Keywords: Pedagogical translation, Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), Translation in Language Teaching (TILT), grammatical development, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Chinese language learning has expanded rapidly worldwide, generating new pedagogical demands and challenges for Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) education. Driven in part by China's economic growth, the global spread of Chinese has accelerated significantly, leading to a substantial increase in the number of learners across diverse contexts (Li, 2019; Gong et al., 2018, 2020). By the end of 2021, more than 25 million people outside China were learning Chinese as a second or foreign language, and over 200 million were learning and using the language overall (Ministry of Education, 2023). Large-scale initiatives such as the Chinese Bridge competitions and the HSK proficiency test further reflect the expansion of Chinese language education and the growing demand for CFL programmes worldwide (China Global Television Network, 2025).

Within this global context, Chinese holds particular importance in Malaysia due to the presence of a sizeable Chinese community and the country's long-standing diplomatic relationship with China since 1974. In line with national goals of fostering social cohesion and economic development, Chinese language education for non-native speakers has been increasingly promoted across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Gong et al., 2018,

2020). Efforts such as teacher training programs in both local institutions and universities in China have been implemented to address shortages and support the expansion of CFL education. Despite these initiatives, many learners continue to experience difficulties in developing core linguistic competencies, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and communicative use. These challenges are often compounded by limited exposure to authentic language environments, restricted opportunities for meaningful interaction, and the strong influence of learners' first language (L1) (Brown, 2000; Ng et al., 2025).

In response to these constraints, the use of learners' first language as a pedagogical resource has gained increasing attention in CFL classrooms in Malaysia. The strategic use of L1 can facilitate comprehension of complex concepts, activate prior knowledge, and support the construction of new linguistic understanding, particularly at lower proficiency levels (Cook, 2001). Similarly, Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) argue that L1 serves as a valuable mediational tool that enhances comprehension and learner confidence while allowing greater focus on meaning. Within this framework, translation between Malay (L1) and Chinese (L2), both oral and written, represents a systematic approach to integrating L1 into CFL instruction.

At a Malaysian public university, Malay-to-Chinese translation tasks have been integrated into classroom instruction, reflecting learners' natural tendency to rely on their L1 when processing a foreign language (Ali, 2012; Kavaliauskienė & Kaminskienė, 2007). Rather than discouraging this tendency, the programme adopts a pedagogical translation approach informed by Translation in Language Teaching (TILT), structuring translation tasks to support learning objectives. However, the pedagogical role of translation in CFL classrooms remains contested, particularly regarding its effectiveness in supporting grammatical development and broader language competence. More importantly, empirical, learner-centred evidence examining how translation contributes to these areas in CFL contexts remains limited.

This study therefore investigates CFL students' perceptions of translation activities in a Malaysian university course, with a specific focus on (i) how learners relate translation to grammatical development and overall Chinese language competence, and (ii) the challenges and coping strategies they experience when engaging in translation tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of translation in foreign language pedagogy

Translation has traditionally been associated with the Grammar–Translation Method (GTM), which dominated 19th-century language teaching before being largely displaced by Audiolingual, Direct, and Communicative approaches (Duff, 1989; Newson, 1998; Vermes, 2010). GTM emphasizes explicit grammar instruction and often relies on literal translation into learners' first language (L1), prioritizing accuracy and written skills over oral fluency and interaction. Consequently, GTM has been widely criticized for its non-communicative orientation, its focus on decontextualized texts, and its limited support for listening and speaking development (Malmkjær, 1998; Newson, 1998; Vermes, 2010; Nguyen, 2024). Within this paradigm, translation is typically treated as a separate skill that may encourage L1 interference. It is often viewed as incompatible with communicative competence.

More recent scholars, however, reconceptualize translation beyond its association with GTM and repositions it within communicative, task-based, and multilingual pedagogies. Under frameworks such as pedagogical translation and Translation in Language Teaching (TILT), translation is no longer viewed as a mechanical exercise. Instead, it is treated as a purposeful classroom tool that can support language development (Carreres, 2006; Fernández Guerra, 2012; Leonardi, 2010; Pan & Pan, 2012; Banitz, 2022). In this perspective, translation tasks are designed to promote metalinguistic awareness, draw learners' attention to form-meaning relationships, and facilitate intercultural understanding. Rather than isolating languages, such tasks encourage learners to actively compare L1 and L2 structures, explore pragmatic and sociolinguistic nuances, and collaboratively negotiate meaning. As a result, pedagogical translation is increasingly recognized as compatible with communicative goals. It supports vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, and critical language awareness.

Pedagogical translation and translanguaging in CFL classrooms

In CFL contexts, research has increasingly shifted toward viewing translation as an integral component of translanguaging pedagogy and task-based instruction (Wang, 2019; Nie, 2022; Zhang, 2020; Zhang, 2023; Zhang, 2025; Xu, 2024; Puspitasari, 2024). Empirical studies consistently show that both teachers and students draw on multiple linguistic resources, including L1, English as a lingua franca, and other shared languages. These resources are used to facilitate meaning-making, explanation, and interaction, even in settings where target-language-only policies are officially promoted. This reflects a growing recognition that multilingual practices are not merely compensatory strategies. They function as essential resources for learning.

Within this framework, translation tasks take multiple forms. These include brief teacher explanations, lexical glossing, and more structured bilingual activities such as collaborative tasks, role plays, and multimodal projects that require movement between languages (Xu, 2024; Lu, 2025; Wong, 2024; Han, 2022; Greenier, 2023). Such practices have been shown to support key classroom functions. These functions include meaning negotiation, peer scaffolding, learning efficiency, and increased participation (Nie, 2022). Importantly, learners generally report positive attitudes toward these multilingual approaches because they allow them to leverage their full linguistic repertoire. However, teachers often demonstrate more ambivalent attitudes. This reflects ongoing tensions between monolingual instructional ideologies and practical classroom realities (Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2020, 2025; Puspitasari, 2024).

Challenges and research gaps in translation-based CFL pedagogy

Despite its growing acceptance, research also highlights persistent challenges associated with translation and L1 use in CFL classrooms. One key concern is the potential over-reliance on L1, which may limit exposure to the target language and constrain opportunities for implicit learning (Bao, 2015; Ji, 2018; Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2020). At the learner level, beginners often struggle to develop grammatical competence through task-based approaches alone. They tend to rely heavily on explicit explanation and may show limited readiness for autonomous or collaborative learning (Bao, 2015; Ji, 2018; Yuan, 2025). These tendencies are further shaped by contextual factors such as examination-oriented assessment systems, large class sizes, and limited instructional time. These conditions may encourage more form-focused and translation-heavy practices (Gong et al., 2018, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

Taken together, the literature suggests a clear shift in the role of translation from a marginal, accuracy-driven technique to a flexible pedagogical resource within communicative and translanguaging-oriented classrooms. While existing research demonstrates that translation can support meaning-making, participation, and language development, it also highlights ongoing tensions related to balancing multilingual support with sustained engagement in the target language.

However, two important gaps remain. First, although prior studies have examined translanguaging practices and general learner attitudes, limited research has explored how learners specifically perceive the role of translation in supporting grammatical development and overall Chinese language competence. Second, while some studies document learner difficulties and strategy use, these are rarely examined within routine classroom-based translation tasks in CFL settings. As a result, there remains insufficient empirical evidence on the specific challenges learners encounter and the strategies they employ during pedagogical translation activities.

Addressing these gaps is essential for moving beyond general advocacy of translanguaging and TILT-informed approaches. It also supports the development of a more nuanced understanding of how translation can be systematically designed to enhance grammatical development and holistic language learning in CFL classrooms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a pedagogical translation perspective, specifically Translation in Language Teaching (TILT), and is informed by translanguaging theory and sociocultural theory (García & Li, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, learners' full linguistic repertoires, including their first language (L1), are viewed as semiotic

resources that can be strategically mobilized during translation tasks. These resources support the mediation of form-meaning relationships, facilitate metalinguistic reflection, and reduce affective barriers in CFL learning.

Within this study, pedagogical translation is conceptualized not as a residual Grammar-Translation Method practice but as a communicative, task-based tool. Translation tasks are understood to prompt learners to notice grammatical patterns, compare cross-linguistic structures, and engage in collaborative meaning-making. Through these processes, translation is expected to support grammatical development and broader Chinese language competence, while also shaping how learners experience challenges and employ coping strategies (Carreres, 2006; Leonardi, 2010; García & Li, 2014).

Extending this perspective, translanguaging theory positions classroom translation as part of a broader repertoire of flexible multilingual practices. These practices create inclusive learning environments, legitimize learners' linguistic identities, and support active participation. This perspective is particularly relevant for examining how students navigate translation tasks, including the challenges they encounter and the strategies they adopt.

From a sociocultural standpoint, the use of Malay and other familiar languages in Chinese classrooms is interpreted as a form of mediation that provides cognitive, affective, and interactional scaffolding, especially for learners at lower proficiency levels (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective helps explain how translation tasks can function both as supportive tools and as sources of difficulty, depending on how they are used and experienced by learners.

Guided by these theoretical perspectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students perceive the impact of translation tasks on their Chinese grammar and overall Chinese language competence?

RQ2: What challenges do students face in translation tasks, and what coping strategies do they use?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional mixed-methods design was employed to examine beginner-level CFL students' perceptions of the impact of pedagogical translation on grammatical awareness and overall Chinese language competence. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews exploring learners' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies in translation tasks.

Participants

The sample comprised 140 beginner-level undergraduates enrolled in elective Chinese language courses at a Malaysian public university. Most participants reported little or no prior exposure to Chinese before enrolling in the course. Five participants were subsequently selected for follow-up interviews using purposive sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate, as well as to ensure variation in L1 backgrounds and levels of engagement with translation tasks.

Translation Task Ecology

Within the target courses, translation was systematically integrated as a TILT-informed, translanguaging-oriented mediational tool. This integration included controlled L1-L2 sentence translation tasks targeting specific grammatical structures, short paragraph translations in both directions, and individual as well as small-group written translation activities. These tasks were discussed using both L1 and L2, and were supported by explicit teacher feedback focusing on cross-linguistic structures and tonal distinctions. Translation tasks were conducted regularly and served both formative and graded functions throughout the course.

Instrument Development and Quantitative Analysis

A Likert-scale questionnaire was developed to measure students' perceptions of the impact of translation on Chinese grammar and overall Chinese language competence. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms at the end of the course. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and percentages, were computed to summarize the data.

Construct validity was assessed using Exploratory Factor Analysis with Principal Axis Factoring and Promax rotation. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. All statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi (version 2.6.44).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Five semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes, were conducted and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were carried out in participants' preferred languages, allowing flexible use of translanguaging in their responses. Transcripts were produced verbatim, with the original language retained and parallel translations provided where necessary to ensure conceptual equivalence.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. The analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with familiarization and initial coding focused on perceived benefits, challenges, and strategies. This was followed by the development and refinement of broader themes, including grammatical awareness, learner confidence, tonal, lexical, and syntactic challenges, and the use of L1 in translation tasks.

RESULTS

Participants Background

A total of 140 beginner-level students enrolled in Chinese language courses at a Malaysian public university participated in the survey. The sample consisted of undergraduates from various faculties who were taking Chinese as an elective foreign language. Most participants reported having limited prior exposure to Chinese before enrolling in the course. From this larger group, five students (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5) were selected for follow-up semi-structured interviews to provide more detailed accounts of their experiences with translation activities.

Construct Validity and Internal Consistency Reliability of the Instrument

Construct validity of the 13-item instrument was examined using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Principal Axis Factoring and Promax rotation. The data were deemed suitable for factor analysis, as indicated by a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of 0.962, commonly interpreted as excellent, and a highly significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2363$, $df = 78$, $p < .001$), confirming sufficiently strong inter-item correlations.

The EFA results indicated a clear unidimensional structure. Only one factor had an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 (9.9833), while the second factor decreased substantially to 0.2464. This dominant factor accounted for approximately 76.7% of the total variance. These results support the interpretation that the instrument measures a single underlying construct, namely students' perceptions of pedagogical translation.

Factor loadings indicated that all 13 items loaded strongly on this single dimension, with values ranging from 0.609 to 0.935. The highest loadings were observed for item 7 ("Translation task encourages me to pay attention to meaning while producing grammatical forms"; 0.935) and item 8 ("Translation task helps me to improve my grammar and sentence structure accuracy"; 0.933). The lowest loading, for item 13, which reflects preference for writing in the native language before translating, remained within an acceptable range at 0.609.

The instrument also demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.975. This value exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating a high level of internal consistency and suggesting that the items reliably measure the intended construct.

RQ1: How do students perceive the impact of translation tasks on their Chinese grammar and overall Chinese language competence?

Item	Statement	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Translation tasks improve my Chinese grammar knowledge.	2.9	0	6.4	44.3	46.4	4.31	0.83
2	Translating into Chinese increases my awareness of grammar and sentence structures.	2.9	0	5.7	47.9	43.6	4.29	0.82
3	Translation tasks help me understand patterns of Chinese sentence structures more easily.	2.9	0	4.3	46.4	46.4	4.34	0.81
4	Translation tasks help me understand grammatical differences between Chinese and Malay/English/Tamil.	2.9	0.7	5.7	49.3	41.4	4.26	0.83
5	Translation tasks help me apply Chinese grammatical rules.	2.9	1.4	8.6	47.9	39.3	4.19	0.87
6	Translation tasks help me produce more accurate and natural sentences.	2.9	0	6.4	48.6	42.1	4.27	0.82
7	Translation tasks encourage me to pay attention to meaning while producing grammatical forms.	2.9	0	3.6	46.4	47.1	4.35	0.80
8	Translation tasks help me improve my grammar and sentence structure accuracy.	2.9	0	9.3	47.1	40.7	4.23	0.84
9	Translation tasks help me monitor my grammatical mistakes and sentence structures more easily.	2.9	0.7	6.4	48.6	41.4	4.25	0.84
10	Translation tasks help me understand complex Chinese grammatical structures.	2.9	0	9.3	47.9	40	4.22	0.84
11	Translation tasks should be included in the CFL curriculum.	2.9	0.7	10	45	41.4	4.21	0.87
12	Translation tasks are helpful for learning Chinese.	2.9	0	3.6	44.3	49.3	4.37	0.81
13	It is better to write in Malay/English/Tamil first and then translate into Chinese rather than write directly.	2.9	5	19.3	33.6	39.3	4.04	1.03

Table 1. The Impact of Translation Tasks on Students’ Chinese Grammar and Overall Language Competence

Table 1 shows that students reported consistently positive perceptions of translation tasks as a support for Chinese grammar and overall Chinese language competence. All 13 items recorded mean scores above 4.0 on a 5-point scale, with responses strongly skewed towards Agree and Strongly Agree and minimal levels of

disagreement. This pattern indicates a broadly favorable orientation towards pedagogical translation in the CFL classroom.

The findings demonstrate strong endorsement of translation as a tool for grammatical development. High mean scores across Items 1 to 4 indicate that students perceive translation tasks as enhancing grammatical awareness, facilitating the recognition of structural patterns, and making cross-linguistic differences more explicit. These results highlight translation as a resource for noticing and comparing linguistic systems rather than a purely mechanical transfer activity.

Translation tasks were also perceived as supporting the application of grammar in production. Responses to Items 5 and 6 show that students associate translation tasks with the ability to apply grammatical rules and produce more accurate and natural sentences. Notably, Item 12 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.81$), indicating particularly strong endorsement of translation tasks as beneficial for overall CFL learning. Item 7 also showed a high mean score ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.80$), suggesting that students recognize the need to attend to both meaning and form during translation. This pattern indicates that translation tasks promote integrated processing rather than an isolated focus on grammar.

Similarly, translation tasks were viewed as supporting accuracy and self-monitoring. Responses to Items 8 to 10 indicate that students perceive translation tasks as helping them identify grammatical errors, refine sentence structures, and better understand more complex forms. This suggests that translation tasks function as opportunities for self-checking and iterative improvement of linguistic output.

In terms of broader curricular value, students expressed clear support for the inclusion of translation tasks in CFL instruction. High agreement for Items 11 and 12 indicates that students consider translation tasks beneficial for language learning. The item related to L1-based drafting (Item 13) also recorded a positive mean score ($M = 4.04$), although with greater variability. This suggests that while many students view L1 drafting as a useful scaffold, preferences are more varied in this area.

Overall, the findings indicate that students perceive translation tasks as a multifaceted pedagogical tool that supports grammatical awareness, rule application, accuracy monitoring, and broader language development.

RQ2: What challenges do students face in translation tasks, and what coping strategies do they use?

Although students generally reported positive perceptions of translation activities, they also identified several recurring challenges when engaging in translation tasks.

A primary challenge relates to lexical selection and tonal distinctions. Students reported difficulty in selecting appropriate Chinese words due to the presence of homophonous pinyin forms that differ in meaning and written characters. As one participant noted, “the main problem I face when translating from Malay into Chinese is finding the correct word, because many pinyin forms sound the same but carry different meanings and use different Hanzi” (S1). Another participant highlighted the combined difficulty of tones, pronunciation, and vocabulary knowledge, indicating that these factors jointly complicate the translation process (S3). These responses suggest that the phonological and orthographic characteristics of Chinese increase the cognitive demands of translation.

A second challenge concerns limited and unstable vocabulary knowledge. Several participants indicated that gaps in lexical repertoire make translation both difficult and time-consuming. One participant explained that difficulty recalling vocabulary requires more deliberate memorization, suggesting that translation tasks expose limitations in vocabulary knowledge and create pressure for further lexical development (S5).

A third area of difficulty involves sentence structure and contextual interpretation. Students reported challenges in aligning Chinese sentence patterns with those of Malay and English, particularly when dealing with differences in word order and meaning. As one participant stated, “sentence structure is the most difficult part, plus grammar” (S2). Another emphasized the need to consider sentence focus and context to produce accurate

translations (S4). These responses indicate that learners struggle not only with individual lexical items but also with integrating form and meaning across languages.

At the same time, students described a range of coping strategies that reflect active engagement with translation tasks. One key strategy involves attending to context and sentence focus before translating, which helps learners select more appropriate lexical and grammatical forms. In addition, participants highlighted the importance of learning from errors and engaging in classroom discussion. Peer interaction and teacher feedback were seen as valuable for refining understanding and improving accuracy. Finally, students emphasized systematic vocabulary memorization as a necessary strategy for improving translation performance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while translation tasks present linguistic challenges, they also create opportunities for strategic learning. Students appear to use these challenges to identify gaps in their knowledge and develop more effective approaches to vocabulary, grammar, and context-sensitive language use.

DISCUSSION

Translation and grammatical development

The consistently high mean scores indicate a strong perceived link between pedagogical translation and improvements in grammatical awareness, rule application, and accuracy. This pattern aligns with research in pedagogical translation and TILT, which emphasizes that well-designed translation tasks can enhance metalinguistic awareness and direct learners' attention to form-meaning relationships when used as communicative tools rather than mechanical exercises (Carreres, 2006; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991; Machida, 2011; Pan & Pan, 2012; Fernández Guerra, 2012; Leonardi, 2010; Banitz, 2022).

These findings suggest that translation supports grammatical development by facilitating pattern recognition and cross-linguistic comparison. The ability to identify structural differences between Chinese and Malay, English, or Tamil reflects the role of contrastive processes in promoting deeper understanding of syntactic systems (Cook, 2001; Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009). In this sense, translation functions as a mediational tool that enables learners to connect explicit knowledge with language use.

Furthermore, the strong association between translation and attention to both meaning and form highlights its compatibility with task-based and form-focused instruction. Tasks that require precise expression of meaning appear to encourage learners to integrate grammatical accuracy with communicative intent. This supports the view that pedagogical translation can bridge the gap between explicit knowledge and meaningful production in CFL learning contexts.

Translation, L1 use, and overall Chinese language competence

Beyond grammatical development, strong support for the inclusion of translation in the CFL curriculum indicates that learners perceive its value in supporting overall Chinese language competence. Notably, the highest mean score for the item indicating that translation tasks are helpful for learning CFL further underscores learners' strong endorsement of translation as a central component of instruction rather than merely a supplementary activity. This finding is consistent with translanguaging-oriented research, which highlights the importance of drawing on learners' full linguistic repertoires to facilitate comprehension, participation, and confidence (Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2020, 2023, 2025; Nie, 2022; Puspitasari, 2024; Xu, 2024; Lu, 2025; Wong, 2024; Han, 2022; Greenier, 2023).

Translation appears to serve both cognitive and affective functions. It supports comprehension, vocabulary retention, and the internalization of sentence structures, while also enhancing learner confidence. From a translanguaging perspective, this reflects the role of multilingual resources as integral components of meaning-making rather than as sources of interference (García & Li, 2014).

At the same time, variation in responses to L1-based drafting highlights ongoing tensions regarding the role of L1 in language learning. While L1 use can function as an effective scaffold, excessive reliance may limit

opportunities for direct engagement with the target language and the development of implicit knowledge (Newson, 1998; Vermes, 2010; Bao, 2015; Ji, 2018; Gong et al., 2020; Yuan, 2025). These findings support a balanced perspective in which L1-mediated translation is strategically integrated rather than uncritically adopted.

Challenges: lexical, tonal, and syntactic bottlenecks

Despite these positive perceptions, the findings also highlight how Chinese-specific linguistic features complicate translation tasks. Difficulties in lexical selection, particularly in distinguishing between homophonous pinyin forms, reflect the phonological density of Chinese and its impact on lexical retrieval (Wang, 2019; Nie, 2022; Gong et al., 2018). Similarly, tonal distinctions remain a persistent challenge for beginner learners.

Limited vocabulary knowledge further constrains translation performance, as gaps in lexical repertoire increase processing difficulty and reliance on external support (Bao, 2015; Ji, 2018; Yuan, 2025). In addition, challenges related to sentence structure and contextual interpretation reflect the complexity of aligning Chinese syntax with learners' L1 systems, particularly given differences in word order and topic-prominent structures (Gong et al., 2018, 2020; Zhang, 2020). These findings suggest that translation tasks make linguistic bottlenecks more visible and cognitively salient.

At the same time, learners' reported coping strategies indicate that translation tasks can function as structured problem-solving activities. Attention to sentence context and meaning suggests a shift away from word-for-word translation toward more discourse-level processing, which aligns with communicative approaches to translation (Carreres, 2006; Leonardi, 2010; Pan & Pan, 2012). The role of classroom interaction, including feedback and peer discussion, reflects sociocultural perspectives on learning as a mediated and collaborative process (Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition, the emphasis on systematic vocabulary learning suggests that translation tasks can act as diagnostic tools that reveal gaps in linguistic knowledge and motivate targeted learning. When embedded within cycles of feedback and practice, translation tasks may therefore contribute to vocabulary consolidation and longer-term language development (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Fernández Guerra, 2012). Taken together, these findings highlight the dual role of translation tasks as both sources of difficulty and opportunities for deeper learning in CFL contexts.

CONTRIBUTION

This study extends translanguaging and TILT research by offering student-centred evidence from a CFL context.

It provides a more focused account of how learners perceive the role of translation in relation to grammatical development and overall Chinese language competence, addressing a gap in which prior research has predominantly examined participation, general attitudes, or task performance rather than grammar-focused outcomes (Wang, 2019; Zhang, 2020, 2023, 2025; Nie, 2022; Puspitasari, 2024).

A key contribution lies in the quantitative evidence demonstrating that beginner-level learners associate translation with enhanced grammatical awareness, meaningful rule application, and improved accuracy. These findings provide empirical support for the pedagogical value of translation, particularly in foundational CFL contexts.

A second contribution is the identification of how Chinese-specific linguistic features, including homophonous pinyin, tonal distinctions, and syntactic differences, shape learners' experiences of translation tasks. The study further shows how learners respond to these challenges through context-based analysis, collaborative discussion, and systematic vocabulary learning. This highlights the dynamic interplay between translanguaging practices, strategic learning, and scaffolded language development, which has received limited attention in previous CFL research.

Taken together, these findings suggest that well-designed, TILT-informed translation tasks can play a central role in CFL pedagogy. When embedded within a sociocultural and translanguaging-oriented framework, such tasks have the potential to support grammatical development, lexical expansion, and learner agency, provided that L1 use is carefully balanced with sustained exposure to the target language.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings are based on data collected from a single Malaysian public university and focus on beginner-level CFL learners. As such, the results are context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to learners at different proficiency levels or in other institutional and cultural settings.

Second, the qualitative component involved a relatively small number of participants. While the five interviews provided in-depth insights into learners' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies, the qualitative findings are intended to offer illustrative depth rather than represent broader population trends.

Third, the study relies primarily on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias or social desirability effects. The consistently high mean scores observed in the quantitative results may reflect generally positive attitudes toward classroom practices rather than purely objective evaluations of learning outcomes.

Finally, the study adopts a descriptive approach to data analysis, focusing on patterns of perception rather than establishing causal relationships. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating longitudinal designs, experimental comparisons of instructional approaches, and more advanced statistical analyses to further examine the impact of pedagogical translation on CFL learning.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that when translation tasks are purposefully designed, learners no longer experience them as residual Grammar-Translation Method practices but as meaningful learning activities that connect explicit knowledge with communicative use and enhance learner confidence. At the same time, the results highlight that Chinese-specific features, particularly phonological and syntactic difficulties, continue to constrain students' ability to translate accurately and fluently. However, these challenges also function as productive learning opportunities, as learners engage in strategies such as attending to context and sentence focus, learning from errors and classroom interaction, and developing systematic approaches to vocabulary learning. In this sense, translation tasks can operate as both diagnostic and developmental tools in CFL learning.

Overall, the study provides student-centred evidence that pedagogical translation can support grammatical development, broader communicative competence, and strategic learning when embedded within a sociocultural and translanguaging-oriented framework. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings support the deliberate integration of structured translation tasks into foundational CFL curricula, with careful attention to language-specific challenges and a balanced use of L1 scaffolding alongside sustained exposure to the target language.

Future research could extend this work by examining the longitudinal effects of translation-based instruction, exploring alternative task designs, and comparing learner perceptions across different proficiency levels and institutional contexts. More broadly, this study suggests that pedagogical translation should be viewed not as a supplementary technique but as a central component of effective CFL pedagogy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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