Beyond Literal Equivalence: Foreign Language Students' Contextual Comprehension, Meaning Negotiation, and Reflective Decision-Making in Translation Learning

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Abstract
This study investigates how foreign language students comprehend, negotiate, and revise meaning during translation learning in higher education. Although translation pedagogy has increasingly recognized contextual and communicative dimensions, limited attention has been given to how students integrate comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective decision-making as an interconnected learning process. To address this gap, the study adopts a process-oriented perspective emphasizing source-text comprehension, linguistic and cultural meaning negotiation, and reflective translation decision-making. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. Questionnaire data were collected from 170 undergraduate students enrolled in German, English, Arabic, and Mandarin language programs in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 selected participants to explain the quantitative findings. The results showed that students strongly recognized the importance of understanding the source text before producing a target text. The highest mean was found for source-text understanding and contextual interpretation (M = 4.25), followed by linguistic, cultural, and contextual meaning negotiation (M = 4.16) and reflective translation decision-making (M = 4.01). Qualitative findings revealed three interconnected themes: establishing contextual understanding before translation, negotiating meaning beyond literal equivalence, and refining translation decisions through comparison, discussion, and revision. The findings reveal an awareness–articulation gap, where students recognize contextual translation principles but require further support in explaining and defending their choices. The study contributes to translation pedagogy by offering a process-oriented framework integrating comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective revision into translation learning and assessment.
Key words: translation learning, pedagogical translation, meaning negotiation, reflective decision-making, source-text comprehension, foreign language education

1. Introduction

Translation pedagogy in foreign language education now encompasses product-focused, process-focused, and hybrid practices. Product evaluation remains valuable for examining target-text accuracy, acceptability, and communicative adequacy, while process evidence provides insights into how students interpret source texts, identify translation problems, consult resources, compare alternatives, and revise decisions. The pedagogical challenge is therefore not to replace product-oriented approaches with process-oriented ones, but to establish a stronger connection between the quality of translation products and the reasoning processes that produce them (Kelly & Bruen, 2015; Károly, 2014; Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021).

When instruction emphasizes an expected target version without sufficiently eliciting students' reasoning, instructors may identify surface-level errors but cannot always determine whether these errors originate from weak source-text comprehension, unsupported lexical choices, limited cultural knowledge, or insufficient attention to reader orientation. Students may also receive limited opportunities to understand how feedback can be transferred to new translation tasks. This issue is particularly relevant

in higher education, where translation activities involve interpretation of genre, communicative purpose, cultural meaning, and audience expectations rather than isolated word substitution.

Translation-competence research conceptualizes translation performance as an interaction among bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, strategic, and translation-specific resources (PACTE, 2003). Competence development is consequently reflected not only in the quality of a final translation but also in learners' ability to recognize problems, evaluate alternatives, justify decisions, and revise their solutions (Orozco & Hurtado Albir, 2002; Beeby et al., 2009). From this perspective, source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective evaluation should be understood as interconnected processes: later textual information may reshape initial interpretations, non-equivalent expressions require comparison of alternative solutions, and feedback may stimulate deeper reconsideration rather than merely correcting errors.

Existing research has generated substantial knowledge about pedagogical translation, translation competence, cognitive processing, intercultural mediation, reflection, collaboration, and assessment. However, these dimensions are often examined separately, providing limited understanding of how foreign language students experience them as an integrated learning process. In particular, less is known about how students move from initial source-text comprehension to meaning negotiation and reflective revision during actual translation tasks across language programs with different curricular roles. This gap is both theoretical and pedagogical: instructors require evidence about whether students' awareness of contextual translation principles can develop into explicit, transferable, and defensible decision-making practices.

This study therefore investigates an integrated process of translation learning among students in German, English, Arabic, and Mandarin programs in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. It addresses two research questions: (1) How do students perceive source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective decision-making in translation learning? (2) How do students experience these processes when completing translation tasks? The study contributes to translation pedagogy by examining how students transform context-sensitive awareness into explicit, defensible, and reader-oriented translation decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pedagogical Translation and Translation Competence

Contemporary translation pedagogy is more accurately described as a continuum rather than a transition from a wholly traditional to a wholly process-oriented model. Product-oriented evaluation can make accuracy, acceptability, and target-text quality visible, whereas contextualized translation tasks can develop cross-linguistic awareness, textual interpretation, and communicative control (Kelly & Bruen, 2015; Károly, 2014; Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021). The limitation arises when the product becomes the only evidence of learning and predetermined answers substitute for analysis of why a translation solution is contextually defensible.

Competence models provide a broader account of the resources learners must coordinate. PACTE (2003) emphasizes bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, strategic, and translation-specific resources; Orozco and Hurtado Albir (2002) operationalize competence development through changes in learners' conceptions, problem recognition, and procedures; and Beeby et al. (2009) demonstrate the role of acceptability and decision-making in distinguishing translation performance. These perspectives converge on the importance of strategic coordination, but provide less explanation of how foreign language students develop and articulate decision-making processes during routine classroom translation activities.

For such students, pedagogical translation occupies a hybrid space between language learning and translator-like activity. A satisfactory product remains important,

but it is pedagogically incomplete unless learners can connect linguistic choices to source-text evidence, cultural knowledge, communicative purpose, and target-reader needs. Translation competence in this context is therefore understood as a developmental capacity rather than an indicator of professional translator status: learners may recognize contextual principles before they can apply and explain them consistently.

2.2 Source-Text Comprehension and Meaning Negotiation

Cognitive and functional approaches illuminate complementary dimensions of source-text comprehension. Process studies show that segmentation, pausing, and translation units change with difficulty and emerging problems (Dragsted, 2005; Alves & Vale, 2009; Sun & Shreve, 2014), whereas functional and contextual accounts emphasize topic, purpose, register, audience, and situational meaning (House, 2006). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that rereading is not necessarily inefficient; rather, it may represent a strategic regulation process when later textual evidence requires revision of earlier interpretations.

Meaning negotiation begins when formal correspondence cannot preserve communicative value. Intercultural accounts foreground mediation of idioms, metaphors, pragmatic meanings, and culture-specific references (Katan, 2016; Tomozeiu et al., 2016), while competence research emphasizes the generation and evaluation of alternatives. The critical tension lies between adequacy to the source and accessibility in the target context. Neither literal retention nor adaptation without contextual criteria is sufficient when translation decisions must respond to textual function and readership.

Because meaning negotiation requires students to evaluate competing interpretations and translation alternatives, their explanations provide insight into the reasoning and criteria underlying their decisions. Vottonen and Kujamäki (2021) demonstrate that students' translation choices may be grounded in source-text analysis, target-language norms, and reader orientation rather than unsupported intuition. Such decision-making also depends on how learners identify information needs and use available resources. Resource use becomes productive when learners recognize what is missing, formulate appropriate searches, and evaluate whether retrieved evidence resolves the translation problem (Sycz-Opoń, 2019). Therefore, cultural knowledge, information literacy, and alternative comparison should not be viewed as isolated abilities but as interconnected resources that support context-sensitive translation decisions.

Building on these perspectives, the present study conceptualizes translation learning as a recursive process in which comprehension, negotiation, and revision continuously interact. Contextual comprehension supports the recognition of translation problems; identified problems trigger linguistic, cultural, and informational inquiry; alternative formulations are evaluated against source meaning and reader expectations; and newly acquired evidence may reshape both interpretation and target-text production. Accordingly, translation learning is understood not as a linear sequence of comprehension, transfer, and correction, but as continuous movement among interpretation, problem identification, evaluation, negotiation, and reflective revision.

2.3 Reflective Decision-Making and Process-Oriented Translation Learning

Reflection regulates the recursive movement between interpretation and production. Decision logs, commentaries, and retrospective reports can reveal whether revision follows deeper comprehension, contextual reconsideration, feedback, or only surface correction (Pietrzak, 2019). Yet reflection is not automatically equivalent to defensible judgement: students may sense that a version is inadequate without being able to specify the criterion that makes another solution preferable.

Situated briefs and diversified assessment provide such criteria by specifying purpose, medium, audience, and conditions of use (Gonzalez-Davies & Enriquez-Raido, 2016; Galan-Manas & Hurtado Albir, 2015). Product assessment and process evidence are therefore complementary. Translation quality shows what was achieved, while commentaries, portfolios, and process reports show how students evaluated alternatives and used feedback (Huertas Barros & Vine, 2018; Orlando, 2011).

Social interaction can make tacit criteria explicit, but its effect depends on task structure. Lecturer questions and dialogic feedback can prompt evidence-based explanation (Washbourne, 2014), while collaboration can expose competing interpretations and strengthen self-efficacy (Haro-Soler & Kiraly, 2019; Van Egdom et al., 2024). Without explicit evaluative criteria, however, peer discussion may simply exchange intuitions rather than develop independent judgment.

Across these literatures, the unresolved issue is the connection between awareness and articulation. Research has established the value of context, strategic competence, intercultural mediation, reflection, and feedback, but has less often examined how foreign language students combine them within one reported learning process. This study therefore focuses on the developmental relation among contextual comprehension, problem-triggered meaning negotiation, and the ability to justify and revise a translation decision.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design consisting of an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The design was selected because the study aimed first to identify general patterns in students' perceptions of translation learning and subsequently to explain how those patterns were manifested in their learning experiences. In an explanatory sequential design, quantitative findings guide the selection of qualitative participants and the development of issues explored in greater depth during the second phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative phase examined three interrelated dimensions of process-oriented translation learning: source-text comprehension and contextual understanding, linguistic-cultural-contextual meaning negotiation, and reflective translation decision-making. The qualitative phase explored how students implemented these processes when reading source texts, addressing non-literal expressions, comparing possible solutions, and revising their initial translations. Integration occurred through both connecting and merging procedures. The survey findings informed participant selection and interview emphasis, while the quantitative and qualitative results were subsequently brought together during interpretation. Such integration is central to mixed-methods research because it enables qualitative evidence to explain, expand, or contextualize numerical patterns (Fetters et al., 2013).

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The study involved undergraduate students enrolled in German, English, Arabic, and Mandarin language programmes at higher education institutions in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. Translation was positioned differently within the curricula of these programmes, including dedicated translation-related courses as well as reading activities, text-analysis tasks, and cross-linguistic assignments. The research setting was therefore conceptualized as a multi-program instructional context rather than as a basis for comparing institutions or curricular structures.

Participants in the quantitative phase were recruited through convenience sampling. The online questionnaire invitation was distributed to undergraduate students who were actively enrolled in foreign language programmes and had completed at least

one translation-related course or academic translation assignment. Participation was voluntary and self-selected. Because the total number of eligible students who received the invitation was not available, a response rate could not be calculated. Therefore, the quantitative sample is interpreted as an accessible eligible sample rather than as a statistically representative sample of the broader foreign language student population. A total of 170 students completed the questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic profile of survey participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Study programme	German	87	51.2
	English	50	29.4
	Arabic	30	17.6
	Mandarin	3	1.8
Gender	Female	129	75.9
	Male	41	24.1
Age	18–20 years	82	48.2
	21–23 years	69	40.6
	24 years and above	19	11.2
Semester	Second semester	34	20.0
	Fourth semester	56	32.9
	Sixth semester	49	28.8
	Eighth semester or above	31	18.2

Representation across programs was highly unequal, particularly for Mandarin (n = 3); consequently, no program-level statistical comparisons were conducted. Program diversity was used only to widen the range of curricular and language-pair experiences considered, not as an analytic predictor or basis for representativeness. For the qualitative phase, 17 survey respondents were selected purposively using maximum-variation considerations: program, semester, gender, translation-learning engagement, and willingness to elaborate on translation problems (Table 2). Purposeful sampling is appropriate when information-rich cases are selected to clarify quantitative patterns in mixed-methods research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Translation-learning engagement referred to students' reported degree of active participation in translation learning, operationalized through the frequency of completing translation assignments, participation in translation-related courses, and confidence in discussing translation problems. It was used as a selection characteristic to include students with different levels of exposure and verbal participation, not as a validated outcome variable. The interview sample comprised eight German, five English, three Arabic, and one Mandarin student; 12 were female and five male, from the second to the eighth semester.

The 17 interviews constituted a bounded explanatory subsample rather than a statistically representative group or a claim of universal thematic saturation. Adequacy was judged in relation to the mixed-methods purpose: obtaining information-rich accounts across the three questionnaire dimensions and clarifying lower-rated patterns such as reader adaptation, decision justification, and peer-supported revision. The excerpts reported in the Results are illustrative rather than exhaustive, and all 17 transcripts contributed to coding and theme development.

Table 2. Profile of Interview Participants (n = 17)

Participant	Study program	Gender	Semester	Translation-learning engagement
R-1	German	Female	6th	High
R-2	German	Female	4th	Moderate
R-3	German	Male	8th	High
R-4	German	Female	6th	High
R-5	German	Female	2nd	Moderate
R-6	German	Male	4th	High
R-7	German	Female	8th	High
R-8	German	Female	6th	Moderate
R-9	English	Female	6th	High
R-10	English	Male	4th	Moderate
R-11	English	Female	8th	High
R-12	English	Female	2nd	Moderate
R-13	English	Male	6th	High
R-14	Arabic	Female	6th	High
R-15	Arabic	Male	4th	Moderate
R-16	Arabic	Female	8th	High
R-17	Mandarin	Female	4th	Moderate

3.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a 15-item questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire was adapted from established translation competence frameworks, particularly the PACTE model, Orozco and Hurtado Albir's instrument for measuring translation competence acquisition, and the Translation Competence Questionnaire developed by Alavi and Ghaemi (PACTE, 2003; Orozco & Hurtado Albir, 2002; Alavi & Ghaemi, 2013). It measured three dimensions: source-text comprehension and contextual understanding, linguistic-cultural-contextual meaning negotiation, and reflective translation decision-making. Each dimension contained five items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Three experts reviewed the items for relevance, clarity, and construct alignment. A pilot test involving 30 students produced satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.86, 0.84, and 0.82 for the three dimensions, and 0.89 for the overall instrument.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed to explain and extend the questionnaire findings. Its questions explored how students understood source texts, identified linguistic and cultural problems, responded to non-literal expressions, compared alternative translations, considered target-reader needs, justified their decisions, and revised initial solutions. Open-ended prompts were used to elicit concrete learning experiences rather than abstract definitions. The guide was reviewed by the same expert panel to ensure clarity, neutrality, and alignment with the research questions.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was undertaken sequentially during the 2025/2026 academic year. In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed online to students who met the inclusion criteria. The introductory page explained the research purpose, participation procedures, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality safeguards, and the right to discontinue without penalty. Participants provided informed consent before accessing the questionnaire items.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Their questionnaire responses and demographic

characteristics were then reviewed to identify participants who represented variation in program, semester, gender, and translation-learning engagement.

In the second phase, the 17 selected students participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through an online meeting platform, depending on participant availability. Each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Participants were encouraged to describe concrete situations in which they had misunderstood a source text, struggled with a cultural expression, compared several translations, received feedback, or revised an initial solution.

With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and participant codes ranging from R-1 to R-17 were assigned. Field notes were also maintained to record contextual observations and preliminary analytical ideas without replacing the interview transcripts as the primary qualitative data source.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, item means, and dimension means. Mean scores were interpreted using five categories: 1.00–1.80 = very low, 1.81–2.60 = low, 2.61–3.40 = moderate, 3.41–4.20 = high, and 4.21–5.00 = very high. Inferential comparisons among language program were not conducted because of substantial differences in group size, particularly the small number of Mandarin participants. The quantitative analysis was therefore intended to identify general patterns in students' perceptions of source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective translation decision-making.

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis through familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and final interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding addressed recurring accounts of contextual reading, non-literal problems, cultural interpretation, alternative comparison, target-reader consideration, justification, peer discussion, and revision. Attention was also given to qualifying and divergent accounts, including limited analysis of authorial intention, problem-triggered rather than systematic reader orientation, and reliance on lecturer or peer prompts. Integration compared confirmation, expansion, and divergence between the datasets at the interpretation stage (Fetters et al., 2013).

4. Results

The primary aim of this study was to examine how foreign language students understood and experienced translation learning as a process involving source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective decision-making. Consistent with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the findings are organized according to the two research questions. The quantitative results first establish general patterns in students' perceptions across the three dimensions. The qualitative findings subsequently explain how these perceptions were manifested in students' reported translation practices.

4.1 RQ1. How do foreign language students perceive source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective decision-making in translation learning?

Three interrelated dimensions were examined through the questionnaire: source-text comprehension and contextual understanding, linguistic-cultural-contextual meaning negotiation, and reflective translation decision-making. Overall, item means ranged from 3.84 to 4.41, indicating consistently positive perceptions of translation as a contextual, strategic, and revisable learning process. The highest ratings were

associated with rejecting word-for-word translation, recognizing the limitations of literal equivalence, and prioritizing contextual understanding. Meanwhile, lower ratings were found for target-reader adaptation, revision through discussion, and the ability to explain translation choices. This pattern suggests that students demonstrated strong awareness of contextual translation principles, although their confidence in articulating and revising translation decisions remained comparatively less developed.

4.1.1 Source-Text Comprehension and Contextual Understanding

As presented in Table 3, students reported strong perceptions of source-text comprehension and contextual understanding, with item means ranging from 4.03 to 4.41. The standard deviations (SD = 0.62–0.79) indicate moderate variation while showing generally consistent responses. The highest-rated item concerned the view that translation involves more than replacing words between languages (M = 4.41, SD = 0.62), suggesting students' recognition of translation as a contextual meaning-making process. Lower but still positive ratings were found for rereading the source text for deeper understanding (M = 4.18) and considering the author's intention before translating (M = 4.03). This pattern suggests that students strongly recognized the importance of overall textual understanding, although more specific interpretive practices were applied with slightly less confidence.

Table 3. Students' perceptions of source-text comprehension and contextual understanding

No.	Statements	M	SD
1	I need to understand the whole source text before translating its parts.	4.32	0.68
2	Translation is not only replacing words from one language with another.	4.41	0.62
3	I often reread the source text to understand its deeper meaning.	4.18	0.74
4	I consider the author's intention before deciding on a translation.	4.03	0.79
5	A good translation depends on understanding context, not only vocabulary.	4.33	0.65
Dimension mean		4.25	0.7

The dimension mean of 4.25 was the highest among the three dimensions. This pattern suggests that students had developed a strong conceptual understanding that translation begins with textual and contextual comprehension. However, the relative difference between general contextual awareness and attention to authorial intention also indicates that comprehension may be treated more as broad topic recognition than as a systematic analysis of communicative purpose.

4.1.2 Linguistic, Cultural, and Contextual Meaning Negotiation

As presented in Table 4, students reported positive perceptions of linguistic, cultural, and contextual meaning negotiation, with item means ranging from 3.91 to 4.35. The standard deviations (SD = 0.63–0.82) indicate moderate variation in students' responses. The highest-rated item concerned the limitation of literal translation in conveying intended meaning (M = 4.35, SD = 0.63), followed by the recognition that idioms and cultural expressions are difficult to translate literally (M = 4.27, SD = 0.71). These findings indicate that students generally understood the need to move beyond formal equivalence when dealing with culturally embedded meanings. However, lower ratings for comparing alternative meanings (M = 4.06) and adapting translations to target-reader contexts (M = 3.91, SD = 0.82) suggest that students were more confident

in identifying translation problems than in applying reader-oriented negotiation strategies.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of meaning negotiation in translation learning

No.	Statements	M	SD
1	I find idioms and cultural expressions difficult to translate literally.	4.27	0.71
2	I compare several possible meanings before choosing a translation.	4.06	0.76
3	I adjust translation choices based on the target reader's context.	3.91	0.82
4	I need cultural knowledge to translate certain expressions accurately.	4.21	0.69
5	Literal translation is sometimes insufficient to convey the intended meaning.	4.35	0.63
Dimension mean		4.16	0.72

The overall mean of 4.16 indicates broad awareness that meaning must be negotiated across linguistic, cultural, and communicative contexts. Nevertheless, the item-level pattern reveals a distinction between problem awareness and solution orientation. Students appeared highly aware that literal translation could be inadequate, but comparatively less certain about how target-reader characteristics should systematically shape a final translation.

4.1.3 Reflective Translation Decision-Making

As shown in Table 5, students reported positive perceptions of reflective translation decision-making, with item means ranging from 3.84 to 4.28. The standard deviations (SD = 0.65–0.86) indicate moderate variation in students' reflective practices. The highest-rated item concerned students' responsibility for the meaning conveyed in their translations (M = 4.28, SD = 0.65), reflecting strong awareness of their role in meaning construction. However, lower scores were found for explaining translation choices (M = 3.84, SD = 0.86) and revising translations after discussion (M = 3.87, SD = 0.84). These findings suggest that although students recognized the importance of reflection, their ability to articulate and defend translation decisions remained less developed.

Table 5. Students' perceptions of reflective translation decision-making (N = 170)

No.	Statements	M	SD
1	I revise my translation after understanding the text more deeply.	4.12	0.73
2	I can explain why I choose a particular translation.	3.84	0.86
3	I consider several alternatives before deciding on the final translation.	3.96	0.78
4	I feel responsible for the meaning conveyed in my translation.	4.28	0.65
5	I sometimes change my first translation after discussing it with others.	3.87	0.84
Dimension mean		4.01	0.77

Reflective translation decision-making obtained the lowest dimension mean, although the result remained within the positive range. A particularly important discrepancy emerged between students' sense of responsibility for communicated meaning and their ability to explain the basis of specific translation choices. The 0.44

difference between these two items indicates that students may understand the consequences of translation decisions without yet possessing equally developed language for articulating the linguistic, cultural, or contextual reasoning behind them.

The findings reveal a generally favorable but uneven pattern. Students demonstrated the strongest awareness of the need to comprehend source texts and avoid lexical substitution. Their recognition of linguistic and cultural negotiation was similarly positive, particularly when literal translation was visibly inadequate. Reflective decision-making was comparatively less pronounced, especially in relation to decision explanation, target-reader adaptation, and peer-mediated revision.

This pattern may be characterized as an awareness–articulation gap. Students were able to recognize broad principles of context-sensitive translation, but their ability to externalize, defend, and collaboratively reconsider particular translation choices was less strongly developed. This discrepancy became the principal issue explored through the qualitative interviews.

4.2 RQ2. How do students experience source-text comprehension, meaning negotiation, and reflective decision-making when completing translation tasks?

The interviews with 17 students were conducted to explain how the broadly positive quantitative perceptions were enacted during translation learning. Three interconnected patterns emerged: contextual comprehension operated recursively throughout the translation process; meaning negotiation was activated when literal equivalence threatened communicative adequacy; and reflective revision was frequently supported by uncertainty, lecturer questioning, and peer discussion. These themes indicate that students' translation processes did not follow a fixed progression from reading to writing. Instead, they repeatedly returned to the source text, reformulated interpretations, evaluated target-language alternatives, and revised initial solutions.

A broad contrast also appeared across the interview accounts. Students were generally able to describe why contextual comprehension and non-literal translation were important. However, their ability to formulate explicit criteria for choosing among competing alternatives was less consistent. Explanations frequently emerged after a lecturer questioned a lexical choice or peers introduced a different interpretation. The qualitative findings therefore support the quantitative pattern while showing that reflective translation competence remained partly dependent on instructional and collaborative scaffolding.

Table 7. Summary of qualitative themes

Theme	Central process	Recurring indicators	Participants
Contextual comprehension as a recursive translation process	Establishing and revising source-text understanding	Whole-text reading, topic identification, rereading, connecting sentences, reconsidering initial interpretations	R-3, R-5, R-9, R-14, R-17
Meaning negotiation between adequacy and accessibility	Resolving meanings that resist direct transfer	Idioms, metaphors, cultural expressions, comparison of alternatives, naturalness, target-reader comprehension	R-2, R-6, R-10, R-11, R-15
Reflective revision and socially supported articulation	Evaluating and revising translation decisions	Uncertainty, returning to the source text, explaining choices, peer discussion, responsibility for reader understanding	R-1, R-4, R-8, R-13, R-16

4.2.1 Contextual Comprehension as a Recursive Translation Process

The first theme showed that source-text comprehension was not merely a preliminary stage completed before translation (see Fig. 1). Students continuously reconstructed meaning as new textual information emerged. They commonly began by identifying the topic and reading the whole paragraph, but their initial interpretations remained provisional. Later sentences could reshape the meaning of earlier lexical choices, requiring them to revisit and revise their first translations. R-9, an English program student, described this recursive process: "Sometimes the first sentence looks easy, but after I read the next sentence, I realize the meaning is different. Then I go back and change my translation."

These accounts indicate that translation decisions were shaped by information distributed across the text rather than by isolated sentences. R-3 similarly distinguished lexical correctness from contextual adequacy: "Before translating, I usually read the whole paragraph first. If I translate word by word, the vocabulary may be correct, but the meaning can be wrong." This distinction between linguistic possibility and contextual appropriateness appeared repeatedly across interviews, showing that students recognized the limitations of dictionary-based equivalence. Topic identification also functioned as an initial strategy for organizing interpretation. As R-5 explained: "I cannot translate directly if I do not know the topic of the text. I need to know what the text is about first."

Knowing the topic helped students narrow possible lexical meanings and establish relationships among sentences. However, they did not always conduct deeper analysis of text purpose or intended audience, which explains the relatively lower rating for authorial intention compared with broader aspects of contextual understanding. Students from Arabic and Mandarin programs reported similar processes despite differences in language systems. R-14 emphasized understanding "what the writer wants to say," whereas R-17 explained that contextual understanding often led to revision of an overly literal first version: "My first translation is often too literal. After I understand the context, I change some words so the meaning becomes clearer."

These accounts extend the quantitative finding that source-text comprehension was the highest-rated dimension. They show that comprehension functioned as an active and recursive strategy involving reading, provisional interpretation, contextual verification, and revision of earlier choices. However, students' comprehension practices were more strongly oriented toward topic and sentence-level relationships than toward systematic analysis of genre, purpose, and readership.

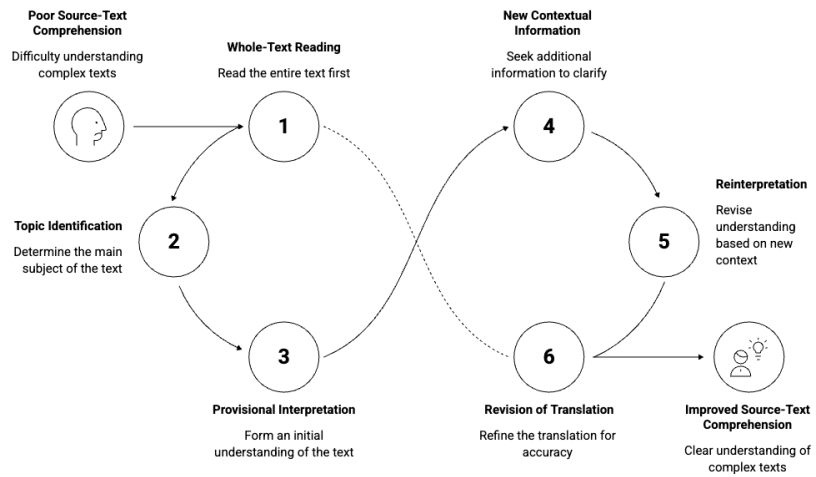


Figure 1. Recursive Contextual Comprehension in Translation Learning
Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis of the integrated survey and interview findings; visual arrangement produced with Napkin AI.

4.2.2 Meaning Negotiation Between Source Adequacy and Target-Reader Accessibility

The second theme emerged when students encountered idioms, metaphors, cultural expressions, and implicit meanings that could not be transferred directly. Meaning negotiation involved balancing source-text meaning with target-reader accessibility. Students did not reject literal translation automatically; rather, they evaluated whether formal similarity could preserve the intended meaning and communicative effect. R-2, a German program student, identified cultural distance as a major challenge: "The most difficult part is cultural expressions. If I translate them literally, Indonesian readers may not understand the meaning." Similarly, R-10 explained: "Some idioms cannot be translated word by word. I need to find another expression that gives a similar meaning or feeling." These accounts show that students understood non-equivalence as both a linguistic and communicative problem.

Students addressed such problems by generating and comparing alternatives. R-6 explained: "Sometimes I write two or three possible translations. After that, I choose which one sounds natural and still fits the source text." Their decisions were guided by two main considerations: target-language naturalness and consistency with source meaning. This was also evident in metaphor translation, as R-11 stated: "When there is a metaphor, I do not translate it directly. I try to understand the message behind it first." However, reader orientation was generally activated when misunderstanding was anticipated rather than through systematic consideration of audience, genre, or purpose. R-15 explained: "I always think about the reader. If the reader will not understand the translation, I try to make it clearer without changing the main meaning." This pattern helps explain why target-reader adjustment received a lower quantitative rating than recognition of the limitations of literal translation.

The qualitative findings therefore clarify an important distinction (See Fig. 2). Students had developed strong non-equivalence awareness, but their reader-oriented decision-making was more situational. They readily recognized idioms, metaphors, and cultural expressions as problems, yet systematic audience analysis was less evident. Meaning negotiation was activated most clearly when direct transfer failed, rather than functioning as a consistently applied principle across the entire task.

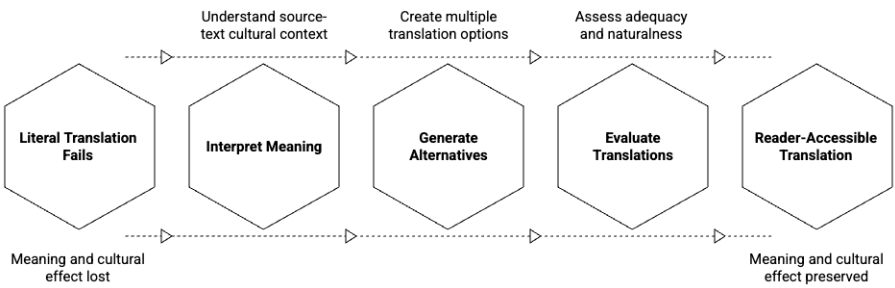


Figure 2. Problem-Triggered Meaning Negotiation in Translation Learning
Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis of the integrated survey and interview findings; visual arrangement produced with Napkin AI.

4.2.3 Reflective Revision and Socially Supported Articulation

The third theme concerned the evaluation, explanation, and revision of translation choices. Students commonly described their first translations as provisional. They returned to the source text, questioned apparently acceptable formulations, and modified target-text expressions after deeper comprehension or external feedback. Reflection was therefore closely connected to revision, but its initiation varied considerably. R-1 described revision as a search for greater contextual adequacy: "After finishing my translation, I usually return to the source text. Sometimes my first version is not wrong, but it is not deep enough." This distinction between a version that was "not wrong" and one that was "not deep enough" suggests that grammatical acceptability did not constitute the student's only evaluative criterion. Revision could be motivated by incomplete representation of context, communicative intention, or implied meaning rather than by identifiable surface error. Uncertainty also acted as a trigger for renewed analysis. R-4 explained: "There are sentences that can have more than one meaning. I feel uncertain, so I check the whole text again before deciding."

Rather than treating uncertainty as failure, students used it as a signal to seek additional contextual evidence. Ambiguity encouraged rereading, delayed decision-making, and reconsideration of initial choices. This pattern shows that reflective awareness developed through recognizing when a translation solution required further justification. Students also expressed strong responsibility for reader understanding, consistent with the high questionnaire rating for this dimension. R-13 stated: "If the reader misunderstands the text because of my translation, I feel that it is my responsibility." However, this responsibility was not always accompanied by the ability to independently articulate why a translation choice was appropriate. R-8 explained: "When my lecturer asks why I choose a word, I must explain the context. That makes me more careful." Lecturer questioning therefore transformed intuitive choices into explicit analytical reflection by requiring students to identify contextual evidence and justify their decisions.

Peer interaction served a similar function. R-16 reported: "Discussion with friends helps me see meanings that I did not notice before. After that, I often revise my translation." These findings indicate that reflective decision-making was strengthened through social scaffolding, although the lower score for discussion-based revision suggests that collaborative reflection was not yet consistently embedded in translation instruction.

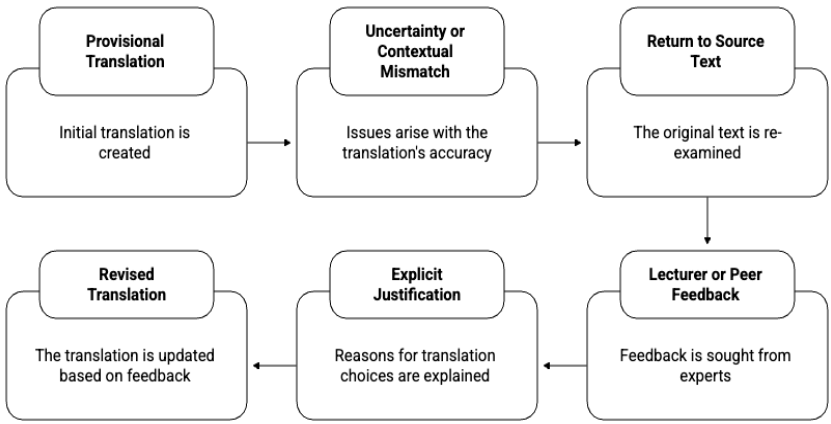


Figure 3. Socially Scaffolded Reflection and Translation Revision

Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis of the integrated survey and interview findings; visual arrangement produced with Napkin AI.

The quantitative and qualitative findings reveal an uneven developmental pattern. Students demonstrated strong awareness of contextual comprehension and non-literal meaning, but their ability to systematically adapt translations to target readers, compare alternatives, and articulate the grounds for their decisions remained less developed. Translation learning was therefore characterized by recursive comprehension, problem-triggered meaning negotiation, and reflection that was frequently strengthened through lecturer and peer scaffolding.

Variation and qualifying cases were analytically important. High average endorsement did not mean that students enacted the three processes uniformly: some accounts stopped at topic-level comprehension without sustained analysis of authorial intention; reader adaptation was often activated only by an obvious non-equivalence problem; and decision justification frequently emerged only after lecturer questioning or peer discussion. These counter-patterns delimit the three themes and explain why the findings are presented as uneven development rather than as a shared, fully established orientation.

5. Discussion

The central finding of this study is an awareness–articulation gap. Students demonstrated strong recognition that translation requires contextual comprehension and that literal equivalence is often inadequate. However, they were less consistent in adapting choices to specific readers, comparing alternatives systematically, and explaining why one solution was preferable. The qualitative findings explain this pattern: comprehension developed recursively through rereading and contextual verification, meaning negotiation was often activated by visible non-equivalence, and explicit reasoning frequently emerged through lecturer questioning or peer discussion. Thus, the contribution of this study is not to suggest a simple transition from traditional to process-oriented translation learning, but to show that contextual awareness may develop before learners achieve autonomous and defensible decision-making.

The prominence of rereading indicates that students approached translation as a form of interpretive reading rather than a linear transfer process. Later textual information could reshape earlier interpretations, making return to the source text a form of strategic regulation rather than inefficient repetition (Mellinger, 2019; Whyatt & Naranowicz, 2020). Nevertheless, students' accounts were more frequently oriented toward topic identification and sentence-level relations than toward systematic consideration of genre, communicative purpose, and intended readership. Their comprehension was therefore meaning-sensitive, but not always guided by explicit functional criteria.

Meaning negotiation revealed a similar developmental pattern. Students recognized idioms, metaphors, and culturally embedded expressions as translation problems, but reader orientation was often reactive rather than systematically applied. Students became more concerned with readers when literal translation risked misunderstanding, rather than consistently considering audience expectations, communicative purpose, or contextual function. This distinction reflects the difference between identifying a translation problem and implementing an appropriate solution based on explicit criteria (Robert et al., 2017; Robert et al., 2023; Mannahali et al., 2026). Previous research suggests that more experienced translators develop stronger domain-informed decision criteria (Prieto Ramos & Guzman, 2024); the present findings highlight the importance of making such criteria visible in foreign language translation instruction.

Students also demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility for the meanings conveyed through their translations, but this awareness was not always accompanied

by the ability to articulate and defend their choices. This pattern can be understood through the development of evaluative judgment, in which learners gradually move from intuitive recognition of quality problems toward the ability to compare alternatives against explicit criteria (Tai et al., 2018; Nicol, 2021). Lecturer questioning and peer dialogue helped students externalize these standards by requiring them to identify contextual evidence and justify their decisions. However, social support should function as a pathway toward independent reasoning rather than as a permanent substitute for it. Therefore, structured comparison, evidence-based peer review, and opportunities to enact feedback are more valuable than unstructured discussion alone (Carless & Boud, 2018; Double et al., 2020).

In addition, the findings have implications for emerging AI-assisted translation environments. As translation technologies increasingly provide fluent and plausible outputs, students require stronger abilities to evaluate contextual appropriateness, communicative function, and reader orientation rather than simply accept generated solutions. The present findings suggest that translation education should continue to emphasize reasoning processes that enable learners to assess and justify translation choices in both human and AI-supported workflows (Bearman et al., 2024; Prieto Ramos, 2024).

The findings demonstrate that translation learning involves a gradual transformation from recognizing contextual complexity to making explicit and defensible decisions. Students' challenges were not primarily related to the absence of awareness, but to the difficulty of converting that awareness into systematic reasoning that can guide independent translation choices. This distinction highlights that successful translation learning requires more than producing acceptable target texts; it requires learners to understand the evidence, criteria, and communicative considerations that shape their decisions. Therefore, developing students' ability to articulate, evaluate, and justify translation choices should be considered a central goal of foreign language translation instruction.

Theoretically, this study contributes to translation-learning research by showing that translation development involves a gradual movement from contextual awareness toward explicit and defensible decision-making. Students may recognize the importance of context, negotiation, and revision while still requiring support to articulate the reasoning behind their choices. Practically, translation instruction should move beyond evaluating final products by incorporating activities that make decision-making processes visible. Translation commentaries, alternative-solution comparisons, reader-oriented revisions, and reflective tasks can help students identify the linguistic, cultural, and communicative considerations underlying their choices. A structured cycle of problem identification, alternative evaluation, justification, feedback, and revision may strengthen students' ability to apply reasoning strategies across translation tasks, particularly in AI-assisted environments where learners must critically evaluate outputs rather than rely on surface fluency.

This study has several limitations. The use of self-reported perceptions may not fully represent students' actual translation behavior, while convenience recruitment and unequal program representation limit broader generalization. The small Mandarin subgroup also prevents program-level comparison, and the qualitative phase was designed for explanatory depth rather than population representation. Future research should combine perception data with direct measures of translation performance, including product assessment, decision commentaries, screen-based process data, and stimulated recall. Longitudinal studies may further examine whether structured reader-oriented tasks, peer review, and repeated justification activities can reduce the gap between contextual awareness and the ability to articulate and defend translation decisions.

Conclusion

This study found an uneven but coherent pattern in foreign language students' translation learning. Average endorsement was strongest for whole-text and contextual comprehension, followed by recognition of non-equivalence, while reader adaptation, peer-supported revision, and explicit decision justification were relatively less developed. Interviews showed why: students reread recursively, negotiated meaning most visibly when direct transfer failed, and often articulated reasoning only after lecturer or peer prompts.

The study's principal contribution is the identification of an awareness-articulation gap: recognizing that context matters does not yet constitute the ability to produce and defend a reader-oriented solution. Translation pedagogy should therefore retain product evaluation while also eliciting comparison, justification, feedback use, and revision. Because the evidence is self-reported and drawn from an unequal convenience sample, future research should test this account with dispersion statistics, translation products, direct process measures, and longitudinal classroom interventions.

Declaration Statement

AI Use Declaration

The authors used ChatGPT only for language refinement and Napkin AI only for figure generation and visual arrangement. Neither tool was used to develop the research idea, design the study, collect or analyze data, interpret findings, or draw conclusions. The authors critically reviewed and approved all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy and integrity.

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