ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV, Issue XI November 2026

Challenges in Translation Learning (English to Vietnamese and Vietnamese to English) among Third-Year English Language Majors at Saigon University

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.151100054

Received: 06 November 2026; Accepted: 11 November 2026; Published: 26 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Translation is an essential component of English-language education because it requires learners to interpret meaning and communicate it appropriately across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This study investigated translation-learning challenges among third-year English Language majors at Saigon University, focusing on English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation, contributing factors, learning strategies, and students' suggestions for improvement. A questionnaire-based survey was conducted within the context of the compulsory Translation course offered by the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Of the 151 questionnaires collected, 149 were included in the closed-ended analysis after two responses with insufficient closed-ended data were excluded. The separately prepared open-ended dataset contained 150 respondent records; therefore, one record was available for open-ended analysis but was not included in the closed-ended dataset. Descriptive statistics were calculated for five-point Likert-scale items, while open-ended responses were coded thematically. Specialized terminology was the highest-rated difficulty in both directions (English–Vietnamese: M = 3.96, SD = 0.892; Vietnamese–English: M = 4.01, SD = 0.870). Students also reported concerns about lexical choice, naturalness, grammar, cultural expressions, and formality. Unfamiliarity with subject areas (M = 4.00) and limited cultural knowledge (M = 3.96) were prominent personal factors. Lecturer feedback (M = 4.16), clear explanations of translation techniques (M = 4.13), context-focused instruction, and authentic materials (both M = 4.21) were highly valued. The most frequently reported learning behavior was using online translation or AI tools while checking their suggestions (M = 4.24), whereas direct translation practice received comparatively lower frequency ratings. In the open-ended responses, vocabulary and lexical choice were the most frequently mentioned difficulty (62.0%), while more translation practice was the most common suggestion (39.3%). The findings highlight the need for an integrated approach combining language development, subject and cultural knowledge, terminology work, critical use of translation resources, constructive feedback, and sustained practice in both directions.

Keywords*:* translation learning; translation challenges; English–Vietnamese translation; Vietnamese–English translation; translation competence; EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Translation plays an important role in the exchange of knowledge, culture, arts, and scientific information across linguistic and national boundaries. As Vietnam becomes more closely connected with the global economy and international communities, the ability to transfer meaning appropriately between Vietnamese and English has become increasingly relevant in academic and professional settings (Sigismondi, 2016). For students majoring in English, translation is therefore not simply an exercise in replacing words from one language with those of another. It requires an understanding of linguistic structures, cultural references, subject matter, and the communicative purpose of a text.

At Saigon University (SGU), translation is a component of the English Language curriculum. Nevertheless, studying English does not automatically enable learners to produce accurate, natural, and contextually appropriate translations in both directions. Students may understand the general meaning of a source text yet

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struggle to identify a suitable equivalent, preserve tone, handle specialized terminology, or reformulate an expression according to target-language conventions. These difficulties can arise from several interconnected areas of translation competence rather than from vocabulary or grammar alone.

Within the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Translation is a compulsory course for students majoring in English Language. The course is generally taken in the first semester of the third year and is intended to connect students' general English proficiency with the practical demands of translation for academic and professional purposes. This institutional setting makes third-year students an appropriate group for examining the challenges that emerge when learners begin to apply their language knowledge to translation tasks.

Previous research has discussed translation competence and student translation performance from different perspectives. The PACTE Group (2003, 2011), for example, conceptualizes translation competence as a combination of bilingual, extra-linguistic, instrumental, strategic, and psycho-physiological components. Research has also identified lexical, syntactic, and textual challenges in student translations (Károly, 2012), as well as difficulties associated with translating into a foreign language (Chung, 2015). In the Vietnamese context, studies have examined English–Vietnamese translation difficulties among English-majored students (Hoàng & Lương, 2023) and Vietnamese–English translation errors among translation-major students (Nguyễn & Triệu, 2015). Trang (2022) has also addressed students' attitudes, difficulties, and strategy use in Vietnamese–English translation.

Although these studies provide useful insights, translation-learning challenges are shaped by the learner population, language direction, curriculum, and instructional context. There is a need to examine how students at a particular institution experience both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation, and how their reported difficulties relate to the learning conditions and teaching practices they encounter. The present study addresses this need by investigating third-year English Language majors at Saigon University.

Although previous Vietnamese studies have examined translation-learning difficulties in other higher-education settings, the present study focuses on the specific experiences of third-year English Language majors at Saigon University across both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation directions.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main difficulties encountered by third-year English Language majors at Saigon University in learning English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation?

RQ2. What factors contribute to the translation challenges faced by third-year English Language majors at Saigon University?

RQ3. What suggestions can be proposed to help third-year English Language majors at Saigon University overcome these difficulties and improve their translation learning?

In addressing these questions, the study also considers students' reported strategies and behaviors when dealing with translation tasks, as these provide additional context for understanding how learners respond to the difficulties they encounter. To provide a fuller account of these questions, the analysis also considers students' perceptions of personal and learning-related factors, teaching methods, and translation-learning behaviors. The study contributes institution-specific evidence that may help students reflect on their learning strategies and help lecturers identify areas for instructional support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation Learning and Translation Competence

Translation learning involves more than acquiring vocabulary equivalents or applying grammatical rules. Learners must understand a source text, interpret its intended meaning, select appropriate target-language expressions, and review the resulting translation in light of its context and purpose. The PACTE Group (2003) proposes a multidimensional model of translation competence comprising bilingual competence, extra-

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linguistic competence, instrumental competence, strategic competence, and psycho-physiological components. These components are interconnected and collectively contribute to the ability to produce an effective translation.

The definition of translation adopted in this study is informed by several established perspectives. Nida and Taber (2003) emphasize reproducing a source-language message in the receptor language through the closest natural equivalent, giving priority to meaning while maintaining natural expression. Newmark (1988) similarly highlights the rendering of a text's meaning in accordance with the author's intended meaning. Munday (2016) describes translation as the transfer of a written text between verbal language systems, involving a source text and a target text. Baker (2018) demonstrates that equivalence-related problems may occur at word, above-word, grammatical, textual, and pragmatic levels. Hatim and Munday (2019) further underline the relationship between linguistic choices, context, and communicative purpose. Taken together, these perspectives support an understanding of translation as meaning transfer and communicative reformulation rather than mechanical word substitution.

Bilingual competence concerns knowledge of the source and target languages, including lexical, grammatical, and textual resources. Extra-linguistic competence involves general and subject-specific knowledge as well as cultural knowledge. Instrumental competence relates to the use of documentation resources and technological tools. Strategic competence supports the identification and resolution of translation problems and the coordination of other sub-competences. Psycho-physiological components include cognitive and attitudinal resources involved in carrying out translation tasks (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011). This framework is relevant to the present study because the challenges reported by students extend across language knowledge, cultural understanding, reference-resource use, and decision-making.

Károly (2012) examined lexical, syntactic, and textual patterns in student translations of a specialized European Union genre, highlighting the relationship between translation competence and translation performance. Chung (2015) focused on teaching undergraduates to translate into a foreign language, a direction that can place particular demands on learners' ability to produce accurate and idiomatic target-language texts. These perspectives support the need to consider both translation directions rather than assuming that competence in one direction necessarily transfers to the other.

Common Challenges in English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English Translation

Translation difficulties may occur at several linguistic levels. Lexical challenges include recognizing unfamiliar words, interpreting idiomatic expressions, selecting contextually appropriate equivalents, and avoiding expressions that are technically possible but unnatural. Grammatical and syntactic challenges arise when learners need to interpret complex structures or reorganize sentence patterns to meet target-language conventions. At the textual level, learners must preserve meaning, tone, cohesion, and the relationship between individual sentences.

Cultural knowledge is also important because expressions may refer to practices, assumptions, or shared experiences that are not directly transferable between languages. In addition, specialized terminology requires familiarity with the conventions of a particular field. A learner may understand the general concept represented by a term but remain uncertain about the established equivalent used in academic, technical, or professional communication. These issues are relevant to both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation, although the specific decisions required may differ by direction.

Vietnamese studies have examined related concerns. Hoàng and Lương (2023) investigated difficulties in English–Vietnamese translation among English-majored students at Thai Nguyen University of Technology. Nguyễn and Triệu (2015) examined Vietnamese–English translation errors made by second-year translation-major students. Trang (2022) addressed students' attitudes towards translation, their difficulties, and their use of strategies in Vietnamese–English translation. The present study extends this area of inquiry by considering both translation directions within one institutional context and by examining students' perceptions of teaching and learning conditions alongside their reported difficulties.

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Conceptual Framework

The present study adopts the PACTE Translation Competence Model (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011) as its guiding framework. The model provides a basis for organizing the challenges and learning conditions investigated in the questionnaire. Difficulties involving vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and lexical equivalence are considered in relation to bilingual competence. Cultural expressions and unfamiliar subject areas are associated with extra-linguistic competence. The use of dictionaries, reference materials, and digital tools is relevant to instrumental competence. Choosing among possible equivalents, considering context, and revising translations can be understood in relation to strategic competence. These connections are used as an interpretive framework; the questionnaire does not directly test each PACTE sub-competence as a separate validated scale.

For clarity, the questionnaire domains can be interpreted in relation to the PACTE components as follows: vocabulary, grammar, and lexical-equivalence difficulties relate primarily to bilingual competence; cultural expressions and unfamiliar subject areas relate to extra-linguistic competence; dictionary, reference-material, and digital-tool use relates to instrumental competence; and contextual selection, comparison of alternatives, and revision relate to strategic competence. The questionnaire did not operationalize the psycho-physiological component as a separate scale. This mapping is interpretive and should not be understood as a statistical test or a direct measurement of the complete PACTE model.

The framework also helps connect students' reported challenges with potential instructional responses. For example, terminology and lexical choice may require systematic language and documentation work; culture-related expressions may require broader contextual and cultural exploration; and strategic decision-making may be developed through guided comparison, explanation, revision, and practice. The study therefore uses the PACTE model to interpret the range of challenges rather than to claim that the survey measures the full model.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate students' perceptions of translation-learning challenges and possible ways to improve translation learning. The participants were third-year English Language majors at Saigon University who were currently taking or had already completed the Translation course during the first semester of the 2026–2027 academic year. Convenience sampling was used because eligible students were recruited from accessible classes and class communication groups.

The research was situated in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Saigon University, where Translation is a compulsory course for English Language majors and is normally taken during the first semester of the third year. The overall research schedule extended from 1 September to 12 December 2026, covering literature review, instrument development, questionnaire administration, data analysis, and thesis completion. The survey findings reported in this article represent the data collected and analyzed for the present study.

A total of 151 questionnaires were collected. For the closed-ended analysis, two questionnaires were excluded because they contained insufficient responses, leaving 149 valid cases (98.7% of the collected questionnaires). All 149 valid cases were third-year English Language majors. Of these, 141 participants (94.6%) were currently taking the Translation course and eight (5.4%) had already taken it. The open-ended file contained 150 respondent records. Thus, one record was available for open-ended coding but was not retained in the closed-ended dataset. Because the two datasets were prepared separately and no reliable respondent-level linkage was retained in the analysis files, the reason for this difference cannot be established more precisely. The respective denominators are therefore reported separately throughout the article.

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Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The instrument included demographic questions, closed-ended Likert-scale items, and two open-ended questions. The closed-ended sections covered perceived challenges in English–Vietnamese translation (six items, EV1–EV6), perceived challenges in Vietnamese–English translation (five items, VE1–VE5), personal factors (five items, PF1–PF5), learning and contextual factors (five items, LC1–LC5), perceptions of teaching methods (ten items, TM1–TM10), and translation-learning behaviors (ten items, TB1–TB10).

The challenge and factor items used a five-point agreement scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The translation-learning behavior items used a five-point frequency scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The questionnaire also included two open-ended questions inviting participants to describe their difficulties and suggest improvements to translation learning. The items were developed by the authors with reference to the study's research questions, relevant literature, and the PACTE framework. The available study records do not document a formal expert-validation procedure or a separate pilot-testing process; this is acknowledged as a limitation.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed online to eligible third-year English Language majors. After the collection period, responses were screened and prepared for analysis. Closed-ended responses were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. No inferential statistical tests were conducted; consequently, the findings are interpreted descriptively and do not establish statistically significant differences or relationships among variables. Higher means on agreement-scale challenge items indicate stronger perceived difficulty, whereas higher means on frequency-scale items indicate more frequent reported use of a learning behavior.

The two open-ended questions were analyzed thematically. Similar ideas were grouped into categories, and each category was coded as a binary variable (1 = mentioned; 0 = not mentioned). A response could contain more than one idea and therefore be assigned to multiple categories. Consequently, the sum of category frequencies and percentages may exceed the total number of respondents and 100%, respectively. The open-ended analysis used N = 150.

Reliability analysis was available for the six English–Vietnamese difficulty items (EV1–EV6). The SPSS output reported Cronbach's alpha based on cases with valid data across all six items. The available output did not provide corresponding alpha coefficients for the other item groups; therefore, the reliability result is reported only for the EV scale and is not generalized to the entire questionnaire. The available records also do not identify the SPSS version used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The quantitative dataset comprised 149 valid responses. All participants were third-year students majoring in English Language at Saigon University. Most were taking the Translation course at the time of the survey (n = 141, 94.6%), while a smaller group had already completed it (n = 8, 5.4%). This profile indicates that the findings primarily reflect the experiences of students studying translation at the time of data collection.

Table 1. Participant Profile (N = 149)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Major	English Language	149	100
Year of study	Third year	149	100
Translation course status	Currently taking	141	94.6

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Translation course status	Already taken	8	5.4

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

Perceived Challenges in English–Vietnamese Translation

The six English–Vietnamese items addressed unfamiliar English vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, complex sentence structures, lexical choice in Vietnamese, preservation of meaning and tone, and specialized terminology. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores ranged from 3.68 to 3.96, indicating that participants generally agreed that these issues presented challenges.

Table 2. Perceived Challenges in English–Vietnamese Translation (N = 149)

Code	Challenge (shortened)	M	SD
EV1	Understanding unfamiliar English words and idioms	3.81	0.896
EV2	Understanding complex English sentence structures and intended meanings	3.68	0.953
EV3	Choosing natural Vietnamese words and expressions	3.85	0.849
EV4	Preserving the original meaning and tone in Vietnamese	3.81	0.913
EV5	Selecting the most appropriate Vietnamese equivalents	3.84	0.908
EV6	Translating specialized English terminology into Vietnamese	3.96	0.892

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

Specialized terminology (EV6) received the highest mean (M = 3.96, SD = 0.892). This suggests that students found it difficult to identify appropriate Vietnamese equivalents for terms used in academic, technical, or professional contexts. Understanding the general meaning of a term may not be sufficient when the translator also needs to identify the conventional expression used in a particular field.

The next-highest means were recorded for choosing natural Vietnamese expressions (EV3: M = 3.85, SD = 0.849) and selecting appropriate equivalents (EV5: M = 3.84, SD = 0.908). These results show that students' difficulties were not limited to decoding the English source text. They also concerned the ability to reformulate the message naturally in Vietnamese. Unfamiliar vocabulary and idiomatic expressions (EV1) and the preservation of meaning and tone (EV4) both received a mean of 3.81. Although complex sentence structures (EV2) had the lowest mean (M = 3.68, SD = 0.953), it remained a reported challenge.

Viewed together, the results suggest that English–Vietnamese translation involves two connected demands: understanding the source text and producing a target text that preserves meaning while following natural Vietnamese usage. This pattern is compatible with the PACTE model, particularly the relationship between bilingual competence and strategic decision-making. It also echoes the attention to lexical and syntactic patterns in student translation performance discussed by Károly (2012).

Perceived Challenges in Vietnamese–English Translation

The five Vietnamese–English items examined natural English expression, English grammar and sentence structure, culture-related Vietnamese expressions, formality, and specialized terminology. Their mean scores ranged from 3.70 to 4.01 (Table 3).

Table 3. Perceived Challenges in Vietnamese–English Translation (N = 149)

Code	Challenge (shortened)	M	SD
VE1	Choosing natural English expressions without word-for-word translation	3.8	0.93

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VE2	Using English grammar and sentence structures correctly	3.7	0.998
VE3	Translating Vietnamese culture-related or everyday expressions	3.76	0.963
VE4	Choosing an appropriate level of formality	3.81	0.942
VE5	Finding English equivalents for specialized Vietnamese terminology	4.01	0.87

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

Specialized terminology (VE5) received the highest mean (M = 4.01, SD = 0.870), making it the highest-rated difficulty in this direction as well. Students may understand the concept represented by a Vietnamese term but remain uncertain about the conventional English equivalent in the relevant field. The result suggests that terminology selection is a concern regardless of translation direction.

Formality (VE4) received the second-highest mean (M = 3.81, SD = 0.942), followed closely by the ability to produce natural English without translating word for word (VE1: M = 3.80, SD = 0.930). These tasks require learners to consider the purpose of the text, the relationship between writer and reader, and target-language conventions. Culture-related expressions (VE3: M = 3.76, SD = 0.963) also presented a challenge, while grammar and sentence structure (VE2: M = 3.70, SD = 0.998) had the lowest mean among the five items.

The results indicate that a grammatically possible English sentence may still be unsuitable if its register or phrasing does not fit the communicative context. This interpretation is consistent with the broader translation-competence perspective, in which linguistic knowledge needs to be coordinated with extra-linguistic knowledge and strategic choices. It is also relevant to research on translating into a foreign language (Chung, 2015) and Vietnamese–English translation errors (Nguyễn & Triệu, 2015).

Comparison of the Two Translation Directions

Specialized terminology was the highest-rated challenge in both directions: EV6 received a mean of 3.96, while VE5 received a mean of 4.01. The difference between these item means is small and should be interpreted descriptively. The pattern indicates that students reported difficulty identifying field-appropriate equivalents whether translating from English into Vietnamese or from Vietnamese into English.

The other highly rated items differed somewhat by direction. In English–Vietnamese translation, students placed relatively high ratings on choosing natural Vietnamese expressions and selecting suitable equivalents. In Vietnamese–English translation, formality and natural English expression were among the next-highest concerns. These findings suggest that target-language reformulation is important in both directions, although the specific decisions involved are not identical.

The questionnaire included six English–Vietnamese items and five Vietnamese–English items. The available SPSS output provides item-level descriptive statistics but does not report a statistical test comparing composite scores for the two directions. It is therefore not possible to conclude that one direction was statistically more difficult than the other. The supported conclusion is that participants perceived challenges in both directions, with specialized terminology receiving the highest mean in each.

Factors Associated with Translation-Learning Challenges

Personal Factors

The personal-factor items covered vocabulary, grammar in both languages, cultural knowledge, and familiarity with different subject areas. Mean scores ranged from 3.85 to 4.00 (Table 4), indicating that participants generally regarded all five factors as relevant to their translation-learning experiences.

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Table 4. Students' Perceptions of Personal Factors (N = 149)

Code	Factor (shortened)	M	SD
PF1	Limited vocabulary	3.95	0.971
PF2	English grammar knowledge	3.87	0.927
PF3	Vietnamese grammar and expressions	3.85	0.928
PF4	Limited knowledge of cultural differences	3.96	0.936
PF5	Unfamiliarity with certain topics	4	0.814

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

Unfamiliarity with certain topics received the highest mean (PF5: M = 4.00, SD = 0.814). This suggests that students may find it difficult to translate texts when they lack background knowledge of the subject, even if they recognize many of the individual words. Limited knowledge of cultural differences was the next-highest factor (PF4: M = 3.96, SD = 0.936), followed by limited vocabulary (PF1: M = 3.95, SD = 0.971). English grammar knowledge (PF2: M = 3.87) and Vietnamese grammar and expressions (PF3: M = 3.85) were also considered relevant.

These findings connect the perceived difficulties with both bilingual and extra-linguistic competence in the PACTE framework. They also suggest that translation instruction may need to address the knowledge surrounding a text, not only the language forms contained in it.

Learning and Contextual Factors

Table 5. Students' Perceptions of Learning and Contextual Factors (N = 149)

Code	Factor (shortened)	M	SD
LC1	Limited opportunities to practice	3.76	0.942
LC2	Lecturer feedback helps identify and correct errors	4.16	0.938
LC3	Clear explanations of translation techniques	4.13	0.927
LC4	Reliable dictionaries and reference materials	4.06	0.895
LC5	Limited time for accurate and natural translation	4.09	0.857

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

Lecturer feedback (LC2) received the highest mean (M = 4.16, SD = 0.938), followed by clear explanations of translation techniques (LC3: M = 4.13, SD = 0.927). Students also recognized the value of reliable dictionaries and reference materials (LC4: M = 4.06, SD = 0.895). These results indicate that participants valued guidance that helps them identify errors, understand why a translation choice is unsuitable, and consider how to revise it.

The two barrier-oriented items require a different interpretation. Limited time (LC5) received a mean of 4.09 (SD = 0.857), while limited opportunities to practice (LC1) received a mean of 3.76 (SD = 0.942). Higher agreement on these items indicates that respondents perceived these conditions as obstacles, not as helpful supports. The results therefore point to the importance of both instructional assistance and sufficient time and opportunity for applying translation knowledge.

Students' Perceptions of Teaching Methods

The ten teaching-method items received means between 3.93 and 4.21, indicating generally positive perceptions of the practices described in the questionnaire (Table 6).

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Table 6. Students' Perceptions of Teaching Methods (N = 149)

Code	Teaching method (shortened)	M	SD
TM1	Clear explanations and demonstrations of techniques	4.04	0.837
TM2	Sample translations to explain difficult language	4.11	0.823
TM3	Explaining why some translations are more appropriate	4.14	0.846
TM4	Useful lecturer feedback on translation mistakes	4.17	0.812
TM5	Sufficient practice in both translation directions	4.06	0.879
TM6	Group discussion and peer review	3.97	0.911
TM7	Attention to context, intended meaning, and target readers	4.21	0.749
TM8	Support for lexical and grammatical decisions	3.95	0.925
TM9	Real-life materials such as documents and news articles	4.21	0.765
TM10	Recommendations of alternative websites for independent learning	3.93	0.905

Note. Data are from the authors' survey (N = 149).

Attention to context, intended meaning, and target readers (TM7) and the use of real-life materials (TM9) shared the highest mean (M = 4.21). This suggests that students particularly valued teaching that moves beyond word-for-word substitution and exposes them to texts resembling actual communication. Lecturer feedback (TM4: M = 4.17) and explanations of why particular translations are more appropriate (TM3: M = 4.14) were also highly rated.

The use of sample translations (TM2: M = 4.11), practice in both directions (TM5: M = 4.06), and clear demonstrations of techniques (TM1: M = 4.04) received positive ratings. Group discussion and peer review (TM6: M = 3.97), support for lexical and grammatical decisions (TM8: M = 3.95), and recommendations of independent-learning websites (TM10: M = 3.93) also received means above the scale midpoint. The relatively high rating for authentic materials is noteworthy alongside the finding that unfamiliar subject areas were a prominent personal factor. A wider range of real-life texts may offer opportunities to encounter different topics, although the present survey does not establish the effectiveness of such exposure.

Students' Translation-Learning Behaviors

The behavior section used a frequency scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The mean scores ranged from 3.76 to 4.24 (Table 7).

Table 7. Students' Translation-Learning Behaviors (N = 149)

Code	Reported behavior (shortened)	M	SD
TB1	Practice English-to-Vietnamese translation	3.81	0.701
TB2	Practice Vietnamese-to-English translation	3.76	0.819
TB3	Use dictionaries to check unfamiliar words	4.18	0.87
TB4	Check collocations and example sentences	3.9	0.876
TB5	Consider context before choosing a translation	4.09	0.808
TB6	Review grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure	4.01	0.797
TB7	Reread translations to check naturalness	4.18	0.717
TB8	Use lecturer feedback to revise translations	4.17	0.82
TB9	Compare work with reliable references or alternatives	4.07	0.827
TB10	Use online translation or AI tools and check	4.24	0.819

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	suggestions		

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149)

The highest mean was recorded for using online translation or AI tools while checking their suggestions before use (TB10: M = 4.24, SD = 0.819). The wording of this item is important: it captures reported tool use together with checking, rather than uncritical acceptance of machine-generated output. Dictionary use (TB3: M = 4.18, SD = 0.870) and rereading translations to assess naturalness (TB7: M = 4.18, SD = 0.717) were also frequently reported. Using lecturer feedback to revise translations (TB8) received a mean of 4.17.

By comparison, direct translation practice received the two lowest means in this section: English–Vietnamese practice (TB1: M = 3.81, SD = 0.701) and Vietnamese–English practice (TB2: M = 3.76, SD = 0.819). These scores do not indicate that students never practiced translation; rather, they suggest that direct practice was reported less frequently than several checking, reference-use, and revision behaviors. This pattern is important when considered alongside the open-ended request for more translation practice.

Open-Ended Responses

The open-ended response file contained 150 respondent records and was analyzed separately from the 149 valid closed-ended cases. In practical terms, the open-ended dataset included one record that was not retained in the closed-ended analysis. The available files do not allow this record to be linked confidently to a particular closed-ended case, so the two datasets are reported using their own denominators. Question 1 asked students to describe their translation-learning difficulties. Question 2 invited suggestions for improving translation learning. Similar ideas were grouped into thematic categories. Because one response could mention more than one issue or suggestion, categories were not mutually exclusive and percentages may exceed 100% when added together.

Reported Difficulties

Table 8. Difficulties Mentioned in Open-Ended Responses (N = 150)

Theme	n	%
Vocabulary and lexical choice	93	62
Understanding meaning and context	52	34.7
Naturalness, style, and equivalence	38	25.3
Grammar and structural differences	33	22
Cultural expressions and idioms	27	18
Specialized terminology	8	5.3
Practice, time, and learning resources	7	4.7
No specific difficulty reported	4	2.7
Unclear or insufficient response	1	0.7

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 150)

Vocabulary and lexical choice were the most frequently mentioned difficulty, appearing in 93 responses (62.0%). This category included concerns about selecting appropriate words, finding suitable equivalents, and using expressions accurately. Understanding meaning and context was the second most common theme (n = 52, 34.7%), suggesting that students' concerns extended beyond isolated vocabulary to the interpretation of intended meaning in context.

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Naturalness, style, and equivalence were mentioned by 38 respondents (25.3%), while grammar and structural differences appeared in 33 responses (22.0%). Cultural expressions and idioms were reported by 27 respondents (18.0%). These themes complement the closed-ended findings on lexical choice, target-language naturalness, grammar, and culture-related expressions.

Specialized terminology appeared in eight responses (5.3%). Although this proportion was lower than the proportion for general vocabulary and lexical choice, terminology received the highest mean in both closed-ended translation-direction sections. The difference is not necessarily contradictory: the closed-ended questionnaire asked participants to rate a specific terminology statement, whereas the open-ended question allowed them to choose which issues to mention spontaneously. Seven respondents (4.7%) mentioned practice, time, or learning resources; four (2.7%) did not identify a specific difficulty; and one response (0.7%) was unclear or insufficient for thematic classification.

Suggestions for Improvement

Table 9. Suggestions for Improving Translation Learning (N = 150)

Suggestion theme	n	%
More translation practice	59	39.3
Vocabulary, grammar, and independent language study	56	37.3
Authentic materials and a wider range of topics	35	23.3
Lecturer feedback and instructional support	23	15.3
Dictionaries, digital tools, and learning resources	16	10.7
Group work, peer learning, and professional exposure	7	4.7
Cultural knowledge and understanding	6	4
No opinion / no suggestion / no response	38	25.3

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 150)

More translation practice was the most frequently mentioned suggestion, reported by 59 respondents (39.3%). This finding corresponds with the lower frequency means for direct practice in both translation directions. Students may use dictionaries, digital tools, and revision strategies regularly while still wanting more opportunities to translate texts independently and apply what they have learned.

The second most common suggestion was to strengthen vocabulary, grammar, and independent language study (n = 56, 37.3%). This is consistent with the high ratings for lexical and grammatical concerns in the closed-ended sections. Authentic materials and a wider range of topics were suggested by 35 respondents (23.3%), corresponding with the positive evaluation of real-life materials (TM9) and the perceived difficulty associated with unfamiliar topics (PF5).

Lecturer feedback and instructional support were mentioned by 23 respondents (15.3%), while dictionaries, digital tools, and learning resources were mentioned by 16 (10.7%). Smaller numbers referred to group work, peer learning, and professional exposure (n = 7, 4.7%) or cultural knowledge (n = 6, 4.0%). The category 'No opinion / no suggestion / no response' accounted for 38 records (25.3%), including 32 blank answers and six explicit statements. It is a response-status category and should not be interpreted as a suggestion.

Reliability Analysis

The SPSS output reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.857 for the six English–Vietnamese translation-difficulty items (EV1–EV6), based on 149 valid cases. This coefficient indicates good internal consistency for this item group in the present dataset. It should not be taken as evidence that the full questionnaire or its other sections have been validated.

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Table 10. Reliability of the English–Vietnamese Difficulty Scale

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items	Valid cases
EV1–EV6	0.857	6	149

Source: Authors' survey data (N = 149), analyzed using SPSS.

The reliability result should be interpreted within its actual scope. It supports the internal consistency of the six English–Vietnamese difficulty items only and cannot be generalized to the Vietnamese–English, personal-factor, learning-context, teaching-method, or behavior sections. The questionnaire was developed by the authors with reference to relevant literature and the PACTE framework; however, the available records do not document formal expert review, pilot testing, or construct-validation procedures. The SPSS output also included a Fleiss' multirater kappa procedure that stopped because no valid cases were available. Since no statistic was produced, this procedure is not treated as evidence of inter-rater agreement.

Ethical considerations were incorporated into the questionnaire process. Participants were to be informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and intended use of their responses before completing the form. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could decline without negative consequences. The questionnaire did not request names or student identification numbers, and responses were treated confidentially for academic research purposes. These procedures were intended to protect participants' privacy, anonymity, and rights. The authors should retain the consent information and institutional guidance as supporting documentation if requested by the journal.

Discussion of Major Findings

Several patterns emerge when the closed-ended and open-ended findings are considered together. First, students perceived challenges in both translation directions, and specialized terminology was the highest-rated item in each. This suggests that identifying field-appropriate equivalents is a cross-directional concern. The open-ended responses, however, placed greater emphasis on general vocabulary and lexical choice than on specialized terminology. The two findings can coexist because the questionnaire formats elicited different kinds of responses: one asked students to rate a specific issue, while the other captured the issues they chose to describe without prompts.

Second, the findings point to the importance of knowledge beyond individual words and grammatical forms. Unfamiliarity with subject areas and limited cultural knowledge received the highest means among the personal-factor items. In the open-ended responses, students also frequently mentioned understanding meaning and context and translating cultural expressions or idioms. These patterns align with the extra-linguistic component of the PACTE model, which recognizes the role of general, subject-specific, and cultural knowledge in translation competence.

Third, students valued instructional guidance. Lecturer feedback and clear explanations of translation techniques received high means as learning supports, while feedback and explanations of translation choices were also highly rated teaching methods. These results suggest that students appreciate feedback that goes beyond identifying an error and helps explain why a particular translation is more suitable. Such guidance may support strategic decision-making by making alternatives and revision processes more visible.

Fourth, context-focused teaching and authentic materials received the highest teaching-method ratings. This is noteworthy because students also reported difficulty with unfamiliar topics and context-dependent meaning. Exposure to a broader range of real-life texts may provide opportunities to encounter different subject areas and communicative conventions. Nevertheless, the survey records students' perceptions and does not demonstrate that a particular teaching method causes improvement in translation performance.

Finally, students reported frequent use of digital translation or AI tools, dictionaries, and revision practices, but direct translation practice received comparatively lower frequency ratings. The most common open-ended

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suggestion was to provide more translation practice. Taken together, these findings suggest a potential gap between the use of supporting resources and students' perceived need for sustained production practice. Digital tools and dictionaries may support instrumental competence, but they cannot replace the learner's own work in interpreting, selecting, justifying, and revising translations.

The overall pattern is broadly related to previous research on lexical, syntactic, and textual challenges (Károly, 2012), translation into a foreign language (Chung, 2015), and translation-learning difficulties reported in Vietnamese university settings (Hoàng & Lương, 2023; Nguyễn & Triệu, 2015; Trang, 2022). However, the sources available for the present article do not provide comparable detailed statistics for all of these studies. The comparison is therefore thematic rather than a direct comparison of effect sizes or item means.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several considerations for translation teaching and learning at Saigon University. First, students may benefit from regular, structured practice in both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation. Since more practice was the most common open-ended suggestion and direct practice items received the lowest behavior means, courses could incorporate short, recurring translation tasks rather than relying mainly on explanations or tool-assisted checking. Tasks can progress from short passages to authentic documents and include time for revision.

Second, vocabulary and terminology development should be integrated into translation activities. Students reported lexical choice as their most frequent open-ended difficulty, while specialized terminology received the highest mean in both translation directions. Lecturers may ask students to build bilingual term records by topic, compare possible equivalents, consult reliable references, and justify the selected term in its context. This approach would connect bilingual competence with instrumental and strategic competence.

Third, translation tasks should include explicit attention to context, cultural meaning, register, and target readers. The high ratings for context-focused teaching and authentic materials suggest that students value these elements. Materials drawn from different fields and text types may help learners build background knowledge and recognize how purpose, audience, and cultural assumptions influence translation choices.

Fourth, feedback should explain not only what is incorrect but also why an alternative is more appropriate. Students rated lecturer feedback and clear explanations highly. Annotated examples, comparison of alternative translations, peer discussion, and guided revision may help learners understand the reasoning behind translation decisions. These are pedagogical implications suggested by students' reported perceptions; their effectiveness would need to be evaluated in future instructional research.

Finally, the frequent reported use of online translation and AI tools suggests a need to strengthen students' ability to evaluate machine-generated suggestions. Classroom activities can ask learners to compare tool output with reliable dictionaries, parallel texts, and their own contextual analysis. The survey item measured tool use together with checking suggestions, so the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that students simply accept automated translations.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the participants were recruited through convenience sampling from one university and one academic year. The findings should not be generalized automatically to students at other institutions or to professional translators. Future research could include multiple universities, different academic years, or comparison groups with different levels of translation experience.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported questionnaire data. Students' ratings indicate perceived difficulty, perceived usefulness, and reported behavior; they do not directly measure translation accuracy or

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competence. Future studies could combine surveys with analysis of student translation products, think-aloud protocols, interviews, or classroom observations.

Third, the questionnaire was developed by the authors with reference to relevant literature and the PACTE framework, but the available records do not document formal expert validation, pilot testing, or construct-validity analysis. Reliability analysis was available only for the six English–Vietnamese difficulty items. The internal consistency of the remaining sections therefore remains unestablished. In addition, the open-ended responses were coded thematically, but the available materials do not report an inter-coder reliability statistic. The Fleiss' kappa procedure in the SPSS output returned no valid cases; consequently, no inter-rater reliability claim can be made from that analysis. Future research should validate the questionnaire through expert review and piloting, examine the reliability and construct validity of each intended scale, and arrange independent coding of a subset of open-ended responses using an appropriate agreement measure.

Fourth, the quantitative analysis is based on 149 valid cases, whereas the open-ended analysis uses 150 respondent records. In other words, one record was available for open-ended analysis but was not included in the closed-ended dataset. Because the datasets were prepared separately and respondent-level linkage cannot be established reliably from the available analysis files, the reason for the difference cannot be determined with certainty. Future studies should retain a unified, anonymized respondent identifier and a documented data-cleaning protocol so that records can be linked and exclusions explained transparently.

Fifth, the analysis is descriptive and does not include inferential tests of differences or associations. Therefore, the study cannot determine whether the two translation directions differ statistically or whether personal factors are significantly associated with perceived translation difficulties. Future research with access to the respondent-level dataset could use appropriate paired comparisons and correlation analyses, provided that the data meet the relevant assumptions. The present article does not report such tests because corresponding analyses and verified test outputs were not available. Finally, the study does not test the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions. Future research could evaluate whether sustained practice, terminology-focused instruction, authentic materials, or feedback-based revision leads to measurable improvements in translation performance.

Conclusion

This study investigated translation-learning challenges among third-year English Language majors at Saigon University. The quantitative findings from 149 valid questionnaires showed that students perceived difficulties in both English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation. Specialized terminology was the highest-rated challenge in both directions, while lexical choice, naturalness, grammar, cultural expressions, and formality were also reported as concerns. Unfamiliarity with subject areas and limited cultural knowledge were prominent personal factors, and students placed considerable value on lecturer feedback, clear explanations, context-focused teaching, and authentic materials.

The open-ended responses provided further insight into students' experiences. Vocabulary and lexical choice were the most frequently mentioned difficulty, while more translation practice was the most common suggestion for improvement. Students also called for stronger language foundations, wider exposure to authentic materials, and greater instructional support. Their reported use of digital tools and dictionaries was frequent, but this did not remove the perceived need for more direct practice.

Overall, the findings support an integrated approach to translation learning that combines language development, subject and cultural knowledge, terminology research, strategic use of reference tools, constructive feedback, and regular practice in both directions. The study offers evidence from one university context and provides a basis for further research into how translation courses can respond to students' reported needs.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Saigon University, their research supervisor, and the 151 third-year English Language majors who contributed responses to the survey.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire Used in the Study

Section A. Demographics/Background Information

Instruction: This section collects basic information about your academic background and experience in translation learning.

1. What is your major?

☐ English Language

☐ English Pedagogy

☐ Other (please specify): _____

2. Which year of study are you currently in?

☐ First year

☐ Second year

☐ Third year

☐ Fourth year

☐ Above (please specify): _____

3. Have you taken or are you currently taking the "Translation" course?

☐ Yes, I have already taken that course

☐ Yes, I am currently taking that course

☐ No, I have not taken that course yet

Note. This section was developed by the authors to collect participants' demographic and academic background information.

Section B. Challenges in Translation Learning

Instruction: This section aims to identify the difficulties you encounter when learning English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation.

Response scale:
1 — Strongly disagree
2 — Disagree
3 — Neither agree nor disagree
4 — Agree
5 — Strongly agree

B.1. English–Vietnamese Translation (English → Vietnamese)

Item	Statement

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1	I have difficulty understanding unfamiliar English words and idiomatic expressions when translating into Vietnamese.
2	I find it difficult to understand complex English sentence structures and their intended meanings.
3	I have difficulty choosing Vietnamese words and expressions that convey the original meaning naturally when translating English texts.
4	I find it challenging to preserve the original meaning and tone when translating English texts into Vietnamese.
5	I have difficulty deciding which Vietnamese words or expressions best convey the meaning of the original English text.
6	I have difficulty understanding and translating specialized terminology in English texts into appropriate Vietnamese terms.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to previous studies on translation-learning difficulties (Károly, 2012; Chung, 2015; Hoàng & Lương, 2023; Nguyễn & Triệu, 2015; Trang, 2022).

B.2. Vietnamese–English Translation (Vietnamese → English)

Item	Statement
1	I have difficulty choosing appropriate English words and expressions to convey Vietnamese ideas naturally without translating word for word.
2	I find it difficult to use English grammar and sentence structures correctly when translating from Vietnamese.
3	I have difficulty translating Vietnamese expressions that are closely related to Vietnamese culture or daily life into English.
4	I have difficulty choosing the appropriate level of formality when translating Vietnamese texts into English.
5	I have difficulty finding appropriate English equivalents for specialized terminology in Vietnamese texts.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to previous studies on translation-learning difficulties (Károly, 2012; Chung, 2015; Hoàng & Lương, 2023; Nguyễn & Triệu, 2015; Trang, 2022).

Section C. Factors Affecting Translation Learning

Instruction: This section explores factors that you perceive as relevant to your translation learning experiences.

Response scale:
1 — Strongly disagree
2 — Disagree
3 — Neither agree nor disagree
4 — Agree
5 — Strongly agree

C.1. Personal Factors

Item	Statement
1	My limited vocabulary makes it difficult for me to produce accurate translations.
2	My knowledge of English grammar affects my ability to translate from Vietnamese into English.
3	My understanding of Vietnamese grammar and expressions affects the quality of my English–Vietnamese translations.

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4	Limited knowledge of cultural differences makes it difficult for me to translate some expressions appropriately.
5	My unfamiliarity with certain topics makes it harder for me to understand and translate source texts.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to the PACTE Translation Competence Model (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011) and relevant literature on factors affecting translation performance.

C.2. Learning and Contextual Factors

Item	Statement
6	Having limited opportunities to practice translation makes it difficult for me to improve my translation skills.
7	Feedback from lecturers helps me recognize and correct errors in my translations.
8	Clear explanations of translation techniques help me deal with difficult translation problems.
9	Having access to reliable dictionaries and reference materials supports my translation learning.
10	Limited time to complete translation tasks makes it difficult for me to produce accurate and natural translations.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to the PACTE Translation Competence Model (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011) and relevant literature on factors affecting translation performance.

C.3. Teaching Methods in Translation Classes

Item	Statement
11	My lecturers explain translation techniques clearly and show me how to apply them to actual translation tasks.
12	My lecturers use sample translations to help me understand how to translate difficult words, expressions, and sentence structures.
13	My lecturers explain why certain translations are more appropriate than others.
14	My lecturers provide useful feedback that helps me understand and correct my translation mistakes.
15	My lecturers give me enough opportunities to practice translating both English texts into Vietnamese and Vietnamese texts into English.
16	Classroom activities, such as group discussions and peer review, help me learn different ways to translate a text.
17	My lecturers encourage me to consider the context, intended meaning, and target readers instead of translating word for word.
18	The teaching methods used in my translation classes help me deal with difficulties in choosing appropriate words and sentence structures.
19	My lecturers integrate real-life translation materials, such as documents, news articles, and texts related to everyday situations.
20	My lecturers recommend alternative websites to enhance our independent translation learning.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to the PACTE Translation Competence Model (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011) and relevant literature on factors affecting translation performance.

Section D. Translation Learning Behaviors

Instruction: This section examines the strategies and activities you use when learning translation.

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Response scale:
1 — Never
2 — Rarely
3 — Sometimes
4 — Often
5 — Always

Item	Statement
1	I practice translating English texts into Vietnamese.
2	I practice translating Vietnamese texts into English.
3	I use dictionaries to check the meanings and usage of unfamiliar words.
4	I look up collocations and example sentences rather than checking word meanings alone.
5	I consider the context of a text before choosing how to translate a word or expression.
6	I review my translations to check grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure.
7	I reread my translations to check whether they sound natural in the target language.
8	I use feedback from lecturers to revise and improve my translations.
9	I compare my translations with reliable reference translations or other possible versions.
10	I use online translation tools or AI tools to support my translation learning and check their suggestions before using them.

Note. The items were developed by the authors with reference to research on translation strategies (Trang, 2022) and the strategic and instrumental components of translation competence (PACTE Group, 2003, 2011).

Section E. Open-ended Questions

Instruction: This section gives you an opportunity to share your personal experiences and suggestions in your own words.

1. What is the most challenging aspect of learning English–Vietnamese and Vietnamese–English translation for you? Please explain briefly.

_____

_____

_____

2. What suggestions would you make to improve translation learning for third-year English Language majors at Saigon University?

_____

_____

_____

Note. The questions were developed by the authors to obtain further insights into students' experiences and suggestions.