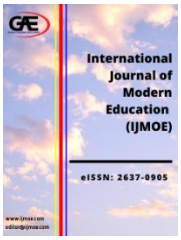
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HUMAN-AI COLLABORATION BEFORE CHATGPT: BEGINNER CFL LEARNERS' USE OF GOOGLE TRANSLATE IN ROLE-PLAY WRITING

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Abstract:

Recent research on AI-assisted language learning has largely centred on generative AI. Yet language learners were already working with AI-based tools such as machine translation before ChatGPT became widely available. This study explored the use of Google Translate by beginner Malay learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) when preparing role-play scripts. It focused on learners' perceptions of the tool, the ways they worked with its translations, and the role it played in their writing process and experience. The study used a qualitatively driven mixed-methods case study involving 55 learners in a beginner Mandarin course at a Malaysian university. Data came from questionnaires, a focus group interview with five learners, role-play scripts, and teacher observation notes. Questionnaire responses were analysed descriptively, while the qualitative data were examined thematically. Learners turned to Google Translate mainly when they needed help with vocabulary, Chinese characters, pinyin, and pronunciation. They were less certain about sentence-level translations and did not always use the first output they received. Instead, they switched between source languages, translated expressions back into another language for checking, compared translations with textbook expressions, and consulted teachers and peers when necessary. Google Translate therefore became one resource within a writing process that involved discussion, checking, selection, and revision, particularly when learners had to prepare scripts that were both communicatively appropriate and manageable for oral performance. The study shows that, for these beginner CFL learners, working with machine translation involved more than obtaining ready-made translations. Their decisions about whether and how to use the output were an important part of the writing process. In beginner CFL classrooms, Google Translate can

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therefore be treated as a linguistic resource whose output needs to be checked, discussed, and adapted by learners rather than simply accepted.

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Keyword:

Chinese As a Foreign Language, Google Translate, Learner-AI Interaction, Machine Translation, Role-Play Writing

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Introduction

Recent research on AI-assisted language learning (AIALL) has focused largely on Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT (Albedah, 2025). However, learner–AI interaction began well before the emergence of generative AI. Neural Machine Translation (NMT) tools, particularly Google Translate, were among the earliest AI-based technologies widely adopted by language learners. Although previous studies have examined the accuracy and learning outcomes of machine translation (MT), considerably less attention has been paid to how learners incorporated machine translation into the writing process when completing complex writing tasks (Mao & Liu, 2024). Revisiting these earlier practices provides an opportunity to understand how learners worked with AI-generated language before the emergence of generative AI.

This question is particularly relevant to beginner learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). Malay learners with no previous experience of a logographic language have to deal with unfamiliar Chinese characters and pinyin alongside new vocabulary and sentence structures. Google Translate can provide quick access to some of this language, but its output still has to be judged in relation to what learners want to say and what they have learned. Previous research has documented practices such as post-editing, back-translation, and cross-linguistic verification, all of which involve learners checking and working on machine-generated language rather than simply taking the output as given (Shin & Chon, 2023). Google Translate may therefore play a role in writing that goes beyond producing a translation: learners may use its output as material to check, discuss, and reshape while developing their texts.

The present study examines this process in an authentic classroom setting by focusing on beginner Malay CFL learners preparing role-play scripts with Google Translate. It asks how learners perceived the tool, what they did with its output while developing their scripts, and how its use shaped their writing practices and experiences. The study focuses particularly on

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the decisions learners made when machine-generated language did not immediately meet their needs, including how they checked, discussed, and modified translations. In doing so, the study provides evidence of how one group of beginners CFL learners worked with an AI-based language tool before the widespread adoption of generative AI, while also considering what these practices may mean for the teaching of beginner CFL writing.

Literature Review

AI-Assisted Language Learning: From Machine Translation to Generative AI

Before the emergence of generative AI and Large Language Models (LLMs), Neural Machine Translation (NMT) tools had already become widely used in language learning (Dizon et al., 2024; Shin & Chon, 2023). The introduction of neural network architecture substantially improved the quality and accessibility of machine translation, enabling tools such as Google Translate to support learners in vocabulary retrieval, text comprehension, and writing. Despite the growing use of generative AI, machine translation remains common among language learners. Klimova (2025) found that Google Translate was the most frequently used language-support tool among the participants surveyed (60.6%), followed by DeepL (23.2%) and ChatGPT (14.1%).

Research has also shown that machine translation can help learners overcome linguistic limitations and complete writing tasks more efficiently (Garcia & Pena, 2011). However, successful use of machine translation depends not only on obtaining translations but also on learners' ability to judge whether the output is appropriate for the intended context. Learners need to understand the capabilities and limitations of machine translation, evaluate the accuracy and contextual appropriateness of its output, and modify translations when necessary. Such practices reflect what Bowker and Buitrago Ciro (2019) describe as machine translation literacy. Examining how learners engage with machine translation therefore remains relevant to current discussions of AI-assisted language learning.

Machine Translation in Beginner CFL Writing

Machine translation has been used as a pedagogical tool for beginner L2 learners because it can reduce some of the cognitive demands involved in generating content and encoding it in the target language at the same time (Garcia & Pena, 2011). Studies have also reported improvements in different aspects of beginner learners' writing when MT tools such as Google Translate are used, including complexity, accuracy, lexical diversity, and fluency (CALF) (Lee & Kang, 2024; Mao & Liu, 2024).

The benefits of MT, however, may differ according to learners' L2 proficiency (Lee, 2022). Beginner learners may not have sufficient metalinguistic awareness to recognise less obvious errors in machine-generated translations and may therefore accept output that appears fluent despite semantic or syntactic problems (Lee, 2022). This issue also deserves attention in CFL contexts because of the typological differences between Chinese and alphabetic languages. In a study of Malay CFL learners, for instance, Jaganathan and Lee (2015) found that learners made considerable use of Google Translate to decode the meanings of Chinese vocabulary but had difficulty selecting contextually appropriate meanings. The authors related these difficulties to learners limited syntactic knowledge and Google Translate's difficulty in dealing with polysemy. While these challenges have been documented, previous studies have tended

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to pay greater attention to outcomes such as error reduction and final text quality than to the processes through which beginner learners work with MT while writing (Lee & Kang, 2024).

Learner Writing Practices and Verification in AI-Assisted Writing

Recent research has also approached human–MT interaction from perspectives that treat machine translation as a translanguaging resource and cognitive scaffold rather than simply as a disruptive or potentially dishonest practice (Kim & Oh, 2023; Yuasa & Takeuchi, 2025). From this perspective, learners can draw on MT as one of the linguistic resources available to them during writing instead of using it only to obtain ready-made answers. Their first language (L1), together with other linguistic resources, can be brought into the writing process to support meaning-making and L2 writing (Yuasa & Takeuchi, 2025).

One way in which learners work with machine-generated language can be seen in machine translation post-editing (MTPE). Rather than leaving the initial translation unchanged, learners may intervene in the output and revise it (Shin & Chon, 2023). Previous studies have documented practices such as editing the source-language input before translation, using backtranslation to check semantic accuracy, comparing translations with textbooks or dictionaries, and revising machine-generated language according to communicative needs (Shin & Chon, 2023; Xu, 2020). These practices are also related to machine translation literacy, which includes an awareness of the limitations of MT and the ability to modify inputs and outputs strategically in order to achieve communicative goals (Bowker & Buitrago Ciro, 2019). Taken together, this literature draws attention to what learners do before and after receiving an MT output, particularly how they check, revise, and make decisions about machine-generated language in their writing.

In the present study, learner–AI interaction is used as the central analytical concept connecting machine translation use, learner agency, and writing practices. Learner–AI interaction is understood as the process through which learners seek linguistic support from Google Translate, evaluate and verify its output, and decide whether to accept, modify, or reject machine-generated language. These decisions reflect learner agency because learners remain actively involved in shaping their texts rather than transferring machine output directly into their writing. Through this process, Google Translate becomes part of an iterative writing process in which learners generate, evaluate, revise, and refine language for their communicative purposes.

Research Gap

Although Google Translate was one of the earliest and most widely used AI tools in language learning, existing studies have mainly examined translation accuracy, writing outcomes, or learners' perceptions. Much less is known about how these learners interacted with machine translation during authentic classroom tasks such as role-play writing, which requires learners to negotiate vocabulary, contextual appropriateness, and communicative performance. Little is therefore known about how beginner Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners evaluated, discussed, and adapted machine-generated language during authentic writing tasks in the pre-generative AI era. Examining these practices provides a useful baseline for understanding how beginner CFL learners interacted with AI-assisted language tools before ChatGPT and how machine translation functioned as a linguistic resource within the writing process.

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Research Problem

1. How do beginner Malay CFL learners perceive the role of Google Translate in role-play writing tasks?
2. How do beginner Malay CFL learners interact with Google Translate during role-play writing tasks?
3. How does interaction with Google Translate influence Malay CFL learners' writing practices and writing experiences during role-play writing tasks?

Research Objectives

1. To examine how beginner Malay CFL learners perceive the role of Google Translate in role-play writing tasks.
2. To investigate how beginner Malay CFL learners interact with Google Translate during role-play writing tasks.
3. To examine how interaction with Google Translate influences Malay CFL learners' writing practices and writing experiences during role-play writing tasks.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design in which questionnaire data were used to identify general patterns in learners' perceptions and reported practices, while focus group interviews, role-play scripts, and teacher observation notes provided a deeper understanding of learner-AI interaction and learner agency (Creswell, 2021). A qualitatively driven design was appropriate because the study focused on learners' interaction with machine-generated language, while questionnaire data provided broader descriptive patterns that complemented the qualitative findings. The study was framed as a case study because it examined learners' use of Google Translate within an authentic classroom writing task (Tisdell et al., 2025; Yin, 2018). Rather than evaluating the effectiveness or translation accuracy of Google Translate, the study focused on how learners used, evaluated, and adapted machine-generated language during role-play writing.

Research Context

The study was conducted in the Introductory Mandarin (TMC401) course at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. The course was offered to undergraduate students from different academic disciplines who had no previous experience of learning Mandarin. Students learned pinyin, basic vocabulary, sentence patterns, simple Chinese characters, and selected cultural elements. Classroom learning included textbook-based instruction, audio-visual materials, exercises, and task-based activities.

The participants came from two TMC401 classes taught by the first author. As part of the course assessment, students completed a group role-play assignment worth 30% of the overall course grade. Working in groups of three to five, they developed an original role-play script using themes and language from the first six units of the course textbook. They then rehearsed, recorded, and performed the role-play.

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The assignment involved content accuracy, creativity, task completion, pronunciation, fluency, confidence, and group interaction. Students discussed their ideas, drafted their scripts, translated and revised them, and rehearsed for the oral performance. Since they had to create dialogues beyond those provided in the textbook, they sometimes needed vocabulary and expressions that they had not yet learned.

Students were allowed to use different learning resources during the task, including textbooks, online dictionaries, and machine translation tools such as Google Translate. They were encouraged to check and adapt machine-generated language rather than copy it directly. The data were collected in 2021, before generative AI tools such as ChatGPT became widely used. During script development, the frequent use of Google Translate observed in class led to an interest in examining how learners checked and adapted its output and how they experienced its use in writing.

Participants

The study involved 55 Malay undergraduate students taking the first level of the introductory Mandarin course. They were all beginners and had not formally studied a logographic language before. The participants were selected through convenience sampling as they were students in the classes where the study took place.

Five of the 55 learners later took part in a focus group interview. Maximum variation purposive sampling was used to include learners with different experiences (Patton, 2015). Selection was based on two criteria: (a) questionnaire responses concerning the use of machine translation and (b) performance in the role-play assignment. In this way, the interview group included learners who differed in both their use of Google Translate and their role-play performance.

Table 1: **Presents the Demographic Information of the Participant Demographics (N = 55)**

Demographic Variable & Categories		Frequency	Percent
Age	19	1	1.8
	20	5	9.1
	21	16	29.1
	22	31	56.4
	23	2	3.6
Gender	Male	10	18.2
	Female	45	81.8
Faculty	FPP	30	54.5
	FSPU	25	45.5

Table 2: Presents the Demographic Information of the Interview Participants

Respondents	Gender	Department	Score of the role-playing script
L1	Female	Business Management (FPP)	Excellent
L2	Female	Business Management (FPP)	Medium
L3	Female	Surveying and Geographic Information Science (FSPU)	Excellent

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L4	Male	Surveying and Geographic Information Science (FSPU)	Poor
L5	Female	Surveying and Geographic Information Science (FSPU)	Excellent

Data Sources

Four sources of data were used in this study: a questionnaire, focus group interviews, learners' role-play scripts, and teacher observation notes.

The questionnaire was administered to all 55 participants after the completion of the role-play assignment. It examined learners' perceptions, emotional responses, and reported practices related to Google Translate. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and included items on perceived usefulness, language support, confidence, dependence, translation direction, and intention for future use. The questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of .905. The reliability coefficients for the perceptions, feelings, and practices subscales were .914, .821, and .777, respectively.

A semi-structured focus group interview was conducted with five learners after they had completed the role-play assignment. The interview focused on how they used Google Translate while preparing their scripts, the problems they encountered, how they checked or revised translations, and their views on the usefulness and limitations of the tool. The interview was conducted in Malay to allow the learners to express their experiences more comfortably and was audio-recorded with their consent.

The learners' role-play scripts were examined to identify examples of translated expressions and subsequent revisions made during script development. Teacher observation notes recorded classroom observations of how learners used Google Translate, discussed translations with group members, and sought help from teachers or peers. These materials were used alongside the questionnaire and interview data to provide a fuller account of learners' use of Google Translate during the writing task.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were processed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26), using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to map out the broad patterns in how learners perceived and reported using Google Translate.

The qualitative data from the focus group interview, role-play scripts, and teacher observation notes were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeated reading of the data to become familiar with the learners' experiences and patterns of Google Translate use. Initial codes were then developed from relevant segments of the data. These codes were compared and grouped into possible themes, which were subsequently reviewed and refined in relation to the research questions and the dataset.

During the analysis, the interview data were compared with evidence from the role-play scripts and teacher observation notes. This helped identify similarities and differences across the data

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sources and provided a more complete picture of how learners used, checked, and adapted Google Translate output during role-play writing.

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

Because the study drew on four separate sources—questionnaires, focus group interviews, role-play scripts, and teacher observation notes—it was possible to check findings against one another rather than relying on a single account. Questionnaire responses, in particular, were treated with some caution: they reflect what learners reported about their own perceptions and practices, not a direct record of what they actually did. For this reason, the qualitative material served to clarify and add context to the patterns that emerged from the questionnaire.

Given that the first author taught both classes involved in the study while also serving as the principal researcher, she brought detailed knowledge of the instructional context to the analysis, but this dual role also carried some risk of bias in how data were collected and interpreted. To guard against this, a second researcher with no involvement in teaching the participants took part in analysing and interpreting the data.

Before data collection began, participants were told the purpose of the study and asked for their consent. Taking part was entirely voluntary, and pseudonyms were used whenever interview findings were reported.

Research Results

Learners' Perceptions of Google Translate as an AI Writing Partner

Questionnaire findings indicated that beginner Malay CFL learners generally held positive perceptions of Google Translate as an AI writing partner during role-play writing tasks.

Table 3: Learners' Perceptions of Google Translate as an AI Writing Partner

	Mean	Std. Deviation
P1. Google Translate is a useful assistive tool in Mandarin writing.	3.62	.871
P2. Google Translate is helpful for content improvement in Mandarin writing.	3.31	.858
P3. Google Translate is helpful for vocabulary use in Mandarin writing.	3.35	.799
P4. Google Translate is helpful for the use of sentence patterns in Mandarin writing.	2.91	.888
P5. Google Translate improves speed for task completion in Mandarin writing.	3.42	1.031
P6. Google Translate provides me with appropriate vocabulary in Mandarin writing.	3.27	1.062
P7. Google Translate provides me with appropriate sentence structures in Mandarin writing.	2.91	.888

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Questionnaire responses indicated a generally positive perception of Google Translate (M = 3.26). The highest-rated items showed that learners regarded Google Translate as a useful assistive tool for Mandarin writing (M = 3.62, SD = 0.87), appreciated its ability to speed up task completion (M = 3.42, SD = 1.03), and found it particularly helpful for vocabulary support (M = 3.35, SD = 0.80). In contrast, they expressed lower confidence in its ability to provide appropriate sentence structures (M = 2.91, SD = 0.89) and sentence patterns (M = 2.91, SD = 0.89). Overall, these findings suggest that learners perceived Google Translate primarily as a source of lexical assistance rather than a reliable provider of complete linguistic solutions.

Interview data provided further insight into these perceptions. As beginner Mandarin learners, participants consistently viewed Google Translate as a practical resource for overcoming immediate linguistic limitations. They mainly valued its support for vocabulary learning, Chinese characters, pinyin, and pronunciation. L5 found Google Translate particularly useful for its combination of written and spoken language support. As she explained, it provided "pinyin and hanzi together with an audio on how to pronounce that word." This helped her not only when writing the script but also when preparing for the oral performance. L2 turned to Google Translate when she came across vocabulary she did not know. L1, on the other hand, used it to check a word before deciding whether to include it in the script.

Google Translate was also useful when the learners needed language beyond what they had learned in class. The role-play required them to create their own dialogues, and this sometimes meant looking for words that had not appeared in the textbook. L5 made this point directly when she said that some words needed for the script were "not stated in our textbook." Google Translate gave the learners another way of finding the language they needed for the task.

The learners were more cautious when they moved from individual words to sentences. L1, for example, noticed that some Google Translate results were different from what had been explained in class, leaving her unsure which version to use. L2 raised a similar concern. She found the vocabulary useful, but some sentence translations contained unfamiliar expressions or word arrangements that seemed awkward to her.

Learner-AI Interaction During Role-Play Writing

Three patterns could be seen in how learners worked with Google Translate during the role-play task. They often turned to it as a starting point, moved between input languages when necessary, and checked the generated translations before using them in their scripts. Evidence for these practices came from both the interviews and classroom observations. Table 4 presents the three patterns.

Table 4: Learners' Reported Practices in Using Google Translate

	Mean	Std. Deviation
A1. I frequently translate words or text from Mandarin to Malay using Google Translate.	3.16	.958
A2. I frequently translate words or text from Mandarin to English using Google Translate.	3.71	.854
A3. I frequently translate words or text from Malay to Mandarin using Google Translate.	3.42	.854

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A4. I frequently translate words or text from English to Mandarin using Google Translate.	3.60	.710
A5. I use Google Translate in completing my Mandarin writing tasks.	3.42	.762
A6. I use Google Translate for exercises, homework and other Mandarin writing tasks, it brings good results.	3.44	.764
A7. I will continue using Google Translate.	3.67	.840

Questionnaire findings showed that learners made extensive use of Google Translate throughout the role-play writing process (overall practice mean = 3.50). They also indicated a intention to continue using Google Translate in future Mandarin learning (M = 3.67), suggesting that the tool had become an established component of their writing practices.

Using Google Translate as a Starting Point

Learners often turned to Google Translate when they came across unfamiliar words or wanted to express something beyond the language covered in the textbook. Their usual practice was not to obtain a complete dialogue from the tool. Instead, they used the translations as a first step and then worked on the sentences themselves.

L1 and L2, for example, searched for words they did not know before constructing sentences with patterns learned in class. L4 worked in much the same way: he checked new vocabulary in Google Translate and then fitted it into sentence structures introduced during lessons. L5 sometimes used Google Translate to look for sentence structures that had not yet been taught, although she said that she did this only occasionally. For most of these learners, then, Google Translate came in at the beginning of the writing process rather than providing the final script. What was observed in class was similar. When learners needed an unfamiliar expression, they would first look it up and then compare the suggested translation with language from the textbook. Further changes were made when the translation did not fit the dialogue.

Switching Between Malay and English

Another distinctive interaction pattern was learners' strategic switching between source languages. Questionnaire responses reflected this tendency. Learners reported using Google Translate more frequently for Mandarin-English (M = 3.71, SD = 0.85) and English-Mandarin translation (M = 3.60, SD = 0.71) than for Malay–Mandarin (M = 3.42, SD = 0.85) or Mandarin–Malay translation (M = 3.16, SD = 0.96).

Interview data explained the reasoning behind this strategy. L2 believed that English sentence structures were more similar to Mandarin than Malay, making English-Mandarin translation more reliable:

The sentence structure in Malay is quite different from Mandarin. English sentence structure is much closer to Mandarin, so I feel more comfortable translating from English.

L1 used both languages in a different way. She sometimes translated the same idea from Malay and English and then compared the two results. If the Malay–Mandarin translation contained expressions that she did not recognise, she tried again in English and chose the version that was closer to the language she had learned in class.

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Verifying and Negotiating Machine-generated Output

Before using Google Translate output in their scripts, learners checked the translations in different ways. One approach was to translate the output back into the original language. L3's group, for example, translated their Malay sentences into Mandarin and then translated the Mandarin version back into Malay to see whether the original meaning was still there. If the meaning had changed, they revised the original sentence and tried again. They repeated this until the translation conveyed what they intended to say.

Learners also asked other people to check translations when they were unsure. L3 had a senior who was studying in Beijing review her group's script, while L4 turned to Chinese-speaking friends for help with translations he was uncertain about.

Verification also extended beyond Google Translate itself. Participants reported combining multiple digital tools–including Pleco, Speak & Translate, Mandarin Translator, Photo Translator, and Malay Chinese Translate–to address different learning needs such as vocabulary lookup, pronunciation, pinyin generation, and character recognition.

The Outcomes of Interaction with Google Translate

Writing Practices During Role-play Writing

Interview, script, and classroom observation data showed that Google Translate formed only one stage of a broader collaborative writing process. Before consulting Google Translate, learners first discussed and drafted their ideas in either Malay or English. After the translations were generated, they continued discussing, revising, and selecting appropriate expressions before incorporating them into the final role-play script.

One common pattern was collaborative script development. The translated version was then discussed again before being finalised:

Our team members will be responsible for different parts. Some of them write in Malay sentences and some in English, so I will gather them, translate them all into English first, and then translate into Mandarin. We will discuss again after that.

This process could also be seen in the scripts produced by other groups. Learners did not always keep the language suggested by Google Translate but made changes to fit the situations they had created for the role-play. Many scripts were set in familiar contexts, including university orientation activities, semester holidays in Langkawi, family reunions during the Movement Control Order (MCO), and school reunions. Learners also kept place names such as Langkawi, Cenang Beach, Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan, Alor Setar, and Jit Sin Independent High School when these suited the scenarios they had developed. L1, for example, replaced unfamiliar expressions from Google Translate with wording that sounded more natural to her. L4 also made changes when a translation did not match the expressions learned in class or what he wanted to communicate.

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Some changes were made with the oral performance in mind. L3 said that her group shortened certain expressions so that they would be easier to remember during rehearsals. L2, meanwhile, chose not to use some machine-generated sentences that were grammatically acceptable but difficult to pronounce.

Writing Experiences

Questionnaire findings showed generally moderate emotional responses to Google Translate. (Table 6). Learners reported feeling moderately more relaxed (M = 3.15, SD = 0.68) and confident (M = 3.15, SD = 0.76) when using the tool, whereas satisfaction with their completed work remained neutral (M = 3.00, SD = 0.72). Stress (M = 3.00, SD = 0.90) and anxiety (M = 3.13, SD = 0.90) reported in the absence of Google Translate were also moderate. The lowest rating was for feeling lazy without Google Translate (M = 2.62, SD = 1.03).

Table 6: Learners' Emotional Responses to Google Translate Use

	Mean	**Std. Deviation**
F1. I feel more relaxed when I use Google Translate to do my Mandarin writing tasks.	3.15	.678
F2. I feel more confident when I use Google Translate to do my Mandarin writing tasks.	3.15	.756
F3. I am more satisfied with my work when I use Google Translate to complete my Mandarin writing tasks.	3.00	.720
F4. I feel lazy to do writing tasks without using Google Translate.	2.62	1.027
F5. I am stressed when I do my Mandarin writing tasks without using Google Translate.	3.00	.903
F6. I am anxious when I do my Mandarin writing tasks without using Google Translate.	3.13	.904

Interview data provided further context for these responses. L4 explained that Google Translate enabled him to produce an initial script despite having no prior Mandarin knowledge:

Google Translate is very good, and it is very helpful to me who can't speak Mandarin. Although it is not 100% correct, the function of Google Translate is already very useful for me, otherwise I don't know how to make the sentences even for the draft of the script.

Similarly, L5 explained:

I have never studied Mandarin before, and it is very difficult for me to create a role-playing script without Google Translate.

The interviews also suggested that learners did not expect to rely on Google Translate indefinitely. L4 anticipated using it less as his Mandarin improved:

I think I will use it less when my Mandarin is getting better. I can write my own sentences without using Google Translate.

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L5 likewise described trying to remember unfamiliar vocabulary encountered through Google Translate so that it could be used independently in future writing tasks. Both interview participants described Google Translate as useful during the early stages of learning while expecting to rely on it less as their Mandarin proficiency improved.

Discussion

Google Translate as Linguistic Support

Learners in this study appeared to use Google Translate mainly when they needed linguistic support rather than complete language solutions. They found it useful for vocabulary, Chinese characters, pinyin, and pronunciation, but showed greater caution when dealing with sentence-level translations. Their responses suggest that they did not place the same degree of trust in all types of Google Translate output, particularly when moving from individual words to sentence construction.

From a sociocultural perspective, Google Translate can be understood as a mediational tool that enabled learners to work with language beyond their existing linguistic resources (Lantolf et al., 2015). In this study, it supplemented rather than replaced what learners had learned in class, especially when they wanted to express ideas for which the textbook did not provide sufficient vocabulary. This adds to the findings of Shin and Chon (2023) and Xu (2020) by showing that the beginner CFL learners in this study also made a distinction between using machine translation for lexical assistance and relying on it for sentence construction.

Learner- Google Translate Interaction and Writing Practices

Google Translate was integrated into different stages of the learners' writing process. Learners did not simply rely on the first translation they obtained. They moved between Malay and English, considered alternative outputs, checked translations against textbooks or with other people, and made further revisions when the translated language did not fit the communicative context or the requirements of oral performance.

These writing practices indicate that learners remained actively involved in constructing and revising their scripts. Cross-language switching was particularly noteworthy in the Malaysian context, where learners strategically drew on both Malay and English to improve translation quality. Such multilingual practices resemble translingual composing, in which learners make purposeful use of their existing linguistic repertoire during writing (Jiang et al., 2024).

The verification and revision strategies observed in this study are also consistent with discussions of learner agency (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Rather than accepting machine-generated language as final, learners evaluated available options and decided which expressions were appropriate for their own communicative purposes.

Learning Outcomes of Interaction with Google Translate

Interaction with Google Translate influenced not only how learners completed the role-play task but also how they organised and refined collaborative writing. Rather than serving as either the starting point or the final step of script development, Google Translate was embedded within an iterative writing process in which learners first generated ideas in Malay or English,

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translated them into Mandarin, and then discussed, revised, and refined the machine-generated output before producing the final script. This iterative writing process encouraged learners to compare translations, consult multiple resources, and negotiate the appropriateness of machine-generated language before incorporating it into their scripts. These behaviours are consistent with the early development of feedback literacy, which emphasises learners' ability to judge, interpret, and act on available feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). In this study, machine-generated language functioned as one source of feedback within a broader collaborative learning process rather than as the final authority. The continued use of textbooks, teachers, classmates, senior students, and other translation tools further supports this interpretation (Kim et al., 2025).

Google Translate also offered some affective support during the writing task. Learners reported moderate improvements in confidence and relaxation, but their responses did not suggest a strong dependence on the tool. In the interviews, learners also said that they would probably use Google Translate less as their Mandarin improved. For these learners, the tool therefore seemed to serve mainly as support at the beginner stage, rather than something they expected to depend on throughout their language learning.

Teachers continued to play a role even when learners had immediate access to Google Translate. Learners still turned to their teachers for help in judging sentence structures, contextual appropriateness, and language use. Google Translate and teacher support therefore served different but related purposes in the writing process. This is in line with Weidlich et al. (2025), who found that AI-supported writing can benefit from combining immediate machine assistance with teacher guidance on language use and contextual appropriateness.

These findings show that, among the learners in this study, many practices now associated with human-AI collaboration—including evaluation, verification, discussion, and adaptation of machine-generated language—were already evident in their use of GT before GenAI. In this respect, the interaction patterns observed in this study provide a useful point of comparison for examining learner–AI interaction in the generative AI era.

Conclusion

This study examined how beginner Malay learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) perceived and interacted with Google Translate during role-play writing, and how these interactions influenced their writing practices and writing experiences before the widespread adoption of generative AI. Using a qualitatively driven mixed-methods case study, the findings indicate that Google Translate served primarily as a source of linguistic support rather than an authoritative source of language. Learners used the tool mainly to access unfamiliar vocabulary, Chinese characters, pinyin, and pronunciation while remaining cautious about its sentence-level accuracy.

Rather than accepting machine-generated output uncritically, learners evaluated and adapted translations through source-language switching, back-translation, textbook comparison, and consultation with teachers and peers. These writing practices show that learners incorporated Google Translate into an iterative writing process rather than treating it as a source of ready-made answers.

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The study was conducted within a single course at one institution, so the findings may not be generalisable to other CFL learning contexts. The questionnaire participants were also recruited through convenience sampling, while only five learners took part in the focus group interview. Their experiences may therefore not represent the full range of ways in which beginner CFL learners use Google Translate. Future studies involving learners from different institutions and larger interview samples could provide further evidence for the findings reported here.

Even within these limitations, the findings show how beginner CFL learners worked with machine-generated language while writing. Having access to Google Translate was only part of the process. Learners still had to decide what to do with its output: they checked translations, considered alternatives, and changed the language when necessary. For beginner CFL teaching, this means that Google Translate and similar AI tools can be used as linguistic resources, but their output should not be treated as ready-made language. Teachers can help learners develop this judgement by teaching them to check translations, compare different options, notice possible errors, and consider whether a suggested expression fits the context in which it will be used. Future studies could examine whether these writing practices continue in generative AI environments and how learners work with AI when the tools are capable of producing more complete texts.

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