The Use of Google Translate in EFL Essay Writing Classes in Indonesia

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Abstract: **With the current ubiquity of computing technology and the internet, many students are using online translation software tools such as Google Translate during the essay writing process. Online translation software is powerful, but it is prone to over-literal translation, and cannot account for context in the same way as a human translator. This leaves students at the mercy of a tool which offers the promise of needing only to think and write in their native language while Google Translate 'does the hard work' for them. Using focus group discussions in a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia, this research seeks to find out the extent to which students rely on the technology at their disposal, and whether they believe that its usage constitutes cheating.**

Keywords: **cheating, essay writing, Google Translate, Indonesia, Jakarta, online translation.**

I. INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, and back through recent history, it was common for mathematics teachers to beseech their students to manually work out the answer to a problem, and to show their workings. Their defense for this reliance on the manual method? "Well, you won't always have a calculator in your pocket, will you?" was the pat answer. This has been quite clearly proven *not* to be the case with most of the population now carrying mobile phones which almost always have a calculator included as a default function or app.

With the internet reaching into most features of our lives, from dating through profile-matching apps such as Tinder, to the spread of the Internet of Things (IoT), it would seem to be almost as patronizing for EFL teachers to posit to students that they will not always have immediate access to the internet to use translation apps when writing in English.

Google Translate, the most commonly used online translation website, currently supports 106 languages [1] and covers 99% of the online population [2]. It was first developed in 2004 when Google founder Sergei Brin became frustrated while using translation software from a third party [2]. Fifteen years later, the app is installed by default on Android smartphones, and their 'Tap to Translate' function works across all apps available on the Play Store [3].

This ubiquity has meant that smartphone users are more than familiar with the usefulness of the app. In 2016, Google launched Google Neural Machine Translation, which uses "deep machine learning" to improve accuracy [4]. According to [5], "the accuracy of the translation depends on the languages translated. The test required mother-tongue language speakers to rate Google Translate with a scale between 0 and 6. The average rating achieved an impressive 5.43 rating".

For second language users Google Translate and other translation software has become a shortcut to communication, especially in written media. Among educators who grew up with more laborious teaching and learning methods, translation software could be seen to be 'cheating', much as the math student who derives the answer to a difficult problem via pre-programmed functions on a calculator. [6], on British academic forum 'TheStudentRoom' cautions against using the translation software:

The grammar/phrasing is archaic or plain wrong and because of the literal translation - you won't know the exact native meanings of the words you've translated. In short, a bad idea. A teacher can easily tell the difference between your personal writing style and that of the internet. Especially when you suddenly "change" in the quality of your writing and are using more sophisticated vocabulary.

[7] warns that 'backtranslation', or translation from the language of source into English, is a problem for institutions which do not have access to anti-plagiarism software such as Turnitin.

The concern for many educators is that the use of translation software precludes the learning of a language, in much the same way that a student might not know how the calculator performed a mathematical function but has arrived at the right answer. The danger will language accuracy is that language translation is arbitrary, subjective and does not have absolute 'right' answers that a student can be confident with. As [8] state:

With Google Translate the meaning can be "lost in translation" because there is no way to incorporate context. The complexity of the text, as well as any context which cannot be interpreted without a true knowledge of the language, makes the likelihood of errors greater. Direct translation is common with Google Translate and often results in nonsensical literal translations.

It is therefore imperative that teachers, lecturers and researchers form a consensus on how best to deal with the technology at the students' disposal. Given that the technology is not going to disappear – it will likely increase in ubiquity – educators must look at ways of sensibly incorporating it into writing classes in such a way that the software is a beneficial part of the writing process, not the central platform that facilitates 'shortcut' thinking and substitutes learning of the language in favour of meeting a deadline.

1.1 Research Questions

The research sought to find out the extent to which translation software was considered a part of the process of EFL students writing essays in their second language (L2).

RQ1: Should educators expect language translation software plays a role in learners' written output?

RQ2: Do the students consider the use of such software to be cheating?

II. BODY OF ARTICLE

The research employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to discover how prevalent usage of Google Translate and other translation software was among university students enrolled in Academic English courses in a private international university in Jakarta, Indonesia. Over the course of the research, from December 2018 to June 2019, 12 students (6 males, 6 females, in two groups of six students each) were asked questions in focus group discussions related to their usage of translation websites, apps and software with the goal of writing academic essays in their second language, English.

The two focus groups were conducted as shown in Table I:

Table I: Breakdown of Participants in FGDs

FGD	Males	Females
FGD 1	3	3
FGD 2	3	3

Source: Author's research

The students were asked questions relating to usage of translation software. All students stated that they were happy to participate in the FGDs and they were all assured that nothing that was said in the FGDs would change their scores in previous essays/assignments. The FGDs were conducted by a research assistant to ensure that the responses would be candid.

The students, aged 18 to 19 years old, were sampled from two Academic English II classes; the researcher used purposive sampling through choosing the students based on their talkative contributions to class discussions, as he felt this would facilitate lengthier or more elaborate feedback.

The respondents were asked the following questions:

Table II. Questions That Were Posed to the Respondents

FGD Questions	
1	How often do you use this software?
2	Are you comfortable writing essays without this software?
3	Do you use this software for the whole essay or just for phrases that you do not know in English?
4	Do you believe that translation software makes your English better?
5	Do you believe that using translation software is cheating?

The FGDS were conducted in English and lasted around 15 minutes. These were transcribed by another research assistant to ensure that the researcher could analyze candid responses to understand students' usage of the software in question. The respondents were assigned codes (R1-12) in order to anonymize their input to the FGD sessions.

III. RESULTS

The six questions provided illuminating answers, and mostly indicated a dependence on the software to varying degrees except for respondents R3 and R16. The following section will explain the main points from the FGDs question by question. The answers have been left verbatim, replete with the errors the students made.

3.1 Do you use translation software such as Google Translate?

All the respondents, apart from R3 and R12, stated that they used translation software to assist their second-language essay-writing; these students said they used it infrequently to check spellings or synonyms. R2 stated "I use it when I am not sure what the words in my head is in English. I think I am smarter in my own language and I feel like I can write it, and then translate it. I know it is not perfect English, but it is more better than writing something with a big [hole] in the text". R1 said "Google helps me to find the words I was looking for and I think it makes me sound like I have better vocabularies". R4 said she thought that all students used Google Translate because it gives you an advantage: "I could write stuff on paper, but I would always think in my head, 'is this smart like teacher wants?' I want to tell the teacher that I can write this better in my own language. I am not stupid, but writing in English makes me feel *bodoh* [stupid]".

R6 said that she typed her essay into Google Translate in Bahasa Indonesia and copied and pasted it into Microsoft Words "to see if there are any wiggly lines. Then I right-click and see if Word can fix it for me".

R5 said that he used translation software only when he came thought of words in his first language (L1) that properly described what he was trying to say, but he could not recall from his education in English:

I'm usually OK with making sentences because our teachers in high school were really intense on grammar, but there are loads of words that I can think of in Bahasa [Bahasa Indonesia, the Indonesian language] that I need Google Translate for. I don't even think about it now. I just open it in the background and use it very quickly. I don't think I use it any more differently that using a standard dictionary or *dwibahasa* [dual-language dictionary]. I certainly don't trust it with full sentences! [Laughs]

In the second group, R9 stated that it was "inevitable that students nowadays will use technology to help us. We are told that certain classes require us to bring laptops, or have smartphones that we can use to access the internet, but we shouldn't access Google Translate? Look how well that turned out for pornography". R10 agreed with her friend stating "this is just the way the world is now; everyone is looking for an edge to get a better score. People invent new technology to help us get better at things and then teachers decide that because you used the same tool that millions of people in the real world do every day, that somehow you are a cheat? *Aneh* [Weird]".

R7 said that he used Google Translate sparingly because he said "My teacher knows how good I am at English, so if I suddenly talk like a genius, it will be a red flag for him. It's better keeping it real, because if I am making mistakes I want to know how to fix it". R8 concurred saying that his teacher at high school said "it was the same as asking someone else to write your essay for you".

R11 said that she used the software when she had too many essays to do and not enough time. "It's almost like we are being forced into using the technology. You can't possibly expect me to write three essays in one night and **not** use technology to help me!' R12 disagreed: "We never have to do three essays in one night – its because you are leaving everything to the last minute! If you manage your time properly you will be fine – most of the lecturers give class time to creating essays or assignments. Perhaps if students used their time better, they wouldn't need to use software like this".

3.2 Are you comfortable writing essays without this software?

R4 was quick to respond with "why should we? Just because our parents and teachers didn't have this when they were at school, they try to make us feel like we are taking short-cuts. It's funny that Google Translate is bad because it's a 'shortcut', but 'life-hacks' are people being clever".

R3 said that it was a matter of what you were used to in high school: "Our teacher would make everyone do the planning stages of the essay old-school, on pen and paper, using brain-storming and deciding where everything should go in the essay. We made the topic sentence and once you had all that done, only then could you go online. Half of the time, the internet was so unreliable that you would end up writing the whole essay offline and wait until you got home to find citations. So it doesn't bother me at all".

R1 said that he could write the essay "but I would feel like it was still too rough to submit" without access to the translation software. R2 agreed saying that she would "be saying goodbye to another 5-10%, especially in English class". R5 said that he knew that he "should be able to write the essay without using it, but it feels un-natural to not use it. R6 answered flatly "no".

In the second group, the respondents were split along gender lines with the male students agreeing that writing an essay was something that they could not do comfortably without access to Google Translate. R8 stated "You are talking about a generation that is never more than a meter from their smartphone. Of course, there is going to be a disadvantage felt if we can't optimize our work". R10 disagreed saying "Writing the essay would be doable, but the question is, why should we not use all of the tools available to us. Somebody said 'Work smart, not work hard'. Well, using Google [Translate] is working smart".

3.3 Do you use this software for the whole essay or just for phrases that you do not know in English?

In the first group, R6 said that she used Google Translate "for the whole essay", while the other respondents stated that they used it for individual words only. When asked why she used translation software for the whole essay R6 said that she had graduated high school "doing it like this, so I will continue until someone teaches me a better way".

In the second group, the respondents all replied that they used the essay for individual words only. R10 stated that "trying to write a whole essay through Google Translate would be like reading an essay by a mad person. It would change style and go from formal to informal even just in one sentence. I wouldn't trust it".

3.4 Do you believe that translation software makes your English better?

In the first group R3 said that "Google has access to better vocabulary, but it can't make good judgments. If I had to use it, I would double-check with the lecturer that the word wasn't too informal or looked out of place. Any time I use Google Translate, I highlight the word so that I can check it later". R5 said that he was "sure that I get good words, but I am sure that I get just as many bad words". R6 said that she thought "Google is better than how I write without it. I can think about things quite deeply in Bahasa Indonesia, but if you give me a piece of paper and a pen, I would still be there hours later with a blank page". R4 said that "a combination of Google Translate and Microsoft Word grammar and spelling check were good for a quick essay, not necessarily a great essay".

The second group answered with a unanimous 'no'. R9 said he was sure that "something is lost when you start letting computers write for you. It's like you are giving your ideas to the computer and the score you get depends on how well the computer did. That's a big gamble. I want my GPA to be good and I want to know that it was because of me".

3.5 Do you believe that using translation software is cheating?

R6 said "My intention is not to cheat when I use Google Translate. All the thoughts I am having in Bahasa Indonesia are mine. I'm not stealing from anyone". R3 disagreed, stating "if you didn't write the words in English, then they are not yours. It's like using drugs to win a race – you can say you won, but in your heart, you know that you cheated". R6 responded "I am just making use of technology, and if the technology is bad, then I guess my scores should be bad, but they aren't!" The rest of the first group concurred that using translation software *is* cheating. Respondent 6 refused to concur stating: "English is not my first language, and until it is, I will continue to use the technology".

The second group said that translation software was not cheating if you were using it as a foreigner trying to communicate on holiday, but if you used it to represent yourself academically, it was cheating. R7 said "If I went to France, I would use Google Translate in the supermarket. But I think if you are making an essay, it should all come from you, with only a little bit of help if you really need it".

IV. DISCUSSION

The focus group discussions prove to be enlightening for the researcher in providing answers to the research questions. Research Question 1 was as follows:

Should educators expect language translation software to play a role in learners' written output?

Using the feedback from the focus group respondents, it would seem as if the students had a responsible understanding of its usage, apart from Respondent 6 who seemed adamant to continue constructing her essays via the Google Translate dialog box. Respondent 3 seemed to best exemplify how educators should expect the software to be used: "Google has access to better vocabulary, but it can't make good judgments. If I had to use it, I would double-check with the lecturer that the word wasn't too informal or looked out of place. Any time I use Google Translate, I highlight the word so that I can check it later". This suggests that the highlighting or flagging of the Google Translated words means that she regards them as being 'other' from her own personally created writing. This is in line with the assertion from [6] that "grammar/phrasing is archaic or plain wrong and because of the literal translation - you won't know the exact native meanings of the words you've translated".

[8] also stated that "With Google Translate the meaning can be "lost in translation" because there is no way to incorporate context". The students also reported that the majority use the software for individual words, cognizant that the software is unable to understand context. It seems that the students leaned on Google Translate, much like a crutch, but that they were still able to construct essays without it (apart from Respondent 6).

Research Question 2 was as follows:

Do the students consider the use of such software to be cheating?

Apart from Respondent 6, the students considered the use of Google Translate for anything more than individual words to be cheating. However, this attitude appears to be as a result of Google Translate not being accurate enough for the students to trust. Respondent 3 made a strong statement regarding ownership of the words we write, but the rest of the students appeared to be eschewing it because the language would be identifiably different or wrong. This suggests a boycott of full-phrases and sentences due to the algorithms not being good enough just yet, rather than borne of moral disdain for cheating.

V. CONCLUSION

As the sampling was purposive to find talkative students, the sampling may also have picked some of the stronger students in their respective classes. This could have skewed their likelihood of using Google Translate in the first place. Any further studies should pick a more random sampling across the academic spectrum.

The research was also conducted at a private international university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The students are skewed towards the richer end of the population and have more access to technology, both at home and at university. Further research should broaden the financial range of the population.

It would also be useful to incorporate quantitative methods into the research. The students could be surveyed, and their responses both qualitative and quantitative analyzed over a longitudinal period to see if attitudes or responses change demonstrably as students mature.

Any future research should also seek differences across cultures, to examine differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures.

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