



A Study on the Impact and Solutions of Students using Google Translate to Learn General English at a University in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT:

Students are utilising Google Translate more and more frequently while they study for both basic and specialised English courses, thanks to the tool's recent strong development and the trend of online and offline learning in many schools. The calibre of the students' education has suffered somewhat as a result of this. Thus, in order to improve the quality of learning, we have chosen to carry out this research to comprehend how students utilise machine translation tools. We will then experiment with different teaching strategies and provide solutions to assist students in using Google Translate and other similar translation programmes effectively.

Keywords: google translate, machine translation, overuse, learning quality

1. Introduction

According to its own introduction, Google Translate (GT) is a multilingual machine translation service developed by Google to translate text, documents, and websites written in over 100 languages. It provides a web interface, mobile applications for Android and iOS, and APIs to help developers build browser extensions and software applications. Launched since April 2006, up to now, the GT website/application has been continuously upgraded. From translating basic texts such as words, phrases, sentences, and short paragraphs entered by users, it can now translate images and speech. Thanks to its extremely useful and fast service, this site has over 500 million users every day. Therefore, it's not difficult to understand why English learners grab their phones whenever they encounter difficult or new words during lessons. GT not only provides meanings and usage of words or phrases, but it also pronounces each word, phrase, sentence, and even reads entire long paragraphs.

In today's digital age, the Internet and its utilities are becoming increasingly rich and convenient for learners in general. With just a small mobile phone or smartphone, learners can find support from countless websites, software, applications, social networks, and communities. People can search for and access information and knowledge whenever they want. However, convenience can bring immediate benefits, but in the long run, it's not always beneficial. From the position of an English instructor who has been teaching for nearly 20 years, through observing students' internet usage during English learning, our research team has noticed the clear drawbacks of abusing internet aids on English learning outcomes. Specifically, in this study, we focus on understanding the use of Google Translate (GT) and other translation applications that students may use in learning English, their advantages, and disadvantages regarding learning outcomes, in order to propose solutions.

2. Research purposes

Our research is conducted to understand the extent of Google Translate (GT) misuse among students in the process of learning English at the Economics Department of a university in Hanoi. We aim to provide a specific evaluation of both the benefits and drawbacks of GT on students' academic performance. Through this investigation, we intend to propose solutions to enhance students' learning outcomes.

3. Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, the research team conducted the following methods concurrently:

Surveying learners through questionnaires: The survey was designed as a Google Form to identify students' habits and opinions regarding the use of Google Translate (GT) in the process of learning English.

Observing learners' behaviors during the learning process directly: The team observed how students interacted with GT and other translation tools while studying English.

Evaluating students' homework assignments: The team assessed the quality of students' homework, considering whether GT or similar tools were used and how it impacted the outcomes.

Research subjects

To gather reliable data, the research team conducted a survey involving 212 students from various English courses, including Basic English 1, 2, and 3, at the Economics Department. The students participated by responding to the survey questionnaire and attending classes taught by the research team.

Research process

This study was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: Surveying, collecting, and analyzing data from the survey results.

Phase 2: Implementing solutions and evaluating their effectiveness.

Concurrently with both phases, there was an observation process to monitor students' habits of using Google Translate (GT) and their academic performance through their lessons.

4. Results

4.1. Phase 1

Results from survey:

The survey results yielded findings that were not surprising to the research team. 100% of the surveyed students admitted to commonly using Google Translate (GT) as a dictionary to look up new words. Whenever they encountered an unfamiliar word, students immediately turned to their phones to access GT and translate it into either Vietnamese or English.

However, as GT has become increasingly advanced, it is capable of translating entire passages from the source language to the target language, not just individual words. For students enrolled in Basic English 1 courses, only about 50% primarily used GT to look up words or phrases. This percentage significantly increased for students in Basic English 2 and 3 courses. 115 out of 130 students, equivalent to 88%, chose to use GT to translate longer texts such as reading comprehension passages, essays, or presentation content. Very few students used it solely for word lookups. Even if a sentence contained only one new word, students relied on GT to translate the entire sentence.

Students utilized GT across various skills such as Speaking, Reading, and Writing, with only 5% occasionally using it for Listening skills. This is likely due to the nature of this particular skill.

How often do you use GT for these kinds of exercises?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Making sentences	0	20 (9.4%)	22 (10.3%)	150 (70.8%)	31 (14.6%)
Translate the sentences	0	16 (8%)	45 (21%)	130 (61%)	21 (10%)
Translate the texts	0	18 (8.4%)	30 (14.1%)	142 (67%)	33 (15.5%)
Reading comprehension	0	20 (9.4%)	29 (13.7%)	113 (53.3%)	50 (23.6%)
Speaking in topics	0	17 (8%)	33 (15.6%)	98 (46.2%)	64 (30.2%)
Writing exercises	0	21 (10%)	28 (13.2%)	109 (54.1%)	54 (25.5%)
Listening exercises	202 (95.3%)	0 (0%)	10 (4.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Observation results:

This survey result is quite consistent with the reality observed by teachers during class. The majority of students rely on machine translation both in direct classroom instruction and when doing homework. Since machine translation only excels at translating single words, when translating whole sentences or texts containing difficult phrases such as idioms or local terms (for example, the names of specific plants, fruits, local foods), machine translation produces meaningless results, sometimes even comical. However, students do not realize this and still use it in their speaking and writing.

For reading comprehension exercises, teachers have observed that many students use the camera function to capture both the text and the questions, then they use GT to translate into Vietnamese, and proceed to do the exercises based on that translation. A similar situation occurs with writing exercises based on a specific topic. If the activity takes place in class under the supervision of the teacher, the use of GT is less frequent. However, for writing assignments done at home, over 90% of the submitted writings involve the use of GT. Many students write their compositions in Vietnamese first, then use GT to translate into English and submit the assignment to the teacher.

Regarding speaking activities, students also employ similar tactics with GT. Most students in Basic English 1 use GT to look up words and construct sentences. However, as they progress to Basic English 2 & 3, the dependence on GT increases. The majority of students almost cannot think in English to answer questions and rely entirely on GT. They cannot speak naturally without looking at the translation. It is regrettable that although GT has a pronunciation feature, very few students use this function.

The impact of using GT on learning English

In the survey regarding the impact of using GT on students' English learning outcomes, 64% of students affirmed that GT helps make the English learning process more efficient in terms of time. They found that looking up words and translating meanings is quick and convenient. However, only 52% believed that GT helps improve their English proficiency. Conversely, 40% of students felt that over-reliance on GT has a negative effect. These students perceived that using GT does not yield effective results.

One positive aspect is that students also recognize the drawbacks of overusing GT in language classes. They admit to being dependent on GT and acknowledge that it boosts their confidence in completing assignments. However, when teachers prohibit students from looking at translations, many students struggle to perform, and a few cannot speak at all.

Students themselves acknowledge their difficulties in independently developing language skills. Firstly, many students struggle to construct complete sentences, even with simple structures and familiar words. The research team members, who are also teachers, have frequently observed students relying on GT to translate sentences like:

- *Tôi thường ngủ dậy lúc 6 giờ và đi làm lúc 7h.*
- *Cha tôi là một thợ thủ công.*

Secondly, some students are aware that GT may provide inaccurate translations, but they do not know how to correct them. This is a consequence of prolonged dependency on GT, leading to a deterioration in critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. GT fosters laziness in learning and memorizing new words, hence students feel insecure if they don't use GT for classroom exercises.

Thirdly, the laziness in learning and memorizing new words has significant consequences for all language skills. The research team has identified several prominent issues, including:

- In terms of conversational skills, only 30% of students demonstrate relatively accurate language reflexes and pronunciation during practice. The remaining students struggle to understand questions from their peers and to respond appropriately. Typically, even with questions posed by the teacher, students often take time to translate into Vietnamese, then formulate their answers in Vietnamese before translating back into English. This circular process is only mitigated when students prepare their dialogue beforehand. Without prior preparation, students often hesitate, and many can only provide short, undeveloped responses.
- During presentations, whether prepared at home or in group work during class, approximately 80% of students cannot deliver their presentations without constantly referring to their prepared notes. These notes may be sourced from the internet and copied, or they may be compositions written by students in Vietnamese and translated into English using GT, without making an effort to memorize beforehand, hence the dependence on written materials persists.
- When organizing reading comprehension exercises for students, to expedite the process, many students also use machine translation to translate the entire text and questions into Vietnamese. If the teacher asks for a more detailed explanation of their choice of answers, especially for tricky questions, students often feel confused. Moreover, when the teacher requests explanations of new words or phrases in the text, the majority of students have to spend time comparing with the translated version to find the meaning.
- Regarding themed writing assignments, 90% of students rely on machine translation to complete their tasks. When it comes to homework assignments, students often submit very lengthy articles with elaborate content, complex structures, and difficult vocabulary. However, when the same tasks are done in class without the use of machine translation, only a few students can complete them satisfactorily. The rest submit articles that are either insufficient in length, lacking in content, or composed of simpler and more hastily written sentences.

- Based on classroom observations and students' progress, the research team has recognized the significant drawbacks of using machine translation (GT) in the classroom. For learners at lower proficiency levels or lacking motivation, uncontrolled and off-guideline GT usage further hampers their English learning progress. Relying on GT and other translation apps for quick translation results only encourages students to swiftly input sentences for translation without truly understanding or deeply memorizing the sentence structures. Moreover, just a few minutes after using machine translation, if encountering the same words and structures again, students tend to repeat the behavior of resorting to GT without even realizing it. In some cases, there are students who can memorize entire sentences or paragraphs of translation, but if they forget a few words, they struggle to speak fluently.

The aforementioned drawbacks of excessive use of machine translation inevitably lead to the consequence of students failing to accumulate language knowledge. Machine translation happens very quickly, and students simply copy and submit their work. Moreover, many students do not even check whether the translation results make sense or have correct structures. Consequently, as they progress to higher-level courses, students become weaker and more reliant on translation apps.

4.2. Phase 2

The detrimental effects of machine translation on the academic results of basic English courses in the economics department are evident and quite severe. To mitigate these effects, the research team conducted an experiment with three groups of students as follows:

Randomly divide students in a basic English class 2 into three groups. Members within each group work in pairs to complete a reading comprehension exercise, answer questions, and then summarize the main points for presentation.

- Group 1: Not allowed to use machine translation or any translation assistance tools, encouraged to exchange ideas with each other.
- Group 2: Allowed to use machine translation only for translating new and difficult words, encouraged to exchange ideas with each other.
- Group 3: Allowed to use machine translation to translate the entire text, encouraged to exchange ideas with each other..

Results:

In terms of time: Group 3 completed the task the fastest, followed by Group 2 and then Group 1. However, the time difference between the latter two groups was not significant.

Regarding the quality of work: Group 1 had the highest number of pairs making mistakes in their answers. Groups 2 and 3 performed similarly.

Regarding the ability to summarize and present: Group 2 retained the most information from the text, followed by Group 1 and then Group 3. In terms of fluency, Groups 1 and 2 also had more pairs demonstrating better performance compared to Group 3. In fact, several students even recognized on their own, "doing it this way helps me understand better!"

The experiment was also repeated with students from other basic English courses by the research team, yielding similar results. Moreover, at the end of the experiment, many students expressed a desire to limit the use of machine translation in their English studies..

5. Recommendations

Before discussing solutions, let's consider the nature of learning. According to educator Toan (2017), "Learning is self-learning. The mechanism of self-learning has long been discovered by psychologists." For learning English, self-learning is a process that requires time and effort. Starting from vocabulary, structures, and key lessons provided by the teacher, learners need to memorize meanings, practice pronunciation, and use them repeatedly to truly internalize the knowledge. Input of knowledge can be supported by tools like machine translation. However, without the following steps, the learning process is essentially worthless. Therefore, when considering the use of machine translation in English learning as in this study, we can easily see that "self-learning" practically does not exist for many students.

In essence, learning a language requires persistent and continuous practice. Nowadays, all software and applications can be used to stimulate creativity and interaction. This is also a time when traditional teaching methods (teacher-centered) are gradually shifting towards learner-centered approaches. According to Osifo, the use of internet-connected phones is considered effective in learner-centered and cooperative learning methods. However, to avoid becoming "addicted" to machine translation, instructors need to guide students on how to use applications like machine translation appropriately, while also teaching them how to use technology in the self-learning process.

The results of this study also show that not all students have appropriate learning strategies. According to Nunan, learning strategies are methods of learning and using information. It is an intellectual activity that learners use to learn and use the target language. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills are closely related, and only through regular practice can language learners achieve proficiency. Therefore, teachers need to understand the characteristics of learners and guide them in appropriate learning methods, as well as how to use technology applications to enhance English skills for students.

To minimize the misuse of machine translation in the process of learning English, the research team proposes the following solutions.

The first solution is that when conducting speaking, reading, and writing activities, teachers should help students with basic vocabulary and structures of the topic through brainstorming activities. Students are encouraged to raise issues, provide related words/phrases in English and Vietnamese (for cases where students do not know the word), and then the teacher will synthesize and help students grasp new knowledge through explanation, examples, sentence formation, linking with the topic, and expanding the use of those words and structures. Students need to memorize some of these phrases to use in presentations, writing, or encounters in reading comprehension. Students can use machine translation at this stage. After that, students can start working on the task.

The second solution is for teachers to guide students on how to infer the meanings of new words and phrases. When encountering these obstacles, learners should rely on surrounding sentences or situations to make judgments about meanings. GT should only be used as a substitute for a dictionary to check whether students' judgments are correct or not. This approach not only helps students develop their critical thinking skills but also helps them remember more deeply and for longer periods. In addition to checking meanings, students should use the GT's word reading function. Simply click on the speaker icon, and the word will be read aloud. Students listen and practice pronunciation.

During the teaching process, the research team found that many students were not equipped with knowledge of parts of speech and did not practice identification enough, so they "delegated" this task to GT. However, with its advancement, GT also provides many options, and students often just choose the top result. As a result, students' sentence formation exercises or written and spoken assignments sometimes sound very complex but are structurally or semantically incorrect. Therefore, the research team proposes a third solution. Teachers should introduce common and reputable online dictionaries for students to consult when necessary, avoiding the temptation to translate entire texts with GT and guiding students on how to use dictionaries and choose meanings based on parts of speech and situations.

Because achieving a deep and thorough level of learning requires repetition, the fourth solution proposed by the research group is for teachers to create multiple situations for students to review the material they have learned. Accumulating solid knowledge will undoubtedly help students break away from relying on GT when they can think and operate with the language skills they possess.

Finally, there is a solution suggested by the students themselves: rewards and penalties. Rewarding students who complete assignments without using GT will provide significant motivation for them on their language learning journey. For individuals or groups who still rely too much on GT, assignments will not be accepted or will receive low grades. This is also a quite effective approach.

6. Conclusion

Since its inception, GT has been continuously upgraded and improved. The convenience of GT poses a significant temptation that many language learners cannot resist. Understanding the optimal usage of GT is essential to help learners set boundaries for themselves. Learning in this way truly brings value to learners. As long as humans retain their ability to think, machines will only serve as tools to support them.

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