



IS GOOGLE TRANSLATE A GOOD CHOICE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Mr. ROBY VARGHESE

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English
Waljat College of Applied Sciences, Muscat
Sultanate of Oman

&

Ms. AARTI VATS

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English
Waljat College of Applied Sciences, Muscat
Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

Google Translation has become a common phenomenon among English Language Learners. Is this a good practice to be nurtured? Language is understood and spoken in its original form with all its inflections, clichés and slangs only when it is used or practiced in the first language. Any translation would leave the language incomplete to a certain extent as no mechanism of date can claim 100% accuracy in translation. However, machine translations have played a significant role in academic pursuits of language learners over a period of 65 years. Google Translate is one such machine translator which has earned significant popularity amongst the second language learners for their translation needs. This article is an analysis of Google translate, a translation tool adopted by students, to understand if it is a good choice for language learners with special reference to ESL students. The article looks into the different pros and cons of Google translate by studying the errors and efficiency of the said tool through some sample translations of different types of English texts.

Key words: English, Google, Language, Translate, Translation





Background

English has established its roots deeply as the most widely learned second language all over the world. With the decreasing geographical barriers and increasing usage of English language, working knowledge of English has become mandatory in almost all the countries of the world.

In a multicultural environment, it is essential to understand the usage of English for non – native speakers not just for academic requirements but also for communicating and interacting with each other. However, lack of proficiency, knowledge, vocabulary and understanding of language acts a hindrance not just to understand the academic texts but also for expressing oneself in a second language.

Machine translators have played an important role in assisting the students to overcome such problems of language. “During the last decades, Google translate, as a Statistical machine translation (SMT), was in the center of attention for supporting 90 languages.” (Ghasemi, Hadis, & Hashemain, Mahmood, 2016)

According to Larson (1984:15) translation is classified into two main types, namely form-based translation and meaning-based translation. Form-based translation attempts to follow the form of the source language (SL) and it is known as literal translation, while meaning-based translation makes every effort to communicate the meaning of the SL text in the natural forms of the receptor language. Such translation is called idiomatic translation. A literal translation sounds like nonsense and has little communication value (Larson, 1984:15). The literal translation can be understood if the general grammatical form of the two languages is similar. Larson (1984:16) says that idiomatic translations use the natural forms of the receptor language both in the grammatical constructions and in the choices of lexical items. A truly idiomatic translation does not sound like translation. It sounds like it was written originally in the receptor language. Therefore, a good translator will try to translate idiomatically. This is his/her goal.

Catford (1978:21) opines that translation is based primarily on three aspects such as extent, level, and rank. According to him, types of translation based on extent are termed as ‘Full Translation’ and ‘Partial Translation’. Full Translation is a type of translation in which the entire SL text is reproduced by the TL text materials. On the other hand, in Partial Translation, only some parts of the SL text to be translated into the TL text.

The types of translations come under the category of ‘Level’ are ‘Total Translation’ and ‘Restricted Translation’. In Total Translation, the TL material replaces all levels of the SL text,





whereas in Restricted Translation, the replacement of SL text material with equivalent TL material at one level only; either at the phonological or graphological, or at the level of grammar and lexis.

'Rank-bound Translation' and 'Unbounded Translation' are the two types of translations come under the category of 'Rank'. Rank-bound Translation translates on the same rank as the source text. Word-for-word translation belongs to this category. In 'Unbounded Translation', it can move freely up and down the rank scale.

Based on the purposes of translation, Brislin in Cholimudin (2007: 26-30) categorizes translation into four types, namely:

Pragmatic translation

As the term suggests, the purpose of this type of translation is practical use in real situation. Here, only the message is conveyed with accuracy, whereas other aspects of the original language version is not translated or taken into consideration. Example: the translation of the information about repairing a machine.

Aesthetic-poetic translation

This type of translation is employed in translation of poems, sonnets, novels, and the like. Aesthetic-poetic translation ensures that the original author's aesthetic form is maintained in its fullest sense. Also, it takes into consideration the emotion and feeling of the original work.

Ethnographic translation

The purpose of this type of translation is to analyze and develop the cultural context of the SL and TL versions. Here, the translators need to take heed to be sensitive to the sentiments of the words used and how they would set in the cultural contexts. Example: the use of the word 'yes' versus 'yeah' in America.

Linguistic translation

It deals with equivalent meanings of the constituent morphemes of the SL and grammatical form. Example: language in a computer program and translation machine.

Pros of Google Translate

Any technology for that matter indeed has its pros and cons. No technology till date is full proof. Google translate being a free translation tool, its popularity has reached beyond borders





and horizons. The second language learners consider this machine work as their virtual companion because of its popularity. The analysis of important pros and cons of this translation tool is imperative at this juncture to determine the effectiveness of this machine work for the learners of English Language.

1. Fast output

The most attractive feature of Google Translate is its pace at which it gives the output- one of the most important objectives of the user. It is incredibly fast and no human effort can match the speed of this tool .in its speed. A human translator may need approximately 8 hours to translate 3000 words, whereas Google translator does the same job in a jiffy or in the blink of an eye. In fact, Google translate does the job instantly as you type. This feature of Google Translate has made it popular among ESL students as they have no time to spare or no patience to wait.

2. Freely Accessible

The trend among ESL students today is to complete a task or an assignment in the easiest way possible and that too in a scenario of minimum effort and least financial hazards. This is one of the reasons why many ESL students find solace in Google translate. Indeed, the result is tangible and no effort or money is needed to get such an output readily and quickly.

3. Accuracy

Thirdly, Google Translate is quite accurate in word-for-word translation. Currently Google has the advantage of translating a word into more than 100 languages in the world. This feature of Google Translate has become the true champion among ESL students. No dictionary can substitute this aspect of Google Translate. However, the accuracy that is obtained in a word-for-word translation cannot be expected in translating texts as Google Translate does not apply grammatical rules.

Cons of Google Translate

Challenges for English –Arabic, Arabic –English Translations

“Using the class room observations, it was found that Google Translate posed lot of challenges specially in the following areas of language such as relative pronouns, verb tenses, punctuation, modals, word order, omission of copula, conditional clauses, modals and articles.





1. Articles and the Conditional

Two common challenges in English for Arabic L1 learners are articles and the conditional. Definite and indefinite article errors are frequent in the writing of Arabic L1 students. Since Arabic does not have indefinite articles, errors such as “This is book” (article omitted) may occur (Smith, 2001, p. 205).

2. Capitalization

Capitalization in English is a challenge for Arabic L1 students because there are no capital letters in Arabic. Arabic letters have different forms depending on their position in a word (initial, medial, or final), but such differences do not make a distinction between proper nouns and common nouns, as do the different forms of letters in English. For example, in English the expression “the White House” (capitalized) refers to the building in which the presiding President of the United States lives, whereas the expression “the white house” (not capitalized) would only refer to a house which was white in color and which has been previously mentioned and thus is known to the reader/hearer. Mourtaga (2004) identified four problems with English capitalization in the writing of Arabic L1 students: not capitalizing the first word of a sentence, not capitalizing proper nouns, capitalizing common nouns, and not capitalizing acronym.

3. English word order

This can be problematic for Arabic L1 students, in particular with subject-verb order and noun-adjective order. In Arabic, in verbal sentences the verb comes first, which is opposite of the typical subject-verb word order for declarative sentences in English. Arabic L1 influence in student writing is seen in constructions like the following: “**Decided the minister** yesterday to visit the school” (Smith, 2001, p. 201). Correct English word order would reverse the verb and subject: “The minister decided yesterday to visit the school.” Also, in Arabic, adjectives generally follow the noun instead of preceding it as is typical in English word order. Arabic L1 influence results in sentences such as the following: “This is the key door”. In contrast, typical English word order would be “This is the door key.” Additionally, in Arabic there are nominal sentences which do not require a verb, which may result in the absence of the copula in English writing, as mentioned above. Passive voice-object topicalization appears in constructions such as “The woman, the car hit the woman” (Kleinmann, 1983, p. 372-373, bold type added). In such a sentence the object is included at the beginning of an active-voice verb construction instead of using passive voice, as in “The woman was hit by the car.”





4. Punctuation

Punctuation challenges for Arabic L1 writers of English maybe both overuse and underuse of punctuation. Because of typical Arabic sentence structure with frequent utilization of connectives, [wa] “and” in particular, Arabic L1 students tend to overuse *and*, which results in extremely long sentences in English Pronoun retention and pronoun misuse are two common problems for Arabic L1 students writing in English. Relative clause errors by Arabic L1 students of English typically include problems with pronoun retention as in “This is the book that I gave **it** to him yesterday” (Kassabgy & Hassan, 2000, p. 359, bold type added), in which an unnecessary pronoun (“it”) is included. Problems with relative clauses also involve misuse of the pronouns *who*, *whom*, *which*, and, *that*. For example, a construction such as “I can **that** I help you” (Smith, 2001, p. 204) would be used for “I can help you,” with insertion of an unnecessary relative clause begun with *that* instead of only using the auxiliary *can* with the main verb “help.”

5. Verb tense errors

These are common in student writing. Smith (2001,pp. 202-203) points out the following verb errors in the writing of Arabic L1 learners of English: “I lost my camera. **Did you see** it?”(bold type added) is an example of using the simple past with an auxiliary instead of the present perfect (“I lost my camera. Have you seen it?”). “He **was ate** his dinner when I came” exemplifies problematic verb construction instead of using the past perfect, as in “He had eaten his dinner when I came.” A problem with the past progressive tense is seen in “He **was eat** his dinner when I came”(instead of “He was eating his dinner when I came”). An example of incorrect present progressive is “When **you come** back?” (instead of “When are you coming back?).”

Challenges posed by Google Translate in other languages

The efficacy of Google Translate is doubtable even in other languages as well. Following samples taken from different internet sources substantiate the argument further that Google Translate cannot be relied on for any translations in most of the other languages as well. It not only deteriorates the meaning but also the structure of the message by adding morphological, Morphosyntactic, lexical, clause linking and textual errors. For example:

1.”You can choose any worse word, but not better for sure. When I was younger, I used to use it to translate certain sentences. One day, I wanted to translate this message from a Japanese





friend of mine, “ I couldn’t make heads nor tails of what you said”. This was translated to “ لم يفتحه ما يفعل ذيل أو رأس يستطع ” which means, “ Neither heads nor tails could do what you said”.

2. I have a friend who worked for an American company. They wanted to invite a senior officer of the Police force called Saadan Said. They wanted to have their invitations bilingual, so they ran their Arabic invitation on google translate. They ended up inviting Mr. “Happy Monkey”, since Saadan is also monkey, but used in a different context, it is a person’s name. Said is also a personal name which means happy.

3. “For example, 'play' can be 'play an instrument', 'play a game' or 'play the field'. In spanish, play an instrument is 'tocar un instrumento' or 'touch an instrument'. But Google translate does not have the capability to make all of these different distinctions and nuances.”

4 “If we take the word "play", in English, you "play the guitar", "play the violin", "play a game". In Chinese, you (if translated literally) "pluck the guitar", "pull the violin" and "play a game". Google Translate doesn't do as well in these circumstances if the word input isn't tweaked appropriately.”

5. “The phrase “*Me estas tomando el pelo*” means “*you’re kidding*” in Spanish, but Google translates this as “*Νέου Πλάκα μου κάνεις*” in Greek or “*New Kidding*” in English.”

6. Recently, there was an incident involving the Malaysian Defense Ministry, who decided to use Google Translate to produce an English version of its official website. The English version of the website was soon taken down after several blatant mistakes went viral on Twitter and Facebook causing quite a bit of embarrassment. Among the more amusing mistranslations were details regarding the staff’s “ethical” dress code. For example, that women in the ministry should not wear “revealing clothes” was translated as “clothes that poke the eye,” a literal translation of the Malay phrase “pakaian yang menjolok mata.” But the most damaging translation error was the following sentence regarding the ministry’s history: “After the withdrawal of British army, the Malaysian Government take drastic measures to increase the level of any national security threat.”

Conclusion

Google Translate is indeed a magical tool which has conquered the translation world. However, the effectiveness or accuracy of this machine tool remains a question mark to this day. The users of this translation tool are on the increase. On account of its popularity, the users tend to forget the dangers and inaccuracies that are hidden in it and hence it is essential to bring into play a word of caution on the part of instructors as well as students. No translation tool,





however efficient it seems to be, has been able to provide 100% accuracy or satisfaction to the user and the case of Google translate is no different. Therefore, over dependency on any translation tool and Google Translate in specific cannot be considered as a good choice by users especially English Language Learners. Although a marvelous tool for word-for-word translation or gist learning, it is A to Z error ridden, enigmatic and sometimes bizarre when used for textual translation or creative writing and may even provide grotesque distortion of the facts that lead to deleterious ramifications as far as learning is concerned.

Reference

Kleinmann, H. H. (1983). Avoidance behavior in adult second language acquisition In B. W. Robinett, & J. Schacter (Eds.) *Second language learning: Contrastive analysis, error analysis, and related aspects*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Lanteigne, Betty. Characteristics of Arabic Text Google Translated to English: An Error Analysis. *Turjuman Journal* (2014)." *Academia.edu*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017. <http://www.academia.edu/12440867/Characteristics_of_Arabic_Text_Google_Translated_to_English_An_Error_Analysis._Turjuman_Journal_2014_>.

Mourtaga, K. (2004). *Investigating writing problems among Palestinian students studying English as a foreign language*. Ebook. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse. 2.A Comparative Study of Google Translate Translations: An Error Analysis of English-to-Persian and Persian-to-English Translations Hadis Ghasemi1 & Mahmood Hashemian
Retrieved from

<https://www.quora.com/How-good-is-English-to-Arabic-translation-on-Google-Translate>

https://www.reddit.com/r/explainlikeimfive/comments/3yhbnp/eli5_why_exactly_is_google_translate_bad/

<http://transvanilla.blogspot.com/2010/04/kinds-of-translation.html>

<http://www.languageconnections.com/blog/the-pros-cons-of-google-translate/>

<https://www.hastac.org/blogs/stevenwenz/2014/02/13/experiment-google-translate-introductory-level-language-courses>





[http://www.academia.edu/12440867/Characteristics of Arabic Text Google Translated to English An Error Analysis. Turjuman Journal 2014](http://www.academia.edu/12440867/Characteristics_of_Arabic_Text_Google_Translated_to_English_An_Error_Analysis_Turjuman_Journal_2014)

"Translate." About - Google Translate. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.
<[http://translate.google.com/about/intl/en ALL](http://translate.google.com/about/intl/en_ALL)>

