



## **Google Translate in Language Learning: Indonesian EFL Students' Attitudes**

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### **Introduction**

With the advance of technology in the form of machine translation (MT), students have been reported to use various online translation tools with Google Translate (GT) being one of the most common (Clifford, Merschel, & Munné, 2013; Garcia & Pena, 2011). Free, time-saving, and a strong form of MT, GT has been widely used among students, including language learners (Bahri & Mahadi, 2016; Clifford et al., 2013; Jin & Deifell, 2013; Jolly & Maimone, 2015). However, as use of MT such as GT is not without pros and cons and may have a tremendous impact on how students go about their language learning, it is crucial to investigate their attitudes towards its use. Despite this, although some research has addressed this issue, no studies seem to have examined it in EFL contexts in terms of the lengths of texts students translate, their relevant perceptions, and their feelings when using it. In such contexts, where English exposure is more limited, the use of the technology may further reduce students' encounters with English. For this purpose, the present study examines EFL undergraduate students' attitudes towards its use for general use and in reading and writing assignments. This brief report will be of interest to scholars and educators with an interest in the use of technology in language learning.

### **Background**

Using translation in EFL teaching and learning has benefits. Google's survey in 2010 showed that language learners used GT to understand a foreign word, to write an email or article, learn to write and speak in a foreign language, and ensure the text they have written in a foreign language is correct (García & Pena, 2011). Supporting this survey, translation has been reported to be able to help students deal with

their difficulties, such as to understand texts, recall and retrieve difficult words and grammatical structures or to complete difficult tasks in the classroom and beyond (Karimian & Talebinejad, 2013). With such benefits, Bahri and Mahadi (2016) discovered that the use of GT may promote students' autonomy in learning Malay because students did not have to depend on their teacher(s) to solve language problems inside and outside of class. They believed the tool could help them relax more and participate in class because they did not have to keep asking teachers for the meaning of words.

However, there are also concerns that the use of MT will have a negative impact on students' language learning. First, it is feared that the use of MT may lead to dishonest academic conduct through its unauthorized use for completing assignments (Harris, 2010). According to Harris (2010), temptations to work in the L1 and then translate it using GT may be strong as students are busy. Secondly, use of such tools may expose students to a poor L2 model (Niño, 2009); Studies have shown that MTs, including GT, are not accurate (Groves & Mundt, 2015) and they also cannot recognize contextual and cultural references in the texts they translate (Harris, 2010).

Furthermore, as students are not directly engaged with the foreign language they are learning when translating longer texts into their first language with MT, they lose opportunities to truly practice the target language and acquire it (Harris, 2010). Musk (2014) points out that such tools may disrupt the process of L2 acquisition through what he calls "target language avoidance." His case study demonstrated that online translation machines led to half of his participants avoiding using the L2 by opting to read sources in their L1. Musk believes that students tend to be product-oriented and want to "get the job done quickly and efficiently" (2014, p. 30). His study indicated that such students took these shortcuts because they were not confident about their L2 language proficiency.

Confirming Musk's (2014) finding, Sukhwan (2014) found that students reported having developed habits that may be detrimental to language learning by using GT. They indicated that with the tool they did not attempt to read L2, did not remember or guess the meanings of new words, and did not write English themselves. This finding supports the belief that MTs may lead to less engagement with English.

## **Previous Studies**

Baker's (2013, p.20) study reveals students' positive experiences using MT, in that it is a "fast, effective way to learn new vocabulary" and "gives you a guide as to what to write". However, students also raised concerns about the use of MT, which relate to its ownership, accuracy, and permissibility. They believed that it is unacceptable for students to use GT to translate whole essays because it will produce a poor quality of writing and is a form of plagiarism. It was also mentioned that GT is unacceptable if students use it without the teacher's permission.

Jolley and Maimone (2015), examining 128 students enrolled in Spanish courses at five US universities, also reported positive attitudes towards MTs. Most of the students believed that the tools help promote language learning and almost everyone stated that they used MTs. This survey found a significant number of students who employed MTs for completing writing, translation and presentation assignments (respectively 85.16%, 70.08% and 68.76%) but they used them most often only to translate individual words (65.08%). The majority of the participants reported never or infrequently using MTs to translate whole paragraphs (85.43%) or texts (88.28%). With regards to ethicality, most students (86.72%) believed that MTs might be a form of cheating depending on their use. Only a small number (12.50%) indicated there was nothing wrong with using MTs no matter how they are used.

## **The Study**

This descriptive-qualitative study examines tertiary EFL students' attitudes towards the use of GT in language learning. Using the tripartite model of attitudes covering the cognitive, affective, and behavioral

reactions of the subject (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1995), this research addresses the participants' beliefs, feelings and practices of using machine translation.

## **Participants**

A total of 200 students or around half of the population of an undergraduate English Language Education Program at a reputable private university participated in this research. Recruited through convenience sampling, the participants came from the first to fourth years of university study with 50 students from each year. In the program, a student is expected to graduate in four years by taking around 130 credits of core courses with the two first years focused on language skills. Students enrolled in the first year normally come from a broad spectrum of English proficiencies (lower beginner to upper intermediate levels), but all are expected to achieve a post-intermediate level by the end of their study. English is used as the medium of instruction in almost all of the courses. However, students normally use Indonesian and their local language outside class as English is not a second language in the country.

## **Instrument**

This study used questionnaires to collect data consisting of close and open-ended questions which were piloted and revised before administration. The close-ended questions consisted of 27 Likert-scaled items with five options (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often/always), three multi-response sets, and a section requiring students to select one of the provided answers. Further, in order to discover the reasons for students' responses to close-ended questions, open-ended questions were also presented. In addition, the instrument covered several areas of students' attitudes: (1) Frequencies of uses for different purposes; (2) reasons for using GT in reading and writing; (3) perceptions of the ethicality of using GT and their reasons for their views (adapted from Jolley and Maimone (2015)); (4) advantages and disadvantages of GT in language learning; (5) feelings related to GT use.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The questionnaires were administered in Indonesian by two team members in available classes. The participants were instructed to select "very often/always" if they believed they always used GT or used it very often that it was close to always. Only fully completed questionnaires were used for the analysis. Students' answers were subsequently logged into a Microsoft Excel Program then converted into percentages for the purpose of analysis. Students' responses to the open-ended questions were categorized into common themes by two researchers and counted and converted into percentages. Any disagreement in classifying the verbal data was resolved by involving a third research team member to reach agreement.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Students' Uses of GT**

#### **Students' uses of GT in general and in reading and writing assignments**

Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who used GT with different frequencies (rarely to very often/always) for various purposes. This research found that students mostly employed GT for translating short texts, especially at the word level, which echoes previous studies' findings. This suggests the students used GT to replace the role of dictionaries. However, there was somewhat a worrying trend as there were many students who used the tool to translate a paragraph or beyond not only for general use

but also for reading and writing assignments. Around a third of the students also used GT to translate a whole text/essay in reading/writing assignments. Furthermore, responding to questions on the frequencies of using GT, around one-tenth to almost 30% of the participants reported to using the tool to help translate a paragraph or more of a text at higher frequencies (sometimes/ often/very often/always). At the paragraph level, the percentage of students who used the tool for general use and in writing (G = 27%, WA = 23%) was noticeably higher than in Jolley and Maimone’s (2015) study (14.37%).

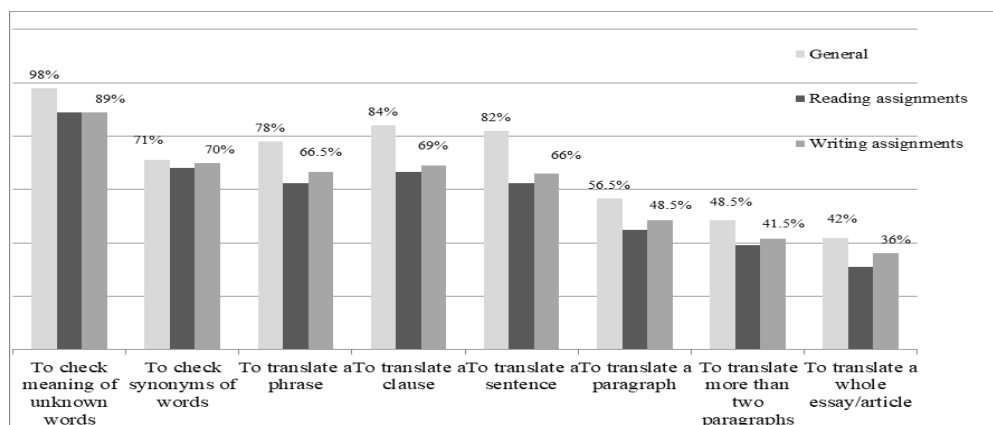


Figure 1. Students’ uses of GT in general and in reading and writing assignments

### Reasons for using GT to translate longer texts in reading and writing tasks

Based on students’ answers to a multi-response set, there were various reasons why students employed GT to translate a paragraph or more to aid them in their reading and writing tasks. As shown by Table 1, most students consistently selected “to save time” as a reason for using GT to translate longer texts (one paragraph = 60.3%, two or more paragraphs = 55.8%, or a whole essay/article = 52.3%). This confirms Harris’ (2010) and Musk’s (2014) observations that students tended to use the tool to get their tasks completed. The next common reasons for translating one paragraph or more of an essay/article were to translate a difficult part/text or to give them a rough guideline for composing in L2 (one paragraph = 68.4%, two or more of an essay/article = 46.5%). Here GT seems to play a crucial role as a means of “scaffolding” for the students. As the impact of its use in these high frequencies is relatively unknown, it is essential to examine this issue empirically in future research.

TABLE 1

Students’ Reasons for Using GT to Translate a Paragraph or More in Reading and Writing Assignments

Reason	One paragraph	Two paragraphs or more of an essay/article	Whole essay/article
To save time	60.3%*	55.8%	52.3%
To translate a difficult part/text	68.4%	46.5%	32.1%
To give me a rough guideline for my writing in English	52.2%	36.0%	21.4%
I’m not confident with my English in writing	27.9%	18.6%	29.7%
I’m not confident with my English in reading texts	18.0%	13.9%	35.7%
It is easier for me to read in Indonesian	19.8%	13.9%	47.6%
Other reasons	5.4%	6.9%	5.9%

\*Percentages reflect the counts of students who selected or choose a particular answer

Regarding students’ use of GT to translate a whole essay/article, it was revealed that text difficulty (32.1%) and low confidence in their L2 ability to write (35.7%) and to read (29.7%) received relatively high rates of response. These commonly selected reasons seem to demonstrate that many students who translated whole essays/articles were not proficient enough to execute the tasks given. This supports Musk’s (2014) finding in which those who did language avoidance were not confident in their language

abilities. This was further supported by the present study's finding that the second highest factor students selected was that it was easier to read in L1 (47.6%), which seems to reflect lower L2 competence. However, it was also possible that the students just wanted to get the assignment finished or were not motivated enough to engage with L2.

### Students' beliefs about the ethicality of using GT

With regards to the ethicality of using GT, most students (71.5%) believed that the use of GT may be regarded as cheating depending on how it is used (Tables 2 and 3). The rest of the participants (28.5%), on the other hand, chose the option "The use of GT is ethically acceptable regardless of how it is used". This figure is much higher than that in Jolley and Maimone's (2015) study in Europe, which was only 12.5% of the participants. This may indicate less awareness among the Indonesian participants about the risks of committing plagiarism in using GT. Although students may have come up with their own ideas, the translated text cannot be entirely claimed as one's own work, especially for language students, as the notion "to plagiarize" does not only apply at the level of content but also the language or words ("Merriam-Webster online dictionary", n.d.).

Students who selected "the use of GT may be regarded as cheating depending on how it is used" (71.5%) were further asked for their reasons in an open-ended question for choosing the answer. Most students came up with one answer, but some offered more than one.

TABLE 2  
*Students' Responses on the Ethicality of GT*

Option	Percentage (%)
The use of GT is ethically acceptable regardless of how it is used.	28.5
The use of GT may be regarded as cheating depending on how it is used.	71.5
The use of GT is considered as cheating regardless of how it is used.	0

TABLE 3  
*Students' Reasons for Believing "The Use of GT is Considered as Cheating Depending on How It is Used"*

Reason	No. of students	Percentage (%)
The use of GT is seen as cheating when its translation is used without further/proper editing.	60	42
The use of GT is seen as cheating when it is used for tests and graded assignments	58	40.6
The use of GT is seen as cheating when it is used to translate above word level.	35	24.5
The use of GT is seen as cheating when students are not allowed to use it.	4	2.8

Table 3 shows that most students believed that the use of GT is a form of cheating when it is used without further/proper editing (42%). However, it becomes problematic when students use GT to translate texts from their mother tongue into English. While the students need to have a relatively high proficiency to be able to edit GT's translation properly, not everyone has the ability to do so. The next common answer students wrote was use of GT is dishonest when applied in tests or graded assignments (40.6%), which seem to reflect students' sense of fairness. Fewer but a relatively substantial number of students (24.5%) appeared to be stricter by arguing that use of the tool is dishonest when employed above word level. Very few mentioned it was dishonest when used in contexts where they are not allowed to use it (2.8%).

In contrast, participants who believed that the use of GT is ethical regardless how it is used only expressed two reasons for the open-ended question (see Table 4).

TABLE 4  
*Students' Reasons for Believing "The Use of GT is Ethically Acceptable Regardless of How It is Used"*

Reason	No. of students	Percentage (%)
The use of GT is acceptable because it is helpful in language learning process.	34	59.6
The use of GT is acceptable because it is a translation tool.	27	47.4

Table 4 shows that as many as 34 students (59.6%) argued that the use of GT is acceptable in any situation because it is helpful for their language learning. Somewhat utilitarian, 27 students (47.4%) believed in the use of GT for any purpose because it is merely a translation tool. This seems to suggest that the students were not critical of the technology’s application as it also has its downsides, or they were just not aware of them. Although the use of GT is discouraged for translating higher level discourse in the students’ language program, they did not seem to understand its potential negative effects. The program’s instructors may not have addressed this issue enough to gain students’ attention.

### Perceived advantages and disadvantages of GT use

Responding to an open-ended question whether or not GT use had benefits, 85% of the total participants stated that GT is a positive tool in language learning, the reasons of which are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5  
*Students’ Reasons why GT is Helpful*

Reason	Percentage (%)
GT enriches vocabulary	74.7
GT provides convenience	21.8
GT helps to comprehend reading texts	17.1
GT helps in writing process	6.5
GT helps pronounce words	3.5

As shown in Table 5, vocabulary was identified as the area where students were most assisted with GT use, which is similar to previous studies’ findings (Bahri & Mahadi, 2016; Jolley & Maimone, 2015). Interestingly, the next common benefit was that it provides convenience (21.8%), a theme which has repeatedly appeared in different aspects addressed in this present study. Other advantages students mentioned were to help them comprehend texts (17.1%) and write (6.5%). With its added support, GT was also identified to help students with pronunciation (3.5%).

Furthermore, when asked if GT has downsides, 80% of the participants stated that the tool has disadvantages for language learning. The rest of the students (20%), however, indicated that the tool does not have any disadvantage to language learning. Again, this suggests that there were a significant number of students who did not deal with the tool critically. Apart from this, as shown in Table 6, one of the most common drawbacks students mentioned about GT was that it does not provide good models of English because its translation tends to be poor (41.9%). Two other adverse effects students pointed out were that the tool makes students lazy (41.9%) and leads to dependence (33.2%). In addition to this, students also believed that the tool makes it easier for students to cheat (5.6%).

TABLE 6  
*Students’ Reasons why GT is Unhelpful*

Reason	Percentage (%)
GT does not provide good language models	41.9
GT makes students lazy	41.9
GT leads to dependence	33.2
GT gives students chances to cheat	5.6

### Students’ feeling toward their use of GT

To elicit information on students’ emotions towards their use of GT, all the participants were asked how they felt when using the tool. They were allowed to choose more than one of the suggested options (listed in Table 7) and/or write down their own ideas.

TABLE 7  
*Students' Feelings when Using GT*

Feelings	Percentage (%)
So-so	80
Dependent	14
Comfortable (I enjoy using it)	10
Ashamed	9.5
Confident	3.5
Other feelings	11

As shown in Table 7, the most popular feeling was “so-so” (80%). They mostly felt that GT functions only as a translation tool, so it was neither very good nor very bad. The next was “dependent” (14%). Students who stated this believed that their English proficiencies were limited, and GT was convenient to use, so they felt dependent on GT. Furthermore, 9.5% reported feeling ashamed because they were language students who should learn English independently. These students might have used GT to the extent they felt it was inappropriate to do but might have been forced to do so for different reasons which need to be investigated in further research. Support should be made available to such students and those who felt dependent to assist them to navigate the technology in their language learning better.

The least selected feeling was “confident” (3.5%) because although they used GT, they felt competent enough in L2 to be able to work independently without the tool. Besides this, as many as 11% of the total participants came up with other feelings not listed in the options. They were feeling assisted by GT, satisfied with its work, and unsure whether or not the translations were correct or not, or confused about what to do to edit the output. The last two feelings showed that language learners are not in control in their use of GT when they are not proficient enough.

## Conclusion

The goal of this present study was to discover EFL students' attitudes toward the use of GT. In general the research demonstrates similar trends identified in previous studies, but it strongly highlights the need for language educators to deal with issues related to the use of the online technology among their students. Although it was shown to be useful in language learning, especially to enrich students' vocabulary, it was revealed that the tool may encourage target language avoidance among EFL learners by using GT for translating longer texts. Various reasons were shown to lead students to more use of the tool but convenience, lower language competence, and lack of awareness of the ethicality of its use seemed to be key factors. More in-depth research is necessary in order to map out these issues and help students to navigate the technology. Apart from this, more work needs to be done to help students see the use of GT in perspective. Open dialogues may assist them to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of the tool and guide them to use it more responsibly. With the presence of such a tool, students with lower competence also need to be assisted and monitored to be able to enhance their language learning.

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