

The impact of machine translation software on students' interaction and participation in class

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Presentation abstract

Machine Translation Software (MTS) has been in use by students with English as a second language since 2000. In recent years its use has increased. There are many studies into its use in HE (Groves & Mundt, 2021; Jolley & Maimone, 2015; Clifford et al, 2013). This year, at the University of York, I am undertaking some research into PGT English as a Second Language (ESL) students' use of machine translation software in the classroom. This will be of interest to all Learning Developers who teach ESL students. It is known that students use the software for reading and completing assignments, but there is less known about how students use the software within class to understand and engage with the class content. Although the software can be a helpful tool to enhance students' understanding of the class content, it can also be a barrier to full participation in class-based discussion and interaction. The aim of the session is to enable the learning development community to share experiences of supporting students who use MTS to support their studies. This session will explore some of these issues- in relation to academic skills sessions and invite participants to share their ideas on how learning developers respond to this challenge.

Key words: machine translation software, English as a second language students, interaction, participation, developmental, dependence.

Community response

Debates about how best to support students who speak English as an additional language in the university context are not novel. However, with current debates

around emerging and existing technologies being part of the current zeitgeist, Louise Frith's presentation at this year's conference seems particularly apt for the LD community. In this presentation, she calls on the learning development community to consider how increasing numbers of such students, who may use translation software, might best be supported. Louise prompts colleagues to reflect on the challenges posed by the use of translation software, particularly in regard to students' participation and interaction in the classroom.

What challenges do colleagues foresee with student use and reliance on translation software?

For one participant, the session stirred up a reflective internal debate about the potential benefits and pitfalls of the use of such technologies:

This session provoked so many questions when it came to how to support students for whom English is not the first language at university. On the one hand, it seems that translation software is the solution as it enables students to more easily follow what's in front of them and understand 'every word' that's spoken in the classroom. On the other hand, we worry about how much of a wall it actually builds in front of them, instead of bringing it down. If students rely on machine translation so much, it threatens to separate them from the human interaction so crucial in the classroom. They might become too content-focused and perhaps passive in that too. But then banning it seems particularly unfair.

How have colleagues responded to the challenges posed by Louise's session?

There was an acknowledgement by one participant that there often seemed to be a clear gulf between international and home students' engagement in the classroom context. For this participant, the conversation provoked by Louise's session, perhaps needed to be turned on its head. Maybe, they reflected, the debate should be directed away from the technology per se towards ensuring international students

understand the effective use of such software and are in classrooms that promote engagement:

In my own classrooms, I observe a lot of difficulties related to (mostly Chinese in this case) students' inability to engage. There is often a clear line of separation between them and the domestic students, and some of it due to int'l students being glued to their phones and refusing to participate. Would that be different if the phones were banned? Or should we perhaps move the conversation away from the software and more towards how to engage them better? Or perhaps these should go hand in hand – introduce students to effective software while learning productive strategies to keep them engaged?

What are the potential next steps for the learning development community?

There was an acknowledgment by colleagues that there was, perhaps, no resolution, no tying up with a neat bow the issues that translation software and its use (or misuse) provokes. Colleagues suggested that there is a real need to support lecturers (and learning developers) to teach in such a way that students who use such translation software and similar technologies can feel empowered to engage, share, and have an authentic voice in the classroom and the academy. As one colleague aptly expressed:

There isn't an easy solution, but it strikes me as counterproductive to focus solely on technology. We need to support lecturers (and learning developers too) to teach in a way that will allow these students to feel safe to contribute and feel part of the classroom instead of (potentially) hiding behind the screens.

Next steps and additional questions

Supporting students for whom English is an additional language, to navigate and get the most out of HE, is critically important. As one colleague raised, perhaps we need to place our focus away from the 'problem' with technology and instead focus on

teaching practice that authentically embodies our core value of 'working in partnership with (such) students,'. Doing so will then aid in ensuring that all students feel empowered to participate fully and with confidence in the classroom context and wider academy. It is clear that this is a discussion that needs to continue. With this in mind, here are some questions that you may wish to consider and respond to in relation to your own practice:

- How might the emergence of new technologies and AI influence the ways in which we support students for whom English is an additional language?
- How might learning development respond to the challenges posed by such technologies?
- What are students' views of such technologies and how might we better engage with them to understand their use of such tools?
- How could classroom resources and practices be made more inclusive for students with English as an additional language?
- How might learning development collaborate with our EAP colleagues to improve the effectiveness of the support we offer to students for whom English is an additional language?

Author's reflection

Doing this research, especially talking to students who have used translation software in the classroom, gave me new insights into the difficulties and anxieties which second language students have in UK classrooms. I now have a much greater awareness of the stress that students experience when they first arrive to study in the UK. This awareness has enabled me to make minor adaptations to my teaching to try to acknowledge and support students who use translation software in class. I think that it is important to discuss students' use of translation software from the beginning of their studies. It is useful for teachers to acknowledge that it is a useful tool, but also to convey the message that it can create dependence and hinder language development and interaction. The community response to my session is really helpful because it reflects the difficulty of this topic.

There are some strategies which, on reflection, I think might be helpful for students and teaching staff:

1. Give students permission to use the translation software in class. (They will do anyway, but a teacher's permission legitimises it and removes stigma).
2. Encourage students to ask questions when they think that the software has mis-translated something, or when there is a complex concept which doesn't lend itself to direct translation.
3. Encourage students who use translation software to sit at the front of the class, so that their software picks up your voice easier and so that you can support them better.
4. Experiment with asking students not to use their translation software for certain tasks and times in the classroom e.g. pair discussion.
5. Remind native speaker students of the difficulties second language speakers might have with slang, colloquialisms and fast delivery.
6. New software is evolving very quickly so as teachers it is useful for us to have ongoing conversations with students so that we are aware of students' use of new technologies.

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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