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GOOGLE TRANSLATE IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract. *Emphasizing the importance of translation in the English language classroom, this paper discusses educational implications of translation as a meaningful language learning activity. It also explores instant translation tools currently used in the English Foundation Program at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Practical ideas of how Google Translate can be effectively used to introduce and practice vocabulary items with Arab learners of English are offered.*

Key words: *English, translation, vocabulary, practice*

1. INTRODUCTION

The new era of technology now offers instant translation to and from various languages. And, as Kelly and Zetzsche (2012) best described it, "translation is everywhere you look, but seldom seen" (p.xiii). So, one of our goals is to look at the translation method in general, and to see its place in the current teaching paradigm. Our aim is also to share some professional experiences of implementing translation tools in the context of teaching English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and discuss further ways of approaching translation in a wider context.

2. GRAMMAR AND TRANSLATION

'Translation' and the 'grammar-translation method of teaching English, are the two basic theoretical concepts which lay the foundation for the academic discussion in this chapter. According to Venuti (2013), translation is a linguistic, as well as a cultural practice, that has given rise to long traditions of theory and commentary around the world.

Let us recap on some of the theory of the grammar-translation method. This method dominated language teaching for about a century, well into the 1940s. Originally used to teach 'dead languages' (e.g. Latin), this approach suggests that the first language is maintained as a reference system in the acquisition of the second language (Stern, 1983, p.455). Its major focus was on reading and writing skills. Vocabulary was taught through bilingual word lists. The sentence was used as the basic unit of teaching and language practice, and the teacher's emphasis and focus were mainly on accuracy. Grammar was taught deductively with L1 being the medium of instruction. Larsen-Freeman (2002, p.10) summarizes the essence of the grammar-translation method as follows:

- It was used to help students read and appreciate literature in a foreign language.
- Grammar study of a foreign language would help students understand the L1 grammar.
- Foreign language study would help learners with their intellectual growth.

Before the reader decides to question the need to continue reading it, we will note that our aim is not to reincarnate the grammar-translation method and go back some hundred plus years in time. In this context, let us quote Venutti (2013, p.9) who refers to an interview with Jonathan Galassi, a prominent translator of Italian poetry. The latter was asked a question about particular types of translation and ways of thinking about translation. He replied in the following manner: "I am afraid I am not very interested in the theoretical aspects of translation. I think that it's really a hands-on artistic practice".

With the appearance of ever improving instant translation tools, translation as a hands-on art of foreign language teaching has yet to be revisited. We will now look into the best practices and highlight major challenges in the ELT context. The communicative method, which has been the basis of the teaching paradigm for the past several decades, is certainly *not* to be replaced, but may involve some changes and the incorporation of the newest trends created by on-line and mobile translation tools and applications that are now available on the market.

To begin with, let us consider current educational policies. The Curriculum Document (2014) of the Language Centre at SQU strongly recommends using a communicative approach with maximum student participation. The document does not include any reference to translation as a skill or a learning outcome. In fact, the word 'translate' is not found in the Foundation Program Document (FPEL). However, the term 'translation' is referred to in cases of English language students with a translation major that are part of the Credit English Foundation Program (CELP), which is fostered by the Language Centre. On the other hand, we can find some inference to translation skills when it comes at least to the following learning outcomes:

- Use knowledge of vocabulary in comprehending the text
- Use general and level-specific vocabulary correctly
- Use spelling rules correctly
- Use a dictionary as a learning resource

The document mentioned above includes a sample of a lesson plan with the focus on vocabulary. Here, the writing stage with the meaning-focus output allocates up to 10 minutes to provide students with definitions, synonyms or L1 *translations* of the targeted words. This means that our policy does not fully exclude translation as being part of the vocabulary-based lessons, especially for beginner and lower level students. Besides, the writing series used in the Foundation Program at SQU features bilingual lists of common terms. Furthermore, vocabulary logs in students' portfolios, especially at lower levels of language competence, have a section for Arabic translation. In summary, the curriculum policy of the Language Centre with regard to vocabulary focuses on the impact of its competency in all skills. For these reasons, it suggests that the explicit vocabulary instruction be a major element of any preparatory language program, and so this is the time when Google Translate can enter the scene.

3. WHY GOOGLE TRANSLATE

Being an important member of the "Google family", Google Translate is probably one of the easiest and most accessible tools to help users meet their translation needs. Since it offers quick and rather accurate dual translation services in a variety of languages, students have discovered the benefits of this application and tend to use it more often both inside and outside the classroom. The reader may have used Google Translate and may wonder how it actually works. For the sake of a linguistic experiment, the abstract to this paper was almost fully translated from the author's mother tongue (i.e. Russian) into English and now appears only with some minor stylistic adjustment. So how did and does this translation software actually do it? In a rather playful mode, the official YouTube Google video shows an image of bilingual elves working for them, but what actually does the job is the statistical machine translation. The translation itself is based on various patterns which are found in a large number of texts. The Google Translate creators are aware of all the challenges involved in proper translations, especially in cases of exceptions, and the exceptions to those exceptions. Thus, Google has decided to analyze a vast number of documents already translated by humans. These documents come from a variety of sources that include different books, UN materials, miscellaneous websites, etc. One of the underlying principles is that Google computers are set to scan for *statistically significant patterns*. Thus, once such chunks have been discovered, such methodology can be applied to similar texts in the future.

Google Translate developers admit that some languages have fewer available chunks and that is why their software did not discover many of them. Also, the translation will often depend on a particular language or a language pair. Moreover, Google Translate has some undeniable advantages: it is free, instant; it offers a variety of languages for input and output; it allows voice recognition, translation of entire web pages, and an upload of entire files for instant translation.

3.1. Rashid's rationale

The readers can google for themselves more about the Google Translate application. Instead, we thought it would be better to ask some local computer geeks. One of my former pre-intermediate students agreed to write his view on the advantages and disadvantages of Google Translate. Below is what Rashid wrote, and it is in his original grammar and wording:

Bad in Google Translate:
1. Long texts translated incorrectly
2. Voice translation unclear
3. Some languages have no audio translation

Good in Google Translate:
1. Translation without the Internet
2. The speed of translation in all language
3. You can save the translation of certain texts
4. Can training on specific text by voice

Regardless of the disadvantages stated above, some of our students may still follow Rashid's example and choose to use instant translation tools, especially when it comes to their reading and writing needs and outcomes. Language students often refer to Google

Translate as a convenient and easily accessible tool, but without proper guidance from language instructors they are likely to face certain difficulties, which are described in the sections below.

4. CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND RESEARCH

To follow up on Rashid's comments, the most obvious advantage of instant translation is its speed. The result is achieved by a mere click of a mouse or a tap of a finger. Such immediacy also has a negative side to it, which can be demonstrated by a number of instances from my classroom observation and practice in Oman. We will take the four commonly used assessment rubrics to look at some cases of using the Google Translate application: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammar and accuracy.

4.1. Task response

With Google Translate, the response to the task of translating a word, sentence or a full website is available at the click of the mouse or a tap of a finger. The machine translation will not follow the pathway which Gouanvic (2005) describes as more or less subjective choices made by translators who are free to translate or not to translate. This Shakespearean dilemma is given by Google Translate as an affirmative response, regardless of the input items. Let us illustrate this with some English neologisms which may enter other languages, including Arabic, with no translated equivalent. For instance, in 2014 Oxford dictionaries selected the word 'selfie' as the word of the year and that same year Google Translate kept it unchanged with its mirror reflection.
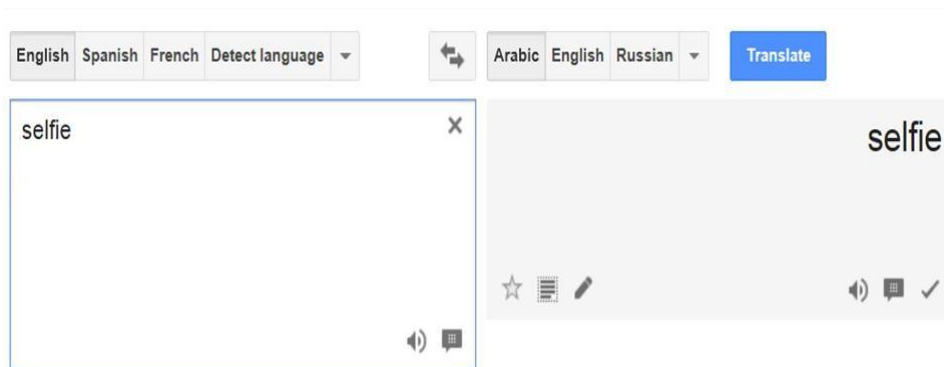

Fig. 1 Google 'translation' of the word 'selfie' in 2014

However, in 2015 it can be found transliterated, and in this form has entered the sociolect of younger generations of Arabic speakers.
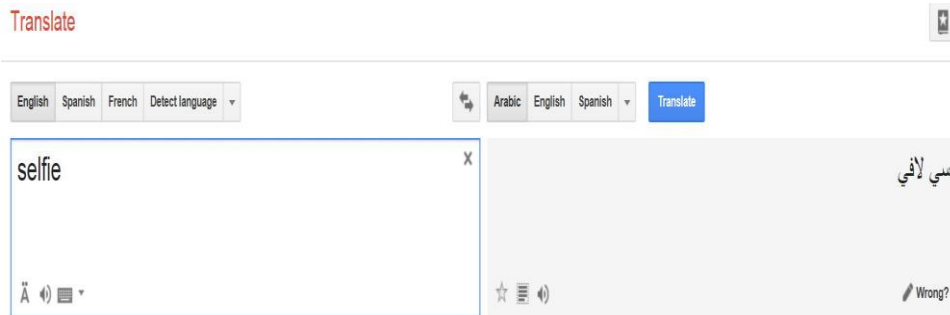
Fig. 2 Google translation of the word 'selfie' into Arabic in 2015

4.2. Coherence

Google Translate, as we stated above, is based on various significant patterns which are later used to translate to and from a foreign language. In this case cohesion may be lost, e.g. in cases of some tongue twisters. The Google translation of 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers' or 'Tom Turkey took turkey to town' will raise some eyebrows of the native speakers of Arabic.
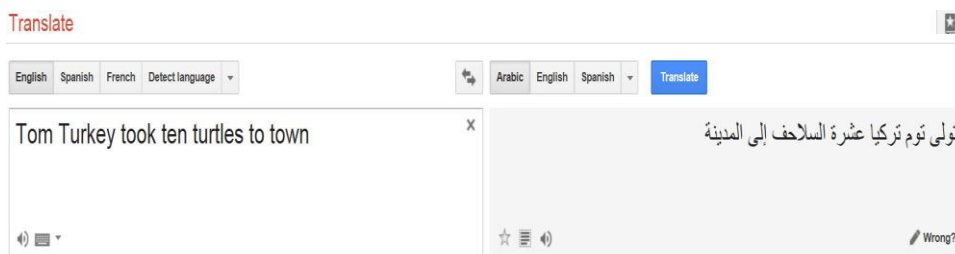

Fig. 3 Google translation of an English tongue twister

Individual words are handled by Google Translate at an ever-increasing level, but when it comes to context, this tool may fail you and cause some misunderstanding in the choice of words. Let us look at a quote from a writing project produced by a pre-intermediate student: 8 years ago, I was a bad boy in my childhood. I was *bitchy*. The instant translation of the intended word from Arabic into English was inadequate and needed further clarification.

Fig. 4 Google translation of the word 'bitchy' from Arabic to English

Since Google Translate takes into account statistically significant chunks, it is advisable to provide input as a basic pattern rather than individual words to create a minimal context. The example below will illustrate this approach.
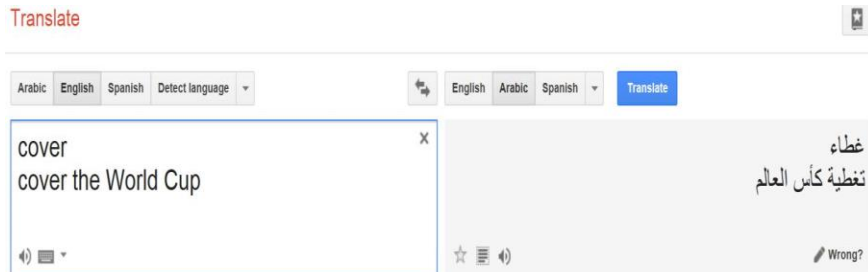

Fig. 5. The difference in Google translation of an individual word 'cover'
and a phrase 'cover the World Cup'

4.3. Lexical resource

Google Translate is likely to be most frequently referred to by the English language learners to look for the translation of individual words. In cases of synonyms, the discrepancy between input and output presents one of the main challenges for Google Translate. This is when the Arabic part appears to be completely the same, whereas the English equivalent presents a significant difference in meaning. Let us look at some examples from the classroom experience.
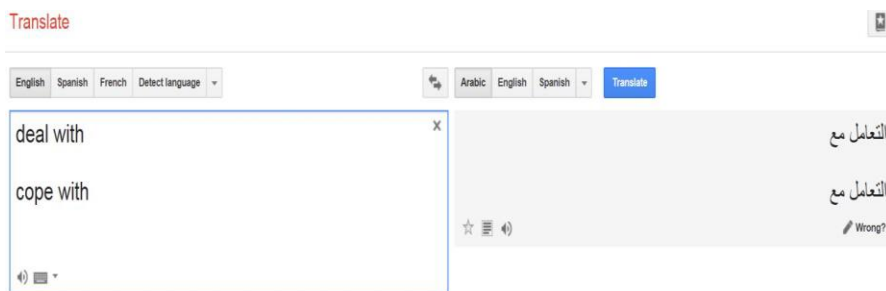

Fig. 6 Google translation of 'deal with' and 'copy with' into Arabic

Let us look at another pair of lexemes: *dialect* and *accent*
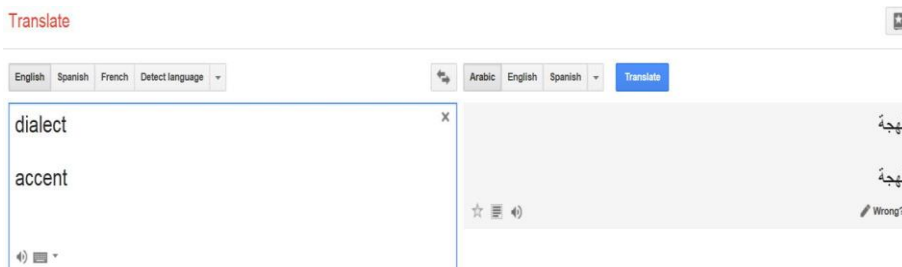

Fig. 7 Google translation of 'dialect' and 'accent' into Arabic

Even if the reader does not have reading skills in Arabic, they will see that the Arabic section in both cases offers a matching pair, whereas a reader with a basic linguistic knowledge would easily tell the difference between the English items.

One way to avoid semantic breaches is to cross check such words in other available online dictionaries. Let us illustrate this with the following pair: *guarantee* and *warranty*.
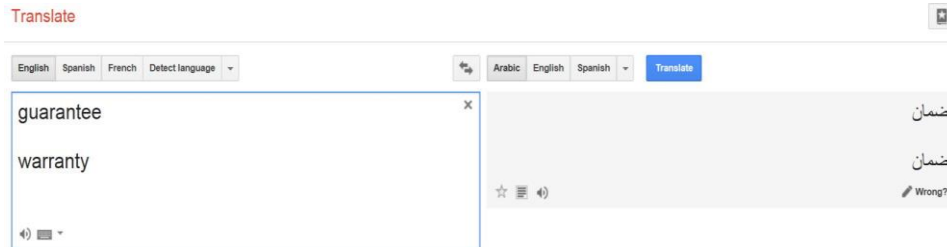

Fig. 8 Google translation of 'guarantee' and 'warranty' into Arabic

A useful reference tool that is effective for such or similar cases is the free online Cambridge dictionary at www.dictionary.cambridge.org. This is how it can help learners differentiate between the two lexical items mentioned above and offer a reliable translation into Arabic.

Fig. 9 Definitions and translation of the word 'warranty'
and 'guarantee' by Cambridge online Dictionary

Let us discuss how much may be lost in translation of individual words. If the teacher cannot read or write in Arabic, they can switch the tabs at the top of the Google Translate menu and check what is 'lost' on the way. Some neologisms may present certain difficulty when it comes to some more complex language innovations. Here is an example. A recent fast food accessory features a kind of combination of spoon and fork and is called 'spork'. This item can be now found in a popular fast food joint in Oman, but Microsoft Office 2013 Word will still underline it with a red wavy line to advise the typist to double check the spelling. If you google the image of sporks, you should be able to see some illustrations of this object. But this is what happens with this neologism in Google Translate:
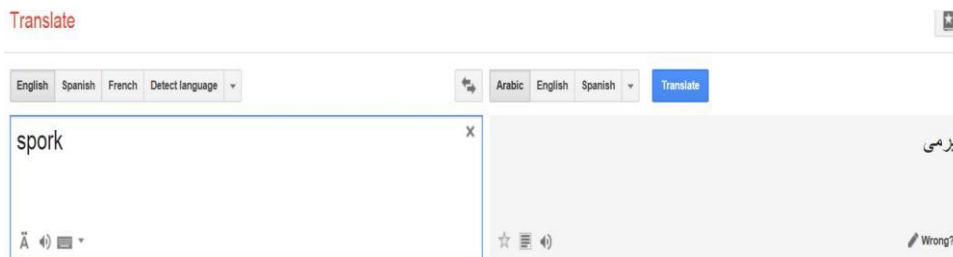

Fig. 10 Google translation of the word 'spork' into Arabic

Let us go backwards and see what is lost in translation 'on its way'. The intended kitchen utensil (*spork*) has been mistakenly taken as verb with a very different meaning (*throw away*).

Fig. 11 A reverse Google translation of the word 'spork' from Arabic into English

This example again shows us the need to bring about more critical analysis on the part of the educator and the learner. Critical thinking in translation is also needed in cases of lexemes which, according to Carter (2012), help us to represent the polysemy – or the existence of several meanings – in individual words (p.23). So, critical thinking really comes into play when students scan the available translated option in search of the proper equivalent.
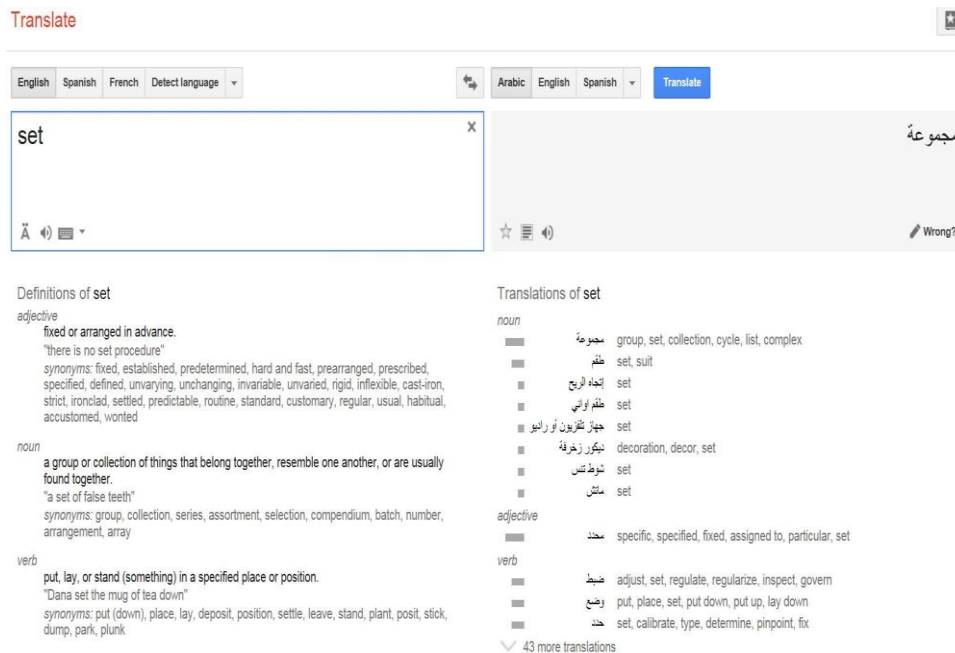
Fig. 12 Google translation of the word 'set' into Arabic with its numerous meanings

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'set' has the largest number of meanings. Google Translate offers a set of 65 sets for this word with 3 parts of speech. In such cases we need more of our learners to engage in critical thinking. Proper contextualization is an essential skill needed to select the proper set of meanings. If our learners take on a role of critical translators, Grossman (2010) advises them to develop a strong sense of style in two languages and should hone and expand their critical awareness of the emotional impact of words. Google Translate also offers an opportunity to correct the translated equivalent with a more reliable and adequate option.

4.3.1. Vocabulary input in the classroom

One of the easiest applications of the translation method is to introduce new vocabulary. Setting up a screen in your classroom with the English wordlist on the left and instant translation into Arabic on the right is a visually viable tool. Whether or not it is pedagogically sound or methodologically appropriate may be the subject matter of another paper. Here we will refer to some possible ways to work with vocabulary lists in the language classroom.

Google Translate could be just another tool to arrange target vocabulary inside and outside your classroom. This can be arranged in two ways: on a student's smartphone or in class, if the premises allow it. In both cases it can function as a kind of digital vocabulary list. A combination of Control and + keys will expand the image on the screen allowing you to demonstrate either of the wordlists: English or Arabic. As students are exposed to the vocabulary columns in two languages, they can be actively engaged in the following activities: a) introduce pronunciation; b) practice spelling; c) check the part of

speech; d) ask students to make sentences, orally or in writing; e) 'recycle' vocabulary in a meaningful manner and context, etc.

As an alternative, this vocabulary list can be practiced in the form of a 'translation game', as group work across the classroom or genders. If the teachers cannot read in Arabic, they will need a reliable translator. This does not have to take much of the classroom time, but will still allow some form of communication involving students' mother tongue.

Spelling is still a challenging task for many of our learners and will cause the teachers' logical question like 'What's up with that?' A possible methodological and technological response to this problem may be WhatsApp, a social medium that has earned a significant popularity among our learners. If a student uses the Google Translation App on his/her smartphone, then the most recently browsed vocabulary items are kept in it and could be revised at his/her convenience. Thus, to follow up on the classroom vocab work students may be asked to make vocabulary lists, WhatsApp them to each other in their L1, have them spell correctly in English and send them back to the initial sender. Google Translate in this case is a tool that can, to a lesser extent, replace their bilingual dictionary and help them to discover the correct spelling. In summary, as Graves and August (2012) suggest: "Vocabulary instruction is most effective and influences students' comprehension when it is rich, deep and extended" (p.4).

So how can we extend vocabulary practice? Kenneth Beare (2015) came up with these techniques to use Google Translate in the classroom in the case of English and Spanish.

In class:
- Have students write short texts in English, and translate them into their original language. Students can be invited to spot grammar errors and find cases of inappropriate usage.
- Use authentic resources, the URL link, and have students translate the original into their target language. This will help out students to focus on difficult vocabulary. In this case it is important to have students use Google Translate only after they have first read the target article in English.
- For beginners, ask students to first write short texts in L1. Then they translate the text into English with Google Translate and tweak the translation.
- Provide your own text and Google Translate it into the target language of the class. Then ask students to read the translation and come up with the original text in English.

Translated search:
Beare continues to look for the best applications of translated search and comes up with these techniques:
- When they have a difficulty with a grammar point, they Google search on the grammar term to provide explanations in their mother tongue.
- Use translated search to find the URLs and pages on a particular topic. The teacher cuts-and-pastes some information to have students translate into English.
- Google translated search is very effective for group projects. If students don't have ideas, or are not sure where to begin, let them use translated search to get them started.

Back in 1995 Nolasko and Arthur suggested that the translation practice in the classroom be used meaningfully and have a clear purpose. The scholars also advised that translation

activities should also stimulate students' interest in communication and allow them to work independently and creatively. This was the year Google started, and almost two decades later it offers a technological platform for such creative language work.

4.3.2. Voice input and output

Google Translate allows you to enter a target word on your smartphone, but the pronunciation must be clear and accurate, which is not always the case with lower level language students. This is especially true when it comes to commonly mispronounced words by Arab learners of English like *license*, *plumber*, *radar*, *shovel*, more academic words like *page*, *language*, *college*, etc. as well as some individual sounds, e.g. [p] and [dʒ]. Google Translate is playable in the classroom but the English pronunciation comes in machine-made quality and represents only the American English accent.

4.3.3. Image input: out-of-class translation trip

A recent add-on to Google Translate is its camera translation function and at the time of this publication works with English to and from French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. It is also available for IPhone and Android users. The point is to take a picture of a sign or label and have Google Translate scan and translate it into one of the languages. A visit to 'Al Fair' will allow a shopper to spot quite a few food items in French, Italian or even Russian, and if it does not disturb other shoppers or violate the shop's photo-taking policy, this could be a fun shopping-and-translation experience. Otherwise, students can be offered signs that are available online and that could be used to translate into English. Such skills may be useful for future trips to Europe when there is a need to translate a sign in a language other than English or Arabic.

4.4. Grammar and accuracy

Chang (2011) compares the efficiency of Grammar Translation method over the Communicative method in teaching English grammar in the Taiwanese context and suggests combining both methods because the former one is focused on accuracy and the latter one on fluency.

With the proper training, Google Translate may be helpful on the individual word level, but the actual accuracy is often lost in cases of grammar and accuracy. Let us look at an example of a sentence taken from a student's story written as homework in its original grammar: *Not frail at the weekend but mislead throughout the holiday in a state of fear and discomfort.*

If students choose to translate longer texts and entire passages with instant tools without proper on-site professional guidance, such inaccuracies could be frequent and would need to be addressed. In this context we can refer to a study in Stellenbosch University in South Africa, which found that of the six text types translated by Google Translate, the Power Point slides yielded the best results. Van Rensburg, Snyman and Lotz (2012) claim that the quality was still below average, and the texts would require extensive post-editing for their function to be met.

5. CONCLUSION

In general, individual lexemes are translated from English into one of 80 languages at ever increasing quality levels. This software mostly deals with individual words or statistically significant patterns that can be converted with a higher level of accuracy. The grammar-translation method has had its day in the history of English language teaching and has now been replaced by other methods which are more communicative in their attitude and nature. But with the growing popularity of modern technologies like instant online translators and smartphone apps, some features of translation principles reappear in the current teaching paradigm, regardless of some elements that are inevitably lost in translation. In this context, our goal as educators is to show students the benefits and drawbacks of instant translation as a learning tool so that they are not lost but, instead, found in meaningful language practice.

Translation cannot be ignored and is an integral part of a bilingual classroom. As language instructors, our aim is to seek the best techniques for making the translation activity meaningful. Thus, this paper offers some practical ideas of how Google Translate can be effectively used to introduce and practice vocabulary items for Arab learners of English. Although Omani students are often found translating from and to English using their smartphone devices, our task as educators is to show the benefits of the modern tools that are found in Google Translate, Bing, etc., before the students get *lost* in translation. As educators, we can and should utilize this tool in and out of our language classroom. If we or our learners do use it, we should not expect miracles and expect the results to be based on what Google has done for the community, i.e. the translation of statistically significant chunks.

Carter (2012) gives his prospective view on vocabulary learning. In his opinion, we should focus on "patterns of vocabulary that go beyond the single word into formulaic chunks and sequences of lexical creativity" (p.15). If we follow the general communicative pattern and still manage to incorporate Google Translate opportunities, our language teaching and learning experience will not be in a 'state of fear and discomfort' as stated in one of the writings given above, but in a state of awareness and involvement in the process of critical linguistic thinking. The proper application of the instant translation tools will add a special touch to the smartphone screen and hopefully improve English Language teaching and learning.

For our final thought let us look into a recent case in my speaking class. A student is stuck for the word 'remedy' and asks the teacher, 'What's a *remedy*?' In this dynamic classroom episode, a teacher may refer back to meaning-pronunciation-form approach to new vocabulary and spend some time explaining this new item. How much time or effort do we have to spend on it? In such a case this item just plugs the natural flow of speech and blocks coherence. For us to go with the flow, can or should this word be translated, be it with Google Translate or not?

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