

Can Machine Translation Help the Language Learner?

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Abstract

Translation was for centuries a dominant strategy in language teaching, until it was displaced by the communicative approach in the sixties. From the seventies the trend has been to ban translation altogether from the language teacher training curricula and from textbooks. Only a few voices have raised to defend its value, within the right context, as another communicative activity, particularly at higher levels.

Machine translation involves another teaching/learning strategy altogether. In the past, machine translation was considered by bilinguals as a source of amusement, and by monolinguals useful, if at all, for 'gisting' purposes, usually after the output had been post-edited. Now, even in its web-based, freely available versions (Google Translate, Bing Translator, Yahoo Babel Fish) seems to achieve results that can be deemed useful, if not elegant yet, for some communication purposes, particularly between close related languages.

Anecdotal classroom evidence points to the fact that, against the explicit advice of teachers, some students recognize having written first the text in their mother language, entered it into a machine translation engine (usually Google Translate), then fixing the output and presenting the final text as their own work. As machine translation improves, this trend cannot but rise.

Rather than condemning this practice, this research investigates whether there could be room for machine translation in the language classroom. For language learning, the machine generated translation could offer a type of scaffolding upon which the individual student can project their grammatical knowledge on the other language. The teacher could find in it also a common platform for a class activity.

This presentation will report on the preliminary results of a study now in course on the use of machine translation in the production of written text by Spanish language students at beginner and intermediate levels. Participants were asked to respond to an email prompt by writing directly into Spanish (control group), and first into English using the www.tradukka.com machine translation interface and pre-editing the pre-editing the source / post-editing the Spanish as required (experimental group), with participants being at some stage both in the experimental and in the control group (a repeated measures design). The researcher then will analyze the time spent on the task and communicative value of the responses (the dependent variables).

The data was collected in the first semester of 2010 and is being analyzed now.