# Do Mobile Translation Apps Enhance Or Hinder Translation Trainees' Linguistic Competence: The Case Study Of Translation Students At Birzeit University

## Majdi J. Abu-Zahra[1] , Ahmad Sh. Shayeb[2]

*[1]Birzeit University, mzahra@birzeit.edu*

*[2]Birzeit University, ashayeb@birzeit.edu*

## Abstract

This research tries to investigate the importance of mobile translation apps when carrying out translation activities in the classroom. Specifically, this is a semester-long study which attempts to see how beneficial it is to allow translation students enrolled in the translation program at the Department of Languages and Translation at Birzeit University full freedom to use mobile translation apps when rendering in-class assignments from Arabic into English. To this end, two divisions of journalistic translation (334) were used as the subjects of the study, one serving as a control group and the other serving as an experimental group. Throughout the course, six assignments were given to both groups to translate from Arabic into English. The control group was given full freedom to use mobile translation apps like Google Translate, while the experimental group was not allowed to use mobile translation apps and was instead furnished with the needed glossary. The final assignment was administered to both groups under the same conditions: no mobiles were allowed and the needed glossary was supplied. Upon analysis of students' mistakes and averages in the final exam, it has become evident that an absolute reliance on mobile translation apps such as Google Translate inside the classroom has a detrimental impact on translation students' linguistic competence and thus their translation performance. Therefore, the researchers strongly recommend translation trainers at tertiary level to allow translation students a very limited use of mobile translation apps especially when students study English at an EFL setting like our case at Birzeit University.

**Keywords**: mobile translation apps, linguistic competence, translation performance, enhance.

## 1. Introduction

Decades ago, translation students used to face many challenges while rendering a text from the source language into the target language. Moreover, as Akan et.al (2019, 58) maintain, translation "becomes a more complex task when we translate from Arabic to English."

Email：mzahra@birzeit.edu

This is especially true when Arab students study English in an EFL setting. Such problems were handled using traditional methods, most importantly the bulky paper dictionaries. However, with the advent of the internet, new technological devices and programs like mobile apps were developed and were promising in facilitating the process of translation, thus saving time and effort.

One important technological advancement is Google Translate (GT). Such a program , among others, helped both translators and language learners a lot to achieve their goals. Yet, problems in using such applications inside the translation class when doing assignments started to crop up. One of these problems is heavy or absolute dependence on mobile applications, mostly GT to do in-class translation assignments. This problem has become a concern for translation instructors at Birzeit University.

The Department of Languages and Translation at Birzeit University has recently started a degree program in Translation (2020). With the new competing students, there was a need to turn out translation graduates who are able to compete in such a highly-competitive market. Therefore, there was a concern among translation instructors at Birzeit University about the extent of using these mobile apps to help students in their work taking into account the improvement of students' linguistic competence, especially in English.

Thus, the Department Translation Committee took a decision to bar translation students from using these mobile applications when doing assignments in class. In addition, the Committee decided to prevent students from using these apps, especially GT, in exams and instead supply them with the needed glossary to ensure that students improve their language, particularly English.

However, some academics see no problem in allowing students free unlimited use of mobile apps on the basis that such apps are among the translators' tools at work. On the other hand, other translation instructors argue that there is a dire need to force translation students to perfect their Arabic and more importantly their English linguistic competence taking into account that English is a foreign language for them. Therefore, students should have the incentive to work on their English and not rely absolutely on mobile apps like GT. This idea sparked our interest to see into the problem.

## 2.   Statement of the problem

With the spread of mobile translation apps worldwide, it has become possible to use such apps to simultaneously translate a text from one language into the other. Students can even translate a text just by taking a shot for the text. The problem is that if students rely completely on these mobile translation apps, they won't have the chance to identify their mistakes and later correct them. Thus, students who have full freedom to use these mobile translation apps may have poor linguistics skills. In our case, the bulk of Palestinian tertiary students have poor English skills, and this is evident from their scores on the English placement test Birzeit University administer for them upon admission. Students joining the translation program at Birzeit University are no exception; some of them score as low as A level (the lowest English level)!

Therefore, there is a need to improve and enhance students' English linguistic competence after spotting their areas of weakness. But, this is not possible when students who have poor English skills use machine translation. As translation instructors , moving around in translation class has proved that some students especially weak ones  rely heavily on these apps which are supposed to be helpful tools, but not a replacement of the human translator.

## 3.    Review of related literature

Hutchins (2003) defines machine translation as computerized systems which are responsible for the production of translations with or without human assistance. Sinhal & Gupta (2014, 22) add "it is a sub-field of computational linguistics that investigates the use of software to translate text or speech from one natural language to another." This translation is done without human assistance or intervention, (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2014).

Machine Translation is subsumed under computational linguistics that focuses on the use of computer software to translate text or speech from one source language to another. Hatim (2004) elaborates on this kind of translation by saying at a basic level, machine translation involves a simple substitution of words from one source language to another target language.

With regard to online translation tools, Google Translate, among all the others, is one of the commonly preferred software by the users because it offers some popular features and includes corpus-based data for the users (Chandra & Yuyun, 2018). Google Translate is a service provided by Google Inc. to translate sections of texts, whole texts or web pages from one language to another.

Bakay Avar and Yıldız (2019, 437) add that "MT has been improving substantially over the last few years as a result of the increased computational power and the parallel corpora, and this improvement has shifted from string/word-based models towards tree/phrase-based models and, in recent years, towards deep learning/neural network-based models."

However, like other automatic translation tools, Google Translate has several pitfalls; one of the most important is whether Google Translate can replace the human translator.
GT translate sometimes cannot identify the intended meaning in the target language when a word has multiple senses. Another problem is that literal translation produced by GT creates a funny content. Stefcik (2015, 140) points out that "MT is used with caution where a high degree of quality is required."

Machine translation has been used by both translation students and EFL learners inside the classroom. In his study, Omar (2021) investigated the value and implications of using machine translation in vocabulary acquisition with forty-seven ESL students at the tertiary level. He found that students had challenges in vocabulary acquisition, and MT does not provide an optimal solution to overcome in using vocabulary unless they are used in meaningful contexts accompanied by higher metacognitive skills.

Chandra and Yuyun (2018) explored the use of GT in EFL essay writing and its role in language learning. In their case study, data was collected from eight participants analyzing their writing tasks. The findings revealed that students preferred GT for three purposes respectively: vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, and students perceive GT as a dictionary facilitating lexical items.

Lee (2019) studied the importance of using machine translation to improve foreign language learners' writing. The finding indicates that if teachers guide the process of using machine translation, it can be a beneficial tool in foreign language learning.

Zengin and Kaçar (2011) attempted to investigate the problems that EFL academicians face in their translation practices and find out the attitudes towards the use of various translation tools. The results of the study conducted with seventy-three EFL academicians from three Turkish universities reveal that the use of online translation tools and search engines are beneficial in enhancing the quality of existing translation practices.

Noviarini (2021) conducted a study titled "The translation results of Google translate from Indonesian to English." The aim of the study was to see if GT can be absolutely relied on as a substitute for human translators. In light of analyzing machine translation, it has been concluded that

MT cannot be a substitute for the human translator. Culture and understanding of the source text stand as the main problems facing G.T. The finding also indicates that G.T. is only useful in assisting the translation process.

Koskinen and Ruokonen (2017) carried out a study to survey translators' opinion concerning the use of technology in translation. They found that 70% of translators who were interviewed believed that technology was important for speed and work productivity.

## 4.      Research questions

This study sets out to answer the following questions:

1. Does allowing translation students to use mobile translation apps like GT improve their linguistic competence and thus their translation performance?
2. How to make use of mobile translation apps in students' translation activities inside the classroom?

## 5.      Research method

This research used the descriptive method. Data was gathered from the two classes; the one (30 students) that served as the experimental group and the second translation class (30 students) which served as the control group. The first class (the experimental) was not allowed free access to mobile apps, mostly GT, but was helped in every translation assignment by being furnished with the needed glossary and then asked to do the translation task. The second class (control) was given freedom to use mobile apps, mostly GT, when doing the in-class translation assignments. Feedback to both classes followed based on the kinds of mistakes committed. The procedure went on in the same manner till the end of the course. Then at the end of the semester, the two classes were given the same in-class translation assignment to do, which is the final exam. They were furnished with the needed glossary, but barred from using mobile translation apps. The assignments were corrected, the mistakes spotted, and the average of each class was calculated separately.

## 6.      Findings and Discussion of the Results

Students in the experimental and the control group were given six in-class assignments each. Both classes were given the same assignments to do. All the assignments were drawn from Arabic journalistic discourse such as Aljazeera.net, BBC Arabic, the Palestinian online Maannews agency and the Palestinian Al-Quds online news website. These assignments were carried out inside the classroom but using different procedures.

The experimental group was furnished with the necessary glossary and the control group was allowed to resort to Google Translate or any other online translation app like Reverso , Yandex or Systran. At the end of the class period, the assignments were collected. Then they were corrected at home, and the class averages were calculated. The assignments were returned to the students the next meeting with the feedback on the mistakes committed. Among the most frequent mistakes done by the students in the experimental group were relative clauses, subject- verb agreement, verb tenses, run on sentences, comma splice as well as spelling. After discussion of students' mistakes, they were asked to rewrite the assignments at home correcting their mistakes accordingly. The average marks for the six assignments for the experimental group read as follows:

| Assig. 1 | Assig.2 | Assig.3 | Assig.4 | Assig.5 | Assig.6 |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 63.5% | 64.4% | 66.2% | 67.1% | 71.3% | 74.6% |

Similarly, the control group was given the same six assignments and was allowed to use Google Translate or any other online translation app. Again, the assignments were corrected at home; the class averages were calculated and the feedback followed. Diction was the main problem with this group. Mobile translation apps in some contexts do not use the right term. In case of multiple sense vocabulary, GT sometimes renders faulty translations. Sometimes, GT gives an unidentified word. The other problem was with the punctuation marks. The averages of these assignments for the control read as follows:

| Assig.1 | Assig. 2 | Assig.3 | Assig. 4 | Assig. 5 | Assig. 6 |
|---------|----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| 80.2% | 80.3% | 80.2% | 80.4% | 81% | 81.7% |

The averages for the control group remained almost the same. This is due to relying on Google Translate apps when carrying out the translation tasks during the lecture time. Over the past few years, Google Translate app, at the level of journalistic discourse, has improved tremendously based on close observation by the researchers. On the other hand, the experimental group showed a good progress in the six assignments. That is, the average moved from 63.5% for the first assignment to 74.6% for the sixth one. The reason for this improvement might be attributed to the constant genuine feedback the students in the experimental group received after each assignment. Students received feedback tackling their repeated mistakes,. On the other hand, students in the control group received no genuine feedback. In fact, the feedback they received was mostly on diction. GT sometimes does not give the exact intended meaning for a certain word.

   Concerning the final exam, both groups sat for the same Arabic-English translation task. This task consisted of a three-hundred word political text extracted from Al-Jazeera.net. Students in both groups were furnished with the necessary glossary they may need in the process of their translation. The results of the two groups were as follows:

| Experimental Group Average | Control Group Average |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 79.7% | 61.5% |

These figures obviously indicate that relying on mobile translation apps does not enhance translation students' performance; rather, it seems that this dependence limits or to some extent confines their creative translation skills. One can confirm that avoiding using mobile translation apps, at least during the first stages of translation study, is undoubtedly a beneficial and a practical tool towards enhancing and reinforcing translation students' linguistic competence. However, it might be argued that mobile translation apps are an integral and an indispensable technological innovation with benefits more than negatives. That is an accepted logic for the everyday life, but absolute reliance on these translation apps also limits the students critical or higher thinking skills if they get used to employing these apps in their translations activities or tasks in the classroom. Once students get addicted to these apps, their translation creativity will never move forward and most probably become immature, or to put it differently, they will be able to manage texts that mobile translation apps can manage. For sure, these

students will not be able to render any legal or literary texts since online translation apps fall short when it comes to rendering such texts. In addition, translation students are advised to use mobile translation apps functionally; one good way is to use them as dictionaries to look up new words; thus, saving time and effort. Moreover, translation instructors can ask students to look for the meaning of a specialized terms using different search engines. However, translation instructors should never forget that students need to work hard on their English and improve their linguistic competence which is not attainable with the absolute dependence on mobile translation apps.

## 7.       Recommendations

The aim of this paper was to scrutinize the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of allowing students free access to mobile translation apps while carrying out  in-class translation assignments. Specifically, it attempted to answer the following two questions:

1.  Does allowing translation students to use mobile translation apps like G.T. improve their linguistic competence and thus their translation performance?
2.  How to make use of mobile translations apps in students' translation activities inside the classroom?

To answer these two questions, two divisions of journalistic translation course were given six in-class translation assignments from Arabic into English. One division (control) was allowed free access to mobile translation apps like google translate, while the other division (experimental) was furnished with the glossary they may need without using mobile translation apps.  The two divisions translated the final assignment under the same conditions (glossary was given with no access to mobile translation apps). Based on the performance of the two divisions in the final exam, the following recommendations may be drawn out:

1.  Translation students at Birzeit University or at any other university in an EFL setting should not be allowed full freedom to use mobile translation apps when rendering a text from Arabic into English; instead, they should be allowed to use such apps in a very limited manner like finding the translation of a certain word. This is in line with Lee (2019) who argues that teachers need to guide the process of MT to help students improve their writing in EFL setting. In fact, allowing students free use of mobile translation apps does not improve students' linguistic competence because the given feedback depends on the nature of mistakes committed, and therefore students do not have the chance to alleviate their mistakes which pass unnoticed.
2.  Translation teachers should help students to enhance their linguistic competence; this could be done through different procedures like controlling the way mobile translation apps are used; using mobile apps in discretion to help the learners enhance their linguistic competence; giving students feedback on their mistakes; asking students to rewrite their assignments to correct their mistakes in addition to training students to retranslate a text back into English (backtranslation). Dorothy Kenny & Stephen Doherty (2014, 1) believe, "there is an onus on translation programmes to help students become confident, flexible and critical users of a variety of computer-aided translation (CAT) tools."
3.  Machine translation, though beneficial in certain cases, falls short when it comes to highly technical texts. This is consistent with Noviarini (2021) who found that machine translation cannot be a substitute for human translator. Therefore, students should be trained to use their discretion and sense of discrimination. The use of GT or any other

machine translation should be to help translation trainees in solving problems through resorting to online dictionaries and search engines to find the specialized terms.

4.  Revision and proofreading of the target text is a very essential step in translators' work. Translators should never fail to read their translation in order to correct any mistakes they do. In this sense, Hutchins (1995) points out that translators do not want to revise the poor quality output of MT systems.

5.  Some  translation courses should focus on interpreting, a situation where mobile translation apps do not help, and therefore students' linguistic competence is very important to successfully carry out this translation task.

6.  Direct admission to Translation Program at Birzeit University should be reconsidered as students should not be admitted solely on the basis of their high school  (Tawjihi) scores. Based on the English placement test, the bulk of new students are placed in the lowest English level despite their excellent high school scores. In addition, the translation entrance exam should be determining factor in admitting students to the translation program.

7.  The University English program (the service courses) should be reconsidered. It seems that many students are not progressing enough to meet the expected program outcomes.

**Authors' Note**

The authors confirm that the content of the article has not been published, or submitted for publication elsewhere.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

# 8.      References

Abraham, L.B. (2009). Web-based translation for promoting language awareness. Evidence from Spanish. In L.B. Abraham & La Williams (Ed.), Electronic discourse in language learning and language teaching (pp. 65-84). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Akan, Md. Faruquzzaman, Karim, Md. Rezaul & Chowdhury, Abdullah Mohammad Kabir  (2019) An Analysis of Arabic-English Translation: Problems and Prospects. Advances in Language and Literary Studies. 10 (01), 58-65.

Bakay, Ö., Avar, B., & Yıldız, O.T. (2019). A tree-based approach for English-to- Turkish translation. Turkish Journal of Electrical Engineering & Computer Sciences. 27(01), 437–452.

Cancino, M., & Panes, J. (2021). The impact of Google Translate on L2 writing quality measures: evidence from Chilean EFL high school learners. System, 98, 102464.

Chandra, S. O., & Yuyun, I. (2018). The use of google translate in EFL essay writing. LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching, 21(2), 228-238.

Chung, E. S., & Ahn, S. (2021). The effects of using machine translation on linguistic features in L2 writing across proficiency levels and text genres. Computer Assisted Language Learning, 1-26.

Clifford, J., Merschel, L., & Munn_ e, J. (2013). Surveying the landscape: what is the role of machine translation in language learning? Revista de Innovaci_on Educativa, (10), 108-121.

Dorothy Kenny & Stephen Doherty (2014). Statistical machine translation in the translation curriculum: overcoming obstacles and empowering translators, The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, 8:2, 276-294.

Ducar, C., & Schocket, D.H. (2018). Machine translation and the L2 classroom: pedagogical solutions for making peace with Google Translate. Foreign Language Annals, 51 (4), 779-795.

Hatim, B. (2004). Translation.  An Advanced Resource Book. NY: Routledge.

Hutchins, J. (2003). Machine Translation: General Overview. The Oxford Handbook of Computational Linguistics. Oxford University Press.

Hutchins, J. (1995). 'Reflections on the History and Present State of Machine Translation', in MT Summit V, Proceedings, European Commission and International Association for Machine Translation.

Koskinen, Kaisa, and Minna Ruokonen. (2017). Love letter or hate mail? Translators' technology acceptance in the light of their emotional narratives." In Human Issues in Translation Technology, ed. Dorothy Kenny. Londres: Routledge.

Lee, M. (2019). The impact of using machine translation on EFL students' writing. Computer assisted language learning, 33 (2): 1-19

Noviarini, T. (2021). The translation results of Google Translate from Indonasian to English. Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 7, 1, 21-26.

Omar, L. I. (2021). The use and abuse of machine translation in vocabulary acquisition among L2 Arabic-Speaking Learners. Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies 5 (1) 82-98.

Shuttleworth, M., & Cowie, M. (2014). Dictionary of translation studies. London/New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

Štefčík, J. (2015). Evaluating machine translation quality: a case study of a translation of a verbatim transcription from Slovak into Gerrman. Vertimo Studijos 8: 139-153.

Zengin, B., & Kacar, I. G. (2011). Turkish EFL academicians' problems concerning translation activities and practices, attitudes towards the use of online and printed translation tools, and suggestions for quality translation practice. Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 10(2), 274-286