

Bridging English Learning: Google Translate, Between A Shortcut and A Supporting Translator (Case Study: University Students in English Classes)

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Abstract. This study investigates the role of Google Translate in the English learning process among Indonesian university students. The research on the application explores its functions as a shortcut, supporting translator, convenience tool, and potential learning aid. Adapting a qualitative descriptive method from Creswell, the study examines how students use Google Translate in various language tasks, including sentence construction, paragraph writing, and free-topic conversations. The data was collected through a case study involving University students in English classes, analyzing their practical use of the application. The findings reveal that students frequently rely on Google Translate to overcome vocabulary gaps and grammatical uncertainties. The research concludes that its use as a shortcut is higher than other possible reasons. However, its effectiveness as a supporting translator comes as the second highest reason, as it relies on students' awareness and critical application. When used as a supplementary tool for checking translations and exploring alternative phrasings, it increases language comprehension. Conversely, its use as a primary shortcut prevents the development of independent language skills. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on technology's role in second language acquisition, offering insights for educators to guide students toward more effective and critical use of digital tools.

Keywords: Google Translate, English Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Language Learning Strategies

Introduction

In the development of English Language Learning (ELL), the integration of digital tools has become increasingly essential, transforming traditional pedagogical approaches and learner behaviors. Among these, machine translation tools, particularly Google Translate, came as universal resources, easily accessible to students worldwide. This widespread adoption needs a critical examination of their influence on language acquisition processes. While these tools offer convenience, their precise role in fostering genuine language proficiency remains a subject of ongoing debate, particularly concerning their potential to either support or prevent authentic learning experiences.

This study addresses a critical gap concerning the usage of Google Translate by university students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Metwally, Busabaa, & Mohammed, 2025). Specifically, it seeks to reveal the functions of Google Translate including between "a shortcut" and "a supporting translator" (Fatkhurozi & Hidayat, 2024). The core problem lies in understanding how students navigate this duality, whether their reliance on the tool leads to superficial task completion or genuinely contributes to their linguistic development in practical scenarios such as sentence construction, paragraph writing, and free-topic conversations.

Therefore, this research aims to explain how students use Google Translate in various language tasks, specifically to explore and describe the patterns of Google Translate usage among university students in various English classes, providing a comprehensive understanding of their motivations, practices, and perceptions (Huynh, 2024). Furthermore, this research was arranged to know the possible reasons of Google Translate usage. It seeks to identify the specific ways in which Google Translate impacts their writing proficiency and conversational fluency (Mujtaba, Parkash, & Reynolds, 2022), distinguishing between instances where it acts as a detrimental shortcut and where it serves as a beneficial supplementary tool. Qualitative, in-depth case studies that meticulously analyze the practical, day-to-day interactions of EFL university students with Google Translate across diverse communicative tasks (Amin, Sabatini, Noni, Hanafie, & Asfah, 2023).

This study directly addresses this gap by offering an examination of student behaviors and outcomes using Google Translate in various language tasks, including sentence construction, paragraph writing (Lan & Huyen, 2024), and free-topic conversations (Alsalem, 2019). By employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the findings will contribute significantly to the fields of applied linguistics and educational technology, providing justification for educators to develop informed guidelines (Huong & Hung, 2021) that maximize the benefits of digital translation tools (Kirchhoff, 2024), while mitigating their potential drawbacks, ultimately fostering more autonomous and proficient English learners (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023).

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, based on Creswell (2014). This approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions, practices, and the impact of Google Translate. It allows for rich, detailed descriptions of phenomena within their natural context, focusing on the "how" and "why" without manipulating variables. The primary aim was to describe Google Translate's current usage and its implications for English learning.

The population included all undergraduate students in offline English language classes at a private university in Bandung, Indonesia. A purposive sample of both male and female university students was selected. A total amount of 396 students from various English classes chosen (namely, General English classes, Structure classes, and ESP class) were included in the study. These participants actively used digital tools, including Google Translate, particularly for tasks like writing sentences, paragraphs, and engaging in free-topic conversations. The exact number of participants in each class will be presented in the table of data analysis.

The research followed a systematic procedure. After obtaining ethical clearance, the selected English classes were identified. The core procedure involved observing students' natural use of Google Translate during regular class activities, such as drafting written assignments and participating in spoken interactions. The researcher, as a non-participant observer, meticulously documented usage patterns. Informal follow-up discussions with selected students were also conducted to gather their perspectives.

Data were primarily collected through direct observation and detailed documentation by the lecturer within the English classroom. The lecturer systematically recorded instances of Google Translate use during various language production tasks. This included noting the specific tasks (e.g., sentence writing, free-topic conversation preparation), the nature of its use (e.g., translating words, checking grammar), observable immediate impacts on student output (e.g., fluency, accuracy), and student reactions. These observations were documented as field notes.

The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive and qualitative approach. The process involved: (1) Data reading; (2) Identifying recurring patterns related to Google Translate usage; (3) Data classification into categories, namely, Google Translate as a "shortcut", "convenience tool", "supporting translator", and "learning aid"; (4) Thematic Analysis over the categories; and (5) Interpreting meaning from the themes and linking them to the research questions and existing theories. The analysis aimed to provide a rich description of the observed phenomena.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and observation of Google Translate utilization patterns among university students, specifically focusing on their engagement in sentence and paragraph construction tasks, and during general conversation activities across different English language classes.

Google Translate Usage in Sentence Construction and Paragraph Writing

Based on the provided data in Table 1, student usage is categorized into three distinct groups: high-dependency (70-100% usage), moderate (20-60% usage), and minimal (below 20% usage). These classifications offer insights into how students leverage Google Translate, ranging from a primary tool to a supplementary aid, influenced by task complexity and evolving proficiency levels. The data can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: Sentence Construction & Paragraph Writing

Classes	Number of Classes	Number of Students	GT Usage 70%-100%	GT Usage 20%-60%	GT Usage under 20%
General English 1	4	119	79	33	7
General English 2	3	56	34	17	5
Basic Structure	2	41	17	11	13
Intermediate Structure	2	49	19	15	15
ESP 2	4	131	99	20	12
Total	15	396	248	96	52

From the table it can be seen that in the General English 1 classes, a large cohort of 119 first-semester students focusing on sentence making showed a strong reliance on Google Translate. A significant majority, 79 students (approximately 66%), fell into the 70-100% usage category. This high dependency suggests that for many beginners, Google Translate serves as a crucial shortcut to overcome foundational vocabulary and grammatical challenges, enabling them to quickly produce seemingly correct sentences. This often indicates a primary focus on task completion rather than deep linguistic processing. The 20-60% usage group comprised 33 students (approximately 28%), who likely used the tool more selectively for specific word look-ups or to verify the accuracy of their self-composed sentences. The smallest group, 7 students (approximately 6%), were in the below 20% usage category, indicating either stronger initial English foundations or a conscious effort towards independent learning.

The transition to paragraph making in General English 2 (56 second-semester students) reveals an interesting shift. While 34 students (approximately 61%) still exhibited 70-100% usage, suggesting that the increased complexity of paragraph writing might still lead to high reliance for generating ideas or main sentences, the nature of the task encourages more nuanced use. The 20-60% usage group included 17 students (approximately 30%), where Google Translate likely served as a supporting translator for ensuring coherence, cohesion, or expanding upon initial thoughts. Students in this group might use it to translate topic sentences, transition words, or to check the overall flow of their paragraphs. The below 20% usage group consisted of 5 students (approximately 9%), who likely focused on structuring their paragraphs independently, perhaps only consulting the tool for specific lexical items.

For the Basic Structure classes (41 first-semester students), the data shows a different pattern compared to General English 1, despite both being first-semester sentence-making tasks. Only 17 students (approximately 41%) were in the 70-100% usage category, which is lower than expected for beginners. This might suggest differences in teaching methodology, student cohorts, or a stronger emphasis on independent work. The 20-60% usage group included 11 students (approximately 27%), indicating a moderate use for verification or specific translation needs. Notably, 13 students (approximately 32%) were in the below 20% usage group, a relatively high percentage for a basic level, suggesting a significant portion of students in these specific classes were either more proficient or more inclined to rely on their own developing skills.

In Intermediate Structure classes (49 second-semester students), the usage pattern for sentence construction shows a more balanced distribution. 19 students (approximately 39%) were in the 70-100% usage category, indicating that some students still heavily rely on the tool even at this stage, possibly due to increasing sentence complexity. The 20-60% usage group comprised 15 students (approximately 31%), suggesting a

strategic use for comparison, refinement, or exploring synonyms, thus treating it more as a supporting translator. Interestingly, 15 students (approximately 31%) also fell into the below 20% usage group, a notable increase from the basic level, signifying growing autonomy and confidence in their sentence-making abilities.

The data from ESP 2 classes, involving a large group of 131 fourth-semester students engaged in both sentence and paragraph making, presents a unique and compelling pattern. A striking 99 students (approximately 76%) were in the 70-100% usage category, which is exceptionally high for advanced students. This high dependency in ESP contexts can be attributed to the specialized and technical nature of the content. Students likely use Google Translate extensively for precise, field-specific vocabulary and complex sentence structures required for academic or professional writing. Here, Google Translate acts less as a basic shortcut and more as a precision tool or efficiency enhancer for specialized language. The 20-60% usage group included 20 students (approximately 15%), who might use it for specific technical terms or to refine complex arguments. The below 20% usage group consisted of 12 students (approximately 9%), representing highly proficient individuals capable of navigating specialized writing tasks with minimal external aid.

Google Translate Usage in General Conversation

The analysis of Google Translate in General Conversation also categorizes student usage into three distinct groups: high-dependency (70-100%), moderate (20-60%), and minimal (below 20%). These classifications offer insights into how students leverage Google Translate as a tool for spoken communication, revealing varying degrees of reliance influenced by proficiency levels and conversational demands. The data are presented in the table as follows.

Table 2: General Conversation

Classes	Number of Classes	Number of Students	GT Usage 70%-100%	GT Usage 20%-60%	GT Usage under 20%
General English 1	4	119	76	32	11
General English 2	3	56	29	19	8
ESP 2	4	131	98	24	9
Total	11	306	203	75	28

In the General English 1 classes as it can be seen in table 2 above, a significant majority of students (76 out of 119, or approximately 64%) fall into the 70-100% usage category for general conversation. This high dependency among first-semester students suggests that Google Translate serves as a crucial linguistic crutch during spontaneous spoken interactions. Students likely rely on it heavily for immediate vocabulary retrieval, sentence construction, and even entire phrase translation to maintain conversational flow and overcome basic communication barriers. This indicates that for many beginners, Google Translate acts primarily as a shortcut to produce utterances they might not yet be able to formulate independently. The 20-60% usage group (32 students, or about 27%) likely uses the tool more selectively, perhaps for specific words or to clarify a complex thought, while the below 20% usage group (11 students, or about 9%) demonstrates emerging confidence and a greater capacity for spontaneous, unassisted communication.

Moving to General English 2 classes, the usage patterns for general conversation among 56 second-semester students show a slight shift, though high dependency remains notable. The 70-100% usage group comprises 29 students (approximately 52%). While still a significant portion, this might reflect persistent challenges with fluency and accuracy in more complex conversational topics, or a continued habit of seeking immediate translation for confidence. The 20-60% usage group (19 students, or about 34%) indicates a growing number of students who might be using Google Translate more strategically – for instance, to express more nuanced ideas, find appropriate idiomatic expressions, or to bridge gaps in their real-time vocabulary, thus transitioning towards a supporting translator role. The below 20% usage group (8 students, or about 14%) suggests an increasing number of students gaining greater conversational autonomy.

The usage data from ESP 2 classes (131 fourth-semester students) presents an interesting dynamic. A substantial 98 students (approximately 75%) fall into the 70-100% usage category, which is remarkably high for advanced students. This could be attributed to the specialized nature of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) conversations. Students might be dealing with complex, technical, or academic topics that demand precise vocabulary and sophisticated grammatical structures, which they may not have fully internalized for

spontaneous use. In this context, Google Translate might be used extensively for pre-conversation preparation, ensuring accuracy in specialized terminology, or for real-time translation of highly specific concepts. This suggests that even at higher proficiency levels, Google Translate can become a vital precision tool or a preparation aid rather than merely a shortcut. The 20-60% usage group (24 students, or about 18%) likely uses it for specific technical terms or to refine complex arguments, while the below 20% usage group (9 students, or about 7%) represents highly proficient individuals capable of navigating specialized conversations with minimal external aid.

Analysis of Google Translate Based on Reason of Usage

The data provided offers a compelling overview of how Google Translate is utilized by a sample of 396 university students, revealing distinct patterns that are influenced by course type and student proficiency. Possible reasons are taken for this analysis, they are: "shortcut", "convenience tool", "supporting translator", and "learning aid". A deeper analysis, however, shows that these aggregated percentages mask crucial differences in usage across individual classes.

Table 3: Possible Reason of Using Goggle Translate

Classes	Reasons				Total Number of Students
	Shortcut	Convenience Tool	Supporting Translator	Learning Aid	
General English 1	63	18	27	11	119
General English 2	29	10	11	6	56
Basic Structure	8	5	16	12	41
Intermediate Structure	10	8	13	18	49
ESP 2	76	11	37	7	131
Total	186	52	104	54	396

From the data above, it can be seen that the "Shortcut" takes the higher result of possible reason of Google Translate usage, 186 out of 396 students (46.97%). The fact that almost half of all students across the sample use Google Translate as a shortcut is a significant finding. This trend is not uniform but is overwhelmingly driven by students in two specific courses: General English 1 (63 out of 119 students) and ESP 2 (76 out of 131 students). This pattern suggests two different motivations for this behavior. In a foundational course like General English 1, the "shortcut" likely stems from a lack of confidence and basic linguistic skills, leading students to rely on the tool to bypass the difficult process of decoding new language. In contrast, the high number of students in the advanced ESP 2 class points to a pragmatic decision. Students in this specialized course are likely under pressure to quickly understand subject-specific content, making them less focused on language learning and more on rapid information extraction. The low contribution from the Structure classes (only 8 and 10 students, respectively) is key, demonstrating that when the pedagogical focus is on the mechanics of language, the "shortcut" approach is less effective and less frequently adopted.

The "Supporting Translator" category accounts for a quarter of all responses, 104 out of 396 students (26.26%), making it the second most popular reason. This figure is heavily influenced by the high counts in the ESP 2 (37 students) and General English 1 (27 students) classes. This suggests that even when students are using the tool for quick translations, many are simultaneously using it to cross-reference or confirm their own understanding, which is a step toward more critical engagement.

The "Learning Aid" category becomes the third of overall percentage, with 54 out of 396 students (13.64%). The majority of these students come from the Intermediate Structure class (18 out of 54 total learning aid users). This is a crucial data point. It indicates that as students make progress in their structural knowledge of English, they are more capable of leveraging Google Translate as a constructive resource for deeper learning. This usage is not about bypassing a task but about actively using the tool to explore grammatical nuances, understand sentence patterns, and acquire new vocabulary in context. The low numbers in General English and ESP 2 suggest this more mature approach is not yet common in foundational or content-focused courses.

The "Convenience Tool" category represents the smallest (52 out of 396 students), and relatively stable percentage of all usage (13.13%). The numbers are low and consistent across all classes, ranging from 5 to 18 students. This indicates that a small, steady group of students views Google Translate as a simple utility for

quick, low-stakes lookups. This usage pattern is not tied to a specific course level or learning goal, but rather to the practical need for efficiency in day-to-day academic life.

Research Findings

The analysis reveals research findings on a dynamic and context-dependent relationship between university students and Google Translate in sentence and paragraph production. While it frequently serves as a shortcut for beginners, particularly in General English 1, its role evolves. In Intermediate Structure, it increasingly functions as a supporting translator, aiding in refinement. The most striking finding is in ESP 2, where high usage persists, but likely transforms into a precision tool for specialized content, highlighting that even advanced learners leverage it for efficiency and accuracy in complex domains.

Meanwhile, the analysis of Google Translate usage in general conversation reveals its diverse roles across different proficiency levels. For beginners, it primarily functions as a shortcut to facilitate basic communication. As students make progress, its role can evolve into a more strategic supporting translator for nuanced expression. Notably, in specialized contexts like ESP, it appears to serve as a critical precision tool or preparation aid, even for advanced learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the analysis and the research findings, it is clear that the functions of Google Translate as a shortcut and a supporting translator are the most prevalent and foundational roles across all proficiency levels.

The data consistently show that the use of Google Translate as a shortcut is a dominant behavior. This role, while a starting point, is not limited to novices; it continues to underpin usage even at more advanced stages, serving as a quick solution for immediate needs. Furthermore, the role of a supporting translator emerges as a critical, pervasive function. As students make progress to the intermediate level, this function becomes more deliberate and refined, used for checking grammar, exploring alternative expressions, and confirming understanding. This strategic use for nuanced expression is a hallmark of the supporting translator role. The tool evolves into a more sophisticated form of "supporting," aiding in accuracy and efficiency rather than simple translation. The "shortcut" and "supporting translator" functions are not merely phases but rather a continuous thread throughout the learners' journey, making them the highest factors respectively, in the overall usage of Google Translate in the academic setting.

The research analysis underlined the need for educators to understand the varied usage patterns to guide students toward more critical and pedagogically beneficial integration of digital translation tools. In addition, educators need to guide students in developing critical awareness and effective strategies for integrating digital translation tools to maximize learning benefits while fostering genuine linguistic independence.

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