

**USE OF ONLINE TRANSLATORS
FOR WRITTEN PRODUCTION IN ESL**

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ISABELLA MORALES GIL

LILIANA ROJAS ATEHORTÚA

LIZ VALERIA SALAMANCA FERNÁNDEZ

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RIONEGRO – ANTIOQUIA

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LIZ VALERIA SALAMANCA FERNÁNDEZ

Advisor

DANIEL FELIPE JARAMILLO GIRALDO

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Abstract

This project aimed to be close to the use of online translators in students of English courses in a private university. It was committed to identify the use of these tools in the written production, as well as the analysis of the perspectives related with the use. This study was achieved with 12 students of English courses of the second semester of the degree in foreign languages with emphasis in English. Data was collected through a case study and a survey which results were contrasted; furthermore, the findings showed that the students use online translators in an indiscriminate way. In this manner, a prejudice was evidenced in the beliefs of the students since there is a contradictory feeling in what they do and what they think they do, demonstrating a lack of the use of translators with pedagogical purposes.

Key words: Automatic translators, neural machine translators, written production, EFL, ICT tools.

Statement of the problem

As time goes by, the use of technological applications for the acquisition of languages has become more common. These kinds of applications like Duolingo, Babbel, British council applications and podcasts for practicing English are available to everyone. This is also the case of online translators, machines designed for being a support of language targets. People who want to write texts, short and long sentences, to know the correct pronunciation of a word or sentence, suggestions of words, translation of texts, documents, etc., come to translators.

This generates several interrogations about the use of these tools and about how it could direct learning and acquisition of foreign languages. Questioning in terms of the use, if it is negative or on the contrary positive, if it exists or not a dependency to these applications, etc.

For a better understanding of this phenomenon, a little research was carried out with second semester students of the Universidad Católica de Oriente. These kinds of students have been chosen, taking into account the academic plan of the degree in foreign languages of the university, because they don't have formation yet as for syntax and semantics, which it makes difficult for them to evaluate the translator's outputs.

Research question

How is the use of neural machine translators in the written production on students from the second semester of English courses from the Universidad Católica de Oriente?

Justification

By means of this research, we want to analyze the use of online translators in the specific topic of written production in students who attend the degree in foreign languages with emphasis in English. This research could allow us to understand the perspective of the students over their practice at the moment of using these kinds of applications as a support to produce written texts. As well as the reflection which was accomplished through the analysis of the results provided by the data collection. Bearing in mind that “the use of translation was seen as a ‘villain’ in the field of the second language acquisition (SLA) despite the absence of scientific evidence proving or disproving any concrete interference with language learning” (Cook’s 2010 cited in O’Hagan (2019, p. 185)). Considering the above, the activities which was designed for accomplishing our objectives, was developed keeping in mind how foreign language students perceive the use of online translators.

Literature review

This segment comprised data about three studies which are considered essential since they have a strong correlation with our study object. Additionally, these studies serve as a model in view of the fact, they provide information related with EFL students, online translators and a possible training in the use of translators with these students.

The first research was about the influence of automatic translators. The objective of this project was: To characterize the writing in English of students of the Degree in English and Spanish at the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana through the use of online translators (Castaño, Jaramillo, 2015). This study was developed under the qualitative methodology allowing to achieve some results such as “la frecuencia con la que usan traductores se debe, en la mayoría de los casos, a desconocimiento de palabras” (p. 29). Another significant result that is important to highlight is that students “comunican esa falta de contexto que tienen los traductores automáticos y, además, la necesidad de saber diversos asuntos sociales o culturales para la buena comprensión de un texto en una segunda lengua como lo es el inglés” (Castaño, Jaramillo, 2015, p. 30). These results were collected through interviews as the data collection method.

The second research regards the training of students from a degree in physical education. In view of the use of automatic translators, highlighting the objective of giving an adequate use to translators through literacy (Amdor, Sosa, 2015). The goal of this project was that its students themselves recognize the problems that could arise when you have a machine translation result. This study was developed applying observation and technico-scientist documents as the data collection method for analyzing the experience. It is significant to mention one of the results achieved in this study, according to Amdor and Sosa (2015, p. 4.)

“Esta experiencia nos muestra un panorama muy alentador desde el cual encarar la traducción y la enseñanza-aprendizaje de las ciencias desde una perspectiva diferente, no tradicional, potenciada con el aporte de las NTICs”

The last research reviewed provides us information about 80 Korean-speaking university students. This study was developed “to provide language educators with information pertaining to the students’ use of, evaluations of, and attitudes towards WBMT [web-based machine translation] tools” (Briggs, 2018, p. 2). It was developed with a non-structured survey. It offered results regarding the perspectives and attitudes of the students over the accuracy of the outputs of translators. Moreover, the use of these applications could be considered as an essential tool for students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. Besides, one of the results of this study evidenced that “WBMT tools are being used frequently and extensively among Korean university students, both inside and outside of the classroom” (Briggs 2018, p 16).

These research projects have important similarities with ours, as are the use of translators, in terms of the written communicative competence, the literacy in the use of translators and beliefs about the machine at the moment of use it. On the other hand, the last study was the most recent of those raised above. This study is from 2018 year, allowing us to have updated information on neural machine translators. It offers us appropriate information like different experiences of students working with translators. As expressed by the result of the research, “The results indicate that the majority of students use them to support their language studies both at home and at school, and for a range of purposes” (Briggs, 2018, p. 1).

Objectives

General objective

Describe the use of online translators in the practice of the written production skills by students of second semester of the degree in foreign languages with emphasis in English at the Universidad Católica de Oriente.

Secondary objectives:

1. Identify the use of online translators by the students of the second semester in English courses at the Universidad Católica de Oriente in the written production skills.
2. Analyze the students' experiences and beliefs related with the use of online translators within the written production.
3. Contrast the results of the first objective with the results of the second objective.

Conceptual references

Translators

To support our research and the research question we started to look for articles, researchers, authors, related to our main topics (online translators and written production). In terms of wanting to clarify doubts, of wanting to have a theoretical basis, it started to look for information about online translators.

The automatic translators

The automatic translators were the first application in terms of language technology. These translators only work word by word and are not adjusted to context. In view of the above, the website Pangeanic remarks “Este hecho derivaba en que los sistemas de traducción automática solo funcionasen como herramientas útiles a la hora de traducir vocabulario o entre idiomas de una misma familia y con estructuras similares” Pangeanic (2017).

According to Abaitua (s.f), the first machine translator took place at the beginning of the decade of 1930. For the next 36 years the translations were very poor quality. For this last year (1966), specific obstacles were recognized. For that time there was a poor knowledge of language and also the informatic techniques offered incomplete results. Furthermore, there was a decapitalization for automatic translators. However, these specific difficulties in terms of language and informatic started to improve. Additionally, Chomsky aided to the evolution of language with his book *Syntactic Structure* (1957); moreover, since the 90s it talks about a new decade because “la TA [Traducción Automática] es una realidad que está a punto de explotar en el mercado del software” (Abaitua, s.f).

The Neural Machine Translators

For 2016 year, it is when it started to talk about neural machine translation (NMT). These kinds of machines work with artificial neural networks which work as our biological neural networks.

In terms of explaining the way in which neural networks work, it will describe their performance based on the input layer, hidden layer, and the output layer. The first layer of neurons have the work of receiving information. The second, the hidden layer, is responsible for processing the information received. The last layer of neurons, the output layer, carries out the received and processed information and to give a value or a result. This is how Neural Machine Translators work.

Written Production

Talking about written production, Sokolik (2003) cited in Nunan (2015) says

Writing is both a physical as well as a mental act. On the surface, writing is a manual process of committing symbols (letters of the alphabet, etc.) to paper or a computer screen by manipulating a pencil, pen, or keys on a keyboard. On the other hand, writing is a mental process of generating ideas and thinking about how to present them effectively in the form of a written text.

It is important to take into account the writing process as it is closely linked to this research, so an analysis of this process was made using the translator when performing a written production activity.

Methodology

This research was accomplished by the hand of the semiological method (Mejía et al. 2020), called “análisis comparativo de casos”. This method has been applied in language teaching, translation, literature and architecture. Semiological method proposes a mixed research, which introduces the quantitative data at the object level by the contrast of individual analysis (multiple case studies) and at the subject level, to achieve a qualitative and quantitative reflection. It is important to mention what these concepts are about; by one side, the quantitative research contains variables which can be measured by means of resources, in turn, it allows to analyze numbered data using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2008). It is relevant to mention, the approach of this research is exploratory-inductive, bearing in mind variables mentioned only appeared after the analysis; that is to say, data will be displayed due to qualitative view of the data collection; which will be explained widely later on. By the other side, “qualitative methods are used to understand people’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions”. (Pathak et al. 2013) In this kind of research, the researchers are focused on how participants believe they interpret their reality and how they actually do so.

According to our object of the study, the use of online translators, the quantitative data is introduced in the development of the three objectives by contrasting with qualitative material of every case: the practice of diverse people (the register and analysis of their activities), the opinions and beliefs of the same participants about their practice, and the contrast of the analysis of the products and beliefs problematized. This last step let get closer to similarities, differences, particularities among (students practice) and (what students describe about what they do) whichever is explained in the next part.

Due to the scope, time and level of research (formative), the number of participants will not be representative, despite this the same methodology will be followed as if it were.

Public-corpus

The activities to develop the objectives worked with students of the second semester in the degree in foreign languages with emphasis in English at the Universidad Católica de Oriente. As mentioned before, in the research question; this kind of participants have been chosen in view of the fact that, the second semester students don't have formation yet as for syntax and semantics. For that reason, they could have an unconscious process at the moment of using online translators.

The practice activity took place through Microsoft Teams considering the current virtual modality on account of the global pandemic. In accordance with this platform, we recorded the screen evidencing the performance of activities to be subsequently examined, and notes were taken of the actions of each student.

In order to reach our first objective, identify the use of online translators in terms of written skills in English courses of second semester in the Universidad Católica de Oriente, the group of second semester students made a text around one hundred words; thereby they must use their writing skills supported by online translators.

This activity allowed us to analyze the singular practice of the students supported by online translators. This is a qualitative analysis, based on our perception of the results acquired at the final moment of the activity. These results are attributed to the singular practice of the students. In addition, a contrast were developed with the information collected in the writing production activity, allowing us to have a statistical view of the data as quantitative research.

According to our second objective, analyze the experiences and beliefs of students in the use of online translators at once of the written production, it took place with the same

participants mentioned before. Firstly, it was performed an interpretation of the single practice of the students through the contrast achieved as a result of the first activity. This interpretation was carried out taking into account a qualitative view. Based on this interpretation, a survey was designed with questions which approached us to the opinions and beliefs that students have about the use of online translators (have students' preference between online translators? If students use online translators, do they review of the result or they just copy and paste?) This survey permitted us to make a contrast according to its results. It was covered under a quantitative perspective as well as its designs.

It is important to recognize the role of the participants for the development of this research. Considering their practice and their voices which allowed us to understand their realities but also their interpretations of them. It means that we knew about the use of online translation applications through the individual practice of the participants; furthermore, the perspective of the participants about the same use.

Our third objective was conducted through qualitative interpretation of the numerical outcomes of our first and second activities raised previously. This interpretation allowed us to recognize if there are meeting points among what is done (students practice) and what is believed (what students describe about what they do). Or if on the contrary it does not exist meeting points. The role of interpretation was the mean by which we could achieve a perspective of human behavior in a determinate situation. "They [the qualitative researchers] use empirical observation because it is with concrete incidents of human behavior that investigators can think more clearly and deeply about the human condition." (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998)

Results

Considering the main objective of this research, which was to describe the use of online translators in the written production skills in students of the second semester of the degree in foreign languages with an emphasis in English at the Universidad Católica de Oriente, this segment will enclose the most relevant aspects accomplished through a written production activity within the students redacted a text around 100 words which they gave their opinion about a controversial image. This first activity was followed by a survey. It is important to clarify that this survey was made in Spanish in view of the fact it was the native language of the participants and this issue could make them feel more comfortable and clearer at the moment of reply to the questions. The survey was developed concerning the use of online translators and the perspectives of the students over their practice. In this way, our data collection methods provided evidence that will be relevant to be presented.

Frequency in the use of online translators to produce a text

¿Qué tan a menudo utilizas el traductor para producir un texto?

12 respuestas

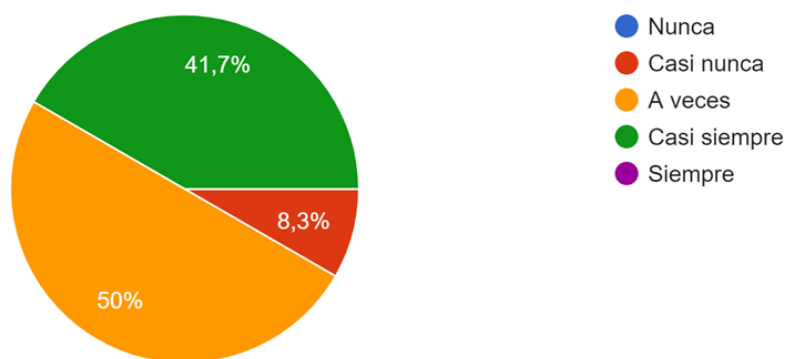


Figure 1

In the practical activity of the written production developed with 12 students of the second semester of the degree in foreign languages with an emphasis in English, it was evidenced that 6 of these students relied on the online translator to perform the proposed activity; 5 of the 6 participants used the automatic online translator DeepL and 1 of them used Google Translate.

After this practical activity, a survey was developed which allowed us to approach the students' perspectives. The diagram showed us that 5 students assume they use the translator almost always, 6 of them say they use it sometimes; and on the contrary, 1 student said he rarely uses it.

Translator preference

¿Qué traductor utilizas con mayor frecuencia?

12 respuestas

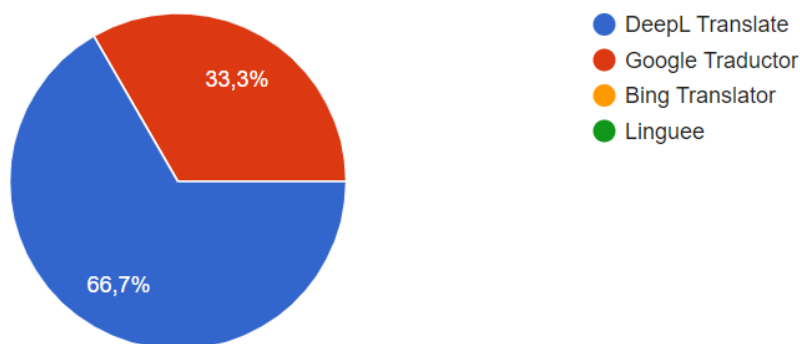


Figure 2

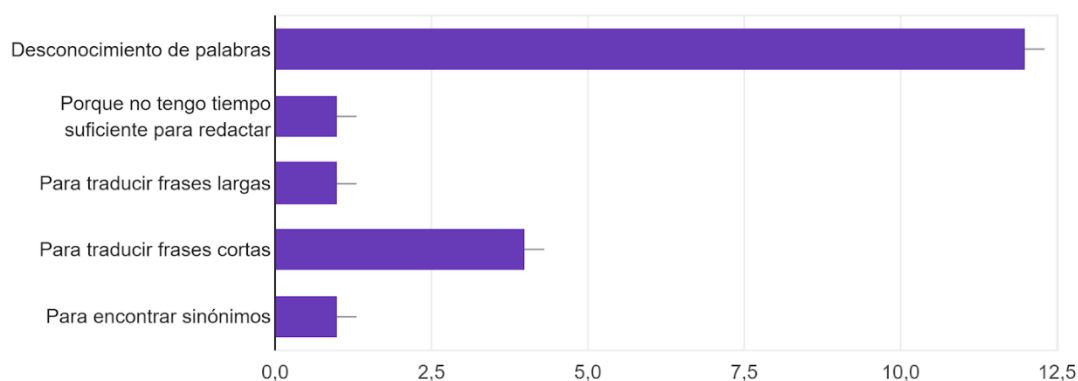
In the practical activity, it was evidenced that 5 students used the translator DeepL and 1 student preferred Google translator to carry out the written production.

The survey showed that the students preferred the translators DeepL and Google Traductor, over other options of translators which were offered.

The use of online translators in the written production

Si estás haciendo una actividad de producción escrita ¿para qué utilizarías el traductor? (puedes seleccionar más de una opción)

12 respuestas



At the end of the practice with 12 undergraduate students, it is shown that the students searched with the help of the translator for words from Spanish to English as well as for the translation of short sentences from Spanish to English and the translation of a complete text. In the survey results, all participants admitted using the translators for lack of knowledge of words, as well as to translate short sentences, long sentences, to find synonyms, and because they did not have enough time.

Previous review

Si traduce un texto completo de español a Inglés o viceversa, ¿haces revisión previa?
 (Puntuación, ortografía, gramática)

12 respuestas

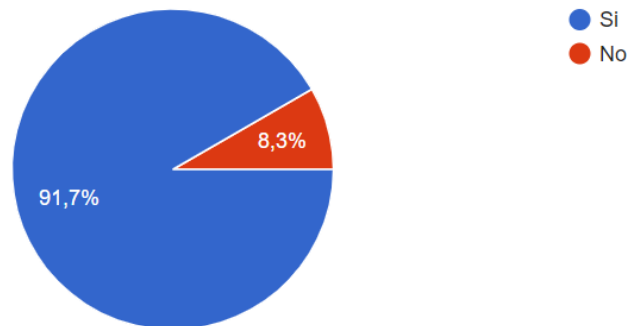


Figure 4

The survey showed that an amount of the 12 students (11 of them) said they make a review of their texts.

Post review

¿Haces revisión de la traducción?

12 respuestas

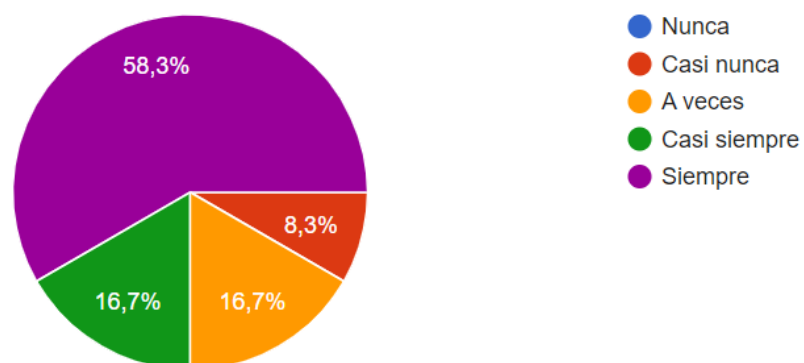


Figure 5

In the results of the survey, could be seen that: 7 of 12 participants stated that they do post-review of the outcomes produced by the online translators, 2 of 12 declared that they do it almost always, 2 of 12 expressed that sometimes do; and, 1 of them affirmed do it rarely

The contrast of the outcomes

¿Contrastas el resultado que arroja el traductor con otras aplicaciones? (Diccionarios online, traductores, correctores de texto)

12 respuestas

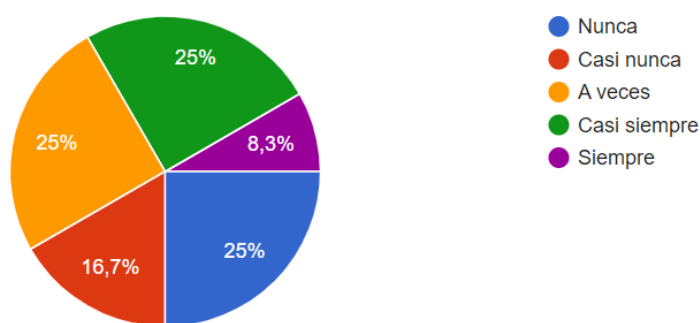


Figure 6

In the practical activity, it was evident that any of the participants contrasted the result of their translation with other translators or other applications.

In the survey it was noticed that the results were very varied, which were that 1 participant declared that he always contrasted his results, 3 answered that they almost always do, 3 opined sometimes they do, 2 said rarely and 3 expressed that never they do.

Resources for the learning of a foreign language

De las siguientes opciones ¿Qué recursos consideras que son más beneficiosos para el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera?

12 respuestas

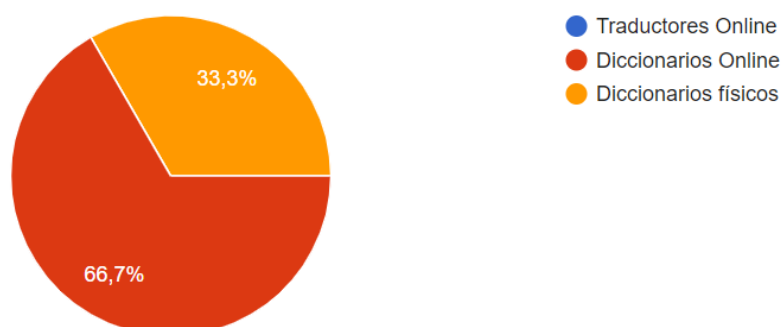


Figure 7

The written production activity showed that 6 of 12 participants made use of online translators, while 1 of the 12 participants made use of online dictionaries.

The survey showed that none of the participants thought that online translators are beneficial for the learning of a foreign language; on the other hand, 8 of the 12 participants announced that online dictionaries are beneficial and 4 participants of the 12 said that physical dictionaries are beneficial.

Time optimization with the use of online translators

En tu opinión, ¿usar el traductor en la práctica de producción escrita optimiza el tiempo?

12 respuestas

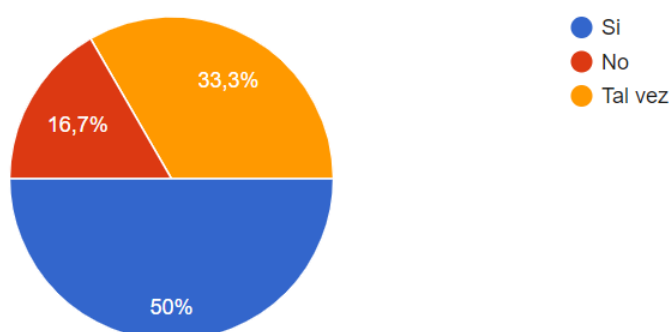


Figure 8

In the practice, it was revealed that 6 of 12 participants used the translator. Only two of those who used it, took 5 minutes less than the stipulated time (20 minutes), (15:28 and 16:08)

while the other 4 participants took all the 20 minutes. (19:31, 20:03, 21:34, 20:48)

However, in the survey results, half of the participants said that by using the translators they could optimize the time, 4 participants expressed that perhaps translators could optimize it, and only 2 declared that it does not optimize it.

Credibility in the use of online translators

Del 1 al 5 ¿Qué tan confiables y precisos crees que son los traductores? (Teniendo en cuenta que 1 es nada confiable, 2 es poco confiable, 3 es medio confiable, 4 es confiable y 5 es muy confiable)

12 respuestas

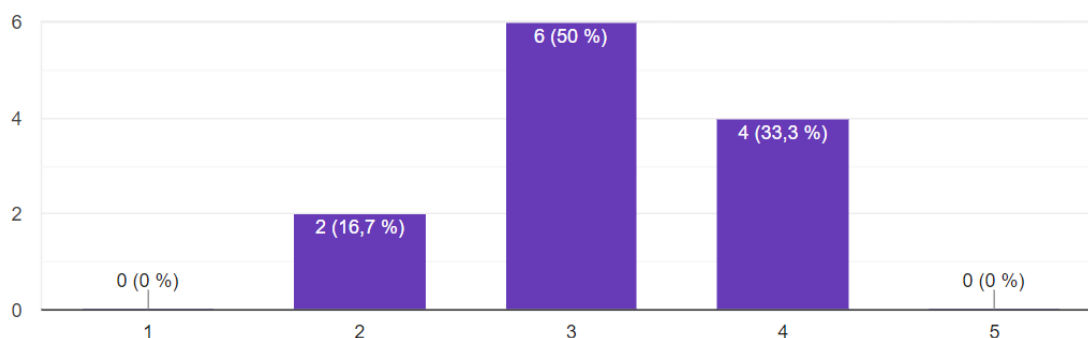


Figure 9

The diagram showed that neither student stated that the translators are unreliable and inaccurate, 2 of 12 felt that the translators are unfaithful, 4 students felt that it is uncertain. However, none of the 12 expressed absolute reliability in the translators. On the other hand, a large majority (6) demonstrated their impartiality to affirm whether translators are totally accurate or not.

Dependency over the use

¿Crees que el uso del traductor genera dependencia?

12 respuestas

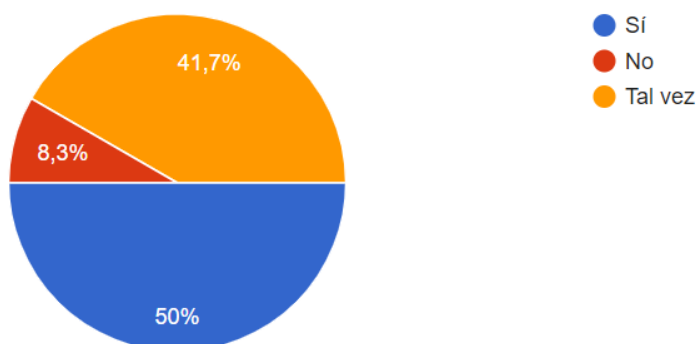


Figure 10

The results obtained from the survey provide us that 50% of the participants said that the use of translators generates dependence, 41.7% opined that it could perhaps generate it and 8.3% claimed that it does not generate dependence.

Sense of dependency

Te consideras _____ al traductor:

12 respuestas

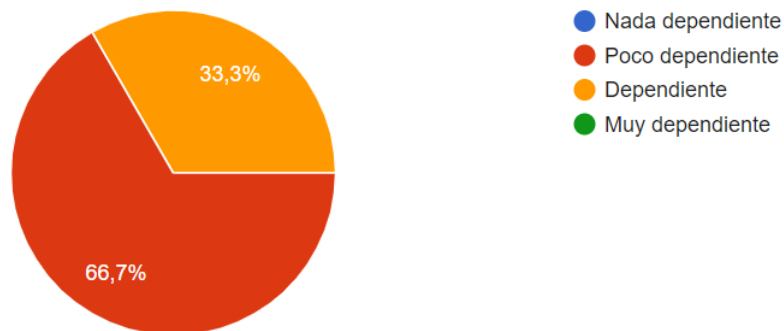


Figure 11

It was shown in the practical activity that 6 of 12 participants used translators, demonstrating the necessity of it to produce a text.

Meanwhile, the results of the survey showed that 66.7% of the participants do not consider themselves as dependent and 33.3% expressed they contemplate themselves as a dependent.

Positive or negative perception over the implementation of online translators

¿Consideras que el uso del traductor es una buena o mala práctica?

12 respuestas

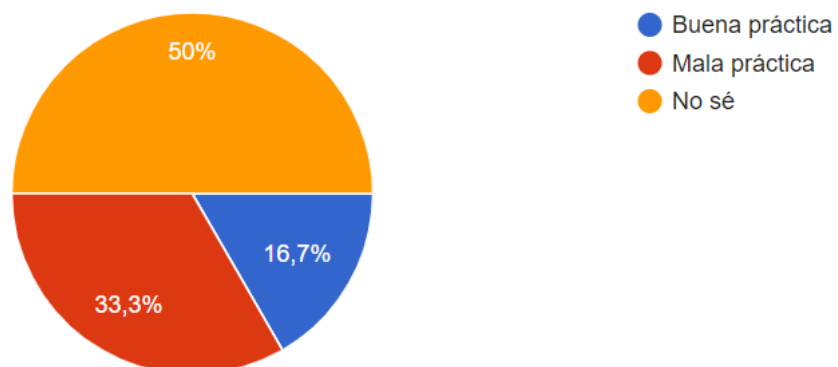


Figure 12

In the practice exercise, it was found that half of the participants made use of the translators. However, in the survey half of the participants said that they do not know if this is a good or bad practice. On the other hand, 4 of the participants estimated that they consider this as a bad practice and 2 expressed that it is a good practice.

Feeling of regret

¿Sientes algún remordimiento al usar traductores para producir tus textos?

12 respuestas

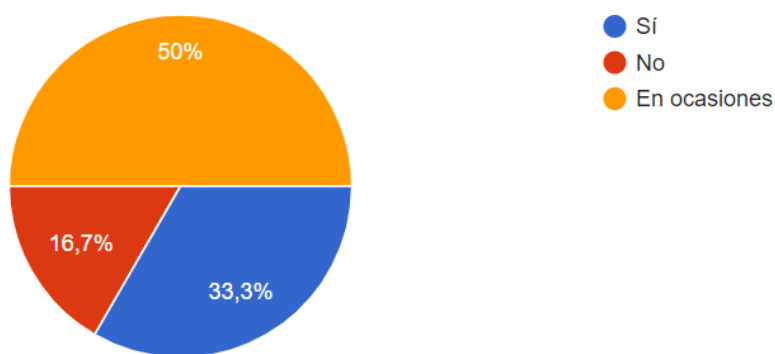


Figure 13

In the survey results, we found that half of the participants feel remorseful at times when they are using translators, 4 revealed that they feel remorseful and only 2 said they do not.

Discussions

The implementation of the proposed written production activity was an important element to recognize if all or some participants (of which 12 were students from the foreign language program with an emphasis in English at the Universidad Católica de Oriente) used an online translator to support their written productions and if they do, to find out how they use it. After that, a survey was implemented and its results showed the students' perspectives about the use and their thoughts. Likewise, once the results of the implementations are collected, a contrast was made between the practical activity and the survey, which shall be explained below.

This study shows that half of the participants used online translators as a support for their written activity. However, in the survey, half of them do not know if this is a good or a bad practice. In this way Rodriguez et al. (2019, p. 2) mentioned the use of translators, specifically the use of the automatic translator DeepL has become an indiscriminate use by students where they do not consider the advantages and disadvantages of the use of it which must be known by them.

Consequently, all this use and non-use of the translator could lead to an ineffective use of the translator, since as shown in Figure 3, in the survey, all students selected the option of using the translator when there is a lack of knowledge of words, in other terms, search for individual words. It should be noted that there are other tools conceived specially for this purpose as different types of dictionaries. It can be seen that the students use the translator as a kind of bilingual dictionary, passing up the extra information provided by the last one. This idea is confirmed in the practical activity, the use of the translator is evidenced in the same way

that in the survey, (they used translators for searching unknown words and also in the survey they affirmed to use it for that purpose) In this sense, there is a coherence in these results.

Therefore, a type of training could be done considering a misuse of online translators for a pedagogical purpose. This possible training could be developed with the students when searching or translating words and texts, since these automatic translators have a small margin of error; furthermore, over the years, their software is modified to be better each time, Rodriguez et al. (2019) indicated the fostering of critical analysis as well as the active learning of students in their learning process.

Another point that stands out from the results obtained from the survey is that, although they were given other translation application options, they did not choose them. There are many options of automatic translators, however, with the answers obtained, the participants said that they prefer the two most popular and possibly yield better results.

Additionally, the students did not seek alternatives bearing in mind they only used DeepL and google Translator, taking into account the evidence provided by the practice. Any of them contrasted the outcomes of the translators with other applications to attempt to make the translation more precise. However, according to the survey, the participants do not seem to be very sure about the credibility of the outcomes provided by translators (see figure 9); in this way, regarding the results provided by Briggs (2018) “It is revealed that a large number of students (41.3%) do not trust the outputs to produce their writing assignments”. In this way, it may be considered the lack of a clear position not only from the students but from the language teachers about the role of the online translators in the learning of a foreign language. Lerma (2020) mention that

Si, por un lado, la traducción siempre ha estado presente en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras (LE), por otro, investigadores y docentes no siempre han tenido una perspectiva consensual sobre su uso y su modo de aplicación en el aula. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, on the other hand, other researches and studies point to a didactic use of these applications instead of omitting them in the process of learning a foreign language. Guilledo (2017) discusses the question of why there exist so many arguments against the translation, and she emphasizes that one of the largest mistakes of the foreign language teachers is not having a clear objective to achieve with the exercise of translating. In this sense, it was affirmed that

El objetivo de la traducción pedagógica no es el de enseñar a traducir a los alumnos,[...], sino el de utilizarla con el fin de aprender la lengua. Si un profesor tiene claro este principio y quiere utilizar la traducción en el aula, es imprescindible hacérselo saber a sus alumnos antes de actuar. (Guilledo, 2017, p.35)

Moreover, Guilledo (2017) provided some examples in which the translation exercise could represent an advantage for the learning process. Guilledo mentioned the communicative method, where the role of translation is considered as “un acto de comunicación diverso, creativo, real y motivador, a la vez que útil porque fomenta la precisión, la claridad y la flexibilidad comunicativa”. The audiolingual method where according to Guilledo, to translate could be a very useful tool to avoid errors in view of the fact the outcomes could be shown and analyzed. And finally, Guilledo mentioned the use of online translators as a technique to complement the multiple intelligences method; this author suggested that “Los propios

alumnos pueden elegir qué textos traducir en función de la inteligencia que estén trabajando [...]” (p. 20).

However, although it has presented a positive view over the translation it is relevant to give rise to other opinions provided not only for the theory but for the results achieved in the survey. It is related to the dependency feeling which students may have at the time of using online translators as a support tool for producing their texts. In this regard, a considerable number of the students think that the use of online translators could generate dependency in the users (see figure 10) Despite that, half of the students used these kinds of applications to support their written production activity. In addition, by the other side, the survey provided us that the superiority of the students do not consider themselves as dependent users (see figure 11) Thus, it is a contradictory position between what they think (the use could generate dependency), what they do (they used it) and what they think they do (they opined that they are not dependent). That contradiction could be explained starting from the idea that even if an amount of students use online translators, they do not desire to be discovered or judged for this. As Guilledo (2017) stated, using online translators in the classroom could mean a new challenge for a foreign language teacher, because it means a facility for access by students. In such a manner, we could go back to the pedagogical purpose exposed by this same author, remembering the importance of having a clear objective at the moment of using these tools in the class.

In addition, according to the results obtained, we could observe that the other half of the 12 participants did not use the translator or other applications; however, the answers of 8 of the 12 participants in the survey, showed that the most beneficial tools for learning a foreign language are dictionaries, whether physical or online, in light of only 1 of the 12 participants

used an online dictionary (WordReference), and none of them considered translators as a beneficial tool for learning a target language (Figure 7). These results reflect the role of dictionaries and translators in the EFL classes where the use of dictionaries had always prevailed over translators. Pozo (2016) cited in Rodríguez et al. (2019) mentioned about the digital technologies that “[estas] se convierten en verdaderas prótesis mentales, de forma que extienden, modifican o reconstruyen nuestras capacidades de aprendizaje”. There has been the idea that the use of the dictionary for learning a language is a good tool since it gives several meanings to a single word and gives you examples of how to use it; however, due to the answers obtained through the survey, it is evident that students have a negative idea about the translators for their learning process.

Conclusions

This research had the purpose of describing the use of online translators in written production skills in students of second semester of the degree in foreign languages with emphasis in English at the Universidad Católica de Oriente. In addition, it was conducted to analyse the experiences and beliefs of the students related with the use of online translators in the practice of the written production. From the data analysis we conclude that, since the pedagogical field, there has always existed a negative view to the use of translators in the classroom, specifically in the teaching of foreign languages. Accordingly, students and teachers used to think that to use them would impact badly in the learning process and this could be considered a bad habit.

This study concludes that a formation on the use of translators is unknown in the EFL classroom for the purpose of learning a second language; therefore, students do not learn to use it properly and consciously; moreover, they could have a guilty thinking and a frightened feeling. In addition, through this project we can reconsider the accompaniment of the translators as a functional tool focused on the learning a foreign language to train the students with a clear purpose for it. Consequently, this could be beneficial for the second language learning process.

Challenges

Considering that for the development of the practice activity there was a controlled space, it is meaningful to highlight the different process of participants keeping in mind their different perspectives and viewpoints; it provides the possibility of distinct and individual ways of understanding the instructions suggested for the process. That is the reason because, it could be seen as a challenge

Moreover, another difficulty in the process was not being able to tell the participants freely about our research, for not influencing the development of the practice activity and the survey.

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