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Talking to algorithms, not students: Students' and lecturers' perceptions of machine translation in academic discussion

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Machine translation (MT) software has been present in English for academic purposes classrooms for several years, yet it remains a contentious issue. Traditionally, research in this field has focused on students' use of MT for reading and writing rather than classroom listening and speaking. This study elicited the reasons as to why international students utilise MT in academic discussions and their attitudes towards it. These were then contrasted with the attitudes and experiences of their lecturers. A mixed-methods design was employed, with qualitative data complementing the quantitative data. Questionnaires were distributed to two distinct groups: international Master's students (N = 88) and lecturers (N = 14). Following this, focus group discussions explored the role of MT regarding the students' understanding of lectures and the assigned reading material. The findings revealed that MT usage is widespread in university classrooms, but only a minority of students use it frequently – an unexpected finding in the 21st century. The latter group generally regarded it as a source of shame and expressed a desire to reduce their reliance on it. Because the students surveyed often reported dissatisfaction with using MT, alternative strategies are proposed, based on the feedback collected. These include exploring the underlying reasons for using artificial intelligence translation software beyond simple language difficulties and recognising the capabilities and limitations of MT. The article concludes with implications for institutional policy and EAP instruction.

Keywords: machine translation, artificial intelligence, academic discussions, attitudes, international students, EAP

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is dramatically impacting various aspects of education and English for academic purposes (EAP), with concerns about plagiarism and a decline in critical thinking skills being prevalent in the discourse (Roe et al., 2023). However, the role of AI-powered machine translation (MT) software is often overlooked, despite being described as a "scandal" (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2024, p. 1). Its use in the classroom overlaps with broader challenges posed by the wider adoption of AI tools in higher education, raising important questions for both universities and students.

In the academic year 2023/2024, over half of the UK's postgraduate students were international students (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2025). With many speaking English as an additional language, and universities increasingly relying on them for tuition fees (Scott, 2021), concerns have arisen about reduced levels of English proficiency among international students (e.g., Fisher et al., 2024). Such anxieties have been furthered by the introduction and proliferation of MT software such as Google Translate, the current versions of which can transcribe and translate long utterances of spoken text, enabling students to see direct translations of everything spoken in the target language. This has raised concerns that it may encourage "avoidance" of the target language (Murtisari et al., 2024) and diminish students' motivation to study English (Ducar & Schocket, 2018).

The project presented in this article was initiated in response to these issues and the increasingly widespread adoption of MT in academic skills workshops at a higher education institution in the north of England. Students were observed using MT to transcribe and translate conversations, task instructions, and their classmates' speech. This raised concerns that such practices might undermine the language-learning potential of academic skills enhancement sessions and reduce opportunities for meaningful interactions in English. To explore these issues, three research questions were addressed:

1. In which situations, and how often, do university students use MT to translate spoken English?
2. Why do university students use MT in these situations?
3. What are students' and lecturers' attitudes towards using MT to translate spoken English in academic settings?

Literature review

MT refers to the automated process of converting text from one language (the source language) into another (the target language), aiming to capture contextual, idiomatic, and pragmatic nuances without human involvement (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024). In essence, it facilitates communication among individuals who speak different languages, employing "rule-based systems, statistical

models, and neural networks…to achieve accurate and contextually appropriate translations" (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024, p. 2).

Since the introduction of MT software into classrooms, numerous studies have explored its impact on students' engagement, participation, and academic performance, particularly among those learning EAP. For example, Ducar and Schocket (2018) considered the pedagogical and moral implications of widespread MT use. One key problem was defined as follows:

> Given that GT can automatically translate any website and the camera app can scan and translate text instantaneously, instructors can no longer be sure that students are actually reading in the L2 outside the classroom, even from a printed page. (p. 791)

This highlights one of the main concerns surrounding the widespread use of MT: that it potentially removes the need for EAP students to use English in their reading and writing. Ducar and Schocket (2018, p. 793) argued that there is an "omnipresence" of MT in classrooms; hence, academic staff must respond with appropriate pedagogical measures rather than attempting to ban it outright. Bowker (2020) agreed, acknowledging that MT software is here to stay and that providing workshops and support sessions on its effective and critical use should be a priority for institutions. Bowker (2020) described this as "machine translation literacy" (p. 14); to become critical users, students should consider whether MT is appropriate for a particular goal, when to use it, and why they are using it.

Indeed, the application of MT can be beneficial for students' writing, both in the writing process itself and the final product (Klimova, 2025; Lee, 2019; Liu & Chen, 2024; Murphy Odo, 2019; Tsai, 2019). Lee's (2019) results indicated that students used MT critically, questioning its accuracy and using it to assess their own writing strategies and processes. This suggests that MT can positively impact students' learning habits and approaches when used effectively. Tsai (2019) found that access to MT improved the English writing of Chinese university students, who then felt a greater degree of satisfaction with their work. Finally, Liu and Chen (2024) reported that Chinese Master's students used language and digital literacy skills to actively improve the MT's content. Notably, these studies refer to the use of MT by East Asian (Chinese or Korean) students and focus on academic writing, a context similar to that of many students in UK institutions.

Overall, much of the literature related to students' MT use focuses on reading and writing, with a relative dearth of research on using MT for listening and speaking. In one notable study, Shadiev and Huang (2019) recruited 60 Russian-speaking students to watch two lectures in English. These students were divided into three groups: those with no support, those with English transcriptions, and those with MT text translations in their native Russian. They observed that although many students who did not receive MT support lost focus or struggled to understand the lecture's content, whereas those who received the MT-text translation were more focused, satisfied and had a better understanding, a finding supported by Shadiev et al. (2024). This suggests

that MT can enhance students' understanding of lectures' content, although questions remain regarding the benefits of MT for academic discussions and overall language proficiency.

The issue of academic discussions was explored by Frith (2023), who studied the use of MT among international postgraduate students. She found that it can hinder participation in class and interaction with other students. In a blog post for the Higher Education Policy Institute (2024), two anonymous academics argued that a significant proportion of international students at UK universities lack the language skills needed to complete their course, and that many use MT to provide real-time translation of the content, reducing participation. By contrast, a similar study in Korea by Oh (2023) found that MT use led to greater involvement in English classroom discussions. One possible explanation for this could be that in Oh's (2023) study, the students used MT to prepare scripts for a discussion; hence, the focus was on accuracy rather than participation in a fast-moving university class where higher levels of communicative English are required. In the latter scenario, using MT to understand other students' utterances and prepare responses could hinder communication. This point was echoed by Lam and Richards (2025), who argued that the "functional proficiency" (p. 35) provided by MT may be inadequate for academic situations such as labs and performances, which require both the development of a student's own voice and the ability to respond quickly.

While students' use of MT is an important topic, the experiences and attitudes of academic staff are also relevant. To address this topic, Groves and Mundt (2021) interviewed 11 staff members from the UK, representing two Russell Group universities and a range of academic departments and professional service roles. Four key themes were identified: (1) the lack of clear policy at the institutional level, (2) concerns about academic misconduct in assessments, (3) concerns about graduates with weak English skills potentially damaging the institution's reputation, and (4) concerns about weak or inadequate language development. Anxieties about the impact of MT on students' language development were commonly expressed, suggesting some dissatisfaction with students' use of MT. This was reflected in concerns about the employability of students who depended on MT throughout their degree. However, as Paterson (2023) pointed out, standard International English Language Testing System (IELTS) admission scores of 6.0 to 6.5 do not indicate immediate academic proficiency, meaning that international students are required to develop their academic English skills alongside the demands of Master's-level content.

In summary, several key questions remain regarding the use of MT in university classroom contexts. While the abovementioned studies examined the benefits and drawbacks of using MT in various academic contexts, as well as attitudes among academic staff, there is limited research into how and why students utilise MT to communicate with other students and lecturers. Moreover, students' attitudes towards MT use have not been considered; hence, there have been few attempts to compare and contrast attitudes between students and lecturers. The increasingly competitive market for international students at UK universities has already led some institutions to lower their entry

requirements, potentially resulting in a greater uptake of MT in seminars and academic classes. In view of this, investigating the effects and experiences of using MT in such settings is both timely and significant. More broadly, the findings of this study resonate with international developments in higher education, where the integration of AI tools in multilingual learning environments presents both opportunities and challenges. This research therefore contributes not only to institutional decision-making in the UK but also to ongoing international debates about the role of AI in academic communication and language learning.

Methodology

Research context and design

This project took place in the Department of Education at a university in northern England. Like many other UK universities, this institution has numerous international students enrolled in postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes. Since the pandemic, the increasing number of international PGT students and concerns about their language skills have led to the creation of an integrated EAP skills course. This course is timetabled, and students are expected to attend a weekly skills workshop that covers a range of topics, including accurate referencing, essay structure, critical thinking, and effective academic language.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to address the research questions, capturing both broad patterns across a large student cohort and in-depth insights into the experiences of students and lecturers regarding the use of MT in class. This design combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data, offering a comprehensive understanding (Plano Clark, 2016). The quantitative data provided an overview of students' behaviour and attitudes, whereas the qualitative data enriched the analysis with detailed accounts of individual experiences and strategies. Given the smaller number of academic staff participants, a qualitative focus was particularly valuable for exploring their perspectives in depth. For these reasons, it was decided to use a student-facing questionnaire, a staff-facing questionnaire, and a student-focused focus group.

Research sample

Approximately 200 students were enrolled in the Academic Skills for Education course at the time of the research, of whom 88 responded to the student questionnaire. The majority were from China (86%), with the remaining 14% from Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Japan.

Most students exceeded the minimum IELTS listening requirement (6.0) for entry to the Master's in Education programme: 42 scored 6.5 or higher, 14 scored 6.0, and 8 scored 5.5 or lower; 14 were unsure of their score. Thus, the majority met the programme's language requirements. Additionally, 31 students had completed a pre-sessional course, indicating that their initial English proficiency may have been below the required level.

When asked about their MT preferences, students listed various applications. Of these, Google Translate was the most commonly used (48.3%), followed by Chinese platforms such as Youdao Translate (37.9%) and Baidu Translate (14.9%), reflecting a preference for familiar, localised tools among the predominantly Chinese cohort.

Regarding the academic staff, 14 lecturers of different ages and genders with a wide range of teaching experiences responded to the questionnaire. All worked with international students in the Department of Education.

All participants were recruited through convenience sampling, meaning that they were selected on the basis of their accessibility and willingness to participate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). However, this type of sampling is not without limitations: it is prone to bias and often results in a homogeneous sample. Consequently, the findings are not fully generalisable and may fail to generate comprehensive insights.

Research instruments

The student questionnaire (Appendix A) contained questions about the situations and frequency of MT use, reasons for using it, and attitudes towards its use. The questionnaire was almost entirely quantitative, with one open-ended question soliciting comments on the use of MT in class.

The questionnaire for lecturers (Appendix B), by contrast, contained more qualitative questions to better reflect their varied and extensive experiences, as well as a perceived willingness to provide more detailed responses. Along with an institution-wide interest and fascination with AI, the use of MT was seen as a source of frustration among some lecturers; hence, it was anticipated that some staff members may have been looking for an opportunity to share their experiences. Questions focused on how often they had noticed students using MT in various academic settings, as well as their stances on various issues related to the use of MT.

The purpose of the focus group (Appendix C) was to provide a space for students to express their ideas, share their experiences in using MT, and discuss their approaches and attitudes towards using MT in classes. Focus groups allow participants to ask questions for clarification and enable the group to synergise, develop, support, and respond to individual members' points of view (Gray-Vickrey, 1993). To encourage participation, focus groups were conducted online using Zoom.

To ensure clarity and anonymity in reporting the findings, participants were assigned codes; for example, FG1 denotes a participant from Focus Group 1, SR42 refers to Student Respondent Number 42, and LR9 represents Lecturer Respondent Number 9.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (Appendix D and Appendix E), which involved summarising and organising the data to reveal

observable patterns. Frequencies were calculated to identify the distribution of responses across questions and to highlight the prevalence of specific trends within the dataset.

Regarding qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed in accordance with the six specific stages (Table 1) proposed by Naeem et al. (2023). This approach enabled the identification of meaningful themes (Figure 1) within the dataset, offering rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Table 1. Stages of thematic analysis

Stage	Description
Familiarisation with the data	Transcribing and reading the data to gain a comprehensive understanding and note emerging patterns.
Selection of keywords	Identifying salient and frequent words, phrases, or expressions as preliminary indicators of themes.
Coding	Labelling data segments with descriptive or interpretive codes that capture meaningful ideas (e.g., 1 = unauthorised recording, data insecurity; 2 = reduced discussion, loss of spontaneity).
Theme development	Organising codes into broader thematic groups to identify patterns and relationships within the data: subthemes (e.g., 1 = data privacy; 2 = impact on teaching) and themes (e.g., privacy and sensitivity concerns).
Conceptualisation	Linking the findings to existing literature to scrutinise explanations and generate new insights.
Development of conceptual model	Developing a conceptual model that narratively represents how the identified themes address the research questions.

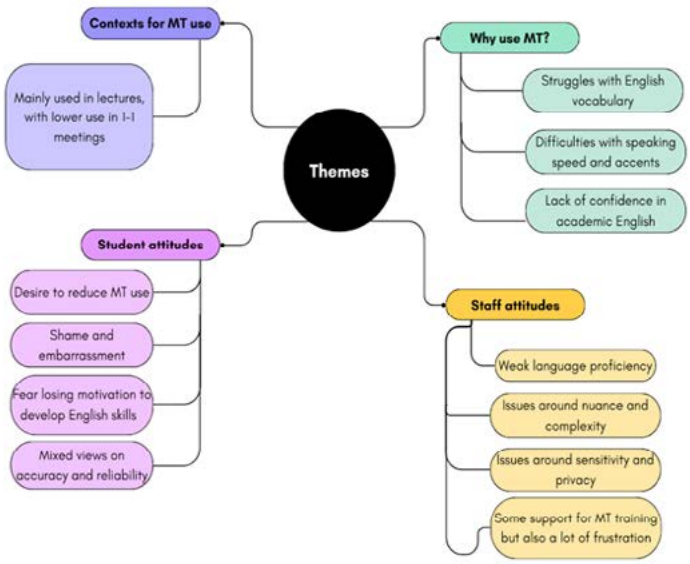

Figure 1. Overview of themes and subthemes identified in the qualitative stage.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was sought and obtained from a UK university. Appropriate measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants' responses. No identifying information was collected, and all data are stored securely on a password-protected cloud server.

Results and discussion

In this section, the results of the two questionnaires and focus groups are explained and analysed. This section is structured according to the three research questions, with the results compared with the findings of previous research to situate the study within its academic context. The themes that emerged from the qualitative stage are depicted in the thematic map presented in Figure 1, which serves as a visual guide for the discussion that follows.

Students' usage of MT in academic contexts

This section analyses and discusses the data in relation to the first research question: In which situations, and how often, do university students use MT to translate spoken English?

Most participating students reported using MT in a range of academic contexts, including lectures, seminars, workshops, one-to-one tutorials, and supervisor meetings. Of these, use in lectures was the most common, with 31 students (35%) reporting that they use MT "occasionally" and 17 (19%) saying they use it in "most sessions". The student questionnaire indicated that students' MT use varies across sessions, with less use in more intimate contexts, such as supervisor meetings and tutorials, and more use in distant sessions, such as lectures and seminars. Lectures can be difficult to follow, and students often have few opportunities to ask for clarification. Hence, using MT to help them keep up can seem like a rational option. As one student wrote, "I don't want to use [MT] but I can't understand or get 100% what the teacher is saying" (SR45). This suggests that students sometimes see MT as essential for teacher-centred sessions.

Comparing the student and lecturer responses revealed some key similarities and differences. First, lecturers agreed that MT use is higher during lectures, although they reported some use of MT during seminars. Eleven of the fourteen lecturers (78.5%) reported observing MT use during lectures, with eight stating that they noticed it in most or every lecture. Conversely, lecturers' reports of MT use during seminars were lower (57%, with only 21% saying they saw it in every session). Moreover, there was a noticeable difference regarding supervisor meetings. Whilst an overwhelming majority of students reported never using MT during these meetings, half of the staff participants reported sometimes observing MT use.

There may be several reasons for this discrepancy. First, lecturers may supervise students who did not respond to the questionnaire and use MT in supervisor meetings. Alternatively, a small number of students could be using MT in a particularly memorable way. This disparity between self-reported

student use and lecturer reports of MT use is a consistent theme across this research.

Among students, self-reported use of MT in academic skills classes appeared to be low (27% usage), a level similar to that observed in seminars (30%). This is unsurprising, as the skills support classes function like a seminar, with group discussion, listening, and speaking being essential for participation. The evidence thus suggests that students primarily use MT in lectures, although some continue to use it in other, more communicative and participatory contexts.

Overall, the results indicate that students utilise MT to translate spoken English in lectures and seminars to a lesser degree, with some use also observed in smaller groups and one-to-one meetings. This differs from the opinions of lecturers, who observed its use in supervisor meetings. Because of the limited research conducted on this topic outside of lectures, the existing literature is of limited value. For instance, Shadiev and Huang (2019) considered the use of MT only in English lectures, rather than examining various academic contexts. They found that MT use led to greater understanding of the lectures' content, enhancing focus and concentration, as students did not need to check unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts. However, they did not compare this with lecturers' perceptions of MT use and did not explore the students' own reasons for using MT. Therefore, it could be argued that they approached the question of MT use by students with a different focus.

Frith's (2023) study focused on academic skill support classes for English language learners. In her survey of 24 international students, nearly all admitted to using MT to some extent, with 43.4% using it frequently or always. This is higher than reported in the present study. Possible reasons could be a smaller sample size, more difficult content, or a classroom atmosphere more open to MT use.

Again, it should be emphasised that few studies have addressed this question, with the most relevant research by Lee (2019) and Groves and Mundt (2021) focusing on MT use for students' reading and writing rather than in lectures and seminars.

Why students use MT in academic contexts

This section analyses and discusses data relating to the second research question: Why do university students use MT in these situations?

Students reported using MT for the following reasons: not understanding some words (59.3%), lecturers speaking too quickly to understand (32.6%), lack of experience in listening to spoken English (29.1%), lack of confidence in their own English proficiency (26.7%), finding lecturers' English difficult to understand (20.9%), and feeling more confident reading in their first language (L1) than listening in their second language (L2) (12.8%).

This list shows that 59% of participants use MT to check unfamiliar vocabulary, whereas 32.6% cited the speaking speed of lecturers as a factor. This latter factor is compounded by a lack of experience among students in listening to

spoken English; 29.1% reported a lack of such experience, and 21% said that they found the lecturer's spoken English difficult to understand.

This finding aligns with the observations of Shadiev and Huang (2019) and Shadiev et al. (2024), who noted that students utilise MT in lectures to keep pace with challenging content, vocabulary, and speaking speed in their second language. The findings were also supported by Frith (2023), who argued that many English-L2 students use MT because they feel they must understand every spoken word, and that they may use MT less if given more time to process the lecturer's speech. These claims suggest issues with vocabulary knowledge and the ability to listen to fast speech. Similarly, Klimova's (2025) investigation of attitudes towards MT use among students studying foreign languages revealed that students use MT primarily to translate at the vocabulary or sentence level. A similar survey of Korean universities also found that MT use was most common at the vocabulary level; however, translating whole sentences was much less common (Murphy Odo, 2019).

One situation that has led to the use of MT among students is the variety of accents spoken on campus. As an international open university, this institution has academics from many different countries; British English also has a wide variety of accents. This can lead students to use MT to understand their lecturers. As one focus group participant stated:

> I never used to translate when one of our teachers spoke English, because most of our teachers come from the UK. Sometimes, when I meet India's teachers or roommates and don't understand, I use the translator because it's hard for me to understand them. (FG1)

In a 2024 study, Vasquez Diaz and Iqbal examined the impact of lecturers' accents on international students' comprehension. They found that 42% of the participants identified unusual accents as the most significant barrier to understanding. Although Vasquez Diaz and Iqbal (2024) focused on different British regional accents, their results are relevant to the present study, as they explored the mitigation strategies applied by these students, including gaining contextual understanding and asking the lecturer to repeat or clarify their expression. Use of MT was not discussed, although one participant wrote: "Read automatically-created subtitles in the lecture recordings to better understand what lecturers say" (Vasquez Diaz and Iqbal, 2024, p. 15). Nonetheless, these results are quite different from the present study. One possible explanation could be the sample. Vasquez Diaz and Iqbal (2024) recruited a student group mainly composed of Nigerian (43%) and Pakistani (27%) students, who may be more inclined to admit when they do not understand something, compared with the predominantly Chinese (86%) group in the present study. Indeed, Frith (2023) points out that students from East Asian backgrounds are more used to being punished for incorrect answers and lack experience and confidence in speaking English.

Frith (2023) and Klimova (2025) cited this lack of confidence as a factor contributing to the use of MT in class. Students entering the UK's higher education system at the Master's level are expected to demonstrate greater levels of

critical thinking, participation, and academic writing skills than those at the undergraduate level (University of Oxford, 2025). Thus, students perceive MT as a way to catch up with difficult speech. Though most participants do not want restrictions or controls on MT usage, they believe they would reduce their MT usage if given more time to catch up with what the teacher is saying. In the present study, 26.7% stated that they do not feel confident in their English listening skills, and 13% reported feeling more confident reading text in their L1 than listening in their L2. Although low confidence is a factor in the present study, it was not as prevalent as in Frith (2023).

In conclusion, students believe that their vocabulary level and listening skills are insufficient to participate without MT, which is reflected in their lack of confidence. However, it is also worth noting that, as Klekovkina and Denié-Higney (2022) argue, using MT to find the meaning of vocabulary in a lecture or seminar may not result in students learning the word so they can use it again in the future. This could have negative repercussions for their long-term confidence.

Students' and staff members' attitudes towards using MT to translate spoken English in live discussions

This section analyses and discusses data in relation to the third research question: What are students' and lecturers' attitudes towards the use of MT to translate spoken English in academic settings? It is divided into two subsections, one focusing on students' attitudes and the other on lecturers' attitudes.

Students' attitudes. The results revealed two main themes regarding students' attitudes: the acceptability of using MT in academic discussions and the reliability and accuracy of MT software. This section explores students' attitudes regarding these two themes.

The Acceptability of MT Use in Academic Settings. Overall, the student cohort displayed a generally positive attitude towards using MT to translate spoken English among both teachers and other students. On a 1- to 5-point Likert scale, where 1 is "totally unacceptable" and 5 is "totally acceptable", 84% of respondents answered between 3 and 5 for teachers' utterances and 82% responded similarly for other students' utterances. This indicates an overall attitudinal stance that the use of MT in class is legitimate. This aligns with Paterson's (2023) finding that students have a nuanced understanding of the ethics of MT use, with few perceiving it as unacceptable. Paterson's data suggest that students feel more comfortable translating short sections of text than whole texts; however, because Paterson's study focused on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking, the issue of students using MT for an entire lecture was not addressed.

In Klimova's (2025) study, there was a substantial degree of ambivalence regarding the acceptability of using MT in class, with 42% being not sure if they were allowed to use it. In the present study, 67.4% stated that using MT in class was not considered academic misconduct, while 8% stated it was. Notably,

however, 24.4% of students responded that they were unsure. Thus, in the present study, the prevailing attitude was that MT use formed an acceptable part of class participation, although a degree of uncertainty remained regarding its legitimacy. It would be instructive to learn more about the students who perceived MT use as misconduct and whether they continued to use it.

Although most students felt it was acceptable to use MT in class, attitudes towards using MT were nonetheless negative. The survey responses revealed a widespread attitude of caution towards using MT, with many students expressing a desire to reduce their reliance on it. On a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating "I would like to stop using MT in the future completely" and 5 being "I do not want to reduce my usage of MT software", the most common answer was 1 (33%), with 2 and 3 accounting for a further 56%. Only 10% of respondents did not wish to reduce their MT use.

Focus group comments conveyed a conflicting attitude, with MT framed as a necessary but "shameful" quick fix for complex classroom challenges. As one student said: "Feel shy and guilty about using it. I'd rather I don't need to use it. I was afraid of being seen by other classmates and teachers" (SR42). Moreover, some students expressed surprise at the amount of MT use that took place, questioning the language skills of those who used it. One commented, "I was surprised that many students were using software to record the teacher's speaking and translate it immediately. I'm wondering how they met their English requirements" (SR32). Other students argued that although MT can be useful in the short term, it can adversely impact a student's language skills and motivation. For instance, one participant stated:

> It is useful for some students at a low proficiency level in academic contexts, as it helps them understand what instructors are saying in class if they have trouble listening to English. However, it still depends on how they use [MT], because if they are too dependent on it, they may be too lazy to develop their own listening skills. (SR19)

This attitude that using MT can harm motivation or make students "lazy" or that it can damage motivation to improve English language skills was largely conveyed in comments about other students rather than in the students' own reflective comments. This indicates that some students perceive MT use as a weakness to be overcome and an improper way to participate in the session. These attitudes are also shaped by sociocultural dynamics. MT use was seen as a way to deal with fears of being perceived as weak or incompetent by peers and lecturers, albeit an approach they sometimes viewed as undesirable. This is reflected in references to feeling shy and guilty about using MT and not wanting to be seen by other students.

These findings echo those of Murtisari et al. (2024), where the students' negative attitudes towards reliance on MT were linked to feelings of laziness, frustration, and reduced vocabulary learning. Although MT use helped students keep pace with the class content, students often highlighted the risks of using MT – a common fear being that MT use can reduce motivation for learning English.

Similar attitudinal concerns were documented in research by García and Pena (2011), Ducar and Schocket (2018), and Klekovkina and Denié-Higney (2022), where MT use was framed as undermining motivation and authentic language development. Klimova (2025), however, found that a majority of her participants were still motivated to learn a foreign language. Thus, further research needs to be conducted on the effects of MT's availability on motivation toward language learning.

The Reliability and Accuracy of MT Software. Students were also asked about their attitudes regarding the reliability and accuracy of MT software. On a 5-point scale, with 1 being "completely inaccurate" and 5 being "perfectly accurate", the results were ambiguous. For most students, there was moderate faith in the accuracy of MT software, as their responses were clustered around 3 (46%), with similar scores for 2 (21%) and 4 (26%).

This was supported by several comments, including: "They [MT] are not correct usually" (SR28) and "Not accurate actually" (SR48). Nevertheless, while students often doubt the reliability of MT software, it remains a commonly used tool. This suggests that, for at least a few students, MT use is seen as necessary to participate in academic life. One student's response illustrated this: "Use it if necessary" (SR64). Notably, Paterson (2023) found that students often considered MT to be more accurate than a dictionary, as it could better accommodate context by translating whole sentences rather than just individual words.

Some students, however, did consider using strategies to improve accuracy, such as comparing the results of different translation apps. One commented:

> I feel confident to use translation because my Chinese is better. But sometimes, the translation is not so accurate; then, when this happens, I would like to use other translation applications to double-check. (FG2)

The use of multiple translators also allowed students to make critical judgments about their output (Hellmich, 2021), meaning they were engaged cognitively and not just "offloading" – letting the software do the critical part of the task (Gerlich, 2025, p. 2). Another student shared this attitude: "Yeah, I wanna say that I'm confident about myself, my understanding and my judgment. I mean. I can tell which translation I think makes sense or not" (FG3). This confidence and self-efficacy in MT use is a positive development that challenges the traditional model of MT use as a response to language and educational deficits and reflects reports of the critical use of MT, as found in Lee (2019) and Liu and Chen (2024).

Lecturers' attitudes. This section explores the attitudes of lecturers towards students' use of MT in academic contexts, focusing on four key themes: language proficiency, the nuanced and subtle nature of academic discourse, privacy issues, and pedagogical solutions and benefits.

Language Ability and MT Dependency. The lecturers' attitudes towards MT use were shaped by their beliefs about students' level of English proficiency. Although many lecturers expressed frustration with MT use among their students, others highlighted that it could serve as a support mechanism for those

with lower levels of English proficiency. Two respondents stated: "It probably does help them understand what the lecture says, to an extent" (LR7) and "Students are enabled to follow content presentation and discussion, in particular in situations where neither the presenter/teacher nor the student is a native speaker of English" (LR5).

Moreover, two respondents highlighted the potential benefits of using MT for students' wellbeing and confidence. Overall, however, there was strong opposition to the use of MT as a pedagogical tool. The data also revealed a belief that it was being used more heavily by weaker students:

> I don't have too much of an issue with it in lectures as an additional learning aid. However, from anecdotal observations, it seems to be the weakest students who are relying on it, and this is very worrying, as some of the students are unable to answer basic questions, such as "How old are you?" (LR14)

This comment highlights the attitude, evident in other student comments, that using MT technology to the extent that a student is unable to conduct basic communication may reduce their overall English proficiency. Another respondent's comment supported this: "It might work with students who have sufficient proficiency but lack confidence; but for those who cannot function in English, I don't see it making much of a difference" (LR12). Another noted that "MT use was most common among students with the weakest levels of proficiency" (LR14). This is in agreement with Murtisari et al. (2024) and Klimova (2025), who reported that MT use is more common among students with weaker levels of language proficiency, a finding that could be attributable to a lack of knowledge or confidence.

A common attitude was that MT use is directly related to reduced entry requirements for English language proficiency. As two respondents stated, MT use is "...frustrating but probably necessary, given typical spoken English levels, especially among PGT students" (LR1) or "[Students] are accepted on the programme with the levels of ELP that don't allow them to cope with the linguistic demands of a degree-level education in English" (LR12).

The lecturers believed that many students lack the listening skills needed to effectively participate in academic discussions. For example, one respondent stated that: "The students who I have seen using it: because their functional language skills are not good enough to keep pace with spoken English at an academic (HE) level – oral or aural" (LR14). Another lecturer added that: "Their IELTS [scores] are too low to be doing an MA – but we have accepted them, and they should be provided all the tools necessary to succeed, as we have sold them an unfair teaching opportunity" (LR3).

These comments align with findings from Groves and Mundt (2021) regarding how MT can help bridge the gap between low entry requirements and challenging course content. However, overreliance on MT to deal with this issue prevents students from developing the language skills promised by the experience of studying abroad. This challenge was highlighted by several lecturers in the current study.

Although this attitude was common, other lecturers were sympathetic to the challenges of colloquial and technical language, which even highly proficient students may struggle with. One respondent stated:

> I imagine that they are using it to find the meaning of words with which they are not familiar, including technical terms, and also more colloquial language, including metaphors. I recently realised that one of my PhD students didn't understand when I asked them what they had been "up to" at the weekend. (LR13)

These two attitudes offer contrasting perspectives on students' use of MT. Both highly technical and colloquial language can be used to justify the use of MT as a translation tool, although its effectiveness for colloquial phrases can be questioned. This approach views MT as a valuable tool supporting students in navigating the realities of target language immersion. The second quotation reflects a more critical, deficit approach (Hyland, 2018), highlighting an attitudinal belief that students are using MT because they lack the necessary language skills to engage effectively in their course. This dichotomy was another common theme, as among the lecturers, eleven cited the students' lack of English proficiency, and only three mentioned a lack of confidence among students.

This aligns with Groves and Mundt's (2021) observations that concerns about MT were primarily focused on students' abilities and output, often relating to IELTS scores and vocabulary. Moreover, the attitude was expressed that weak levels of English language proficiency may reflect negatively on the institution. Several lecturers expressed unease about accepting students with weaker English language skills onto courses for which they lacked the necessary language proficiency. Many staff members also voiced pessimism about the benefits of MT, arguing that it slowed communication or misled students. This differs from an earlier paper by Groves and Mundt (2015), in which they stated:

> However, should the profession embrace the use of machine translation, it will bring a large number of exciting potential developments. Firstly, the use of translation will allow a move away from the sentence-level work needed in a large number of EAP classrooms. Students will be able to express themselves, even if they have a very limited level of English. This will allow EAP instructors to shift the emphasis away from the low-level mechanics of English and begin to focus on the deep literacies. (Groves & Mundt, 2015, p. 120)

This prediction does not seem to be shared by lecturers today, as worries remain about the basic comprehension of students using MT, let alone their deep understanding of texts. Two explanations can be given for this distinction. First, Groves and Mundt's (2015) optimism comes from the early days of MT use, when it was not as widespread second, their study focused on MT-assisted writing rather than classroom participation.

The picture portrayed by lecturers in the present study is not a positive one. Students use MT as a compensatory mechanism for "insufficient" (LR3) levels of English proficiency, with a greater number of fee-paying international

students being required because of the UK's failing funding model (QAA, 2024). This leads to a perceived deficit in language proficiency that is being filled by MT, albeit insufficiently.

Nuance and Complexity. A second theme was the sceptical attitude of lecturers regarding the effectiveness of MT in handling complex academic discourse. Academic language is often subtle and nuanced, with different possible interpretations, cultural connections, and challenging concepts. Lecturers found the accuracy of MT in these contexts to be an obstacle to effective participation:

> [MT] and speech recognition software are not sufficiently advanced (accurate) or reliable (over different voices, accents, genres, contexts, different "grammars", subtle differences in use of words, and, critically, in translating metaphoric language which is rife in academic discourse) to deal with academic content in all discipline areas. (LR9)

Moreover, some lecturers expressed the attitude that MT use promotes literal interpretations of texts rather than an engaged, co-constructed approach to meaning-making:

> Based on my experience, their focus is on translating and not understanding or engaging. They take everything literally – translation software misses a lot of things and translates incorrectly or incompletely…[understanding] becomes a mechanical exercise, whereas understanding should be an exercise in meaning making and engagement. (LR11)

Thus, the reported challenges were not simply technical but attitudinal, highlighting a perception that MT undermines the nuanced communication central to academic discourse. This concern was echoed by Urlaub and Dessein (2022, p. 3), who argued that MT could lead to "reductionist perceptions of language" among students, as users see language as a tool simply for sending and receiving messages, thus ignoring the sociocultural aspects of academic communication. Similarly, Groves and Mundt (2015, p. 118) contended that MT provides only a "shallow" translation (although it remains debatable whether a common entry requirement of IELTS 6.0–6.5 is sufficient for a deeper understanding of nuanced discourse), whereas Paterson (2023, p. 5) counters that MT does at least allow "linguistically marginalised" students to participate in academic discourse, bringing new perspectives and voices.

Overall, lecturers displayed a critical attitude towards students' reliance on MT in academic contexts, suggesting that such use reflects a misunderstanding of what it means to communicate and engage in an academic space.

Privacy and Sensitivity. A second negative attitude towards MT use was that it is often used without permission and with little regard to the privacy issues involved. Two lecturers stated:

> I deal with sensitive issues and problematic, sometimes contentious topics and use of [MT] often reduces/restricts/causes me to revise/rethink and moderate what I would normally deliver…[MT] takes away some of the lecturers' agency and ability to get students to speak freely, as some are

> concerned about their responses being recorded. When I deal with some sensitive issues, I turn off the Panopto recording; I cannot do this with [MT]; hence some topics will no longer be addressed on my modules. (LR3)

> Individual phones are not subject to privacy and security regulations that university devices would normally be. The lack of explicit policy to guide students and teachers doesn't exist, and there is no protection offered to tutors. Students often don't understand such concerns regarding privacy and data security. (LR11)

These comments reflect the attitude that students' MT use involves recording staff and students without their consent, detrimentally impacting lectures. Unlike the university's lecture-capture system, Panopto, students' MT use cannot be controlled by the lecturer; consequently, they either avoid discussing sensitive topics or do doing while being recorded. One student stated that it "feels a little disrespectful to teachers" (SR70). Although it may not always signal an intentionally disrespectful attitude, it nevertheless produces negative consequences for both academic staff and students; valuable lecture content is omitted, and the staff lose a degree of control and autonomy in their work.

Overall, the analysis of both student and staff responses points to the following conclusions: first, MT is used by some students but is not widespread; second, MT is generally used to improve understanding in academic contexts; and finally, a widespread negative attitude towards MT use exists among both students and staff, albeit not strong enough to prevent its use.

Pedagogical Solutions and Benefits of MT. Among the lecturers, the most common solutions involved raising entry requirements, providing more pre-sessional/in-sessional language support, and offering more opportunities for international students to interact with native speakers outside the classroom. These suggestions all focus on developing students' language skills or preventing students with lower levels of English proficiency from entering the institution – suggestions which reveal an attitude of attribution, with staff linking use of MT to inadequate English proficiency. Multiple studies have identified the need for students to undergo MT training (Bowker, 2020; Hellmich, 2021; Klekovkina & Denié-Higney, 2022). In the present study, there was also a small number of comments discussing the potential to train students and staff for a university setting in which MT is prevalent:

> We need to raise the awareness of those who do enrol in the limitations of [MT] and the benefits of "struggling" and developing other strategies. (LR13)

> Educating teaching staff so we actually understand what 6.5 IELTS means and can tailor our teaching; accordingly, peer observation and expert observation to help staff improve their communication skills with international students. (LR8)

These comments reflect an attitude of openness to adaptation, although the prevailing attitude was one of frustration and disappointment, with students seemingly unable to participate without the support of MT.

Ducar and Schocket (2018) proposed several approaches to help teachers reduce the use of MT. Firstly, they focused on alternative software such as dictionaries and thesauruses, which require students to be more cognitively engaged in their understanding of a text. Indeed, this is reflected in student comments such as: "I would encourage students to use a dictionary instead of translation software to help aid their English skills" (SR71). However, such comments were rare, suggesting a minority attitude that values deeper engagement through dictionary use. By contrast, a more common student attitude celebrated the speed and convenience of MT.

> I think I can't understand English, but I am sometimes too lazy to do that. I just want to finish the task…So I just use that function to take a screenshot of that paragraph, and it will directly translate into the language that you want. (FG3)

> When we are doing the summative assignment, we really need to spend lots of time finishing it, so sometimes using MT can help us save some time. (SR 38)

This response suggests a belief that dictionary use is slower and more taxing than instant translation. Teachers must strive to teach students both how to use dictionaries and thesauruses efficiently and the benefits of doing so. Moreover, in speaking and listening contexts, the use of effective stalling and delaying language (Tang, 2015) can help maintain interaction and participation. Conversely, given that the participating students were only assessed on their written work, devoting class time to an unassessed skill could prove demotivating and detrimental to their overall grades.

In speaking and listening contexts, students would benefit from efforts to slow speech and an awareness that they are not expected to understand every word spoken in class (Frith, 2023). Frith's overall point is that students use MT because they are afraid of making mistakes and do not see opportunities to review and revise their understanding. Thus, if academic staff wish to reduce MT use, then slowing their speaking speed and allowing students time to check their understanding could be beneficial. Moreover, presentation software such as Google Slides auto-generates subtitles, which can positively impact understanding (Che et al., 2017). This will also help keep students' eyes on the lecture slides, rather than on their own devices and allow the lecturers to see the subtitles, offering corrections if needed. This could address the perceived lack of control highlighted by some lecturers.

However, such pedagogical changes would need to be carefully designed to avoid concerns about reducing the level of content and the broader reputation of universities (Groves & Mundt, 2021). This reflects an attitude among academic staff concerning fairness to students who do not use MT. One lecturer stated:

> If content were to be reduced or made into simpler English, this will be to the detriment of (1) other students in the room (which will eventually

> adversely affect…the students who *are* coping with the English), (2) the intended aims and content of the course that was approved, and (3) the nature of final assessments (which have been approved). Courses would have to be altered and re-approved… (LR9)

Overall, both the presence of MT and the strategies suggested to reduce MT usage in class can be seen as shaped by staff attitudes towards students' language proficiency and the perceived legitimacy of MT as a learning tool. This indicates a mismatch between university admissions and the expectations of lecturers, potentially to the detriment of students.

Conclusion

By collecting and analysing data from two questionnaires and a focus group, this study examined when and why PGT students used MT in academic contexts, as well as the attitudes of both students and lecturers towards its use. The main findings were as follows. First, students use MT in a variety of academic contexts, but more often in less intimate settings such as lectures. Some students use MT in supervisor meetings and small-group activities, which can cause frustration among lecturers. Secondly, students use MT primarily to translate unfamiliar vocabulary and to cope with the fast-paced speech and sometimes unfamiliar accents of lecturers. Lecturers agreed that insufficient vocabulary knowledge was a contributory factor. Finally, both students and lecturers expressed dissatisfaction with the current level of MT usage. Many students regarded it as embarrassing and potentially hindering their English language development. Concomitantly, lecturers viewed it as indicating that students lacked the English proficiency necessary to fully participate in their courses. Pedagogical solutions to reduce the level of MT use were provided, such as utilising the auto-captions provided by Google Slides to generate English subtitles for lectures, allowing more breaks to catch up on the material, and educating students about the limitations and effective use of MT.

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the findings are based on a single cohort of students and may reflect the specific characteristics of that group rather than being generalisable to a broader population. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' and lecturers' attitudes towards MT, future research should recruit participants from multiple institutions and various educational levels. Secondly, focus group attendance was low, limiting the depth and diversity of contributions. A larger, more engaged group would offer richer insights into how students use MT in their academic journeys. Future research might benefit from being centred around focus groups rather than questionnaires, thereby allowing for more detailed and interactive discussions. Thirdly, although the lecturers' perspectives were elicited through the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews would have provided more nuanced insights into their views and classroom experiences regarding students' MT use. Incorporating such interviews in future studies would strengthen the qualitative component of the research. Finally, an

additional data collection instrument, namely classroom observation, would be valuable. Observing how students use MT in real-time during lectures, discussions, or group work would offer a practical perspective that complements self-reported data.

For instance, future research could employ a longitudinal design to explore whether the overall English proficiency of students is negatively affected by an overreliance on MT in academic settings. To achieve this, a comparison could be made between the linguistic outcomes of students who use MT regularly and those who seldom use it. In addition, it would be useful to investigate how students' use of MT in academic settings is impacted by their linguistic backgrounds and previous experiences with learning English and translation tools. Comparative analyses spanning a range of academic disciplines could also illuminate any interdisciplinary differences in MT usage. Finally, research could determine the extent to which students' confidence and willingness to take part in discussions are impacted by MT use, along with the factors that determine their perceptions of MT as either a helpful resource or a possible barrier to language development.

The study has important implications for policymakers, EAP lecturers, and students. For policymakers, the findings point to the value of clear yet flexible guidelines on MT use that balance academic integrity, language learning, and accessibility, alongside investments in supportive technologies such as captioning and multilingual resources to lessen reliance on MT. For EAP lecturers, the results highlight the need to adapt pedagogy to address the factors driving MT use. Measures such as moderating the pace of speech, allowing more breaks, and providing accessible resources can ease comprehension. Alongside this, awareness that students often utilise MT to manage rapid delivery and unfamiliar accents may encourage more reflective communication practices. For students, the study emphasises using MT strategically rather than habitually. Building critical awareness of its limitations while drawing on its benefits can aid comprehension without hindering language development. Recognising that overreliance may slow progress underscores the importance of complementary strategies, especially vocabulary building and listening practice.

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Appendix A

Investigation into the use of machine translation (MT) software to assist speaking/listening in academic contexts

I. Demographic Information

1. Please state your country of origin

.....

2. Please state your IELTS listening score. If you did the IELTS test more than once, please state your highest score.
   a. Below 5.5
   b. 5.5
   c. 6.0
   d. 6.5
   e. 7.0
   f. Higher than 7.0
   g. I don't know
   h. I prefer not to say

3. Did you complete a pre-sessional English course before starting your Masters?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I don't know

II. Questionnaire items

1. Do you use machine translation software to translate spoken English during lectures, seminars, workshops or tutorials?

	No	Occasionally	Most sessions	Every session	I don't know
1. Lectures					
2. Seminars					
3. Academic skills workshops					
4. 1-1 tutorials					
5. Supervisor meetings					

2. If you use MT to transcribe the teacher's spoken English, why?
   a. I don't understand some words
   b. I find the teacher's spoken English difficult to understand
   c. I don't feel confident about my English listening skills
   d. The teacher speaks too quickly
   e. I don't have experience of listening to English in different accents
   f. I feel more confident reading the words in my own language
   g. I don't know
   h. I don't use MT in class
   i. Other

3. If you use MT to transcribe other students' spoken English, why?
   a. I don't understand some words
   b. I find other students' spoken English difficult to understand

c. I don't feel confident about my English listening skills
d. Other students speak too quickly
e. I don't have experience of listening to English in different accents
f. I feel more confident reading the words in my own language
g. I don't know
h. I don't use MT in class
i. Other

4. How accurately do you feel the MT software translates spoken English?

1. Completely inaccurately ..... 5. Perfectly accurately

5. To what extent do you feel it is acceptable behavior to use MT software to translate the teacher's spoken English?

1. Totally unacceptable ..... 5. Totally acceptable

6. To what extent do you feel it is acceptable behavior to use MT software to translate other students' spoken English?

1. Totally unacceptable ..... 5. Totally acceptable

7. Do you feel that using MT to translate the teacher's spoken English is academic misconduct?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. I don't know

8. Would you like to reduce your usage of MT software to translate spoken English in the future?

1. I would like to completely stop ..... 5. I do not want to reduce my usage of MT software

9. Do you have any other comments about the use of MT to translate spoken English?

.....

Appendix B

Academic Staff MT form

1. Have you noticed your students using MT to transcribe and translate your spoken English during the following synchronous teaching contexts:

	I haven't observed MT use	Rarely	Sometimes	Most sessions	Every session	I don't know
1. Lectures						
2. Seminars						
3. 1-1 tutorials						
4. Supervisor meetings						
5. Other 1-1 meetings						

2. Why do you think students use MT to translate teachers' spoken English?
   .....
3. What do you feel are the benefits of student use of MT to translate teachers' spoken English?
   .....
4. What do you feel are the risks of student use of MT to translate teachers' spoken English?
   .....
5. Do you have any other comments about student use of MT to translate teachers' spoken English?
   .....
6. Do you have any suggestions about how to reduce MT usage among our students?
   .....

Appendix C

Questions for the Focus Group

1. Do you use machine translation in lectures or seminars? If so, what are your main reasons for using it?
2. How long have you been using machine translation? When did you start, and what motivated you to do so?
3. For what specific purposes do you use machine translation during lectures and seminars?

4. What do you perceive as the main advantages of using machine translation in these contexts?
5. What do you perceive as the main disadvantages or challenges of using machine translation in lectures and seminars?
6. How confident are you in the accuracy of translations produced by machine translation tools?
7. Would you like to reduce your use of machine translation? If so, why?
8. Can you share any particularly positive or negative experiences you've had when using machine translation?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences or views on using machine translation in lectures and seminars?

Appendix D

Investigation into the use of MT software to assist speaking/listening in academic contexts: Quantitative analysis

1. Do you use machine translation software to translate spoken English during lectures, seminars, workshops or tutorials?

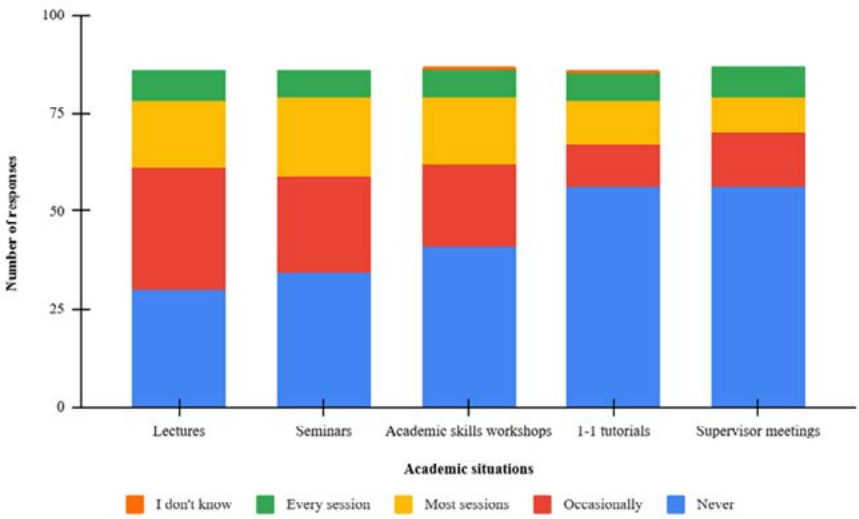

Figure 2. Use of MT by students in academic situations.

2. If you use MT to transcribe the teacher's spoken English, why?

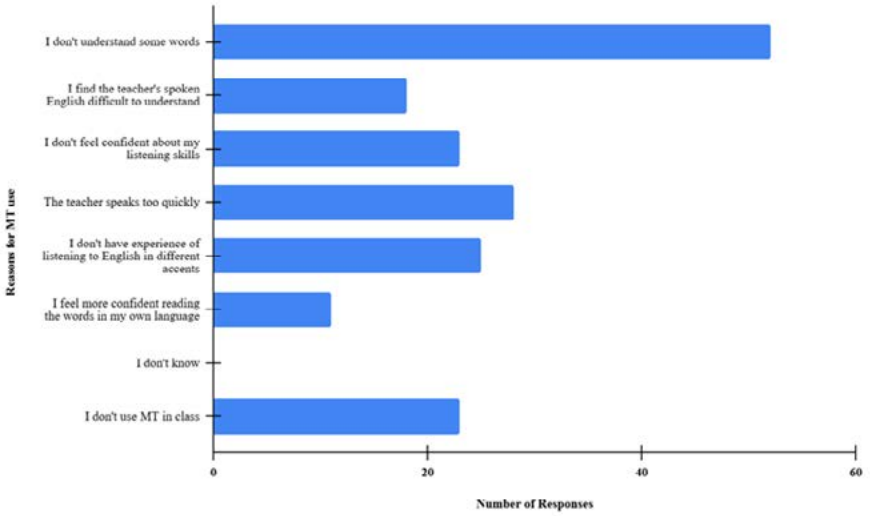

Figure 3. Reasons given for students' MT use when translating teachers' speech.

3. If you use MT to transcribe other students' spoken English, why?

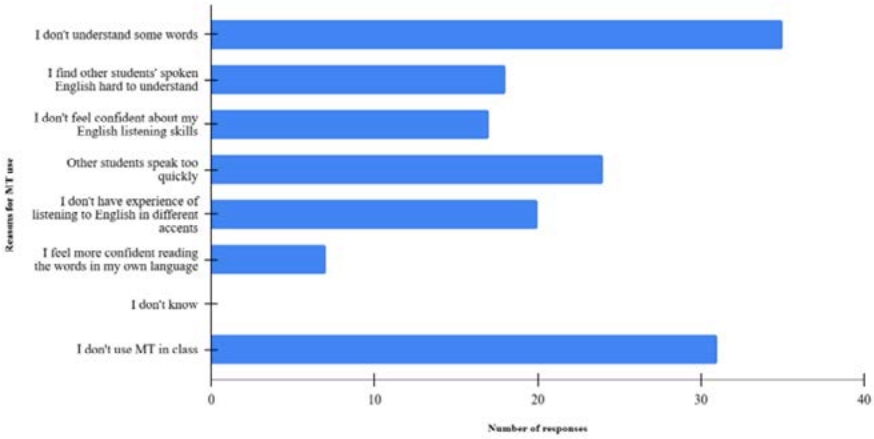

Figure 4. Reasons given for students' MT use when translating other students' speech.

4. How accurately do you feel the MT software translates spoken English?

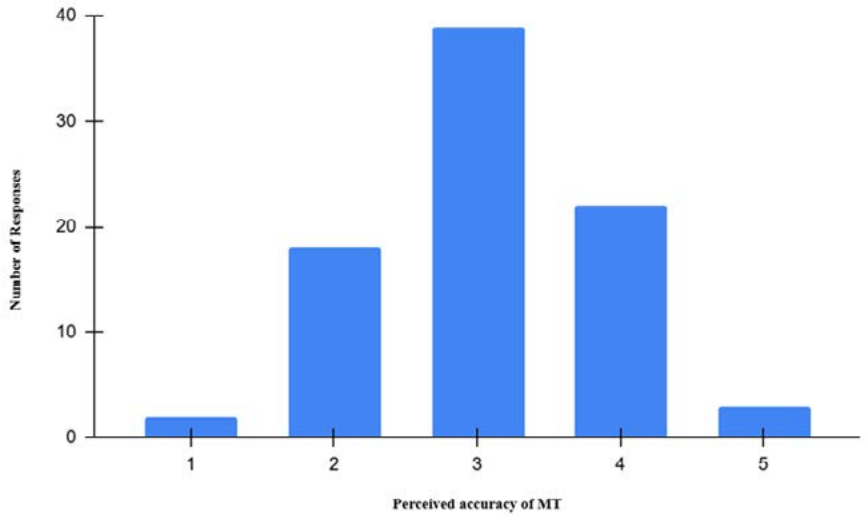

Figure 5. Students' perceptions of the accuracy of MT software (1 = completely inaccurate; 5 = perfectly accurate).

5. To what extent do you feel it is acceptable behaviour to use MT software to translate the teacher's spoken English?

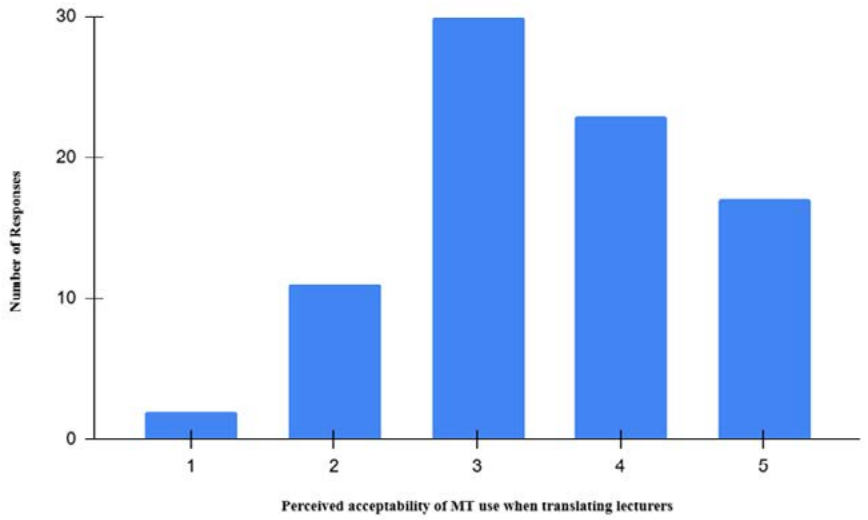

Figure 6. Perceived acceptability of MT use to translate teachers' speech (1 = totally unacceptable; 5 = totally acceptable).

6. To what extent do you feel it is acceptable behaviour to use MT software to translate other students' spoken English?

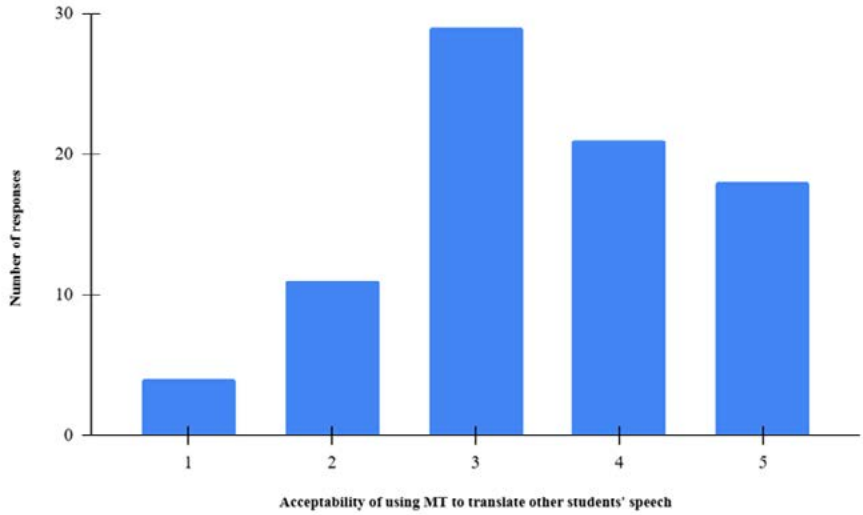

Figure 7. Perceived acceptability of MT use to translate students' speech (1 = totally unacceptable; 5 = totally acceptable).

7. Do you feel that using MT to translate the teacher's spoken English is academic misconduct?

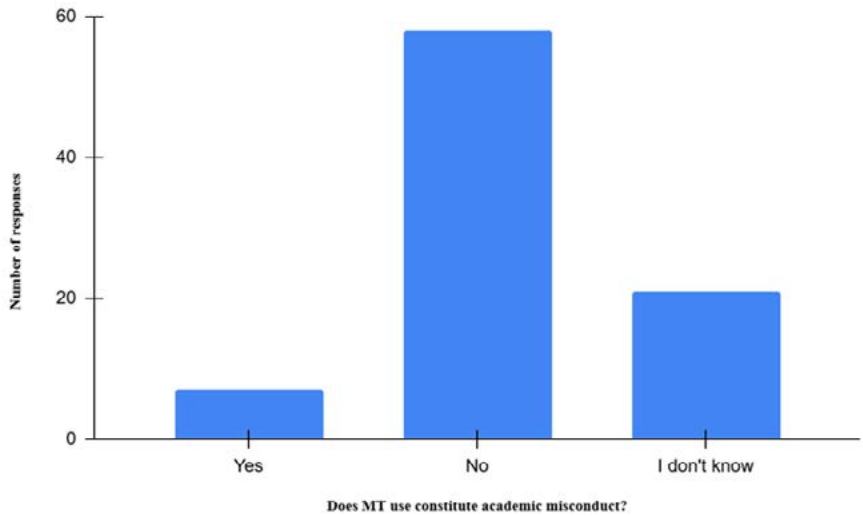

Figure 8. Students' perceptions on whether MT use constitutes academic misconduct.

8. Would you like to reduce your usage of MT software to translate spoken English in the future?

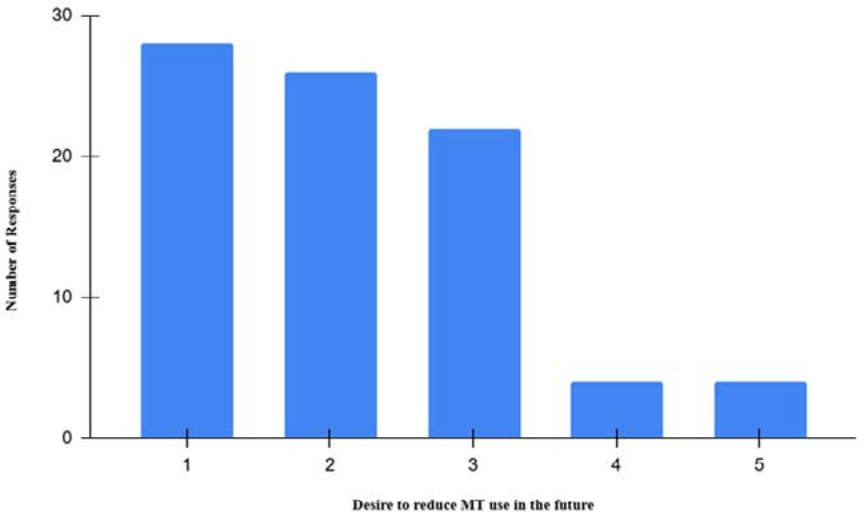

Figure 9. Students' desire to reduce future MT use (1 = I would like to completely stop using MT in the future; 5 = I do not want to reduce my usage of MT software).

Appendix E

Academic staff: quantitative analysis

1. Have you noticed your students using MT to transcribe and translate your spoken English during the following synchronous teaching contexts:

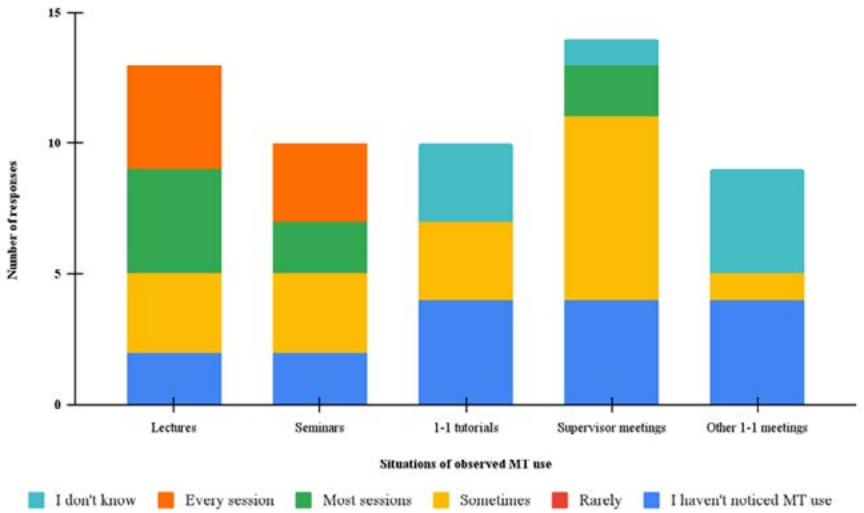

Figure 10. Frequency of MT use among students perceived by academic staff, by situation.