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Teachers should let learners examine the output of AI translation

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An important role of English teachers in the era of AI is to provide opportunities for learners to actively examine and digest English obtained by the help of AI-powered translation tools. This study aimed to conduct an activity, wherein the instructor lets college students whose English proficiency level is around CEFR A2 prepare speech drafts for small oral presentations in English using DeepL. They were required to ask their instructor questions about the English produced by DeepL to enhance their comprehension, and the instructor answered these questions. Students gave presentations in class without reading from their drafts. The presentations were successful overall, despite the participants' limited English proficiency. Such successful experiences can provide learners with confidence and motivation. This activity is suitable for novice learners who have difficulty composing English speech drafts. The teachers' role is crucial in allowing each learner to obtain optimal English from AI-powered translation tools, regardless of their proficiency level.

Keywords: AI, translation, questions, pedagogical support

Introduction

It is relatively easy to produce English speech drafts using AI-powered translation tools (neural machine translation systems including DeepL, and Generative AI). Nevertheless, such speech drafts may not be meaningful if students do not understand them well. This study proposes that teachers let students raise questions about the English generated by AI-powered translation tools to actively examine whether the generated English is appropriate for their own use.

The idea of letting students ask questions was derived from an article published in the *Financial Times* in 2023. When ChatGPT appeared, many schools banned the use of Generative AI for their students because it had become easy for them to do homework using ChatGPT. However, an article published in the *Financial Times* warned that it was not a good idea to ban ChatGPT. Instead, it argued that teachers should allow students to become better users of Generative AI. The article said, "Rather than

banning ChatGPT teachers should ask pupils to give it an assignment and critique its response”(Cavendish, 2023). When this idea is applied to the context of TEFL, teachers can let students examine English produced by AI-powered translation tools if it is suitable for their needs and proficiency level. This is what the author pursued in this study.

Nearly all college students in Japan use AI-powered translation tools. (Kawauchi & Saito, 2023; Nambu, 2023) However, some students use their output without fully understanding it (Sato, 2022; Yamanaka, 2023). Some teachers have emphasized that students should alter the output of AI-powered translation tools to make it more suitable for themselves (Satake, 2021). But how can they do this effectively? It is often difficult for learners to alter their target language. Oda (2023) observes that corrections made by students often result in ungrammatical English. Therefore, this study aimed to conduct an activity in which novice learners of English ask their instructor questions to refine the English generated by AI-powered translation tools.

Method

Participants

Seven university students who majored in economics or business participated in this study. They all grew up in Japan and are native speakers of Japanese and none of them had a significant experience of staying abroad. Their English proficiency level was approximately CEFR A2. All participants took the same elective English course in which the study was conducted. The course was held once a week and the author was the instructor.

Design of small oral activity

A small talk activity was conducted at the beginning of the class, and each student gave a short speech on the topic of the week. The activity was conducted seven times. The topic for the next week was announced a week prior, so the students had time to prepare for a short speech. They submitted a speech draft and questions to the instructor prior to the class, and the instructor answered the questions. The students read the instructor’s replies, altered the English of their speech drafts, and memorized the drafts.

The students used DeepL (free version) in composing speech drafts. They used Japanese as the source language to obtain English translations. The length of each draft was 50–100 words. DeepL provides alternative expressions, and the students were advised to choose expressions that they felt comfortable speaking. Nevertheless, some expressions remained difficult for the students. Thus, they were encouraged to send questions to the instructor to alter the speech drafts into easier English.

The seven topics used for the small talk activity were as follows: All these were taken from everyday life.

Topics for small talk activity. Where to buy clothes / How to check the news / Your

friends / Your favorite course / Your plan for the winter break / Your winter break / What do you want to do for the rest of your college life?

Results

The students raised a total of 66 questions, which were categorized by the author, as shown in Table 1. The most popular question concerned the accuracy of the translation using DeepL. Students often raised questions when the English translation results were not direct translations of the original Japanese. The second most popular type of questions were the ones to ask for alternative expressions. These questions were raised when the English translation by DeepL was difficult for students. See the sample questions given in (2). The questions were originally written in Japanese and they are translated into Japanese for the reader. The words in italics means they are Japanese terms.

Table 1. Types of questions raised by students on the output of DeepL (n=66)

Types of questions	Number	Percent
Accuracy of translations “Is this translation correct?”	28	42.4%
Asking for alternative expressions “Is there any other way to put it?”	12	18.2%
Whether their own idea is correct “I want to say this way. OK?”	11	16.7%
Differences among similar expressions “Are X and Y any different?”	6	9.1%
Grammar “Why do I need X?”	2	3.0%
Others	7	10.6%

Sample questions by students.

- a. Accuracy of translation
“Is ‘disadvantage’ the correct translation of ‘*demeritto*’ (demerit)?”
- b. Asking for alternative expressions
“‘Acquaintances’ is a bit too difficult. Any easier way to say ‘*shiriai*’?”
- c. Whether their own idea is correct
“To mean ‘*jimoto no tomodachi*,’ DeepL says ‘locals.’ But I want to say ‘my local friends.’ Is this OK?”
- d. Differences among similar expressions
“I thought the English for ‘*furugiya*’ was ‘vintage clothes store.’ DeepL says it is ‘thrift store.’ Which one is correct?”
- e. Grammar
“DeepL says, ‘Since I don’t watch TV these days, I get information from my smartphone.’ I think it makes sense without ‘Since.’ Do I still need it?”

In class, the students were all able to deliver speeches without reading drafts. These procedures were typically performed smoothly. They often skipped grammatical morphemes (e.g. 3rd-person singular -s, plural-s), but the speeches were sufficiently intelligible. To the author, their English sounded far more natural than in the past without AI, though this is to be investigated by formal experiments. Two sample speech drafts are provided below:

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Sample speech draft 1 (Topic: Where you buy clothes).

I usually buy clothes at stores. I usually buy clothes at stores because I want to actually see them with my own eyes and try them on before buying them. I often go to GU. However, recently, I have been finding found many cute clothes on the Internet, and I would like to try buying clothes online. (sic)

Sample speech draft 2 (Topic: How to check news everyday).

I usually use my smartphone and watch the news on an app called SmartNews. Since I don't watch TV these days, I get information from my smartphone. The SmartNews app gives me notifications of news, so when there is news that interests me, I open the notification and watch the news. (sic)

Discussion

The sample speech drafts in (3) and (4) may not be particularly interesting to teachers who teach high-proficiency students. However, for the author, who has taught English to CEFR A2 students for nearly 20 years, the speeches were impressive. For the students, this was their first time expressing their thoughts in English in that detail. In class, the author was able to observe the excitement among the students.

Some pointed out a potential problem with this activity: Students could end up relying on DeepL, which could prevent them from coming up with English expressions on their own. This is a legitimate concern. The author believes that this activity provides the first step for learners with limited English proficiency. They are expected to become more independent speakers in the long run, and instructors should provide different types of activities for the next step.

Conclusion

This study examined a small talk activity using DeepL as an assisting tool. The key finding was that CEFR A2 learners were able to deliver small talk speeches when the generated English was appropriately modified. The students altered the translation results and obtained the optimal English for themselves by asking their instructors questions. This activity provides an initial step for English learners to express their thoughts. As learners' proficiency increased, they will rely less on AI-powered translation tools.

This study has some limitations. The speeches were considered successful. However, this was based only on the authors' impressions and must be verified through formal testing.

This study focused on teachers' roles in the era of AI. The quality of English provided by AI-powered translation tools may be nearly perfect. However, this does not imply that they are appropriate for each learner. Thus, the teachers' role in the AI era is to encourage learners to draw their best English for themselves. Asking questions is a strategy that should be investigated more in future studies.

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