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Using machine translators for assessments of EAP courses – perspectives of students and teachers

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Machine translators, such as Google Translate, are AI-powered language tools that can help level the playing field for students learning English as a second or foreign language by providing them with a fairer chance of academic success. However, their use in assessments raises ethical concerns regarding academic integrity. While prior research has explored the perspectives of either students or teachers on this issue, few studies have compared the perspectives of these two key stakeholders. Such a comparison is essential for maintaining the integrity of English of Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. The present study addresses this issue by comparing student and teacher perspectives on using machine translators for EAP written assessments. By gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, the study revealed commonalities and, more importantly, differences between the two groups. These findings carry two significant pedagogical implications: the urgent need to enhance students' AI literacy and the necessity to consider the intended learning outcomes of a course when determining whether and how students can leverage machine translation tools in assessments.

Keywords: Google Translate, academic integrity, EAP assessments, intended learning outcomes

Introduction

This study explores student and teacher perspectives on using machine translators (MTs) for assessments in EAP courses. MTs, such as Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT Translator, are AI-powered language tools. They have been instrumental in improving cross-cultural communication and knowledge dissemination over the last

decade. This is evident in their roles of facilitating reading and writing. When used in academic writing, MTs help to level the playing field for non-native students (Grieve et al., 2024). This is achieved by allowing non-native students of the target language to more effectively express their thoughts and also enabling them to channel their energy into other academic endeavours rather than linguistic considerations (Lee & Briggs, 2021). However, when this technology is used by some students to complete assessments, concerns regarding academic integrity arise (Roe et al., 2023).

The concerns documented in the current literature fall mainly into two areas: length of the translated segment (Dorst et al., 2022) and contextual factors (de Vries & Groves, 2022). The discussion on the length pertains to issues of text ownership. The common understanding is that using MTs at the word/phrase level is generally acceptable, while using it at the sentence level or above is considered unethical and can even be regarded as academic misconduct. This is mainly because, in such cases, “both the language and the idea would no longer be owned by the original writer” (Grieve et al., 2024, p. 6). The discussion on contextual factors centres on students’ fields of study. The use of MTs by students in non-language-focused courses (e.g., mathematics) is much more tolerated than by those in language-focused courses (e.g., EAP). This possibly explains why some students studying German presented in White and Heidrich’s (2013) research perceived the use of MTs in translation as cheating even though they had permission to use them.

Most of the aforementioned research on the ethics of using MTs focuses on students’ perspectives. Very few studies have examined the issue from the perspective of teachers. The limited research that has gathered teachers’ perspectives, for example, Groves and Mundt (2021), has raised other important considerations, e.g., students’ linguistic development and their future employability. There has been little investigation into this issue in the context of EAP courses, which are taken by most students in higher education and are designed to develop students’ academic literacy, i.e. language skills in academic contexts (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). This study intends to bridge this gap by comparing student and teacher perspectives on using MTs for assessments in EAP courses.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected in a major Hong Kong university where the medium of instruction (MOI) is English. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The quantitative data was obtained from two online anonymous surveys, one with 37 language teachers and the other with 47 students from mainland China. These students were new arrivals at the university, and English is a foreign language (EFL) for them. There are two main reasons for gathering data from this group of students. The first one is the limited opportunities for English input and output in mainland China (Butler, 2014; Lin, 2023). The second and more important reason was the higher tendency of these students, compared to local students, to use MTs for assessments, as reported in both student and teacher feedback on the university’s EAP courses.

The surveys for students and teachers contained similar questions about participants’ perspectives on students using MTs for EAP assessments. The questions

focused on the frequency of use, the length of translated segments, and the ethical considerations. The internal consistency reliability of the survey results was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and a subsequent t-test was conducted for comparative analysis. Prior to the t-test, the normality of the survey data was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results of the normality test indicated that the residuals were normally distributed, as evidenced by p-values exceeding the 0.05 threshold.

The qualitative information was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 students and 10 teachers who responded to interview invitations sent to all survey participants. The interviews were structured around the survey questions, and probing questions were added to elicit further details on the topics discussed. The interviews were transcribed and then coded in NVivo 14 for thematic analysis following the methodology outlined by Cohen et al. (2011), which involves repeated reading, categorising and sub-categorising, and cross-checking recurrent themes.

Results and discussion

The results of the study revealed both commonalities and differences between the students' and teachers' perspectives on the use of MTs in completing EAP written assessments (Table 1). Both groups shared similar views on the length of translated segments. A majority of students (66%) and teachers (70%) considered using MTs to translate an entire essay as cheating. A notable percentage of them (20% and 26% respectively) also regarded using MTs to translate sentences or paragraphs as unethical. Only a small percentage of them (14% and 4.2% respectively) considered using MTs at the word/phrase level as unethical. In other words, most of them thought using MTs at the word/phrase level was acceptable.

Table 1. Student and teacher perceptions of MT use as cheating

	Percentage of students (N = 47)	Percentage of teachers (N = 37)
Translating words/phrases	14.0	4.2
Translating sentences/paragraphs	20.0	26.2
Translating essays	66.3	70.0

These results corroborate the context-specific stances in prior studies, which assert that language-focused courses such as EAP should be less tolerant of the use of MTs in assessments. This may explain why, in such courses, when a student “begins to translate entire sentences or paragraphs, the potential for translation plagiarism increases” (Roe, 2023, p. 24). The findings were further supported by the interview data of the current study, as illustrated by Student Comment 1 (SC1) below.

SC1

I think it's much better to translate words or sometimes phrases, but not the whole sentence... because sometimes the translator translates the whole sentence, it will make a mistake, like translate words [in] a Chinese way.

The major differences in perspectives between these two groups were three-fold: awareness of mainland students' use of MTs for assessments, acceptability of using MTs for EAP assessments, and contribution of MTs to students' lifelong language development. The first difference is illustrated in Table 2, which reveals that, compared with students, significantly fewer teachers were aware of the frequent use of MTs by mainland students for assessments ($t(82) = -6.53, p = .001$). This lack of awareness, compounded by the challenges that teachers face in identifying MT-translated texts, as reported by a number of teachers during interviews for the present study, could lead to higher grades for essays translated using MTs. This situation may ultimately allow students who use MTs to complete EAP assessments to "gain an unfair advantage" over their peers who are more aware of the ethical use of MTs (Grieve et al., 2024, p. 8).

Table 2. Awareness of MTs being used by mainland students for EAP assessments

	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Students	47	65.7	25.8			
Teachers	37	28.4	26.3	-6.53	.001	-1.4

Apart from the awareness consideration, students and teachers also differed in their views on the acceptability of using MTs for EAP assessments. This divergence is evidenced by the fact that fewer teachers than students considered the use of MTs for EAP assessments acceptable (Table 3). This difference is statistically significant ($t(55.22) = -2.64, p = .011$). Some teachers explained possible reasons for this difference during the interviews. An example is provided in the Teacher Comment (TC) below.

TC

Using MTs undermines one of the intended learning outcomes of EAP courses - to improve students' language skills.

The intended learning outcomes of a course are an essential context-specific factor in determining the ethicality of using MTs for EAP assessments. However, this consideration involves complexities that students may not typically consider or address.

Table 3. Acceptable level of students using MTs to help with EAP assessments

	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Students	47	3.94	1.14			
Teachers	37	3.38	0.67	2.64	.011	-.62

The third notable difference between the two groups was their perspectives on the value of MTs in enhancing students' long-term writing skills. This distinction is indicated in Table 4, which reveals that compared with students, significantly fewer

teachers believed that leveraging MTs could improve students’ long-term written communication competencies ($t(82) = -2.29, p = .024$).

Table 4. Impact of using MTs on long-term student writing improvement

	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Cohen’s d
Students	47	3.40	1.04			
Teachers	37	2.92	0.86	-2.29	.024	-.50

This observed difference may be attributed to the extensive experience that many students have in using MTs. This is supported by the comments from a student interviewed for the current study, who explained how MTs can facilitate learners’ long-term vocabulary development (see SC2). This student focused on the affordances of machine translation tools in supporting contextual vocabulary learning (also known as incidental learning in lexical studies). This learning approach is fundamental to learners’ long-term language development, especially for enhancing their productive language skills (Lin, 2023).

SC2

... each time you use DeepL, you are expanding and broadening your vocabulary size and also, ... you learn these words in context...because you’re learning in context, you possibly remember more of these words. And so that actually benefits you more in the future.

Another noteworthy finding is that although these students from the mainland were studying in Hong Kong where Google Translate and ChatGPT Translate are easily accessible, over half of them (52.3%) reported primarily using DeepL, an MT widely adopted by Chinese students (Yu & Coulson, 2025), to translate between Chinese and English. When asked about the reasons for their choice during interviews, many students commented that DeepL provides more effective translations between the two languages. These remarks indicate the initial stages of these students’ development in AI literacy.

Conclusions

This mixed methods research compared student and teacher perspectives on using MTs in EAP assessments. By analysing both qualitative and quantitative data, the study revealed a number of similarities and differences between students and teachers regarding this issue. The results confirmed the findings of some prior research (e.g., de Vries & Groves, 2022; Grieve et al., 2024; Roe et al., 2023). For instance, the ethical concerns about using MTs are viewed as scalar rather than dichotomous. In other words, leveraging MTs at the word/phrasal level is acceptable, whereas usage beyond this level causes ethical issues. More importantly, the study identified three major differences in perspectives between students and language teachers, which include awareness of students’ use of MTs for assessments, tolerance of using MTs

in EAP assessments, and perceived value of MTs in contributing to students' lifelong language development. The study also revealed that most students choose machine translation tools based on their effectiveness in performing target tasks rather than their availability. These findings have two profound pedagogical implications.

1. *Raising teachers' awareness*

There is a need to increase teachers' awareness that some EFL students are using MTs for EAP assessments. This is particularly important in universities where English is the MOI, as leveraging technologies such as MTs is a survival strategy for many of these students (Grieve et al., 2024). An important aspect of this awareness is recognizing that using machine translation tools is part of students' translanguaging strategies which facilitate their long-term language development (García & Kleifgen, 2020; Groves & Mundt, 2021; Yu & Coulson, 2025). With enhanced AI literacy, most students will gain a deeper understanding of the affordances and constraints of these tools and thus use them more constructively.

2. *Enhancing students' AI literacy*

Despite many participants in the present study exhibiting early signs of AI literacy, which is evident in their awareness of the ethical use of MTs and their decisions about which MTs to adopt for their academic studies, there remains an urgent need to further develop students' AI literacy. This involves deepening students' understanding of the strengths and limitations of AI-powered language tools, including MTs and tools powered by large language models such as ChatGPT. The success of this development is determined by two major factors. First, training on constructive and appropriate GenAI use should be part of EAP curricula. Such training can greatly enhance students' AI literacy (Grieve et al., 2024). Second, universities should establish clear and comprehensive policies on academic integrity issues related to these tools and implement them transparently and consistently. The policies need to consider the intended learning outcomes of a course when determining whether and how an AI-powered language tool can be used in assessments. This approach ensures that academic integrity policies are context-specific, more persuasive for students, and consequently easier to implement (Roe et al., 2023).

This comparative study investigated student and teacher perspectives in leveraging MTs for EAP assessments. Its first contribution is the identification of differences in views between students and teachers. An even more noteworthy contribution is its enrichment of the existing literature by emphasising the importance of considering the intended learning outcomes of a course when determining the ethicality of using MTs for assessments in higher education. This study has significant pedagogical implications.



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