



English Teaching and the Use of Online Translation: Some Thoughts from Action Research at a University in Japan

Toshiyuki Takagaki

Onomichi City University

ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of on-line translation (OT), it is important to explore how we could integrate OT into EFL teaching. This article reports to what extent students were familiar with OT based on the questionnaire survey at a Japanese public university. The results show that, among the respondents, a majority of them make use of OT for translation, though not so often; They use Google Translate most which they found it on the internet by chance and also because it is free of charge; They mainly use OT for the purpose of dealing with school-related work in which they look up words or sentences, and thought it was useful. The findings were mainly discussed from the viewpoint of how students could become more informed of and more familiar with OT. Then, it was suggested that English teachers should consider using OT in the appropriate teaching context.

INTRODUCTION

English is commonly regarded as an international language because in addition to being used in the traditional English-speaking countries, it is also used in many other countries as a second or foreign language. According to Lewis et al. (2015), the number of speakers of English as a first language is estimated to be around 300 million, while the number of speakers of English as a second language is over 500 million. Consequently, English is widely used as a Lingua Franca (ELF) around the world.

In order to cope with this linguistic reality accompanied by rapid globalization and information and communication technology (ICT) development, the importance of studying English was stressed at the governmental level as seen in *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities* (MEXT, 2003) and *Strategies Toward Global Human Resources Development* (Global Human Resources Development Council, 2012).

Accordingly, universities across the nation have been placing a special focus on English education in an attempt to foster globally competitive students. Many universities have strengthened English language programs, while they have downsized other foreign language programs such as French and German (Iwasaki, 2007).

Figure 1 shows the current efforts of Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology (MEXT) to achieve a student's English proficiency level of CEFR A2 upon graduation from high school. The Japanese government intends all young people to become

functional in English by facilitating their communication skills at school. Measures which have been put into action include an earlier start of teaching English at elementary school (MEXT, 2008), teaching English in English at senior high school (MEXT, 2009), and so on.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) has announced the *Global Communication Plan* (MIC, 2014) which states as a mission that language barriers will be eliminated through such visions as wider global communication, stronger global presence of Japan, and better hospitality at the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. One of the measures of MIC and National Institute of Information and Communication Technology (NICT) is to promote research and development for online translation technology.

In this article, online translation (OT hereafter), is defined as translation through the use of applications and websites that can be done on the Internet by typing in or speaking into a smartphone, tablet, or other ICT devices. The input automatically produces an equivalent text and/or speech in the target language ⁽¹⁾.

Figure 2 shows what the advancement of OT may mean for teaching communicative English. Specifically, with the help of OT, it could be possible for anyone to reach and even surpass CEFR A2 level, while shortening the time for learning. The use of OT apps or websites could be similar to wearing a power-assist suit which makes it much easier for wearers to lift and move a heavy weight. NICT, for example, has developed a multilingual speech translation application called VoiceTra which supports some 30 languages and has developed the quality to the point that its English capability is equivalent to 600 or higher on TOEIC (Otake, 2017, Uchimoto, 2015).

Figure 1. Current English Education

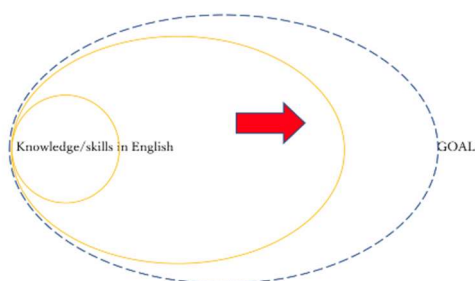
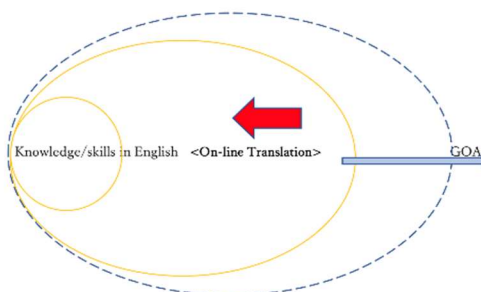


Figure 2. Future English Education



This is not to suggest that the rise of OT will negate the need for English teaching because basic English knowledge will be required to utilize OT apps or websites in an effective and efficient manner (Otake, 2017). Furthermore, simply having a good command of English is likely to be insufficient to work in the global society. In order to become globally functional, students also need sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and intercultural competences that often entail foreign language learning (Byram, 1997; Canale & Swain, 1980).

Nevertheless, we should explore how these seemingly opposite directions shown in Figures 1 and 2 can be integrated, and search for ways to achieve sound integration, because despite OT's potential impact on the future of English teaching as a foreign language, research in this area is scarce. Moreover, this investigation will generate necessary implications not only for English but also for other foreign language teaching.

The purpose of the current study is to explore the relationship between English teaching and OT at university by surveying how familiar students are with OT. The research questions to

be addressed are: (1) To what extent are students familiar with OT? (2) How do they actually use OT?

To answer these questions, data will be gathered through questionnaires. Then, the findings concerning the students' familiarity with and use of OT will be discussed. Lastly, implications for English teaching will be provided.

SURVEY

Participants are students who were enrolled in *Sophomore English* at a public university in Japan whose majors include Japanese literature and economics. Their English proficiency level is considered beginning intermediate whose ®TOEIC Bridge scores range from 70 to 100, roughly equivalent to CEFR A2.

A questionnaire was developed to address the research questions. The questionnaire was administered to a class of 20 as a pilot study in December, 2020. Based on the responses, some question items were revised. The final version⁽²⁾ was distributed through Microsoft Forms in July, 2021.

Fifty-one out of 60 students responded to the questionnaire. The responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. On the Use of OT (N=51)

Questions	51 Responses
1. Have you ever used translation/interpretation apps or Internet sites?	Yes (44) No (7)
2. Do you use them for translation or interpretation?	English-Japanese translation (37) Japanese-English translation (30) English-Japanese interpretation (4) Japanese-English interpretation (4)
3. How often do you use the apps/Internet sites?	A couple of times a week(21), Once a week (19), Often (4)
4. Name of the application(s) or Internet site(s).	Google Translate (27), Weblio (8), DeepL(3), Miscellaneous (5)
5. Why did you choose the app(s)/site(s)?	By chance (13), Free (11), Top hit(6), Friends (4), Easy to use (4), Famous(4), Miscellaneous(5)
6. When do you use the applications or Internet sites?	Assignments (39), Class (16), Miscellaneous (9)
7. What is the linguistic unit for the use of the apps/sites?	Word (38), Sentence (17), Multiple sentence (5)
8. Are the apps or Internet site useful?	Useful (34), Very useful (9), Not so useful(1)

Note. Multiple answers were allowed for questions 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Generally speaking, the results show that, among the respondents, a majority of them make use of OT for translation (Q1 & Q2), though not so often (Q3). They use Google Translate (Q4)

most which they found it on the internet by chance and also because it is free of charge (Q5). They mainly use OT for the purpose of dealing with school-related work (Q6) in which they look up words or sentences (Q7), and thought it was useful (Q8).

DISCUSSION

Some points to consider have resulted from the survey. Firstly, among the respondents, a majority make use of OT for translation, often at word-level. This indicates that these Internet sites or apps are replacing traditional dictionaries and electronic dictionaries. Also, their frequent OT use of sentence-level translation is something that dictionaries cannot handle well. Given that most students have smartphones and personal computers nowadays, the transition from dictionaries to OT makes sense and seems inevitable.

Secondly, only a small number of students have ever used OT for interpretation. This is reasonable in the Japanese context because, besides the pandemic situation of Covid-19, they rarely have an opportunity to speak English in their daily lives, particularly when they live in a remote place from big cities. Naturally, their chances to speak English are limited to English classes. If so, they would never become familiar with OT unless they are recommended to operate the speech translation apps or sites at school. Thus, it may be important that English teachers show, to some extent, how some OT applications or websites can function as an interpreter, and be meaningful for students to have hands-on experiences in class during which they could acquire basic OT skills.

Thirdly, only a limited number of OT were frequently mentioned by the students, although there are many other applications and sites available. Since their use of OT is predominantly confined to class-related purposes, it may be necessary to show them in class how these OT apps and sites work, because each app and site may have different purposes. Some apps are good at translation for travel, while others are good at translation for business settings.

Finally, it should be noted that some teachers may feel uneasy to employ OT apps or websites in class. They may worry students would not learn English by excessively relying on OT. However, as no one would disagree to the use of crutches or wheelchairs when you have trouble walking, it is a matter of how and when to use OT, and how much and how long, all of which are subject to vary depending on students' proficiency level, the purpose of the study, length of lesson, and so forth.

CONCLUSION

This article reports to what extent students were familiar with OT based on the questionnaire survey at a Japanese public university. The findings were mainly discussed from the viewpoint of how students could become more informed of and more familiar with OT. Then, it was suggested that English teachers should consider using OT in the appropriate teaching context.

In this article, OT in the English teaching context was mostly viewed from the short-term perspective. In the long run, the value of English learning will be questioned more than ever before with the rapid development of OT. It has been pointed out repeatedly in Japan in the past that studying English takes so much time and energy only to end up with poor outcomes⁽³⁾.

Teachers, therefore, should be capable of substantiating the advantages of studying English. Otherwise, teaching English at school may not be able to endure the test of time should no language barriers exist due to the drastic improvement of OT and other related artificial intelligence technology (Yamanaka, 2019).

Last, but not the least, it should be mentioned that this is an action research project from which any results cannot be generalized. It is hoped more studies from both quantitative and qualitative viewpoints will be carried out to reach a deeper understanding of the nature and the role of OT in English education, leading to better teaching and programs in other languages as well.

NOTES

1. Some online apps and websites can be operated off-line as well.
2. First three question items ask students' major, year (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th year), and TOEIC Bridge score. TOEIC Bridge test is administered for all the freshmen on campus at the end of academic year.
3. Hiraizumi vs. Watanabe debate (1975) is one of the famous cases in Japan. Hiraizumi, a congressman, proposed that only a limited number of students study English, whereas Watanabe, a professor of English, argued for English education which would merit students' mental growth as well as raising cross-linguistic awareness.

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Toshiyuki Takagaki is a Professor of English at Onomichi City University, Japan, where he has been teaching and researching for thirty years. His interests are bilingualism, world Englishes, and EFL teaching.

Email: takagaki@onomichi-u.ac.jp