Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions towards the Impact of Using Google Translate on Their Translation Skills

Raghad A. Alburaih[1] & Farah Nasser Algraini[1]

[1] Department of English Language, College of Education, Majmaag University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Farah Nasser Algraini, Department of English Language, College of Education, Majmaag University, Al-Majmaah, 11952, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: f.algraini@mu.edu.sa

Abstract

This study investigated the impact of using Google Translate (GT) on the translation skills of EFL both male and female students from different Saudi universities. The instrument of this study was a questionnaire that was modified according to the study's purposes. The questionnaire contained 22 items divided into 3 sections. It was answered by 212 participants from different Saudi universities. According to the findings, participants had a positive attitude towards GT when using it as a translation tool for expanding their vocabulary. They were utilizing it as a quick and easy dictionary since they wanted to make sure of the meaning. Additionally, many participants mentioned that GT made them too lazy to check dictionaries. Students indicated that GT would negatively affect the text without reviewing. They confirmed that overreliance on GT can harm their translation abilities. Finally, students must know that GT is a double-edged weapon that can be both positive and detrimental if used incorrectly. According to the findings, recommendations and suggestions for further research were provided.

Keywords: Google Translate, machine translation, translation skills, EFL, perceptions

1. Introduction

When human tribes began traveling and recognizing the importance of trade and communication, they realized the value of learning each other's languages. Due to the increased contact and trade among people, this need has become more urgent. English is one of the languages that is used as a tool of communication among people whose first languages differ from the lingua franca (Clyne, 2000). Learning English is sometimes a difficult process for language learners (Erin, 2021). Translation is one of the problems that students encounter when learning English. Translation is the process of substituting a text in one's language (House, 2015). The need for translation arises from the necessity of human communication, in which language obstructs comprehension. Global communication cannot occur without translation (Newmark, 2003).

The introduction of new technological tools has fundamentally altered previous techniques, opening up new possibilities for both language learners and teachers in the field of language acquisition (Tabatabaei & Gui, n.d.). Some researchers argue that translation approaches to language learning and instruction are reviving as a result of the needs and reality of today's globalized world (Dagilienė, 2003). Machine Translation (MT) is a type of computer program that converts documents from one language to another (Sukkhwan, 2014). Google Translate (GT) is a prominent machine translation service. Most EFL university students use GT (Munpru & Wuttikrikunlaya, 2013). Because of that, this study focuses on GT rather than other MT technologies. It aims to investigate the Saudi EFL students' perceptions towards the impact of using GT on their translation skills.

If someone has ever taken a foreign language class, he/she must be aware that instructors prevent students from using GT to accomplish assignments. Despite this, many students still use GT to translate their texts because it is free and convenient (Carl, Gutermuth & Hansen-Schirra, 2015). However, a heavy reliance on GT may hinder students' progress towards translation skills (Boase-Beier, 2014). It has been indicated that EFL students face a variety of problems when using GT, such as incorrect use of terms and unfamiliar words (Putri & Ardi, 2015). According to the researchers' best knowledge, a paucity of studies has been conducted in Saudi Arabia on this subject. The research has been rare regarding the impact of GT on translation skills in either the Arab or international contexts, and most of these studies focused on the impact of GT towards one of these four basic

skills which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Considering these reasons, this study is important in filling this literature gap.

Moreover, this study attempts to address the following questions:

(1) What are the Saudi EFL students' perceptions toward the positive impact of using Google Translate on their translation skills?

(2) What are the Saudi EFL students' perceptions toward the negative impact of using Google Translate on their translation skills?

Nonetheless, the findings of this research are expected to be valuable for students, educators, and researchers alike. This study sheds light on EFL students' translation knowledge, providing them with the chance to recognize the benefits and drawbacks of GT. In addition, this study helps teachers understand the advantages of GT that can affect their students' translation abilities. Moreover, the results of the study serve as a guide for researchers who are interested in conducting similar studies or exploring other aspects of GT translation in the future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Translation in the Technological Age

Nowadays, the transmission of knowledge, ideas, and information requires translation. Moreover, translation is necessary for effective and sympathetic cross-cultural communication. As a result, translation is essential for social harmony and peace (Burrow-Goldhahn, 2018). It has the power to alter history in the process of disseminating new information. It involves a lot of creativity because it is inherently a reconstruction of a text (Morel, 2019). It allows people to gain a deeper understanding of unknown cultures and societies, not just through their literature, but also through their films and other electronic media (Kapur, 2014). Translation is important in many fields such as business, literature, media, journalism, and education (Simurka, 2020).

In the past, EFL students used dictionaries to understand unfamiliar words in a different language, which was time-consuming and difficult to interpret accurately. With advancements in technology, language learners now have access to new tools that make translation easier (Habeeba, 2020). As societies develop, technology permeates daily routines, making life more efficient and comfortable (McGee & Ericsson, 2002). Translation is an indispensable skill in language acquisition, helping learners acquire new vocabulary and enhance their understanding of foreign words and expressions. Translators are more likely to notice differences between languages, facilitating overall foreign language learning. Computer-assisted translation is a relatively new method of translation that continues to grow rapidly. Initially, it primarily consisted of word-for-word translations using dictionary programs, but has evolved to include extensive texts containing complex phrases (Tarjama, n.d.). Machine translation (MT) has gained attention as a digital technology, allowing students and scholars to produce written compositions and comprehend English-language texts. MT has become one of the most helpful devices due to technology improvements, expediting the process and reducing overall costs. Google Translate is one of the most widely recognized and popular MT software available.

2.1.1 Google Translate

Numerous MT software options are now available to assist individuals in translating any text. By the end of 2008, Google released Google Translate tool. GT allows users to translate texts or web pages from one language to another automatically (Boitet, Blanchon, Seligman & Bellynck, 2009). In order to determine the most commonly used translations, Google uses statistical machine translation (Brown et al, 1990) based on linguistic modeling, statistical decision theory, and matching probability (Ney, 1995). GT serves 200 million users with one billion daily translations (Shankland, n.d.) and outperforms other publicly available machine translation algorithms (Seljan, Brkić & Kučiš, 2011). It is primarily designed to provide users with quick and affordable access to general information from the original texts, although the quality of the translation is considered moderate (Anazawa, Ishikawa, Park, Kiuchi, 2013).

Google Translate, like any other technological invention, has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the most significant advantages of GT is that it is free and simple to use, and it can assist translators and students in a variety of ways (Carl, Gutermuth & Hansen-Schirra, 2015). Moreover, GT is a translation memory software and improves its performance as it processes more translation orders and revisions (Alsalem, 2019). furthermore, GT is frequently used for vocabulary development, writing, reading, and translation purposes (Sukkhwan, 2014). In addition, a large number of machine translation tools are freely available on the internet, but GT is considered the most widely used tool with superior accuracy compared to other machine translation tools (Aiken & Balan, 2011).

On the other side, there are notable disadvantages associated with GT. The most significant drawback of GT is often providing out-of-context, irrelevant, or even ridiculous translations. The quality of GT's English–Arabic translations is consistently poor, and those translations cannot be reliable unless they are independently reviewed by a qualified human translator (Alsalem, 2019). Furthermore, GT has no benefit for the learning process because it just fosters students' dependency, lacks accuracy, and prevents students from recognizing alternative words that are generally found in printed dictionaries. Additionally, GT is considered as a complementary tool rather than a grammatical tool. This tool is incapable of accurately identifying some grammatical rules, such as the subject-verb agreement that human translators are well-versed in (e.g., "Fat salary" is translated into Arabic as (راتب سمين) instead of (راتب عال جدًا), or "Never say die" becomes (لا تقل مت أبدا) instead of (لا تيأس). See Figure 1.
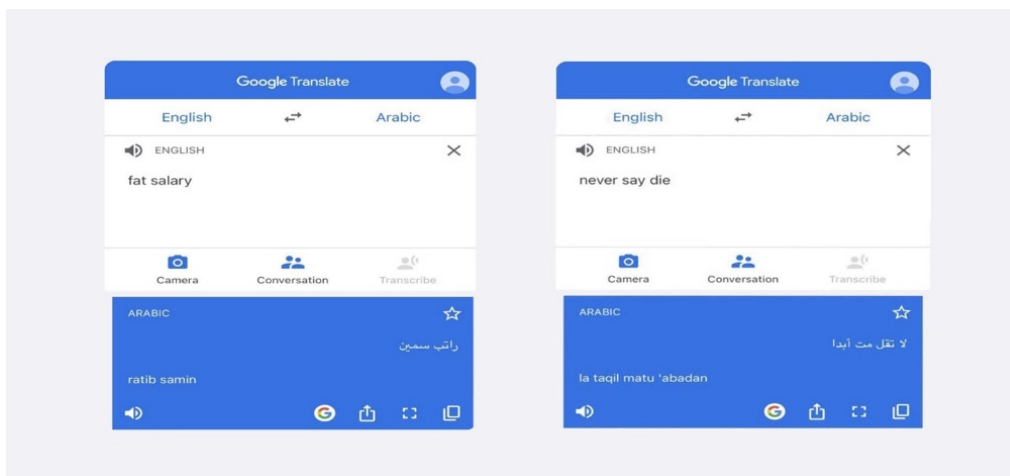

Figure 1. Google Translates' translation of some collocations

Despite the advancements in GT, it still cannot translate the word into context. It has been suggested that students should be cautious when relying on GT for translating words in several contexts as GT can lead to misunderstandings (Medvedev, 2016). One of the major translation problems for GT is the translation of special fixed phrases which are idioms and proverbs such as "Costs an arm and a leg" that is translated by GT into Arabic as (يكلف ذراعًا ورجلًا) while the correct translation is "باهظ الثمن", or "When pigs fly" that GT translates it into Arabic as (عندما تطير الخنازير) while the correct translation is "إنه أمر مستحيل". Also, "The exam was a piece of cake" is translated by GT into (كان الامتحان قطعة من الكعكة) rather than (كان الامتحان سهلٌ جدًا). See Figure 2.
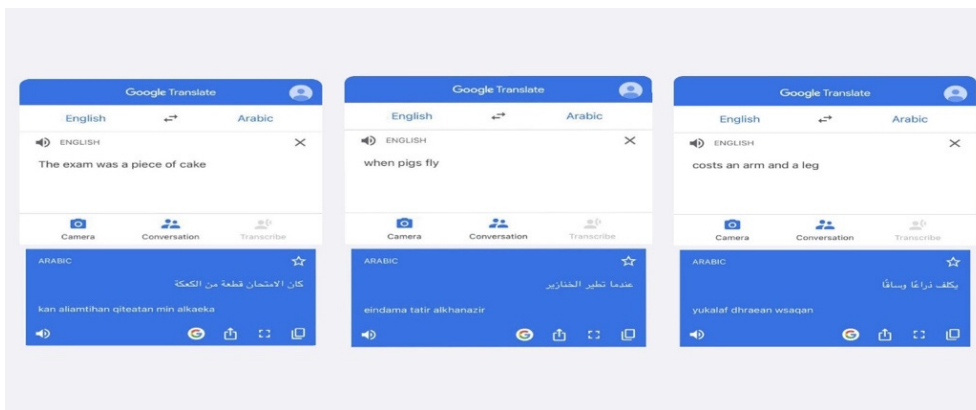

Figure 2. Google Translates' translation of some idioms

Notably, it is a challenge for GT to accurately translate idioms as they require indirect understanding and cultural knowledge. GT's inability to interpret idioms can lead to considerable, critical errors in translated texts (Amitia & Yuwono, 2020). This can be problematic for EFL students because this may hinder their abilities to develop their fundamental translation skills if they rely solely on GT. However, it is crucial for EFL students to recognize GT's limitations and use it as a supplementary tool instead of just solely relying on it. Gaining the essential translation skills, including understanding and accurately interpreting idiomatic expressions, cultural nuances, comprehending contexts, requires necessary practice and knowledge that GT cannot offer. Seeking guidance from human translators, making use of target language recourses, actively studying idiomatic expressions are

vital steps for EFL students to enhance their translations capabilities beyond the limitations of GT.

2.1.2 Google Translate vs. Human Translator

It can be said that GT is helpful for people to offer a quick translation (Li, Graesser & Cai, 2014) although it may cause some lexical errors (Hijazi, 2013). However, GT automatically translates sentence by sentence without considering the semantic meaning of the whole text. It lacks the flexibility to consider the differences in syntactic structure between the source and target languages. The human translator, on the other hand, is effectively capable of breaking down texts into single, independent phrases while taking into account various qualities (Li, Graesser & Cai, 2014). Furthermore, GT cannot recognize culture. Lexical items, which are considered a significant part of cultures such as slang, idioms, and certain names, are too complex for machines to understand or interpret. In fact, machines have never been able to overcome this challenge. While this is a huge difficulty for machines, native speakers who are fluent in the source and target languages and are familiar with their cultures' idioms and slang are capable of finding adequate equivalents in the target language (Sitsanis, 2018). However, it can be proposed that there is no doubt that GT is a valuable tool for communication although its shortcomings may cause some inaccuracies, confusion, and even offense. As a result, human translation surpasses GT in terms of quality. After all, machine translation can never be able to match the level of human comprehension necessary to generate a high-quality, professional translation.

2.2 Previous Studies

In a conducted study, the performance of Google Translate in translating legal material was evaluated focusing on two levels which are lexical and syntactic. English articles from various legal contracts were used as input, and the system translated it into Arabic. The study concluded that GT is not suitable for legal translation due to its lack of precision (Hijazi, 2013). Another study examined students' motivations to use GT to improve their English learning. A total of 125 non-English students of Songkhla Rajabhat University participated in this study. Research instruments included a five-point rating scale questionnaire, a checklist, and translation assignments (English-Thai and Thai-English). The findings revealed that almost all pupils used GT only on a limited basis. The students had a positive attitude toward the GT even though it had several limitations (Sukkhwan, 2014). In addition, a study aimed to determine how GT is a useful tool for developing students' translation skills. The research was carried out in one of Bandung Regency's vocational schools in West Java. The findings of this study implied that using GT could help students to improve their translating skills (Kusmayadi, 2014).

Moreover, another study conducted to examine if there is any significant difference in Chinese-to-English translation accuracy between intermediate and advanced human translators and commonly used free machine translation systems. The results showed that the proficient native Chinese speakers were significantly more accurate and better at translating sentences and phrases from Chinese to English than the freely available online machine translation applications used. In comparison to machine translation technologies, human translators with at least a moderate level of experience in a non-native language generated considerably fewer translation errors. This outcome can be attributed to the various human capabilities to consider subtle linguistic variations, context, and nuanced meanings associated with different languages and cultures (Brazill, Masters & Munday, 2017). Furthermore, a study was carried out to observe Saudi EFL students' attitudes regarding the use of GT. A total of 92 Saudi EFL university took part in the study. The study found that nearly all participants used GT, mostly for vocabulary, writing, and reading purposes while translation was the least frequently employed. The findings also revealed that GT was commonly used to look up the meaning of unfamiliar words, complete writing assignments, and read an English textbook (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2017).

Additionally, a study was conducted to investigate the EFL students' perceptions of GT and how it may affect their translation skills. The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the participants viewed GT as a quick dictionary, using it for sentence-by-sentence translation and vocabulary enrichment. Most of them acknowledged that GT could not be a reliable tool with the translation quality falling between good and weak. Surprisingly, despite the limitations, students reported that using GT improved their translation skills, particularly learning and practicing grammar (Yanti & Meka, 2019). Also, an alternative study was carried out to investigate the effectiveness of GT and the students' attitudes toward using it. It was discovered that the participants had a high level of positive attitude toward GT. The study also showed that GT has some advantages such as low cost, ease of use, and quick translation (Habeeba, 2020). Another research was conducted to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students at Pendidikan Muhammadiyah University Sarongs' Early Childhood Teacher Education Study Program regarding Google Translate (GT). The participants heavily relied on GT for writing tasks and expressed a belief that the benefits of GT outweighed its drawbacks. The researchers predicted increased effectiveness in GT usage in the future based on their findings (Axelina & Setiawan, 2021). An

additional study explored students' perceptions of using GT in online English classes. The findings indicated that students held a positive view of GT as a translation tool for enhancing their English language learning. When encountering uncertain meanings, students frequently turned to GT for immediate clarification (Khotimah, Wahyudin & Rohbiah, 2021). Furthermore, a study focused on examining the adverse effects of students' dependency on Google Translate and strategies to address or mitigate these effects in the classroom. Although there are advantages to using Google Translate, the research findings revealed that students' addiction to relying on Google Translate during presentation classes had negative consequences (Hardini & Dewi, 2021).

In summary, the studies reveal that Google Translate (GT) is a useful tool for vocabulary acquisition, writing support, and reading comprehension among students. Although its translation quality is average, it can aid in language skills development and grammar understanding. However, human translators with native language expertise perform better than machine translation systems in terms of accuracy and nuanced understanding. These findings underscore the need for careful and informed usage of machine translation tools in various contexts.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The study involved 212 EFL students including 85.4% female and 14.6% male EFL students from different educational levels from a variety of Saudi universities. The samples were divided into two groups; the first one included 50 for conducting the reliability and validity tests and the second group included 162 whose responses were collected to be analyzed and discussed. Appendix A provides detailed information about the research participants.

3.2 Instruments

The research instrument was a questionnaire to answer the research questions regarding the EFL students' perceptions towards the negative and positive impact of GT on their translation skills. The researchers adapted 10 statements of Yanti et al's (2019) study to serve the purpose of this study. In addition, the questionnaire used 22 statements divided into three parts. In the first part, three Yes/No questions were used to collect demographic information. The second part consisted of nine items included the advantages of using GT, and the last part consisted of 10 items regarding the disadvantages of using GT. The second and third parts used the Likert rating scale, including five ratings from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". In order to evaluate the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, 19 items of the second and third parts were specifically utilized. The first section, on the other hand, was dedicated to collecting demographic information and was not included in the reliability and validity testing process.

3.2.1 Reliability of the Questionnaire

Once the total is 80% or above, the instrument is considered reliable (Artstein & Poesio, 2008). With a score of 0.85, the instrument is highly reliable.

3.2.2 Validity of the Questionnaire

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, a panel of EFL instructors was involved in the validation process, and they offered their comments and suggestions. The researchers made necessary changes based on the panel's input. By implementing these modifications, the questionnaire was enhanced to effectively assess the targeted aspects and align with the research goals, resulting in increased validity.

3.2.3 Statistical Validity of the Questionnaire

In order to statistically validate the questionnaire, the Pearson test was used to measure the correlation coefficient between each item and the whole field. According to Tables 1 and 2, the significance values were less than 0.05. Hence, the measurement of the fields was valid to achieve the main objective of the study.

Table 1. The correlation coefficient of the pros of using GT

No.	Item	Pearson Correlation	P-Value
A1	EFL students can utilize Google Translate to translate the text in the classroom.	.574**	<.001
A2	It is easier to translate the texts by using Google Translate.	.626**	<.001
A3	Google Translate is great for quick translation.	.597**	<.001
A4	Google Translate makes me confident when translating texts.	.484**	<.001
A5	The translations from Google Translate are as accurate as those of the dictionaries	.429**	.002
A6	My translation skills have been improved with Google Translate.	.524**	<.001
A7	Google Translate helps me enrich my vocabulary.	.554**	<.001
A8	Google Translate is faster in translating than human translator.	.604**	<.001
A9	Google Translate is available 24/7.	.553**	<.001

Table 2. The correlation coefficient of the cons of using GT

No.	Item	Pearson Correlation	P-Value
B1	Human translation is more efficient than Google translation.	.441**	.001
B2	I only use Google translate when I face difficulties in comprehending translation in class.	.486**	<.001
B3	Google Translate makes me lazy to use the dictionaries.	.456**	<.001
B4	I use other tools to recheck Google Translate's translation before submitting.	.521**	<.001
B5	Learning structure is hard for me when I use Google Translate.	.491**	<.001
B6	Google Translate does not provide me with the exact meaning.	.546**	<.001
B7	The sentence structure is messed up by Google Translate.	.549**	<.001
B8	With Google Translate, the meaning can be lost in translation.	.500**	<.001
B9	Google Translate does not have any cultural knowledge of the language.	.478**	<.001
B10	Google Translate does not have a system to correct for translation errors.	.395**	.005

4. Results and Discussion

Table 3. The percentage of using Google Translate

Questions	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage	Sometimes	Percentage
1) Do you have the Google Translate application on your device?	146	90%	17	10%	-	-
2) Do you frequently use Google Translate in translating the text?	61	33%	12	7%	90	55%
3) Do you use another machine translator?	74	45%	89	55%	-	-

Table 4. The result of mean scores, standard deviation, ranks, and P-value for the pros of using GT

No.	Item	Mean	Std.Dev	Rank	P-value
A1	EFL students can utilize Google Translate to translate the text in the classroom.	3.19	.99	16	<.001
A2	It is easier to translate the texts by using Google Translate.	3.30	1.19	15	<.001
A3	Google Translate is great for quick translation.	3.72	1.10	18	<.001
A4	Google Translate makes me confident when translating texts.	2.41	1.12	18	<.001
A5	The translations from Google Translate are as accurate as those of the dictionaries	2.12	1.07	19	.007
A6	My translation skills have been improved with Google Translate.	2.85	1.12	17	<.001
A7	Google Translate helps me enrich my vocabulary.	3.59	1.10	13	<.001
A8	Google Translate is faster in translating than human translator.	3.79	1.01	9	<.001
A9	Google Translate is available 24/7.	4.21	.95	2	<.001

Table 5. The result of mean scores, standard deviation, ranks, and P-value for the cons of using GT

No.	Item	Mean	Std.Dev	Rank	P-value
B1	Human translation is more efficient than Google translation.	4.28	.97	1	<.001
B2	I only use Google translate when I face difficulties in comprehending translation in class.	3.62	1.07	12	<.001
B3	Google Translate makes me lazy to use the dictionaries.	3.54	.98	14	<.001
B4	I use other tools to recheck Google Translate's translation before submitting.	3.81	1.08	8	<.001
B5	Learning structure is hard for me when I use Google Translate.	3.97	.99	7	.007
B6	Google Translate does not provide me with the exact meaning.	3.73	1.00	10	<.001
B7	The sentence structure is messed up by Google Translate.	3.99	.92	5	<.001
B8	With Google Translate, the meaning can be lost in translation.	4.06	.86	3	<.001
B9	Google Translate does not have any cultural knowledge of the language.	4.05	.96	4	<.001
B10	Google Translate does not have a system to correct for translation errors.	.395**	1.03	6	<.001

The findings showed that the majority of participants have downloaded the application of GT on their devices, and they frequently use it to translate text from foreign languages in their classrooms. These findings support those of (Sukhhwan, 2014) who found that all students practically utilized GT, as well as those of (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2017) who claimed that GT was frequently used to check up on the meaning of new words. Regarding the benefits of GT gained by EFL students, they used it as a quick and easy tool for translating texts. This is in line with findings presented by (Habeeba, 2020) and (Yanti & Meka, 2019) who found that GT is considered a quick and easy machine translation. Moreover, with GT, the participants claimed that they could comprehend text far better, helping them enrich their vocabulary. This result is in harmony with several views raised by different researchers such as (Khotimah, Wahyudin & Rohbiah, 2021) who found that GT was used immediately if there was a doubt about the meaning, [39] who figured out that participants used GT often to learn new vocabulary, and (Yanti & Meka, 2019) who stated that GT could enrich students' vocabulary. The participants considered this a significant benefit of GT that it is always available, and that GT was used 96% of the time by students. Therefore, it is available all the time and everywhere.

Despite GT's advantages, it has several disadvantages as well. Regarding item (A6), which indicates that translation skills can be developed through GT, it received a low rating while (Kusmayadi, 2014) reported contrary results, hypothesizing that the use of GT in language learning improves the students' skills, specifically the students' translation skills. In addition, the participants showed that they tend to use other tools to recheck GT's translation before submitting their assignments because GT is not always correct according to how they believed. Since the translation of GT is not as accurate as printed dictionaries and sometimes the translated meaning can be lost, they were afraid of its negative effect on their language learning processes. These findings are consistent with the results mentioned by many researchers such as (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2017) who stated that GT cannot correctly translate all words and sometimes delivers wrong meanings, thus students should check the meaning in a dictionary or seek help from their teachers or classmates. Also, Yanti and Meka (2019) argued that almost all students realized that GT could not be good without rechecking. Furthermore, Hardini and Dewi (2021) stated that students realized that learning became difficult because GT did not give an accurate translation.

Nevertheless, several students agreed that GT does not have a system for correcting translation errors, which is consistent with Hijazi's (2013) findings, emphasizing that GT commits a number of lexical errors due to the system failure to distinguish between multiple legal senses. Meanwhile, a large number of students thought that learning structure is hard for them when using GT, and the sentence structure may be missed up. The findings corroborate what Hardini and Dewi concluded observing that students think GT still has lots of grammar mistakes, so they might follow the wrong ones. In addition, students agreed with the point which is that GT does not have cultural knowledge of the language. The findings confirm the study of Brazill, Masters and Munday (2017). As a result, most of the students were not confident when using GT. The same results were reported by other researchers such as Hardini and Dewi (2021). Moreover, the students agreed that if they often use GT, they may be lazy to open dictionaries. The findings corroborate the results of Yanti and Meka (2019).

5. Conclusion

It can be said that GT is undeniably popular among EFL students as a useful tool to help them in translating texts. Most of the participants utilize GT. In addition to the ease of use, students use GT as a speedier dictionary to assist them in looking up meanings faster. The participants also agreed that they can increase their vocabulary with the assistance of GT. However, despite the fact that GT is one of the fastest machine translations, its translation is not as accurate as that of dictionaries. It is evident that GT cannot always be depended on to translate from Arabic into English. Moreover, several participants agreed that using GT makes them too lazy to look up words in a dictionary. Furthermore, students recommended using it carefully and to double-check the results of GT.

6. Limitations, Recommendations, and Suggestions of the Study

The conducting duration of this study is considered a significant limitation as this duration was limited to just one semester. Thus, it is worth mentioning that the results of this study migh have been impacted by the short duration. However, based on the findings, EFL learners are recommended to get benefit from their prior knowledge to enhance their accuracy of translated outcomes while using Google Translate as an assistant. Furthermore, guidance should be provided to EFL learners in order to reduce distractions that prevent their practice time and block effective studying, and accordingly fostering their knowledge and proficiency. Additionally, EFL teachers can vitally teach their students some strategies to sufficiently employ GT to improve their translation skills, contributing to boost EFL students' professional development of translation skills.

Moreover, some potential areas for future research can be suggested. For example, implementing the same study in various settings or using alternative machine translation tools. Also, conducting this study with different educational levels to express potential variations in results could be another suggestion for further research. In addition, researchers can examine the effectiveness of using GT on fostering EFL learners' comprehension skills through similar studies or carrying out the study with EFL students from different countries to investigate potential cultural influences.

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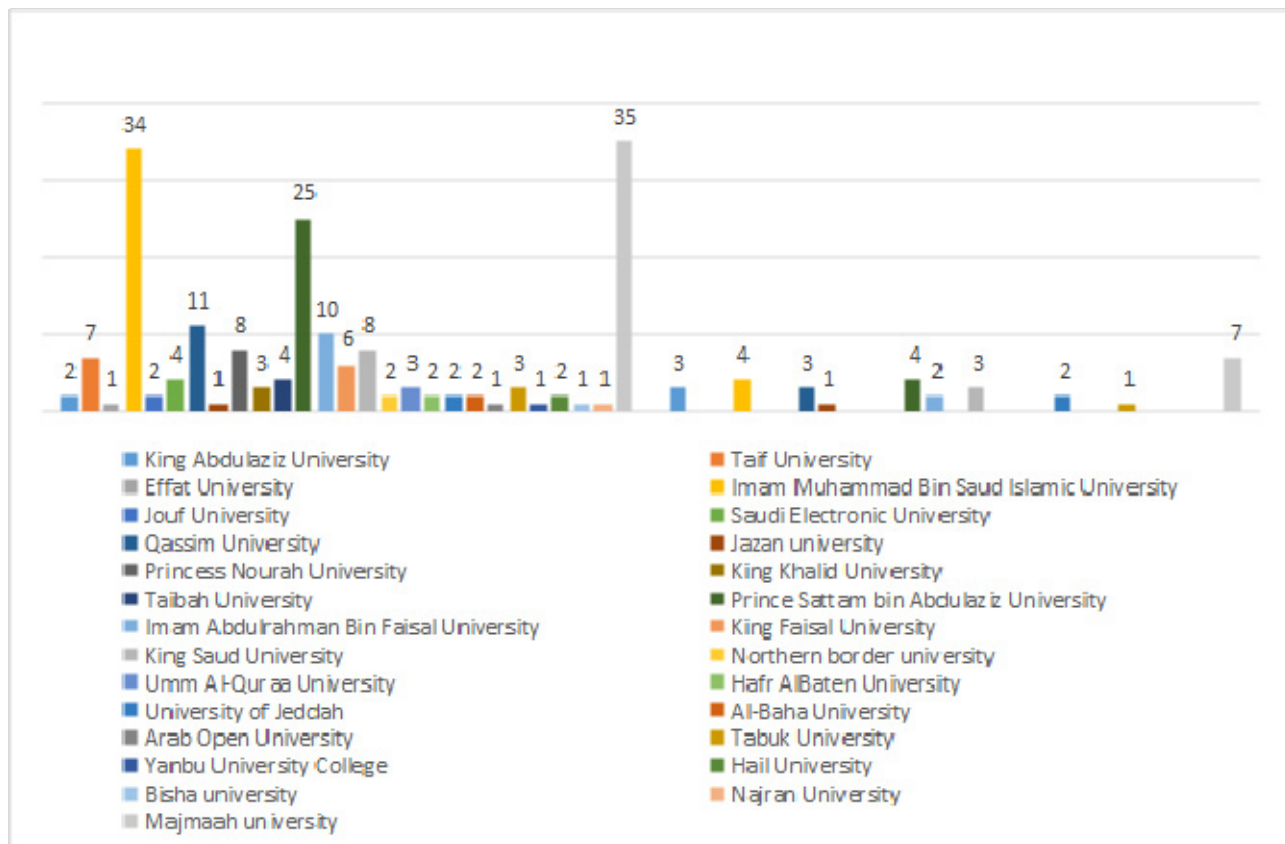
Appendix

Figure 3. The participants' levels and universities