

EVALUATING DEEPL AS A TRANSLATION TOOL: Facilitating or Hindering for EFL Students' Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is influenced by various tools, including machine translation (MT). Theories such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis highlight the role of comprehensible input in language learning, with recent studies demonstrating mixed effects of MT tools. Although MT tools like DeepL show potential, their impact on EFL students' abilities remains underexplored, particularly in writing and grammar. This study aims to evaluate the effects of DeepL on EFL students' language acquisition, focusing on their perceptions of how the tool helps or hinders their learning. A qualitative case study approach was used, involving semi-structured interviews with three EFL students who have used DeepL in their academic activities. The results indicate that DeepL facilitates comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, but if used excessively and without creating self-reflection, it can become a dependency that hinders independent language production. While DeepL is beneficial for language learning, it should be used as a complementary tool to prevent over-reliance and encourage deeper engagement with language practice. This study contributes to the understanding of the dual impact of translation tools in language education.

Keywords: EFL Students Perception; Evaluating DeepL; Translation Tool; SLA

ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran Bahasa Kedua (SLA) dipengaruhi oleh berbagai alat, termasuk terjemahan mesin (MT). Teori seperti Hipotesis Masukan Krashen menyoroti peran masukan yang dapat dipahami dalam pembelajaran bahasa, dengan studi terbaru menunjukkan efek campuran dari alat MT. Meskipun alat MT seperti DeepL menunjukkan potensi, dampaknya terhadap kemampuan siswa EFL masih kurang dieksplorasi, terutama dalam menulis dan tata bahasa. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi efek DeepL pada penguasaan bahasa siswa EFL, dengan fokus pada persepsi mereka tentang bagaimana alat tersebut membantu atau menghambat pembelajaran mereka. Pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif digunakan, melibatkan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tiga siswa EFL yang telah menggunakan DeepL dalam aktivitas akademik mereka. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa DeepL memudahkan pemahaman dan penguasaan kosakata, tetapi jika digunakan secara berlebihan dan tanpa refleksi diri, dapat menjadi ketergantungan yang menghambat produksi bahasa secara mandiri. Meskipun DeepL bermanfaat untuk pembelajaran bahasa, alat ini sebaiknya digunakan sebagai alat pelengkap untuk mencegah ketergantungan berlebihan dan mendorong keterlibatan yang lebih dalam dalam praktik

bahasa. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman dampak ganda alat terjemahan dalam pendidikan bahasa.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Persepsi Mahasiswa EFL; Evaluasi DeepL; Alat Terjemahan; SLA

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) has become a field of in-depth study in applied linguistics. One of the theories underlying the understanding of SLA is the theory proposed by Stephen D. Krashen, which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. Krashen argues that the process of second language acquisition occurs more naturally when learners are exposed to input that is slightly more difficult than their ability level, but still comprehensible ($i+1$). In addition, Krashen also suggests that emotional and motivational factors have a major influence on the effectiveness of SLA, where learners with low affective filters tend to be more successful in mastering a second language (Krashen, 1982).

Recent studies highlight the role of machine translation (MT) tools as effective tools in the SLA process. One such theory, known as pedagogical translation, states that translation, whether done manually or through automated tools, can significantly aid in second language acquisition (Yafi, 2025). By engaging in translation tasks, learners develop metalinguistic awareness, improving their understanding of the structure, grammar, and vocabulary of the target language. Furthermore, research has shown that MT tools can support language learners by providing immediate feedback on vocabulary and syntax, helping to bridge the comprehension gap when learners lack exposure to authentic language input. These tools serve as a “framework” in the learning process, helping students transition from basic language knowledge to more advanced proficiency, thereby facilitating second language acquisition (Hajar, 2023).

As technology advances, various translation tools are now available to accelerate and facilitate the second language learning process. One such tool is DeepL, which has the potential to assist second language learners by providing input in the target language that is more accessible and faster. Previous studies have shown that this translation tool can support second language acquisition, particularly in writing skills and vocabulary comprehension (Polakova & Blanka, 2023; Zhang & Li, 2022).

For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, language learning is usually limited to classrooms and assignments that do not always reflect the use of language in real-life situations. Therefore, second language acquisition among EFL learners tends to be more influenced by formal output driven by direct instruction, rather than through natural immersion in the target language environment (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). However, translation tools such as DeepL can provide more natural input and improve language skills by providing more accurate sentence examples in more relevant contexts.

DeepL is a translation tool that uses neural machine translation (NMT) technology, which is more advanced than other translation tools, such as Google Translate. Research shows that DeepL can produce more accurate and refined translations, especially in more complex languages (Santos, 2022). However, there are also concerns that reliance on these translation tools may hinder the process of deeper and more natural language acquisition, as learners may rely on them too often to solve their language problems (Baker, 2018).

Previous research on the use of MT tools in the context of EFL has shown mixed results. Some studies have found that the use of translation tools can facilitate second language learning by providing quick access to better translations (Polakova & Blanka, 2023). However, there are also studies that indicate that these tools can hinder learners' ability to internalize language and develop language skills independently. Therefore, there is still a research gap that needs to be filled regarding the extent to which the use of DeepL in the context of EFL can accelerate or hinder second language acquisition.

This study aims to evaluate the extent to which the use of DeepL as a translation tool can affect EFL language proficiency, particularly in writing, grammar, and vocabulary skills. This study also aims to explore EFL learners' perceptions of DeepL usage and its impact on their second language acquisition process, whether DeepL actually facilitates or hinders their second language acquisition. This study is expected to provide a clearer picture of the benefits and potential weaknesses of using translation tools in foreign language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in EFL Context

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process by which individuals learn a language other than their native tongue, often referred to as a "second language" (L2). SLA involves acquiring proficiency in the language's key components, including phonology, semantics, grammar, and vocabulary. According to Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, SLA is most effective when learners are exposed to "comprehensible input," which is slightly above their current proficiency level but still understandable. This exposure enables learners to internalize the language naturally. SLA is not merely about memorizing vocabulary or grammatical rules but about interacting with the language in meaningful contexts that allow learners to internalize and use the language creatively. Moreover, contemporary SLA research emphasizes the role of technology and digital tools in supporting the learning process. Tools like online dictionaries, translation applications, and language-learning platforms play a vital role in supplementing traditional SLA methods by offering quick access to translations, meaning, and grammatical structures (Setiyadi & Salim, 2013; Syamsiyah, 2017).

2. The Role of Translation Tools in Language Acquisition

In the digital age, translation tools have become a significant aid for second-language learners. These tools, especially machine translation (MT) systems, are designed to translate text from one language to another, providing learners with quick access to language resources. Tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and others have been integrated into SLA practices, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. While these tools are convenient and efficient, research suggests that their use can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they can help learners understand unfamiliar words or phrases, making it easier to access and comprehend texts in the target language. On the other hand, over-reliance on translation tools can hinder learners' development of critical language skills, particularly in terms of language production, because learners may bypass active engagement with the language (Shirahata, 2023; Siumarlata et al., 2024).

3. Diverse Types of Translation Tools and Their Role

Various translation tools are available, ranging from simple online dictionaries to advanced neural machine translation (NMT) systems like DeepL. These tools leverage algorithms and AI to produce translations that are often more contextually accurate than

their predecessors. While traditional dictionary-based tools focus on word-for-word translation, NMT systems attempt to capture the overall meaning and context of a sentence, leading to more fluent and natural translations. Translation tools are widely used by EFL learners to support reading comprehension, writing, and even speaking practice. The effectiveness of these tools, however, depends on the learner's ability to critically assess and refine the translations they receive (Siumarlata et al., 2024; Syamsiyah, 2017).

4. DeepL An Advanced Translation Tool

DeepL is one of the leading neural machine translation systems that has gained significant attention for its high-quality translations, particularly in the context of European languages. Unlike earlier translation tools that often provide literal translations, DeepL uses a sophisticated AI model to produce translations that are more fluent and contextually appropriate. This makes it a valuable resource for EFL learners, who can use it to understand complex texts, learn new vocabulary, and refine their writing. Studies have shown that EFL students who use DeepL report improvements in their ability to comprehend and produce written English. However, while DeepL can assist in translating technical terms, idiomatic expressions, or complex academic texts, it is not without limitations. For instance, DeepL may struggle with the nuances of informal language or culture-specific expressions, which can lead to inaccurate translations if not carefully reviewed (Yuasa & Takeuchi, 2025).

5. Effective Use of DeepL in Language Learning

To maximize the benefits of DeepL, EFL learners should use the tool as a supplemental resource rather than a primary one. It is most effective when used for understanding difficult vocabulary or to clarify meanings in context, but learners should not rely on it solely for constructing sentences or writing essays. DeepL can be particularly useful for revising written work, helping learners to refine their sentences and structures. However, learners should engage in active learning by comparing the translations with their own understanding of the language, ensuring that they do not simply accept the machine's output. Teachers can guide students to use DeepL for specific tasks, such as vocabulary enrichment and reading comprehension, while emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and language production in other areas of learning (Setiyadi & Salim, 2013).

6. Between Facilitate or Hinder EFL Students' Language Mastery

The use of DeepL in EFL contexts presents both advantages and challenges. On the positive side, DeepL can facilitate language acquisition by providing immediate access to accurate translations and helping learners improve their vocabulary and reading comprehension. This can be especially beneficial for students struggling with understanding academic texts or unfamiliar terminology. Furthermore, by using DeepL, students can develop their metalinguistic awareness, as they become more familiar with sentence structures and word choices in the target language. However, excessive dependence on translation tools, including DeepL, can hinder learners' ability to develop productive language skills, such as speaking and writing. Research suggests that when students rely too heavily on translation tools, they may bypass the cognitive processes involved in creating language independently, which is essential for long-term mastery of a second language. Moreover, translation tools may provide grammatically correct translations that miss the cultural or contextual nuances, potentially leading to misunderstandings or lack of fluency in real-world communication (Shirahata, 2023; Siumarlata et al., 2024). In conclusion, while DeepL can play a supportive role in EFL learning, it should be used judiciously. It can help

learners by providing quick translations and enhancing comprehension, but it should not replace active language practice. Educators must strike a balance by encouraging students to use DeepL as a tool for supplementary learning while emphasizing the importance of language production and contextual learning.

METHOD

This research was conducted in the English language education study program. The focus was on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students who had used the DeepL translation tool in academic activities such as writing assignments, translating readings, or understanding English material. This context was chosen because Neural Machine Translation (NMT) technology is developing rapidly and DeepL has become a popular choice among students, making it important to investigate students' perceptions, experiences, and in-depth understanding of the use of this tool in the second language acquisition process.

This study adopts a qualitative design with a case study approach. A case study design was selected because the aim of the research is to explore in-depth the students' perceptions, experiences, and views regarding the use of DeepL as a translation tool. Case study research allows for a comprehensive examination of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context, making it particularly suitable for understanding the complexities of how DeepL impacts students' language learning experiences in a specific setting. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on statistical analysis, a case study approach enables the researcher to collect rich, qualitative data that provides a nuanced understanding of individual experiences, as well as the acquisition process in second language learning (Singh, 2019).

The primary data collection method employed was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for case study research as they offer a flexible framework that allows participants to freely express their views and experiences, while still adhering to key topics of interest. This approach encourages participants to share unexpected yet valuable insights that can further enrich the understanding of the research phenomenon. The case study method also enables a deeper exploration of the contexts in which DeepL is used, revealing its role and impact on students' language acquisition.

Participants were English Education students who had used DeepL in their assignments or learning activities. The selection technique was based on those who used DeepL so that the data collected truly reflected their experience with the translation tool. The qualitative sample size was approximately three students for interviews, which allowed for rich and representative thematic analysis in the context of the case study.

The data collection procedure in this qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with interview guides compiled based on the main objectives of the study, namely to explore students' perceptions of the benefits of DeepL, the challenges they face, and the impact of using DeepL on their language comprehension, language production, and metalinguistic awareness. The questions in the interview guide were designed to be open-ended so that participants could freely express their views, critically reflect on their experiences, and convey their personal narratives. This approach is in line with the nature of semi-structured interviews, which use a series of open-ended questions to generate rich and in-depth data and allow participants to express their individual perspectives more freely

(Hashemnezhad, 2022; Sønsthagen & Brustad, 2025). The interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus or online if conditions did not allow for face-to-face meetings. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded in audio format and then transcribed verbatim to maintain data integrity, in line with the view that the text of the interview transcription is the main basis for qualitative analysis and allows researchers to examine participants' language choices in detail (Fernandez, 2018).

The data obtained from the interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The researchers reread all transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data, then performed open coding by identifying important units of meaning, such as phrases, sentences, or ideas related to the participants' experiences in using DeepL. These codes were then inductively grouped into themes that emerged from the data, such as themes about the ease of understanding texts, dependence on translations, awareness of language forms, and concerns about translation quality. This approach is in line with the definition of thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or themes in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017), and also with guidelines that emphasize that credible thematic analysis requires a systematic coding process, reflective review of themes, and efforts to meet trustworthiness criteria (Nowell et al., 2017). By using an inductive approach, the resulting themes are not forced from theory from the outset, but emerge from consistent patterns in the participants' stories and reflections.

RESULTS

Table 1. Code of Results from Participant Interviews

Thematic Keywords	Participants 1 (P1)	Participants 2 (P2)	Participants 3 (P3)
Text Understanding	DeepL helps you understand the material better because it has a broader vocabulary.	DeepL supports the comprehension through vocabulary suggestions that enhance your vocabulary.	DeepL provides translations with clear language structure and appropriate sentences.
Reliance on Translation Tools	Sometimes I feel dependent on DeepL, especially when time is limited.	I'm concerned about relying on translation tools, but I try not to rely too much.	I rely a little on DeepL, even though some word choices are sometimes inappropriate.
Awareness of Language Form	DeepL influences grammatical structure and word choice, providing greater understanding.	I feel the impact on grammatical structure and word choice, especially in understanding DeepL's translation style.	I understand correct grammar because DeepL's translations are accurate and appropriate.
Concerns about	Sometimes DeepL translations lack depth	DeepL is very helpful, but still needs	Sometimes translations need

Translation Quality	because they don't examine the meaning further.	correction due to errors in the translation.	correction due to inappropriate word choices.
Impact on Academic Work	DeepL speeds up work without affecting the quality of the assignment.	DeepL speeds up work, but still requires correction for some errors.	It speeds up assignments and improves sentence quality.
Suggestions	Use DeepL, but always try to use your own thinking and skills.	Use DeepL for assignments, but try translating them yourself first and always double-check the translation.	DeepL is very useful because it's accurate, simple, and has a wide selection of words tailored to the context.

Results from interviews with participants revealed several key themes that emerged from their experiences using DeepL as a translation tool. One key theme was ease of understanding the text. All three participants reported that DeepL significantly assisted in understanding their academic material. This was due to its more precise word choice and clearer translations compared to other translation tools. DeepL provided the added benefit of broader vocabulary suggestions, allowing participants to broaden their understanding of the material they were studying. They felt more confident in tackling academic assignments, thanks to the improved translation quality.

However, participants also noted that they often relied on DeepL, especially when faced with urgent assignments. This raised concerns about diminishing their ability to think and write independently. One participant even mentioned that they sometimes simply copy-pasted translations without conducting further research to understand the deeper meaning. However, they also tried not to rely entirely on the tool and sought to integrate DeepL with their own skills and knowledge.

In terms of language form awareness, DeepL use also impacted participants' understanding of grammatical structures and word choice in English. They felt that DeepL's suggested translations helped them recognize more precise forms of language. However, they tended to begin writing in a style similar to DeepL's translations, indicating the tool's influence on their writing style.

While DeepL was helpful, participants acknowledged that the tool was not perfect and sometimes produced less accurate translations. They felt that while DeepL accelerated their work, the translations still needed to be checked and corrected to ensure they were appropriate to the intended context. This suggests a concern that reliance on this tool could diminish their depth of understanding of the translated material.

Finally, regarding DeepL's impact on academic work, participants agreed that using DeepL accelerated their work, especially in completing assignments requiring translation. However, they also emphasized the importance of manually correcting DeepL's translations to ensure the quality of their assignments. Thus, while DeepL helped expedite the process, participants recommended using the tool as a supplementary aid, not a substitute for their existing writing and translation skills. Overall, using DeepL had a positive impact on language comprehension and academic assignments, but also brought challenges related to

dependability and translation quality. Participants suggested that DeepL be used wisely, combining the tool with their own skills and understanding to achieve optimal results.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that DeepL helps students understand texts more effectively by providing clearer translations with more accurate word choices and offering broader vocabulary suggestions. However, while it facilitates comprehension and accelerates academic work, DeepL also creates a dependency that can hinder the development of independent language production skills. This dependency, as reported by participants, often leads to shallow engagement with the material, as they sometimes simply copy the translation without deeper reflection on the content.

The results support the initial hypothesis that DeepL can facilitate language acquisition by improving comprehension and vocabulary. However, the results also reveal a more complex challenge: overreliance on translation tools can limit students' ability to internalize language structures and reduce the cognitive engagement necessary for deeper language learning (Shirahata, 2023). This is consistent with previous research showing that while machine translation tools like DeepL can provide immediate benefits, they can also undermine students' critical thinking and language production skills (Siumarlata et al., 2024).

These findings contribute to existing knowledge by highlighting the balance required to use translation tools effectively. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on the positive or negative aspects of translation tools, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how DeepL can facilitate or hinder language acquisition, depending on its use (Polakova & Blanka, 2023). This insight is crucial for educators and learners to develop strategies that leverage DeepL's benefits while mitigating its potential drawbacks. Furthermore, this study fills a gap in our understanding of the impact of specific translation tools like DeepL in EFL learning contexts.

Limitations of our study include the small sample size, which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of EFL students with DeepL. Furthermore, the self-reported nature of the data may introduce bias, as participants may emphasize certain aspects of their experiences over others. However, the strength of this study lies in its qualitative design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions and the complexities of their learning process. By focusing on real-life experiences, this study provides valuable insights into how translation tools can be integrated into language learning environments.

In conclusion, while DeepL shows potential as a tool to facilitate language comprehension and enhance vocabulary, its potential to hinder the development of independent language skills requires careful and judicious use. Future studies could further explore how different student profiles and contexts influence the tool's effectiveness in second language acquisition (SLA).

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to evaluate the role of DeepL as a translation tool in facilitating or hindering EFL students' language skills, particularly in writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

The findings suggest that while DeepL improves comprehension by providing accurate translations and a broader vocabulary, it also fosters dependency, which can limit the independent development of language skills. While DeepL accelerates academic work, excessive use of the tool can hinder the deeper cognitive engagement necessary for language acquisition. DeepL facilitates language learning more effectively when used as a supplementary tool, but it must be balanced with independent practice to avoid hindering the development of more complex language skills. The significance of this study lies in its nuanced examination of how machine translation tools like DeepL can support or hinder language acquisition. However, limitations such as the small sample size and potential bias due to self-reported data mean that these results should be interpreted with caution. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the effective use of translation tools in EFL contexts. Future studies could investigate how student profiles and contextual factors influence the effectiveness of such tools in language learning.

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