

Reflection: Using Google Translate in an educational setting

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MEDT 7462- Module 13

I know that many of my reflections begin with a reminiscing of the way things were over a decade ago, but I cannot help but be continually amazed at the progress technology has made in that relatively short time. My wife is a foreign language teacher (politically correct term is “world languages” these days) and because of her I have had the experience of working with translators since the days of DOS. Those tools were cumbersome, intrusive, and many times just plain incorrect. I remember being amazed at “Babel Fish” when it went online. It was one of those cool sites that I used to show off the power of technology and the web to any disbelievers that I encountered.

Now, Google Translate is available and it seems to have taken the logical progression from the days of Babel Fish. My wife tells me that the translations are much more accurate (I wouldn’t know) but that there are still some grammatical issues... especially with colloquialisms and informal (or incorrect) sentence structure or word choice. Much like all computer software, the quality of what comes out depends on the quality of what goes in.

Some features that I’ve noticed that are a big step up from the Babel Fish days of yore are the “Instant Translation” (as you’re typing) and the “listen” button that will read aloud. Also, there are many more languages available in this tool than there were in the tools just a few years ago.

I’ve heard about some potential uses for Google Translate in the future, including something akin to the “Universal Translator” in science fiction (or the true, original “Babel Fish” from Hitchhiker’s Guide.) I’ve read that by combining Google Translate with several of the other Google tools, a “seamless” translated conversation could take place, with voice recognition feeding the translator as someone speaks and text-to-speech reading it back to the recipient after it is translated. The hope is that eventually this process will become so fast that the listener will hear the translation as the speaker is talking... with no delay. This is already possible with asynchronous communication using these tools... which is very exciting.

In an educational setting, I can envision students having access to the huge portion of the internet that is not in English. Being able to instantly translate web pages, wikis, and blogs, would allow our students to glean information from sources previously beyond their reach. In addition, this would give them a more balanced, culturally authentic view of our entire world without the filters typically applied by English-speaking writers.

The same would be true of opening the doors for a wider audience for our student’s own work. With access to translation tools, others around the world who do not read English could enjoy the blogs, wikis, and ideas created by our students.