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Special Issue

Machine Translation & Language Education: Implications for Theory, Research, & Practice

Guest Editors:
Kimberly Vinall & Emily Hellmich

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

This first special issue of 2022 is guest edited by two scholars with attested expertise in the use of digital technology in foreign language education, in particular machine translation, and the issues it raises for applied linguistic research and practice. Kimberly Vinall, who got her PhD in Education from UC Berkeley, is the new Executive Director of the Berkeley Language Center, and, as such, she contributes to the professionalization of the some 70 language teachers on campus. Her research has focused on the political culture of textbooks for the teaching of Spanish and on the influence of neoliberal ideology on second/foreign language education. She was managing editor of the *L2 Journal* from 2013 to 2015 and has been both a frequent contributor and the co-editor of several special issues. Emily Hellmich, who also got a PhD in Education from UC Berkeley, is Assistant Professor of French and Second Language Acquisition and Teaching in the Modern Languages Department at the University of Arizona. Her work has focused on the intersection of globalization, digital technology, and language education, and she has published in the fields of applied linguistics, CALL, and education. She was also a former managing editor for the *L2 Journal* from 2015 to 2017.

More recently, both Kimberly and Emily have sought to explore the advances made by machine translation and its impact on FL teaching. Two years ago, they embarked on a research project to find out how language teachers deal with a digital device like Google Translate that is increasingly used by students and that puts into question the total immersion methodology of communicative classroom teaching. They reported the results of this research in the articles "Down the rabbit hole: Metaphor, machine translation, and instructor identity/agency" (2021) and "FL instructor beliefs about machine translation: ecological insights to guide research and practice" (2021). I wish to thank Kimberly and Emily for putting together this stimulating special issue that lays the ground for future research on this important topic.

As mentioned in the introduction, this special issue explores three research questions:

1) *What are the implications of machine translation for language/culture learning and teaching?* The contributions to this special issue clearly show the potentially transformative effect of the uses of *Google Translate* for foreign language education and their pedagogical, institutional, cognitive, and emotional implications.

2) *How can applied and educational linguists engage with machine translation in learning contexts?*

This issue provides a first in-depth introductory reflection on the pedagogic practices of language teachers at the high school and college levels teaching a variety of European and Asian languages. Such a reflection calls for engaging not only with the products of machine translation and their application for teaching and learning, but also with the diverse processes of meaning making, whether it be the linguistic and cognitive processes of human translation and interpretation, or the digital processes by which computer algorithms translate big data into linguistic equivalents.

3) *How can applied and educational linguistics contribute to broader discussions around the impacts of machine translation in society?*
   Beyond the issue of academic honesty that worries language teachers, the use of machine translation in foreign language education raises broader discussions about the desirability of rehabilitating translation as a useful pedagogical methodology; it brings back the need to enhance the reflexive and comparative component of a communicative pedagogy that has in the last forty years pretty much replaced *reflecting on language* with *using language* for instrumental purposes.

Most importantly machine translation raises the question of what we are teaching foreign languages for. In their introduction, Vinall and Hellmich make a strong case for using machine translation not only to render a foreign language utterance comprehensible, i.e., to give it meaning, but to encourage language learners to reflect on the meaning making process itself. Their argument is echoed by others in the field. For instance, in their recent proposal to include global citizenship education in foreign language education, Luetge et al. (in press) argue that teaching "global citizenship" through foreign language education means*:*

> empower[ing] educational actors with the capacity to *orient themselves when confronted with unknowns.. .* It encourages them to engage with the digital and to recruit a variety of modalities, leveraged by whichever tools at hand, as the basis for diverse meaning making practices that have the potential to transform foreign language education. (my emphasis)

As the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, that process is complex, diverse, and draws on a variety of modalities. It also always retains a margin of untranslatability that reflects the unknown and unexpected nature of human interpretation. In that sense, machine translation could be one of the ways in which learners can become aware of the diversity of meanings, representations and interpretations that intercultural communication elicits. Google Translate, then, would be seen not as a tool for reducing the foreignness of foreign languages, but, on the contrary, as an opportunity to engage, i.e., grapple with the diversity of meaning that such foreignness represents. Vinall and Hellmich, quoting Spivak (2000), advocate maintaining the "spacy emptiness" between named historical languages without which, according to Spivak, there is no real translation. Their advocacy offers a fitting research agenda for the future of foreign language education in the age of machine translation.

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