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What do students' chatroom discussions tell us about their attitudes to the use of Google Translate for coursework assignments?

Alison Organ
York St John University

Google Translate and Modern Languages in Education
University of Nottingham, 29 June 2018

In this presentation:

- The research project
- What does it reveal about students' attitudes?
- How does this tie in with previous research?
- Next steps

The research project

Stage 2:

HE student and staff attitudes to the use of FOMT for target language production

- Surveys sent out nationally (so far 98 student and 35 staff responses)
- Partial replication study of Jolley and Maimone 2015
- To be written up this year

Stage 1:

- Student attitudes to the use of Google Translate as posted spontaneously to a student chat room

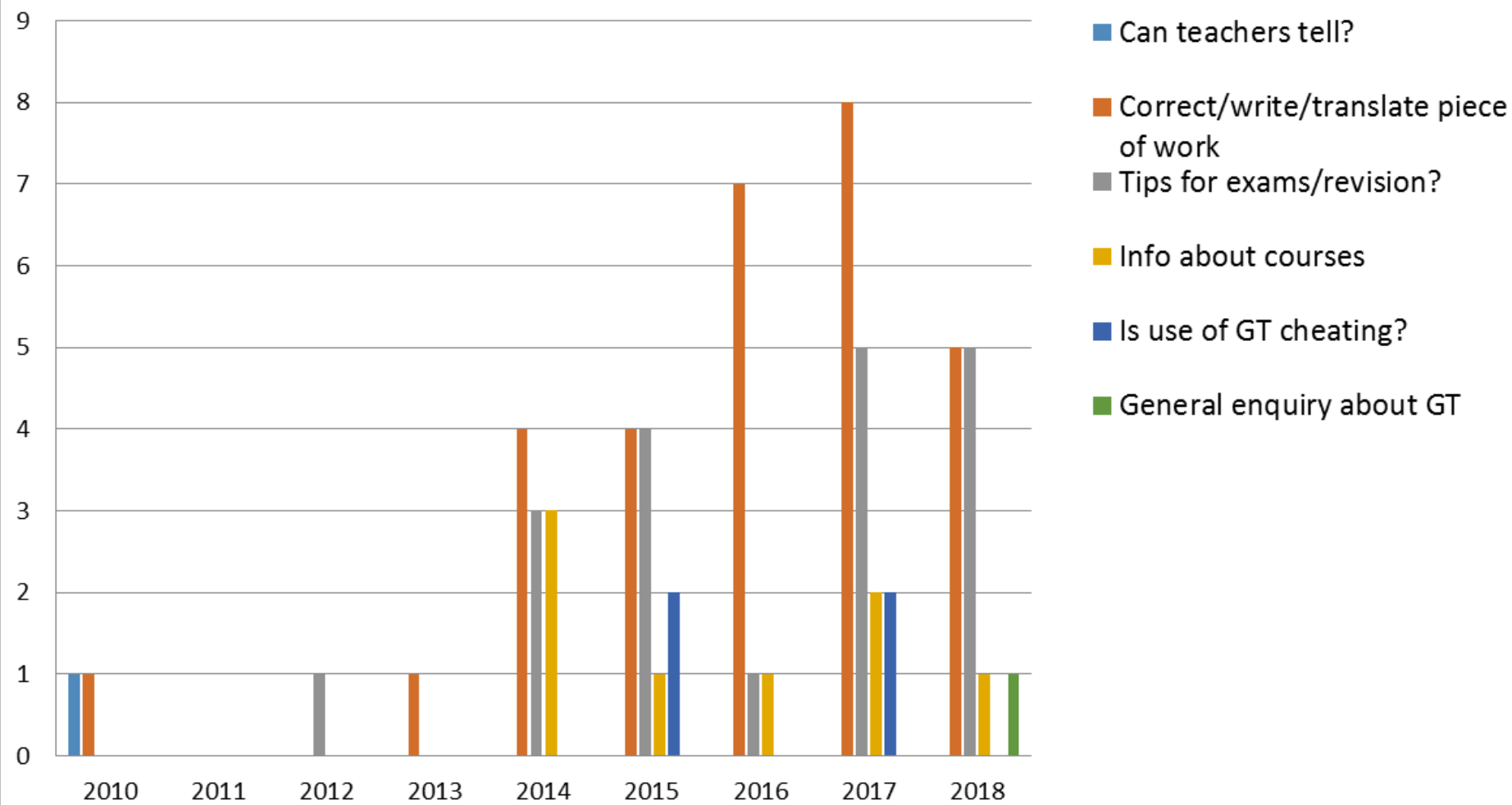
The research project – stage 1

[The Student Room](#)

(Other chat rooms are available!)

- Search term “google translate” returned 834 results
- 63 posts and 143 responses from 2010 to 2018 were judged relevant to the study:
 - 70% GCSE
 - 10% A Level
 - 21% other or level not mentioned
- Of the total comments (posts and responses)
 - 35% negative view
 - 21% positive view
 - 44% mixed view or n/a

Type of enquiry per year



A typical thread:

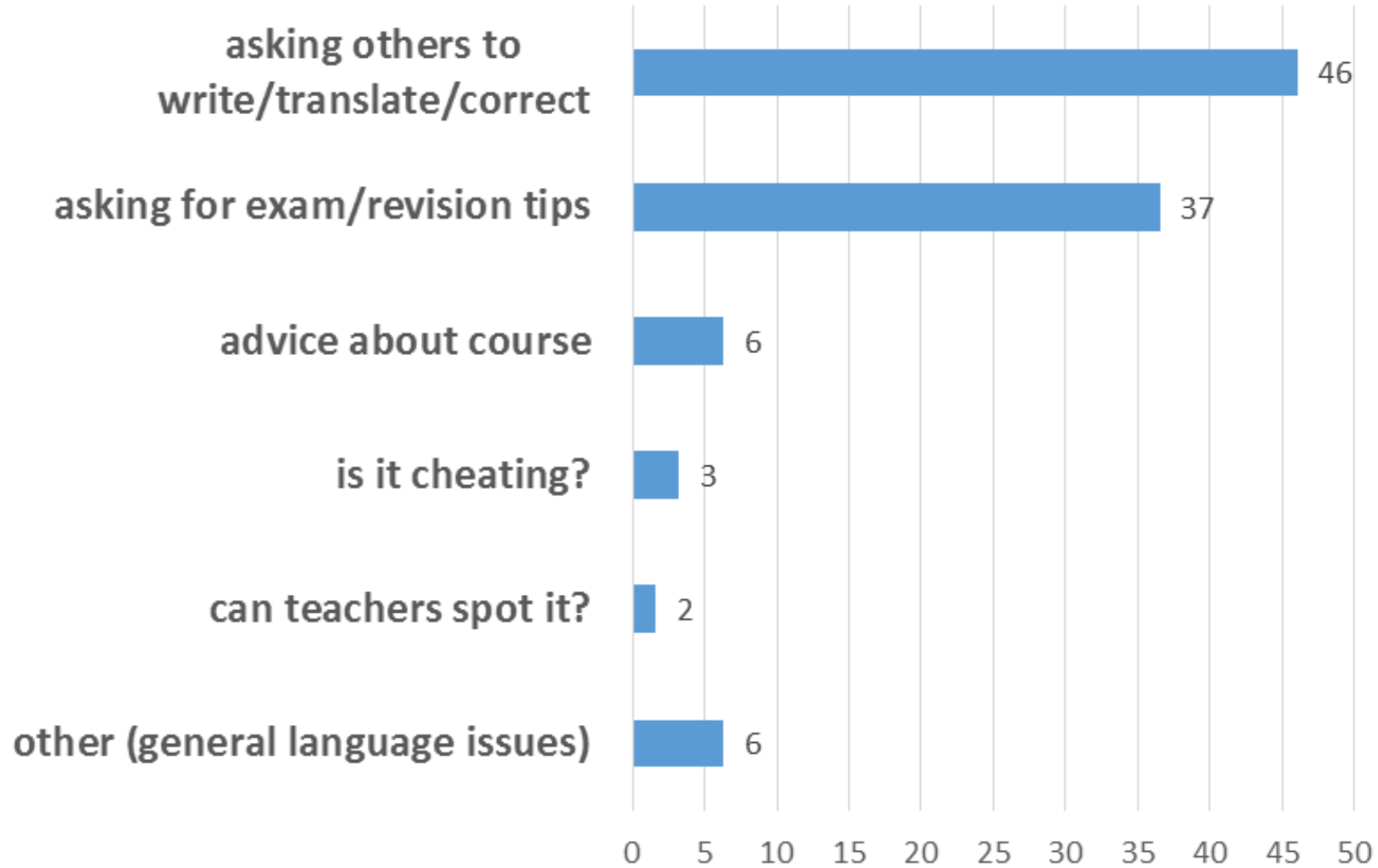
Original post (2016):

- I am doing some coursework on French (A writing piece which equates to only 15% of my GCSE) - and I needed a bit of help, so I was wandering (sic) if any French people / people who are good at French to possibly help me?

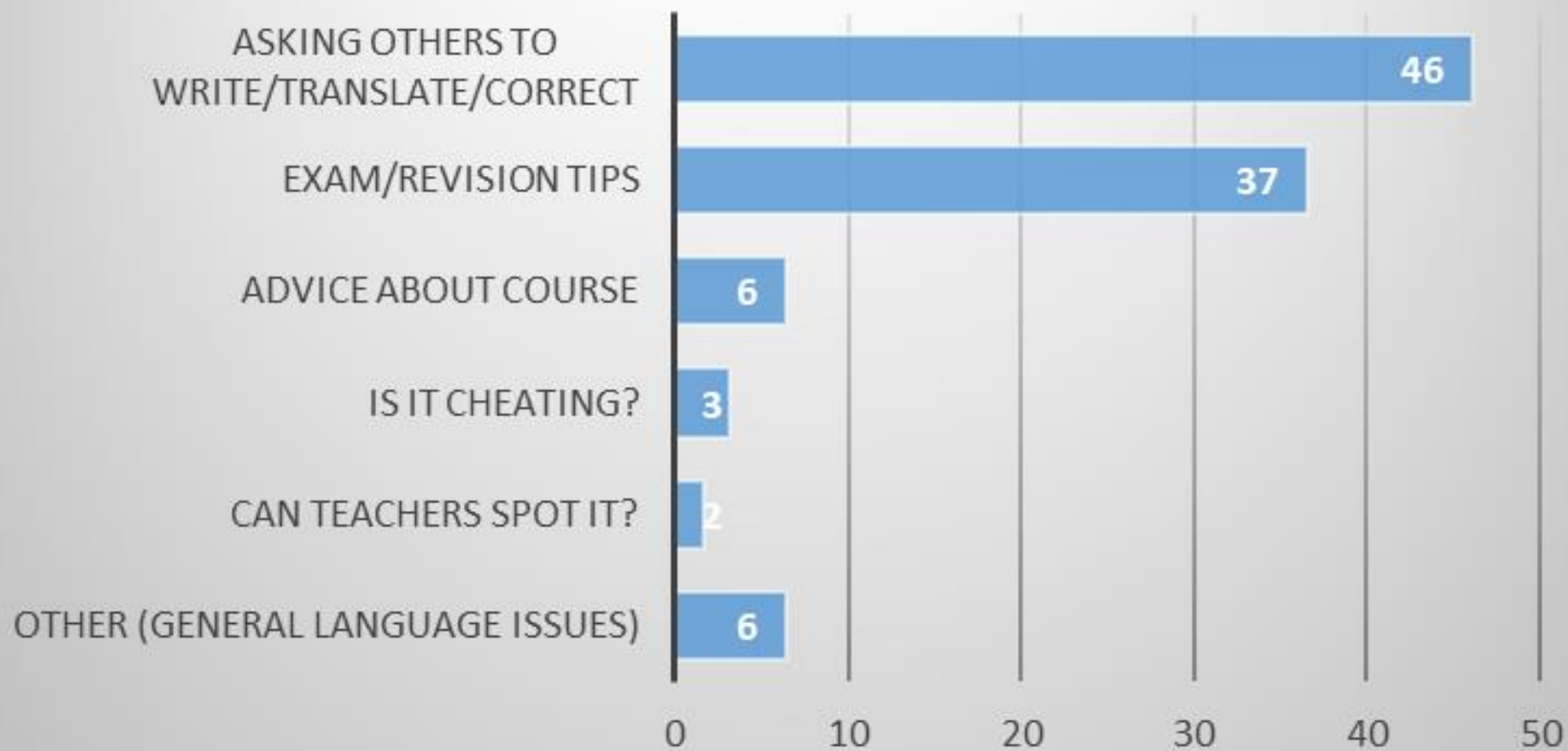
Responses:

- google translate is your friend. Don't paste entire paragraphs into it, do small phrases or sentences, and use some of your knowledge to make sure it is correct.
- try reverso-- it's better than google translate.
- google translate is really not your best friend. Try memrise for topic specific vocab and use linguee.fr, it gives you words in context.
- I don't not use Google Translate as for quick translations, it's usually very reliable. However, use sites such as word reference to check the accuracy of any long sentences or paragraphs.
- Please don't just 'type it into google translate' as some people on this thread have suggested - what's the point of that, after all? What in earth are you learning by doing that?
- Even though I did that [used GT] I honestly have to say it didn't prevent me from learning some of the language. Admittedly, I would have learnt more, particularly grammar, if I hadn't done that. It's the lazy option for someone who might not be keen on learning a language. I used it for as-level french too. I am disgraceful.

Nature of post (% of total posts)



Nature of post (% of total posts)



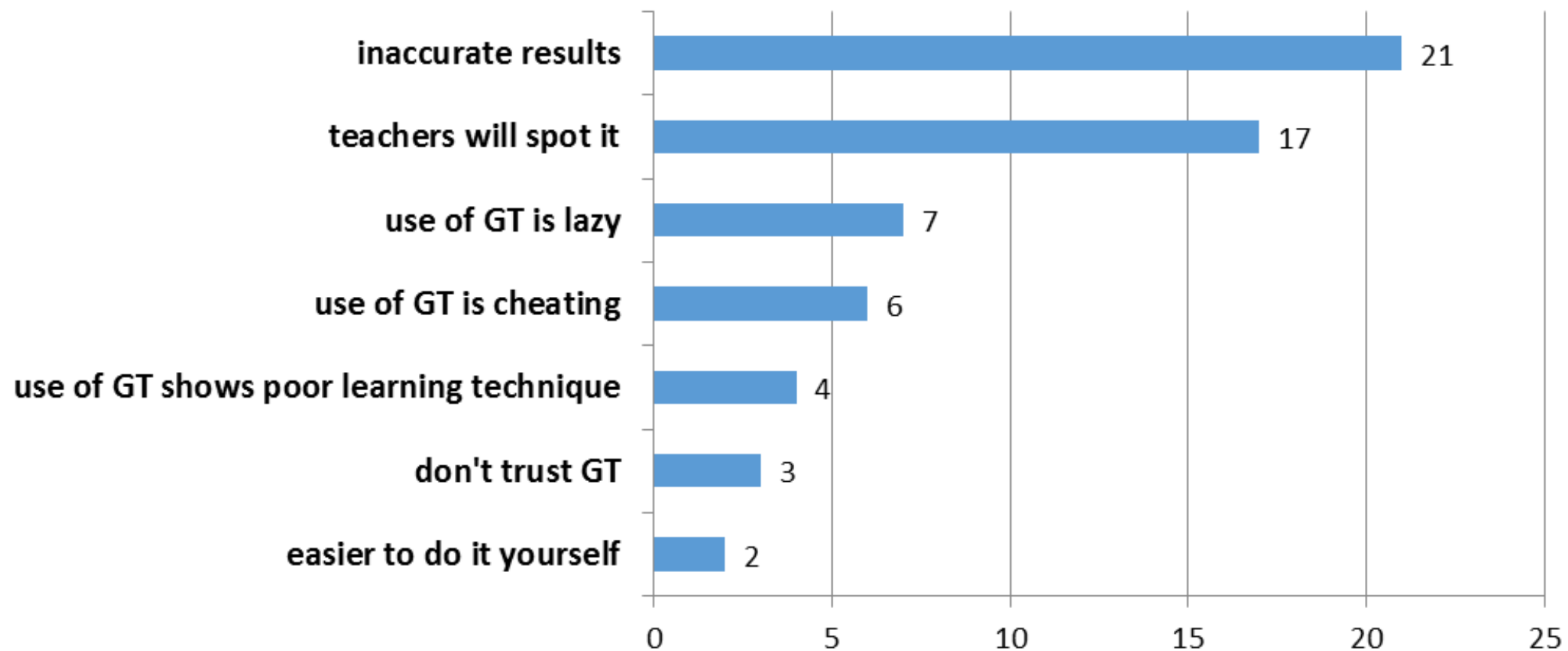
Reasons for posting

- Lack of ability / confidence – asking others to write/translate/correct
 - Can someone please help me translate , preferably who knows what they've (sic) translating is pretty much 100% correct. I'm too scared to use google translate because its for a controlled assessment. (2017)
- Exam / revision tips
 - Guys my speaking exam is 23rd april, and I am panicking so much because I seem to have forgotten all the tenses and phrases I need. I have no idea how to revise for it and feel like I am going to flop. My target is 8, so can someone please give me an idea or two to help me ace it. (2017)

Reasons for posting

- Advice about course
 - So i'm a year 11 student curious about doing A-Level French. Would just like to know people's experience of doing French. If you guys do A Level AQA or Edexcel French, can you tell me how is/was it? Plus, how was the course and the exams, and was it difficult? Plus, did you google translate some of your work :P~weird question i know (2014)
- Is it cheating?
 - Is using Google Translate breaking exam board rules? (At GCSE) ... What would happen if I did a controlled assessment using Google Translate, did the controlled assessment exam, got a good grade and that's the end of it? Would the moderators at the exam board pick up on it? (2015)
- Can teachers spot it?
 - Ok, so I used Google translate cos I couldn't be bothered with my French essay. Today my French teacher said that she can really easily tell when someone has used text translation - is this true?? (2010)

Negative comments (% of total comments)



Negative comments (35%)

- Inaccuracy of results

- As long as you check it afterwards then it should be ok but I wouldn't recommend translating more than a couple of lines at a time as it often gets the context/grammar/gender etc wrong and if there are too many mistakes you may not notice. Also it may literally translate idioms and expressions that are very English so you need to be careful. (2010)
- ... sometimes if you translate a word that has more than one meaning, it gives you the wrong one. You probably wouldn't make that mistake if you looked in the dictionary because it gives you an example. E.g. retten and sparen both mean "to save" in German. But one is like money and one is save as in rescue. (2010)

- Teachers will spot it

- Of course they can tell! They know that the grammar/sentence structure/vocab is a bit off and not in the typical style of someone who's learning a language. Computerised translations are no good unless you have a firm grasp of the language - that way you can use it as merely a guide. Even then, it's not exactly reliable. (2010)
- ... In short, a bad idea. A teacher can easily tell the difference between your personal writing style and that of the internet. Especially when you suddenly "change" in the quality of your writing and are using more sophisticated vocabulary (sic). (2010)

Negative comments (35%)

- Use of GT is lazy
 - If you can't be bothered with your essay then there's not really any point in doing languages is there? It's not exactly demonstrating what you can do yourself. (2010)
 - Whether you genuinely want to risk screwing up your entire GCSE because you're too lazy to put any effort into your coursework is your choice. (2015)
- Use of GT is cheating
 - Don't be an idiot, don't use a translator, don't cheat and just do the CA [controlled assessment] properly. (2015)

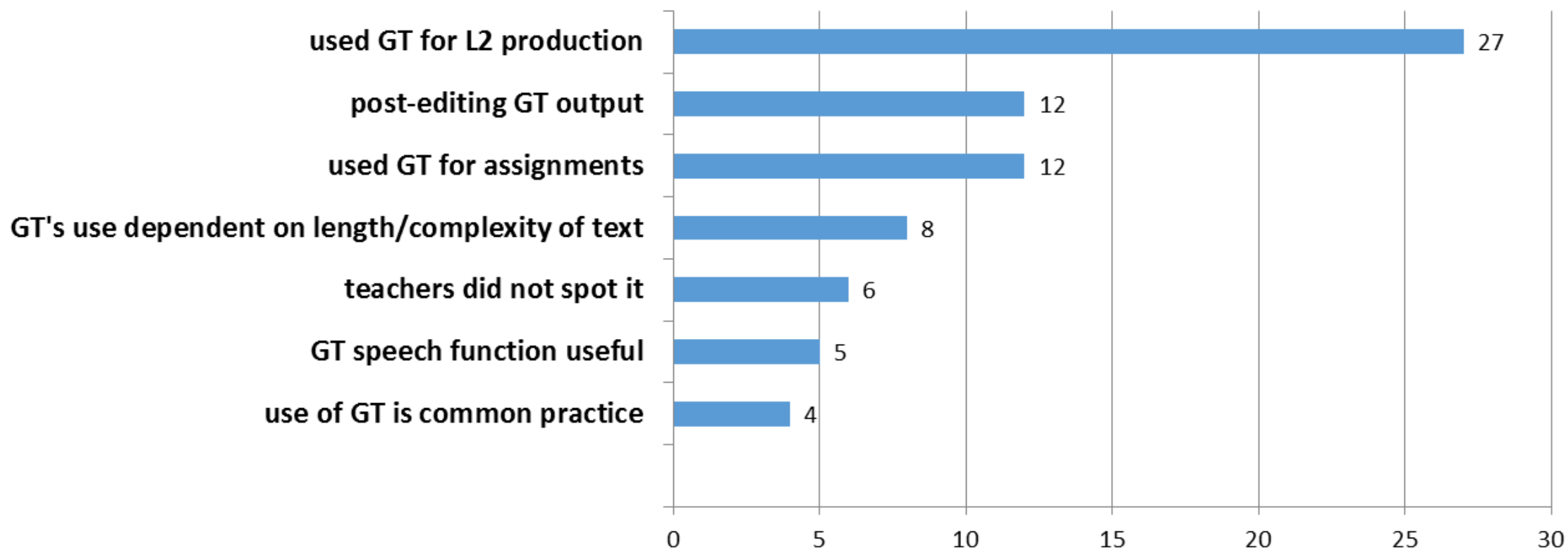
Negative comments (35%)

- Use of GT shows poor learning technique
 - Also, it's just pointless. If you care so little about learning a language, why even go to the effort of running it through a translator? You're learning nothing by doing that, whereas by writing it yourself, you can learn from your mistakes. (2010)
- Don't trust GT
 - No, this is BAD advice. Write your CA [controlled assessment] yourself with a dictionary. Google translate often messes up. Plus it's waaay (sic) harder to memorise something you haven't written yourself. (2015)
 - If this is for language coursework, please don't, for your own sake. They are banned (source) and trust me, it is incredibly easy to work out when you've used a translator. This is because translators do not work. They can translate the gist of what you're saying but the translations they give often sound extremely unnatural and words are often translated literally and therefore incorrectly. If you use a translator for chunks of your work, you will fail. (2015)

Negative comments (35%)

- Easier to do it yourself
 - Of course you could go over the translated text and try to refine it, but then you might just as well do the entire translation yourself, because it'll require the same amount of effort... (2010)
 - Google translate is actually sooo bad it's untrue. I also learned this the hard way, doing translations from french to english and vice versa all of last year, I used it a lot. But luckily I almost always read it over and you would not believe how many stupid mistakes it made. I then learned that it was much quicker doing the whole thing myself with a dictionary than translating it all and proofreading! (2010)

Positive comments (% of total comments)



Positive comments (21%)

- Used GT for L2 production and assignments
 - French, Spanish, German at GCSE. A*A*B. Without Google translate I'd have had no coursework and no speaking answers. Google translate saved my life those 2 years. (2010)
 - Also I did actually Google translate everything at A level last year and had an A :/ (2014)
 - Has anyone tried to use google translate for their french Cas [controlled assessments]? I have and got 2 A* so far LOL, the people who say you can't use it are idiots, it's so easy, all you have to do is type what you want and then translate bit by bit, NOT BIG CHUNKS though. It's made my french gcse so much more easier. (2015)
 - I got an A* at GCSE and continued with French. I'm doing A2 now and I absolutely love it. **See the thing is, the jump between GCSE and AS is difficult because you go from using google translate and memorising your coursework to actually having to learn the grammar rules and applying them in spontaneous situations.** (2017)

Positive comments (21%)

- GT use dependent on length/complexity of text
 - google translate is your friend. Don't paste entire paragraphs into it, do small phrases or sentences, and use some of your knowledge to make sure it is correct. (2016)
- Teachers did not spot it
 - I often do most of my French work on translate and get very high marks, despite my teacher consatntly (sic) reminding us of how he can find out whether we use translate or not. (2010)
 - Ha I once did a whole french essay and translated it. I got a really good mark for it, even though there were some ridiculous mistakes, like I'd misspelt a word in english so it was stillt here [still there] as an english typo. (2010)
- Use of GT is common practice
 - haha don't worry everyone does the exact same for language exams! I think I used to type the whole thing on the English side of google translate, translate it to french, and let my teacher attempt to work out what i was saying lol. I think unless you have a crazy-good talent for it naturally.... or grew up in that specific country.... everyone will use translate lol. (2016)

Advice from fellow students showing linguistic awareness

- Recommending other tools (e.g. WordReference, Reverso, Linguee, SpanishDict, and Quizlet (26%)
 - Use the wordreference.com forums instead of google translate! The dictionary is far more extensive and you can choose words closer to the meaning you're after, as too many words have more than one meaning to make online translators accurate! The people on there are also really helpful and if you need a full sentence translated or a tense explained or you can't find the right word you'll usually get several native speakers helping you out within minutes. (2010)
 - Apart from that, you can also use wordreference.com for any word you're unsure about (whilst I was in school I insisted that google translate was the easiest way but now studying French at university, I realise that my teachers were right to recommend wordreference, and it is now actually my best friend when it comes to words I'm unsure about!) (2014)

Advice from fellow students showing linguistic awareness

- Recommending GT speech function
 - First off, memorise all your questions. This is an obvious one but it's essential so I'll say it here. For improving your accent, copy your responses on to google translate and then play them, and try to copy what the voice says. (2017)
 - If you're stuck for pronunciation, google translate's speak feature is actually surprisingly good at pronunciation, especially for Spanish. (2018)

Post-editing (12%)

- It depends how good you are at French. I used to use google translate sometimes and then read through it to check word order, tenses etc. to make sure it was all correct. Though I suppose on the other hand if you were bad at French (and your teacher was aware of this) then incorrect grammar wouldn't be out of place. (2010)
- For example, for my GCSE French Orals, I typed every single answer out on Google translate. Obviously it isn't perfect, you have to do a bit of editing yourself, but you can add really complicated words, terms and phrases that get you very high marks, which otherwise would have been nearly impossible to put together using only a dictionary. After tweaking the answers and memorising them, I went into exam and got 27/30, despite doing hardly any translation by myself. If you use it wisely, and use a bit of common sense, google translate can be a lifesaver. (2010)

How do student comments tie in with previous research?

Similar result to student of intermediate ability

- I used to do this too! Translate it then change it so it sounds more natural. I don't see how they know the difference between Google badly translating it and you badly translating it, though. (2010)
- Like someone said already, I think this says everything about the level expected from GCSE students. It really makes me wonder how anyone manages to fail, when google translate can get a C. (2010)

Somers et al (2006:2):

“It is shocking to consider that the standard of translation achieved by FOMT might be worthy of a C grade – a moderate pass – at ‘A’ level.”

Groves and Mundt (2015:113):

“After all, why would a potential student go to the effort and expense of learning a foreign language if she is able to produce an acceptable L2 text from her own L1 writing, instantly and with no financial cost?”

How does this tie in with previous research?

Students' advice to each other about post-editing also chimes with much of the recent research:

- acknowledge that students are already using it
- instruct students in how to use it more effectively

(Correa 2014, Groves and Mundt 2015, Jolley and Maimone 2015, Farzi 2016)

“Our position from the beginning of our inquiry into this subject has been to think how we can partner with students in the exploration of MT instead of prohibiting its use...” (Clifford et al, 2013:109)

Limitations

- the data was selected by means of a manual search through posts to the forum
 - this study provides a snapshot of student behaviour gathered through data submitted spontaneously to a public forum, rather than in response to a specific questionnaire or survey
- some of the data concerns a version of Google Translate which has now been vastly improved
 - if students were willing to risk using Google Translate when it was acknowledged to be unreliable, they are arguably even more likely to be tempted to use it now that it is less detectable
- many of the posts refer to coursework assignments, which are no longer a feature of public exams in the UK (Smith 2015)
 - the data shows that even post 2016, when the new specifications were introduced, contributors are still seeking help for essays or oral presentations which they intend to memorise.

Next steps

Stage 2 of the research project:

- Lecturer survey:
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yorks-j-qualtrics-GTstaff>
 -
- Student survey:
 - <https://tinyurl.com/yorks-j-qualtrics-GTstudent>

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