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Information Retrieval among Undergraduate English Translation
Students at the University of Helsinki

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Abstract

Over the past 10 years, there has been a great deal of research on how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has affected Translation education. This paper presents a study about use of ICT practices among undergraduate English translation students at the University of Helsinki. It tests the hypothesis: While translating, contemporary English translation students at the University of Helsinki rely primarily on the Internet for reference material. A mixed method was utilized in this paper. A quantitative methodology involving questionnaires with a 5-point Likert scale was used to gather data in 2010. Qualitative data was also gathered in the form of detailed answers that some respondents wrote on their questionnaires. Results suggest that a major shift in Translation Studies has occurred and contemporary Western learners rarely use the library or printed sources when doing their translations. Instead, they tend to use the Internet which is more closely related to training future translators for real world tasks.

Keywords: Translation education, parallel texts, translation

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, there has been a great deal of research on how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has affected Translation education as well as education in general in the West. For example, Berber (2008) did a comprehensive worldwide study on the use of ICT in teaching conference interpretation. A common perception in the university is that the library is dead and students acquire all or almost all of their information from the Internet. Is this true? It can be argued that access to computers and the internet is not globally equal and that training of future translators is thus affected by “geopolitics of pedagogy” (Cronin 2005). Nevertheless we believe this claim to be valid within Western training institutions.

After we presented this study as a conference paper, eminent translation scholar Andrew Chesterman put forth:

“What kind of evidence would persuade you that this kind of teaching method is not the best method and the old fashioned method might be better? What would make you change your mind since the kind of data that you have presented is mostly data on what students think? In fact, maybe whether students ‘like it’ or ‘don’t like it’ is not relevant, you might say. What would make you change your mind to go back to the old method?”

Maria González Davies (2005) claims that research on translation studies should pay more attention to “what happens [...] in the classroom”. She calls for more studies on class dynamics and the tools of the trade of translation teachers. Burden (2003) suggests that students are conditioned to think that anything that is beneficial is going to be disagreeable and this attitude is at odds with the way teachers plan teaching approaches.

This study will be limited to the law translation course in the English translation section of the University of Helsinki. This paper will present an introduction, literature review, research methods, results and a discussion and conclusion section.

Literature Review

Since Dewey's research (1938/1997) the role of the experiential learning has been seen as an important approach to teaching. More recently Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984, 2005) have brought out the essential role of experience in the learning process: the learners “learn by doing”. However in order for the learning to be proper it is essential that the learning takes place “in context” (McLellan, 1994) and the context and activities need to be authentic in

relation to a real life situation where the same skill or knowledge would be used. Kiraly (2000: 3) shares this constructivist approach to education and suggests that “true [translation] expertise can only be developed on the basis of authentic situated action, the collaborative construction of knowledge, and personal experience”. Kiraly (2003, 2005) and Robinson et. al. (2008) have further developed this social constructivist approach to translator training, the latter reviewing its contribution to the educational field in general and also online learning.

According to Kearsley (1996) “The most significant aspect of the Web for education at all levels is that it removes the artificial wall between the classroom and the ‘real world’”. Chouc (2010) further suggests that many researchers and teachers have accepted that the computer can provide an alternative to real-life setting, and that such technology can be used without sacrificing the authentic context which is a critical element of the model.

Our literature review found a number of articles that relate ICT to translation studies (Berber 2008, Espunya & Pujol, 2007, Krajka, 2007, Robinson et. al. 2008) but they are prescriptive. Recent research on general translator education abound including Donavan (2011), Aarikka-Stenroos (2010), Angelone, Brander de la Iglesia (2010), Murphy (2011) and Pakkala-Wekström (2010). Harvey (2002) focuses on the unique nature of translating legal texts and Morris (1995) provides a number of articles on law translation. Kinnunen (2005, 2006, 2010, 2011) has written extensively on legal translation in Finland. However, none address Finland or computer use. Suraka (2005) in his book, *Access to Finnish Law*, gives a thorough explanation of the Finnish legal system in English and provides a work book where students look up laws in Finnish and English on the Internet using primarily FINLEX (2012), the Finnish law data base. We found no empirical study on ICT use among students in Finnish university English Translation students.

Research Method

Originally, a quantitative research methodology was chosen for this study because our literature review found none addressing this specific field of translator education that utilizes a blended learning approach. In addition, one colleague had recently argued that qualitative research is useless applied language study without actually writing a paper to support this concept. The writers feel differently and decided to conduct a quantitative study to show that such studies are useful in our field.

Our hypotheses are:

1. English translation students at the University of Helsinki rely primarily on the Internet for reference material.
2. English translation students at the University of Helsinki collaborate on the Internet but also need face-to-face teaching.

We seek to prove or disprove these. This study is limited to English Translation students at the University of Helsinki although it may give a good indication about student practices elsewhere. In addition, this study was interested in how these features manifested themselves among the learners.

A questionnaire was designed using a 5-point Likert scale as developed in 1932 by Rensis Likert. (Duprey & Shehan 1999). This required the individuals to make a decision on their level of agreement with a statement: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. According to Duprey & Shehan 1999, this is the most commonly used question format for assessing participants' opinions of usability.

In keeping with the Likert research tradition, our questionnaire addressed student opinions concerning teaching and learning practices built on experiential learning, social constructivism and blended learning in general used in the courses they participated. The questionnaire as a whole had 34 questions, but this paper will be limited to address only the questions related to computer and Internet use. Therefore, one could say that a modified system was utilized because in a full scale Likert survey questions relate to a wide range of areas and are correlated with the number of respondents. This was not deemed necessary because of the limited nature and statistically small number of participants of this study.

The questionnaire was administered through the online platform Moodle. In some cases, respondents added qualitative answers to their questions. These answers were integrated into the analysis because they flesh in the quantitative data. Rather than being purely quantitative or purely qualitative this paper utilized mixed methods. Mixed methods are widely accepted in educational research today (see Creswell & Plano Clark 2007, Greene 2007, Johnson & Christensen 2008, Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2009, Onwuegbuzie & Collins 2007, Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2006, Ridenour & Newman 2008). The researchers feel that in educational research, mixed methods yield reliable and valid results.

The total number of respondents for the entire survey was 20 (N=20). The respondents were a combination of students from two different groups: first group was comprised of advanced students in an LSP course on legal and administrative translation. The class had eight (8) participants, 7 of which responded. This was an 87.5% response rate among the advanced student target group. The second group was comprised of thirteen (13) second year English translation majors. At that time, there were sixteen (16) second year English Translation majors studying in the program. So, the sampling consisted of a representative sample of 88% of the students in the program. One must keep in mind that the department only accepts 18 students per year. So, unlike in many other countries, our groups are quite small. In addition to practical translation and translation theory courses the students are also trained in the use of the Internet for searching information in a compulsory ICT-skills course for all the students of the university (Helminen 2007: 184) and during their translation skills courses.

Reliability

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was tabulated using the PASW Statistics 18 software. It was found that the overall Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire is high ($r = 0.984$) which in turn indicates a high degree of internal consistency and thus relatively high level of reliability of the instrument.

Means and standard deviations for individual questions will be presented in a following table in with “m” standing for “mean” and “sd” for “standard deviation”.

Question	M	SD
<i>1. It is always better to have translations via web platform (Moodle etc.)</i>	3.85	1.27
<i>2. It is always better to have your translations through email instead of a web platform</i>	3.05	0.89
<i>3. It is always better when you can download the course materials and assignments from the web</i>	4.25	0.93
<i>4. It is always better to use term banks such as Eurlex, IATE etc. whenever you can [in class]</i>	4.05	0.83
<i>5. It is always better to translate without parallel texts from the Internet</i>	1.85	0.88

6. <i>It is always better when you can use parallel texts that are on the Internet</i>	4.65	0.49
7. <i>It is (always) better to translate with only printed dictionaries</i>	1.60	0.68
8. <i>It is (always) better to use the Internet to find background information</i>	4.65	0.93
9. <i>It is always better when you can write and edit assignments in class with Word or some other word processing software</i>	3.20	1.32
10. <i>It is always better to have translation lessons in a computer classroom</i>	2.55	1.05
11. <i>It is always better to be able to use programs such as Google Docs</i>	3.60	0.88

Results

In the following paragraphs we will describe 11 out of the 38 questions. The questions were chosen since they focus on the tools the students use in their translation exercises both in class and on their own or during group assignments. For the composition of the two courses and students groups see chapter 3 Research methods.

Moodle vs. Email

The use of Moodle versus email was addressed by the study. Moodle is a web-based platform widely used in the Finnish education system. Instructors have all of their material, forums, assignments, links, and course material there.

The results can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

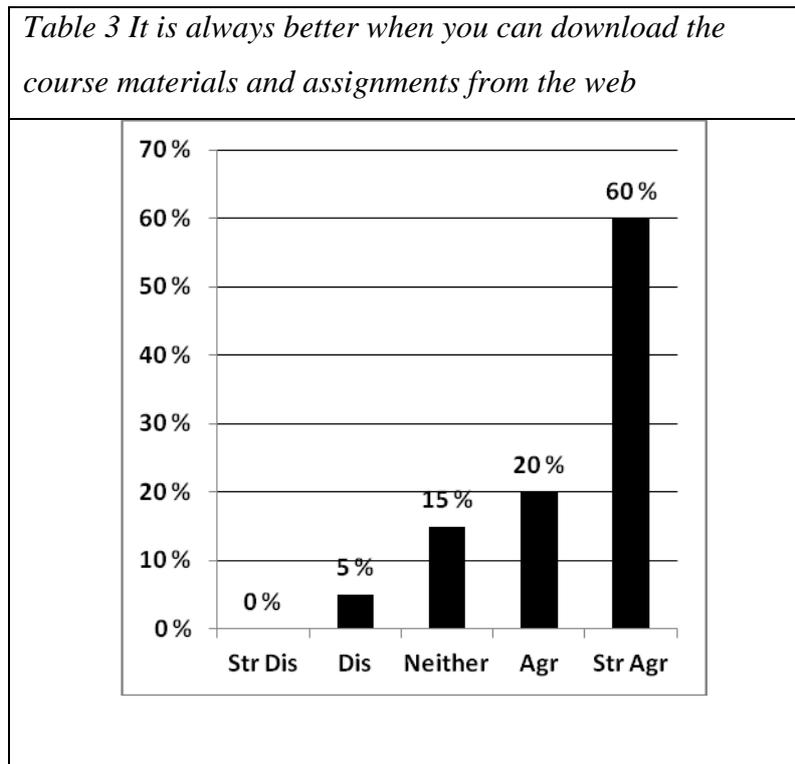
Tables 1 and 2. Web Platforms

<p><i>Table 1 It is always better to have translations via web platform (Moodle etc.)</i></p>	<p><i>Table 2 It is always better to have your translations through email instead of a web platform</i></p>																								
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Students in the studied institution are used to have their translations and other assignments in an electronic form. A web platform, the Moodle, was used as a communication and co-operation tool during the studied courses, although students could use e-mail too. A majority of the respondents (12 or 65%) favoured a web platform and only one in ten preferred some other method when asked whether or not it is better to use a web platform instead of some other method in completing in their assignments. Although the standard deviation in replies concerning the web platform was relatively higher (1.27) and two respondents (10%) strongly disagreed with their use, it should also be noted that none were strongly against both of the electronic communication methods.

Using electronic course materials

The use of electronic course materials was also addressed by the study. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Downloading materials from the web

When asked about their opinion on using electronic course materials and the web as the distribution channel for assignments and course materials only one respondent (5%) reacted negatively and 15 (80%) positively. As can be seen from the mean value of 4.25, the students clearly preferred using a web platform for their classes. If we record the scores for ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’, 12 of the students (65%) preferred using a web platform for their classes. For them, it was preferable to download course materials and assignments from the web.

The answers may reflect practices in the courses the students have been attending. When we started studying translation the teachers photocopied the material and they handed it over to the students. If one did not come to class, one did not get the material. In our classes, the teacher often posts the assignment on the web and the students download the text and translate it.

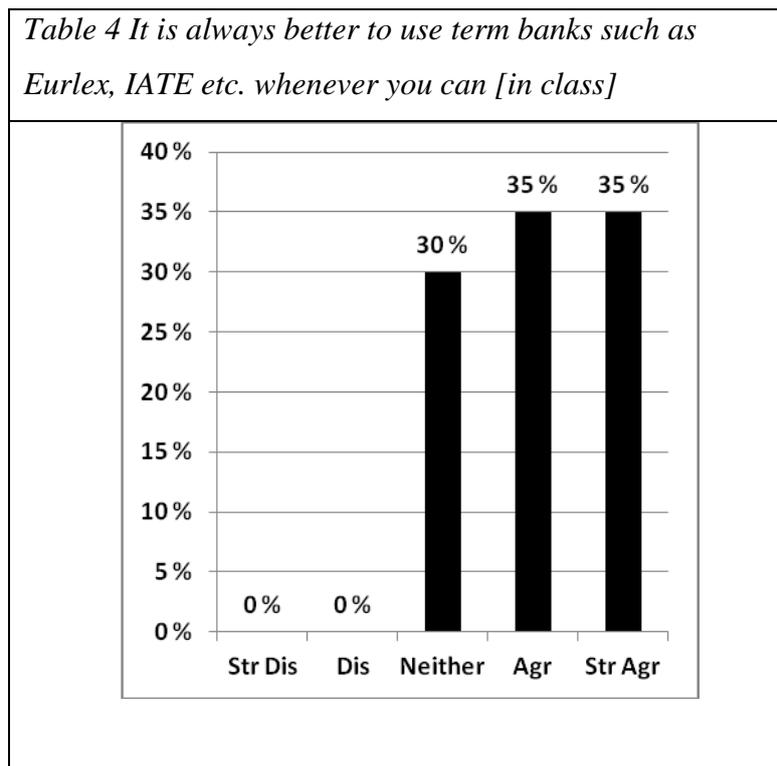
For many assignments, the students form groups to translate texts. Then they post their drafts and finished texts on Moodle and comment on them using the forums. So, by the time we actually went through the translated text in class we were looking at third or fourth versions

which were pretty clear. Such activities teach the learners to use the tools available to develop their remote translating and co-operation skills, abilities and perspectives.

Term Banks

The use of term banks was also addressed by the study. Term banks are specialized terminology databases on the Internet or an intranet and alongside more traditional specialised terminological dictionaries and standards seen as important tool in translation of LSP texts. The results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Term banks use in class



In Table 4, one can see that students prefer using internet based term banks for their translation. Mean value of 4.05 and standard deviation of 0.83 indicate a clear preference for online terminology tools among the respondents. On a closer analysis of the results one can note, that since one third (7) of the respondents were specializing in legal translation and were thus familiar with the Eurlex and the IATE, both online databases containing EU terminology and translations of legal texts. Two thirds (12), general translation students, were familiar with the tools, but used them sporadically. Still 13 of the students (70%) agreed or strongly agreed when they were presented with the claim “In translation classes, it is (always)

better when you can use term banks such as Eurlex, IATE etc. [in class]”. The remaining 30% were indifferent.

Parallel texts

Finding parallel texts was also addressed by the study. The results can be seen in Table 6 and 7.

Table 6 and 7. Parallel Texts and the Internet

<p><i>Table 5 It is always better to translate without parallel texts from the Internet</i></p>	<p><i>Table 6 It is always better when you can use parallel texts that are on the Internet</i></p>																								
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Tables 5 and 6 show clearly that respondents favour parallel texts from the Internet. So, even if you encourage them to go into the library, contemporary translation students avoid it. Recently there has been some discussion in Finland that the university no longer needs a library because students can find everything they need using computers. Tables 6 and 7 support this. According to class room discussions and translation commentaries of translation students studied here, the students use mainly the Internet when they search for background information, terminology, parallel texts or vocabulary; this was clearly evident from the responses.

All of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that: “In translation classes, it is (always) better when you can use parallel texts that are on the Internet” (mean of 4.65) and

only one (5%) disagreed with the question “In translation classes, it is (always) better to translate without parallel texts from the Internet” (mean of 1.60).

Googling vs. print

The study also asked if it was better to translate with only printed dictionaries versus using Internet to find background information. The results can be seen in Tables 7 and 8

Tables 7 and 8. Dictionaries vs. Internet

<p><i>Table 7 It is (always) better to translate with only printed dictionaries</i></p>	<p><i>Table 8 It is (always) better to use the Internet to find background information</i></p>																								
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Two more questions analysed the same phenomena of information mining in the internet or, as students commonly put it, Googling, “In translation classes, it is (always) better to use Internet to find background information” and “In translation classes, it is (always) better when you can use term banks such as Eurlex, IATE etc. [in class]”, this was tested by asking the opposite later in the survey “In translation classes, it is (always) better to translate with only printed dictionaries”. Although only 70% favoured term banks and other online sources for terminology searches, none of the respondents preferred printed dictionaries. When the replies for both questions are compared statistically using online term banks has a mean of 4.05 (standard deviation of 0.83) and using printed dictionaries has a mean of 1.60 (standard deviation of 0.68). Respondents as a whole are thus a slightly more inclined not to use printed sources than using online sources. It would be interesting to analyse the reason for this tendency. One could hypothesize that the ease of use of the Internet (most students have personal computers in their dormitories and a free of charge Internet connection provided by the university) and the availability of free, although of often less than perfect quality, online dictionaries weights heavily against purchasing fairly expensive printed dictionaries.

Background information

The use of the Internet to find background information was also addressed by the study. The results can be seen in Table 8, presented above.

When students were asked on their preference for the Internet as the best source for information (“It’s always better to use Internet to find background information”) an overwhelming majority, 18 respondents (95%), agreed or fully agreed with it. Interestingly one respondent, an outlier, strongly disagreed with the claim differing from the mean (4.65) by more than three times the standard deviation (0.93).

When compared to Table 8 (It is always better to translate with only printed dictionaries) with 90% disagreement rate this clearly shows that the surveyed students favoured electronic resources. This supports a general trend towards using the Web instead of printed resources observable in translation commentaries provided by the students during the academic year. The mean values of both questions further indicate strong preference (1.60 and 4.65 respectively) towards the Internet as the main information source.

Class room equipment

The use of word processing software was also addressed by the study. The study also addressed the use of how learners write and edit assignments in class with MS Word or some other word processing software and if they preferred to have translation lessons in a computer classroom. The results can be seen in Tables 9 and 10.

Tables 9 and 10. Computer use in class

<p><i>Table 9. It is always better when you can write and edit assignments in class with Word or some other word processing software</i></p>	<p><i>Table 10. It is always better to have translation lessons in a computer classroom</i></p>																								
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Questions 9 and 10 created two out of the three widest standard deviations (1.32 and 1.05 respectively) in the survey. This may have been caused by the difference in the two groups surveyed and will be further analysed in the Tables 9b and 10b in the following. Most translation lessons the students attended during the academic year did not include translation in class, this was especially true for the second year group of the two groups surveyed. Translation assignments were discussed and analysed in groups and by students themselves who identified translation problems in the texts, sometimes creating draft translations, but they usually did not have time or were asked for finished translations

When students were asked about class room facilities (“It’s always better when translation lesson is in a computer class”) only 5 (20%) agreed or strongly agreed with this against 9 (45%) who did not think (disagreed or strongly disagreed) this as important for translation lesson. A third remained indifferent (neither agreed nor disagreed). Since most of the students consider Internet as their main information source and they all returned their translations through a web platform or email, they possibly did not consider translation lesson as a place for actually doing translations.

	9. Word processing in classroom		10. Lessons in computer class	
	LSP	General	LSP	General
Strongly disagree or Disagree	43%	16%	43%	39%
Neither	14%	46%	14%	46%
Agreed or Strongly agree	42%	38%	43%	15%
Mean / Standard deviation	2.71/ 1.58	4.00/0.76	2.57 / 1.40	3.29/0.45

(LSP = LSP course students; General = general translation students)

Interestingly the replies of the two student groups were very different from each other. Due to the small number of students the difference is not statistically significant but qualitatively it is interesting. The answers of the students who attended the LSP course and were third or fourth year students were polarised, they either disagreed or strongly disagreed (3 students or 43%) or agreed or strongly agreed (3 students or 43%) to both questions. Whereas the general translation students, comprising second year students were more indifferent on both questions (six neither agreed nor disagreed 46% in both questions). This may be explained by the type of texts usually translated: general texts, where the amount of new information to be searched is limited, versus specialized texts that often require more knowledge mining and thus more time and concentration.

The subgroup results will be presented in the below tables 9b and 10b.

Tables 9b and 10b. Detailed computer use in class

Table 9b. It is always better when you can write and edit assignments in class with Word or some other word processing software

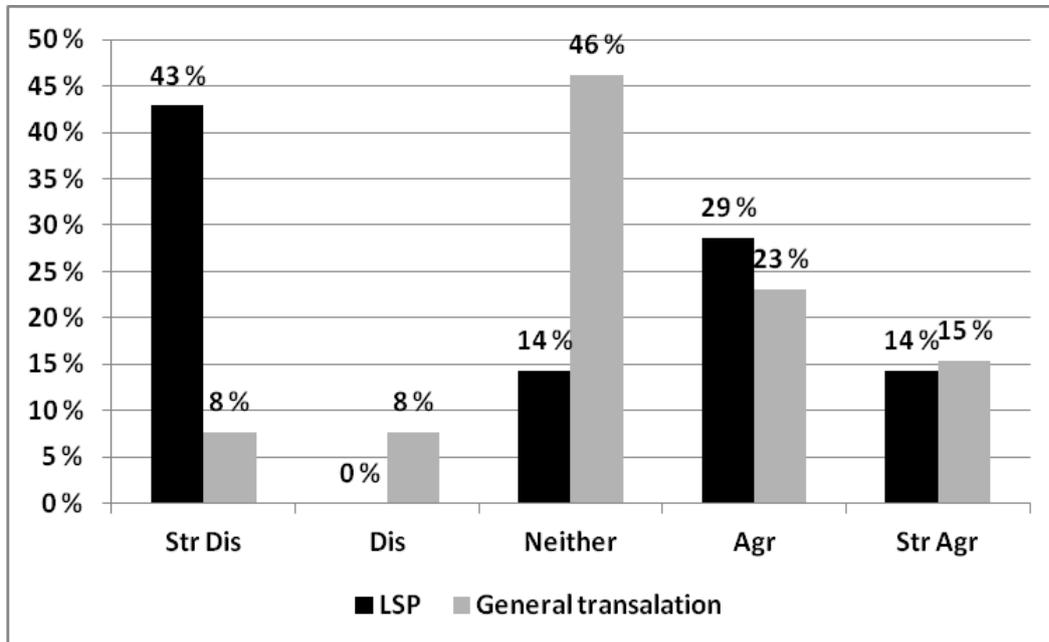
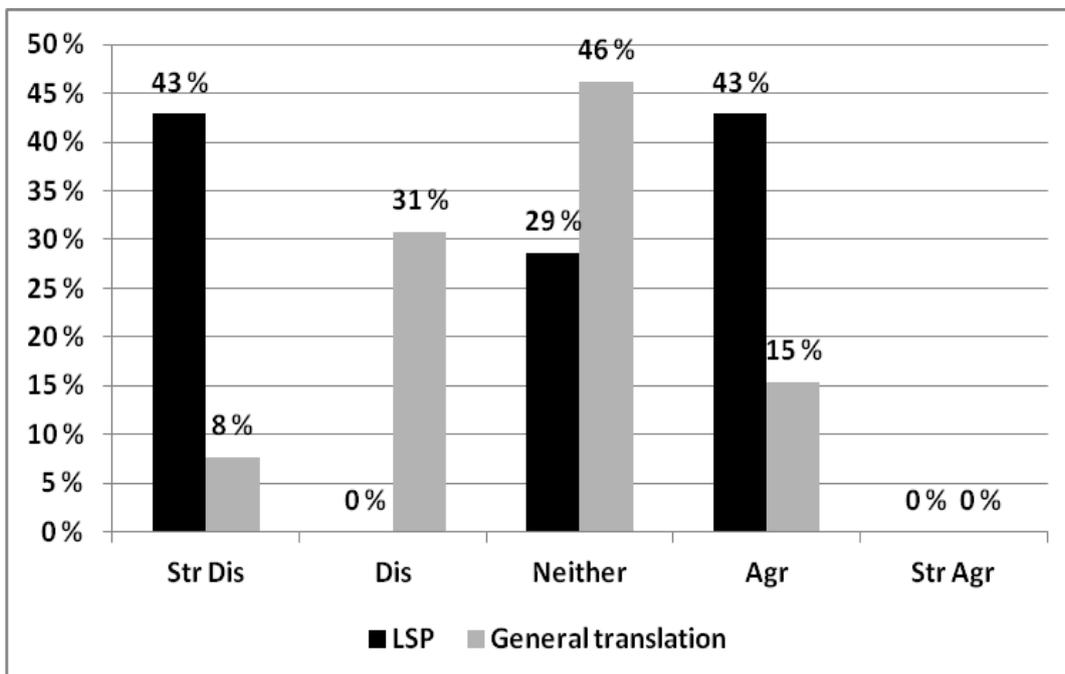


Table 10b. It is always better to have translation lessons in a computer classroom

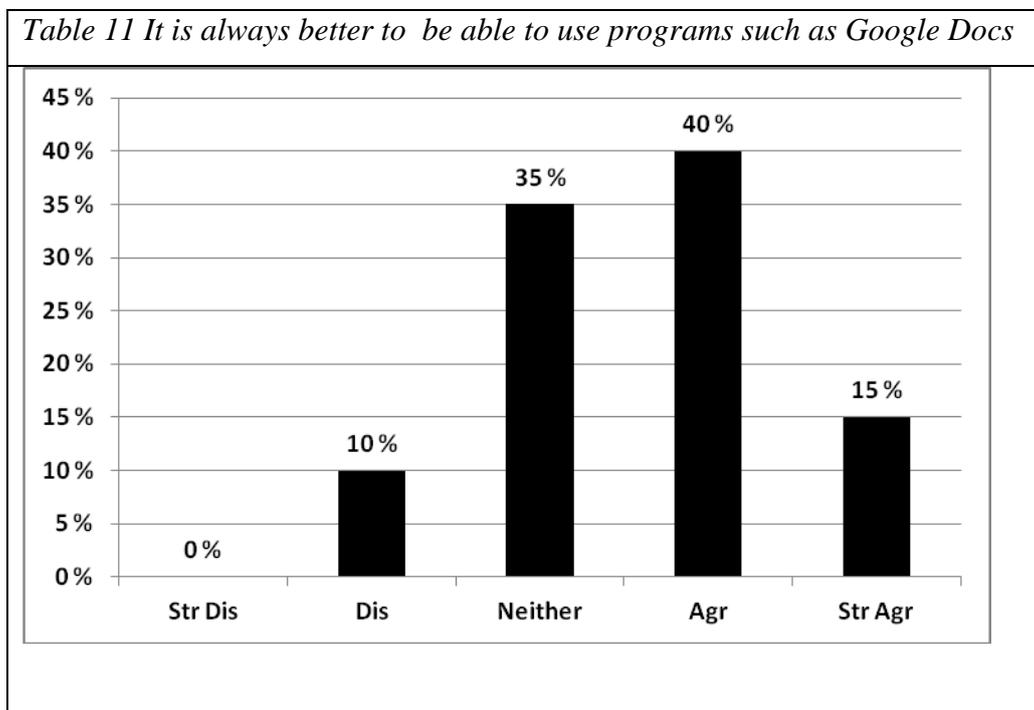


This structure of translation lessons might explain the results for another question concerning the importance of possibility to edit translations in class with the help of word processing software and a computer. Nearly half agreed or strongly agreed with the claim, a third remained indifferent and a surprisingly large number, 20% of the students, strongly disagreed with this.

Google Docs

The use of Google docs was also addressed by the study. Google docs are a package of web-based, free office programs offered by Google. The package allows users to collaboratively create and edit texts, spreadsheets and other items. The results can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11. Google Docs



The package was not used as a compulsory learning tool during the academic year the students took part in the research, but some of the students used it spontaneously. According to the replies more than a half (55% or 11) of the students recognised the usefulness of such a collaborative tool.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results clearly indicate that among our respondents those using only printed sources and the resources at hand for translation are extinct. Today, the students and the professionals translate with the help of the Internet, its resources, its tools and with the help of the networks of their colleagues and other contacts.

A move from email to web platforms, which was supported by the surveyed students, improved management of knowledge from the student side and management of the teaching from the teacher side.

A step further in making learning environments even more authentic would be to move the process of writing a new translation from students' local desktops into the web and into the cloud. According to the survey results, especially the question on GoogleDocs, students do not yet recognize the possibilities offered by the cloud software tools. This may be due to understanding of translation as an individual effort, by lack of information on the new software developments or some other reasons. Cloud software and various social networking tools are among the areas we want to look in for our future research and – also – help the students to understand and to learn how to use them for collaboration and working together more flexibly.

Adoption of more student and learning centred practices and the Internet as a communication and information searching tool transformed the teaching into more flexible modern social constructivist learning environment where the students can build the information together wherever they are and whenever they can do that. In essence work and translate like the professional translators they are turning into.

The proposed change is further supported by the fact the Finnish elementary and secondary level educational systems have already changed. Most students beginning their university studies have already adopted social constructive learning philosophy, are using the Internet as their main information source and - at least some of them - understand problem solving and knowledge building as a co-operative and experimental process.

About the authors

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