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SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' USE OF AI TRANSLATION TOOLS: FINDINGS FROM CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND SURVEY RESEARCH

Conversations about AI-assisted translation (AIAT) in education tend to occur at a remove from the classroom itself, in policy documents, academic journals, and conference halls, while the students who use these tools daily are rarely consulted directly. The present study attempts to close that gap by focusing not on what AIAT tools can do in theory, but on what secondary school learners actually do with them in practice. Data were gathered through a combination of a written questionnaire and structured classroom observation conducted across mixed-age groups of secondary school students in the Zhytomyr region, ranging from grades 8 to 11. A total of 26 students participated. The dual-method approach was deliberate: questionnaire responses capture what learners report about their behaviour, while observation captures what they demonstrably do — and the two, as the data confirm, do not always match.

The questionnaire asked students about the frequency, purpose, and perceived reliability of AIAT use in their English learning. Results revealed that all 26 participants use at least one AI translation tool on a weekly basis, with Google Translate and ChatGPT cited most frequently. When asked why they use these tools, the dominant responses centred on speed and confidence: students reported turning to AIAT primarily when they were “not sure” about a word or phrase, or when they wanted to “check” their own output. Notably, 21 out of 26 respondents (81%) agreed with the statement “if the AI says it, it is probably correct,” and only 6 reported ever questioning or modifying the translation they received. When asked whether they considered the possibility that an AI translation might sound unnatural or culturally inappropriate in Ukrainian, the majority indicated that this had not occurred to them as a relevant concern. These attitudinal findings are significant because they suggest that the issue is not simply one of habit or convenience, but of a deeper, largely unexamined assumption that machine output constitutes linguistic authority.

Classroom observation produced a more granular and, in several respects, more troubling picture. Students were observed completing writing and translation tasks during regular English lessons in which AIAT tools were permitted. I recorded not only the final outputs but also the process: how long students spent reading the AI-generated result before accepting it, whether they made any modifications, and how they responded when the teacher drew attention to a potential problem in the machine output. Across all observed sessions, the average time between receiving an AI translation and submitting it as a final answer was under 15 seconds. Revision of any kind was observed in fewer than one in five instances. When the teacher pointed to a specific phrase and asked whether it sounded right in Ukrainian, students' most common response was to re-enter the text into the tool rather than to reason about it independently — a pattern that suggests AIAT is functioning not as a support for thinking but as a substitute for it.

Three specific episodes from the observation data are worth examining in detail. In the first, an 11th-grade student was asked to translate a short opinion paragraph into English. She used ChatGPT, received a fluent output, and submitted it without reading it in full. When the

teacher read the translation aloud, the student was visibly surprised: the AI had shifted the text from first-person to third-person throughout, fundamentally changing its meaning. The student had not noticed because she had not read the output as a piece of language. Instead, she had treated its existence as sufficient proof of its correctness.

In the second episode, a 9th-grade student used Google Translate to render the Ukrainian phrase “він поведився по-свійськи” into English and received “he behaved in a piggish way,” which, while technically translatable, was stylistically incongruous with the semi-formal context of the task. The student submitted the phrase unchanged; when asked why, he said it “sounded English enough.” The third episode involved a group writing task in which two 10th-grade students disagreed about a word choice and resolved the dispute not by discussing the options but by asking ChatGPT to “decide.” The AI produced a third option neither had considered, and both students accepted it without further discussion. What these three moments share is a common posture toward AIAT: not as a tool to be interrogated, but as an arbiter whose outputs close down deliberation rather than opening it up.

One of the more striking findings of the study concerns the gap between what students reported in the questionnaire and what was observed in the classroom. While 6 respondents claimed to regularly modify AI output, observation data identified only 2 students who demonstrably did so across multiple tasks. Conversely, several students who described themselves as “critical” users were observed accepting machine translations within seconds without any visible evaluation. This discrepancy is not necessarily a sign of dishonesty: it more likely reflects the fact that students have internalised a positive self-image as careful learners without having developed the concrete skills that would make such carefulness operational. They know, in the abstract, that AI can make mistakes; they simply do not apply that knowledge in the moment of task completion. This distinction between knowing that critical evaluation is desirable and actually performing it points to the core pedagogical challenge the data reveal.

The study does not conclude that AIAT tools are harmful or that their use should be restricted. What the data do suggest is that access to these tools, without corresponding instruction in how to evaluate their output, produces a specific and identifiable pattern of dependency that is already well established among secondary school learners in the observed sample. The implications for classroom practice are direct: it is not enough to permit or prohibit AIAT use; teachers need concrete strategies for making evaluation a visible, teachable, and habitual part of the translation process.

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