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EDISI 10 JUN 2023

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Translation Applications for Language Learning

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Learning a second or third language may be challenging, especially for students with poor proficiency in the target language. They may lack the vocabulary to express their ideas. Therefore, they may struggle to find suitable words to express their ideas since they may think of the idea in their first language. Then, they need to translate their idea into the target language. After that, the next struggle is to make sure that the sentences in the language do not have any grammatical errors in terms of tenses, subject-verb agreement, choice of word, spelling and punctuation. However, students in the 21st century have the advantage of improving their language skills by using certain translation apps.

Translation apps are online tools which apply artificial intelligence to translate the meaning of spoken or written language. The translation is a complex process as a text cannot be translated word by word to consider the context. Fortunately, many translation apps can perform translation according to the context where the words are used. This is due to the fact that the apps use natural language processing (NLP). NLP is a subfield of artificial intelligence, computer science, and linguistics that enable computers or applications to understand text and speech in human communication. For example, Google Translate applies NLP to translate speech and text provided by users. Therefore, Google Translate can perform translation quite effectively.

There are many translation apps available. Some of them do not require users to sign up and sign in. However, if the users sign up/in, they can get some benefits offered by the apps. Free translation apps also offer commercial accounts where users can have additional features. According to Maria (2023), the best translation app for various purposes is Google Translate, while the best translation app for accuracy is DeepL Translate and the best translation app for business is Microsoft Translator. Table 1 provides some information about the apps. Based on the comparison of the features described in Table 1, the apps which are suitable for Malaysian students with the Malay language as the first language are Google Translate and Microsoft Translator since it offers the Malay language. If students learn English, Mandarin or Arabic, they can use the apps to enrich their vocabulary and learn the correct structure of sentences and pronunciation. Microsoft Translator supports multiple users to chat, and the chat can be translated into the selected target language, Thus, it is suitable for pair or group work where group members can collaborate by joining a room to chat in selected languages.

Table 1

		Google Translate	DeepL	Microsoft Translator
1.	**Website link**	https://translate.google.com/	https://www.deepl.com/translator	https://translator.microsoft.com/
2.	**Web app**	✔	✔	✔
3.	**Phone app**	✔	✔	✔
4.	**Number of languages**	133	29	129
5.	**Support Malay**	✔	X Alternative: Use Indonesian	✔
6.	**Support English**	✔	✔	✔
7.	**Support Mandarin**	✔	X	✔
8.	**Support Arabic**	✔	X	✔
9.	**Support multiple users**	X	X	✔ (allow group work and collaboration)

Translation apps can never replace human translation (Habash, 2022). There are at least three reasons to justify this. First, translation apps cannot understand the culture. Language is related to culture, so that translation needs to consider culture. Certain words mean differently in different cultures. Second, translation apps may not be able to detect the writer's/ speaker's tone, so the translation provided by apps is less natural compared to human translation. Finally, human translators can always communicate with the text provider or client to discuss the translation scope when necessary, which apps cannot do. Thus, translation by humans is more accurate than by apps.

Although translation apps are less accurate than human translation, they offer many advantages in language learning. They can provide students with vocabulary by translating students' ideas into the target language learnt. Moreover, students can learn sentence structure and grammar when complete sentences are provided. They also can listen to the text to learn the pronunciation of words.

However, students should use translation apps cautiously in language learning. They cannot fully rely on translation apps, especially when they complete their writing assignments by simply copying and pasting the translation provided in their written assignments. They should always make sense of the translation provided to fulfil the needs of their assignments. Besides, they should also pay attention to certain things, such as making sense of the word choice to ensure the words provided by the apps are according to context and grammar, as apps sometimes provide sentences with grammatical errors and spelling (British or American English spelling).

It is hoped that translation apps facilitate students in language learning. The apps should help in improving their language proficiency and boost their motivation in language learning.

Reference

Habash, F. (2022, December 14). AI Translation vs Human Translation: Pros and Cons. Localization Insights. https://www.getblend.com/blog/ai-translation-vs-human-translation-pros-and-cons/

Maria, A, (2023, May 1). The 10 Best Translation Apps for Travelers and Language Learners in 2023. *Language Learning . Resources* https://www.fluentu.com/blog/best-translation-apps/