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LOST IN TRANSLATION: HOW OVER-RELIANCE ON AI TOOLS SLOWS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Annotation: In recent years, AI-powered applications such as Google Translate, ChatGPT, and DeepL have grown increasingly popular among EFL learners. Despite the undeniable advantages these tools bring, a significant portion of students treat them as a complete solution rather than a supplementary aid. This paper investigates the consequences of excessive dependence on AI translation and writing assistants, arguing that such dependence hinders vocabulary growth, weakens independent thinking, and obstructs the development of authentic communicative competence. Alongside this analysis, the paper proposes a set of evidence-based strategies through which learners can integrate AI tools productively into their study routines.

Keywords: AI tools, EFL learning, Google Translate, language acquisition, translation dependency, digital literacy, learner autonomy

Introduction The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped how learners approach foreign language study. In today's classrooms, students who encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or complex grammatical structures can resolve their confusion within seconds by turning to a mobile application. Platforms such as Google Translate, DeepL, and AI-based conversational assistants like ChatGPT are not only cost-free but also constantly accessible, making them attractive to learners at every proficiency level.

Yet a critical question tends to go unasked: does reaching for these tools actually build language ability, or does it merely enable task completion? The distinction is significant. Submitting a translated paragraph may satisfy an immediate assignment requirement, but it leaves the learner without any deeper understanding of the target language. The act of bypassing difficulty, rather than working through it, may produce a finished product while simultaneously preventing genuine learning from taking place.

This article explores the underlying reasons why learners gravitate toward AI tools so heavily, examines the negative outcomes that follow from unchecked reliance, and outlines a more balanced approach to incorporating technology in language education.

Why Students Over-Rely on AI Tools One of the primary drivers of AI dependency is sheer convenience. A full paragraph can be rendered into the target language almost instantaneously, sparing the learner from the cognitive effort involved in reading, inferring, and processing. For students who experience anxiety around making errors, AI tools hold a particular appeal: they consistently produce an output that appears correct, eliminating the vulnerability that comes with attempting something independently.

A second contributing factor is academic pressure. Students operating under tight deadlines and high parental or institutional expectations naturally gravitate toward the most time-efficient option

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available. The repeated choice of speed over effort can consolidate into a fixed habit that becomes increasingly difficult to unlearn over time.

Third, many EFL learners struggle with a persistent lack of self-belief in their own linguistic capabilities. Krashen (1982) introduced the concept of the affective filter, arguing that emotional barriers such as low confidence can effectively block the intake of new language input. By turning to AI tools, students sidestep the discomfort of uncertainty — yet in doing so, they also sidestep the conditions under which real language acquisition occurs.

The Problems Caused by Over-Reliance The consequences of excessive AI use in language learning are wide-ranging and interconnected. To begin with, learners who habitually rely on translation tools rarely engage in the kind of repeated, contextual encounters with vocabulary that research identifies as necessary for long-term retention. Nation (2001) demonstrates that words become embedded in memory through multiple meaningful exposures across varied contexts. A word glimpsed once in a translation interface and never revisited is unlikely to enter a learner's active lexicon.

Furthermore, delegating writing tasks to AI removes the opportunity to practice the cognitive processes that underpin effective composition. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) emphasize that writing is fundamentally a mode of thinking — an activity through which ideas are organized, evaluated, and refined in the target language. Students who outsource this process to technology may produce grammatically acceptable texts while never developing the capacity for independent written expression.

Over-reliance on AI tools also leaves spoken language skills largely underdeveloped. Translation and writing assistants offer little support for listening comprehension or spontaneous oral interaction. As a result, learners who lean heavily on these tools can find themselves severely disadvantaged when confronted with real-time communication — whether in the context of an English-medium workplace, an international examination such as IELTS, or an everyday conversation with a native speaker.

Finally, it is worth noting that AI translation systems are by no means infallible. Errors involving idiomatic expressions, contextual nuance, and grammatical agreement are common. A student who accepts AI output without scrutiny may unknowingly submit work containing significant inaccuracies — an outcome that is particularly problematic in academic contexts where precision and originality are expected.

The Situation in EFL Contexts In settings where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, the temptation to rely on AI translation tools is especially pronounced. For many students, these applications represent virtually the only interface through which they engage with the target language in daily life. Over time, this can foster what researchers describe as a "translation habit" — the tendency to formulate thoughts in the native language first and convert them into English only as a secondary step (Cummins, 2000). This cognitive pattern actively inhibits the internalization of the language and entrenches continued dependence on external support.

The more students lean on AI to circumvent linguistic challenges, the more remote their prospects of independent proficiency become. The struggle that learners seek to avoid is, in fact, a core mechanism of language acquisition. When technology eliminates that productive difficulty, it simultaneously eliminates the learning that would have resulted from it.

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How to Use AI Tools Wisely The argument presented here is not that AI tools should be abandoned. Rather, the issue lies in the manner of their use. When approached thoughtfully, these technologies can serve as effective complements to traditional language study rather than substitutes for it.

A productive starting point is what might be called the "attempt-first" principle: students should engage with a text on their own terms before consulting any external aid. Even partial comprehension — understanding the gist of a passage without grasping every word — activates prior knowledge and primes the cognitive system for learning. The effort invested in this initial attempt is not wasted; it creates the conditions under which new vocabulary is more readily absorbed.

When translation tools are consulted, learners should go beyond passive reception of the output. Writing down newly encountered words and constructing original sentences that incorporate them is a straightforward strategy for moving vocabulary from passive recognition into active use. This small additional step can make a substantial difference to long-term retention.

AI conversational tools such as ChatGPT can also be repurposed as interactive language partners. Rather than requesting ready-made written content, learners might use these systems to practise dialogue, receive corrective feedback on their output, or explore why certain phrasing sounds natural while other formulations do not. This mode of engagement transforms AI from a shortcut into a genuine learning scaffold. At the institutional level, educators have an important role to play. Many students are genuinely unaware of how their reliance on digital tools is impeding their development. Explicit classroom discussion about AI literacy — what these tools can and cannot do, and how to use them without undermining one's own learning — can equip students to make more informed and autonomous decisions.

Conclusion The proliferation of AI language tools has undoubtedly simplified many aspects of foreign language study. However, simplicity and effectiveness are not the same thing. When learners treat translation platforms and AI writing assistants as substitutes for genuine engagement with the target language, they may complete their tasks, but they are not acquiring the language. True proficiency emerges from the cumulative experience of making errors, navigating uncertainty, and gradually building confidence through independent use. For students studying English in contexts where authentic exposure is already scarce, this dynamic carries particular weight. The path forward is not to eliminate technology from the learning environment, but to reframe the relationship between learner and tool. An AI application should function as a resource that supports understanding and extends capacity — not as a replacement for the mental effort that language learning demands. Cultivated with care and intentionality, digital tools can genuinely enrich the acquisition process rather than arrest it.

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