

# Leaving the “peer” out of peer-editing: Online translators as a pedagogical tool in the Spanish as a second language classroom

Traductores en línea como herramienta pedagógica en la clase de ELE: Individualizando la revisión por pares

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## Abstract

If you can not beat them, join him [*sic*] (*Google Translation of Si no puedes con tu enemigo, únete a él*). *Academic dishonesty is widespread in schools and colleges across the world, and with the advent of technology, cheating is easier than ever: While computers and the internet provide students with all the tools they need to plagiarize from the comfort of their own home, instructors find themselves playing “forensic linguist” in order to gather evidence of cheating. Academic dishonesty in the foreign language classroom is not that different from academic dishonesty in other disciplines except for two areas: unauthorized editing by a proficient/native speaker and the use of online translators (OTs). While these two are not usually an issue for assignments in chemistry or psychology, they are two well-known types of academic dishonesty in the foreign languages. In this paper, I examine the use of OTs: how are they different from an online dictionary? How can they be detected? How can their use be prevented? Finally, I propose using them as part of the class in order to discourage/minimize academic dishonesty and raise metalinguistic awareness.*

**Key Words:** academic dishonesty, cheating, linguistic comparisons, metalinguistic awareness, online translators.

## Resumen

If you can not beat them, join him [*sic*] (*Traducción automática del traductor de Google de Si no puedes con tu enemigo, únete a él*). *La deshonestidad académica es común en escuelas y centros educativos de todo el mundo y, con la ayuda de la tecnología, es más fácil que nunca: mientras las computadoras e internet proporcionan a los estudiantes todas las herramientas necesarias para plagiar cómodamente desde casa, los maestros se encuentran haciendo de “lingüista forense” para recoger evidencia de trampas académicas. La deshonestidad académica en la clase de lengua extranjera no es muy diferente de la que se puede encontrar en otras disciplinas excepto por dos tipos: edición no autorizada por parte de un nativo hablante o alguien con nivel avanzado de la lengua meta y el uso de traductores en línea. Aunque no sean un problema para asignaturas como química o psicología, son dos tipos de engaño académico muy comunes en clases de lengua extranjera. En este artículo examino el uso de los traductores en línea: ¿en qué se diferencian de los diccionarios en línea? ¿Cómo se pueden detectar? ¿Cómo se puede prevenir su uso? Finalmente propongo utilizarlos como parte de la clase para minimizar y disuadir su uso así como para aumentar la conciencia metalingüística de los estudiantes.*

**Palabras Claves:** deshonestidad académica; trampas; comparación lingüística; conciencia metalingüística; traductores en línea.



## INTRODUCTION: ONLINE TRANSLATORS

Widespread access to the Internet and other forms of technology has undoubtedly transformed the twenty-first century classroom: most instructors use computers to enhance their teaching (through the use of videos, podcasts, social media and other (teaching) software) and students are often asked to participate and/or do research from the comfort of their own homes (as opposed to having to go to the library). As a consequence, learning is no longer solitary and competitive but collaborative and social (Layton, 2005, p. 8), which makes it harder to establish the limits of what is public and shareable and what is not.

Academic integrity has always been an issue at all levels of education and across disciplines. Plagiarism and unauthorized collaboration have been long reported and academic honor codes have been created and used at several institutions since well before students had widespread access to the Internet (some honor codes date back to the nineteenth century). However, in the age of Web 2.0 and social media—where everybody is both user and author—the limits of collaboration are often blurred. The best example is Wikipedia, a free encyclopedia, written collaboratively by its users. Its Web site says:

*Don't be afraid to edit – anyone can edit almost every page, and we are encouraged to be bold! Find something that can be improved and make it better—for example, spelling, grammar, rewriting for readability, adding content, or removing non-constructive edits. (Author's emphasis.)*

In a time when anonymous and disinterested/altruistic collaboration is both encouraged and praised (people collaborate without giving themselves credit and without getting anything in exchange), it is often difficult to convince students of the importance of individual work. For this reason, a number of handbooks about how to tackle academic dishonesty in the digital era have been published recently (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Blum, 2009; Harris, 2001; Eisner & Vicinus, 2008; Lancaster & Clarke, 2008; Lathrop & Foss, 2000; Layton, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Although very comprehensive in the description of the various offenses encountered across a vast array of disciplines, none of them addresses the use of online translators (henceforth OT) by second-language students. However, it has been noted elsewhere (Correa, 2011; García & Pena, 2011; Luton, 2003; Niño, 2009; O'Neill, 2012; Williams, 2006) that many second-language learners—especially those with a weak command in the target



language—use the help of OTs to complete their assignments, even when/if they are advised not to do so.

Not long past are the days when the use of the spell-check or grammar-check functions available on most word processors was frowned upon in the second-language classroom. Back then, the help they provided was regarded as unethical because it was impossible for the instructor to see how much of the spelling was attributable to the student and how much had actually been corrected by the software application. Nowadays, and very much on the contrary, when we ask students to write something at home, we expect them to use the spell-checker under the assumptions that: (1) not doing so is careless, and (2) they still need to make conscious decisions when presented with the options, which makes it very easy to detect whether a student has relied too much on the application or whether they actually possess a good command of spelling. As a consequence, some (Fandrych, 2001; Hughes, 2003) have ventured to propose the use of spelling- and grammar-checkers as learning tools in the second-language classroom, which is very different from considering them unethical.

In this paper, I propose the use of translators as a valuable tool that can be used in the second-language classroom with two main purposes: 1) discouraging and minimizing academic dishonesty, and 2) raising metalinguistic awareness.

### **“I DO NOT UNDERSTAND: HOW IS THIS CHEATING?”**

A problem that instructors often encounter is that of the *accidental* cheater, i.e. those who, by carelessness and/or ignorance, end up cheating without intending to do so. Although carelessness is something that students need to tackle themselves, ignorance can be fixed with information, which must be provided by the instructor and/or the institution. I have already pointed out that what is academic dishonesty in one discipline might not be so in another; so, in our case, it seems that the responsibility of establishing the limits of what is acceptable or not in that classroom falls back on the second-language instructor.

In her analysis of 53 definitions of plagiarism, Pecorari (2002, p. 18) found the following six common elements:

1. an object (i.e., language, words, text)
2. which has been taken (or borrowed, stolen, etc.)
3. from a particular source
4. by an agent



5. without (adequate) acknowledgement, and
6. with or without intention to deceive.

The main difference between traditional plagiarism (where students copy text from other sources into their paper) and the use of an OT is the type of source: when a translator is used, the student cannot be accused of stealing someone else's ideas. He cannot be accused of stealing someone else's words either, because the original words are still his/hers. However, under Pecorari's definition, *object* is not only defined as *words*, but also as *language*. When one reads the English translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is undeniable that the author is still García Márquez, but it would be absurd not to acknowledge the work of the translator, Gregory Rabassa. In the same way—and although we cannot deny the authorship of the original text/ideas by the student—the final product is not his either. Furthermore, the difference between our students and other writers is that students get a grade, and most of this grade is based on their ability to convey those ideas *in* the target language.

In our anecdotal experience, my colleagues and I encounter many accidental cheaters who use OTs because they have not been properly made aware of the difference between them and an online dictionary. After all, if what you are looking for is a word, either one of those tools should suffice—shouldn't it? The danger, of course, is that one word might grow to two, or three, or a sentence ... or a paragraph. I have seen students using OTs as dictionaries in the computer lab (that is, in the presence of their teachers) because translators are *easier* to use (they provide one result per word instead of several options and if the subject is provided, it conjugates the verb). I would equate the use of a dictionary to the use of a calculator and the use of an OT to the use of a spreadsheet where all the formulas have already been entered. Although using a calculator might be allowed in some classes where the emphasis is not on the four operations, the use of a spreadsheet that generates the answer to a math problem would be more questionable. The issue here, obviously, is that a text translated online has been produced “with no intellectual input from the student” and, as such, “has no instructional value” (McCarthy, 2004, n.p.). In other words, the use of an OT not only prevents the student from gaining human capital (improving their language skills or engaging in language analysis), but it also provides an inaccurate product of a dubious quality that will, in the end, result in a bad grade (even if the student succeeds at not being caught).



## PREVENTION AND DETECTION: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In this paper I take the view that prevention is more efficient—and less tedious and painful—than detection (and punishment). However, no matter how much effort is spent on educating the students about academic honesty and warning them about the consequences of their acts, there will always be a portion of *committed* cheaters who will still try to get away with it.

### Prevention

Beasley (2004, p. 9) classifies cheaters in three groups: (1) accidental (they do not understand plagiarism or they cheated unintentionally), (2) opportunistic (they know it is wrong to plagiarize but they saw the opportunity or they thought they did not have other options), and (3) committed (they are determined to cheat or they do it for the thrill of it). For obvious reasons, prevention works best with the first two.

Accidental cheating is a serious, yet preventable issue. In most cases, it is the “failure of faculty to provide clear guidelines that creates misunderstandings about which behaviors are acceptable and which are not in any given course” (Higbee *et al.*, 2011, p. 1). As has been pointed out before, and contrary to most instructors’ beliefs, some students do not see the difference between an online dictionary and an OT unless they are explicitly told so. However, once the instructors clarify why the use of one is encouraged while the use of the other is forbidden, it becomes the solely responsibility of the student to act accordingly.

Instructors often feel that attempting to catch plagiarizers is a waste of time (Correa, 2011) and that it is unfair that the only ones who get caught are the *truly clueless and lazy*, while the sophisticated ones escape penalty (Lathrop & Foss, 2005, p. 187). Be that as it may, it is undeniable that students trying to pass nonsensical compositions as their own not only frustrates the teachers but also disrespects other students’ work, which often results in an uncomfortable climate that is “counterproductive to our mission as educators” (Bolin, 2010, p. 14).

One of the best ways to discourage students from using OTs is to make them see that there is no gain in using this tool, since the result is often of a worse linguistic quality than they might think:

The end result? The student has not improved his or her writing skills in the language, the teacher is frustrated and baffled by a nonsensical composition, and



the student is angry at not getting an A on work which he or she erroneously assumed would automatically be better than whatever he or she could have done without computerized help. (Luton, 2003, p. 769)

When other forms of prevention do not work, making students aware that detection measures are being taken also works as a powerful deterrent (Stapleton, 2012). As a matter of fact, Bunn *et al.* (1992) and Houtman and Walker (2010) report that the probability of detection has three times the effect of the severity of the penalty to be imposed if caught. This reaction to the danger of being caught is very similar to the way we react when we (think) we see a police car on the side of the road (and after we pass it we get back to speeding again). However, how sad is it that we decelerate because we might get a ticket and not because it is the right or safe thing to do? Threats, detection, punishment, and prohibition address only “lack of deterrence” (Kavadlo, 2010, p. 55), but they do not remove the students’ motivation to cheat or change their attitude. There is a sociological theory called *broken windows theory*, according to which:

[I]f a window in a building is broken *and is left unrepaired*, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in rundown ones. Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by window-lovers; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing. (Wilson & Kelling, 1982, p. 31; author’s emphasis)

This theory is not only about the risk of being caught or the severity of the penalty. Quite the opposite, it predicts that (1) people tend to do what they see around them, (2) individuals do not want to be the first ones to break the rules (be it breaking a window or cheating). This way, we can look at prevention of cheating in positive terms, enhancing the value of honesty and “redirect[ing] social pressure towards integrity” (Kavadlo, 2010, p. 55).

### **Detection (strengths and weaknesses)**

Although prevention (be it in the form of giving information, instilling an atmosphere of mutual respect, or issuing threats) might be worthwhile for accidental and some opportunistic cheaters, there is no doubt that, if committed cheaters are determined to cheat, we should be determined to catch them. Among



the reported weaknesses of OTs, we can find (Niño, 2009; Somers et al., 2006; Williams, 2006):

1. Literal translation.
2. Grammatical inaccuracies.
3. Discursive inaccuracies (connectives and co-reference).
4. Unable to account for cultural references and other extra-linguistic issues such as context, connotation, denotation or register.
5. *Unnatural* writing.
6. Misspelled words (in the original text) that are not translated (they are just reproduced).
7. Difficulty with some idioms.
8. Errors that humans (even those at lower levels) do not commit.
9. Proper nouns that get translated into the target language.

Although sometimes an online translation might be difficult to distinguish from a series of hasty or sloppy (but allowed) dictionary consultations, adding what we know about the strengths of online translations might help us see the bigger picture. For example, OTs are good at conjugating, spelling, basic agreement, and some common idioms. Let's consider the following example:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Esto es mucho tiempo. Estoy cansado de pensar qué decir, ya que mantener fastidiarme acerca de lo que te dije y la verdad es que no lo decía en serio

Before we look at the original text in English, two things stand out: the first, obviously, is that the translation does not make sense. The second thing, however, is that even though it does not make any sense, the spelling is perfect (even advanced students tend to forget the accent mark of *qué*), and all verbs are appropriately conjugated (even if they are not in the correct tense). This mismatch between carelessness and carefulness is usually a good sign that the student was not simply translating word by word with the help of a dictionary (online or hardcopy). For the most part, students who rely too much on dictionaries tend to fail at conjugation and agreement. Additionally, the appropriate use of an idiom like *decir algo en serio* (*to mean something*) indicates that the translation was not done *word by word*. The original text for (1) is provided below in (2):

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<sup>1</sup>All example translations in this paper were produced using *Google Translate* (<http://translate.google.com/>).



- (2) This is time consuming. I'm tired of thinking what to say, since you keep nagging me about what I told you and the truth is that I didn't mean it

Another example (3) is:

- (3) Querido John,  
Hace siglos que no te he visto. ¿Qué vas a hacer en estos días? I han sido muy ocupado con la escuela y nosotros tenemos finals próximos para arriba, así I No creo que yo va a ser capaz de ver ustedes esta wekk.

Again, we see an obvious mismatch between the correct spelling of words like *qué* or appropriate use of *hace siglos* and the apparent non-sense of words like *finals*, *wekk*, *I han* or *I No*. Just by looking at the word *wekk* we can see that the original text probably contained a typo (it should be *week*), which resulted in the word simply being reproduced. The original text is provided in (4):

- (4) Dear John, It's been ages that I haven't seen you. What are you up to these days? I have been very busy with school and we have finals coming up, so I don't think I will be able to see you this wekk.

In addition, the translator was also unable to translate *finals*, and it failed twice to detect *I* as the subject of *have* and *think*. Although it is plausible that a lower level student inserts some words in English like *finals*, no one would leave an *I* without translating.

Obviously, not all translations are as easy to detect as the examples provided, as there will always be students who read and fix their papers before handing them in (probably less often than we would like). However, when the level of a piece of writing does not match the performance exhibited by the student during the semester, a red flag should come up.

## ADVANTAGES/PEDAGOGICAL USES: NOT ONLY FOR TRANSLATION COURSES

Developing absolutely plagiarism-proof assignments is impossible (Lathrop & Foss, 2005, p. 165), but instructors can still tailor their assignments in a way that will discourage and/or minimize the incidence of cheating. What I propose here is to use OTs as part of the assignment, with the double aim of promoting academic integrity and raising metalinguistic awareness.

Although student collaboration in the form of peer-editing is a widely accepted practice in the second language classroom (Berg, 1999; Byrd, 2003; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Paulus, 1999), it has not been until recently



(Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) that attention has been paid to the benefits that editing peers' papers has *for the editors*. Examples of this are, among others, gaining editing experience that leads to improvement in self-editing and promoting higher-level thinking or facilitating language awareness. As will be seen in the next two sections, OTs can be useful tools not only for practicing editing skills (before and after the translation takes place) but also for gaining a valuable insight into the nature of language:

If students can see that communicating in another language is not simply a matter of plugging words into a formula that can be calculated by a machine, they will begin to understand language and communication as complex and multilayered. (Williams, 2006, p. 572)

## Post-editing

As has been seen in the examples provided previously, the output offered by OTs is often far from perfect. One of the activities that can be carried out is, simply, to edit the output. It can be carried out with or without the original text, depending on the level of the student. In the first case, the student would be comparing the original with the translation provided by the computer. In the absence of the original text, however, the student would have to decipher what the intended meaning is first, which might prove to be the most difficult part of the assignment. Consider the following example (5) and the original translation in (6):

- (5) Cuando yo era un niño pequeño y nos fuimos al rancho de mi abuelo en Wyoming me encantaba ir a la granja de mi tío para alimentar a los caballos por la mañana y la leche de las vacas de la tarde.
- (6) When I was a little boy and we went to my grandparent's ranch in Wyoming I loved to go to the barn with my uncle to feed the horses in the morning and milk the cows in the afternoon.

When both (5) and (6) are provided, it is clear that *went* has a habitual sense and should be translated as *íbamos*. The same way, in (6) it can be seen that *milk* is used as a verb, so the noun *leche* has to be substituted by its corresponding verb *ordeñar*. However, if the original translation in (6) is not provided, the task becomes intrinsically more difficult: the editor might well infer that *(nos) fuimos* should be in the imperfect tense, but it would be more difficult to guess what *leche* is referring to. It could be that they liked to drink the cows' *milk* in the afternoon, or it could be that they *milke*d the cows in the afternoon. Be this as it



may, in the absence of the original, it would be the ultimate choice of the editor (as long as it makes sense).

Some faulty translations lend themselves as starting points for metalinguistic explanations. In (5), for example, the editor could be asked to (a) explain why *milk* was not translated as *ordeñar* and (b) provide other examples that would pose a similar challenge for the translator. (For more on challenging the translator, see The game of challenging the machine section). Examples of other possible problematic constructions are provided below:

- (7) Subjunctive in adverbial clauses:
  - a) When I go to Spain, I will buy ham
  - b) Cuando voy a España, voy a comprar jamón
- (8) Subjunctive in relative clauses:
  - a) She is looking for a car that goes faster than her bike
  - b) Ella está buscando un coche que va más rápido que su bicicleta
- (9) Tú/usted/ustedes distinction
  - a) Mr. Dominguez, when did you arrive?
  - b) Sr. Dominguez, ¿cuándo llegaste?
  - c) When did you arrive, guys?
  - d) ¿Cuándo has llegado, chicos?
- (10) Long distance agreement (adjective)
  - a) The movie we watched the other day at your house was too long.
  - b) La película que vimos el otro día en su casa era demasiado largo.
- (11) Long distance agreement (verb)
  - a) Where did you and your brother stay?
  - b) ¿De dónde tú y tu hermano quedé?
- (12) Dummy “it” constructions:
  - a) It has been very cold lately.
  - b) Ha sido muy frío últimamente.
  - c) It is a new day.
  - d) Se trata de un nuevo día.

Another way that students can recognize where and how they can outperform translators is by translating a text the traditional way (with the help of a dictionary), compare it to the translation provided by the computer, and then come up with a third version of the text combining both translations. In this case the editor is responsible for deciding where his or her translation fails and where the translator is actually doing a good job (and *vice versa*).

What all these activities have in common is that, as long as the *original* text is provided by the instructor, they are more or less controlled (there are a



determined number of possible answers). Once students feel comfortable working with the type of output that the computer provides, the responsibility of creating the original text can be shifted to the student, which would result in more open, meaningful activities. As the main goal of any editing exercise is to “decide at what point the translated text becomes usable” (French, 1991, p. 62), students have to be open to the possibility that some of the texts will need a considerable amount of editing while others will not.

### Pre-editing

Although the post-editing activities are in many ways similar to what can be accomplished with regular peer-editing, OTs—where the author of the original text and the editor are the same person—provide an additional possibility: pre-editing activities.

Given that the output provided by OTs is oftentimes faulty, the most obvious pre-editing activity would be to change and fix the original text in English as needed in order for the translator to give an appropriate translation. This would not only raise students’ awareness of ambiguity and everyday nuances of language, but—as we can see in examples (13) and (14)—it would also remind them of the importance of spelling and punctuation in English:

- (13) a) I've never been there before  
b) Nunca he estado allí antes  
c) I've never been *their* before  
d) Nunca he estado antes de su  
e) I've never been *they're* before  
f) Nunca he estado antes son
- (14) a) We ate a burger and *than* went to the movies  
b) Nos comimos una hamburguesa y que fue al cine  
c) She is taller *then* he is.  
d) Ella es más alto entonces es él.

It is important to mention here that in many cases starting a sentence with an upper-case/lower case, or ending with/without a period, can change the output considerably (for example the output for (14c) without the final period was “*Ella es más alto, entonces es*”).

Of course, the reverse situation, in which students can pre-edit a text that they wrote in Spanish until they get an acceptable translation in English, is also



possible (and more challenging). This can help with, among other issues, accent placement (15) or gender assignment (16):

- (15) a) Si no puedes con el enemigo, unete a *el*  
 b) If you can not beat them, join *the*
- (16) a) *El* frente caliente es sintoma de fiebre  
 b) The warm *front* is symptom of fever

A word of caution must be considered when working from Spanish into English, however. As OTs are getting better at guessing missing accents and re-assigning gender, the possibility exists that an ungrammatical input like those exemplified in (17a) and (18a) could produce a grammatical output as in (17b) and (18b). For this reason, it may be wise to remind students that having a good translation is never a guarantee that the original text is also error-free (or *vice versa*):

- (17) a) No gusto la pelicula porque la protagonista es no guapo y la pelicula es muy violento.  
 b) Do not like the movie because the protagonist is not handsome and the movie is very violent.
- (18) a) Yo tengo dos perro pequena y una gato que esta muy gordo.  
 b) I have two small dogs and a cat who is very fat.

Finally, in order to raise metalinguistic awareness of the differences between English and Spanish word-structure, I propose pre-editing activities in which the original text is modified in order to make it more machine-friendly. This would also serve the purpose of making students aware that, when speaking to a non-native speaker, the same content can be expressed in several different ways, some of which are more difficult to process than others:

- (19) a. My bike is pretty rad because it gets me around efficiently  
 b. Mi moto es bastante rad porque me pone alrededor eficiente
- (20) a. My bicycle is impressive because I can go everywhere with it  
 b. Mi bicicleta es impresionante porque puedo ir a todas partes con él

As we can see from the examples above, a similar message can be delivered in different ways. Any language student should possess enough metalinguistic awareness to able to adjust a sentence like (19a) into something like (20a) when speaking to a non-native speaker who might not understand words like *rad* or a phrasal verb like *get around*. Of course, there are other possible problems in the output that still need to be addressed (long distance agreement between *bicicleta* and *él*).



## The game of challenging the machine

It is widely accepted that games in the second-language classroom not only enhance motivation, participation, and retention but also contribute to reducing anxiety (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2006; Young, 1991). Once students know enough about how OTs work and are comfortable pre- and post-editing texts, they can immerse themselves in the game of challenging the computer (which is what I have been doing throughout the paper as I generated the examples).

As we have seen, there are a variety of constructions that are hard for OTs to process. In pre-editing activities, students have to modify them in order for the output to be appropriate. What I propose here is precisely the opposite: the students' task in this case would be to create a *grammatical* text (in English or Spanish depending on their proficiency level) that would result in as many errors as possible when translated (extra points could be awarded for funny examples). Of course, it is essential that the original is well-formed and makes sense. Garden-path sentences, heteronyms, or homonyms, among other constructions (many of which circulate widely on the internet), lend themselves well to this type of challenge:

- (21) a) The farm was used to produce produce  
b) La finca fue utilizada para producir producir
- (22) a) The dove dove into the bushes  
b) La paloma paloma en los arbustos
- (23) a) Fat people eats can accumulate  
b) La gente gorda come puede acumular
- (24) a) I do not eat bass because I am a vegetarian.  
b) No como el bajo porque soy vegetariano.

Idiomatic constructions translated literally into English, also called *fromlostian* translations (from the famous *from lost to the river* as a translation for *de perdidos al río*), are a good place to start. While some of them still result in humorous translations, the more common the idiom, the better job the OTs do. The challenge here is to find idiomatic expressions sufficiently common for the students to have heard them, but sufficiently uncommon for the translator to fail. For example, as we can see in the examples below, common expressions like the ones in (25) and (26) are translated successfully, but the ones in (27-29) are not:

- (25) a) No vengas muy tarde *por si las moscas*  
b) Do not come too late *just in case*



- (26) a) *Más vale prevenir que curar*, así que planifica con antelación.  
b) *Better safe than sorry*, so plan ahead.
- (27) a) *Se me ha ido el santo al cielo*. ¿Qué te estaba diciendo?  
b) *I lost the holy heaven*. What was I saying?
- (28) a) El torero se salvó de la cornada *por los pelos*.  
b) The bullfighter gored escaped *by the hairs*.
- (29) a) La discusión parecía muy fuerte, pero *no llegó la sangre al río*.  
b) The discussion seemed very strong, but *no blood came to the river*.

Although challenging the translator with *fromlostian* sentences can be done in either direction, it would be more reasonable to do it from the target language into English. This way, students can see clearly which expressions do not make any sense in their native language (as opposed to guessing whether the expression exists or not in the target language). Also, asking the students to use the expression in a wider context (embedded in a paragraph instead of in isolation) can facilitate the acquisition of these expressions at the same time that it adds more difficulty (and excitement) to the task:

The process of reproducing a target-language structure in the students' first language has several pedagogically useful effects. In the first place, the process produces strange and often humorous first-language constructions that helps [sic] fix these constructions in the student's mind [... and] it amuses the students and holds their interest, introducing an element of play into the learning process. (Richmond, 1994, p. 75)

## LIMITATIONS AND CAVEATS

OTs were not designed to be used in the second-language classroom for obvious reasons. Quite the contrary, an extraordinary amount of effort is currently invested by language instructors and institutions to prevent, detect, and punish their use. As a consequence, promoting activities that require students to work with such "forbidden" Web sites brings with it some concerns: Will these activities teach them how to use OTs for other classes without being detected? Will they think that the use of this tool is allowed with other instructors?

García and Pena (2011, p. 485) draw an analogy between OTs and GPSs: while GPSs undoubtedly help the user get from point A to point B, they do not train him/her to do it in an autonomous manner. In the same way, although OTs might help translating the main ideas from language A to language B, they do not teach the language learner how to do it by themselves. I do believe, though, that



their use (*as proposed here*) strengthens the connections between languages the same way that using a GPS for the same trip several times might help the user remember the route next time.

In this paper I do not intend by any means to propose that translation can substitute for communicative activities or suggest that peer-editing can be replaced by activities with OTs. The social component of peer-editing and the negotiation of meaning that often occurs between an editor and a writer of similar proficiency levels are very valuable components that are absent in the activities I have proposed. However, the use of OTs as a supplementary tool presents a possibility that traditional peer-editing cannot provide: playing and experimenting with language.

Another limitation about the use of OTs is that the effectiveness of these activities depends on the proficiency of the student. Although using them in the beginner levels might be counterproductive (the help provided by the translator would be beyond the students' zone of proximal development, or *ZPD*, and no learning would take place), some of the activities suggested here would be appropriate for third- or even fourth-year students who already possess an articulated (meta)linguistic knowledge and, thus, can make appropriate choices for their level.

Lastly, although I have not provided data proving that the use of OTs improves language learning (see O'Neill, 2012), it needs to be stressed that the main purpose of this article is to offer a way of discouraging/minimizing cheating in the L2 classroom (making students aware that their language skills are better than those offered by translators) and raising metalinguistic awareness.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that OTs are a valuable tool for those who need to understand texts written in an unknown language. Although the translations they provide are often full of gibberish and nonsense, they still give the reader access to a wide breath of information that might be otherwise unavailable.

However, it has been noted that oftentimes second-language students use them to translate assignments that they write in their native language in order to pass them as their own. Although this does not fit the traditional definition of "cut & paste" plagiarism, it is indeed one of the most common issues that second-language instructors have to deal with in their classrooms. In this paper I have



proposed several activities in which instructors can use OTs as a valuable tool with two purposes: (1) discouraging and minimizing academic dishonesty, and (2) raising metalinguistic awareness. By asking learners to review and modify the text (be it the original or the translation), we emphasize the view that writing is a process and not just an end product (as the students planning to use the online translation might think). Also, having students realize that their skills often outperform those of the computer might lead them to see that using an OT and then fixing the output takes more work than doing it from scratch, which might discourage this type of cheating. It sends the message that such efforts are just not worth it.

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