“Can’t we use Google Translate?” A multimodal analysis of language choices at the interface with Swedish Google

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Abstract

Searching for information on the Internet is one way in which the use of computers is regularly integrated into the activities of the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. At the same time, students are adapting to the affordances of interactive search engine features, such as Google translate. What this paper examines is how students navigate their way in Swedish Google in respect of their language choices, given that this software offers new language options on the basis of their previous choices.

Although there has been a burgeoning interest in interactionist studies of the second language classroom using conversation analysis (e.g. Mondada & Pekarek Doehler 2004, Seedhouse 2004, Markee 2008, Hellermann 2008), to date few such studies have dealt with the interactional interface between computers and second language learners (but see Čekaitė’s 2009 study on the affordances of spell-checkers). Here close attention is paid to the students’ use of their multimodal resources to show how they respond to the emergent contingencies of doing Internet searches. One significant finding is that the translation features of Google contribute to the incremental replacement of English by Swedish over the trajectory of the activity. The obvious effect is that the students’ contact with the target language is drastically reduced.

The empirical data of this study comprise about 5-6 hours of video-recorded Internet searches involving 10 pairs of pupils in years 8 and 9 of two Swedish secondary schools. The video-recorded searches are ones that have arisen from tasks set by their ordinary English teachers as part of their regular ESL classes.

References