

## **‘I Can’t Live Without Google Translate’: A Close Look at the Use of Google Translate App by Second Language Learners in Saudi Arabia**

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### **Abstract**

Google Translate App (GTA) use is ubiquitous among second language learners in Saudi Arabia for translating between Arabic and English and vice versa. Learners perform various translation tasks drawing on different features of GTA. However, what specific features they draw on when using Google Translate, and how the app influences their English learning process is unknown. This study aims to answer the following research question: what are the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners in Saudi Arabia? The research participants were twelve second language learners at a university in Saudi Arabia. Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted to gather the data over six-weeks. Thematic analysis indicates that GTA provides five different modes of writing in English, offering options to use the app in-class and in everyday life, and serving as a language learning resource. The findings also indicate that the personal histories of learners with GTA related to their introduction to and frequency of using the app in everyday life, and the benefits they observed when doing so. The study recommends language instructors promote the use of the app as a mini dictionary, and encourage language learners to use it as a resource to ensure accurate spelling and pronunciation.

**Keywords:** affordances, English learning, Google Translate App (GTA), Saudi Second Language learners

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## Introduction

The Google Translate website was launched as a translation service by Google to translate from one language into another. Since 2006, it has been used by five hundred million people worldwide and translates over one hundred billion words per day (Turovsky, 2016). It started as a webpage but with the spread of mobile technologies an app was produced in a downloadable form to be used on any mobile device. The Google Translate App (GTA) provides translation services in multiple languages, and consequently language learners have been drawn to it to help them learn a particular language and navigate any obstacles they encounter while doing so. Second language learners consult Google Translate to complete their work, and the presence of Google Translate in the classroom cannot be denied (Ducar & Schocket, 2018). When using Google Translate in the classroom, learners are typically referring to the downloaded app on their smartphones.

In Saudi Arabia, language learners extensively use Google Translate, especially those studying at university. Arabic is the first language used in Saudi Arabia, and English is taught as a second language, being a compulsory subject in the Saudi educational system. English is referred to as a second language in Saudi Arabia, based on the assumption that any language additional to the first language is a second language (Dewaele, 2018). The majority of students at the university level who are majoring in English in Saudi Arabia refer to Google Translate to assist them in their assignments (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2017; Alsalem, 2019). This is supported by the fact that translations between Arabic and English were reported to be among the most popular on Google Translate (Turovsky, 2016). Researchers in the field of language education have therefore been advised to investigate Google Translate and any contributions its use makes to the process of learning English (Amin, 2020). This study answers this call by exploring the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners in a university in Saudi Arabia. It also aims to explore the participants' personal histories with GTA.

## *What is GTA?*

GTA is most readily defined in terms of the features it offers users. According to Ducar and Schocket (2018), Google translate offers an instant translation of typed words or phrases, as well as facilities related to the three other skills: listening, speaking and reading. GTA allows features such as typing and drawing characters and letters, the option to engage in a bilingual conversation, translating after the user speaks a word or phrase, pronouncing the translated statement, and “[translating] a text image into another language” (Ducar & Schocket, 2018, p. 782).

## *Definition of Affordance*

The term affordance describes the quality of a specific device in relation to the people who engage with it. Barton and Lee (2013) explained that the concept of affordances was introduced by Gibson in 1979 to describe the scope of meaningful actions that an individual perceives selectively in a particular environment. They stated:

When it comes to perceiving action possibilities in online spaces, this means more than providing a list of the features originally intended by the designers. There is a long history of the mismatch between designers' original expectations and the ways people bend technologies to their own purposes. (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 27)

Thus, the affordances of an app are more than just the built-in features provided by the designers and developers of that app, because how people utilize the built-in features of the app to fulfil their unique purposes might not match the original designers' intentions. The term affordances was also defined as "the possibilities for action which people identify in relation to specific resources" (Barton & Potts, 2013, pp. 816-817). This definition related activities to their intended purposes relative to a particular resource.

The concept of 'affordance' is essential in this paper, as the participants use the features of GTA to enhance their literacy in English. In summary, herein affordances are the characteristics of the built-in features of GTA as used by second language learners.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners in Saudi Arabia?
2. What are the personal histories of second language learners in Saudi Arabia with GTA?

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Literacies Concepts***

The concepts of literacies, including vernacular literacies and digital literacies, were referred to by scholars in the literature pertaining to this area, and so this section previews these concepts. Literacies within 'New Literacy Studies' refers to the activities of reading and writing as a set of practices associated with everyday social contexts, not merely as skills to be learned out of context (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Papen, 2005; Street, 1993). The term 'vernacular literacies' was first used by Barton and Hamilton (1998) in their examination of literacies relative to the everyday lives of people in England of the 1990s. The term 'vernacular literacies' was used to refer to a broad range of voluntary and spontaneously produced literacy practices. They explained that these literacies originate from everyday experience and support the completion of daily tasks. This implies these kinds of literacies related only to everyday experiences and so are not linked to the literacies learned in classrooms and universities.

The term 'digital literacies' is close to vernacular literacies and refers to the literacies that take place online via digital technologies. The view of digital literacies proposed by Barton and Lee (2013) shares chief characteristics with vernacular literacies. They stated "When we say 'digital literacies', 'new (media) literacies', and 'new vernacular literacies', we are broadly referring to everyday reading and writing activities online" (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 8), and the plural use of literacies stresses that literacy is not a skill, but includes the multiple literacies required for various purposes.

The concept of digital literacies involves vernacular practices and influences upon language learning. For example, Jones (2017) drew on Jones and Hafner (2012) and Lankshear and Knobel (2008) to conceptualize digital literacies as: "the study of the everyday, vernacular literacy practices people engage in using digital technology and the ways these practices affect language learning and language use" (Jones, 2017, p.286). Thus, Jones' concept invites language educators to use the concept of digital literacies when examining everyday literacies involving technology. He related vernacular literacy practices to language learning, asserting that people draw upon digital tools when performing vernacular practices and that these tools influence how people learn a particular language.

This paper builds on the concepts of vernacular literacies and digital literacies, by citing the activities of English as a second language learners in Saudi Arabia, specifically in relation to the use of GTA.

### ***Quality of Translation on Google Translate***

Previous studies have focused on the translation feature and the final texts produced by Google Translate. For example, Patil and Davies (2014) evaluated the accuracy of Google Translate for translating important medical statements from English into 26 languages and found that the accuracy of the translation differs from one language to another. Vidhayasai, Keyuravong, and Bunsom (2015) explored the accuracy of Google Translate for translating a legal document from Vietnamese into English. The document related to the terms and conditions on an airline website and it was found that the translation was inaccurate and unintelligible and potentially could create a negative impression for passengers and other customers of the airline. Groves and Mundt (2015) examined the accuracy of a text produced by Google Translate after being translated from Malay and Chinese into English and found that the text had translation errors. Ghasemi and Hashemian (2016) investigated the errors produced by Google Translate in a translation from English to Persian and vice versa and found no difference in the translation quality, as both ways had errors. This research will discuss all the features of GTA as used by second language learners to translate between Arabic and English, and to investigate the personal histories of these learners with GTA.

### ***Google Translate and Language learners***

Several studies have investigated the use of Google Translate and language learning, where English Language is the target language. To create an overview, Ducar and Schocket (2018) synthesized previous research dealing with the use of Google Translate. They explored in detail the strengths and drawbacks of using Google Translate and presented the pedagogical implications of incorporating Google Translate into second language classrooms where English was used. They reported that Google Translate never produces spelling errors, effectively corrects the spelling errors of students, and translates high-frequency idioms effectively, as well as detecting the use of proper nouns by capital letters. However, they cautioned learners and instructors that Google Translate produces grammatically inaccurate sentences in English.

Views pertaining to using Google Translate, as expressed by students majoring in English in Saudi Arabia, were reported by Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017). They explored the attitudes of ninety-two EFL students majoring in English. They utilized a quantitative tool, and a questionnaire was used to collect students' perceptions. They found that the majority of their study participants used Google Translate to determine the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, assist them in completing their written assignments and when reading in English. They asserted, "The students had very positive attitudes toward GT as it is free and easy to use and translates text quickly; its translation is better than their own, and it is helpful for learning vocabulary" (Alhaisoni & Alhaysony, 2017, p.79). They found that translation was the least used feature on Google Translate.

The views of EFL students majoring in English in Taiwan were explored after using Google Translate to draft assignments (Tsai, 2019). The study included three levels of students majoring in English (freshmen, sophomores and seniors), and evaluated the effects of using Google

Translate for translation tasks with English. Data were collected from eighty-four students in the form of writing product and questionnaire responses. The students were asked to translate a text into English without the help of Google Translate, and one with the assistance of Google Translate, and the results were collected. A computerized assessment was performed to compare the students' writing outcomes with and without the help of Google Translate. He stated:

Google Translate can provide EFL students with a 'second audience'. For example, when having difficulty in expressing their thoughts and ideas in English, EFL students can use Google Translate to immediately translate their thoughts and ideas in English. The GT texts can offer students initial advice on word usage and sentence structures for further reference and revision in their English writing (Tsai, 2019, p. 520).

Tsai (2019) found that the students' writing outcomes with the help of Google Translate contained fewer errors in both grammar and content. The study also revealed that students found using Google Translate to assist them in their English writing a positive experience, as it helped them with selecting vocabulary items, and improving their written English. Interestingly, the students thought that their writing outcomes with the aid of Google Translate contained more grammatical errors, although the evaluation process proved the opposite.

Another study considered the use of Google Translate as a spell-checking resource. This research, conducted by Bin Dahmash (2019), investigated the materials and resources used by a group of Saudi friends at a university to understand English on social media, and reported the use of Google Translate among other resources to correct English as a second language. She used focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observations, informal interviews and an online log with seven female participants majoring in English language and translation over three-months. She found that Saudi undergraduates used GTA principally to correct and enhance their English. Her study revealed that the participants used GTA to check their accuracy with English spelling in two ways; firstly, by typing a word in English (if the word was translated it must have been spelled correctly and if not then it was misspelled), and by writing the word in Arabic and tapping to translate it into English to see the word spelled correctly. She asserted:

Using Google Translate app in checking what a word mean in English reflects the influence of their academic major studies on their everyday literacies. They were taught to use Google Translate app to assist them in translating texts from English to Arabic in one of their academic courses (Bin Dahmash, 2019, p. 147)

More recently, Amin (2020) systematically synthesized previous research on the use of Google apps in learning and teaching English on Google Scholar and ERIC digital databases, and reported on previous studies that had examined Google Translate. She examined thirty-four studies of Google apps (without specifying the name of the app) for learning and teaching English. She found the Google apps generally improved English language learning, and that the writing skill was the most regularly targeted. She revealed that Google translation website in particular affected the translation skills of second language learners.

The studies mentioned above by Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017), Tsai (2019) and Bin Dahmash (2019) did not ask participants to disclose the specific features they used on Google Translate. Participants in Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017) and Tsai (2019) were asked to fill in a questionnaire, but the version of Google Translate, i.e. app or webpage, was not specified. Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017) explored the attitudes of students towards the use of Google Translate, while Tsai (2019) required that participants use Google Translate to complete language-based activities and subsequently collected their views. Bin Dahmash (2019) focused on the use of English on social media and did not ask about the use of English with Google Translate in particular.

Studies by Ducar and Schocket (2018) and Amin (2020) did not include participants, but rather synthesized previous research regarding second language learners using Google Translate. Thus, they did not consider the personal accounts and experiences of second language learners. Ducar and Schocket (2018) demonstrated the strengths and drawbacks of Google Translate and its pedagogical implications, and Amin (2020) reported that previous literature examining Google and Google Translate did not draw on qualitative tools to collect data.

The current study addresses these gaps by employing qualitative methods to explore the specific features of GTA second language learners draw on to manage their literacies in English. The current study also explores the personal histories of second language learners with regard to using GTA.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research methods were employed in this study, and these took the form of focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Interviews are appropriate to collect a detailed description of a particular situation and to interpret and understand the aspects of study participants' personal experiences (Kvale, 1996). Focus group interviews, in particular, are valuable to generate a collective view of the participants' values, experiences and perceptions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Therefore, focus group and individual interviews were employed to generate a nuanced description of the use of Google Translate by second language learners and their personal histories with the app in Saudi Arabia.

### **Research Procedures**

Data collection involved two sessions of focus group interviews and 23 individual interviews and took place over six-weeks starting from May 2020. Data was collected during COVID-19 pandemic, when no face to face interaction was permitted due to partial and total lockdown in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Thus, all the interviews were conducted synchronously via an online platform chosen by the participants. The focus group interviews involved six participants in each session and were conducted via a WhatsApp group. The individual interviews involved 12 participants in the first session and 11 participants in the second session and were carried out using WhatsApp private chat. The participants sent videos of the recordings from their smartphone screens and sent screenshots to clarify their accounts of the features they draw on when engaging

in literacies via GTA.

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited drawing on a sampling technique, referred to as snowball sampling (Morgan, 2008; Patton, 2001). Using this technique, the researcher asked one of the participants to invite other potential participants meeting the study criteria to contribute to the study. The researcher asked an instructor who teaches English to send a WhatsApp message containing detailed information about the research, as well as the researchers' name and contact number, to one of her students to invite her to participate.

The researcher ensured ethical considerations were met; participation was purely voluntary, the aims of research were clearly stated, the participants' identities were treated confidentially with pseudonyms, and withdrawal from the research was permitted at any time without incurring negative consequences. The participants contacted the researcher and the researcher ensured that all the participants had completed an English course in the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. The participants were female learners of English aged between 19 and 21 years and studying at the College of Applied Studies and Community Service at King Saud University.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data was analyzed using Kvale's (2007) 'content analysis' and Saldaña's (2016) 'coding' techniques. The data was coded and analyzed with ATLAS.ti, a software that assists in qualitative analysis. The use of ATLAS.ti supported retrieval of all the quotations selected in the data with a particular code, and this ensured the reliability and trustworthiness of the results (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Analysis of data through coding and content analysis assisted in the production of specific themes to address the research questions.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the results of the current study in relation to the research questions and the previous literature.

#### ***The first question: What are the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners in Saudi Arabia?***

The data suggested that the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners can be grouped into four themes: 1) writing modes, 2) in-class use, 3) everyday use, and 4) as a language learning resource.

Writing in English using GTA was carried out in five modes. These modes were copying and pasting a text, taking a photo of the text, typing letters to form a word, drawing letters with fingers on a touch screen and dictating the desired word with one own's voice (see Figure one A). Figure one A illustrates the text area in which the participants performed two modes of writing: copying and pasting a particular word and typing the word by selecting the letters from the smartphone keyboard. Participant 11 recorded her smartphone screen to clarify how she writes on GTA in three different ways. She began by tapping on an area where she was able to enter a text by selecting letters from the keyboard to complete the word 'engineer'. After that she tapped on

'handwriting' to write the word 'engineer' and as she began to draw the first letter of the word the keyboard started to suggest words to complete it. The third method Participant 11 used was to tap 'voice' and then speak the word 'engineer'. Participant 5 illustrated the 'handwriting' feature with a screenshot of her drawing of the word 'play' on the virtual keyboard for GTA (see Figure one B).

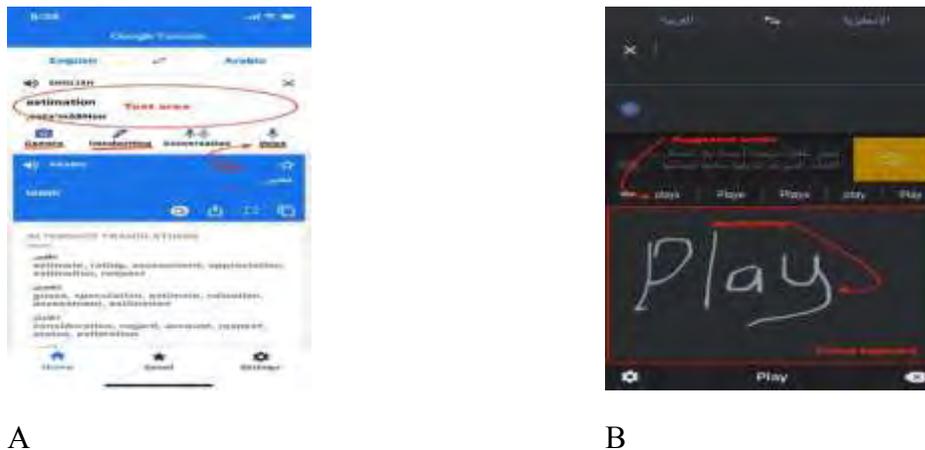


Figure 1. Five writing modes in A and Participant 5's handwriting approach in B  
 Participant 1 used a smartphone screen recording to explain her photo writing mode. She opened GTA, tapped 'camera' and aimed her camera at an English text on her TV and then tapped 'instant' and a translation was generated from English to Arabic. After that she tapped 'scan' and GTA asked her to use her finger to highlight the text she wished to translate. Writing by copying and pasting and photography was demonstrated by Participant 3. Participant 3 screenshotted her uses of GTA to clarify her writing approach. She explained that she copies and pastes a word in English on GTA, using 'food poisoning' as an example (see Figure two A) and then using the 'camera' to translate a long text. From Participant 3's account, when using the camera several steps are followed; the first step is to take a photo of the desired text, after that she uses her fingers to highlight the desired word or words (see Figure two B) and then a translation is produced by tapping on the selected words (see Figure two C).

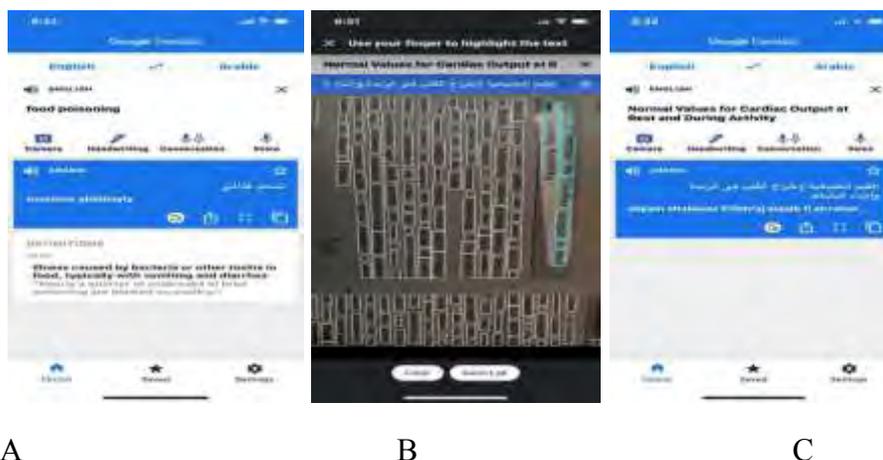


Figure 2. Participant 3's explanation of her writing modes on GTA

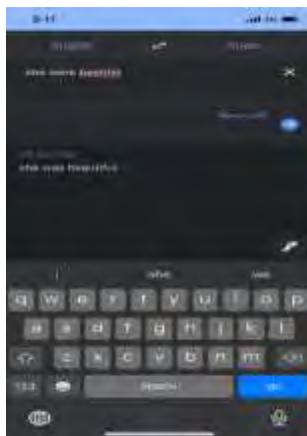
It appears that the choice of mode of writing, i.e. taking a photo or typing letters, depended on the length of the English text the second language learners needed to translate. The majority of the participants in the second session of their individual interviews stated that they use their cameras to take a photograph if the English text is long and they want the entire text translated. However, they select letters from the keyboard to write if the English text is only one or two words. The results concerning the use of voice to write in the app agrees with the findings of Bin Dahmash (2019), who reported that female undergraduates in Saudi Arabia use their voices to search Google apps. This evidence indicates that second language learners were creative when drawing on five different modes of writing in GTA.

This research found GTA was used in the classroom on several occasions. It seems that the use of GTA was intensified during the virtual classes conducted within the COVID-19 pandemic. In focus group two, Participant 1 attached a screenshot of GTA and stated that she used it in class, and the other participants in the group explained they used the app more often when attending virtual classes. Participant 5 illustrated that GTA is beneficial to students struggling with the proper pronunciation of some English words, as the app plays the desired word several times so the learner can practice pronouncing it before speaking in the virtual class. Participant 7 mentioned that Google Translate suited beginner level students when translating terms in class from English to Arabic, and when seeking to understand the content of lectures, as most instructors avoid using Arabic in class. Similarly, Participant 4 reported that a shy student like herself rarely asks the instructor to translate terms related to her major 'medical secretary' and so uses GTA in class to enable her to verify the meaning of these terms. Participant 5 explained that she uses GTA in class to translate unfamiliar vocabulary, and to answer questions in reading classes. Participant 5 further added that sometimes she knows the answer to a question posed in Arabic and that she uses GTA to translate from Arabic to English and participate in class. It seems that GTA might assist learners differently to navigate the challenges they encounter in the classroom. Shy students and beginner level students refer to it to assist them in reaching their potential. This evidence indicates that GTA enables learners to participate in class and increase their interaction with their peers and the instructor by enhancing their pronunciation, reading and vocabulary. These results are consistent with the results presented by Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017), who reported that Google Translate was used by English language learners to assist them when understanding the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary as a way to improve their reading skills. This evidence also shows that Google Translate increased learner's comprehension when translating keywords in class.

Everyday use of GTA was restricted to translation from English to Arabic and vice versa. Translation was accomplished via two features: 'conversation' enabling users to engage in a bilingual conversation and 'camera', in which users receive an instant translation of a text image. Many of the participants explained that they used the 'conversation' function on GTA simply by tapping 'conversation' then tapping the mic and speaking in formal Arabic. After that they show the other person engaged in the conversation the smartphone screen to enable that person to read the translated word, and then invite that person to tap the mic to reply by speaking to get an instant translation of their response. Participant 7 mentioned that the 'conversation' feature had been beneficial to her many times, as she often uses it with fast food delivery men and online shopping when she wants additional explanation. Participant 10 gave the example that she used the camera to translate information about a hair mask to see if one would be suitable for her curly hair. Participant

3 explained that she translates food recipes from English to Arabic using the camera, as she has changed her eating habits. This evidence therefore indicates that GTA was used as a translation tool during daily life.

GTA was also used as a language learning resource, as it improved the participants' English grammar, pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. Progress in grammar development was accomplished with Google Translate using the 'do you mean' feature, and by specifying the part of speech the desired word belongs to with examples. The 'examples' feature uses quotation marks around meaningful sentences that include the desired word. Participant 7 explained that 'do you mean' corrected her use of 'were' in a sentence (see Figure three A). Participant 1 reported that Google Translate clarified whether the word is a verb, noun, adjective, preposition or an adverb and places it in a sentence. She illustrated this with a screenshot of 'under', stating that it can be a preposition, adverb or an adjective, and that Google Translate uses 'under' in meaningful sentences (see Figure three B), and that reading these examples improved her grammatical competence. English pronunciation was enhanced by tapping the speaker icon to listen to the desired word after writing it down. The participants in focus group one explained that tapping the speaker icon after writing a specific word meant they could listen to an accurate pronunciation several times, and that pronouncing the word after listening to it helped them to participate confidently in class. GTA improved spelling skills by correcting words the participants had written in the app with 'do you mean' feature and thereby motivating participants to memorize the spelling before typing out the English word. Participant 8 explained that she memorizes accurate spellings before writing an English word in Google Translate and that when she makes a spelling error the app corrects her. Participant 7 showed an image of how Google Translate corrected her spelling of the word 'beautiful' with the 'do you mean' feature (see Figure three A).



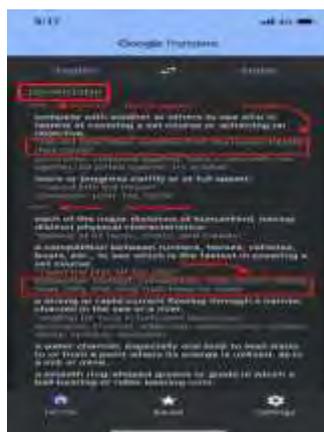
A



B

Figure 3. Participant 7's account of 'do you mean' in A, and Participant 1's account of 'under' in B.

English vocabulary was also improved with GTA features, using the 'definition' and 'translate' from English to Arabic and vice versa functions, as well as by saving the translated word. The participants in focus group two mentioned that their vocabulary learning capacity was enhanced by the translation feature, which helped them understand the meaning of the vocabulary item and the examples provided by the 'definition' feature. The examples feature also enabled the participants to evaluate how a word can be used in context. Participant 3 reported that the 'definition' feature boosted her vocabulary, by providing the part of speech of the word, defining it in English, using it in a sentence and provided synonyms for it. Participant 3 illustrated this with the example of 'race', which can be a verb or a noun, and observed that reading the definition, examples and synonyms enhanced her capacity to use English vocabulary (see Figure four A). Participant 12 illustrated that she saves the words she checks on Google Translate by tapping 'save', and after that she reads over her saved words in her free time. She explained that viewing and rereading the saved words helped her improve her vocabulary (see Figure four B).



A



B

Figure 4. Participant 3's account of definition in A and Participant 12's account of 'save' in B

The preceding evidence demonstrated how GTA was used as a language learning resource to enhance second language learner's grammar, pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. These findings fill a gap in the literature identified by Amin (2020), who recommended researching how GTA might be used by English learners. The participants were found to use the 'do you mean' feature as a spelling resource, and this result is consistent with the finding of Bin Dahmash (2019) that female undergraduates in Saudi Arabia used Google Translate to check the accuracy of English spellings. The findings related to the use of the 'do you mean' feature to correct spelling and learners' motivation to memorize accurate spelling before typing in English on Google Translate fill a gap in the literature identified by Tsai (2019), who reported that the influence of Google Translate on EFL students' performance in writing had not been explored. The use of the 'do you mean' feature to correct grammar contradicts the evidence presented by Ducar and Schocket (2018) and Alsalem (2019) that sentences translated into English and produced by Google Translate contained grammatical errors.

***The second question: What are the personal histories of second language learners with GTA?***

The second language learners gave personal accounts of their unique histories with GTA. They described how they began using it, how frequently they use it in everyday life, and how they benefit from engaging with the activities on the app.

The initial uses of GTA by second language learners comprised part of their personal histories with the app. All the participants reported that they first used the app to translate from English to Arabic and vice versa; however, where they had learned about Google Translate from varied. Participant 9 explained that she had downloaded GTA when she enrolled at university to assist her in translation, and she then learned how to use the app by herself. Participant 4 explained that her father had introduced her to Google Translate as a website seven years previously when she was an intermediate stage student. In her case, Participant 4 explained that she had downloaded Google Translate as an app three years previously and learned how to use it by trial and error. Similar to Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 12 and Participant 3 reported that they used Google Translate first as a website to translate terms used in their English courses when they were intermediate students. However, Participant 5 and Participant 12 downloaded the app after seeing an advertisement on the Google search engine, while Participant 3 downloaded it based on a friend's advice. Participant 7 indicated that she was searching for a translation app to assist her in translating a long text in English for an assignment and found that GTA translated it instantly when she placed the camera over the text. Participant 8 and Participant 10 mentioned that they had searched the app store for a translation app and found GTA attractive as it was the only app that could produce an instant translation by placing a smartphone camera over the source text. It appears that for the majority of participants Google Translate was first used as a webpage for translation purposes, and knowledge of the app came from Google search engine advertisements, personal searches or advice from someone close. The ability to translate texts from images using a smartphone camera was the main feature that initially attracted the participants to GTA.

Another constituent of the second language learners' personal histories was their frequency of use of GTA in everyday life. Participant 4 explained that her frequency of use of GTA depends on the activities she is involved in during the day, and that she uses the app more often when she watches an English movie without subtitles. Participant 5, similar to Participant 4, mentioned that her use of the app depends on what she is doing, and that the last time she used GTA was when watching a TV series in English. Participant 6 and Participant 10 reported that they use GTA more throughout the academic year when they are attending university. Participant 3 expressed that her frequency of using GTA rises during academic terms as her major is taught in English, and that her use then decreases during holidays when she is only translating essential language. It appears that the frequency of using GTA in everyday life varies over the holidays, depending on the need to translate from English to Arabic.

The value second language learners placed on engaging in activities with GTA constituted part of their personal histories with the app. The majority of the participants stated that GTA has become one of the most essential apps on their smartphones, and that managing those aspects of their lives in which they encounter English without the app would be challenging. Participant 2 explained that having GTA is a necessity, as she heavily uses the 'conversation' feature to engage in bilingual conversation. Participant 9 asserted that many learners of English depend on the app to

improve their English competency, while Participant 5 equated GTA to a free English teacher. Participant 4 considers GTA as a tool to resolve crisis situations, while Participant 12 views the app as an essential tool. It seems that the participants have incorporated GTA into their everyday lives, attributing significant value to it. The positive attitudes of these learners correspond with the views of Saudi students at Aljouf University, as reported by Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017). The results pertaining to the value these learners place on GTA indicates their satisfaction with it, and this result is consistent with the findings of Tsai (2019), who reported that university students in Taiwan were pleased with their experiences of using Google Translate to complete writing tasks.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper has explored the affordances of GTA as perceived by second language learners in Saudi Arabia, and described the personal histories of the participants with the app. The findings illustrated that GTA provides five different modes of writing in English and offers value for learners in two domains: in-class and in everyday life. It indicated that GTA was used as a resource for language learning, as second language learners referred to it to improve their language competency. The findings also illustrated the personal histories of the learners with GTA, detailing their initial use of it, and their current frequency of using the app in everyday life, and their preferences regarding the options available.

Based on the findings, language learners are advised to use all five of the writing modes reported in this study. They can clearly improve their writing skill by exploiting GTA as a resource for spelling. They could also use the app to ensure accurate pronunciation and improve their speaking skill. Meanwhile, language instructors are advised to encourage their students to use GTA to verify the meaning of any unfamiliar vocabulary they encounter during reading classes, and to read the definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary in English. Language instructors can inform their students about the 'definition' feature and the extent to which it provides 'synonyms' of the desired word and puts the word in context. Thus, the definition feature could serve as a mini dictionary.

The current study had limitations in terms of the sample size and in the gender of participants. Further researchers could conduct a similar study with a larger sample size and learners of both genders. The current study examined the use of GTA in general without requiring the participant to use it in specific classes. Future research could implement the use of GTA in the English classroom, explore its impact on learners' overall achievement in English, and identify individual differences in learners' use patterns and level of benefit obtained, by applying an experimental design.

### **About the Author**

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