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Linguistically diverse 1st year university students' problems with machine translation over the three academic years

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Abstract

In this article, the term *linguistically diverse students* is used to refer to “students whose first language is other language than Latvian. The scientific data collected by the author are from 2013/2014 academic year until 2015/2016 academic year (3 academic years). Machine translation technology is constantly being applied by linguistically diverse students, but a machine cannot assess whether a sentence sounds good or bad. Motivation is a powerful force in second-language learning. The aim of the research is to find out how to solve linguistically diverse 1st year university students' problems with machine translation. Educational support and motivation enhancement are very important.

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1. Introduction

Language can be defined as a means of communication that shapes cultural and personal identity and socializes one into a cultural group (Goillnick, & Chinn, 2006). Language can be nonverbal (e.g., facial expressions, gestures) and verbal, e.g., actual speech used in conversation. Language also includes both oral components, such as listening and speaking and written components – reading and writing. It is impossible to separate language and culture.

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University students from diverse language backgrounds encounter some difficulty every day. Because language and culture are so intertwined, language minority students are expected to learn and use a tuition language and new cultural dispositions effectively. Often tuition language and culture are different from what they have learned at home. In this article, the term linguistically diverse students will be used to refer to students whose first language is other than Latvian. State universities tuition language is Latvian.

2. Theoretical basis

Data collected from academic year of 2013/2014 until academic year 2015/2016. i.e., three academic years, indicate that approximately 40% of all 1-st year students of the Faculty of Electronics and Telecommunications, Riga Technical University (RTU), are linguistically diverse (Ratniece, & Cakula, 2015). Therefore, academic personnel must be aware of diversity in their classrooms and how it may influence student achievements. The Bachelor study program provides a blend of knowledge from electrical engineering and computer science focusing on communications networks and systems, encoding theory, information/optical processing and transmission. The aim of the program is to provide an academic education and prepare students for further studies at the Master's level.

Dulay, Bust and Krashen (1982) in their survey of major findings in second-language research indicate that the most beneficial environment for the learner is one which encourages language learning in natural surroundings for genuine communication. Furthermore, it has been shown that optimal second-language learning takes place in an environment:

- Which is non-threatening, in which the learner feels free to take chances and make mistakes;
- Which is linguistically and non-linguistically diverse – no grammatically sequenced syllables, no attempt to homogenize the environment so that learners understand everything;
- In which learners focus on tasks and activities of interest to them, and use language as a tool to get things done – very little explicit discussion of language;
- In which learners' interests and needs serve as the basis for learning activities;
- In which learners' talk is considered to be the task as in “being on task”: small talk, jive, and tall tales are not only tolerated, they are encouraged, and not just at “sharing time” but throughout the day.

The author argues that motivation is a powerful force in second-language learning. Motivation governs a need to communicate, to make friends, to identify with a social group, to become part of a community and to begin to plan one's future. Motivation becomes a positive force. Anxiety becomes an inhibitor. Self-confidence is very much related to second-language learning as is a low anxiety level and a tendency to be risk-takers and do guess work.

As the student becomes more secure in the second language, it is entirely likely that the native language precedes, to some extent. As vocabulary in the second language increases, words in the native language may well be forgotten. During the second-language learning process, a learner may insert words from each language in the same sentence. Again, this tendency demonstrates a motivation to speak the second language and is a way of permitting precise expressions which carry cultural content and can be stated in a given language.

Linguistically diverse students develop social language by being immersed in home country-speaking language environments surrounding everyday activities. These students can function in face-to-face social interaction but may lack language skills for learning academic content. The language of the classroom requires linguistically diverse students to use language that is conceptually demanding and cognitively complex. Unlike social language skills used to retell events, talk about experiences, describe activities, or give personal opinions, academic language requires the use of different forms of language to accomplish specific academic tasks (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2011, p. 26).

To become life-long language users, diverse students as well as native-Latvian speaking students need to gain control over language and feel comfortable about using the language. The ensuing principles for second-language instruction can help lecturer create supportive language environments:

- A. Latvian as a second language (LSL) learning should be built on the educational and personal experiences they bring to an educational establishment. In language learning, students should be encouraged to use their previous experiences with oral and written language to develop their second language and to promote their growth to

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