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How a Misguided Objective Can Ruin an Excellent Book

A Review of Anthony Pym's and Yu Hao's *How to Augment Language Skills. Generative AI and Machine Translation in Language Learning and Translator Training* Published by Routledge, 2024

Anthony Pym and Yu Hao's (2024) newest addition to Routledge's offer, *How to Augment Language Skills: Generative AI and Machine Translation in Language Learning and Translator Training* is an interesting read and, at the same time, a major disappointment that can cause a personality crisis when you happen to be both a translation and L2 (Second Language) teacher. According to the authors, they seek to "bridge the gap" between language and translation training. However, after reading the book, I feel more conflicted than ever regarding these two aspects of my profession, as both these "teachers" in me try to come to terms with the authors' suggestions. The main problem being that, while the title proposes a broad exploration of IT (Information Technology) and AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools for enhancing both language and translation training, the book focuses exclusively on encouraging L2 teachers to utilise the newest technological translation tools, a stance that raises concerns. The following review analyses the authors' approach, admiring the solutions proposed for translator training while questioning the practical application of translation

technologies in language classrooms and highlighting issues with the book's assumptions, arguments, and applicability for different audiences.

When it comes to the book's intended audiences, its impact is both substantial and underwhelming. Although the title promises insights into generative AI and Machine Translation (MT) tools for both translation and language training, the content does not align with this dual purpose. The authors primarily concentrate on the translation aspect of the problem, granting the complexity of language teaching in the technological era only a passing notice. This disparity between the title and the book's content may confuse readers who anticipate a broader examination of AI's role in both fields. While the book does indeed provide an insightful and complex examination of recent technological changes in the translation market, there is no comparable analysis of language teaching markets or other related sectors. Even though the authors categorise language specialists into "translators, teachers, and others", a division that seems overly simplistic given the diversity within each field, they do not further define these specialties within language services, stating only that philology graduates tend to divide proportionally into these markets when starting employment. However, without a nuanced understanding of these distinctions, the authors' proposals for integrating translation tools into language learning and other spheres because "it may prove to be useful" may seem ill-informed or even inappropriate. By limiting their market analysis to the translation industry, the authors miss the opportunity to contextualise their suggestions within the broader scope of language services and to consider how other professionals might be influenced by technological changes. Consequently, language teachers may question the relevance of the book's arguments to their professional contexts, leading to a justified scepticism about its practical application. Especially since the authors put much emphasis on the adoption of translation-specific software in language classrooms while ignoring AI tools explicitly developed for language learning, such as conversational AI, adaptive learning platforms, virtual conversation partners, and pronunciation feedback tools, which could arguably have a greater direct relevance both in translation training, as a way to help in achieving a full and AI independent language proficiency, and in L2 classrooms where fluency and immersion are prioritised.

Pym and Hao's advocacy for translation methods in language classrooms disregards the immersion approach to language learning almost completely in a short, three-page section. This omission is significant, as

the immersion method has a strong research base showing its efficacy in helping students internalise language structures and vocabulary through real-world application, something that can be considered extremely useful in both L2 and translation didactics. By failing to substantively address this methodology and the usefulness of AI tools that exist to facilitate this approach, the authors overlook a key debate in language, and consequently translator education, about how best to develop fluency and cultural competency with the help of new technology. Seen in this light, the aforementioned failure to address emerging AI tools designed specifically for language immersion becomes a significant shortcoming in Pym and Hao's analysis for both intended audiences. That is to say, while these technologies may not be traditionally associated with translation, their absence in the book represents a missed opportunity to illustrate how AI can support a broader spectrum of language-related competencies in translation training. However, the issue is even more problematic than that: the tone of the book may come across as patronising to L2 teachers, who might feel as though their expertise is undermined. The authors' approach could be interpreted as, "We, the translators, with our translation AI tools are here to instruct you, the teachers, on best practices in didactics". Given that translators and L2 teachers have distinct roles and skill sets, such an approach risks alienating L2 instructors who may, for important reasons, not see translation as an integral part of language acquisition. For those L2 educators grounded in immersion and similar methods, the recommendation to pivot towards translation-focused software is not only counterintuitive but also dismissive of their competencies and experiences.

The authors' position does not really surprise when we bear in mind that, throughout the book, they blur the distinction between the skills required for translation, interpretation, teaching and general language use, which contributes to a problematic oversimplification of language-related competencies. They seem to miss the fact that, although translation and language teaching share some linguistic fundamentals and requirements, the competencies demanded by each profession differ significantly. It is true that translators need to possess skills in the nuanced transfer of meaning, cultural equivalency, ethical decisions, fidelity to source material, and the use of specific MT and computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools. However, the same cannot be stated about language teachers who often prioritise fluency, communicative ability, and cultural understanding, often achieved through pedagogical techniques that diverge

from those used in translation. The simplistic suggestion that all language users would benefit from acquiring translation skills and the ability to use MT tools implies the flattening of these professional roles, ignoring the specialised skills unique to each field. In other words, insisting that all language professionals should know how to use translation-specific IT and AI tools could be seen as an encroachment upon their pedagogical autonomy and expertise.

To make matters worse, Pym's and Hao's assumption that tools designed for translation can seamlessly benefit L2 students does not seem to be well founded. For example, they argue that MT tools could support L2 learners in drafting essays in their target language at an early learning stage. However, this claim lacks persuasive evidence, and the authors do not convincingly demonstrate how MT would enhance students' linguistic skills. Ignoring the risk that reliance on MT could hinder language acquisition by reducing students' exposure to essential language structures and vocabulary does not seem to be a good strategy, as these competencies are usually achieved by immersion – something that generative AI can help with, but not with the tools suggested here. The assumption that MT and other AI tools used in translation will lead to skill growth in L2 learners ignores the distinct learning processes involved in language acquisition. Unlike translation, language learning involves gradually building communicative competency through repeated practice and exposure. When students use MT to produce language, they may bypass these critical steps, potentially developing a reliance on technology rather than their own language skills or strengthening the need to produce texts in L2 via internal translation, and not a direct communication of thoughts. The authors' failure to address these pedagogical challenges raises questions about their insistence on the transferability of translation technologies to language learning contexts.

Nevertheless, if we ignore the authors' insistence on transferring the translation teaching methods to language classrooms, the amount of information and exercises described in the book is impressive, and the analysis within their area of expertise is spot-on. Translation instructors will find in this book a wealth of information regarding the history of AI and IT systems in their field, a profound analysis of the recent changes in the translation market, their possible consequences, and a variety of exercises that come from the authors' own teaching experience that are tailor-made for translation training. The authors even ponder the most common questions

asked by the translation students, such as what the job will look like with the advancement of AI. The book also deals with all relevant issues related to generative AI, such as the fallibility of the systems, potential biases, the necessity for Machine Translation Literacy, and many more. It is a compact compendium of everything a person creating a curriculum in translation needs to know, so the book can be wholeheartedly recommended to anyone in higher education who struggles with incorporating new technologies into their translation teaching program, even though, at times, the data lacks strong sources and some conclusions are drawn on very limited research, so caution is recommended. It will be also an interesting read for translation students, graduates and even professional translators who wish to further expand their skills and knowledge of AI and MT translation tools. Possibly even other language specialists will find something they can use in their line of work, as long as they carefully consider and contextualise the information according to their own professional needs. Rather than applying the authors' recommendations wholesale, it would be helpful to critically assess the potential benefits and drawbacks of introducing translation tools in specific work areas. However, for many language educators, especially those focused on developing communicative skills and fluency, the book's emphasis on translation tools may seem out of place.

In conclusion, in *How to Augment Language Skills: Generative AI and Machine Translation in Language Learning and Translator Training* Pym and Hao put forth an ambitious, though misguided, vision for the integration of translation technologies into language education. On one hand, there are many strong points the authors make in the book: they acknowledge that AI poses a potential challenge to all language professions, including translation and language education, due to its possible effects on language diversity and learning. On the other hand, they propose that training all language students in translation skills and MT technology is the solution to this issue, a suggestion that appears overly broad and out of touch with the realities of other markets within language services. It seems to be by design: although the book provides a comprehensive overview of recent changes in the translation world, it lacks a parallel analysis of the language teaching industry and other language services, which limits its broader applicability. While we can agree that translation skills and AI tools may benefit a subset of students—such as those pursuing translation careers—there is little evidence that such training would support language learners more broadly. The future of language services

undoubtedly involves adapting to AI, but this adaptation will likely vary based on specific professional needs. Instead of proposing a “one-size-fits-all” approach to AI training, the book could have offered more targeted recommendations based on different language-related professions, especially since there are many approaches in AI assisted language learning that can benefit also translator training. As it stands, the authors’ advocacy for a universal translation-centred approach to AI tools may seem misguided, especially to educators who prioritise communicative over transfer-based language skills. By conflating the roles and skills of translators, language teachers and other professional language users, the authors risk alienating their audience and undermining the specialised expertise that those experts bring to the table, putting the translation competencies above any other skills. Therefore, for educators focused on translation training, the book’s insights may prove valuable: it serves as a noteworthy contribution to discussions on AI in translation and translator training, but its potential impact on language education as a whole remains limited.

ABSTRACT

The review of Pym’s and Hao’s book, *How to Augment Language Skills: Generative AI and Machine Translation in Language Learning and Translator Training* highlights its significance while also expressing disappointment. The authors aim to connect language learning and translation training; however, the book primarily focuses on encouraging L2 teachers to utilise translation technology, which raises methodological concerns. The book’s title may confuse readers expecting a wider exploration of AI’s role in both fields. However, although it discusses technological changes in translation, it fails to offer a similarly detailed analysis of language teaching and overlooks important tools specifically developed for language learning. Furthermore, Pym and Hao blur the distinctions between the competencies needed for translation and teaching, risking the alienation of L2 educators. While the book offers valuable information for translation instructors, its guidance may not translate well into broader language education contexts, particularly for those focused on communicative approach.

KEYWORDS: Language teaching, translation, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Translation