

Case study 1

Anna is a Year 4 pupil who has recently arrived from Holland. She is always very keen to participate in whole class activities whenever possible but her – as yet - limited understanding of English makes it difficult for her to follow what is going on in the classroom. Bilingual support, provided by a Dutch-speaking MLA, was helpful during the initial settling-in period, but this has now been discontinued at the request of the school. She is the only Dutch speaking pupil in her class and is reluctant to speak in the classroom setting.

We decided to use Babelfish to try to support Anna during the Literacy Hour – a lesson during which she has always struggled to make sense of what is going on in the classroom. The aim was to make the whole-class activity accessible for Anna so that she could work alongside other pupils in her group and, hopefully, interact with them at an appropriate level.

The whole class had been working on understanding and writing instructions during the week, and the task for that particular lesson was to re-order a set of instructions for filling the bath. During the discussion which preceded the activity, we used Babelfish to ensure that Anna fully understood the task and the worksheet that she would be using.

Anna is confident when working on the computer and very quickly understood how to use the translation engine. She was keen to type in the English words for translation and could read and understand the translated version of the text. She was happy to work independently as long as the translation made sense.

Although very frustrating at times, the ability to translate back into English as a checking mechanism meant that sentences could be re-worked as often as necessary.

The advantages of using online translation for Anna:

As the only Dutch speaking pupil in her class, she felt isolated from other children and often had no way of showing whether she understood the lesson or not. Using Babelfish helped her to access the task and demonstrate her understanding of the lesson.

Anna enjoyed using the computer during lesson time and found Babelfish easy to use. For her, being able to use the computer during a part of the lesson she would normally have great difficulty in understanding meant that she could maintain her interest in the lesson. Additionally, she was able to approach the group work with more confidence, knowing that she fully understood what she needed to do. Her confidence in using English was increased, partly as a result of the discussion that took place while the work was being translated, but also because she was able to refer to both the English and the Dutch versions of the text while she was completing her task. A better understanding of the vocabulary meant that she was able to join in the conversations with other pupils in her group. ("Is this now? Cold now?")

Anna was also able to make connections with other pupils in the class who were interested both in the work that she was doing on the computer, and in finding out about the Dutch language as a result.

She was able to successfully complete a task that her peers were also engaged in for the first time.

The disadvantage of using online translation for Anna:

It would have been impossible for her to work without intensive adult support which, unfortunately, is rarely available. Even though she was extremely competent when using the computer, with good keyboard skills and a secure grasp of how to use the translation engine, Anna needed help in selecting the appropriate languages, and she needed someone to explain the activity quite carefully.

Once she had begun to work on the translation it quickly became apparent that the English sentences could not be translated directly into Dutch. Unfortunately, although the list of items needed was easy to translate, the instructions and titles were more difficult. Sentences such as 'Turn off the cold tap when happy' do seem rather strange on closer inspection! In the end it became necessary to analyse each sentence and break it down into extremely simple statements in order to arrive at a reasonable translation.

When the text was translated back into the original language it rarely made sense, making it difficult for both teacher and pupil to have confidence in the translation.

Because of the nature of the activity – translation – there was an emphasis on producing written work when perhaps an activity of a more practical nature would have been more beneficial in terms of understanding instructions in English.

It was extremely time-consuming, and kept the support teacher fully occupied for almost the entire lesson. Under normal circumstances Anna would have received support together with newly arrived Turkish and Somali speaking pupils also in her class.

Conclusions:

Although Anna clearly enjoyed the task and her confidence increased as a result, there were a number of disadvantages which meant that we did not repeat the exercise.

In many ways Dutch is similar to English, and it was relatively easy to see where errors were occurring. However, this would not be the case with many languages and translating back into English rarely resulted in an accurate translation. For this reason I would regard using the translation engine with some caution, and would probably choose to use a dictionary in preference.

Similarly, the worksheet we used was uncomplicated, and it was not difficult to break the sentences down into short, clear, statements. However, it would need to be done by someone with a good command of English, ideally in advance of the lesson.

I am not convinced that there were linguistic benefits to using the translation engine in this way, but Anna certainly benefited in terms of developing her self-confidence when working with other pupils. It was also useful in making the language-learning activity a two-way process so that Anna was able to learn the English she needed, but was also able to teach me the equivalent phrases in Dutch.