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Learning English through Translation - A Case for Bilingual Dictionaries

Ali Ahmad and Muhammad Rashid Hafeez

Abstract

The study aims at investigating the learning of English as a second language through translation using bilingual dictionaries tool translation. The study was quantitative in nature. It followed a pre-test post-test single group experimental design. A questionnaire was also administered among the teachers imparting second language education.

The population of the study consisted of the higher secondary school students learning English as a second language as well as the teachers teaching English at this level. 100 secondary school teachers teaching English as a second language at higher secondary level and 50 students learning English at the said level were selected as the sample of the study.

It was found that the learners of English do not use bilingual dictionaries to get the help for the semantic problems faced by them during language learning. However, it was observed through the analysis of the test that the use of bilingual dictionaries in translation tasks brings better results. The study concluded that in such circumstances where two languages involve in language teaching, language learning can be improved through translation by using bilingual dictionaries.

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1.1 Introduction

Second and foreign language learning is a very complex phenomenon. It “goes on in many different contexts, under many vastly different conditions, involving many different kind of teachers and teaching, themselves using much diverse material with many different learners” (Porte, 2002:35). The process of second language learning is knotty because the learners have already learnt a language and the patterns and structure of that first language always interfere during the course of second language learning. The habits established in the childhood for the first language interfere with the establishment of a different set of habits for the second language (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

The history of language teaching is replete with methods and approaches that have been employed for effective teaching of English. The grammar translation method has stood the test of time and remains the most ancient method for teaching languages. Bonyadi (2003) stated Greek and Latin for their importance given to translation in eighteenth century and language was taught through Grammar Translation Method.

Translation is, thus, a powerful tool for second language teaching in the classroom. It helps the students to find out the equivalents of the second language in the first language and vice a versa. Bonyadi (2003) has discussed some grounds as to why should we use a second language in the class room. He claims that translation develops the reading comprehension ability in the students, during this process of “conscious learning” the learner comprehends the texts of the source language and then changes it into the target language, and the process of learning through translation is a source of teacher-student and student-student communication.

Translation helps the learners to understand the text of the second language fully. They analyze the text and then restructure it in the other language. This process is governed by the semantic and syntactic background of both the first and the second language. The grammatical patterns are to be learnt during the course of time. But without the vocabulary of the second language, one is helpless to plunge into the translation and then to reach the second language.

Teubert (2002:190-191) claims, “Meaning is the core issue of translation. A translator produces a paraphrase of the text in another language. Meaning and meaning alone links a paraphrase to the original text”. For the translators, it is essential to learn the meaning to grasp the second language. So they need a tool for the enhancement of the vocabulary of the second language. Bilingual dictionaries can prove a powerful tool for this purpose.

The bilingual dictionaries may be a great help in enhancing the vocabulary of the second language. The dictionaries are the repositories of words (Jackson, 2002). They help to solve almost all the semantic problems of the language learners. One feels

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inclined to agree with Alkasimi (1983) that the development of the dictionaries should not be viewed merely as theoretical instruments but as tools that have great practical value. The history of lexicography stands witness to the fact that the early dictionaries were written for translation purposes. Alkasimi (1983) claimed that the early dictionaries in Iraq were aimed at providing Assyrians the translations of Summarian signs; in Arabic dictionaries were written to explain the lexis of Quran and Hadith; in English the early glossaries were aimed at providing the translations of Latin words for pedagogical purposes (pp. 1-2). It shows the fact that the bilingual dictionaries are aimed at translation. However Nielsen (1994: 53) feels: "...bilingual dictionaries are not made for the exclusive purpose of translation from one language to another. They may be made for the comprehension of, e.g. foreign language texts." Even then the value of the dictionaries as a tool for translation can hardly be over emphasized.

The discussion shows that bilingual dictionaries may serve as a tool for learning second language. They provide the equivalent of native language in foreign language and of foreign language in native language. They are aimed at translations as well as the comprehension of the foreign language texts. So these dictionaries may prove a great source of help for the learner learning English as a second language.

The present study is aimed at finding out the tendencies of second language learners towards the use of bilingual dictionaries in second language learning as well as the impact and usability of bilingual dictionaries in the process of second language learning.

1.2 Methodology

The method of research opted for the research is quantitative. Both questionnaire and test was used as research tool.

1.3 Population and sample

1. The teachers engaged in teaching English as a second language higher secondary level and the students engaged in learning English as second language at the same level were selected as the population of the study.
2. 100 teachers and 50 students were selected as the sample of the study. A questionnaire was administered among these teachers. A test of translation to and from second language was taken from the students as a pre-test. Then the researchers managed to teach them the use of dictionary during translation activities during the course of second language learning for 6 weeks. Then a post-test was conducted and the results were analyzed.

1.4 The Questionnaire

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The questionnaire was adapted from Hartmann (1999), Nesi (2000), Tono (2001). The questionnaire included 13 questions. The questionnaire was administered among the teachers teaching English as a second language at higher secondary level. The questionnaire included questions about the habits of using bilingual dictionaries, the use of specific type of the dictionary, the frequency of dictionary during specific English language teaching tasks, information about the ownership of bilingual dictionaries, the use of electronic and online bilingual dictionaries and teaching the use of dictionaries in English language class rooms. The opinion of the teachers about the usefulness of the activity of using bilingual dictionary during language learning was also sought.

1.5 The Test

50 students were selected for the training of dictionary use to evaluate the impact of bilingual dictionaries on learning English as a foreign language. The pre-test was taken before the start of training. The training was managed one hour daily for four weeks about the use of a dictionary during the translation tasks. After that a post-test was administered to the same students. The pre-test and the post-test included 50 questions based on the following areas:

1. Translation of lexemes from English into Urdu.
2. Translation of lexemes from Urdu into English.
3. Translation of one verb sentences from English into Urdu and Urdu into English.
4. Translation of complex texts from English into Urdu and Urdu into English.

The test was evaluated and the results of pre-test and post-test were compared using t-test.

1.6 Discussion

During the data collection, a questionnaire was administered among the teachers and an experiment was conducted upon the students using pre-test post-test study design on a single group. The analyses of both the questionnaire and the test are given below.

The Questionnaire

Table 1: Teaching English using only English as Medium of Instruction

Option	Frequency	Ratio
Always	04	04%
Nearly Always	06	06%
Half of the time	15	15%
Rarely	41	41%
Never	34	34%

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This question was about the medium of instruction during the teaching of English. The Table 1 shows that only 04% of the population has always been imparting education where the medium of instruction was totally English. Otherwise they have been teaching English in the institutions where the medium of instruction was Urdu (the lingua franca) or any other local language. When a local/national language which serves as a first language is used to teach the second/foreign language, the need of using a bilingual dictionary is possibly increased. The question was asked to clarify the same fact. And 75% of the sample had been in the system where the teaching of English was carried out using first language.

Table 2: Method of Teaching

Method	Frequency	% age
Grammar Translation Method	96	96%
Direct Method	04	04%
Any Other Method	00	00%

Table 2 was about the use of the specific teaching method for teaching English to the students. 96% of the students were being taught using grammar translation method. Only 4% claimed that they taught through direct method. The higher rate of teaching through grammar translation method shows the great tendency of the learners towards translation as well as using a bilingual dictionary for translation.

Table 3: Use of Bilingual Dictionary in English language teaching

Use of dictionary by teachers	Frequency	% age
Teachers using bilingual dictionaries/glossaries	49	49%
Teachers without dictionary use	45	45%
No answer	06	06%

Table 3 shows that the English language teachers do not use a bilingual dictionary as a habit in second language learning. Only 49% of the population use a dictionary in second language teaching which is not a very much positive attitude. More than half of the language learners do not use a dictionary during teaching a second language.

Table 4: Type of bilingual dictionary used frequently

Type of dictionary	Frequency	User
Unidirectional Bilingual (English into Urdu)	19	38.77%
Unidirectional Bilingual (Urdu into English)	11	22.44%
Bidirectional (English into Urdu into English)	12	24.48%
Glossaries in Hand Books	07	14.28%

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In the present system of Pakistani education, mostly teacher use bilingual dictionaries. Among 49% in Table 3 who claim that they use a dictionary/glossary in language teaching, 38.77% say that they use unidirectional bilingual (English into Urdu) dictionaries. The users of Urdu into English dictionaries and the bidirectional dictionaries are less in number. It shows the high tendency of the respondents towards finding equivalents of foreign language in their native language. 14.28% among the teachers said that they use glossaries only. These text based glossaries are included in the handbooks and follow no lexicographic theory to include the equivalents in them.

Table 5: Level when first time you yourself used a bilingual dictionary in English language Learning

Level	Frequency	Ratio
Primary	02	4.08%
Middle	07	14.28%
Secondary	25	51.02%
Higher secondary	15	30.61%
Other higher level (Please mention)	00	00%

Table 5 shows that though the learning of English starts at early stage of education, the use of a dictionary starts very late. From 49% of dictionary users in Table 3, only 4.08% started using a dictionary at the primary level of second language learning. How did they find out the translation equivalents in not the concern of the present paper. According to 51.02% respondents, the use of a bilingual dictionary/glossary in language leaning started at secondary level and 30.61 at higher secondary school level.

Table 6: Time of use of a dictionary during English Language teaching

Task	Frequency	%age
Reading English Book	25	51.02%
Reading Urdu Book	02	4.08%
Reading English Newspaper	04	8.16%
Reading Urdu Newspaper	00	00%
Using internet	00	00%
Writing something academic	07	14.28%
Translating Exercises	11	22.44%

The respondents were asked about the task when they use a bilingual dictionary. It was found that most of the teachers use English into Urdu dictionary during reading English texts. 51.02% of the respondents among 49% in Table 3 who claim to use a dictionary/glossary in second language learning, use a bilingual dictionary while reading

English books. While the tendency to find out the equivalents of Urdu words in English is very low. The table above shows that the learners of English have not much tendencies to find out the equivalent of Urdu words in English. They do not bother to find out the meaning on new words from English.

Table 7: Treatment of new/unknown English words

Action	Frequency	Ratio
Look up meaning in a bilingual Dictionary	37	37%
Guess Meaning	20	20%
Look up in some glossary in a Hand Book	12	12%
Ignore	21	21%
Ask someone	08	08%
Search internet	02	02%

Table 7 shows that the respondents mostly consult a bilingual dictionary or a glossary in a handbook to find out an equivalent to a new word. 37% of the respondents say that they use a dictionary to find out a meaning and 12% of the respondents use a handbook to find out meaning. Only 2% of the respondents go to the internet for the meaning. Remaining 49% do not consult a dictionary for the meaning. They just guess the meaning or ask someone. And 21% of the respondents say that they ignore the meaning which shows that they do not have a positive attitude about the use of a dictionary.

Table 8: Personal Bilingual Dictionaries

Number of Dictionaries	Frequency	Ratio
No Dictionary	22	22%
One Dictionary	48	48%
Two Dictionary	18	18%
Three dictionary	12	12%

Table 8 shows the number of bilingual dictionaries owned by the respondents. 22% of the respondents own no dictionary. All other respondents in the sample own at least one dictionary. It is strange enough that they have a dictionary with them and they do not consult it for meaning.

Table 9: Use of Electronic Bilingual dictionary

	Frequency	Ratio
Use of Electronic dictionary	08	08%
No Use of electronic dictionary	72	72%

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No Knowledge	20	20%
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Many English-Urdu and Urdu-English dictionaries are available electronically. The question was asked about how many respondents use a bilingual electronic dictionary. It was found that only 08% of the respondents use an electronic dictionary. A major number of the learners do not even know about the electronic dictionaries.

Table 10: Use of online bilingual dictionary

Users	Frequency	Ratio
Use online dictionary	02	02%
Don't use online dictionary	78	78%
No knowledge	20	20%

This table shows that the respondents are not aware of online dictionaries. The use of online available bilingual dictionaries is 02% only. The result also shows that the respondents have least habits of internet use also.

Table 11: Using a Bilingual Dictionary improves language learning

Option	Frequency	% age
Always	82	82%
Nearly Always	08	08%
Half of the time	06	06%
Rarely	04	04%
Never	00	00%

The respondents were asked about the benefit of bilingual dictionary in language learning. Most of the respondents (82%) were of the view that these dictionaries always improve language learning. This shows that the respondents are aware of the usefulness of the dictionaries.

Table 12: Area of language learning improved by using bilingual dictionaries

Skill	Frequency	Ratio
Translation and retranslation of lexemes	49	49%
Translation and retranslation of texts	13	13%
Vocabulary of the English language	10	10%
Vocabulary of Urdu or any native language	28	28%

Table 12 shows the result of the question which was asked to gather the opinion of the respondents about the impact of bilingual dictionaries on different areas of

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language learning. It was found that the respondents think that these dictionaries help them in improving the translation of lexemes and in vocabulary enhancement.

Table 13: Have you ever taught the dictionary use in the class room?

Option	Frequency	%age
Always	00	00%
Nearly Always	00	00%
Half of the time	06	06%
Rarely	14	14%
Never	80	80%

Table 13 shows the responses of the teachers about the question of teaching the dictionary use to their students. The analysis shows that the teachers do not tell their students in the class room about the dictionary use. 80% of the respondents have never taught them how to use a dictionary.

The Test

As discussed above, the students went through an experiment. The researchers conducted a test before the start of the study and then they taught the students for 6 weeks. After training of dictionary use during translation tasks, a post test was conducted for the same group of student. The results of both the tests were calculated using t-test experimental design. Following are the results of the test:

Table 14: T-test Whole Sample

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T value	P value
Pair 1	Overall Pre Test	19.62	50	5.7103	-18.96	.0001
	Overall Post test	24.6	50	6.1146		

Table 14 shows the results for the whole sample. The comparison of the achievements of the whole group from the pretest to the post-test reflects a change of the mean score from 19.62 to 24.6. Hence there is a mean difference of 4.98. The t value is quite high at -18.96 which is quite significant at the selected probability level. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the achievement of the whole group on the pre-test and the post-test scores.

Table 15: Low Achievers

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		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T value	P value
Pair 1	Low Achievers Pre Test	14.52	25	2.365	-14.03	.0001
	Low Achievers Post test	19.04	25	2.1886		

The comparison of the achievements of the Low Achievers from the pretest to the post-test reflects a change of the mean score from 14.52 to 19.04. Hence there is a mean difference of 4.52. The t value is quite high at -14.03 which is quite significant at the selected probability level. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the achievement of the Low achievers on the pre-test and the post-test scores.

Table 16: High Achievers

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T value	P value
Pair 1	Low Achievers Pre Test	24.72	25	2.6064	-13.59	.0001
	Low Achievers Post test	30.16	25	2.6721		

The comparison of the achievements of the High Achievers from the pretest to the post-test reflects a change of the mean score from 24.72 to 30.16. Hence there is a mean difference of 5.44. The t value is quite high at -13.59 which is quite significant at the selected probability level. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the achievement of the High achievers on the pre-test and the post-test scores.

Conclusion

It follows from the above discussion that using a bilingual dictionary helps a lot in developing the second language skills. It was observed during the treatment that the students employed dictionary as a language learning strategy during the classroom. This was quite a new and exciting experience for the students. Earlier on that they had to rely on the translation of the words as provided by the teacher. Instead of giving the fried fish

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to the children, the teacher taught them how to catch the fish and resultantly they got the experience they could make use of throughout the rest of their lives.

The findings of the study endorse Llorca's (2005) view that using the bilingual dictionary lightens the cognitive load on the students. Instead of inferring the meanings from the text too often, the students have the toolkit through which they easily know the meanings of the words.

The teachers correspond to the view that using the bilingual dictionary helps in developing the second language translation skills. Nevertheless, they concede that teachers do not promote the use of bilingual dictionary in the classroom. There is a dire need to address the situation so that the students could make an effective use of dictionary for polishing their translation skills.

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