Two Languages in the Mind: Translation in a Language Classroom

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Research in bilingual access has well established that in accessing words from one language, the semantically related words in the other languages known get automatically activated, suggesting that it is a shared storage system with language non-selective access. Using these robust findings from bilingual processing, the paper shows how translation can be used as a potent pedagogical tool in a language classroom. Texts-in-translation specifically will be used as they create opportunities for such cross-language transactions. A set of activities based on texts-in-translation would be presented to aid teachers in materials design from such texts and to develop multilingual competencies in Indian learners.

**Keywords:** bilingual lexical access, language classroom, texts-in-translation, translation

**Introduction**

The paper revisits the notion of ‘translation’ in a second language classroom, and shows how it can be used to support bilingual/multilingual educational practices. Translation is a unique mode of language use, and in order to translate, learners need to mobilize very diverse, interdisciplinary skills and knowledge i.e. knowledge of languages, subject, real-world knowledge, as well as problem-solving strategies to accomplish their tasks. Rather than using translation as a fifth skill after reading, writing, speaking and listening, the idea that I am trying to establish is that language and translation skills are not independent of each other, but are interdependent. Understanding differences and similarities between languages, understanding that languages do not have equivalents, and that the same phrase can be translated in different ways in different contexts—are welcome outcomes of using translation activities in a second language classroom. More importantly, when translation activities are used in a second language classroom, we are actually acknowledging the presence of another language in the mind. With this objective, the activities suggested in the paper use texts in
translation to celebrate cross-language transactions, something that happens unconsciously, automatically, and even surreptitiously in the minds of the learners.

The article begins with a summary of the theorization and experimental research that charted the route for ‘a multilingual turn’ in educational practices (May, 2013). The paper begins by reporting some experimental work on bilingual lexical access and the way the bilingual lexicon was modelled, and moves on to show that how the shared storage model (the language non-selection approach) accounts for reading, listening and production in bilinguals.

Bilingual Lexical Access

As bilinguals, we differ from monolinguals in that we constantly need to manage two languages to comprehend and produce words in the appropriate language. How do we access words from different languages in our lexicon? Are words of different languages stored in one or separate containers inside our brain? Is the access language-specific or language non-specific? In other words, when we are confronted with a word, e.g. in a lexical decision task 1, do we first access the lexicon from one language and then from the next? Or is there a parallel search through all languages? Earlier, the language selective position was favoured (Gerard & Scarborough, 1989; MacNamara & Kushnir, 1971), but over the past few decades, support has accumulated for the non-selective view (for reviews, see De Groot, 2011; Dijkstra & Van Heuven, 2002).

Let us look at some experimental evidence in support of the language non-selective view. Most of the psycholinguistic experimentations are reaction/response time experiments where subjects are required to read or say a word or a sentence, and the time taken to respond to the stimuli is noted down. What does this experimental paradigm assume? Less time means ‘easy access,’ and longer time means ‘difficulty in access’. Also, lesser time would mean that what is being accessed is cognitively simple and longer time would mean what is being accessed is cognitively more complex. The difficulty in access could be because of interference from another task, or from another language, or because the access is indirect. I summarize a classic semantic priming task. A priming task usually tests whether a prime (say, bread) would help a subject to recognize a word
(say, butter) faster when they are semantically related when compared to a prime that is unrelated (say, knife) or faster than a condition where no prime is provided. Such priming tasks were used to establish the fact that words in the mental lexicon are organized as a semantic network. When one unit in the network is activated (either because you see or read the word, or even when you prepare to speak), all other related words in the network are activated, and these wait to be accessed. So if one of these words actually turns up in the process of listening, reading or speaking, the time taken to access them would be much lesser.

This methodology over the years has been extensively experimented with, refined, and extended to domains other than words, and also to bilingual contexts. If we find that an L2 target word (‘butter’ in English) is responded to faster when preceded by its L1 translation (‘makkhan’ in Hindi)) than by an unrelated L1 word (‘seb’; ‘apple’ in Hindi), it would mean the words ‘butter’ and ‘makkhan’ are part of the same semantic network. Such bilingual priming experiments have shown that the lexicon is not language specific but language non-specific, and the prime in one language can have a facilitative effect on the target from another language (Sunderman & Kroll, 2006).

With this background in scientific research, let us get back to what such research implies for second language teaching and education. If the languages that we know come from a shared store, where there is one lexicon but with some sort of ‘language tags,’ the automatic activation of words in both languages (for a language specific stimuli) can either be suppressed or be triumphed.

What happens in schools and classrooms is something contrary to these findings. Schools try to create situations where one language always gets pitted against another and language teachers try their best to prevent ‘contamination’ from other languages (Makalela, 2015; Shohamy, 2006). This separation of language systems is artificial and often counter-productive.

In this article, I take on a particular type of text, i.e. texts-in-translation which often feature in English textbooks. Texts in translation open up possibilities of cross-language transactions but are routinely ignored by textbook writers and teachers, in fear of cross-contamination. This fear is neither personal nor subjective but a product of decades of historical indifference, which started with the grammar translation method falling

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into disrepute in the 1950s. The word ‘translation’ became a word which was feared and abhorred. The affix ‘trans-’ after being dormant for a good 60-70 years has turned a full circle and is now back in a new avatar ‘translanguaging’ that celebrates the linguistic repertoires a child brings to the classroom.

**Bilingual Education and L2 Classroom**

One of the questions that comes up in language policy and education discussion is whether knowledge of more than one language is an asset. Should learners be encouraged to ‘bring’ their own languages into the classroom? Motivations to bring in the learners’ language can be varied: it can be for the benefit of the child (to help in cognitive growth, to build self-esteem, to recognize difference), for society (to build intercultural acceptance); for a language, or for language education. What is the impetus for bilingual education in India? Why is bilingual education an English teacher’s burden? As quite expected, the motivation is neither the child, nor society, nor language, but language education. The bilingual education as it translates in the Indian context is to help children learn English.

An English teacher, therefore, needs to allow children to use their L1s in the classroom, and the teacher uses the L1s (as many as she knows) to help the children understand words, phrases, sentences and texts in English. Teaching English using learners’ L1 is a pedagogic requirement, and is not informed by research on bilingual mind or bilingual processing. The fact that conceptual representation is language nonselective—and that every word, phrase or clause activated in the brain in one language (either L1 or L2) automatically activates the word, phrase or sentence in the other—is neither acknowledged nor deployed.

**Texts-in-Translation**

On the face of it, it appears that the addition of multicultural texts in the English textbook (use of texts translated from other languages) is an attempt in the right direction. Let us quickly look at some of the reasons why these were included: we will find that though it was a move towards multiculturalism, the intention was anything but that.

Teaching materials (here, stories, poems, plays) originating from a student’s L1 culture greatly increase comprehension and retention of L2. Simply changing the names of places and characters into more familiar
ones increases comprehension (for example, changing English names to Japanese names for EFL students), and changing a few lexical items (places, actions) with more familiar Japanese words or actions resulted in higher cloze scores (Oller, 2004; Chihara, Sakurai & Oller, 1989).

A study on Iranian learners showed that cultural origin of folktales for Iranian EFL students had a greater effect on their comprehension than the level of the syntactic and semantic complexity of the text. Iranian learners performed better on the texts adapted in English from their native culture than on texts from the American culture (Floyd & Carroll, 1987). When students from India and the US were told to read letters about an Indian and American wedding, the subjects read letters from their own culture faster, and were able to recall them better (Floyd & Carroll, 1987). The study of first language literature translated into a second language creates a ‘bridge’ between the first and the second language. Texts-in-translation introduced as teaching materials were used with the intention of reducing the unfamiliarity of context and content, so that the stories/plays selected were not too distant from the learners’ world knowledge.

**Teaching of Texts-in-Translation**

Since the intention is one of reducing cognitive load rather than an acceptance of multilingualism or multiculturalism, the treatment of the texts by textbook writers and teachers is very similar to their treatment of an English-origin text. The treatment is largely monolingual and monocultural. The way the questions and exercises are designed hide the fact that the work is a translation. In short, translation or translation activities never form a part of the discussion of the text: this illustrates what the noted translator, Lawrence Venuti (1996) says about teaching of translation “The whole issue of translation is really repressed in the classroom...” (p. 328).

What is more serious is not the suppression of the fact that it is a translation, but the fact that it suppresses all creative opportunities for exploiting the text to further knowledge of both languages. We now have experimental evidence that both languages are active when bilinguals read in one of the languages (e.g. Dijkstra, 2005), or hear in one of the languages (e.g. Marian & Spivey, 2003), and interestingly even when they speak in a particular language (e.g. Kroll, Bobb, Wodniecka, 2006).
What I present now are a few classroom activities with words, metaphors and texts which can be used for learners with five years of formal exposure to English instruction. Each activity is organized in the following manner: an introduction to the task, the task prompt, followed by the task.

Activity 1: Dictation Task

Introduction: One of the activities that can be used to teach a text-in-translation is an oral interpretation task (what foreign language interpreters usually do, but these are usually simultaneous!). In a classroom context, this can be modified to a dictation task.

Task Prompts: Short Sentences in English

Task: The teacher dictates sentences to learners. The catch is that learners must not write down the sentences in English as they hear it, but must listen, process the meaning and then write it in their own language, keeping the meaning as close as possible to the English sentence. Later learners are given time to reconstruct the original sentences in English based on their L1 sentences. They can work in pairs to compare and refine the translations, and to reconstruct the original sentence. This works really well in multilingual pairs as they can also at this point discuss differences between the sentences and how those differences relate to their L1.

Activity 2: Translating Words and Phrases

Introduction: The activity legitimizes bilingual lexical access and makes use of this access for comprehension and awareness raising to form (here, L2). This activity not only works for texts-in-translation but also for monolingual texts (here, the learners are the ‘natural’ translators!)

Task Prompt: The text below is a translation of a Hindi text.

The words ‘jaarhe ka din’ (a winter day) or ‘sardiyon ka mausam’ ‘thand ka mausam’ (winter season) in Hindi, or an equivalent in any other language would automatically get activated. Since the child uses L1 in a variety of contexts, the lexical representations would get activated
faster.

The learners could then compile their lists and see the multiple ways in which each of these phrases can be translated. The focus of the task is on meaning, therefore there are no fixed or correct answers. Once the lists are compiled, learners can select those phrases or sentences that work best in the story. The activity highlights what we call a translator’s choice. There would be contexts where a word in the text may not have a direct translation in the L1 but the conceptual representation would be activated automatically. The way this representation would get translated into a word or phrase may not match the syntactic representation in the L2. For instance, ‘one fine winter day’, a noun phrase, to be translated in Hindi would be ‘jaarhe ka din tha’ (it was a winter day’). Rather than the teacher using L1 to teach meanings, it is the learner who accesses his or her L1, and thus entrenches a symbiotic relationship between his L2 and L1.

Activity 3: Translating Metaphors

Introduction: An important aspect of lexical representation holds the way we communicate emotions as metaphors. They seem to be very similar across languages\(^4\) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, the phrases we use to express anger have two common metaphors (anger as fire, and anger as hot liquid).
**Task Prompt:** The sentences above or similar sentences could be used as task prompts.

**Task:** Learners are required to find as many metaphors in their languages, and to classify them into categories like above (there might be many more categories, anger as poison, anger as destruction, anger as insanity etc). For instance, in Hindi we are likely to find the following phrases: *dil meĩn aag lagna, khoon khaul jaana, aag baboola hona, angaare par lotna, angaaree barashna, aag bhabhak uthna, gusse se paagal hona*.

The list illustrates the universality in the use of these metaphors. Learners here contribute these metaphors from various languages, and make a metaphor pool. Usually it is believed that lexical phrases are learnt later in the course of language acquisition, however such activities highlight that metaphors cross-linguistically have a common base. Similar activities can be designed for other emotions like fear, happiness, grief, surprise etc.

**Activity 4: Comparison of Two Texts for the Same Situation**

**Introduction:** This is an activity to prepare learners to look at comparisons of two translations of a text. The activity highlights differences in style, choice of words, and tone.

**Task Prompt:** Learners are given two texts to read, and asked to carefully analyse the differences.

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**Text A:** Then I saw he had a gun. Pointing at me. And I saw my life passing before me. And my death. Damn!

**Text B:** It was at that precise moment I noticed he was pointing a gun at me. I would like to say my whole life flashed before my eyes and I suppose it might have. But if it did, I wasn’t watching, for I couldn’t take my eyes off the end of the gun. Was this all there was then?

If learners of English are made to compare translations of the same text, it would raise their awareness of the ways in which translation is affected by language choices. For instance, in the above example, we can see that two translations are significantly different from each other so much so that they could pass off as two totally unconnected texts. While the first translation expresses the shock by short sentences and even phrases, the second is more reflective and philosophical. The content (events and thoughts) in both texts are the same, but the translator’s choice of language changes the connection the text makes with the readers.

**Activity 5: Comparing Two Translations of a Text**

Here is an activity I created for Class IX NCERT book Beehive (2018-2019)
Activity 6: Subtitles of a Movie

Task: Use a movie clip in the learners L1 with English subtitles. The learners are familiar with the meaning and the context of the film. In isolation, the subtitle might sound inaccurate for the dialogue/speech but contextually it is relevant. Learners need to pay close attention to the decisions the translators have made in the clip. They then contrast them, sharing their own impressions and discussing what they have discovered. As learners perform this exercise, students note the linguistic creativity involved in various translations. Such an approach motivates learners to find and play with new meanings.

In using texts-in-translation in a language textbook, some of these activities can be incorporated with information used from the text. However, they can also be used as classroom activities with newspapers, ads, and commercials.

Conclusion

The paper began with evidence from research to show that lexical access in bilinguals are linked in the brain, and therefore exposure to one word automatically activates its equivalent or translation in the other languages. This involuntary and unconscious activation needs to be used in pedagogical practices rather than pretending that the other languages do not exist. In this paper I have focused on translation as a skill which, in this digital age (where people are watching movies and TV shows with subtitles), functions as an ideal for developing a bi-/multilingual competence, and perhaps as a way to awaken the creativity of the language learner. The activities presented here are designed to challenge students to go beyond the languages they normally work with by learning how a text gets translated into multiple languages. They also allow linguistic creativity to come into play when learners are learning how best (aesthetically) to capture meaning of a text. Further, they illustrate to learners the many possibilities of translation as mediation between languages and cultures.

To conclude, translation activities can teach learners to be critical and creative as they analyse, contrast and compare a message in multiple languages. However, these translation modes represent only a small portion of the many multilingual possibilities, with the influx of digital technologies, translation in the classroom will hopefully become more varied.
Endnotes

1. In a lexical decision task, participants are given a string of letters and they are expected to say whether it is a word or not in the language specified. Usually a button is pressed for ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

2. I am using Hindi for illustration; any language could be used for these activities.

3. Learners are likely to come up with diverse answers; so long as speakers of the same language agree that the translation has the same ‘sense’, the responses may be accepted. This transactive model of teaching would be a move away from the ‘one correct answer’ model of teaching which is usually the bane of all classroom discussion and activities.

4. Some central metaphors like anger, fear, surprise are shaped by embodiment, the shared experience of being human and perceiving the world from this perspective (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and are hence universal, and are formed with a limited range of variation cross-linguistically.

References


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