Does Using Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionaries Affect Translation Quality Differently?

Masoud Motahari
Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch, Iran
Ailar Taherian
Instructor, University of Applied Sciences and Technology, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This research was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between the quality of translations produced by translation students who used bilingual (English to Farsi) dictionaries with that of those using monolingual (English to English) dictionaries. To this end, 78 senior undergraduate students of English Translation took part in a piloted English proficiency test, 60 of whom were chosen on the basis of their performance on this test. Subsequently, the 60 participants were randomly divided into two groups and a nontechnical English text was given to both groups. One group used a bilingual dictionary while the other a monolingual dictionary in the process of translating the text. The works of these students were evaluated and scored by two raters who enjoyed inter-rater reliability. To respond to the research question posed in this study, the means of the scores of the two groups were compared through an independent samples t-test. The conclusion was that there was no significant difference in the quality of translation of the two groups. In other words, using a bilingual or monolingual dictionary was not a determining factor in terms of the translation quality of the students.

Keywords: translation, monolingual dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, translation quality

Introduction

Translation is a practice which dates back to thousands of years in human history when people of different linguistic communities realized that they needed to understand each others' different languages. The modern institutional proliferation of translation, however, is only a 20th-century phenomenon as Venuti (1995) asserts with its formal institutionalization occurring in the 1950s and 60s. "In the 1970s and 80s, interest in the theory

and practice of translation grew steadily. Translation became increasingly interdisciplinary because of its borrowings from conceptual and methodological paradigms of psychology, communicative theory, anthropology, and also from culture and gender studies" (Venuti, 1995, p. 234).

It is perhaps along the same lines above that Baker (1992) writes about the emergence of translation studies or translatology as an "academic discipline which takes the phenomenon of translation as its main object of study" (p. 233). Baker is by no means alone of course in her conceptualization of the discipline as there are many scholars who attempt to define this field (Gentzler, 1993; Hatim & Munday 2004; Munday, 2004; Venuti, 1997).

Albeit the field of translation is growing momentously around the globe, there is somewhat noticeable controversy concerning the definition of translation. This diversity is noted by Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, p. 181) who define translation as "an incredibly broad notion which can be understood in many different ways". They further elaborate that translation may be envisaged "as a process or a product with the identification of such sub-types as literary translation, technical translation, subtitling and machine translation; moreover, while more typically it just refers to the transfer of written texts, the term sometimes also includes interpreting" (p. 181).

There are others who tend to adopt a more product-based approach in defining translation such as translation being "the expression in another language of what has been expressed in another, source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences" (Dubois cited in Bell, 1991, p. 5). And there are others such as Flato (2004, p. 63) who argue in favor of the importance of words in translation by pointing out that, "Translation has to rely upon the force of words, which are in the business of making manifest".

Yet another more recent perspective is advocated by those – such as Williams and Chesterman)2002(– who argue that translation studies as a discipline focuses more upon the subjective role of the translator and his/her indispensable mental processing. Accordingly, they maintain, the attention has shifted somewhat from translational research to translatory research, and from a prescriptive methodology to one of a descriptive nature highlighting the role of numerous psychosocial constructs in the process of translation.

Regardless of the specific definition of translation that one may subscribe to, there is perhaps little hesitation over identifying the usefulness

of one tool in the hand of the translator: the dictionary. Jian-hua (2001, p. 2) maintains that a dictionary "is a reference book, in which the lemmas are collected in a certain order and dealt with separately to supply a certain quantity of information".

Rey-Debove (cited in Béjoint, 2002) argues that a dictionary can be defined by the following eight characteristics

a)   *A dictionary is a series of separate paragraphs;*
b)   *A dictionary is meant to be consulted, not read;*
c)   *Dictionaries have a double structure;*
d)   *A dictionary is an ordered set;*
e)   *A dictionary is a list of linguistic units;*
f)   *A dictionary is a didactic book;*
g)   *A dictionary gives information about linguistic signs;*
h)   *A dictionary is a structured representation of a predetermined lexical set.* (p. 9)

While the instrumentality of the dictionary has rarely been doubted, one can, nonetheless, question whether one single type of dictionary can serve purposeful to everyone's multiplicity of possible reference needs.

One major typology of dictionaries is whether they are bilingual or monolingual. An ongoing debate in the literature of language teaching/learning is over which serves more efficiently the purpose of such pedagogy (Atkins & Varantola, 1998; Koren, 1997; Martin 1998; Scholfield, 2002). Baxter (cited in Carter, 1987, p. 126) states that, "Prolonged dependency on bilingual dictionaries probably tends to retard the development of second language proficiency". The prime reason for this opposition to bilingual dictionaries, Baxter further argues, is the fact that they represent "the belief that for each word in the L1, there is an equivalent in the L2, and vice versa. An additional reason is that the learner browsing a monolingual dictionary will benefit from the incidental exposure to the target language" (p. 126).

An interesting analogy is provided by Atkins and Varantola (1998) who state that, "Monolinguals are good for you like whole meal bread and green vegetables and bilinguals, like alcohol, sugar, and fatty foods, are not, though you may like them better" (p. 22). They further report that, "Look-ups in a monolingual dictionary had a better chance of success than those in a bilingual dictionary" (p. 44). Bogaards (1998, p. 151) found that, "Bilingual dictionary users are at a loss especially when high-frequency words with many different senses are to be looked up".

The case with applying monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in translation, however, is different as Béjoint and Moulin (1987 p. 3) argue, "The superiority of the monolingual over the bilingual is not as obvious as many of us would think or say". Generally speaking, although dictionaries are one of the most important tools for the translators because of the valuable lexical data they provide to them, some argue that they occupy only a secondary position in translation studies since a dictionary is a major component of the research phase of translation (Fenner, 1989; Roberts & Taylor, 1990).

With reference to what has been discussed so far above, this research was conducted to see whether monolingual or bilingual dictionaries help amateur translators produce more quality translations. In line with the above purpose, the following null hypothesis was stated:

H₀: *There is no significant difference between the quality of the translations rendered by translation students who use bilingual dictionaries with that of those using monolingual dictionaries.*

Method

Participants

A total of 60 senior undergraduate students of English Translation chosen from 78 such students through a proficiency test (that is, those who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean) took part in this study. Another 30 students, very similar to the target sample in terms of their language proficiency and education status, participated in the piloting phase of the study.

Instrumentation

To respond to the research question of this study, three instruments were used: a test of language proficiency in order to homogenize the participants of this research, a test of English to Farsi translation to assess their translation ability, and the Waddington (2001) rubric to score the translation tests.

English Proficiency Test

In order to homogenize the participants, a Barron's TOEFL consisting of 40 items in structure and written expression and 50 in reading comprehension was employed. This test had been piloted by the researchers beforehand and item facility as well as item discrimination had been calculated together with the reliability of the test. After piloting, 34 items out of the total 90 were discarded leaving 26 items in structure and written expression and 30 items in reading comprehension.

Translation Test

A text taken from *The New Yorker* called *The Nutcracker* was used as the translation test in this study; as the title indicates, the text was about ballet comprising 262 words. This text was a news report and contained no technical information and/or jargons. The time allotted to the translation test was 30 minutes.

Translation Assessment Rubric

To analyze the quality of the translation of the 60 participants of this study, the researchers used the rubric developed by Waddington (2001).

The scale is unitary and treats the translation performance as a whole, but requires the rater to consider three different aspects of translators' performance (Waddington, 2001). For each of the five levels, there are two possible marks which allow the rater freedom to award a higher mark to the candidate who fully meets the requirements of a particular level and the candidate who falls between two levels but is closer to the upper one.

Table 1 below demonstrates the rubric explained above. To do the job, the points given in Table 1 must be noted. There are five levels to the table, and for each, there exists three parts, including: Accuracy of transfer of ST context, Quality of expression in TL, and Degree of task completion. Accuracy means if the transfer is a complete one or there exists some kind of minor inaccuracies. Quality of expression means whether the translation reads like a translation or a piece originally written in the English language, and finally the degree of task completion is analyzed, which ranges from successful to totally inadequate.

Table 1 – Waddington model for translation quality (2001)

Level	Accuracy of transfer of ST content	Quality of expression in TL	Degree of task completion	Mark
Level 5	Complete transfer of ST information; only minor revision needed to reach professional standard.	Almost all the translation reads like a piece originally written in English. There may be minor lexical, grammatical or spelling errors.	Successful	9,10
Level 4	Almost complete transfer; there may be one or two insignificant inaccuracies; requires certain amount of revision to reach professional standard.	Large sections read like a piece originally written in English. There are a number of lexical, grammatical, or spelling errors.	Almost completely successful	7,8
Level 3	Transfer of the general ideas but with a number of lapses in accuracy; needs considerable revision to reach professional standard.	Certain parts that read like a piece originally written in English, but others read like a translation. There are a considerable number of lexical, grammatical, or spelling problems.	Adequate	5,6
Level 2	Transfer undermined by serious inaccuracies; thorough revision required to reach professional standard.	Almost the entire text reads like a translation; there are continual lexical, grammatical, or spelling errors.	Inadequate	3,4
Level 1	Totally inadequate transfer of ST content; the translation is not worth revising.	The candidate reveals a total lack of ability to express himself/herself adequately in English.	Totally inadequate	1,2

Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of the study, 60 senior undergraduate English translation students (Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch) were selected among 78 students based on their language proficiency level to participate in this study. As stated above, a Barron's TOEFL test was used after it had been piloted among 30 similar students.

Once the participants were chosen, they were given an English text to translate into Farsi. Prior to this, the students were divided randomly in two groups: one who used a bilingual dictionary and the other using a monolingual dictionary. Each group consisted of 30 participants. The candidates' translation productions were scored by two raters in order to maximize the reliability of the scoring procedure. Once their go-togetherness was established statistically, the 60 papers were divided between the two raters randomly for their rating. These scores were ultimately used to verify the hypothesis of this study.

Results

Participant Selection

To select the participants required in this study, the researchers used a mock TOEFL. Prior to the actual administration, the test was piloted to make sure that it could be used confidently for this screening. The section below presents the results of these two consecutive processes of piloting and actual administration to ensure homogeneity in the two groups.

Descriptive Statistics of the Proficiency Test Piloting

Following the piloting of the test, the mean and standard deviation of the raw scores and the reliability were calculated. The mean and standard deviation were 32.73 and 8.88, respectively. Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics of the TOEFL in the pilot phase.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics of the TOEFL piloting

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
TOEFL Piloting	30	15	50	32.7333	8.87823
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Item analysis was also conducted revealing that a total of 34 items were faulty and removed from the test for actual administration. Table 3 indicates the reliability of the test scores gained by the participants on the pilot TOEFL.

Table 3 – Reliability of the TOEFL piloting

KR-21	N of Items
.98	90

Descriptive Statistics of the Proficiency Test

Next, descriptive statistics was conducted after the actual administration of the test. Table 4 shows these statistics with the mean being 68.62 and the standard deviation 8.65, respectively.

Table 4 – Descriptive statistics of the TOEFL administration

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
TOEFL Piloting	78	48	90	68.62	8.651
Valid N (listwise)	78				

The reliability of the TOEFL in this actual administration for homogenization of the participants was calculated below (Table 5). An index of 0.99 reassured the researchers of the reliability of the test.

Table 5 – Reliability of the TOEFL

KR-21	N of Items
.99	56

Dividing the Participants into Two Groups

Among the 78 students who took the TOEFL, the researchers selected 60 who scored between one standard deviation above and below the mean and

divided them into the two groups randomly. An equal number of 30 students were thus placed in each of the two groups. The descriptive statistics of the two groups appear below in Table 6.

Table 6 – Descriptive statistics of the scores of the 60 participants on the TOEFL administration

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Ratio
Group 1	30	60	76	68.87	5.191	-.313
Group 2	30	60	76	68.60	5.150	-.105
Valid N (listwise)	60					

Translation Test

Once the two groups were in place, that is the participant selection process was over, the translation test was administered to both groups. To make sure that the two raters of the study who were going to score the translation paper enjoyed adequate inter-rater reliability, their scores on 25 tests were first compared. Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics of these two sets of rating.

Table 7 – Descriptive statistics of the translation scores given by the two raters to a sample of 25 participants

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Ratio
Rater 1	25	1	7	5.00	1.555	-2.18
Rater 2	25	1	7	5.20	1.555	-2.02
Valid N (listwise)	25					

As is clear from the above table, the skewness ratios of both groups fell slightly outside the acceptable range of ±1.96 (-2.18 and -2.02); hence, running a parametric test was not legitimized. To this end, the researchers resorted to running a nonparametric test for correlation – the Kendall's tau-b

– to check the inter-rater reliability of the two raters scoring the translation test (Table 8 below).

Table 8 – Inter-rater reliability between the two raters

			Rater 1	Rater 2
Kendall's tau-b	Rater 1	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.889**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	25	25
	Rater 2	Correlation coefficient	.889**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	25	25

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As Table 8 indicates, the correlation between the two sets of scores given by the raters was significant. Therefore, the researchers could rest assured that they could use these two raters in this study.

Table 9 below displays the descriptive statistics for the translation test administration in both groups. The mean and standard deviation for the participants in the first group which used monolingual dictionaries was 5.00 and 2.10, respectively, while the two indicators were 4.07 and 1.91, respectively, in the second group using bilingual dictionaries.

Table 9 – Descriptive statistics of the scores of the 60 participants in two groups on the translation test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Ratio
Group 1	30	1	9	5.00	2.101	-.615
Group 2	30	1	8	4.07	1.911	.581
Valid N (listwise)	60					

Testing the Hypothesis

To verify the null hypothesis of the study, the researchers conducted an independent samples *t*-test on the mean scores of both groups. Prior to this,

the normality of distribution of these scores within each group had to be checked.

Going back to Table 9, the skewness of both groups fell between ±1.96 (-0.615 and 0.518) meaning that they were both normal distributions and thus running a *t*-test was legitimized.

Table 10 below shows the results of running the *t*-test. With the *F* value of 0.36 at the significance level of 0.55 being larger than 0.05, the results of equal variances assumed had to be reported in this case. The results (*t* = 1.800, df = 58, *p* = 0.077 > 0.05, 2-tailed) manifested that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 10 – Independent samples *t*-test of the two groups' mean scores on the translation test

	Levene`s Test for Equality of Variance		*t*-test for Equality of Mean					95% Confidence interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig	*t*	df	Sig. (2 tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variance assumed	.36	.55	1.8	58	.077	.933	.518	-.104	1.971
Equal variance not assumed			1.8	57.5	.077	.933	.518	-.105	1.971

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study showed that there was no significant difference observed in the quality of translations of those students who used monolingual dictionaries with that of those who used bilingual dictionaries. In other words, in the process of translating an English text into Farsi, using an English dictionary or an English-Farsi dictionary would not bring about

significantly different results in terms of the quality of translation among students of translation.

The above result indicates that while it may be a common belief that a bilingual dictionary (L2 → L1) may serve more useful in the process of translation, this was not the case among a randomly selected sample of translation students whose English language proficiency level was not significantly different.

Ironically, those who used a monolingual English dictionary did achieve a higher mean (5.00) compared to the group using a bilingual one (4.07). Of course the difference was not statistically significant but it does raise doubts albeit perhaps negligibly regarding the instrumentality of bilingual dictionaries in translation. One reason behind this might be the abundance of equivalents in a bilingual dictionary thus making it hard for a novice translator to choose the most appropriate one among the lexical entries listed.

Furthermore, many such dictionaries lack examples and/or notes on usage which could further complicate the process of finding the most appropriate equivalent in the context under discussion. This is specifically true when juxtaposed with the fact that quite a number of teachers report from their classrooms that many students find it hard to employ the abundant information in their dictionaries appropriately and contextually. That is to say that the act of finding the most fitting equivalent among a list of words provided by a bilingual dictionary needs a certain skill and expertise.

This of course is in line with the findings of several studies reported in the literature highlighting particular problems for dictionary users who were unable to make full of the vast amount of information provided in reference works because they lacked dictionary skills (Berwick & Horsfall, 1996; Nesi, 1999; Sevenson, 1993; Wright, 1998).

Sometimes the application of definitions and meanings which are given in a bilingual dictionary is not proper in the translation and causes translation to seem strange. This is particularly true in the case of cultural terms. Thenceforth, familiarizing translation students with how to use the information in dictionaries with regards to their specific context may be a worthwhile study skill to be included in the undergraduate program of English translation.

For those interested to conduct further studies pertinent to the theme of the present research, the following topics are suggested:

1. A similar study can be done using a prior treatment in using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and the performance of the

students from a quality point of view could be assessed following the treatment.

2. The participants in this study were all university translation students. Similar studies can be done with professional translators.

3. In this study, various demographic factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic background, which may have influence on the quality of translation, were not considered. Other studies could be done with the role of such factors under investigation.

4. This study compared the application of the two kinds of dictionaries on the overall quality of translation. More detailed studies could be run to check the comparative impact of using such dictionaries on the accuracy of lexical choices used by participants in the process of translation.

The Authors

Masoud Motahari is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in both TEFL and Translation Studies majors and has presented in national and international conferences.

masoud1353@hotmail.com

Ailar Taherian holds and MA in Translation Studies from Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch. She has been teaching general English courses for two years at the Aviation Industry Training Center, University of Applied Sciences and Technology, Tehran. Her main research interest is in translation teaching methods.

saltaherian@yahoo.com.au

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