

## Exploring the Use of Bilingual Dictionaries to Enhance Speaking

### Explorer l'utilisation de dictionnaires bilingues pour améliorer l'expression orale

Slimane BOUKHENTACHE   
Jijel University / ALGERIA  
s\_boukhentache@univ-jijel.dz

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**Abstract:** Mother tongue use in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has lately gained significant popularity. This study explores the use of bilingual dictionary-Arabic/English to enhance the speaking skill. A 3<sup>rd</sup> year EFL speaking class at Jijel University was given a listening task on the Gaza conflict and then was invited to discuss the topic using bilingual dictionaries to support their spoken production. This activity was followed by a questionnaire to collect students' attitudes towards the use of bilingual dictionaries to support their language output. The findings showed that the students managed to integrate new words and thoughts into their productions, none of which could have been possible without the use of bilingual dictionaries. Consequently, this paper advocates that bilingual dictionaries should be used to support oral production.

**Keywords:** Bilingual dictionary — translation —translanguaging—speaking skill

**Résumé :** L'utilisation de la langue maternelle dans les classes d'anglais comme langue étrangère est récemment devenu acceptable. Cette étude explore l'utilisation du dictionnaire bilingue-arabe/anglais pour améliorer la compétence orale. Une classe d'Anglais de 3<sup>ème</sup> année à l'Université de Jijel s'est vu confier une tâche d'écoute sur le conflit de Gaza, puis a été invitée à discuter le sujet en utilisant des dictionnaires bilingues pour soutenir la production orale. Cette activité a été suivie d'un questionnaire visant à recueillir les attitudes des étudiants à l'égard de l'utilisation des dictionnaires bilingues pour soutenir leurs productions linguistiques. Les résultats ont montré que les étudiants ont réussi à intégrer dans leur discours de nouveaux mots et à exprimer de nouvelles pensées qui n'auraient pas été employées sans l'utilisation de dictionnaires bilingues. Par conséquent, cet article préconise l'utilisation des dictionnaires bilingues pour soutenir la production orale.

**Mots- clés :** Dictionnaire bilingues—traduction-translanguaging, expression orale

\* **Corresponding author:** Slimane BOUKHENTACHE

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## Introduction

Nowadays, with the effect of globalization, the need for developing conversational skills has become an urging necessity; consequently, a myriad of didactic tools such as games and bilingual activities have come to the fore. Bilingual dictionaries are among the promising techniques to boost foreign language oral proficiency; they could, for instance, offer rapid translations of L1 words to support communication in the target language.

The use of bilingual dictionaries is an old practice that has always marked English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms. These dictionaries could be put to support the acquisition of foreign language skills. Almaliki's (2018) study demonstrated that the use of bilingual dictionaries could significantly boost the reading and writing skills, notably through vocabulary learning. Likewise, Hayati and Pour-Mohammadi (2005) argued that bilingual dictionaries enhance the reading comprehension as much as monolingual counterparts do. Nevertheless, Syahid (2017) showed mixed feelings as regards online bilingual dictionary use for improving writing production, suggesting teaching students to exploit them more effectively.

A few studies have dealt with the impact of bilingual dictionaries on EFL learners' production skill. Zarei and Naseri (2010) demonstrated that the use of bilingual and bilingualised dictionaries enhanced vocabulary production and that the use of bilingual dictionaries are more effective with advanced students. Likewise, Syahid (2017) showed that the use of bilingual dictionaries improved EFL learners' narrative productions.

To the researcher current knowledge, no study has explored the effect of bilingual dictionaries on students' speaking skill (such as fluency, clarity, and precision). Few studies pointed in passage that bilingual dictionaries are effective for improving students' speaking. Aboghunaim (2019) indicated that bilingual dictionaries could improve both writing and speaking skills. Contrarily, Lew and Adamska-Salaciak (2015) argued that bilingual dictionaries cannot substitute monolingual dictionaries in assisting learners' speaking and writing.

This study attempts to explore the effect of bilingual dictionaries on the communicative capacities of a speaking class at the University of Jijel, Algeria, that is, the ability of the students to integrate new words acquired via bilingual dictionaries into their active speaking repertoire. It poses the following research questions :

- a) What are the words that EFL speaking students at Jijel University look up in bilingual-Arabic/English-dictionaries?
- b) To what extent do these students correctly use them in conversation practices?
- c) What are the students' opinions towards the use of bilingual dictionaries to upgrade their conversational skills in English

## 1. Review of the Literature

Bilingual dictionaries are reference books that explain words, phrases, and expressions through translation. Dictionary entries could be in the learner's L1 and the translation in the foreign language or vice versa (e.g., Arabic-English or English-Arabic). These dictionaries can also include information about pronunciation, synonyms, antonyms, and use.

Bilingual dictionaries are very old language reference books. They appeared before monolingual dictionaries because it was probably believed that the only route to learn a foreign language is through translation. The earliest form of these reference tools were Greek-Latin small glossaries, and it was only in late antiquity that larger and alphabetically bilingual glossaries appeared (Dickey, 2021).

Increased communication among different people of the world has always led to the development of bilingual dictionaries. The early civilizational contacts between Greek and Latin peoples led to the appearance of these dictionaries, and increased contact among different ethnic groups throughout the world has resulted in further development and refinement of these reference books. The rapid spread and development of bilingual dictionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was due to the rise of colonialism and increased communication among world nations. Similarly, technological developments and globalization that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the popularization of bilingual dictionaries making them more practical and accessible (Fontenelle, 2015).

Bilingual dictionaries need to exhibit some crucial characteristics. According to Haas (1962, p.174) an epitome bilingual dictionary would include what follows:

- Appropriate translation of each source language word in the target language
- Explanation of all language units (e.g., words, phrases, and idioms) that users could consult
- All needed inflectional and syntactic information
- Sufficient information on language use
- Names of famous people, books, and plays
- Specialized vocabulary related to professions
- Information about correct spelling
- Information about correct pronunciation

Overall, this indispensable and necessary information assists learners in acquiring properly and fully new words and concepts in foreign languages.

There have been many systematic research studies on dictionary use. Lew (2004) pointed out that studies on dictionary use have relatively short history (dating back to the 1960s) and that they mostly relied on questionnaire use. Accordingly, although questionnaires have been harshly criticized, they are still widely utilized in investigating dictionary use. Nevertheless, though difficult, observations think aloud protocol, and performance-based tests are often more effective to explore different issues of dictionary use.

More recent studies have investigated actual bilingual dictionary use. A very famous study conducted by Laufer (1997) used an experimental design and demonstrated the effectiveness of bilingual dictionaries. Likewise, Lew and Arletan (2015) offered an analysis of

good bilingual dictionaries and made a case of them. They argued that bilingual dictionaries could effectively contribute to the development of productive skills.

This study attempts to show how the use of bilingual dictionaries could contribute to the development of speaking skill. Arguably, bilingual dictionaries could enable EFL students to access meanings that could not be attained through monolingual dictionaries.

## **2. Research Methodology**

This educational research aims at testing the effectiveness of bilingual dictionaries in assisting students' speaking skill. A total of 26 EFL students from Jijel University were given a listening passage to listen and react to. The listening passage was by Piers Morgan on Talk TV in unconcerned show that opposed Rahma Zein and Mosab Hassan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDTrsysXWt80>). The hot issue of Gaza was chosen to make the students strongly react to the sensitive content.

After watching the video, the students were asked to critically discuss the content of the video and further express their own opinions. The student-participants were invited to use *WorldReference-Arabic/English dictionary* to find the English words that they knew in Arabic and ignored in English. The aim of the use of the bilingual dictionary in the second stage is to integrate into the students' active speaking repertoire the Arabic language concepts that they did not master in English.

The video used for listening was simply a springboard to sparkle hot discussions about Gaza 2023-2024 tragic events. This topical and sensitive issue was intended to boost students' interests and reaction to the content diffused by Western Media that supported Israeli actions in Gaza.

In collecting data on the impact of the online bilingual dictionary *WorldReference* on students' speaking capacity, the researcher relied on classroom observations and a follow-up questionnaire. The researcher, being himself the teacher, observed the extent to which the EFL students included the target words in their text summaries and in the oral discussions. Additionally, the researcher asked the students after the end of the intervention (that took three sessions of one 1 hour and half) to report on their experience of bilingual dictionary use for promoting the speaking skill.

## **4. Findings**

This section reports the findings from the process of bilingual dictionary use for improving speaking ability.

### **4.1 Results from Classroom Observation**

The findings from classroom observation report the results yielded from students' summary of the content of the TV show and their reactions to the opinions expressed during the TV debate. Classroom observation unveiled that the EFL students at Jijel University advantageously used *WorldReference-Arabic/English dictionary* to enhance their speaking skill. They reported having looked up the following words: 'charity', 'convoy', 'indignation'. Besides, the student-participants came up with new words that they learned through bilingual dictionary look-ups; among these words are 'innocent', 'non-believer', 'prophecy', 'rubble', 'decayed', 'international community', and 'raids'.

### **4.2. Results from Follow-up Questionnaire**

When the students were asked about which dictionaries they preferred, they mostly expressed their preference for bilingual dictionaries, though they sometimes found monolingual dictionaries effective and sufficient for a full understanding of new words in the target language. For instance, one student observed that the explanation provided for the word 'enthusiastic' in the monolingual dictionary is satisfactory; however, some words like 'counterpart' (نظير in Arabic) are better understood via the use of the bilingual dictionary.

Overall, the student-participants pointed out that bilingual dictionaries are very effective for finding equivalents of the words they know in Arabic and ignore in English. Indeed, the use of the Arabic-English version of the dictionary allows capitalizing on the Arabic vocabulary repertoire to express thoughts and meanings in the target language. For example, one student-participant said that the use of the bilingual dictionary allowed him to find the equivalent of الغارات الاسرائيلية as Israeli raids. This view is supported by a significant number of participants saying that the Arabic-English dictionary is very practical for finding words they do not know in English and for integrating them in their oral productions. The monolingual dictionary, on the other hand, can only be used in this specific case to check target words if they know them partially.

### 5. Data Interpretations

This section attempts to answer the research questions and discuss them in relation to the review of the literature.

#### 5.1. Type of Bilingual Dictionary Look-ups

The student participants mostly look for words used in Arabic media and culturally specific words that are rarely expressed in the English language corpora. For example, the students consulted the meaning of the word الحقرة as *despise* or *oppression*. This word is typically related to the Algerian culture, and it could be considered as historically related to the sufferance and oppression of the Algerian population throughout centuries of colonialism.

Additionally, the students looked for ordinary words like *bombarding*, *cleansing*, and *invading*. Such words are very common in the English language repertoire, but the students do not know them. Consequently, they used the Arabic-English part of the dictionary to find meanings of concepts that they know in Arabic and they want to integrate into their English language-speaking repertoire.

#### 5.2. Students' Opinions about the Use of Bilingual Dictionaries for Speaking Purposes

Generally, when the participants were asked on the effectiveness of bilingual dictionaries in promoting the speaking skill, they mostly agreed that they are effective. Accordingly, their use is practical for finding English equivalents of Arabic words. Besides, they reported that the use of Arabic-English section of the dictionary as being helpful for improving productive skills. Actually, they said that it is sometimes the only way to get meanings of words they know in Arabic and they ignore in English.

Furthermore, most of the students said that bilingual dictionaries give succinct meanings that allow gaining time. A significant number of the students reported in the follow-up questionnaire that bilingual dictionaries give meanings that are more accurate and their explanations do not need extensive readings and illustrative example.

Nevertheless, the student participants said that the overuse of such dictionaries could enhance interference and stimulate thinking in the Arabic language system. One student said, 'I feel I am not learning English when I use Arabic'. Possibly, he wanted to say that employing Arabic as a medium for learning English could lead foreign language learners to think in Arabic, thereby altering the direct association with English language system and meaning.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, it could be said that the use of bilingual dictionary is effective in many ways. It could help using words that learners do not know in English. Additionally, it gives access to meanings easily and without wasting time. More importantly, bilingual dictionaries could be exploited judiciously to develop notably the capacity to speak in English. However, it is to be pointed out that not all the students like using them, and even those students who are in favour of their use argued that they should be used cautiously and at specific circumstances. Indeed, the use of translation should be regulated. Overuse of bilingual dictionaries could deprive students from establishing a direct link with the target language and develop a natural feel for English.

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