

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF USING BILINGUAL AND MONOLINGUAL DICTIONARIES IN READING COMPREHENSION OF INTERMEDIATE EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Reading as a basic and complementary skill in language learning is remarkable in keeping one abreast of new findings and increasing one's academic and professional position. In this regard, dictionaries can play crucial role in different processes of language learning including reading comprehension. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of bilingual dictionary compared with monolingual on reading comprehension of intermediate EFL students. The participants in the experiment were forty-five intermediate EFL students studying at Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz. They had been screened out from a larger population by means of a proficiency test. They were then divided into three equal groups: bilingual group (BG), monolingual group (MG), and control group (CG), and took the same reading comprehension test but each group used a different strategy. That is, BG used only bilingual dictionary, MG used only monolingual dictionary and CG could take advantage of guessing ability and contextual cues no reference to any kind of dictionary. The results of this study indicated that BG scored the highest (M=16.86), followed by MG (M=16.26) with CG doing the lowest (M=14.73). These findings revealed that using dictionary during reading can aid intermediate EFL students to comprehend a text more efficiently. As regards the effectiveness of bilingual dictionary, the response to the research question is that, as a powerful pedagogical tool, it can appear as useful as monolingual one in reading comprehension of intermediate EFL students.

Introduction

“Reading is a basic and complementary skill in language learning.” (Chastain, 1988:216). Second language learners need to read and to read greater and greater quantities of authentic materials for communication. The word “reading” of course has a number of common interpretations by language teachers. It may mean reading aloud, a very complex skill, which involves understanding the printed words first and then the production of the right noises. It may also mean an activity in which students read a passage for comprehension (also called silent reading). Whatever the case, reading involves comprehension and when readers are not comprehending, they are not reading. What does a foreign language learner then need to learn if s/he is to become an efficient reader of that language? Why some people who are efficient readers in their own language cannot read efficiently in a foreign language?

A simple answer to the above question is that people who need to read a text in a foreign language do not know that language enough to be able to read efficiently.

Being able to comprehend a text accurately and at a relatively rapid rate presupposes a rather extensive knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Celce-Murcia, & McIntosh, 1991:198). Without a well-developed knowledge of vocabulary the process of reading might break down. In fact, reading and vocabulary have a bilateral relationship: one really is not possible without the other. In the same line of argumentation, dictionary, as an important pedagogical tool, plays a vital role in various process of language learning including reading comprehension. However, there are still some questions about the appropriate use of dictionary during reading. For example:

- How can students use dictionaries properly?
- When and under what circumstances can they use dictionaries?
- Which dictionaries can be used in various processes of language learning including reading?

To find appropriate answers to the above questions , an experiment was conducted.

The Experiment

Purpose:

The present study attempts to find out the contribution of bilingual dictionaries to reading comprehension through comparing it with monolingual ones. In other words, it is to verify the following null hypothesis:

“ Bilingual dictionaries are not as useful as monolingual ones in reading comprehension of intermediate EFL university students.”

Participants:

To answer this question 45 intermediate EFL students studying at Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz were screened from a larger population by means of a proficiency test. Their scores on this test ranged from 38 to 49 out of 70. They were both male and female students majoring in “Translation” and “Teaching English”. They were divided into three groups: bilingual group (BG), monolingual group (MG), and control group (CG).

Test items:

Two tests were administered in two separate sessions:

Test A: It was an English Language Proficiency Test whereby 45 intermediate-level individuals at have been selected. This proficiency test contained multiple-choice items and it was to assess the test-takers’ general knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Test B: This was Nelson Standard Reading Comprehension Test. It contained four passages followed by a total of thirty two multiple-choice items (eight items for each passage). The questions mostly required the participants to draw inferences. Based on careful reading and a more profound comprehension of the text.

Procedures:

The two tests were administered in two separate sessions with the English Language Proficiency Test presented in session 1, and English reading comprehension in session 2. The first session consisted of the whole population (102 EFL students) marking the answers of grammar, vocabulary and comprehension items. It took about 50 minutes. The second session consisted of the selected participants (45 intermediate EFL students) reading passages in English and answering the multiple-choice comprehension questions about the given passages. The 45 participants were initially divided into three groups of equal number (15) and each group was assigned to use different strategies to answer the questions. That is, the first group, (BG), was allowed to read the passages and take advantage of only bilingual dictionary. The second group, (MG), used only monolingual dictionary, and the third group, (CG), could use no dictionary at all. Thus the CG could normally process the passages via guessing and contextual cues. All the groups were asked to answer the questions within 40 minutes.

Results:

Table 1 below indicates mean scores and standard deviations for the performance on the reading comprehension of the three groups. As is shown in the table, students using the bilingual dictionary during reading the passages scored highest (M=16.86), followed by those who used monolingual dictionary (M=16.26) with those reading the same passages without using any dictionary doing the worst (M=14.73)

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation for Reading Scores

Groups	Test-type	N	Mean	SD	SE
Group 1	Bilingual Dictionary	15	16.86	1.95	0.50
Group 2	Monolingual Dictionary	15	16.26	2.31	0.59
Group 3	Control	15	14.73	1.90	0.49
Entire	Sample	45	15.95	2.21	0.33

N: number of participants

S: standard deviation

SE: standard error of measurement

Table 2 illustrates the results of the one-way ANOVA for the reading comprehension texts. Alfa was set at 0.05 for this analysis. As it can be observed, there is a significant difference among the performance of the three groups (df=2, F=3.22, P=0.021).

Table 2. ANOVA of the Reading Scores

Sources	df	SS	MS	F	P
Group 1	2	36.31	18.15	3.22	0.021
Group 2	42	179.6	4.27	-	-
Group 3	44	215.91	-	-	-

df: degree of freedom

F: statistic value

SS: sum of squares

P: probability value

MS: mean square

Table 3 shows Tukey procedure of comparing the sets of mean scores of the three groups on the reading comprehension texts. It shows a significant difference among the students' performance. That is, BG scored the highest followed by MG and CG respectively. It suggests that the use of bilingual dictionary during reading has an important effect on the student's performance, and may lead to an improvement of Iranian EFL students' reading comprehension ability.

Table 3. Tukey's HSD Procedure of Comparing Means of Reading Scores

Groups	N	bilingual	monolingual	control
Bilingual	16.86	-	0.6*	-
monolingual	16.26	-	-	-
control	14.73	+2.1333*	1.5333*	-

a= 0.05 (* denotes pairs of groups significantly different at the 0.05 level.)

Discussion:

With regard to the main purpose of this study, and as tables 1 and 3 indicate, the hypothesis was safely rejected at the 0.05 level of significance. In other words, the data strongly suggested that using monolingual dictionary during reading increased comprehension compared with the control but was less effective than using bilingual dictionary for the same task. These findings imply that using bilingual dictionary during reading by Iranian intermediate EFL students is more effective than using monolingual one, and it is probably because of a few reasons discussed below.

The subjects in BG and MG scored higher than those in CG mostly because they took advantage of dictionaries. Furthermore, the mean scores of these two groups are very close to each other. This reveals that each type of dictionary helps L2 readers differently. The degree to which a particular dictionary can appear useful depends on the limitations of that particular dictionary, on the one hand, and the limitations of the user, on the other hand. Mostly, a dictionary (either monolingual or bilingual) is restricted by both the type of information that it can provide and the ways in which it represents the information. The user is also limited by his/her level of proficiency in the target language. For example, unlike bilingual dictionaries, monolingual dictionaries cannot make use of the reader's LI. As the study indicated, the learners' difficulties with the vocabularies in MG often resulted not only from lack of understanding of the meaning of a particular word but also from incomplete understanding of it. This problem is because of the nature of monolingual dictionary itself which defines words in the foreign language. Students at lower levels of language proficiency certainly have difficulty to understand the definitions in the foreign language, and this in turn affects their comprehension.

Another significant factor that may decline the L2 readers' comprehension is that they do not consider it necessary to look up the meanings of most target words. This is not because they have successfully inferred word meanings with the help of the dictionary. On the contrary, as Hulstijn (1997:335) found in his study, they mostly do not look up difficult words because they do not perceive them as relevant in the context of their reading comprehension. Therefore, it seems quite natural that the subjects in both MG and BG lost some scores because of the above-mentioned reason. That is, although they had access to a dictionary, they did not take full advantage of it.

The difficulties in using monolingual dictionary is surely the major reason that makes L2 readers eager to use bilingual dictionary if they have to look up a word. According to Bejoint and Moulin (1987), bilingual dictionaries are ideal for quick consultation, while monolingual dictionaries, though difficult to use, have extra merit of directly introducing the user to the lexical system of the L2. It is perhaps for this reason that the above-mentioned researchers in a comprehensive study including over 1000 learners in seven European countries found out that bilingual dictionaries were used by the majority of the students (75%). However, this preference does not necessarily mean that bilingual dictionaries are more helpful. Like the findings of this study, they discovered that very often the monolingual dictionary is successful in helping users find the relevant information. Yet, bilingual dictionaries, as observed in this study, motivate the L2 readers to take more advantage of it and consequently improve their comprehension.

Based on the results of this study in which both BG and MG scored higher than CG and the distance between these two groups was not severe, it can be inferred that dictionaries do function as important pedagogical devices. Especially, in the process of reading comprehension L2 readers at intermediate level of language proficiency can benefit from bilingual dictionaries as much as monolingual ones.

Conclusion:

This study aimed answering the question if bilingual dictionary could be as useful as monolingual one in reading comprehension of intermediate EFL students. The results rejected the developed null hypothesis which was 'Bilingual dictionaries cannot be as useful as monolingual ones in reading comprehension of intermediate EFL students.' In general, using a dictionary apparently had a significant effect on students' performance on the reading comprehension test.

However, the possibility that using a dictionary might not always be helpful should not be unexpected, because the task of finding the meaning of a word in a dictionary is a complex process. This process may entail looking for a suitable headword, comprehending the entry, locating the appropriate part of the definition, connecting the right sense to the context, and putting the word within the context of the unknown or difficult word in the text. (Aron 1986:138) showed that students may have difficulties with all of the steps in this process, especially when they are pressed for time that results in reducing the speed of reading.

As a result of the advantage of bilingual dictionary for intermediate EFL students, the performance of students using bilingual dictionary does not tend to be significantly different from those who use monolingual one. For the same reason, the Iranian learners of English are advised not to appeal to a bilingual dictionary in the first place, but postpone this very strategy to the time when they feel there is no other choice for them to find the word meanings. "In recent years, with the common availability of electronic pocket dictionaries, students are even more easily tempted to punch in a word they don't know and get an instant response. It is unfortunate that such practices rarely help students to internalize the word for later recall and use. (Brown, 2001:377)".

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A comprehensive comparison of comprehension and production vocabulary in 31 firstborn bilingual and 30 matched monolingual children fails to find empirical foundation for this assumption. Several raters completed Dutch and French adaptations of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventories for children aged 13 and 20 months. At 13 months, bilinguals understood more words than did monolinguals; at 20 months, monolinguals knew more Dutch words than did bilinguals (combining comprehension and production).⁵ Comparison of data on the lexical knowledge of bilingual vs. monolingual toddlers collected by their parents, using the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory (CDI). *Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 19, 212–219.