

Translanguaging and Vocabulary Learning

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Translanguaging involves the use of the first language in the second or foreign language classroom. Such language use has been a matter of debate with regards to vocabulary learning, but the research findings are clear. Using the first language to explain the meanings of foreign or second language words is highly effective and has a positive effect on the learning of vocabulary. The primary reason for this positive effect is that first language translations are clear and comprehensible. For the same reason, hard-copy or electronic bilingual dictionaries are a very useful resource for elementary and intermediate level learners of English as a foreign language. Learners at the elementary and intermediate levels do not have a large enough vocabulary to cope with monolingual English dictionaries, because even dictionaries which have been specially prepared for learners of English as a foreign language use a defining vocabulary of around 2000 words.

One of the arguments against the use of first language translations to convey meaning is that there is typically no exact correspondence between the meaning of the foreign language word and the meaning of the first language translation. This is undoubtedly true, but there is also no exact correspondence between the meaning of the foreign language word and a picture or a monolingual definition or a demonstration or any other way of conveying meaning of a word. The meaning of a word needs to be built up over many meetings with the word in a variety of supportive contexts. Learning the translation of a word is a very useful and effective early step in building up this meaning.

There is evidence that, in the early stages of learning another language, the lexical stores of the first language and the foreign or second language are shared. This means that even if translations are not used, the learner's brain will still associate the foreign word with the first language meaning. It is only in the later stages of language learning that separate lexical stores are developed.

Teachers who know the first language of their learners should feel comfortable using first language translations to convey word meaning and should encourage their learners to use first language translations when they use word cards or flash card programs to deliberately learn new words. They should also feel comfortable encouraging their learners to use bilingual dictionaries.

About the Author

Paul Nation is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His research areas include language teaching methodology and the teaching and learning of vocabulary. His web resources site contains many free resources for teachers and researchers, including books, word lists, vocabulary tests, articles and resources for speed reading and extensive reading. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/resources/paul-nations-resources> ORCID ID: [0000-0002-2920-9874](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2920-9874)

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