

# The Influence of Bilingualism on Student Translation Methods in Malaysian Schools

Kavinthiran Somsundram, Karthehes Ponniah

Faculty of Language and Communications, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900 Tanjung  
Malim, Perak, Malaysia

Email: kavinthiransomsundram@gmail.com

Corresponding Authors Email: karthehes@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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## Abstract

This conceptual review examines the influence of bilingualism on students' translation strategies within Malaysian educational contexts. Malaysia's multilingual landscape requires learners to navigate multiple languages, with English and the mother tongue being the most prevalent, creating complex cognitive and linguistic interactions during classroom tasks. While bilingualism is widely recognized as a cognitive and pedagogical asset, limited research has explored how bilingual learners themselves select and apply translation strategies. This review synthesizes existing literature to highlight the strategies students employ, including literal transfer, paraphrasing, inferencing, and translanguaging. The review identifies gaps in current research, particularly the lack of empirical studies focusing directly on students' translation methods in Malaysian classrooms. Understanding these processes is significant for informing pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, and professional development for teachers. By consolidating knowledge from prior research, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of bilingual cognition and its practical implications for multilingual education. The findings underscore the importance of aligning classroom instruction with learners' linguistic realities to enhance academic engagement and translation competence.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, Translation Strategies, Translanguaging, Malaysian Education

## Introduction

Malaysia's multilingual landscape has consistently positioned bilingualism as a cornerstone of students' linguistic and academic development. In most schools, learners engage with at least two languages, typically English alongside their mother tongue, producing complex interactions between cognition and language during learning (Gill, 2014; David & Dumanig, 2021). Within Southeast Asian education systems, such bilingual environments have been shown to foster cognitive flexibility, enhance language processing, and promote strategic language use, particularly in academic contexts where English functions as a primary medium of instruction (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; García & Lin, 2017). Within this setting, translation emerges as a critical linguistic practice. For bilingual students, translation is not merely the transfer of words across languages; rather, it constitutes a purposeful and strategic act that

draws upon diverse linguistic resources to construct meaning and bridge comprehension gaps (Cook, 2016). Investigating how students translate therefore offers valuable insights into the ways they manage cross-linguistic processing in classroom contexts.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that bilingual learners employ a variety of translation strategies including literal transfer, paraphrasing, inferencing, restructuring, and translanguaging depending on task demands and proficiency levels (Lewis et al., 2018). In Malaysia, translanguaging has gained particular prominence as both a pedagogical and cognitive resource, enabling learners to mobilize their full linguistic repertoires, deepen comprehension, and participate more meaningfully in classroom discourse (Yusri, Huzaimi, & Sulaiman, 2022; Ooi, 2022). Empirical studies in Malaysian ESL classrooms further reveal that students frequently shift between languages during meaning-making processes, underscoring the close relationship between bilingual competence and translation-related practices (Somasundram et al., 2024; Nabila, 2024). These practices illustrate how bilingualism actively shapes the ways students translate, interpret, and reformulate information across languages. Despite the expanding body of research on translanguaging and bilingual classroom practices, relatively little empirical attention has been directed toward the influence of bilingualism on learners' translation methods. Much of the existing literature has focused on teachers' translanguaging practices or the broader benefits of bilingual education, leaving a notable gap in understanding students' strategic decision-making during translation tasks (Mohd Don & Lee, 2020; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). Consequently, the strategies learners employ in school-level contexts, where translation often occurs informally and implicitly as part of everyday learning remain underexplored.

Addressing this gap is both timely and necessary. A deeper examination of how bilingualism shapes students' translation methods can illuminate the cognitive processes underpinning cross-linguistic mediation, reveal the strategies learners rely upon in academic tasks, and identify challenges encountered when navigating between languages. Such insights are critical for informing pedagogy, designing effective language-support mechanisms, and aligning classroom instruction with the linguistic realities of Malaysian learners (Lewis et al., 2018; Wang, 2024). Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the influence of bilingualism on the translation methods employed by students in Malaysian schools, thereby contributing to a richer understanding of bilingual cognition and its pedagogical implications within multilingual educational settings.

### **Problem Statement**

Malaysia's multilingual education system requires students to navigate multiple languages, most commonly English alongside their mother tongue, in academic learning. While bilingualism is widely recognised as both a cognitive and pedagogical asset, its specific influence on how students engage in translation as a learning strategy remains insufficiently examined. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on teachers' translanguaging practices or the broader advantages of bilingualism, leaving a gap in understanding how bilingual learners themselves select and employ translation strategies during classroom tasks (Mohd Don & Lee, 2020; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

Research has demonstrated that bilingual learners employ a variety of strategies including literal transfer, paraphrasing, inferencing, and translanguaging depending on task complexity

and their level of language proficiency (Lewis et al., 2018; Asik & Gonen, 2022). However, within the Malaysian school context, empirical studies that directly investigate the influence of bilingualism on students' translation methods remain limited. This lack of focused inquiry makes it difficult for educators to design effective language-support strategies or to align classroom instruction with the cognitive and linguistic realities of bilingual learners.

Recent research in bilingual education underscores the significance of adopting learner centred perspectives to better understand language use and the deployment of strategies in multilingual classrooms. García and Lin (2017) contend that examining how learners actively draw upon their linguistic repertoires is fundamental to understanding meaning making processes in bilingual contexts. In the absence of focused attention on students' translation practices, important dimensions of bilingual cognitive processing and strategic language use remain insufficiently explored, particularly within school based learning environments.

Recognising the ways in which bilingualism shapes translation practices is therefore crucial. Such inquiry can provide valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms that underpin cross linguistic mediation, reveal the strategies learners employ when engaging with academic tasks, and highlight the challenges they encounter when navigating between languages. Cenoz and Gorter (2017) further emphasise that understanding learners' strategic language behaviour is necessary for the development of pedagogical approaches that reflect multilingual realities rather than monolingual norms. Addressing this gap is vital for informing pedagogy, guiding curriculum design, and strengthening multilingual learning practices. In response, this study investigates the influence of bilingualism on the translation methods employed by students in Malaysian schools, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of bilingual cognition and its implications for teaching and learning in multilingual educational settings.

## Literature Review

### *Bilingualism and Multilingualism in Malaysian Education*

Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual context has fostered a high prevalence of bilingualism and multilingualism among students. Within the formal education system, English and Malay serve as the two primary languages of instruction, while regional and heritage languages further enrich students' linguistic repertoires (Ahmad, 2016; Cao, Husin, & Hassan, 2025). Research has consistently highlighted that bilingual students develop enhanced cognitive flexibility, attentional control, and problem-solving skills through the management of dual languages. These cognitive advantages not only support general language acquisition but also influence the strategies students employ in translation tasks. Educational policies have also played a significant role in shaping bilingual experiences. For instance, the use of English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics has reinforced the importance of bilingual competence in academic contexts. However, bilingual proficiency in Malaysia is not uniform; it varies according to exposure, socio-cultural background, and individual proficiency levels (Ahmad, 2016; Somasundram et al., 2024). This diversity creates a unique environment for examining how bilingualism influences the translation strategies employed by students in Malaysian schools.

*Translanguaging Practices in Malaysian Classrooms*

Translanguaging, defined as the fluid and purposeful use of multiple languages in learning, has emerged as a prevalent strategy in Malaysian ESL and language classrooms (Ooi, 2022; Zhan, 2024; Yusri, Huzaimi, & Sulaiman, 2022). Teachers often encourage students to switch between languages to enhance comprehension and participation, enabling learners to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires. Research further suggests that translanguaging can serve as a preparatory step for translation tasks, allowing students to scaffold meaning in their stronger language before producing output in the target language. This demonstrates a direct connection between bilingual competence, translanguaging, and translation strategies, as learners use translanguaging to plan, refine, and execute their translations (Zhan, 2024; Ooi, 2022).

*Translation as a Learning and Pedagogical Strategy*

Translation has long been employed as a pedagogical tool in Malaysian classrooms, spanning primary to tertiary levels. Ahmad (2016) found that foreign-language learners rely on translation to bridge comprehension gaps between their first language (L1) and second language (L2). Similarly, Shahrom, Abdul Halim, and Ang (2018) observed that university students employ a range of translation strategies that include literal translation, paraphrasing, and sense-for-sense translation depending on their proficiency and the learning context.

At the primary level, Ngu et al. (2022) reported that Year-6 pupils often rely on direct word-for-word translation as a vocabulary-building strategy. In contrast, Wang (2024) noted that older learners adopt more sophisticated approaches, integrating cultural and semantic understanding into their translations. Subtitling studies, such as those conducted by Abbaspour (2022) and the International Islamic University Malaysia in 2024, further illustrate that translation strategies must account for cultural context and audience expectations. Collectively, these findings highlight that translation strategies in Malaysian classrooms are closely tied to students' bilingual competence and their cognitive processing abilities.

*Cognitive and Strategic Implications of Bilingualism*

Bilingualism significantly influences students' cognitive processing, which in turn shapes their translation strategies. Cao et al. (2025) emphasize that bilingual students demonstrate enhanced executive functions, attentional control, inhibitory control, and mental flexibility, all of which enable them to select translation strategies appropriate to different contexts. The interaction between bilingual cognition and translation practices suggests that students' choices are not arbitrary but informed by both linguistic proficiency and cognitive skills. Translanguaging further supports this process by allowing learners to dynamically manage and deploy their language resources, bridging comprehension and output during translation tasks.

**Significance of the Study**

Understanding the influence of bilingualism on students' translation methods carries both theoretical and practical importance. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of bilingual cognition, translanguaging, and translation strategies. While previous research has often examined these areas in isolation, synthesizing them highlights the interconnectedness of language proficiency, cognitive processing, and

strategic language use, particularly within the Malaysian educational context (Cao, Husin, & Hassan, 2025). Such integration provides a foundation for developing conceptual models that can guide future research on multilingual learning and cross-linguistic mediation.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study have direct implications for language pedagogy and curriculum design. By examining how bilingual learners select and apply translation strategies, educators can better tailor classroom instruction to reflect students' linguistic realities (Lewis et al., 2018). Awareness of the strategies that students naturally employ can inform the design of classroom activities, assessment methods, and language-support programs that enhance comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall academic performance.

In addition, highlighting the role of translanguaging and cognitive flexibility in translation practices can support teacher professional development, enabling educators to facilitate cross-linguistic learning more effectively (Zhan, 2024). At a broader level, insights from this study can inform policy-making in multilingual education, ensuring that instructional approaches are aligned with students' cognitive and linguistic needs.

Overall, the significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge gaps in the existing literature, guide classroom practice, and inform educational strategies that strengthen bilingual learners' translation competence in Malaysian schools.

## Conclusion

This conceptual review examines the impact of bilingualism on students' translation practices within Malaysian educational settings. Drawing on scholarship in bilingual cognition, translanguaging, and translation strategies, it argues that translation should be understood as a cognitively mediated and strategic activity rather than a straightforward linguistic transfer. Bilingual learners mobilize their linguistic repertoires and cognitive flexibility to select strategies that facilitate comprehension and meaning construction during translation tasks.

The discussion highlights that bilingualism plays a pivotal role in shaping how learners process information across languages. Translanguaging, in particular, emerges as a central mechanism that supports planning, comprehension, and reformulation, thereby enabling students to engage more effectively with complex academic content. These insights underscore the interconnectedness of bilingual competence, cognitive processes, and strategic language use in multilingual classroom contexts.

A significant gap identified in the literature concerns the limited attention given to students' own translation methods in Malaysian schools. While existing studies have largely emphasized instructional approaches and the broader advantages of bilingual education, fewer have investigated learners' strategic decision-making during translation. Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing a learner-centred perspective on bilingual education.

Overall, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ways bilingualism shapes translation practices in Malaysian classrooms. The findings carry important implications for pedagogy, curriculum development, and teacher training, particularly in fostering cross-linguistic learning. Future research should extend this conceptual groundwork

through empirical investigations that explore students' translation strategies across varying proficiency levels and educational contexts

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