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Investigation of Monolingual German and Bilingual German–Persian Instruction Based on Vocabulary and Its Effect on Spoken Language

ABSTRACT

The issue of conducting foreign language classes based on monolingual or bilingual instruction is among the important topics in the field of education, which, in general, is examined in various countries. Vocabulary acquisition constitutes a significant part of language learning. Equating the target language with the same language leads to the expansion of the learner's vocabulary range, resulting in mastery of spoken language and other skills mentioned in the study. The purpose of this research is to compare the teaching of a foreign language (German) in monolingual and bilingual formats in Iranian institutions, focusing on teacher-led instruction, and to examine its effect on the quality of learners' language acquisition. A comparison of these cases at the intermediate level shows that, on average, a considerable proportion of learners in monolingual (German) settings are able to communicate fluently and confidently on various topics. Considering cultural aspects and engaging in discussions about the cultural issues of the target country and comparing them with those of the native country, through various texts, will lead to a deeper understanding and increased motivation among learners. One of the main objectives of this teaching method is to make foreign language classes conversation-oriented. One of the primary strategies to achieve this is instruction based entirely on the target language, independent of the native language, with automatic mental equivalence generation. Consequently, the broader the learner's vocabulary range, the greater their gradual mastery of the target language will be, particularly in its spoken and written dimensions. Naturally, these results, consistent with the initial hypotheses, will have a significant impact on comprehension in various topics and situations.

Keywords: Monolingual, Bilingual, Target language, Native language, Vocabulary

Introduction

It is widely recognized that mastery of a foreign language in today's world—regardless of age, occupation, or social status—is not only a priority but also a necessity. Individuals learn a foreign language for various reasons, yet they should be aware that this motivation is shared globally and is rooted in the need to communicate with people from different parts of the world and diverse cultures. Such communication requires proficiency in all four skills: speaking, listening, writing, and reading. The

importance and role of vocabulary in learning a foreign language are undeniable. Communication can be established even with knowledge of only a few essential words in a foreign language. However, learners must understand that the main cause of misunderstandings is not merely insufficient vocabulary, but rather the inability to use it correctly in an appropriate context, aligned with the topic at hand. In recent years, this concern has led researchers to examine the fields of cognitive psychology and learning psychology with a special focus on foreign language education. According to Börner, “Anyone who wants to learn vocabulary must first have an idea of how a word should be taught” (1).

In research on monolingual and bilingual instruction, the role of vocabulary and its appropriate use in relation to the teaching content is seen as central to learners’ spoken language performance. Börner emphasizes the priority of knowing how to teach a word and the mental concept learners must have about it (1). Similarly, Tschirner defines vocabulary as the sum of all words of a language or of an individual at a given time (2), leading to related fields such as lexicology, which analyzes vocabulary, and semantics, which studies the relationships between words within the intended content.

Blachowicz notes that vocabulary instruction and its impact on learners—whether monolingual or bilingual—can vary depending on the textbook used and the stage of vocabulary development (3). Freudenstein and Storch also highlight the importance of selecting vocabulary according to the topic in a comprehensive manner (4, 5), as this plays a significant role in advancing learning and improving learners’ ability to communicate orally. John Halfy similarly confirmed that initial focus should be on producing a few words in sentence form, linked to the overall content.

Many researchers and educational experts, including Tschirner, Köster, and Butzkamm, argue that vocabulary knowledge and breadth have a decisive impact on oral communication and mutual understanding in various situations (6, 7). Rapid and conscious learning, along with appropriate linguistic responses from learners, is one of the most effective outcomes of monolingual (target-language) instruction, especially in speaking skills. Haddadi and Meysami (8) investigated the impact of linguistic interference on accurate pronunciation in German for Iranian learners, highlighting how native language influence affects oral proficiency, a factor relevant to both monolingual and bilingual instructional contexts.

According to Luchtenberg, the issue is not merely translating a word into the native language but understanding the life-world of the target-language country (9). Börner also examines the differences and effects of bilingual instruction, noting that the native language can act as a contrasting factor in recognizing and acquiring foreign vocabulary (1). Cross-cultural features and the comparison of similarities and differences between languages occur automatically in the learner’s mind, and the resulting words are stored in lexical memory according to their characteristics. Similarly, Moradi et al. (10) explored vocabulary acquisition in German through e-learning platforms, emphasizing the role of individualized learning strategies in enhancing vocabulary retention, which is crucial for effective oral communication in both monolingual and bilingual settings.

When learning vocabulary in a foreign language, part of the learner’s experiential knowledge—developed in their native Persian—becomes activated, creating a contrast in recognizing and accepting foreign content. This raises the question: How can learners best acquire foreign vocabulary, and how should they be taught to use it correctly with appropriate content?

The purpose of holding monolingual foreign language classes is to expand vocabulary in the target language through various methods without relying on the native language. This approach fosters communication through individual presentations, pair or group discussions in the target language, and strengthens learners’ speaking skills.

The central research question is whether there is a relationship between monolingual instruction—based solely on the target language and excluding the native language—especially at the intermediate level, and learners’ mastery of spoken language. Furthermore, how effective is the teacher’s training and application of modern monolingual teaching models in this process? The study’s hypotheses are that the monolingual teaching model may help German language learners achieve adequate mastery of spoken language, and that vocabulary expansion through this model, supported by the teacher’s effective role, may aid in

storing new words and sentences in memory and creating new conversational structures. An additional aim is to enable learners to select words and sentences suited to the topic when learning German.

Methods and Materials

The present study is experimental and of the analytical–field type. For this purpose, 40 intermediate-level German language learners from a language institute were selected. In the field section, the learners of one class were divided into two homogeneous groups in terms of age and language proficiency level, based on their scores. The instructional process was conducted in two formats: monolingual (target language: German) and bilingual (native language: Persian, and target language: German) in the two groups separately.

In the first group, instruction was carried out entirely in the target language without considering the native language, focusing on the target language (German) with the aim of enhancing learners' mastery and concentration, and ultimately simulating immersion in an environment based on the target language. This was done while taking into account linguistic and cultural aspects by the designated instructor (proficient in the monolingual method).

In the second group, instruction was conducted in a bilingual format, using both the native language and the target language simultaneously, with the native language serving as an auxiliary factor, but at the same time presenting contrasts with the new language and vocabulary.

Finally, after a defined period of one academic term, both groups were analyzed and evaluated in terms of spoken language and mastery of the language through the administration of a standardized test appropriate for the intermediate level. Additionally, learners' interest in continuing their language learning under the respective teaching method was assessed.

Findings and Results

Vocabulary instruction can be divided into three main components:

1. Orientation and appropriate selection in accordance with the content.
2. Instruction and application in the speaking section.
3. Final monitoring and evaluation.

According to Tschirner's definition, "Vocabulary is the sum of all the words of a language or of a person at a given time" (2). The discipline that analyzes vocabulary and deals with the detailed meaning of words is called lexicology. Another branch of knowledge refers to the relationships between words, which is known as phraseology.

As Blachowicz states, vocabulary from different textbooks is introduced with reference to the relevant sources according to various stages of vocabulary instruction, the difference being in the number and type of exercises provided to the learner (3). Since the lexical range selected from certain textbooks is broader, it is possible to present and practice vocabulary and related content for a comprehensive and practical topic.

Vocabulary and Its Acquisition: Various meanings for this concept are found in the literature, but generally, vocabulary refers to the total set of words in a language and the entirety of a person's lexical knowledge. According to Stork, vocabulary should be assigned comprehensively to a specific content topic and understood in terms of that content (11). There is no doubt regarding the role of vocabulary in communication and in the appropriate selection and application of vocabulary in spoken language. It can even be stated that, in the domain of conversation and communication, grammar is less important than having sufficient knowledge of the relevant vocabulary.

According to Freudenstein, an incorrect selection of vocabulary with respect to the relevant content in various situations will result in the inability to establish appropriate communication (4). This view is also confirmed by John Halfy in his research

on communication within the scope of vocabulary range. Initially, the focus should be not on individual words alone but on expressing several words within the framework of a sentence and its overall content.

In general, three types of vocabulary acquisition (WSE: *Wortschatzerwerb*) can be distinguished:

- **Incidental acquisition**
- **Controlled instructional acquisition**
- **Learner-controlled acquisition**

The first type, incidental acquisition, occurs when the learner's attention is directed toward using the language according to the situation in which they find themselves, and vocabulary is acquired and used based on the relevant context. This type of acquisition, which is situation-oriented, happens particularly when the content of conversation is natural and authentic. Examples include reading a text, watching a film, or listening to a song.

In the second type, vocabulary acquisition is classroom-controlled, focusing on practicing specific vocabulary and teaching it. The aim is for permanent, retrievable, and contextually correct use of vocabulary. Each stage involves performance, practice, and the proper integration of words with each other.

The third type, learner-controlled acquisition, relies on learning vocabulary through association with other words. It occurs outside the classroom environment, with learners autonomously controlling and applying it. It is essential for learners not only to understand new vocabulary but also to retain it in memory so that, in an appropriate situation, it can be quickly retrieved and used based on the conversation's content.

Monolingual and Bilingual Vocabulary Practice in the Classroom: Many educational experts agree that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is one of the most significant obstacles in instruction, whether in native-language-based classes or in foreign-language-based classes (1, 7). As Tschirner and Köster also assert, the breadth of vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in spoken language and mutual understanding in various situations (6). Explicit and conscious learning, together with appropriate linguistic reflection and learner responses, is one of the most effective approaches in language instruction.

The meaning-making process, aligned with the intended content, must be correctly selected and implemented by the teacher, considering specific classroom situations. A key point is that meaning-making should be clear and comprehensible to learners, as what is understood remains in memory. In multilingual German classes, as conducted in German-speaking countries, meaning-making often occurs non-verbally or verbally in the foreign language, whereas in non-German-speaking countries, bilingual instruction is possible. However, for decades, German-as-a-foreign-language classes were held either monolingually or entirely with reliance on the native language, until criticisms arose in the 1970s (12).

Butzkamm consistently emphasizes that the native language should be excluded from the classroom, although he acknowledges that in one of the practical skills of foreign language use—specifically, the targeted but discreet assistance in translating unknown expressions—the native language may be inserted as a supporting factor through the “sandwich technique” (7).

Learners generally tend to revert to the semantic system of their native language, even if they are not asked to do so in class. Thus, even in monolingual meaning-making, they seek some connection to their native language, with semantic clarity and maximal comprehension playing an important role. Butzkamm also notes that effective vocabulary learning is particularly linked to accurate practice and learning, drawing on the native language as a foundation for what has been learned (7).

Incidental vocabulary acquisition, which today often occurs rapidly and directly for German learners through internet searches, does not necessarily lead to mental consolidation and expansion of lexical range. Learners often do not reflect on the word, phrase, or information they have just looked up, and such incidental acquisition typically remains as a short-term electronic aid without entering long-term memory.

One of the key challenges in vocabulary retention is the lack of repeated use. If a class is not conversation-oriented and vocabulary is not used in sentences—especially short sentences—it will be forgotten and will not remain in long-term memory. A language is composed not only of individual words but also of the connections between them within a specific context and meaning. Correct presentation and use of vocabulary in the right situations are crucial for communication, starting with short presentations or dialogues and, over time, developing into comprehensive communication with a broad vocabulary range.

In sum, vocabulary acquisition in a language is a complex process, examined not only from the perspective of semantic information but also in terms of syntactic and grammatical function and pronunciation, with appropriate content serving as the basis. When learning vocabulary in a foreign language such as German, Iranian learners generally lack the cultural knowledge and experiential background common in their native language. In this respect, the teacher's knowledge and the ability to point out relevant items during lessons play a crucial role in learners' understanding and appropriate behavior in various situations.

Given the numerous challenges that have arisen over the years in teaching German to Iranian learners, the decision to conduct classes monolingually in the target language (German) or bilingually in both the native and target languages, as an important factor in advancing educational objectives, must be carefully discussed and examined.

It is evident that the content of instructional books is designed with consideration of the culture of the target country in various dimensions, and vocabulary and texts from a different cultural context must first be understood and subsequently learned. The teacher's adequate knowledge in this regard plays a crucial and supportive role in language comprehension and in facilitating a better understanding of the language. This is not merely a matter of transferring a word into the learner's native language, but rather about comprehending the life-world of the target-language country (9).

At present, there is no general consensus based on the findings of research in the field of instruction and the way learners acquire language. Nevertheless, some fundamental assumptions can be made. In principle, the comprehension and acquisition of foreign language vocabulary are possible due to the neurophysiological basis of human perception, behavior, and thought. The structural principles of a language are linked to the semantic concept memory; therefore, acquisition must occur within suitable formats and content, in alignment with the cultural elements of the target country.

According to Börner, "There are universal domains within the scope of human experience that lead to the development of corresponding concepts in different languages, from which one may infer the meaning of a word from shared primary knowledge and experience" (1). When learning foreign language vocabulary (German), the experiential knowledge developed in the native language becomes activated and serves as a contrasting factor for identifying and assimilating the semantic components of foreign words. In the course of this process, the similarities and differences in meaning between words in the native and foreign languages become evident, and new words—carrying new and influential cross-cultural features—are automatically scanned mentally and stored in the learner's lexical memory according to their attributes.

Different Features of the Meaning of New Foreign Language (German) Words: The first category includes sensory features such as seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting, as well as situational features, such as integration into specific spatial and temporal contexts. Following these are behavioral and functional features (i.e., common activities in various everyday situations). The emotional load of the intended content, along with its linguistic features, if not understood, can lead to linguistic anomalies. Considering all of these elements can help form ideas about the meaning of new foreign words, which are then organized and integrated into the learner's mental vocabulary.

The various semantic components of foreign vocabulary ultimately become comprehensible and are anchored in the semantic cores of the native language. Cognitive processing operations such as comparison, differentiation, association, coordination, classification, and synthesis play an important role. Learners actively manage the vocabulary they need to learn and consolidate in their long-term memory.

According to Neuner, for all words that do not elicit a distinct meaning in the native language, the linguistic context and specific cultural aspects associated with the target language must first be clearly identified (12). As Luchtenberg notes, this is a complex process of meaning allocation that involves interactive negotiation between the learner, the text, and the teacher in the context of cross-cultural vocabulary practice (9).

The native language, the foreign language in question, the learner's linguistic knowledge, and the meanings of the foreign vocabulary developed in the classroom must be considered together so that, ultimately, the learner can achieve an appropriate understanding of the topic by relying on the text content and communicative context. According to Börner, the vocabulary of a language that is stored in the mind during the learning process is the product of the learner's mental operations and is therefore largely influenced by cognitive motivation (1). This is particularly true for foreign language vocabulary learned outside the target-language country, since in institutional learning—unlike in native language vocabulary acquisition—language learning is almost entirely controlled and follows a specific plan. Precise and deliberate interaction between teachers (who must possess sufficient, up-to-date methodological knowledge) and learners' performance is of special importance.

These conditions impose considerable limitations on the quality, quantity, and durability of foreign vocabulary learning, which often occurs without real-life situational interaction in the classroom and is primarily confined to text-based learning. The goal of learning any foreign word is for the learner to be able to recognize it, understand it, store it, retrieve it, and use it correctly. Mental vocabulary, or long-term lexical memory, can be conceived as a complex network in which words are closely interconnected. As Börner explains, "Foreign language vocabulary learned is stored in the learner's mind to be retrieved and used at the appropriate time and place" (1).

The vocabulary of the native and foreign languages should be stored in the learner's personal mental lexicon either as an integrated system or as separate entities with cross-links, so that in speaking situations it can be easily retrieved and used correctly in context. According to Müller, there are at least five basic types of associative relationships between individual words—such as coordination, synonymy, subordination, and antonymy—assumed to underlie vocabulary organization (13).

The more effectively a word enters the verbal memory, the higher the likelihood that it will be stored in the learner's mental lexicon, integrated into an existing knowledge network, and consequently retained for a longer period. Effective vocabulary retention means intelligent, systematic preparation and presentation of the word to be learned. Verbal memory operates semantically over time, essentially recording meanings. Based on prior findings, the storage of vocabulary to be learned can be optimized primarily under the following conditions:

1. When material is presented not in isolation, but in a meaningful context (comprehensive, situational learning).
2. When it is organized in a structured manner, implying the creation of interrelations, such as through hierarchical classification or syntactic coordination in sentence formation.
3. When it is interesting and potentially impactful for learners (requiring motivation and deeper emotional processing).
4. When it is received by learners with willingness and conscious engagement in language learning.
5. When it is repeatedly used orally or in writing in active interactions.

Given the above, vocabulary learning in a foreign language—when approached through the traditional method (foreign language = native language), still widely used—will have less durability and a direct effect on learners' speaking ability. This is because learning such so-called vocabulary often involves attempting to acquire words in a somewhat incoherent and disorganized way (word-pair associations). Contrary to common belief, memory storage is a highly dynamic process that constantly changes and expands in scope and structure during foreign language acquisition.

Foreign language vocabulary, mostly acquired in controlled learning contexts, is unstable and variable depending on the individual and the learning stage. In language acquisition research, this is referred to as learner language. The set of vocabulary

items that work interactively and simultaneously is accessible during foreign vocabulary learning. Receptive vocabulary refers to the words activated during reading and listening, also called passive vocabulary. Communicative vocabulary refers to the words especially needed in speaking and writing, playing a crucial role in communication—particularly in conversation-based classes—and is therefore also called active vocabulary.

In practical terms, vocabulary use includes elements such as the components of a word (prefixes, suffixes), adequate knowledge of foreign word-formation rules, and correct sentence-level application. Regarding which vocabulary should be prioritized for stable acquisition in a foreign language, and the role of word choice in improving communication, certain key criteria must be considered. Appropriate vocabulary selection should be as useful as possible for the learner, considering their interests and needs. On one hand, the chosen vocabulary should ideally be immediately usable, which includes the so-called basic vocabulary—especially important in the first years of foreign language learning. Thematically, this vocabulary largely covers the fundamental domains of human experience mentioned earlier and should align with the progression in the textbook.

This communicative and culturally relevant dimension has increasingly gained importance in foreign language education since the communicative shift of the 1970s, replacing earlier frequency-based word lists with speech-act inventories, communicative situations, and regional or cultural topics that require appropriate linguistic expression. Such elements must be deliberately integrated into foreign language teaching methods. In German textbooks, for example, a portion is devoted to the cultural aspects of the target country through texts, which should be part of the lesson plan. Awareness of the target culture plays a notable, albeit indirect, role in accelerating learning and improving comprehension. The teacher's knowledge and familiarity with cultural topics and communicative situations in the target country are key, as they foster greater learner motivation and interest. Creating communicative contexts around various topics with cultural underpinnings is essential for learning vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and functional sentences for communication.

German should be the teaching and working language, with the native language used only in exceptional cases. When important content, such as instructions, is conveyed in the foreign language, learners should experience it as a means of transferring information. From the outset, German should be the medium of communication. Teacher use of the target language provides opportunities for content-related vocabulary development and familiarizes learners with German intonation and pronunciation, thereby strengthening listening comprehension.

Daily classroom routines should be accompanied exclusively by the target language. Predictable classroom routines form a foundation for learners' subsequent language development, as they acquire a shared symbolic meaning through regular repetition by both teachers and learners. Monolingual teaching in the classroom means gradually increasing the proportion of the target language while using the native language in a controlled, supportive way in the early stages of foreign language instruction. As learners progress, native language use as a supplement should be increasingly reduced.

Lesson content should be delivered through sensory means, including:

- Visual materials (real objects, pictures).
- Extralinguistic cues (facial expressions, gestures, voice tone).
- Physical enactment accompanied by language (the teacher combines new words and sentences with a sequence of movements that clearly illustrate the statement's content; students imitate the movements and learn them alongside the language).

Separation of native and target languages: At times, complex issues require clarification; if temporary use of the native language cannot be avoided, the teacher should consciously and explicitly switch languages. Otherwise, mixing languages can have counterproductive effects. A predetermined signal should be used to mark the switch (e.g., a “language button” gesture).

Promotion of the target language: Native language use—especially by the teacher—to quickly convey meaning should be avoided, as it undermines the foreign language’s value and hinders learners’ active and constructive use of it from the start. Relying on the native language for conveying essential information may lead learners to view the foreign language as an incomplete tool for important messages, ranking the native language above it for communication.

Points to consider include:

1. Teachers should be proficient in daily teaching routines in the foreign language, such as greetings, classroom instructions, assigning homework, announcing tests, correcting errors, giving praise, etc.
2. Human interaction with learners and fostering a friendly atmosphere in various situations, using expressions relevant to the context.
3. Working with target-language texts should remain a priority and objective in foreign language teaching. Learners should maintain constant engagement with the foreign language, and all instructional time should be conducted in the target language to achieve the ultimate goal of functional, communicative proficiency.

Discussion and Conclusion

Learners aiming to acquire and master spoken German, through a monolingual teaching process without simultaneous use of the native language and relying entirely on the target language at the intermediate level, were able—by the end of the term—to achieve significantly greater spoken proficiency compared to an equivalent group taught bilingually under otherwise identical conditions. This resulted in increased motivation to continue learning, unconscious distancing by the learner from the native language, and conscious reinforcement by the teacher, fostering an automatic mental readiness in the target language and reducing moment-by-moment mental translation into the native language. This is one of the main goals of monolingual instruction, particularly in Iranian institutions. Overall, statistical analysis showed positive outcomes for the group taught monolingually. Implementing such target-language-based courses can significantly contribute to learners’ accurate and standard mastery of the language.

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Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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